

Predicate

(dialogues with Pablo D'Stair)

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Printed in the United States of America

for my father,
Jose Gonzalez-Fernandez

(in this edition)

Stephen Graham Jones's first novel, *The Fast Red Road*, won the Independent Publisher's Award for Multicultural Fiction. That was exactly ten years after he started writing. His next novel, the thriller *All the Beautiful Sinners*, was a Texas Monthly Book Club Selection, and his next, *The Bird is Gone: a Manifesto*, won him an NEA fellowship. Since then it's been (in something like this order) *Bleed Into Me: A Book of Stories*, the horror novel *Demon Theory*, the seventy-two hour novel *The Long Trial of Nolan Dugatti*, and what he considers the third iteration of *The Fast Red Road: Ledfeather*. Just last year his bunnyheaded zombie novel *It Came from Del Rio* came out, as well as his first horror collection, *The Ones That Got Away*, which is currently on the final ballot for a Stoker Award. Up next (that he can talk about it) are *Flushboy* and *Not for Nothing*, and likely the second installment of the Bunnyhead Chronicles. Jones's hundred and thirty or so stories have been included in various anthologies and craft books and annuals and best-of-the-years, in *Asimov's* and *Weird Tales* and *Cemetery Dance*, and he occasionally writes essays on horror, articles on craft, and reviews movies. Jones earned his PhD. from Florida State University, taught at Texas Tech for seven or eight years, and now teaches in the MFA program at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

*Now don't try to figure out
Where I come from
I could be the smart guy from Wall Street
I could be the Purple People Eater's son*

-The 5 Royales

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Volume no. three

‘...the blindness overtaking me
is beating like a drum...’

Pablo D’Stair: Somewhere, I think the lines between Craft—as personal and aesthetic preference—and Craft—as technical application of method—got all garbled up when it comes to literature and literary dialogue, be it dialogue about Literature as an entity, Literature as one particular piece of writing, or Literature as something that someone does, someone expresses.

Stephen Graham Jones: Yeah, that uppercase craft, like that—I agree: so much of the trash showing up on the shelves, it’s because of ‘Craft,’ which, to me, that’s what you practice when you’ve cycled through this or that program, have whatever good degree, can do just pretty impressive stuff on both the sentence and the structural level, but, finally, that’s all you’re doing. There’s no art in so much of what passes for ‘literary’ these days. And art should get that capital letter, I think. Except it’s been sucked across, is having its uppercase-

ness appropriated by craft, as if just writing beautiful sentences is enough. But it's not, it never is. Beautiful sentences and balanced paragraphs and scenes and chapters that feel like units, are developing, escalating, finally delivering the reader to some place that feels right, is both a surprise and an inevitable place to be, it's all worth nothing if you're just writing. If you're only showing people that you've been trained well 'I can do all this now, Ma, look'. No, give me somebody like Philip K. Dick, writing to save his life. Give me Dostoyevsky, padding his paragraphs because he's getting paid by the word. Give me people writing in blood. And, if the sentences and all the 'craft' stuff's in shape, great. If not? I'll take the blood any day. Lick it off the page, hope I catch whatever they had.

PD: Being something of an extremist, I'm suspect of beautiful sentences—not that there isn't something to be said for fashioning one, not to say that one cannot have a certain kind of power, so maybe it's better to say 'I am suspect of obviously-constructed-beautiful-sentences'—they try too hard at something I don't get. Either way, in all honesty, I think what I consider 'component pieces' get far too much attention, folks concern themselves with sentences when for whatever reason they either cannot or do not want to access what ought to be their concern when faced with a piece of writing, namely to indulge, be caught up in, perhaps take stabs at understanding their personal reactions to it, wholly. Sentences, while fine and good, are only there because they happen to be there, but it gets out of hand when—for one example I just find silly—there are actually Best Sentence awards (and the subcategories of Best First Sentence, Best Last Sentence

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etc). It's all too much. And as a quick aside, I will say that I dig that old Dostoyevsky was always marking off his work by the printer sheet—I've long held that one can strike every other sentence out of *Crime and Punishment* and leave the text fundamentally unaltered, even improved.

SGJ: Didn't know Dostoyevsky did that. Cool. With my first novel, there was a point where I excised a few twenty-thousand word chunks, just making myself close my eyes and hit delete. Would rather see what he cut than what I did, though. Especially as I'm sure I kept it logged in my brain, just spit it back out in some different fashion.

PD: I misexplained—he didn't actually do that (as far as I know). I meant that I've always felt that he had an idea for a novel that went like this 'Raskolnikov kills a pawnbroker out of a misguided philosophical impulse toward philanthropy and then a detective who knows he did it lets him unspool until he confesses' right? And that novel is in there, but is about an eighth of the full text. Now, understand me that I feel the book, as it stands, is a monstrous work of ungodly perfection—old D. had a mind that I every day remind myself I'm in awe of—but all of the surrounding elements, the secondary counter-plots, perfect as they are, I often suspected they were filler—profound filler, but filler.

SGJ: Yeah, and the filler, that's exactly where stories become real. When people ask me for advice on how to write a novel, the only thing I can ever tell them is just plan on three, maybe four things happening, total.

Three's better, though. And just dartboard it. 'Martin chaperones the dance, Martin finds himself on a tractor at some point, Martin has to buy a suit.' That's it, that's a novel. But, stacking everything around it such that Martin can get *to* the dance, that Martin can *find* a tractor, that Martin has some *need* for a suit, that's where the real meat's going to be, that's where you're going to discover who Martin really is. And, this three-things-only trick, it's something I've learned by trial and much error. Used to, when I sat down to write, I'd be so nervous that I didn't have enough to cover three hundred pages that I'd spit up fifty plot points, which, if I'd keep the story just to those fifty, great. But those fifty, each of them involves ten more, at least, so the story snowballs, gets so dense, lays the reader out flat. I mean, I still have a taste for that kind of density, and a proclivity, sure, but now I know it's just a defense mechanism to try to deal with the nervousness of not having enough for a novel. Which, I think, is one of the big differences in novels and short stories. With the story, you never have that nervousness. If the story goes two pages and's over, cool. If it balloons up to a novella, so what? You've got more freedom in the short story, I think. Less nervousness, anyway.

PD: Indeed, and touching back on D. I'm just in love with his shorter work and his lengthier work seems like a shorter work with a lot of writing put on top of it—*The Gambler* could have been huge, *Karamazov* could have been slim, you know? I just mean I'm a minimalist at heart—no one remembers *Crime and Punishment* as about anything but Raskolnikov and Profiry—not really, they don't have the book in their head about Sonia and Dmitri and the louse Dunya might

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marry. *Crime and Punishment* should have a dime store pulp (I say that in praise, not as a pejorative).

SGJ: Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain were basically doing Dostoyevsky, but just without the writing on top. But still they were able to kind of obliquely get *at* the rest of the stuff—all the iceberg we can't see. People are always going on about Hemingway this, Hemingway that, but c'mon. Cain, Thompson? Which, I'm not saying Hemingway didn't have a good touch, a direct way with lines, a kind of sparseness that isn't about 'reserve' but about simply having a good eye for the one thing in the room that can mean the whole house, but the stories and novels he burned all that good writing on, man. Kind of a waste, you ask me. He could have told stories that infected people, rather than just impressed them.

But, yeah, sculpted-perfect sentences in a crap story then become crap sentences, no doubt. There's that guy...Douglas Bauer, maybe? I used to know his name better before 24. But he has a book on craft, on writing, and there's some essay in there where he says that too many writers are polishing each and every last sentence until it shines, is blinding—I'm exaggerating him here, of course—and the result of all the wax-on/wax-off stuff is that there's no rhythm, that the prose is blinding. Those writers are forgetting that some sentences, they're just utilitarian, are only for getting Jim the Character from the living room to the kitchen, with something simple like 'Then Jim walked into the kitchen.' Nothing at all special about that, and what Bauer's saying is there doesn't need to be. Then, too, should something momentous be about to happen in the area of the oven, say, then you can drop some perfect verb, some ideal of figurative language, and, because we've been set up by

'boring' sentences, that stand-out sentence is going to stand out all the more. And, what Bauer's talking about, you catch a bit of it sometimes, reading McCarthy, how he's trying to make each moment so poetic, give it such lyrical depth, show off his vocab, all that, but you see it even more in all the people who try to write like McCarthy, and, because they don't have whatever he has, all they can do's ape it—all they can do's present this slicked-up, dense, semantically-packed prose. But McCarthy, more often than not, he's making that special prose of his do what he wants. Everybody who's trying to be him? Not so much.

PD: We're talking about Cormac McCarthy, I'm thinking—or if we're not, what I am saying here is with it mind that we are. Oddly—I adore McCarthy—one of the things about McCarthy's writing that I find so alluring is that he doesn't (at least not how I tend to think the words to mean and how it seems you're saying them) try at all to build a consciously poetic landscape out of it (no Purple Prose, so to speak) but at times fashions some of the most indelible, vivid, and complete landscapes of thought and indeed of physical sensation out of nothing but simplistic, utilitarian sentences. Which is a poetry itself, a poetry in restraint. For me, often the surest way to be certain I take away nothing specific from a piece of writing is to fill it with specificity, try to capture a precision that really cannot be captured (trying to 'express the inexpressible' as they say, but to do so quite literally—to show it, not to show something while accepting that what you desire to be shown is exactly what cannot be). It's the old thing, the difference between endless nuance and constriction—in a way a kind of trick, if a block of text has no sentence in

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it that is over eight words long, in my experience, then endless personal, introspective, investigative energy is brought to it and worlds are unpacked, but from beautiful construction, flourish upon flourish upon a core of utilitarian necessity what is left to the reader is to do little more than admire, which too easily devolves into 'looking'—reading as looking-at-words.

SGJ: Yeah, I guess it's what I was just saying with Hemingway: it's not about getting all ornate and dense on the kind of cushion that's been re-sewn onto the piano bench in the living room, though there is the history of a family there, and in spite of the fact that you've done all this research on piano benches so can render it very very well, it's about how when somebody flushes the toilet upstairs, that old depression glass in the lower pane of the window trembles a bit, because the pipes run alongside it in the wall, and that changes the quality of the light for a few seconds, so it's both a moment when somebody's pretty much flushing a toilet on whoever's sitting in the living room *and* a moment where they grip the arms of their chair, thinking maybe a dimensional vortex is opening up all around them—and, in that moment, their fingers gripping into the arm of the chair, everything's possible. Those are the moments I write for. McCarthy, though, he does bug me tremendously, at least when he's trying to apply a style that worked—say, the density of *Blood Meridian*, or the mossiness of *Suttree*—to, I don't know, to the border, fifty or eighty years ago. Seems what he ends up with often's these lush beautiful, impressionistic ways of saying 'cactus,' or 'sunset,' which are great in and of themselves, but don't really serve the story—or, only serve to fetishize the landscape. But, when the readers

are all urban, that kind of romantic indulgence sells, I guess. Cactus and sunsets are exotic, maybe. However, *The Road*, that much more simpler diction he proved he can still do when he tries, I so appreciated that, as he was acknowledging that writing's not one-style-fits-all. You change it from book to book, as necessary. You have to, really.

And, I think this—only just now seeing this—it's why I gravitate more toward commercial or genre fiction: because those writers, they're kicking all these books out because the stories are welling up inside them, sure, are going either to come out as fiction or as dropping kittens off the bridge, but on just as important a level they're engaged in the crucial art of finding a place to meet up with the marketplace. They're making money. They're trying to infect an audience with their stories in such a way that both the story's preserved *and* the audience is hooked. Which is maybe the most honest art of all, especially because we've been so trained to think those two are mutually exclusive. Or, to say it different, so many literary writers blame the audience for not reading 'my beautiful books.' But it's never the audience's fault, if that happens. Wallace Stegner's 'To a Young Writer,' from *The Atlantic*? It's a big, running excuse, it places no culpability on the writer. And that's where absolutely all of it has to be. There's too much competition for it to be otherwise.

PD: Do you, then, feel that marketplace, commodity, monetizing etc. is an integral component of writing—or more directly, that the acceptance or embracing of whatever the current standard of the Writing Marketplace (or the Literary Marketplace) is, is a sign of appropriate commitment, a step, shall we say,

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toward being a Real Writer? I ask it that way, straight off, only because of your use of the word ‘Crucial’, and certainly I don’t want to suggest I am dismissing the notion out of hand—I just feel it is something that needs some delving in to. Often I come across the idea that a writer, even a fervent, producing writer, is better just considered a Hobbyist, not a Writer (and the term tends to be used as a derogatory, though I don’t know why). As I say, I don’t see it as a slight—though I know it is meant as a slight—but I do think it carries a kind of unfortunate philosophical slant to it that somehow the content of what a writer produces should be regarded in—and only in—equal measure as what-the-writer-is-as-a-commercial-entity. That is, if Philip K. Dick wrote all he wrote but only self-pubbed (or just kept it to himself or posted it around for free) while it might be worth looking at it would not carry any weight, would be seen as footnote to any author who had content commercially available. And also, it makes the idea of writing outside of commoditized methods seem always an Automatic—‘He/she doesn’t try to publish because they don’t want to be part of that world’—rather than as an Active (and worthy of consideration) decision to create and to find avenues outside of marketplace (either as a rejection or simply as a disinterest). So, a direct question is Do you think disinterest in the marketplace equals a disinterest in writing—worthwhile, real, meaningful writing? And also, there seems to be, in however many times I approach the topic, a logical wobble when it comes to the idea of ‘Getting a book available for sale to a potential reader’ versus ‘Putting a book in the hands of a potential reader’ as far as finding active readership. Selling it, certainly, carries with it the self-explained commodity of currency, but often I find it odd that it is

suggested that a reader reading a book without this specific commodity exchanged is valueless—or that at the very least only of ethereal, rhetorical value.

SGJ: Never thought of it like that. But, man, were I only just finding PKD in some dusty trunk at some estate sale, would the work itself still matter? Guess I can't see how it wouldn't. *Ubik* would still be *Ubik*, *VALIS* would still be mind-bending, reality-changing—even displaced from the decades they were written in, are such a part of. I can't think of any way around that. Yet I still hold that writing in some safe space outside of the market, that's not the way to go. However, I think there's a difference in not being able to find somebody to publish your stuff and not sending it out at all. If I found this dusty trunk on the curb, then I'd guess it'd be stuffed with rejection letters, too. Rejections PKD would have just written through, knowing they were all wrong, that there really was a conspiracy to keep the truth quiet, all that, that these rejections *proved* that. At the same time, though, man—I'd really love to read John Doe's journals on that shelf in *Se7en*. Who wouldn't? There's some kind of allure there, reading Kaczynski's manifesto, finding, I don't know, finding some Anne Frank diary. But I think that allure, it's the same rush of possibility you get when you buy some old, particularly bad painting at a flea market, just on the chance you can scrape the paint off, find something amazing underneath. That's not answering your question, though. So, finally, no, the market isn't what legitimates a work, I don't think. I guess the work either is or isn't good, all on its own. But, the work isn't complete, sitting in a dusty trunk. It needs a reader to complete it.

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PD: First, just to quickly say that Yes, who doesn't want to read John Doe's notebooks, or leaf through Indian Jones' father's Grail Diary? Absolutely, and I'd publish either or both in a heartbeat. Sort of to the side and sort of on subject, I once thought it'd make a great novel to have it about one of the prop designers on *Citizen Kane*—just some guy makes the little things, very behind the scenes, but he's also assigned the job of writing the words that appear in the pages of Kane's memoirs that are only so briefly seen during the film. The thing of the novel, though, is that (very Patricia Highsmith, I was obsessed with her when I thought this up) this man kills his wife about a quarter in and then, in addition to living his life and doing his job, has to cover the crime up—so, we set that investigation against the investigation in the film, itself, and the kicker is that on page ninety of the prop memoir—something no one will ever see—he writes his whole confession, to be buried and made as obscure as *Rosebud* is to the filmic characters.

SGJ: Those are the kind of stories I live for, yeah. I mean, *Matlock* and *Columbo* would crack it in fifty-two minutes. The rest of us, though, we've been fooled for three quarters of a century. And counting. The way I see things, though, this is always the way it is. *Yes* that journal's a confession. Of *course* that's Aristotle's book on laughter way up in the corner of that shelf. Anytime anybody's late to meet me somewhere? What I always do's find a window, guess the road they might have been coming down, see if there's maybe some suspicious lights in the sky back that way. Because, by the time the people get to this dinner or whatever, the

aliens are going to have erased their memories, of course, explained their clock problems away, but they're maybe not thinking of me. I'm thinking of them, though. Constantly.

PD: Indeed. Now (returning from this aside) it is interesting your insertion of the idea of rejection notes with PDK's stuff—only because I think it speaks to how core the contemporary notion of publication has become—even in this rhetorical, you attach a kind of marketplace—the notes would indicate a sad mistake some publisher made, that the work was shown and not accepted, which just redoubles my wonder at the question without the rejection notes. Understand, I feel how you feel, I believe a reader, certainly one with actual eyes, would recognize the brilliance of brilliant work, but I do also think there needs to be some association to marketplace to avoid being the footnote I suggested—you offer this in the shape of rejection notes, I offer in the same spirit the fact that in some old pulps or some decades out-of-print pocketbook 'toss away book' I have found pieces I think are miraculous and that I treasure alongside the most 'acceptably renowned' things on my shelf. To be honest, I suppose the question centers more around 'If we have this reaction to material written but remote from us, why is it so infrequently that we really, really (the way we would with PDK, for example) get behind the work of our peers when it is just manuscript—why don't we celebrate it so strongly if we see it without it needing publication in this or that form? I have never really seen someone just flat championing an unpublished piece—other than championing it toward getting it published.

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SGJ: Good point. That knee-jerk thing we all have where print's somehow legitimating the piece. Like, in liking it, we're agreeing with the other people who, liking it also, helped it get in print. And so we're not so alone, maybe? Or we just trust that if so many other eyes didn't find something egregiously wrong, here, then it must be quality enough to warrant my attention, my praise, my championing, for whatever that might turn out to be worth. Makes me cue on that whole *The Stones of Summer* thing. But probably just because I don't have a good answer for why *I* don't, or haven't, championed some unpublished piece, argued to put it up alongside Asimov's 'Nightfall' or Clark's 'The Nine Billion Names of God,' all that pantheon stuff. Maybe it's just that, if these stories are salmon, I want them to have swam all the way up to me, first. That that struggle, whatever luck was necessary to have made that trip, it somehow gives them worth. That, when they die panting at the lip of the pool I'm standing at, a piece of their essence infuses up to me, and now the story's mine in a way an unpublished piece never can quite be.

I was saying that writing is never complete until it finds a reader, closes that circle. And the market, its function there's as bottleneck, of course, quality control, only the best crabs can make it to the top of the bucket. The crabs that aren't even trying, nobody ever sees them. So, you've got to keep the market in mind when writing, I think. You've got to think about selling this. Not for the money, though that definitely helps, but so that it can become something somebody else can invest in, can potentially engage. However, yeah, you mention different communities—just giving it away on-line, say, or self-publishing it digitally. Which can get the work out there

just the same, I agree. However, at least for me—and this could be because I was conditioned in the old system, or maybe just because I like to get royalty checks—when I buy something, it's more likely I'm going to read it. If I download it free and legal, I'll carry it around maybe, sure, what's a few more kilobytes on my device, but the stuff I actually pay for, I feel compelled to try to make that investment worth itself. Whereas the free book, it's already giving me exactly what I put into it: nothing. Anything I get out of it, then, that's a gain, definitely. But the chances are slim I'm ever going to get around to reading it. A dynamic which I kind of suspect is going to change, but's going to take decades and decades to do so.

PD: Everyone likes to get royalty checks (I'd like to get some). And I want to stay on this a moment just to elaborate my position before going forward: I am not anti-selling books and also, though I see how you think I suggested it, I am not exactly behind online-ness. I am an artifact man, a physical book man—the electronic thing, it's harmless, I've said I think e-versions of a work are kind of elaborate, inexpensive business cards—no harm no foul, someone reads them or someone doesn't. So, I just want to touch that there, because I'm not avoiding this line of conversation out of any oddness and I don't want to come off that way. If there is something in 'giving out a free book' (with purpose, with reason and method) it has to be the physical thing—trading a file, there's nothing wrong with that, but it's not giving anything away, it isn't an exchange of anything that one should expect a reader to read and respond to—nothing is transpiring.

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SGJ: We should get Cory Doctorow in here for this, somehow, or Kelly Link. I am all for e-books and digitization, though, not so big on the artifact part of books. Or, for me, the artifact's the memory engrams I'm making when reading the piece—it's that, two years from now, I'm going to remember this book as something that happened, not something I read. Or, at the very least, the memory of the reading is the thing that'll stick. Which is to say I'm always giving books away. Sure, I have two or three sentimentals, some favorites, some zero issues of comics, all that, but I have favorite rocks I've found at the bus stop, too, and twist ties that I thought were a kind of cool color, had to squirrel away. Talking digitization, though, I kind of wish Netflix would start renting novels the same way their instant queue works. I'd love to sit there on the couch, remote in hand, and scroll up through the story on my television screen, the letters each as big as my hand. And, with my stuff going digital—that's got to mean it's accidentally being transmitted into space, right? To other galaxies. To planets not yet born. So exciting to me, just that chance of somebody that far away picking my book out of the air.

PD: I like that, but let's return to that idea of Craft, from earlier—in the sense of 'measure twice, cut once': Craft as in aligning literary creation to the creation of an intricate system of plumbing or architecture or precision medical equipment or clean sound recording is a bane to me, a real howling bore.

SGJ: Definitely nothing to pay attention to with the first draft, yeah. But some writers can make it work,

too. Maybe because they have robot brains? Sometimes I wish I had a robot brain.

PD: So are you a drafter? I'm always curious, probably just because I'm not. I'm curious as to the philosophy of drafting, specifically as it regards the idea of 'When is the work finished' to you, personally? To contextualize—I don't draft because I feel that reworking a 'finished' piece is the same as adding in my remarks on it as an audience member—it would, in essence, be the same as somebody other than me adding in material, adding in new words having to do with how they reacted, and all of this is outside of the act of setting a novel down to paper. To you, is the idea of drafting connected to the marketplace? The work is being prepared for something specific, so in a sense, tooling it toward a specific is still part of a creation? And that I ask from the vantage point of thinking that inclusion-of-the-marketplace-during-conception (and indeed through birth) would understandably put one in a different headspace than 'just writing'—'just writing' would kind of be Step One: Now I have the raw material and let me fashion it into X or Y or Z based on desired (or rather pre-perceived) audience reaction.

SGJ: With novels, I'll draft, sure. Or, I guess even just doing one draft, that'd have to be considered drafting, but, with a novel, with something going a hundred thousand words or so, yeah, I'll tear it down, build it up again. A few times. First at my own insistence, because I'm never as smart as I thought I was when writing, and second when my various readers inform me that I'm not even smart or talented *after* the fact, and then, yes, when an editor—the Market—tells me that I

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need to do this, need to change that. I've done two thousand pages just to get three-fifty, I mean. But I've also slammed down a seventy-two hour novel that's published almost exactly as I wrote it, too.

PD: I ask mainly because I've never worked with an Editor, capital E, and the way I came up writing, other than in endless conversation with my peers, the marketplace was a nonentity—not even in the sense that it was shunned or written away from, it simply didn't have a tangible (or at least not a meaningful) connection to writing. Understand, I don't even mean in the sense of 'Writing as Art, above it all' (I'm a thriller man from way back) it just wasn't part of the equation. So, to take something you say here that I think I understand, when getting a response or talking with a peer about some scene, it was kind of irrelevant whether or not someone 'got it' or 'it worked'—we abstractly knew it 'would work for some, not for others' and even if the wild majority (this all in rhetoric) disliked it or didn't see something, it didn't change the fact that it was there. Which I suppose is always the worm with me—because truly, and I don't mean to keep reiterating it but I don't want it to get glossed over, I'm not in opposition to doing things such as you talk about nor do I find them damaging, I just wonder at the full line of thought—was the notion 'Asking the opinion of others in the hopes of it aiding in producing the best work' versus creating 'The most widely accessible (even within a niche) work'? Especially when, immediate visceral reaction aside, so much of what I find of value in the things I read and love is stuff that doesn't occur to me until years after—and if it goes long enough that all I can remember is what I liked the first time I read something, I dissociate that from the

permanence of a reader-experience. It becomes nostalgia and a first, initial-impact-reaction cannot be re-had, even if the book is re-read—early things I think about a piece of writing I tend to discard, so have trouble valuing, in the sense of taking them to heart and embracing them as integral to the actual creation of a work—the initial thoughts of others. Especially true—sorry to sidestep myself—when I take in to account the fact that if the work is given to someone with the description of it as ‘not complete’ this colors the reaction, means I will not know how it, as a ‘finished work’, would have impacted.

SGJ: Reading incomplete work bites, definitely. All you can really talk about then’s the prose, which is about the last thing that’s important. People I’m working with, I always tell them to go away for a long time, write something all the way through, then give it to me. If you’re having to ask for permission to dive into the next chapter, I mean, you’re not really writing. Or, if I can tell you stop and you *do* stop, then you also *should* stop. And, to answer all out of order, I think there’s another option where suggestions or edits are concerned, aside from to make it better or to fit the market—though, yes, those are the two big ones, that we always pretend are the same one. To say it different, when I’m changing a piece at an editor’s request, I always assume they think they’re making it better, and, in making it better, it’ll have a better chance in the marketplace. But, really, that’s not why I’m making the changes, or even considering them. The reason I’m going back into the novel for the twentieth time’s that I’m getting paid, I’ve already cashed the checks, and, whatever the editor’s reasons, these aren’t suggestions he’s making, they’re just getting

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couched like that. They're demands. They're 'Do this or we pull the novel' type of edits—which I've had happen. Or, that's what I always hear, anyway. So, if it's making the novel better, if it's making it sell better, great. But first it's just about I'm doing what my boss says, because I'm on the clock. I guess I've worked enough labor jobs that it's hard for me to think any other way. However, when they say 'This needs to happen here,' I of course tend to read that as 'This little part here's broken,' now how can I fix it in a way that both serves the story and doesn't get me fired? Maybe someday it won't be that, but, too, I think that's the best way for it to be. It's why I could never self-publish—I'm a terrible boss, will just let myself do whatever.

However, I didn't always believe in rewriting. And, as far as short stories go, I pretty much still don't: they either work or they suck, and, if they suck, throw them away. In the time it takes to try to recuperate one, you can write two or three more. The Bradbury-model of a story-a-week. But, novels, I only started buying into the whole rewrite thing when I watched the DVD extras for *Ravenous*, and that director, Antonia Bird, she's taking us through the deleted scenes, the ones her producers made her cut, and it kind of just washed over me, that sometimes the editors know what they're talking about. That they're *not* all just trying to put their footprint on your book. Watershed moment, there. Ever since then, I take all the suggestions. Maybe don't implement each and every one—and, 'suggestion,' at least once you've cashed the check, it doesn't mean exactly that—but, it's like in workshop, you learn that when everybody's saying fix this one scene, and do it like this, or that, that what they're really all agreeing on for you is that there's something broke in this scene. So, the suggestions, you

take them like that: something's broken here. How can I fix it? Sometimes it'll be like your editor or agent or friend says, but just as often it's not. Just as often, their fix is stupid and insulting, and you have to smile and take it, then lower yourself to your keyboard once again, try to gain entry back to this world, pay whatever you have to to get there, and do it all over again. Better.

PD: *Ravenous* is such a great movie—so underappreciated too. Fantastic screenplay to it, everything done just right (minus, in my opinion, a bit too much a tilt toward humour for the first two minutes, but this goes away). I never watched the extras—I always think I'll like extras so much more than I do. Do you, then, see novel writing, short story writing as something collaborative on the scale of film-making? 'Book-making'—maybe I answered my own question, there. Because I suppose it makes sense—it does, of course it does—from the point of view of a Publisher-Published-Product, a book, everyone pulling together to not only make the book but achieve X or Y or Z with it. For myself—and I guess it surprises me a bit how much this is true now that I'm thinking about it—it does get on my last nerve when a writer gets annoyed with the decisions or inputs or direction of their publisher—not in a cynical 'caveat emptor' sort of way, but in the sense that it is the combined force that makes a book a 'marketplace book', there is nothing auteur about it. To the other side of the coin—because my heart is always, always with the auteur—I do think it is a drag when the collaborative aspect of 'book-making' is harped on too much by the author—either way, I guess I've psychoanalyzed that some of my subconscious aversion to marketplace has to do with the lines coming too close

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to absolute artifice, too often. Christ, I hate it when actors I like do dubious films then go on the junket prattling about how great the films are—I worry something is being lost, though nobody is meaning it to be.

SGJ: Yeah, you can tell when a writer's just cashing in her name, getting enough to float another year or two. Which, it's not so helpful to this house of fiction we're trying to keep standing, I don't guess, but I don't begrudge them doing that, either. If I could, who's to say I wouldn't. It's easy to be honorable, at least until you're given an option not to be. And, too, I've worked with editors who I felt were just trying to crawl inside me, wear me like a skin. It's kind of fun, the challenge of it all, the brinkmanship and posturing and staged sacrifices, but the result ends up being that the conflict's not in the book, the conflict *is* the book. And then everybody suffers. Too, I've always wondered if so many of us would be writers if we published without our names on the covers. If, say, there were more money involved somehow, but the trade-off was that only the book's title was there, not you. I don't know if we'd see a lot of great stuff happening, or if the audience would get kind of cynical and suspicious. Or maybe the opposite of that, its negative definition, is James Patterson, say, who we know's just the name on the cover now, thus meaningless, a brand. Do we approach the text differently, are we more or less suspicious of the story? I don't know. I mean, I'm thriller-born as well, have burned through so much Alex Cross stuff, and, honestly, the post-Patterson books, I like what I've hit. The prose is stronger. Grossman and company can write, this novel-by-committee thing's working out. But, talking *no*

names on the cover—completely different from ghostwriting—I guess in that kind of situation, the publisher would ‘become’ the name, right? We’d trust Pantheon the same way we trust King, and the fantasy-football minded portion of the audience would have stats on the writers in Pantheon’s stables, and we’d maybe just end up the same place we are now. Which isn’t a bad place. There’s so much competition that whoever makes it to the top must deserve it. That kind of model really helped Connor Macleod’s swordsmanship and vigilance, anyway. Got to think it’s helping my storytelling.

PD: Literature does not have to work—in fact, to my way of thinking, an identifying mark of literature is that it does not work. By this I don’t mean that it doesn’t work the way a kitchen sink might not work (i.e. it can be called broken) but that it does not work, full stop (i.e. there is nothing for it to do).

SGJ: I agree, yeah, but there’s a middle ground there, too, I think. For me, anyway. A book can completely fail, but I’ll still love it. Or, I mean, if I saw a werewolf hooked up to a polygraph in there, and it told us this whole catalogue of stuff it can tell just by smelling a rabbit, then I’ve been somewhere, I’m satisfied. Never mind if the story around it sucked, was cardboard. I’ve seen a werewolf lie-detector scene. Or I’ve seen a zombie picking this miniskirt instead of that one. And this is where genre fiction tends to just crush so-called literary fiction: if something on the boring shelves fails, then I’ll feel like my time was stolen. So I saw some guy riding the bus all day because his girlfriend kind of maybe didn’t like him, and this reminds him of his dad’s

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affair with his aunt, and his brother's near-suicide, and the way his geography teacher could play badminton—*who cares?* This is the life we all lead. I don't want fiction to take me deeper into this world all around me, I want it to chute or ladder me to some wonderland I'd never guessed at. This is how the world becomes bigger. Not by digging holes into it every six steps. That's how you trash a landscape.

PD: Marvelous and a better starting point for what I consider a crucial discussion I could not have asked for—I want to specify something about Literature, Literary Fiction, Genre Fiction, Escapism and all of that. I don't think Literature, when I use the word, is aimed at any type or particular style of writing—rather it is a difference between 'merely writing' (the act of setting down words) and 'writing through a specific filter' this filter, it just being there, is what differentiates literature from anything else. I do not posit Literature as 'better' or 'worse' than non-literature, but find it violently important that some way of differentiating be discovered.

SGJ: Really? Not me. Way I see it, that effort to differentiate is where the violence is happening. Or, that uppercase literature, there's some hierarchy built in, deeper than just the proper noun of it. To say it different, I guess, what's literature for one person isn't for another, there are no absolutes. And it finally doesn't have anything to do with the qualities of the writing, the depth or reach of the story, but with what the reader brings to the text. What they connect with. For some it's Salvatore, and for some it's Murakami. Or, for the denizens of Walter Miller's post-apocalypse, it's

Leibowitz—a completely random process: what's survived. Too, I think there's books out there—I'm not saying anything revolutionary—that are both escapist and high literature, to fall into that model for a bit. Say, Pullman's *His Dark Materials*. As far as I'm concerned, that's one of the five great works of the twentieth century, maybe three, far outpacing *Ulysses*, or even—feels like sacrilege, here—*Gravity's Rainbow*. *His Dark Materials* is our *Moby Dick*, I mean. Which sounds like an overstatement, yeah. But I believe in it all the way.

PD: Escapist, I think, does break two ways—Escape Out or Escape In, the former more a drift away from 'higher' the latter a direct line to it. *The Man Who Was Thursday*, anything by Wells, some things by Lovecraft or Leroux. Absolutely. Thing about *Ulysses*—or thing about people's reactions to it, a lot of the time—or about anything that is aimed, and succeeds, to be in the realm of Literature Absolute—is the awkward assumption that Joyce was sitting around thinking he had a real crackerjack book everyone was going to love, that would be instantly accessible—that he wanted a New York Times Bestseller.

SGJ: That's what I thought with my first novel. Not that I'm close to being Joyce or anything, but that stupid, blind impulse, that wishful assumption that because I wrote it 'so well,' everybody's going to automatically love it...my first novel was my dissertation at FSU, and one of the profs on my committee, he said if I wanted, he could maybe get this published for me. I told him thanks, gee, shucks, all that, but no, took it to New York instead, where a friend of mine had some job that gave him keys to a few literary agencies or

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publishing offices. So he swiped letterhead, pretended to be my agent—guess he was, really—but it was reject reject reject. Because my first novel, surprise (to me), wasn't commercial, wasn't New York, was, as that prof on my committee had suggested, built for the small press, for a different audience. So I came back to him on bended knee, that novel got me a good award, but still—I think I'm perpetually hopeful. No, insistently hopeful, always nurturing this secret little certainty that Oprah's going to champion my next book, that King's going to say he was wrong in 1990 about Barker, that somebody *else* is the future of horror. But I don't see how you can be a writer without being a dreamer, either. It's the exact same impulse. I can't imagine writing *for* an audience of a hundred and fifty people only. Or, I wouldn't, I don't think. And it's not about money there, either—could be a hundred and fifty donors from the yacht club. It's about me wanting to say stuff to a lot of people. But, what about the guy in that story who paints a leaf on his dying friend's window so she'll think it's spring, right? And then keep on living one more day. Beautiful story, very 'kid-donating-blood-in-a-tent,' expecting to die from it and doing it anyway, but that's less about an artist having a very important audience of one than it is about a friend using his art *for* a friend. However, those novels that pretend to be aimed at one very specific person, that's a very fun conceit. It's how I remember *Atonement*, anyway, who cares if I'm remembering right. Or, in *Life of Pi*, the magic of that piece is that I actually feel like Martel wrote it not for everybody, but for me. Like we've passed some secret between us. But David Mitchie's *The Magician of Lhasa* is exactly the same experience—feels like he was tasked to tell me this story. That everybody else is getting it's just fun, doesn't

matter. And maybe the best novels, or the ones that matter to us most—all us individuals, yeah—that's how they get 'best.' They don't feel broadcast wide, they feel targeted in the most self-destructive way, a way that, if it misses its mark—misses *you*—then the thing's a failure. Except of course there's thousands of you's out there to feel those crosshairs on their forehead.

PD: I like that very much...we got to that by way of...*Ulysses* and people thinking literary-literary personal expressions are meant to be for the masses when something like *Ulysses*, it obviously is what it is and anyone suggesting it is a layman's beach read is some kind of character, indeed. Then, there's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* which Stevenson penned to be a real Shilling Shocker, but I believe it was his wife read it and saw the elevation it had. It's easier to see things that appear to be nothing as magical, having the ability to prestidigitate themselves, shape shift—now it's 'a horror story' now its 'high art'—and it's more exciting. There's trouble—harmless trouble—when something that just wants to be high art, no disguises, comes in—it seems pompous even when it isn't, like it's trying to pull a fast one when it probably wants to be, for the most part, left alone. Another paradox there, in that there is more a gut reaction to hate someone who wants to say he is better than folks in a high faulting way (i.e. 'I wrote *Ulysses*') than someone who just as much, often gratuitously so, posits themselves as 'better' based on success, celebrity, even disguising their elevation in a language of 'I'm like you—I'm not James Joyce.' If any of that makes sense.

Retuning to the actual subject we were on though, for myself, I consider a work to be literature if it showcases

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the point of tension between conscious and unconscious expression—that is when something is composed in an exorbitantly unconscious way I don't consider it literature (but this isn't to deride it, just to differentiate) and when something is largely consciously written, so much to the point that the conscious is clearly given predominance, I do not consider it to be literature (again, this only distinguishes it, does not devalue or elevate).

SGJ: I think I follow you, yeah—get better what you were saying, before. The way I read this distinction you're reaching for, it's between books that feel like wonderful, magical accidents, and books that you're really impressed that all this work went into it. *Catch-22* versus, I don't know, Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow*. *FUP* up against *The White Hotel*, cage fight to the death. Which, I would not be placing bets in either of those duels, man. I love all four of those books so, so much. But again, there's middle ground, I think. There's *The Wonder Boys*, there's *Deliverance*—books that drink from both wells, writers that camp on each side of the river, can sculpt their stuff, have so much control of it, that they can render the effect, the *feel* of something completely organic, completely accidental. Absolutely true. Finally, I think, those are the books I prefer, too. As for who can do this the most consistently, though, man. Neal Stephenson's the knee-jerk answer there, and I'd put Percival Everett in the running, but I think I'd finally come down with Charles McCarry. He outpaces everybody, has this Nabakov kind of intellect, these Lem kind of smarts, it seems, but a way of reaching right into people's hearts that's more in keeping with Louise Erdrich. Amazing, amazing writer. We need to clone him.

PD: We should clone him, but then put him in direct competition with himself—which McCarry, now that there are two, do you like? Or do you think they would—as separate but the same entities—accept that, though they are doing different things, they are equally good? As a kind of aside, one of my ‘pretend bits of advice’ that really I sort of believe is that any writer who is entering the Scene should do so as at least two writers, never letting on, never letting anyone know. Not only does it have the advantage of being able to recommend your own work with no one being the wiser, but there’s nothing so interesting as discovering you are rooting more for ‘one of yourselves’ than the other.

SGJ: That’d be good advice, yeah—I mean, so long as you didn’t really recommend your own stuff, or review it. And, I’ve considered doing the Ian Banks/Ian M. Banks shuffle, or even the Jack Ketchum trick, where everybody knows ‘Ketchum’ is just a hooky name—King was so lucky to be named that—but, I’m always terrified that I won’t hold myself to the same standards, if I did. Which, I know, ‘this guy has standards?’ But, yeah, surprise. Isn’t to say I don’t have a lot of cool-but-not-too-cool names in hip pocket, here. Been saving them for years now, waiting. And, the one piece of advice I always try to give to writing students, it’s to figure out what you want your name to be right now, when you first start publishing. Because if you wait, things’ll snowball, you won’t want to break some imagined chain of provenance, or to risk losing an audience, and then you’re stuck with a name you never really thought about. Me, say, my name’s so bulky, so only-using-the-middle-name-so-as-to-distinguish-me-from-that-other-guy. If I

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had it to do over, I'd be somebody else right now. I want a cool name on my cover, like ZZ Packer, or WBE Dubois, or Caleb Carr. But then, I don't know—'Sara Douglas' is a nothing-special name, but in the right font, I guess, and when slapped on the spine of all these series of fantasy novels, it becomes cool. And maybe that's the boat I'm missing: it's not the name that makes you cool, it's you who makes the name cool. So, I'm trying, I guess. Lugging all these syllables around from book to book.

PD: Something from earlier, your two examples of the 'rejected/contemplative guy on the bus' and the 'werewolf lie detector', I think, both represent an overtly conscious writing—on one hand, the werewolf lie detector: a cool scene, an interesting scene, something to get lost in because of whimsy particular, nothing birthed of a struggle to express something unconscious through a conscious construction, just a really cool scene; and on the other hand, an overtly, self-referencing, naval gazing piece of writing of some individual relating particulars as though there should be universality in them, indeed, from your tone I am imagining a kind of writing that presupposes a universality. Interesting to me is your passionate use of 'Who cares?' with regard to the latter and your celebration of the former (I find neither reaction inappropriate or odd, mind you, just interesting). It goes without saying that quite easily, in someone else, these reactions would be reversed—'Who cares about a made up, superficial scenario of a werewolf being interrogated? But look at the obvious pertinence to this introspective consideration of life etc etc'. An ideal literature to me, just to have something to play with, would be a novel of someone who has been left by his

girlfriend and he rides around on a bus thinking about a werewolf being interrogated.

SGJ: Exactly. Oscar Wao.

PD: Exactly.

The label of Literary Fiction has gotten hold, it is undeniable, in an odd way and has set up stipulations and is horribly misunderstood to automatically Be Literature, while the same artifice of Genre Fiction (under whichever subname) seems to be set up as Not Literature.

SGJ: It's like—it's like literary fiction presumes to be 'quality' just because there are no plasma cannons in it, thereby saying that anything with plasma cannons can't be quality. But it's so, so not about the presence of plasma cannons or spell-casting wands or haunted houses, it's about whether the writing connects with the reader. Content doesn't matter, even remotely. Emotional resonance, though, that's the thing. It's like with music: you've just got to come up with some melody or arrangement to elicit that kind of response. Sometimes you luck into it, most times you don't. And here's where so many of the genre writers mess up. They think it's *enough* to have some cool plasma cannons going on. Wrong. Wrong wrong wrong. You've got to arrange those cannons so that, when they fire, the reader goes with those blasts—I've been watching a lot of *Spaceship Yamato*, lately—that their heart goes out there into space too. If you've done that, you've done all you can do in writing, I think. You've made somebody feel what you feel. You've connected. And everybody's better for it. And, yes, ramping off what you were saying above, I

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guess it finally is enough to just connect with one person, finally, though you're hopefully trying for all. One reader. I mean, if you can save the lives of everybody who reads your story, that's great, sure, but if you can save even one life, that's pretty great too. Has to be worth it.

PD: I'm pausing to nod my head, in earnest appreciation of something said and said well. And here I further by bringing up one of my personal slants on this philosophy (bear with me, perpetually bear with me). You bring up, eloquently, the idea of connection, emotional, in the sense of 'sharing pleasantly', getting to the same place and with the same reaction—which not for one moment would I suggest is anything less than a profound, profound and beautiful thing to want and is a little dream to get, certainly. Also though, there is a connection that comes from getting to the reaction ('a reaction') leading a mind where you are leading it to the exact opposite, to a controversy (I mean unintentionally, here, not on purpose)—the reader is with you, understands you, says all the things you wish to hear the reader say, but they say them in a sense of visceral dislike—I speak from a personal experience—you see that the work, tick by tick, moved them, they understand, but they, for lack of a better word (and to use the word as I heard it referenced to me) Hate the work, hate what it makes them feel, find it unpleasant, worthless—not that it didn't succeed, but that it's success lead to nothing desirable (as Dylan might say 'there's no success like failure/and failure is no success at all'). This connection, this touch, this intimacy is as much to be treasured and taken to heart by a writer as a love letter—is, in fact, a love letter, for all intents and purposes. There's the tricky thing, returning to looking

for (even asking for) reaction, to confusing the 'Did it do what I hoped it would?' with 'Did what I hoped it would do have the reaction I hoped it would have?'

SGJ: Good point. I'm always passing Ketchum's *The Girl Next Door* off to people—I try to keep a lot of copies—and the reaction it gets, the connection it makes, it's maybe what he intended, sure (like that matters), but no way is it the reaction or connection we as readers want. Profoundly uncomfortable, I'm saying. Like Delaney's *Hogg*, I guess, except, for me, more visceral. However, Tim O'Brien's *In the Lake of the Woods*, or DeLillo's *Underworld*, or Eugenides' *Middlesex*, even Barker's *Mister B. Gone*, my reaction to each of them, it's nothing like what they, or the publisher, could have wanted. Though I guess I did buy them, too, so maybe that's the real reaction. Anything after that purchase point, so what, right? Well, from the publisher's perspective, anyway. Not meaning to cast them as evil necessarily, either, but they are businesses, and the bottom line has to be profit, not art, or saving people's lives. The job of the writer, then, it's to make the publisher enough profit that you can keep on saving lives, I guess. Which, I mean, Sara Douglas, since I was just talking about her, she's saved my life just as much as Mitch Albom.

PD: It's an odd and unfortunate thing, genre fiction being automatically cast down, mass market paperbacks getting the snub—because *A Simple Plan* is a supermarket paperback it is treated the same as the new James Patterson, you know? and this is a bad, bad mistake. And then if someone recognizes and admits that Smith's novel is not tripe (and 'rescues it' so to

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Speak, sublimates it) they pack it on the shelf with shit like *Duplicate Keys* or *Moo* (for some reason I'm hating on Smiley, today) or fucking *Divine Secret of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* some other 'Literary Fiction' that is not representative of literature—usually to the chagrin of literary fiction writers, who, of course, to me, aren't interested in the honesty of literature.

SGJ: *A Simple Plan* should have its own shelf. Or, there should be a superstar shelf in each store, an endcap selected by the readers—by whoever's willing to trek across the store, lug this book to that place. And other readers should be able to remove books from that shelf as well, meaning only the books with ultra-dedicated readers will survive. I'd be there, fighting for *A Simple Plan*, yep.

PD: For awhile after *A Simple Plan*—because the conceit of the story is nothing new, you know?—I kept running in to what I would term 'poor man's *A Simple Plans*'—other novels with ostensibly the same concept and even decent set ups that did not have the profundity and imperativeness of Smith's work. *Windfall* is the only one springing to mind. It's really interesting how even with fine superficial constructions—the details of how the central character in *Windfall* attempts to slowly trickle the money in to his life are fantastic, for example, I loved them—one book can be an absolute, harrowing, imperative masterwork and the other an 'alright jaunt'. I think everyone should write a bag-of-money novel, quite frankly—I'd be tempted to start a press that published nothing but bag-of-money novels—the idea just seems great and new no matter how many times you hear it.

SGJ: I'd write for that press, and under Smith's shadow. Always trying to do something as well as *A Simple Plan*, always failing from the get-go. But I could never do *Godfather* either, or *Presumed Innocent*. *Dune*, though, I'll take a few stabs at my own *Dune*, yeah, even though it's every bit the masterwork *Godfather* is. Part of being a writer, or keeping on being a writer, I think it's figuring out what you can do, what you can't. And, I know I'm not writing an *Erasure* any time soon, much as I might like and respect that novel. But I'll go until my fingers are numb, trying to do my own *Deadwood* as good as Dexter did. Or, just keep it to Everett: *God's Country*. That he can switch gears like he can, man. Amazing, amazing writer.

And, I don't know—talking beautiful things that blow up: *House of Leaves*, yeah? Amazing, amazing book, but, even though I think Danielewski ends it exactly as he planned—he's no-doubt that kind of writer—still, the thread was lost at about the three-quarter mark, and we're ending thematic, like *No Country for Old Men*, not dramatic plus thematic, like *American Psycho*, or *Love Medicine*. Readers love to see those threads come together in ways that kind of take your breath away. Even—even *Await Your Reply*, another seriously amazing novel, it falls into the trap of, at the end, trying to be important, rather than going for the killshot. As, say Marquez is always doing. And King has that instinct as well. Or, take the end of Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*: it's an *American Psycho* ending, it's saying stupid 'big' stuff for critics, but it's coming from the characters, isn't Alexie controlling the story, but, instead, writing it down as it happens. Like him or not, you've got to respect his instincts, his talent. He gives himself to the page each time. That's all I, as a reader, can ask.

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PD: Well, here even better. Danielewski's book is something I would call an absolute conscious construction—and as you point out, there is nothing negative to say about it, no one can fault it fundamentally because there is nothing fundamentally wrong with conscious construction. But this example—and your pairing it (which I will change to juxtaposing it) with *American Psycho*—illustrates very clearly that the investigation of Danielewski's work leads (and apparently this is a desire of the author) to Danielewski's work—it is there to investigate itself and to explain itself and to riddle with itself and needs no outside point of reference to do so, supplies all of its nuance specifically to some controlled end—while Ellis' work, as marvelously controlled (a finer example of controlled writing I cannot think of) as it is, is exemplary of a control that seems to pre-exist the writing, a frame work, while the novel itself is investigating things wildly unconscious, disastrously personal—the investigation of one page of *American Psycho* leads not to another page but away from the page, even reinforcing the sad expression of who/what Patrick Bateman is. Danielewski's book is closer akin to a technical drawing say by Escher or Geiger—an intricate, intelligent rendering that, I will say, 'discusses response to what it represents' while Ellis is closer akin to a cubist work or to the sort of control present in Pollock which we will say 'represents the response it is discussing'. And as a side note, on the idea of control, I want to emphatically point out that work not consciously controlled, drafted, outlined, is not going to just wander off, formless, incoherent, lacking cohesion, a bunch of gobbledygook, but I often think people imagine this is

what will happen, that no one is capable of reigning themselves in at all, that if left to 'free write' (a term I disdain) they will create indecipherable, incoherent drivel, self-referenced, indulgent, a noisy mish mash of unpunctuated nonsense and this just isn't so.

SGJ: Completely agree about MZD and BEE, though I doubt I could have articulated it that well. And, Pollock—haven't they done studies of his paintings, and found that the level of randomness or chaos he puts on the canvas, unlike when everybody else tries, is almost perfectly in keeping with the amount you get when you measure a tree, or grass—nature. So, there's something going on with him, he was tapping into something, and I can't figure it out. He must have had an eye for it, though. Or just been real lucky. Doesn't matter to us, as we've got the product, but, with him in particular, maybe solely, I'd be interested in his process. In how he selected this one for the gallery, not that one. It would have to be revealing. And, the only book I can think of that has this wild, almost random feel, but that also feels absolutely real, it'd be Sean Carswell's *Train-Wreck Girl*, I think. That novel really got to me, in maybe the same way paintings get to other people: I don't really know for sure, or can't articulate exactly why this is so real, so right, but it is. It's how PKD or Vonnegut can feel to me as well. Which—when I first started writing, that was my sole goal. I wanted to elicit an emotional response from the reader that she couldn't pin down, that she couldn't articulate. I suspect painting does this for a lot of people—me, I look at a Modigliani, and all I can think is that that head is not to scale with that body, bub—and music does it for even more, but I can't paint, can't do anything with music, but I can, on a good day, kind of spill myself all

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over the page. Which—it's a weird sort of exhibitionism, wouldn't you say? It is for me.

PD: There's a line in the film *Max* where young Adolph Hitler is having a conversation with the art dealer Max Rothman and Hitler negatively critiques a very expressionist painting Rothman has in the gallery, saying (among other things) that it has 'No technique'. Rothman replied 'But could you do that? Could you be that voluptuous with yourself?' and this has haunted me every day since I first heard it. Because yes, it is indeed a raw and unguarded exhibitionism, it is the obvious and self-evident expression of what is obvious. There's a great abandon in wanting to express plainly, voluptuously, obviously—I think some people break it down the other way and that it is unfortunate: they look at a finely rendered realist work and consider it obvious to express that way, to paint what is outside the window like the canvas is the window and the paint is literally what is on the other side, while they look at something else, something Cubist or pointillist or De Stijl, and think it is a burst of difficult, profound creativity, that it is not obvious to see the world as *Guernica* when the work, really, is a gun-shot-dead of what is obvious, unfiltered, simply there. In writing, I think what differentiates, among other things, an artist from a craftsman is the ability to stifle the natural tendency away from stating what is personally obvious—art is obvious, craft isn't.

SGJ: Well said. And, that 'But could you do that?' it haunts me as well. Other people are always such complete mysteries to me. These hermetically sealed bags of mystery. Like, I'll watch somebody dancing, or woodworking, and I can't even connect the littlest,

smallest bit to that impulse, because what I'm always asking myself while I'm watching them do that is 'Don't they know about writing, and reading?' But then my wife tells me that they, if they're even thinking about me, are probably thinking the same thing: 'What's wrong with that guy watching us? Doesn't he know the beauty of the lathe, of the pirouette?' No, I don't, sorry. And, I don't think what you're doing's stupid—I'm happy for tables, and chairs—but, for me, the only way to be even somewhat authentic is to lie in the most convincing way, lie until I believe it, and then consider myself a complete failure if everybody else doesn't take that lie to be true, as well.

When people read my stuff, it's always strange for me, I feel so naked there, so obvious. But I think writing can come from, I don't know, from accumulated loneliness, too. I say the magic of writing's being able to connect with somebody in a real way, even though that person isn't even born yet, but that impulse to even connect, would we even have that impulse if we didn't feel some lack of connection in the first place? And not on the unborn's side, but on ours. On mine. Except I consider myself pretty happy, all-told. Who knows? Could just be that some people, the only way they can make sense of the world, it's to draw it with words on a blank piece of paper. How it always feels for me, anyway. Well, that and wanting to get all the bad stuff out of my head, trap it somewhere so I can pass it on, not have to think about it anymore.

PD: This seeming paradox of happiness-and-loneliness I understand and find intriguing. Something seems to suggest that the one preclude the other, but in reality this isn't so. It could be as simple as, as you seem

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to have it, a lonely person has no choice but to find joy, happiness in their expression as it, however rhetorically or however literally, means they are connecting out-of-being-alone. In my extremist tendencies, I admit, I tend to argue all the time against 'Man is a social animal' but in my heart I know it's true—my gripes get confused, I know, with the 'specificities of social', not the existence and necessity of it. And there is no joy—speaking for myself—more profound than getting something out of my head, actually feeling 'It's gone'. It makes you believe in strange things, if you've written and had that real feeling—there was a novel or a story or a poem or whatever that was comprised of this and this and this, I used to feel it, used to know it was there...and now it is physically gone, I cannot think about it if I tried.

SGJ: I wonder if the compulsion to write's in some way associated with our impulse to turn off our interior dialogue, to just, for however long you can sustain it, 'be?' For most people that impulse gets satisfied with religion, with sports, with something you can focus on so completely that you kind of lose yourself in the best way. But the only place I lose myself like that's on the page, really. And then, for a while, it's quiet in my head, and I kind of like it. We all make our own churches, I guess, then sit there as long as we can.

PD: And this gets right back to what we were both earlier discussing about Literature, naming it or not, differentiating it, personally or generally. The worth of it, or even the existence of it, is not measured by any particular effect, by any quantity or result—that one piece of writing survives for hundreds of years,

thousands, whatever, is simply a fact—it is a fact that it exists in a tangible, touchable form—and it is only a fact.

SGJ: Canon's arbitrary, no doubt. But, too, some of the songs in the top 40 are pretty catchy.

PD: Sure, absolutely. And I admit that, at least from a point of view of 'reactor' to a Top 40 hit, give me a Top 40 hit from 40 years ago and it has a haunting kind of fascination—in 40 years forward, so will the top 40 from now. Popular doesn't mean valueless, I would never say so—I'm no reactionary—and it doesn't mean Of Value, either. Nothing is more arbitrary than what someone likes except maybe, and perhaps paradoxically, what most people like.

SGJ: Totally agree. However, if enough people like something—if we're just completely hooked on Britney Spears, then the way she says 'baby,' it works its way into us, and it changes us forever, I think, and all the art we produce after hearing that word like that, after making it part of ourselves, all our art's going to be different. Not better, not worse, but infected. Which, I always want to rig up some model where good stories are sentient, are trying to replicate themselves in as many places as possible, trying to effect some global change which'll allow for more and more of them to exist. Where the writers are just these unaware carriers with grandiose dreams, but really we're just vehicles, we're just hosts. What really matters, what really lives, it's those words on the page. Those squiggly words that just want to go everywhere, do everything.

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PD: You have no idea how much I think about this same thing—I strip it of the more benign aspects you give it, just down to a microbial element of evolutionary thought, but I think about the same thing. For me it's the middle ground between 'grandiose dream' and the Pontypool linguistic virus, you know? I think there are certain patterns of thought that leave residues of themselves, this residue forcing itself into whatever context it can find—it's delicate, needs to be left alone, though—too much attention, it stops being 'it' (the idea, the story, however we're putting it) and it becomes our manipulated rendition of it. Sentient thought is a kind of infection, sure.

SGJ: Which, I'm guessing, would be why words can be dangerous. But yeah, part of me's always subscribing to this microbial model, but the wall I always run up against is time. Or, the direction of time, I should say. Like, if thoughts are the parasites, the microbes, the evolving, infectious things, and we're just these unaware hosts plodding around, a delivery and refrigeration service, pretty much, then how can it all come from a single, 'first' thought? Why so many now, especially since, life being life, there'd be competition. Seems competition would winnow rather than multiply. And, where time comes in is that *Time's Arrow* way, where we, the hosts, are moving one way, but the stories are moving the other, such that, at some point in their 'past' (our way-future), there are uncounted billions all chattering at once, directionless, just a goop of narrative, but as they compete and fight, there gets to be fewer and fewer, until there's that last—to us, 'first'—story, or thought, or word.

PD: But let me be fast to say that Literature is a specific thing, a distinct thing to me, not everything is literature, certainly not—and one of the constant disquiets and upheavals in my thoughts is the quandary this breeds: If I know literature is something that is not tangibly measured and at the same time I know that literature is only certain things and not others (there might be something other than literature that is but cannot be tangibly measured or consciously known) why ever investigate, why bother with attempting to call something literature?

SGJ: I don't even use that word, 'literature.' Probably because of what you're talking about: so amorphous, so useless as a term. And it's got all built-in hierarchies, too, which I of course resist resist resist.

PD: Sure I don't disagree with that—it's an oddness to want to term things, even if it is, as is my little obsession with 'What is Literature?' (I will parenthetically say that my investigation does not ask with an already posited definition, only searching for more qualifiers, but means, dead-from-nothing, 'What is it, what is it we, I, you, anyone means by it?') is just a branch of it—What is genre fiction, what is science fiction, what is creative non-fiction? My bent has little to do with hierarchies and in fact would like to see some conversation on the things people write ignore them altogether, perhaps treating literature as more a concept, an entity

SGJ: —a virus, yes—

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PD: and less ‘a kind of something of which there are many kinds’ would be a help. But, all of that interests me less than what you mean by ‘resist resist resist’. I’m interested in this from a few specific angles—first, resistance, to me (and it might just be me) suggests sort of an antagonistic force, a pressure to resist against, but you don’t want to resist calling your work anything—as in you don’t mind it labeled—and even seem to encourage this as a necessity, taking the marketplace in to account.

SGJ: All for labels, yeah. And, yeah, I do see, or sense, an antagonistic force. And it’s all the self-styled litterateurs, who look down their nose at stuff that stoops to involve itself with convention and formula, and takes the audience into account. And, the only reason I see them as antagonistic is that their opinions tend to get more circulation, and they’re smart people, well-informed people, so the audience will just kind of knee-jerk believe them, and then will list Stephen King as a guilty pleasure, say. When there should be nothing at all to be guilty about, with anything you read. Well, unless it’s kiddie porn or something, but I don’t know how ‘read’ really applies there. I mean, I was reading, what was it—*Wintergirls* a while back. A YA novel about eating disorders. Pretty amazing, too, but it’s got this glittery sparkly cover that isn’t so in keeping with being cool on the bus, and not getting beat up. But I left that dust jacket on, and I held the book up high each time I was reading, because I so resist the idea of being embarrassed by anything you’re reading. Or—how in Italy back when, all the ‘thrilling’ crime kind of stories, they were all published with those yellow covers, until the whole genre become known as ‘giallo?’ I mean, the

branding aspect of that, sure, it's cool, but how is that yellow cover any different from wrapping *Hustler* in brown paper at the convenience store? Not saying I want kids ogling those covers—might sell a lot more Slurpies, sure—but, I don't know, I'm very uncomfortable when people list X or Y as a guilty pleasure, as something they do when their brain needs some time off. Maybe I need to start telling them that reading them, that's *my* guilty pleasure. Except chances are, if they're like that, I don't read them in the first place.

PD: I'm for labels, as well—and I'm a Giallo man from way back. While there are unfortunate rhetoric elements, fears of things 'not getting a fair shake' because of labels—and I admit part of my brain gets stuck on this from time to time—I think the beauty of categorization is that it reminds us 'Hey, what the fuck is a fair shake and what does it have to do with writing?' Because it cuts in all directions—the notion of a 'genre writer' having a nice audience, even though he has to accept that certain members of that audience perceive the genre differently than he does and so only superficially 'take his work for what it is' as well as the recognition in an 'outsider genre' writer having to confront the reality of audience—that it isn't single unit, it is crystallization on top of crystallization and that anyone who does take a read of someone's 'unlabeled, genreless work' is probably categorizing it with this or that label, anyway. I mean, shit, I picked up Camus and Dostoyevsky and Soderberg and Topor because I was reading things (and watching films and listening to radio shows) that were 'intellectual thrillers' philosopher-killers committing some murder as a laboratory experiment etc. etc. I treated *L'Étranger* as a kind of fictionalized

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Compulsion and went in to *Doctor Glas* with the thought in my mind of it was kin to *A Perfect Murder*. I wonder if I told Topor that I picked up *The Tenant* as a 'cool idea for a thriller' what he would think, you know?

SGJ: Same way my first John Barth, *Giles Goat-Boy*, I was kind of expecting it to be more of a monster story. But then I left that text so much more satisfied than I would have been had it have taken that *Monster, 1959* kind of turn. I completely agree about that 'what's a fair shake and what's it got to do with writing,' too. You make your own luck. You're either good or you're trying to be, and then trying some more.

PD: Do you feel this push toward resistance a necessary part, for you, in creation—if you weren't writing against some Other, in reaction or resistance to it, would you feel less inclined to write—or more interestingly, perhaps, would you note a change in the personally perceived importance of what you do write?

SGJ: Man, yeah. Every time I sit down, I'm thinking about all those teachers in elementary who would make me the example for the class that day, of somebody who wasn't going to be anything. All those teachers who would say to the class, 'Go find Stephen in ten, twelve years, and see if he's still all that.' In a larger sense, though, yes, this resistance to classification, this resistance to hierarchies, this resistance to the possibility that there can even be 'slumming' when it comes to writing, all that definitely fuels me. Just a whole lot of people needing to be put in their place. But, the best comics, they're always the angriest ones, right? Me, I guess I'm just kind of pissed off, am not out railing in

the streets. Yet, anyway. Maybe it'll be enough. At the same time, though, I'm not writing solely for that, either. With writing, it's just something I can't help. It happens, and it's like I'm waking up at the keyboard, waking up in another novel, and: here we are again, dude. Hold on.

PD: Yeah, it's part of you, just a part, not 'all of you reduced to a thunderclap of initial frustration'. As far a back as kindergarten I fancied I was a writer and have similar experience to what you say—some humorous, some actually kind of disturbing from the point of view of thinking about education (though admittedly at various times I was probably an instigator as much as anything)—though I think with me it gave a comfort to the identity of Writer, it was part of it to kind of be separate from the usual way of looking at things. I never—probably because a lot of the writers I dug—attached a notion of success or celebrity, in general, to writing, it was always a kind of success in itself—if I wrote *King Lear* and everyone said 'Piss off with that' well...I'd written King fucking Lear, I was the winner though no one generally would recognize it, even. I think however the idea of Writer is first romanticized by someone becomes the thing, it never is really gotten away from and however that first stamp is made, the rest of one's 'career' is a kind of self-justification of that first idea of Identity—identity other than 'I am me,' identity as 'I am writer—writer is this and I am that.'

SGJ: Same here. My early conceptions of what it meant to be a writer, they're hard to overwrite. But for me, it was the opposite, I think. My only real model was John Ritter in *Skin Deep*. I seriously and really and truly thought that was what being a writer was about. I mean,

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before then, I knew I had the facility to lie, a suspicious comfort with words and the page and just reading in general, and that same year I was inhaling *The Dark Half*, which was pretty formative as well, but I thought it was going to be a series of escapades, and a lot of drinking, but mostly just fame. However, I should say that there was this one story I read in elementary, ‘The Boy Who Predicted Earthquakes’ by Margaret St. Clair, and, by then I’d already hit *Where the Red Fern Grows*, knew I could leave an axe head in a tree like that, but this short story—it’s this kid who can see the future, and gets famous from it, has this show everybody sets their watch by, only, one day he looks into his crystal ball, sees a comet hurtling for Earth, and, what he tells the world is that tomorrow’s going to be the best day ever. He lies to them. And it’s the most beautiful lie ever, is such a gift. That stuck with me as well, made me understand that stories can change things, that lies can help. Probably why I’m always championing Tobias Wolff’s ‘The Liar,’ I suppose. Same kind of ending, just on a much smaller scale. One I maybe identify with even more.

PD: This is a bit more of a Pablo-centric questions so I hope it makes sense—to me, quite honestly, in the ‘world of writing’ it seems there is little need to resist anything—if you don’t want to be part of something, don’t, if you don’t want to write X write Y etc.—and so the notion of setting one’s Self or Work in opposition to some other always strikes me as having a grand artifice to it, a kind of ‘I’m inviting in something so I can tell it to get out’ kind of spirit: of course, this might not be a bad thing, but my question is ‘Do you feel this is what you are doing when you say resist?—it doesn’t take effort or action to resist any ‘literary

hierarchy' but your emphatic repetition—resist resist resist—seems to suggest it does to you—do you feel pressure to write other than what you want to write, or is there, to whatever degree, a sense of playacting to this resistance?

SGJ: Yeah, I've always been keenly aware of my tendency—compulsion, really—to set up these haunted houses of straw men, and then run through as fast as I can. In this case, though, I do think that the prevailing—or, what I in my paranoid way consider 'prevailing'—assumptions concerning literary and commercial fiction, they're trickling down to me, they're changing the landscape of the market, and that's the market I have to live in. So of course I want to do some landscaping of my own. Which isn't to say I'm just some mad shrubber off in the corner, mumbling to myself, leaves a-flying. But so many of my favorite writers, starting with Nietzsche, I guess, they've lived in imaginary gardens as well. I don't mind. It's real if it feels real.

PD: Oh Christ, sure—actually being a mad shrubber is where it is at, principally. I think the phantom entity of some sort of idealistic persecution is a good thing. A writer who just out-and-out has an arrogant, formless pomp—not so interesting—but one who has elaborate, constant interior monologue of defense against this well worded critic or who is always muttering their responses to make-believe Bill Moyer interviews has that special arrogance I think is a symptom of good art.

SGJ: Yeah, it's like—that focus writers bring to their own work, it's hard to shift your eyes back to

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normal when you look up from the page, so that you see story everywhere, and, being basically narcissistic—aren't all writers?—the first assumption is that it's focused on you, that it's all for you, and so the story becomes something you can't extricate yourself from, and the page is the only place it can all make any kind of sense.

PD: And it isn't that the 'imagined arguments' are based on the world as it is and how to get in to it—it's like you, they are a kind of (almost humble) assumption that the landscape will change to incorporate, inexorably, one's work: you don't need to be top dog, just an inevitably remarked thing. Maybe that's really more arrogant—as I think it rightly should be—because the world isn't altered in high profile cataclysms, it is slowly unsettled, drifted apart into a new form so fundamentally that change is almost impossible to remark until it already happened a long time ago. It's not so impressive a volcano leveling a city, but learning that the coastline is disappearing a micron at a time is aweing.

SGJ: My book flutters its pages and ten years later we feel the hurricane. After I've starved, of course, or am in jail for trying to rob banks. But, yeah, we have books that are huge successes, of course—*Twilight*, *DaVince Code*—but taking over the world for X months or years isn't the same as being a watershed kind of book, I don't think. To take nothing away from Meyer or Brown, here, but not to give too much to *Ulysses*, either, which might be a frame-up job, because the critics need a champion. But *Fight Club*, say. An after-the-fact commercial success, thanks to David Fincher and Jim Uhls—not to slight Palahniuk, but I doubt he'd say *Fight*

Club's his best, either—but, more importantly, a watershed kind of book, that, like Rowling, brought this whole disenfranchised audience to the table, and kept them there, reading, and, because it basically created a new audience overnight, it did change things. The publishers of course want to conscript writers to make books that *target* that audience, that can cash in on that success, but, too, there's all these people who love *Survivor* or *Diary* like no other book, and think that's the only way to tell a true story, and so, each time they put pen to paper, are trying to do that. And failing, of course—there's only one Chuck P, at the end of the day—but failing in all these interesting ways, and those books, their pages fluttering, we're in that hurricane now, our hair all lifting up, the pressure dropping, the trees swaying. It's a good time to be reading.

PD: At some points I think to myself that there should be some hard and fast marker—I want to say something like 'Conscious construction needs to be only present in X quantities, if there is too much consciousness in a piece of writing it drifts out of being literature'—but this would be rubbish and in two seconds I'd be screaming arguments at myself.

SGJ: Yeah, somebody'd throw John Barth on the table. Or Calvino. Or Nabokov. Even Flannery O'Connor. Anomalies. Geniuses. Robot brains.

PD: Absolutely. Though, I do want to tinker a bit with the statement 'robot brain' just to tune it more toward an overtly technical attention to conscious construction—robot brain, when set in with those names and others of their ilk, suggest more a tendency to stamp

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things out that have a kind of solid, flawlessness to them—insert a coin, pull a lever, ‘robot’ makes it sound effortless—while I think that great ‘technician writers’ in fact put far, far too much effort in. This isn’t a disagreement, just my slant. Out of curiosity, what do you consider the characteristics of a robot brain when it comes to writing?

SGJ: Man, was afraid you’d ask for this. Was hoping I could say ‘robot brain’ and you wouldn’t notice. But, Nabokov, I’ll use him. He could construct these impossibly tight little narratives, these almost mechanistic—yes, built-by-technician—stories where the dramatic line and the very-intended theme and the characters are all in a kind of lockstep, a kind of synchronicity that, I don’t know, that only *Star Trek Next Generation’s* Data could have ever finally dreamed up. Yet, unlike Data, Nabokov, man, he can make looking at this dumb, stupid squirrel, he can make those absolutely momentous, more human than anything I suspect I’ve ever felt, and it’s like he’s coring right down to the brainstem of what it means to be human, and he’s playing it like a harp. And that, that ability to both be in complete, absolute control, while at the same time making the reader laugh, cry, feel authentic, forget they’re reading—all the good stuff we associate with right stories—I don’t know. I can’t do it, and I’ve got a person brain. So I have to suspect Nabokov has something better. That he was a Data, one with Lor’s chip, so he could feel. Except he wasn’t evil, somehow. And that’s maybe the trick, the one Stan Lee’s been teaching us all along: great power, great responsibility. Nabokov saved us all, I think. And he didn’t have to.

PD: I feel that way, or almost, about Chesterton and Saramago, only a bit dirtier, it's a bit clumsier, my thinking. But I do get what you mean. It reminds me of the line of argumentation (for lack of a better word) between prodigy and genius: the one is not the other and some go as far as to say that the one precludes the other. There can certainly be a striking, alarming shake up to the core of one's self when a three-year-old or a five-year-old can grab a violin and tear the roof off with Paganini—but it's hard to see it as anything but technical verve, some mechanic (maybe this is where the core difference in our view of robot-brainedness comes in) hard to imagine the prodigy knows what the prodigy is doing. I think it's kind of wild that—as far as I know—literary 'prodigy' is never recognized until sometime mid-adolescent, young adulthood and even then is so tempered, treated only as an indication of what one day might be worth something. Nabokov—to bring this around—and a few others of his ilk, so often I see them as straddling a line between prodigy and genius—but I never felt a newness from Nabokov and it is the newness, the sense of 'creation ex nihilo' that differentiates. Nabokov's robot-ness—because I think you describe him perfectly—is always what keeps him at a distance for me, he's something I regard but seldom inhabit, seldom feel in me, uninvited.

SGJ: There's definitely a kind of narrative lope, a syncopation to Nabokov, and it either works for you or it doesn't, so I follow what you're getting at there. Or, I follow maybe because I feel the same way about Paul Auster. I've tried and tried to read his stuff, but each time, I get a few pages in and then I'm reading something else. Just doesn't click. Or, maybe Ayn Rand's

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a better example. Her prose is a firestorm, sure, and kind of clumsy, but still, I've had so many friends tell me that I of all people would love her stuff, would, as you say, inhabit it. But each time I try—and it's not fear of being converted or brainwashed, I don't think—each time I try, I can't stick with it. I can't get into synch with her sentences. And it's not about that they're in any way not chiseled, or malformed—like I'm always saying, story first, I can deal with the bad writing if it's *sincere* bad writing—it's that I don't recognize them like I need to, if I'm going to fall face-first into this story. And, I mean, even with Cormac McCarthy or Thomas Pynchon—or, to go translated, Gunter Grass—there's something there I recognize, and I can't quite figure out what it is. But it's not there with Auster, it's not there with Rand. And, who it's there most with, for me? One of my ex-profs, William J. Cobb. Which, 'of course,' I know. I modeled myself after him. It's so strange now, though, reading his stuff. Because I can almost always anticipate the flavor of the next sentence. That same way when you're rewriting something, you'll find yourself, early in the rewritten paragraph, talking about how the foam that forms over cooking macaroni's the same as the foam in the urinal trough at the bar, and then, lower in that paragraph, you've already mentioned how the sides of a urinal feel like arms, reaching out to hug you, and, you didn't drop that macaroni-association because you remembered this was when you were talking about urinals, you dropped it because something in the story at this particular moment is saying 'urine,' and you recognized that, were just giving it room to be what it's trying to be. That's how I read Cobb's stuff. And not at all how I read Auster, though I've tried and tried. It's just somehow so completely alien to anything I can know. Much more alien than stuff

that's off-world, deep in the future, obviously made-up. And maybe that's the power of it, the allure, I don't know.

PD: One thing I feel, though, is that literature itself, as a possible thing, as an inarguably existent fact, is a Universal Quantity—however I emphatically assert that there is nothing, nothing Universal in the particulars of a specific example of literature. One person cannot write a piece that carries relevance to every-person and any person who finds meaning or relevance in some piece cannot even go as far as to assume that this meaning was at all intended by the author—really, they should celebrate that it was not, that it profoundly was not.

SGJ: I agree: different books for different people. However, I do think there are emotional landscapes we've all walked, too, or have wanted to walk bad enough that we may as well have, and that every once and again a book will take us for a stroll through there, maybe on accident, like Keith Richards waking with a perfect, perfect lick in his head, or maybe from five years of pure strain—which is all worth it if you kick out an *Oscar Wao*. Or however it is that Yann Martel did *The Life of Pi*. Whatever he did, it was the absolute right thing. But that novel feels just like an accident, too. The best always do, I think. *Catch-22*, *Cuckoo's Nest*, *Crying of Lot 49*. But the super-intentional can be magic as well. Coover's *Ghost Town*. Dickey's *Deliverance*. So, yeah, not just different books for different readers, but different way of getting these books on the page, I guess. Which, now that I've written it, seems pretty obvious.

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PD: I don't know about that, honestly—about it seeming obvious. For example, I was thrilled when I read an introduction to Kunt Hamsun's *Sult* (Hunger) by a writer I very much dig called Duncan McLean, wherein he rejoiced that he felt it obvious that the book was—I paraphrase—'just made up as Hamsun went' but that this did not rob the novel of all of the brilliance and power it had (nor did it quite make it an accident, I agree with what I think you mean by 'seems an accident', but would probably say 'make it seem obvious and inevitable' or something instead). I loved this so much because it is how I have always felt about Hamsun and, really, it's how I feel about most novels I find kinship with—if it proves out to be true or not is irrelevant to me, entirely irrelevant. I don't really come across that idea so much—usually it's a focus on the work, the tinkering, the toil, the etc the etc. So much to the point that I really find it anomalous for someone to give solemn credit to novels that may well have been 'dashed off and that's that'—the tendency does, I think overwhelmingly, turn toward finding some 'proof-of-robot-brained-genius-at-work,' some tangible, recorded, tick-by-tick procedure toward the illusion of accidental—most people want every word and every effect it had on them (which most people offhandedly, myself included, tend to extend to being the reaction every reader has and should have) to be the scientific result of a master hand, their response an appropriate, measureable testament to an absolute quality.

SGJ: I think that compulsion is just a result of, if we believe all this work went into it, then we can buy into the notion that if we too work this long, apply ourselves this much, we can produce something like this.

It's kind of a running denial of genius, I mean. A way of bringing the great talents down to a level that doesn't make the rest of us feel so irrelevant. I'm completely happy with the fact that Stephen King's a better storyteller than I am, though. And I know I'll never do dialogue like Leonard, and I know for sure I'll never approach even one-tenth of Charles McCarry's talent, but, too, I firmly believe in luck. That I'm the monkey at the typewriter, just jamming down keys almost at random. That someday I might write something even better, completely when I'm not even paying attention. Which, yeah, that not paying attention, it's how I use genre, how I use convention: as baffles to occupy the thinking parts of my brain. So that the real parts of my brain can maybe write something real down. Because I'm convinced you can't do anything, not if you're thinking about it. You have to be a zen archer, and close your eyes before you launch that arrow. And, that process of closing your eyes, it's so damaging, yeah, you have to trade big pieces of yourself, you have to hit all kinds of friendly bystanders with your crazy arrows. But every once and again, you Robin Hood it right down the middle, and the whole world hears that thunk, is never the same again.

PD: Absolutely. I always feel I build from genre—no matter how much or little it seems to appear in my work, you know?—every idea I ever think up is an idea for a thriller—really, everything.

SGJ: If there's any other way to do it, I don't want to know about it.

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PD: And you're right that the conventions—whether just those personally perceived or those studied—can do exactly that, give the brain a game to play while you write. 'Why does someone discover the body? Just because, it's what happens, there's always that 'someone discovers the body moment'—but meanwhile, while such superficially important conversations are happening, the prose is going down, the atmosphere. Atmosphere—an acceptance of atmosphere—is what is brilliant about genre—in the end, a genre piece lives or dies on what it feels like, and if it is 'felt' enough then it is literature. To make another cinema allusion, it's the difference between praising the director and praising the cinematographer, the director of photography, etc. Though I run the constant risk of being drummed out for blasphemy, I say this: the film *Memento*, it's not a very good film writing wise, structure wise, content wise—but it is great to watch, it is just enough of a good idea and the atmosphere is propelling.

SGJ: Yeah, the atmosphere, how well you've composed the lighting and all that, it's definitely what makes it real, finally. But, in film, at least, after watching, I'll be talking to somebody, and they'll mention the cinematography, or the score, and I always kind of have to look back to the idea of the theatre, ask myself, *Was* there music in there, anyway? *Was* it all pretty through the camera lens? And, I don't think it's that I don't even pay enough attention to track all that's going, it's that I identify so completely with the characters that the music and cinematography does its job on me in ways I don't even know. I'm just a puppet in there; somebody else has got the strings. And the best fiction does this as well, I think—it seduces the reader into an engagement with

the text so deep that the writing doesn't matter. The atmosphere, all that 'filler' between the plot points, it's just part of a real world, isn't any kind of device or rhetorical tactic. That willful kind of gullibility, though, I mean, I've stubbornly held onto it, sure—often to my own detriment—but so often people get it conditioned out of them. They're taught to analyse, to criticize, to take apart their experience instead of just letting the story wash over them, and they can't ever turn that off. It's so sad when that happens to people, I think. And I see it a lot. Temporary bitterness can lodge in somebody, become a permanent kind of cynicism, and then, suddenly, they've lost the ability to cry at *Iron Giant*. It's the worse kind of existence, that. Terrified of it ever happening to me.

PD: To bounce back to literature, it's like reading Conan Doyle—all atmosphere, as good as the incidentals are you're a fool to appreciate Doyle for that, it's the way the things feel, full stop. Or take the majority of Jim Thompson. And no matter what anyone else might say, atmosphere is not something that is built—it's blind arrows, as you say, it's having the confidence to understand there is something 'other' to a really good piece. Someone says 'I don't know Scott Smith, *Simple Plan* has kind of been done before' and it would be impossible to argue—it has—but that unique atmosphere, that unbuilt part is what makes it. Writing from genre can be grating if too many people are talked to, though—maybe why I don't workshop etc.—due to the tension between 'I want to say I'm writing something new' but 'I know there is no language but the final product to get that across'—atmosphere cannot be

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explained, even through comparison—comparison almost kills it the most.

But, all of this is too airy even for my taste, let me jump in to some particular line of investigation and see what, if anything, is jarred loose. There is an artifice to precision and to the idea that anything in literary creation is (or needs be) precise.

SGJ: Though—you hit McCloud’s discussion of iconic characters in *Understand Comics*? If I’m remembering right, he says that the more vague the character there, the more the reader puts himself into that panel. So, a happy-faced stick figure becomes ‘you’ so much easier than some photo-realistic pencilwork. Or, to keep this to straight prose: I see myself so much more readily in a fantasy novel than I do a ‘realist’ novel. Because, yeah, I maybe always did want to sail a ship to fight a dragon. This story’s making me become, for three hundred pages, who I probably secretly think I am. Or want to be. And, tapping into that, it’s so much more vital than getting down the politics of an office right, or the tensions of a family dinner. It lets you escape, and leaves you different, whereas seeing other people eating dinners just like you do, sure, it makes you feel less alone, maybe, and fiction definitely has that magic, even across time, but it doesn’t make your heart beat faster, either. And—I mean, take Ursula LeGuin, I’m thinking this is *The Left Hand of Darkness*, where we’re way off planet, way out of our native timeline, but these people are sitting at their table, eating dinner, and they—my friend Keith Irwin used to use this example, so it’s his, not mine—they keep these little weighted sticks, like these balls on the ends of stir-sticks, and they use it to break the ice that’s continually forming on the surface of

their drinks. At which point you realize that, as strange as these people and their society might seem, they're us, and, bam: now a story's taken you somewhere else, made the world so much larger, but it's made you feel less alone, too. Good fiction can do that, can take you into the turkey slaughterhouse like Egolf did, and make it feel just like home.

PD: Something else I so love to investigate, so another of my layered set ups to a series of inquiries. Oh, first let me say I do dig McCloud, but dig on Eisner's *Comics and Sequential Art* a lot more (probably not surprising, right?) but it's been forever since I've read his thing, I kind of want to dig it up, now. Anyway, I have always felt a bit alone in never having wanted to fight a dragon—to take specifically from your example—and have never really gotten behind anything I read in an escapist sort of way—or not nothing, but it's seldom and so I feel the foreigner when this aspect of 'enjoying reading' comes up: which leads to my continual confession that, really, I'm not much of a reader, so perhaps it makes sense that my position of writing often wildly differs from folks who like to read. Imaginative, escapist aspects are great, I'm not saying they aren't, but let me toss in this specific slice of my thought life, if you'll indulge me, to make example of what I mean. There is a brilliant episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (well, there are many, but I'm only talking about one right now) called *Darmok* wherein the captain is stranded on a planet with an alien captain and some sort of beast—the conflict being that the alien captain can only communicate through metaphor, can only speak by citing iconic example, repeated phrasings built from its myth and specific culture. And I watch this

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episode and every time I fall over with jealousy, it destroys me that this didn't occur to me to write. But, while the surrounding parts of the episode are great—Riker figuring out how to get the enemy ship to lower its shields, transporters tied in to the specific thread of the story, etc.—I don't give a shit about that part. And when I fantasize myself into the situation or a like-situation, it isn't 'in space', isn't 'on a starship'—because the part that turns me on is the extension of the fantasy into actual life, not the other way around. I feel it always goes a bit too far—hyperbolic appreciation, perhaps, genuinely felt nestled in to expression of honest assessment—to say 'This takes us someplace else and makes us feel at home' and such thoughts, but I only feel this way not because a novel has never made me feel at home, but because it has never made me feel away, even for an instant (except maybe that it makes me feel more aware of a rhetorical world, gives a dagger to the rhetorical for awhile, a violent pertinence). There's a brilliant documentary about termites and driver ants that speaks to this, as well—watching it made me deeply question things about my humanity and identity, but it didn't have to get me there, I never felt 'Wait, where am I? Termites? I don't care about this, this is nothing like me' and then some artful rendering made me see that I was being indicted by the piece as much as anything. This is multiplied over when I know a foreign environment for a novel is the creation of an author—it'd be a bigger trick, I sometimes muse, for a writer to write a whole novel about an alien, foreign, worlds-removed-culture that reminds me nothing of my own life—I also posit that it would be impossible, but you know what I mean.

SGJ: Earthlings can only write Earthling novels, yeah. Were I to *War & Peace* up some termite mound, it would still be Tolstoy, would still be achingly human. And, that STNG episode, it's one of my favorites too, and I have the exact same response: Why did I not write this? Because it is brilliant. However, were I to synopsise it, I would say Picard's on-planet, trying to find some means of communication with a race so alien the universal translator can't crack their metaphor. All the Riker stuff, the ship stuff, the story happening in the sky—until you mentioned it, I'd completely forgotten it. For me, that story's like you say: two people talking, or trying to. Sandor Marai's *Embers*, pretty much, just with some *Enemy Mine* in there. But the *Enemy Mine* part, that's what draws me. I'm the fly, buzzing around, looking for something sweet to settle down onto. And this set-up, it's pure sugar, all icing. However, once I'm down there, on-planet with them, the bait doesn't matter, the set-up's gone. It's just a people story. The best writing does this, I think. And, *Embers*, that's a novel I would have never gone to, except I make myself follow my own advice, of always reading the books of those you consider your enemies, your opposition. And, *Embers*—two old dudes talking it up in some remote mansion, half the thing delivered in some kind of flashback? I couldn't imagine anything more opposite to what I'm built to read. Except it was beautiful, it was perfect, it was, and is, a wonderful little story, one that matters. Just as the STNG episode matters.

PD: Yours is a better synopsis to the episode, I like that. And *Enemy Mine*—good for you, nice little film. And the one (STNG) being a meal while the other (*Enemy Mine*) is all icing is such a direct and correct way

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of putting the matter. Nothing not to be taken from *Enemy Mine* that cannot also be taken from STNG—it, as you have it, boils down to that ‘people story’, that communication. It’s really one of those great setups—in outer space or not—the attempt to decipher one another, to understand one another. *Enemy Mine* I think has the sort of verve of the adventure story to it more, probably (to tangentalize, a moment) because it is a one-shot thing. It’s fascinating to me, the single pieces set in larger continuities like STNG—how it may well be that larger continuity that immediately sets me thinking of the content as removed from the exact episode—after all, we know Picard ain’t gonna die, we know Riker will get the shields down and even if the alien captain is killed it is kind of pre-accepted. The tone immediately sets itself as a detail in a larger expression—like other brilliant episodes *The Inner Light*, *Family*, *I, Borg*, *The Drumhead* etc. Novels, stand-alone films and stories have a built in truth that they could be all expansive, making bold, Everything Statements, so much to the point they are often, I feel, inappropriately made grandiose when they want to be intimate, nothing of exhaustive consequence is being explored, just one aspect of endlessness.

SGJ: Wonder if that has something to do with the permanence in our culture of *The X-Files*? Instead of being big and sweeping, it could be intimate, episode by episode, and somehow, sometimes, so intimate that it even felt big and sweeping, but like a secret you’re not going to tell anybody, ever. Are just going to sit at your table and grin about. And, the genre episodes always got that across so much better than the conspiracy episodes—which, being trans-season, long-arc’d, of course had that pressure to try to ‘mean’ more, to be

'important,' to go 'somewhere.' There was never that implicit promise with the genre-episodes, though. We always knew they'd be contained, that Mulder would soapbox about it all in vain, Scully would secretly believe, and then Chris Carter's name would come up, releasing part of us, but keeping the important part of ourselves there, in a newly created, very 'possible' space. A space we could almost will into existence.

Stuff with the scifi icing on it, or the gory packaging, that's where the crowd's going to go, I think. And, if you want to reach the most people, it makes sense to offer something they've already got a taste for. And I do, I want to reach the most people possible. Not saying this is *why* I write genre stuff, but it's part of it, definitely. Why task yourself with creating an audience from scratch, when there's already an audience out there waiting? I mean, Palahniuk did it, Rowling pretty much did it, King too, but gambling on being able to do that, it's not sure enough for me. I believe in my ability to write, I mean, but I think even King would say his success had a lot to do with timing, and luck. That he's stayed on top, that's pure talent, but getting launched like he did, that was more like, I don't know. Like a prophecy coming true. And, that not using books as trapdoors, to escape, or not feeling like you're going somewhere else, I think that's where the big divide is between people who prefer the literary to the commercial, to the genre-driven. I don't want to say there's only two kinds of readers, but those are the only two kinds I can think of, anyway: those Tolkien touched once and forever, and those who got infected with reading, with story, by—I don't know, obviously: Updike? Mailer? Celine? Fitzgerald? I'm of the Tolkien readers, I guess I'm saying. Growing up, books were the best, and, really, only way for me to be

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somebody who wasn't me. The best vehicle for me to pretend. And I didn't just suckle at that nipple, I pulled it down into my stomach, tried to bite it off.

PD: Sure, I'm with you and it's true it can get over-simplified. In fact, what you say about how you took Tolkien, it's often my argument in defense of anything generally considered 'less than worthwhile'—this can either be large form ('Television sucks your brain away' to which it always seemed obvious to me that it is a matter of the interpretive mind looking at it) or it can be terribly specific—for example, I adore watching 50 Movie Pack films or reading things I know were intended only for a moments distraction, no thought to be included in a conversation like we're having, you know? But when I engage with them, it is on my terms, I alter them in to objects as I alter 'high art' into my own personal object—I can find as much to say and explore about cinema in the blandest, Z grade, poorly dubbed Italian Giallo as I can in a slow burn work by Polanski or I can take the skeleton of a supermarket political thriller and find discourse about whatsoever, sure. It's not where you disappear, but how—you're right. Touching on King and luck and all, it's always that, luck, and I don't begrudge anyone going ahead and—not in a pandering way—finding there is an audience for something they do and so exploring both that audience and themselves. I suppose, in fact, often it troubles me how a readership—or viewership—will revolt against an alteration, will in fact, in cases, tap away at what is genuinely 'This author's work' by so insistently and in such numbers framing it as their little fetish.

SGJ: Yeah, we gave our new puppy a different kind of food the other day, with the same result: puke everywhere. And that it can even be possible to betray your audience—that's so wonderfully complicated, says so much about us, I think. It almost makes writers like voted-in politicians, who promised to do this and that, always between these prescribed lines. But, yeah, when Anne Rice took a religious bent, I know a large part of her audience got suspicious. At the same time, though, Orson Scott Card, sure, his politics seem pretty whack to me, and dangerous besides, but that doesn't at all take Ender away. I'll still and forever read Card. I mean, Rod Stewart or Steve Martin, I've heard they're not the easiest people to get along with, but I love their art, and that's all that matters, finally. But I've gone off-course, sorry. Not what you were getting at at all. You're talking more like, if Pringles changes its formula, starts giving us something that tastes more like Ruffles, we're maybe going to revolt in our consumery ways, yeah? However, I always so respect those writers who have made a name for themselves and then write something completely not in keeping with what they've done before. What it is, I think—aside from staying interested yourself—is testing whether it's the content or the writing that's working, here. Same way King tested whether it was his writing or his name that sold books. And it's a perfectly legitimate test, too, and made even better because there's so much at stake: lose your reader's trust once, and you're likely not ever getting it back. So, if you're going to make a gamble like that, you've got to believe in your own strength as a writer even more than your mom does.

Returning to some earlier point, it isn't to say I don't all-the-way dig *The Virgin Suicides* or all the stodgy, consciously literary stuff. There's so much there for the

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stealing. And there's good stories besides. But, even still, I read *The Virgin Suicides* as escapist, I identify with that plural narrator enough that, for a couple hundred pages, I forget me. And it's good, it's a rollercoaster ride, one I can shut the book on if I want at any time. Except of course I never do. And, sure, standing up inside that story, I look around, and understand that this is also my life, my real life, and maybe I even learn something, tap into the great mystery, all that, but, definitely, I go at all books like I'm reading a Louis L'Amour, like the invitation on that cover, it's to be this unkillable gunslinger, drifting around, dispensing justice. The invitation is never the *American Beauty* kind, of 'look closer,' of 'this is you.' Anytime I become aware of that kind of possibility, anyway, then I'm gone, I'm somewhere happy, I'm off-planet, five hundred years into some barbarian future, where I get to carry a sword. Go to happy places, I say. Even if that happy place is written by Jack Ketchum.

PD: I'm coming to be more and more with you—not that I ever posited myself against you—and in reflection it might just be a ripple of the 'kind of thing I would, or still do, pretend to be'. It's funny, I learned one of my younger brothers shared this little quirk of mine, that (one) I always liked, when playing, to be the devastated villain, the broken ant-hero (even before I knew any such term) or more correctly, not the anti-hero, but, yes, the villain, but made sympathetic somehow. Secret weaknesses and the tragedies or grandeurs that form more escapist villains I would sublimate. I always wanted to have to take an elixir of some kind every five hours in order to survive, some curse on me, some weakness that could be exploited and

likely would be by the hero. I don't know. Not trying to use you as my psychoanalyst, you know? Even in youth though, there was something about the Phyyric victory that I loved, even the villainous one, something about being defeated, exploring the ethic from that vantage. So, I may have posited a resistance to escapism since so many people I knew (both literally and rhetorically) wanted to be the Good Guys or only to be the Bad Guy for the sake of 'playacting being bad'. I know what you mean about a happy place even if it's Ketchum, though—my happy places are usually that and as a writer it is a happiness that drives me to write so awful ennui laden and wasteland and existential horror sort of landscapes and situations—it is joy, like Kafka cracking up to his friends every time he read his work aloud.

SGJ: I would have so loved to have been one of those friends. Maybe there's some recordings somewhere, anyway. Though I kind of doubt it. And, your preference for those kinds of protagonists, I'm completely with you on that. I mean, these stories, they're basically either distillations or exaggerations—same thing?—of our own lives, so, if the hero's all good, didn't accidentally stab some kid in the head five years ago, then have to kill the mom to pretend that day never happened, then he becomes less real, I think. Less somebody we can identify with. Just because we're not all good, or all bad, either. We're just us, dragging all these mistakes and regrets behind, looking ahead nevertheless, a hopeful kind of gleam in our eyes.

PD: We'll return to that, I don't want to lose a thought here, first: I know that when I write a novel it's

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more or less all made up as I go—I know this, but feel a squirm in saying it—

SGJ: Think it's the complete opposite, for me: everything I write, it's me, it's the most base, vain memoir. My only real job's to disguise disguise disguise, to apply enough camo that maybe only family will see me. At which point I judiciously don't send them books.

PD: Truthfully, I mean the same thing as you're saying here: when I say 'make it up as I go' I mean just the superficial parts, the sentences, that I don't prewrite or outline—the work is me, me in fifty disguises, me in eighteen trains of thought, you know? Mostly me revealing stuff I am unaware I am revealing through a preselected filter of a narrative. But unlike you (though maybe you were being facetious) it is at this point I love to get the reactions of the people who will read the book and only see me, not even care about the 'plot' or 'characters' of the book—people who just understand writing that way and know me enough to identify me in it—I love it when I get to know how those people take the work, because that's really, really what the thing is, in the end, and it reminds me of that to hear their responses.

SGJ: I really like to hear about people's visceral, involuntary responses to my work, if that's the same. Like, *Demon Theory*. My whole life I've had the distinct certainty that there are leathery flying things up in the sky at night, and that, at any time, they can swoop down, take me away. That nobody'll ever know. I've always walked close to houses, way under the eaves, just for that

reason. The right shoulder of so many of my shirts are nappy and torn, from rubbing against brick walls, catching on ivy. So I wrote a novel about all that, and, when people tell me they liked the novel, that they got it, sure, that's great to hear, but then when I talk to them two months later and they're looking both ways first then saying that they're kind of scared of open spaces now, that they keep having these dreams—it happens with *Demon Theory* a lot—then I just smile inside, know I did something right. That I'm having that effect on them I was talking about, that *Inception* trick, of implanting something in their heads that they don't quite know the provenance of. For a rare bit, then, I feel completely like a success, like all this writing's been worth it. Just—just keeping one person from being able to turn the light off or not, or making one person cry at the end of *Ledfeather*, that's what it's all about for me. Well, that and learning how to replicate it, times a hundred thousand, then multiply that too. Just looking for that springboard Stephen King found, I guess, then hoping I've got his integrity, some slice of his talent, can hold it together.

PD: It is the most personally gratifying thing—yes. I'll buy you a drink. You put something in someone's head that they're afraid of now—not necessarily a demon or a killer, but an idea, a concept, made something that was once this, through a revelation of personal noia or slanted interpretation of the world, new to someone. It's, as we both are saying, better than 'thumbs up/thumbs down'—because I can see it and it verifies itself in a manifest, unremoved way. The longest gush, even from another artist I respect, could never equal the actual knowledge that someone once changed hotel rooms based on something that I wrote—they

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went to the front desk and asked to change rooms because a little thing in their room reminded them of something I'd written. I think it not only, personally, reinforces something in me (on in oneself) to see their individualized construction of the world spread to someone else, it kind of profoundly, no matter what, opens up the truth of the truest statement there is and the oldest argument in the world—We don't know what we are looking at—you don't any more than me, I don't any more than you and there is no authority on what the neighbor is doing on the other side of the wall. Moreso, it reminds us—this is central to my artistic endeavors—that we are no authority on ourselves, we don't even own what we take for granted and what word, what sight, what idea can alter us—and how quickly—from being 'this person' to being 'that person'.

SGJ: I would love that fan letter, that email from the blue: 'I had to change rooms. It's your fault.' Or, 'I talked to him today. Thanks.' Or, really, I have gotten letters and messages, that certain of my stories have helped people through this or that tough time, and, I don't know. For a minute or two, I can kind of feel like that kid who predicted earthquakes.

PD: Again, we'll return, I was saying about 'making it up as I go': I personally know other folks who are the same, they get some germ of an idea in them and then start writing on page one and continue to page X, they write in order and that's the novel—and yet I squirm. Why should I have a reluctance, any nausea about not only an assertion of aesthetic and process, but of blunt fact? I think this squirm is because, even in knowing this about myself and about some other people,

intimately, I know that I have this mechanism in me that when I look at my shelf or think of some piece of literature I almost feel it appropriate to justify it out with mathematics—‘It took him Tolstoy ten years to finish that book’ or ‘Camus filled four notebooks with outlines and drafts’ or ‘Saramago was working from a consciously constructed reaction to X socio-political phenomena’ or ‘Topor wrote from an established point of philosophical identity in order to give it face and justification’—I think these thoughts. And worse, I behave like there's some necessity to work toward finding a way to convey that a literature is or is capable of being 'good', 'understandable', of even fucking being 'legible'. But then I ask ‘Why can't I just assume that *The Fall* was just something Camus zapped out over two late evenings from some impulse got on him?’ Why wouldn't it be so? Would that be bad? Would it be good? Would it be more or less meaningful? Would it cause a general disquiet?

SGJ: Along the same lines, I've never understood, and don't think I ever will, why people hate all those ‘It was all a dream’ endings. I mean, the novels or stories or movies that are brave enough to *say* that at the end. But, I mean, that's the last line to every single work of fiction, is it not? Only exceptions I can think of'd be stuff like Luigi Meneghello's *The Outlaws*, where he tells us up front it's all true, he's just pretending it's fiction. Even playing that game with him, though, it's like reading Barth's *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor*: some people will say the ending's a cop out, as it erases everything that came before, Alice-style, very Dorothy. But every single fucking novel does that. None of them ‘really’ happened. Every story begins with ‘Once Upon a Time’ and ends with ‘But it was all a dream.’ The people

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who resist the dream-part, I think, it's because they want the once-part to keep on happening for just a few more minutes, please.

PD: Now we're best friend (I hope...unless I ruined that already with some previous hogwash) now we are just very best friends. Here's the thing—I agree with you, painfully. And a truer thing has never been stated and so simply—none of it happened, it is a dream, whether the novel says it or not. Not to say it's a requirement, but a narrative (*The Man Who Was Thursday* springs to mind) that employs such an ending—it was a dream, a nightmare, a vision, a conjuring, whatever—that admits it is a narrative is kind of wonderful. I think some folks are irked just because having the 'novel itself wake up' kind of needles in on the implied fact that it is always the 'reader waking from a trip into reverie' but really I don't think this is what irks most people—yes, they want it to be real, amplify the escapist element (no matter the genre) the elsewhere-ness, and I think this comes back a bit to not wanting, not really wanting, to bring what is true in the novel into focus in actual life, it's like the emotions and reactions and the thoughts associated with a book should stay with the book if we agree that we'll treat them as real and so when a book just says 'No I'm not real' it puts a jab to us—'Well, then what are you then? A waste of time?' And we do have to face it that writers, too (a lot of them) like to lose themselves in their fictions—one of the reasons overt conscious construction is not so interesting to me is that I don't think a writer really needs to confront themselves at all to do it, no matter how they might say so.

SGJ: Oh, okay. I get it now, what you've been saying throughout. The writing there's dishonest, is just a game, an exercise. Exactly. Yes.

PD: It is an exercise, yes. Even not going as far as to say it is out-and-out dishonest, it is just not...revelatory, no one is being voluptuous. It's more like saying 'Hey, here's something interesting that someone could think' versus 'Here's something interesting that I think'. Don't you find it that sometimes people will, fully thinking they are telling you their own idea, just repeat something they read from a book that day? Nothing wrong with it, but this mindset extends too far in to writing that researches and wants to balance based on the external—or on writing that wants to remove the external, make it all about itself.

SGJ: There's finally got to be an external referent, yeah, or association, or some analogue jump we can make. The tall signs on the interstate tell us there's truckstops here, right? You'll see some of those signs left over, sure, just referring now to the ghosts of truckstops—which are just as real as 'real' truckstops—and you'll see some put up in advance of a coming truckstop, which is another kind of just-as-real truckstop, but you never see any that are just standing out there, being all about themselves, all their meaning stopping at their own edges. Or, we call those trees, maybe. Things that just are, that aren't the result of any intention, and so we don't feel either seduced or compelled to try to extract anything from them—meaning, identification, import—we just see them, then move on. Which is what we tend to do with novels that start and stop at the endpapers, I think. If they even make it that far.

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PD: You don't consciously go to your dark-side, for example—not all the way, not properly. And you don't consciously go to your 'true side', impossible, because people are more unconscious than conscious, more of what we do is un-regarded, un-thought, un-remarked, un-remembered and un-reflected on than the little bit of us we can say we remember (and even then, what do we remember?) The disdain toward 'dream revelation' in books I think also comes, to some people, from wanting to give more power to the written word than it really has—to make it magical, moral, human, clever, etc. eternally, definitively, definable. If a novel reminds a reader that it and anything found in it is only as tangible as a dream, it can feel a kind of betrayal and be an uncomfortable thing. If a truth cannot be made eternal, inviolate, absolute even in an entirely constructed and controlled make-believe, then Christ, it means the world must be a madhouse of relativistic abandon—which it is.

SGJ: Trick is, dreams, and dreaming, that impulse to be somebody else for three hundred pages, that need to pretend that I think we all have to some degree, that's real, right? Just because it's not tangible, isn't something you buy in a box, that doesn't mean it's not in each of us. Stories that acknowledge that impulse, that feed it, that fan it, I respect them so much. All fiction is a delicately sustained dream. It's not something to shy away from. Substitute 'construct' for 'dream' there, too, and then you start stepping on even more toes. Or, there's a lot more people in the room, anyway. But turning around in your story and pointing to the story *as* story, granted, not everybody's limber enough

for that, but, rather than being an exhibition of some kind of narrative boredom, which I think is pretty much the indictment post-modernism always catches, I think it's training us to consciously do what we do every moment anyway: construct and destroy and rebuild our own personal narratives, without which we'd have no kind of identity, nothing to persist from day to day. Like, Brian Evenson's stuff, I don't know if he's doing it on purpose or not, but a solid seventy percent of his stories read to me to be about that identity process. Read enough of him and you get suspicious of things. The good kind of suspicious.

It could be that there's a group of readers out there who kind of doubt the reality of the world, just at a very fundamental level—I do, wish I didn't—and, to those readers, the sustained dreams stories are, they feel real, they feel like home. The logic there, it's a logic that makes complete sense. My single greatest fear? It's not a person with a dog head, some Anubis around the next corner—though I'm terrified, just writing that—it's that one day I'm going to be driving around, just doing nothing, going on some errand, and I'm going to look down to the ignition and there's going to be no keys there. Meaning, in this dream, I forgot to put them there, forgot that little detail, this is the glitch in the matrix. And it's not that I'll collapse into myself because this is all a dream, it's that, if it is a dream, I kind of want to keep having it, don't want to have seen that empty keyhole. Which is as close as I can get to understanding those people who resist the Alice/Dorothy endings, all the John Barth sleights of hand.

PD: That an idea or the misplacement of one will reveal a void to everything else—it is terrifying. 'If I

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don't remember to keep dreaming, the dream will end--but if I really get lost in the dream, delve in, that's the surest way I'll forget it's a dream and all will be lost.' It's a kind of hell, that. Here's everything you want or know, but everything you want or know is not real...and it's because of you, it's your fault. I'm shivering. What always disappointed me in, to take another sidestep from a detail in what you said, about The Matrix sort of set ups is it's that people are put in to the 'Dream-world versus Real world' set-up by someone else—therefore it's a kind of Black Hat, White Hat set up, 'You don't like this, but it's real, you were a prisoner of your fantasy' versus, just as one mind-blowing example *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*—can you even maintain an unreality inside of reality, can you fulfill your own desire when part of your desire is the removal of an aspect of yourself?

SGJ: You're living in a bubble, yeah, your own little portable fantasy, but somebody's likely to pop it. Or, 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' yeah? O'Connor, mapping out for us the perils of walking around inside a fantasy. That Black Hat, White Hat set-up, though, I agree, those stories usually are framed like that, and they try to milk some intellectual kind of sophistication from the 'Is it real or is it Memorex?'-kind of explorations, but at the same time, an exploration like that not framed within some crime or thriller story, I'm not sure I could be hooked into engaging it. I hit the cineplex more than the art-house, I guess I'm saying. Because I always want it both, the drama and the deep stuff, but, if I can only have one, give me the explosions, the car chases, the gunplay. But, yeah, it's best when that

gun's being drawn from a Cronenberg slit in your stomach.

We were talking before about all those important works, some of which are quality whether the critics or history have legitimated them or not—if you try to be Thomas Pynchon each time you sit down at the keyboard, you're going to fail every time. If you're trying to write *Moby Dick*, something timeless and important and such a product of the tensions of its time, all disguised as a monster story, a sea adventure: fail. You've got to luck into these things. I feel confident Melville did, and that Pynchon, on his good days, does. And, Camus, I don't know. He was no doubt writing in blood, but you're right, each step feels mapped, but at the same time authentic. And, Tolstoy, I think Tolstoy was a serial monogamist: he fell in love with this set of characters, lavished all these words on them, all this effort, tried to keep them alive as long as possible, and then he'd move on to the next, and the next, and we're all better for it, as violent a process as that is. To the characters, I mean. But it's maybe the only way to be, too. I always sub-dedicate my novels to some character from a different novel, anyway. Because they're real, and I don't want them to be dead, please. And because I owe them.

PD: This I agree with—this version of luck. It's a luck that has nothing to do with the work itself, I think, but has to do with a lot of circumstances. I know what you mean by history or popularity or anything legitimizing, making real the quality and timelessness of a work or a writer, but it's all luck—not the quality of the work, but the 'recognition' and naming of it as something other than 'a book some guy wrote'. After all, when we say 'If you try to be Melville or whomever' we

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are saying this because we have elevated them—either personally or because we just trust those around us—and so wrongly assign the accident of this elevation with the accident of what they did (to an extent). Tolstoy, for example, who you bring up, is on record as saying he intended to, wanted to, and was obsessively set on being the greatest writer the world had ever produced and had it very much in mind to Be Tolstoy (an easier thing for him to do, because he was Tolstoy—and I don't have a full opinion of Tolstoy because I have read little of him—I dig *The Forged Coupon* and I dig *The Kreutzer Sonata*, other than that I'm in the dark).

SGJ: Excellent. Had no idea that was his ambition. Completely suspected he was just another hypergraphic rich dude. But that he actually wanted to rule the world, like that. Beautiful. I've always identified with Browning for that reason, because his aspirations are my aspirations, and nothing else will do. But glad to know there's other foolish people as well. Other dreamers.

PD: It is charming—especially since, for whatever it's worth, he won, he got it! Now even people that've never read him 'know he is a great writer'. But also sad, this oftentimes sublimating the tension out of literature, greatness as a kind of eternal relaxation. It is, I think we must admit, kind of curious that a lot of writers (or any artists for that matter) seem to paradoxically seek an end to the tension, the forcefulness, the flailing against nothing when this is integral to their birth as artists—I understand wanting to know that one, for example, will have a built in audience in the hundreds of thousands, but in knowing that, it must, I think, be

deeply turned around, the very notion of audience. Isn't it so strange when an established writer releases 'an earlier work' that just because of luck, as we've been saying, and circumstance only got a tepid, if any reception (it wasn't fundamentally, intrinsically worse—might even be better) but because it is technically released after newer works that established the artist it gets viewed through the filter of 'novelty', as 'An Early Attempt', like it's a curio and automatically must be looked at as relic of something else? I find it strange and it seems to happen a lot.

SGJ: Worse, I even cultivate all these fantasies of it happening to me, like that. But maybe we all do. Hopefully.

PD: Or when, just for another example, it might be revealed that this or that work was done by a famous writer—we'll take King/Bachman—under a different name. Once the reveal comes out, because one name succeeded more than the other, that stuff automatically is looked at as a 'lesser component piece' of the successful side and seldom the other way around. It's almost tantamount to saying 'the reason it didn't succeed earlier or the reason it was published under another name is because it is, inarguably, worse'.

SGJ: That is a strange dynamic, yeah. Some of the Bachman books rock, I mean. Gordon Lish, though, a long time ago I heard that he wrote thrillers on the side, for the pulp racks. I mean, while he was changing the world with the *Quarterly*, ghostwriting for Carver, all that. But I've never tracked down which, if any, thrillers are actually his. Would love to know, though. Probably

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for those same stupid reasons you're talking about. Which is to say I'm part of Jerry Springer's audience at some level, I guess, cheering to see whoever's backstage, ready to ambush. Kind of sucks, that impulse. Or maybe it means I'm human? Too, though, I should add that, when I find a writer I like's had a secret identity all along, this makes them even more of a superhero, for me. Juggling one career's hard enough. To juggle two, you need to be from Krypton.

PD: And it may or may not be true that Melville had every intention of writing something timeless and representative and sublimating disguised as a sea adventure story—in which case, he sat down with it in mind to do so and succeeded—either in the sense of the book is that, intrinsically, or in the sense that it is now considered that. I don't think it matters

SGJ: Author intent's crap, yep. Doesn't matter in the least. It's what's on the page that matters, and how you take it, what you do with it. We never heard Salinger saying Holden Caulfield wasn't actually telling people to shoot other people, did we? He was no more an authority on *Catcher in the Rye* than any of us. He just knew some cool stories behind it, some in-jokes. Otherwise: just a reader. But 'just' is the wrong word there. The reader's everything, really. Without them, there's nothing. I mean, so you're telepathic, great. Does it matter if you're stuck on some moon with nobody to mindtalk with? Got to have a receiver. Stories need that every time.

PD: This here, I don't argue with, but I do always find it the odd thing to make allusions about.

Because, as I have said, to me audience is abstraction—the notion that there can be an audience is important and it is a wonderful and pure and real desire to have interaction—but then I hit my logistic ripple. The metaphor here, the telepathy, is rather true, except it means the artist must be privy to the audience—the artist should want this, however abstractly, because otherwise it isn't that they are wasting their time writing but rather it is a mistake of them to disown or disbelieve in the rest of the world, be it their desire or not—when the truth is, if a writer (for romantic effect) stranded alone on the moon, knowing he would never come home and whatever he wrote would never be found were not to write because, even literally, physically, he knew there would be no tangible, concrete audience, it would be the inhuman and wrong conclusion that if he wrote—wrote all he wanted, all he would have written if he'd never been stranded—it's a mistake, a waste, something that has no purpose. So, I do agree with you—the reader, the audience, which I will call the 'knowledge of the other, the awareness of one's own mortality even' is everything, my only addition is the paradox that the audience doesn't need to be manifest to exist.

SGJ: Hadn't thought of it that way, but yeah, leave me alone on the moon, I'll be scribbling away with my low-grav pen. Or, in lieu, sculpting the regolith into letters big enough to be read from Kansas.

PD: In a lot of ways, I don't think it matters, this luck and this slate of recognition and I don't think it doesn't matter—that there is a world of reaction out there is a fact that will never go away. My mantra repeats 'Every reaction that can be had to a work will be had to a

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work’—it doesn’t matter in what quantity or by who or in what time and place—if it can be thought, it will be thought, whether you encounter it personally or not. Even if you encounter one thousand people in a row who have the same feeling about your work, ten million others have the opposite feeling, ten million other have ten million other ideas hardly seeming associated, then some million others just don’t care. This is just true—reaction is Heraclitus’ flux, and I go as far as to say a work not eliciting new, varied, and even strange reaction, all the time, is stagnating—it isn’t the fault of the work, but the reaction should just be put on a shelf like a swim team trophy from fourth grade if it’s the same (or nearly the same) from everyone. It’s (more concrete, now) why unless, when visiting a review site or looking in to some writing work via reaction of readers, I see reactions running the gamut from ‘This is best thing I ever read’ to ‘This is the worst piece of shit, it’s unreadable’ I think there must be something funny going on, something suspicious.

SGJ: And that’s finally the best marketing hook, isn’t it? What’ll sell somebody on a book is if they think something might be going on here. Not if everybody loves it or hates it. Or, well, that’s the best hook for me as well, makes for the best reads, I think—the kind you go into blind, not worried about agreeing with this or that bunch. It makes the reading ‘yours’ in a good way, I think. Your reaction’s unclouded by expectations. At the same time, though, we still read the reviews and posts and all that...just to get a feel for if we like the book? Not sure. When you read reviews before the book, though, it’s always kind of between-your fingers, like you don’t want any spoilers to creep through. When the real

spoiler's the critic's tone, the critic's attitude, all that. Not saying critics are bad, I just think you need the primary material first, then the secondary. While, yeah, acknowledging that it is nice for a certain momentum of word-of-mouth to kind of bolster your decision to get into this or that book. Wish there were a happy answer, here. One that didn't contradict itself.

PD: It is cool that though something is a Masterpiece it is also someone else's least favorite book. Nothing should be a masterpiece without being viciously hated in far greater measure by a far greater number of people than it is loved and loved by, in my opinion.

SGJ: Have never heard it said like that. Yes.

PD: Changing gears, a moment, or maybe re-shifting into a previous gear, sometimes I very pointedly wonder if in addition to expressed literature do we honestly need to see notebooks showing it from conception, through lulls, through reworkings, do we need to make a goddamned storybook out of the process of creation in order to prove to ourselves that it's something worthwhile?

SGJ: I know, it's ridiculous, is some strange breed of literary voyeurism, I guess. Or, from the other side, exhibitionism. Which I don't doubt I'm likely to fall prey to. Or, maybe there's a market for it because it makes these writers human, not robot brains.

PD: I like to read notebooks and letters a lot, but just not with it in mind that they illuminate anything more than one person's take on something. People who

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try to sneak in an author's opinion of their own work into a personal reaction are curious to me—"Well, the writer thought it was really something and he wrote it! So he must have something there?"—it's like people who obsess over the liner notes to an album or to behind-the-scenes stories and whenever they talk about the music it's filtered through this. Obnoxious. I mean, interesting, again, I read liner notes, I read author letters and am fascinated by 'early drafts' if they are readily available in whatever form, but as a separate curiosity, not as evidence in an investigation of an absolute.

SGJ: A lot of the book groups and classroom visits I've done for different of my books, it's always...I don't know. Awkward. Because invariably the questions get to some version of 'Why'd you do this, here?' Which, first, I likely don't even remember writing that part, maybe not even the whole book, and, second, even at the time I did it, I had no idea then, either. It just felt right. I'm a hundred percent subscribed to the notion that it's instinct and intuition. That you never back off the story, look at it from some godspace, and then deduce what comes next. You fumble into it, and you dive down a lot of dead-end alleys getting there. I never have any kind of real idea why this happens here in my story, my novel. It just does. And, does it feel right? Because that's got to be the only thing that matters. But, the way I'll answer those hard-to-impossible questions, it's always just by becoming my own reader, which is some triple-awkwardness. But the only one I know. I just kind of squint and say 'Doesn't what happens here kind of halfway set up something that's talked about here, at this later part? Then maybe because of that.' Or I'll sometimes instead just say that happened because I

couldn't think of anything better, or because I was thinking about the time I was five and got lost in Carlsbad Caverns, and I remember what this one woman looked like, and, because she was still in my head after all this time, I decided to let her drive by in a silver Lincoln, kind of smile up out of the story, just so I can wave to her again. Which is just a complicated way of saying I have no idea why this is happening here. I just hope it works.

PD: As you have a distinct perspective here that I don't have, I'd like to indulgently ask you about some things that have always fascinated me—you being a reader who is 'read' far more than I or a lot of people I know, and certainly having a wider, more anonymous audience. Having come so directly in contact with one face of a readership—one I can only imagine would be, as you say it is, awkward—do you find that you more want to construct a kind of phantom audience—better to say while being asked a question like 'Where do you get your ideas?' a direct question from a direct audience member, do you find yourself wishing you were being asked something else, something a bit less...awkward? I mean, for me, I would never ask a writer I admired about their work if we happened to meet (I'm referring to the proverbial 'idol writer' like were I to have met Saramago, rest his soul, dig? Not to say I don't respect the work of people who I talk to about it)—or not so directly, not in a Q&A way and even then I would have to get their reactions to things having nothing to with their own work to contextualize—and I would never never ask a writer I admire, directly, for advice or such. For me, even sometimes in coming in touch in a limited way with the microscopic audience I have, I get sunk

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feeling (right or wrong, nice or not, I do) and find that I'd rather be doing anything than repositioning myself in a way that I can address matter such as 'Why did this happen here in the story'. Have you ever wanted to just, instead of having readers ask you about your work, tell them they have to ask you about anything but your work? Or rather, have you ever had the temptation to say 'Now, I'm not going to answer your questions, today, today you're going to answer mine—whatever they are.' There is, after all, something of an artificiality, 'the audiences concept of writer-as-authority', and as a lot of what you say about your work—much of which I deeply, personally echo—seems contrary to the notion of 'investigation', does the amount of investigation, interrogativeness in audience put you at odds? This is, of course, a whole secondary conversation, but it touches on the 'live-and-in-person' aspect of the writer: the Q&A seems such a prevalent thing—it doesn't happen after a play (not for most people) it doesn't happen after a rock and roll concert or an opera (for most people) yet it seems almost expected that a writer open themselves up to it and in such a way that they are, so to speak, at the mercy of the audience and the audiences' perceptions. Not to get all 'meta' here, but one of the reasons I set up *Predicate* as I do is to 'even the roles out', to, in a sense, have my dialogue partner interview me about my response to them, you know?

SGJ: I think that's a good model, too. And, talking after-the-reading Q&A's—or, lately, I've been doing gigs where I just sit up on some stage or something and get interviewed by somebody, then take audience questions—that's far and away my favorite part of it all. I love the challenge of having to think on my

feet, of having to keep the audience engaged. Lots of places I've read, I'll ask beforehand if I *can* do a Q&A afterwards, when that's not really been happening in their series, when the crowd doesn't really know it's going to happen. I can stay up there as long as they'll have me, though, fielding questions about whatever. And, yeah, there's some of those 'pen or pencil'-type questions—I saw Charlie Kaufman have to answer the 'Where do you get your ideas from?'-one once, and it was pretty beautiful—but what always surprises me is that the answers I have, they're both not exactly the same as last time, and they always lead to more and more. It's so fun. So, give me an hour, and ideally I'll read for twenty minutes or so, then Q&A the rest of the time. Provided the audience is into it. And, I've heard...I think this is Samuel Delaney, maybe? He'll read for a bit, then do a Q&A, then close with reading another piece. I could be thinking of BH Fairchild, though, I guess. I see so many readers, it's hard to keep it all straight. Percival Everett, though—last time I saw him read...I'm lying, the *second*-to-last time I saw him read, he did this cool thing where he put the manuscript pages down, walked away from the podium, and said he was just going to tell a story now. One he'd maybe told before, sure, but it was kind of off the cuff, too. And he held it together so, so well. I was completely impressed. Also, at a festival once, there were two or three of us queued up to read, and I was kind of off in the wings, paging through whatever I had, making sure they were all there, when the guy going right before me, he did that same thing: put his manuscript pages down, stepped away. Except, what he'd done was commit the whole story to memory. And you could tell—it was prose he was reciting, not a story he was feeling his way through out-loud. So, yeah,

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then I had to slump onto stage with my bulky pages, read the boring way. But I've followed a lot of readers who have completely outshined me. It's why I dig the Q&A part, I think. I know I can do that as well as anyone. But, yeah, only if you've read something that's got the audience engaged. So fun to try.

About something we'd been saying about drafting and reworking—I always, always take Rick DeMarinis's advice, which is, if you ever hit a wall, get intimidated into wordlessness, can't figure out what comes next, any of that junk people try to call 'writer's block,' like it's some romantic thing instead of something that doesn't exist—but maybe that's the soul of what it means to be romantic, yeah? Non-existence, 'idealness'—if you ever get like that, all you've got to do's lower your standards. Keep ratcheting them down, you'll find an insert point for your next sentence soon enough. Or, really, if you run into one of those writers, before telling them to lower their standards, I'd say tell them just to quit, please. It'll make the slushpile I'm in that much shorter. However, if they're that kind of writer, I'm not that nervous, either, as it's going to take them years to kick even one book out. Which, that's a process, an investment, I'm not even remotely interested in. Books make me crazy, make me lose sight of the lines between this and whatever's other. Each time I step into a story, I'm already trying to write my way out, trying to get back to normal, please.

PD: I'm very much the same—and the fucking cool down period gets shorter and shorter. I can hardly be enthusiastic even in the old symbolic ways—'Ah, I'm done, time for a drink, a cigarette, relax for a bit'—because there's another thing (or five) right in queue and

by the time (I am a publisher and so put my own stuff out through my label) the proof copy arrives I just can't be bothered—in a sense it's magic, because instantly my books are like someone else wrote them, which is my eternal end goal, to write something that I didn't write.

SGJ: Man, yeah. My old stuff, I read it and wonder who was that crazy dude, and why did he use prepositions like that, and did he know he was writing about me? I'm forever finding stories on my hard-drive, tucked away in unlikely places, that I'm thinking I probably wrote, but that's just going on the evidence at hand. I'd be completely amenable to some version of Whitley Streiber's aliens, though, controlling me with pixie dust.

PD: The superficial changes from older work to current work are always the fucking best, right? 'Why so many parenthesis?' 'Why did I insist on this clip to the sentences versus that?' I love finding old stuff I started and abandoned for whatever reason—the purest of the pure stuff, really the only time the writer comes face-to-face with themselves as audience ('I...wrote this? What was going through my head? I remember neither the time nor place') it is an inescapably important experience for the artist.

SGJ: Which is why I always push for downtime, with writers. For you to get reprogrammed by the world. Writing every day's great discipline and all, I guess, but if you go dark for as long as you can hold your breath, you come back different, and your old stuff's completely unfamiliar, now that you've figured out—while *not* trying

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to figure out—the real way to do it. Until next downtime, anyway.

PD: Looking at ‘finished work’ is one thing, but that thing you started and were into for a day-and-a-half and got enough of it down that it’s not just a doodle but then just stopped—God knows why, no memory of why—and can actually be completely, completely surprised by it (like it, dislike it, whatever) is magic. And as you say ‘it’s just going on the evidence at hand’—Did I write this? The wonderful question then becomes (more pointedly than with finished work) if it’s good, do I take pride in it, do I say this is something I wrote, even? Which comes around in a way to Expression versus Creation and all. If the conscious part—assuming it was there—dies away, and all that’s left is the words, are they a creation? It’s like thinking up a great story in a dream—who did that?

SGJ: Yeah, or it could be that the stories are all just fluttering around in some pink cloud circulating around us all, and all we’re really doing’s pinning them down. That’s what I feel like, anyway. So, yeah, I do like to take credit for skewering this or that one to the page, maybe not hurting my hand just too badly in the process. But then I think I value more the ones where I do hurt my hand.

PD: More to your point about ‘writers block’ though, it’s good advice and charmingly put, this advice you repeat here. That feeling (I’ll just stick with calling it ‘writers block’ because it’s easier) of a block is a good thing, I don’t know why it hangs people up—it just

means 'You can't do this here—you can't swim here because it's a goddamned tree, do something else' and then so just do something else, yeah—

SGJ: —'You can't swim here because it's a goddamned tree,' I love that. I want to get a tattoo of that. Beautiful beautiful—

PD: —constantly being forced to imperatively realize that the words you do write down are infinitely more interesting than the words you 'might one day write down' or the 'other words you could've wrote down'

SGJ: So many writers use precisely this kind of mechanism to silence themselves, to wallow around in indecision, until that's all they know. Good for them. Hope they stay there.

PD: They will. Even if they write and write they'll stay there: Realizing the words you write are the important words is writing, is what writing is.

SGJ: I've only got this indirectly, but apparently Gary Brandner, *The Howling* guy, in this novel *Billy Lives!*, he says, 'Aspiring my ass. You write or you don't. The curse of this profession is that it's so much more fun being a writer than it is writing.'

PD: I rather like that. To me, yes, it is fun having written—I'm not a profession based guy, so I have to reword a bit—but it is a bore and a drag to write, in many ways. To me, that's the identity of Writer—I do something to have done it, the pleasure comes after the

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fact, like a memory. Now that it's happened, now that it's over, it's cool—like being in a fight (or kinkier things if one has such a bent) it was not pleasant to go through, but it is marvelous to think back on, relive—win or lose it's a magnificent thing. Which is a bit of the reason why I trend outside of associating with marketplace or traditional careerist success in writing—because if that is connected it, in some way, dilutes the achievement, colours it different. If a boxer remembers being in a fight, not as exciting as just a guy remembering being in a fight, or if a porn star thinks about how often he or she gets laid it isn't as interesting as just some person thinking about it (and the little story-lines all are reinforced as make believe). So, if a writer has it in mind they are writing as per a contract or a commission—it isn't 'not interesting', but I think that colours the identity—arguing contract points—a movie star always has to be reminded they aren't who they pretend to be, but with a character actor, you know, they get to grandly indulge in the finest nuances of the art and walk away wholly intact, everybody respects them, they do just as much, but nobody is gonna fuck with them, remind them they aren't anything but what audience makes them.

SGJ: At the same time, it's nice to know you have a solid-enough handle on your craft to fake it, I think. Or, to fake your way to something real—which isn't just half the game for me, but the whole game. I heard Joe R. Lansdale say once on a panel that some stories he writes because he had no choice, they were coming out one way or another, while others he wrote like putting together a chair. Which, yeah, this gets back to the art versus craft thing we were talking about at

first—and I suspect Lansdale prefers those stories he wrote from the heart, which would be the ‘art’ ones—but I get solicited all the time to write stories that I would never have considered writing. And some I take, just to see if I can. And, what surprises me each time is that, yes, I can put a story together like a chair, and, if I’m writing properly, losing myself in it as you have to, then it’s not just any chair either. It’s the only chair I know. Every time.

PD: Which reminds me I wanted to add something about ‘the words you write are the important ones’, I’ll jab it in here before I forget again: one of the reasons I shy from rewrites and drafting is this very idea, though your chair scenario is an interesting counterpoint. To me, if I am reading something I wrote and a new remark, a new sentence, a new idea crops up—well, that’s what other books are for, and I can go write another book—

SGJ: I’m learning to be like this. Trying to learn. There was a while, though—specifically, my first novel, and third—where I was working under that dictum ‘This is your last novel. Say it all here, now.’ Which is excellent, I think. If you read it as ‘Don’t compromise, even for a single line. This is all that’s going to exist of you in fifty years.’ Great. Except, like everything, I take it too far, think that, if this is all I’m getting man, I better say it *all*. Meaning everything that pops up, I chased it down, pinned it to the page, tried to normalize it so nobody would notice. Now, though, I’m realizing that I don’t need to pack everything I know, or think I know, into each book. That there’s going to be time later. More books, like you say. Always more books. At the same

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time, though, I believe in giving it all away with each line. But that's different, that's more like effort, like not holding anything back. It's not throwing up on the page.

PD: Certainly, yes. 'Not compromising' versus 'attempting to cram in what doesn't necessarily belong' (a kind of reverse compromise). It's, really I think, one of the reasons the bigger things are called, generally, the Masterpieces and the smaller works 'lesser'—but it's an illusion, a mix up between the actuality of art and art as it out-references to the world. High rococo looks hard and minimalism looks easy—it's just as much the truth to say it's the other way around, though. It's an important admission on the part of a writer to be restrained, to not make a coffee cup into Socrates' cup of hemlock. Like you were saying, elsewhere, if the sentence needs to be 'Edmond put on his coat, walked out the door' it would be a fool mistake to say 'Edmond adorned himself with a coat, the fibres of which had weighed down his body at least every other day since the transaction had been tendered, and his fingers, palms moist a bit with the temperature of the room, embraced themselves fast around the knob and pressure and inertia took him from where he had been, in one step, to, it must be said, everywhere else he ever would go' or whatever. I mean, even if not being silly with it—there's perhaps a time to say something about how the pet turtle is like the owner and another time to just remark the owner has a pet turtle.

SGJ: Yeah, it is about restraint. Say, reading Graham Swift, the restraint's always what impresses me. And I think restraint's something you learn just by being excessive. You don't learn not to step on caterpillars by

not stepping on caterpillars, yeah? Me, I'm still trying to learn the restraint. Still trying to stop listening to my own rationalizations for why this actually *needs* to be here, that it's *not* an indulgence.

PD: Absolutely, but stop shifting me into asides, I'm warning you for the last time! I was just saying about I shy from rewriting because it would be like someone else adding words in to something I consider finished and this is the same as if I read something by Camus, you know? I don't get an idea from it, a sentence and so plug it into *La Chute*, I go write my own thing. It's an endless disease, thinking that putting in a bit more, trimming a bit less, altering the same amount will have any effect—it will, but only an arbitrary one: Person A might 'get it more,' so to speak, but Person B will 'dig it less' and Person C, who would have found it intriguing without, will find it ho-hum with and on and on until a point past death.

SGJ: Yeah, at some point, mother geese that all us writers are, we have to kick all these little goslings out into open space, hope they can fly, but not spend too much time worrying over the splat they've made, either. Just move on, move on, you're a shark, stopping is death.

PD: And to further your nice analogy—the worst horror that can happen to a writer (shark) is that they stop moving long enough to die, but then their carcass is floating around underwater forever, no one looking at it knowing they are looking at a ghost, respecting them as though alive simply for being dead.

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SGJ: Guess you're right. There are a lot of carcasses polluting up the water. Though too they may just be like the old vampires Anne Rice would always set on a throne in some buried chamber: gone into a kind of stone stasis, looking inward. But maybe they can still wake. Hopefully they can.

PD: I assert that novels need to be the author's live performance, because otherwise authors don't have live performances, they have something so unbelievably not theirs it is frightful. And in being the live performance—the equivalent thing—novels need to be concerned only with the author and with the moment, with the throttle of expression as it happens (I don't mean they need to depict literalist memoir or be superficially representative of time and place, mind you). See, sometimes I catch myself saying Creation instead of Expression and I really want to stop that—I don't believe in creativity, or rather I disdain creativity and align it to all matters conscious, all thing that a literature should not be.

SGJ: I tend to frame it more in terms of discovery than creation or expression, I think. It's that James Dickey poem 'A Birth' I'm always pushing, how, creating a field with grass in it, you discover a horse. That's the most honest figuration of art I've seen, yet. And that's exactly what writing feels like to me. All I have to do's drag my pen across the page, and soon enough things'll start showing up. It's splattering your brain onto the canvas is what it is—you're the horse you're finding—but, if you save enough synapses, maybe you can do it again, not just Harper Lee it and call it quits.

PD: It's exactly like that—a place I tend to begin with when confronting any piece I am writing and that reminds me I wanted to address the following with you: I feel there needs to be a divide, especially in writers, between their understanding of literature (or 'writing' or 'books', whatever term we're using, I'll just go ahead with literature) as Readers versus their understanding of literature as Writers. I come from the bent that the only way to respect the reader, as a writer, is to, in a sense, ignore them, make them an abstract—because the only way to produce something honestly for The Audience (or even a particular audience) is to set down exactly what you feel like, how you feel like—it is a mistake to say 'Know your audience' because you cannot and, frankly, don't you think that's a bit insulting—'I know you, Stephen, I know what you want to read and I know it so well, know you so well I can craft your desires for you'. Write as you will, audience (in whatever concentration you get one) will take care of its own wants and desires

SGJ: Yeah, I agree that you finally can't tailor-make things for the audience, even with all the market research in the world. Research is by definition of some group that existed, not one that exists. The audience is fickle, will have scooted two feet over as soon as you've launched your book missile. Or book pinata, I guess it might be, full of surprises. What I do, I think? Now that I'm thinking about it, anyway. It's that I write what I would want to read. Like everybody, I would hope—but I don't know. Do we all picture a milling audience of ourselves out there, waiting? I think I might, anyway. Problem there being, of course—or maybe this is the

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good part—that my tastes and predilections are just all over the place. I'll read *Atonement* and *Speaker for the Dead* back to back, and love each on their own terms. Which makes me hard for me to target, I think. Or—this is the most ideal—it makes me focus not on the content, but on writing a story that engages the reader. A story that would, content aside, engage me. And then, after the first draft is down, I try to read it like a reader, not like the person who wrote it. And, as I do this more and more, I hold myself to a higher and higher standard for clarity, that kind of stuff. But people, those potential consumers trolling the shelves, they're acutely aware if you try to target them, I think. Kids moreso than adults—I think a large part of the adult audience actually finds it kind of comforting, as being in that target group lends a kind of unearned identity—but we all have that radar, the lizard parts of our brains still remembers that there are shadowy things up in the sky, trolling for *us*.

PD: We do. I realize what I want more than anything is someone to find my book or have it handed to them like I was handed *Sult* or *The Man Who Thursday* and to have it be 'the thing' to the finder—they don't look me up and I never, never know (any more than Hamsun or Chesterton can know what they did to me). Which is why interaction with audience should not be seeking for verification of impact—but it is so tempting to make it that, it even happens by accident. I'm of a mind that every desire of a writer should be to become what books were—formatively—to them, 'an unverifiable thing'. But of course, then there is real life and the perfectly sensible and interesting exploration of art and reaction and idea and audience etc. I think it just needs to be kept in mind always that the audience being

sought is the one that one never encounters—the way you became a reader, that private, individual, unduplicateable thing.

SGJ: That's kind of neat. The idea of just living in a refrigerator box, pushing your manuscripts over the top to the hungry crowds—or, to the people needing the pages to fuel their campfires, you can never know. Not sure I could do that, though, have the feedback loop go unclosed like that. 'Unverified,' yeah. Kind of makes me suspect why I'm even doing all this writing stuff, then. Hm. Not that I'm going to stop—can't—and I guess my argument for the way it is would be that the feedback loop is a corrective, that it refines the product, the competition of the marketplace can, in the best case, increase quality, the same way Blondie got better and better playing to empty houses, didn't explode until they actually had something going on, but I see problems built into that as well. Or, it doesn't preclude the possibility of the refrigerator-box writer getting better and better as well, simply by engaging her own art in solitude, in isolation. And those texts she produces could still be 'complete' as I define it, if they're finding readers. It's just, she never knows. In which case...she imagines them into her reality, maybe? Guess that's what I'd do, were I her. I'd pretend the feedback loop was in fact being closed. Or, I mean, that's maybe what I'm doing now, even.

PD: Sure. And touching on the idea of respecting the audience by not 'writing for them' it needs to be added that the writer's (your) unconcerned expression, to look at it another way, may well be something an audience wanted but never knew because

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it was not based on precedent—they might want something they've never seen before and you can't know that by asking them or studying them.

SGJ: Exactly. Throw as many darts as you can, as fast as you can. And never doubt that there's going to be more darts on the table, when you reach down. They'll feel like the letters of a keyboard, but you'll know better.

PD: This brings to mind I'd meant to chat with you a bit about the notion of the 'presupposed time limit' on a work—indie or mainstream—that is kept alive more by writers, especially those in the Scene, than by readers. The prep work that can well go in to publishing and promoting, it seems to make a work pertinent 'from release date (maybe) through the end of the year'—don't you find this?

SGJ: How the chain bookstores treat the books like perishables, right? They come stamped with an expiration date, are no good after three weeks. Does kind of suck, but they've got to keep product moving, I guess. However, as we go more and more to on-line retailers for our books, be they print or digital, this shelf-life trick's the exact opposite: the books are available forever, it seems, so long as there's still copies in some dusty warehouse. So, the on-line places are serving the whole audience—well, maybe not the ones who prefer the casual browsing—whereas the brick and mortar places are serving an audience they imagine changes its preferences every few weeks. Which, the audience may well be doing that. Or, part of the audience. But we want the backlist, too.

PD: And it seems to cause a lot of consternation—it isn't often a writer (referring to one single work) says they plan to slowly dribble copies of it out to people over the course of five years to make a name, when more often than not this is how the works they admire have come to be. Better to say, someone says 'I want to be the next Stephen King or Chuck Palahniuk (in whatever way it's said, I'm just picking two examples, here) they don't tend to mean 'I want to have a decades spanning career that started modestly and had this and that pocket of success and these dry spells etc etc'—they mean they want to be Bestseller, have the result and not live and enjoy the story of getting it.

SGJ: Yeah, that's the dream, but that's the curse, too. Once you get locked in the market's sights, it becomes very difficult to develop as a writer, I think. Not just because the publishers are pressing you for more of the same, but because you feel compelled to do what's worked before, to not let your faithful audience down. So, the way I've been doing it—very unintentionally, but still—I think it's been such a gift. I've got nine books now, and for each of them I've been free to try out whatever I wanted. Sure, there's people who read all of it, but the people who cherrypick this or that, reject the rest, they make up the majority, I think. I haven't much been worried with brand recognition, I mean. I've just been trying to figure things out on the page. Hopefully in some entertaining fashion.

PD: When someone is keen on being Chuck P., writing 'the next Fight Club', I often scratch my head. And when one says they want that, they never mean they

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want to write a modestly successful cult novel that after a decade in general obscurity was made into a high profile film by David Fincher and that film is what most people mean when they say *Fight Club* (to his credit, I love how much Chuck seems aware of this, it does me good every time he wryly puzzles at the ‘success of that novel’). But, let’s make it a question, too: Do you see something defeatist in the self-imposed marketplace design many writers subscribe to—not that the market itself is bad, not at all, but in the accepting of the current paradigm of success as the place to take lessons from rather than looking at the longevity of artistic pursuit?

SGJ: I think the catch there is that, without any recognition from the marketplace, you often won’t keep writing. You’ll suspect it’s you—and it is—and so’ll drift into something else you can lose yourself in. Which, like I was saying, if that’s happening to you, then maybe it should be happening to you. The real artists, though, my romantic notion is that they write in spite of the market. And sometimes they overtake that market. And sometimes, yeah, they John Kennedy Toole it. Probably more often than not they take some version of that way out. Which sucks. So, I guess I don’t see anything defeatist in it, but maybe just because to subscribe solely to the longevity of artistic pursuit trick, it kind of valorizes isolation, it makes not plugging into that marketplace an honorable thing, which of course leads to hierarchies. And, not that I’m not creating hierarchies myself here. I just think mine are better for fiction. But of course I think that.

PD: A writer should understand literature as this discovery—start writing, starting from X plan or Y

plan or no-plan-at-all and see what you get—and this extends to my view of the marketplace: as I just said, I find it a bit insulting the idea of writing for an audience, from a supposed powerbase, but I have no trouble with someone, once they have written something unconcerned with audience, then trying to figure out if it ‘has an audience’ commercial or otherwise, indeed I think it is a truer testament to the artist to do so.

SGJ: There’s the art of the story, and there’s the art of getting that story into the hands of readers, yeah. Readers who didn’t even walk into the store looking for you.

PD: I’m not going to do a long speech, for a change, I just would like to know: I find ‘the store’ to be such an illusory thing—why is it that so many writers fetishize the idea of being ‘In Store’? Not even saying this as a proponent of the ‘new electronic marketplace’, in fact to the contrary—but don’t you kind of find ‘the store’ like being left around where people are least likely to come across you in any real way? If one didn’t have a choice, if someone else just put your book in a store, well...great, but why in God’s name do writer’s work so hard to get their book on a shelf?

SGJ: Good question. I suspect it’s our way of dealing with the specifically American ‘shame’ of being artists, that is, being people who aren’t producing things other people need, like pencils, or toilet brushes, or hubcaps. So, if we can get our books on a shelf, then they become a can of soup, pretty much, and we’re part of the game. A game we resist and talk bad about, but

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one we're conditioned all the same to feel bad about not being in. Oscar Casares, I remember his *Brownsville* was by the candy bars at all the grocery stores in South Texas for a while, and I was so, so jealous. For a while there, he was mattering more than any of us, I felt like. He was so much more in the game.

PD: Another quick shift, here—Sometimes you hear it as a lament, this idea that ‘There Are No New Stories’ (whatever that really means, but I’m going from what seems to always be implied, that certain stories keep repeating themselves, principally, and that it’s only a matter of superficial details changing that marks one piece of literature from another—why this bothers anyone I don’t know, but that isn’t what I’m talking about right now) and sometimes you hear it celebrated (though celebrated in what I feel is a tired way of celebration—a beard rubbing, solemn nod of some kind). Really, it is irrelevant—if there was another person literally living my exact life in a town that looked exactly like mine, thinking the same thoughts, writing the same words, even literally expressing (creating) the literature that I express (create) it would make no difference to the originality or authenticity of my expression—originality not only means nothing now, it never had a meaning, just still doesn’t, it is a nonexistent proportion and it only exists as sentences talking about it. Person A thinks something up and unbeknownst to them—separated by however many years and however many languages and experiences—Person B thinks up the same thing

SGJ: Ah, rewriting *Don Quixote*, yeah? Or, in biology, convergent evolution: two similar eyeballs that share no mitochondria in their backtrail.

PD: Very much so—not purposefully rewriting *Don Quixote*—or *American Psycho* or whatever—but just because, two people, independent of each other, go similar ways, get sick with the same germ. The final works are not likely to be ‘the same’ at least not to my way of thinking, hence don’t worry—I often think it’d be a cool challenge to ‘write a book you have read’ without looking back at it. You’ve read *Crime and Punishment*, great, now write it—go write it as your thing and see if the product on the page at all resembles, in any way, Dostoyevsky, you know?

SGJ: I used to do this exercise in the classroom all the time. I’d read Updike’s ‘A&P’ out loud, just setting it up as some canonical story anybody on the contemporary scene has to be aware of, but then, once I was done, instead of talking about it, I’d say rewrite it, this is a quiz. Get it as perfect as you can. And, I’ve still got a file of all those old assignments, done in forty minutes, by hand. And they’re so beautiful. The class couldn’t remember names, places, person, tense, any of that, but some of them could use completely different everything and get across the same feel, while others would use the same place, same people, and tell something completely their own. You know, the poets always have to do this, don’t they? ‘Now write an Auden poem.’ I think fiction writers should as well. ‘Now write a Flannery O’Connor story. Now Tobias Wolff. Now Asimov.’ It would help everybody involved, I think.

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PD: It would, yes it would—mostly, I think, in the sense of making people come face-to-face with the realization that what Asimov or Updike or Wolff etc is, is not some Universal. If you ask someone to write ‘Like Mamet’ for example, you will pick up on what they feel are the ‘marks of Mamet’, what they ‘feel Mamet does’—and it’s great to get that out, to break it down (whether as a literal exercise or as something personal, just do on one’s own time) and then to understand that their take on Mamet probably has absolutely nothing to do with Mamet, Mamet’s thoughts, Mamet’s ideas and that those things don’t matter. In the end, you’re left with the book you read, not the book someone wrote—readers need to own that more and reader/writers need to, certainly. It frees up a lot of trouble, knowing that you dig King but if you were to tell King what you dig about him he’s probably going to say ‘Well sure—but those are your ideas, you dig? Don’t ascribe them to me.’ This harkens back to what we touched on earlier, the idea that an author, in seeking opinion or response, must be just as wary and introspective of praise as of chastising.

SGJ: Even more wary, yeah. The chastisements fuel your next project. The praise intimidates you—‘You mean I didn’t mess up, there? How in the *world* am I going to not mess up next time...’

PD: Right. And do we really stamp originality as what literally came first, do we believe in the notion of Proto-people, do we suggest that a current expression of something is less relevant than some expression dated to some time past, or worse, that the existence of something previous deepens or defines the existence of something, now?

SGJ: I might be one of those stupid lamenters. I mean, I can never write *VALIS* for the first time, I can never pull off a *Solaris*, and *It*, it's been written, too. Not saying I could have done any of those, but they're all used up already, too. In the best way. However, I'd guess that King, doing it, he was feeling this same anxiety of influence thing, and wondering how he could wedge his story into the shelf. As was Lem, as was Dick. Yet there's always room, I think. Even I try to rewrite *Don Quixote*, I'm going to jack it up somewhere. Maybe in a very interesting way. I've kind of always suspected Dulcinea was a telepathic puppet master, I mean. The story almost makes sense, like that. So, maybe I can do that, and, while I'm there, set it in 1972, so I can play around on the AM band, and set it in Kansas City, because I've liked a couple of movies that have been set there. It'll be *Don Quixote* to me, but when Rocinante's a 69 Chevelle, I may be the only one to recognize it. And, yeah, very could be that we're all just telling one story, one 'listen to me, this is important' story, just dressing it up different. But I'm okay with that. Only anxiety of influence I feel is when some twenty-four year old whips out some perfect novel, some *Broom of the System* or *Everything is Illuminated*. Or when I read about how much Bradbury or Ellison wrote to get to where they are. But then I'll remember that Bob Seger, in 69, he decided to cash it in, this singing thing wasn't making it like he wanted, he should just go back to school, do something real. I'll think about him sitting in class, a whole library of perfect songs and wonderful concerts all in his chest, still, in his head, just cooking, and I think yeah. Yeah.

PD: So much to meat in this, wonderful.

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First—I can't help myself—here we find a perfect example of something one person finds to induce jealousy and another person just cannot stand and is un-phased by—*Everything Is Illuminated*...I don't even want to go in to it, it induces the opposite of jealousy in me, it induces relief 'Thank God I didn't write that and please say I never, never, never would'—that book is epitome of constructing pretty sentences, craft-for-the-sake-of-crafting-craft. But, moving to more serious and pertinent matters, I like how you use the words 'Try To Rewrite'—and how this again touches on the perhaps accident of elevation—because there is a palpable difference in saying 'I am going to try to write *Crime and Punishment* (to stick with my earlier set up)' in the sense of 'I am going to attempt to RE-write it, make it come out the same as old D.', and 'I am going to write *Crime and Punishment*' in the sense of 'I am going to break it down to whatever my memories are (in my experiment one isn't allowed to go back and look at the book, one is treating their memory of someone else's work as proxy for their own idea kicking around in their head) and I am going to treat that as My Idea and write where my idea takes me, ignoring the fact that there is a *Crime And Punishment*—and of course the much more fascinating difference of just happening to write something like it, something that will invite comparison simply because both exist, if that makes sense. 'John X writes a book that shares superficial similarities with *Crime and Punishment*, so a reader will access it through the comparative eyes of a reader, while the writer had no thought of this comparison in mind—was unbeknownst of it—and so is not having their work regarded as original, but derivative, when it is absolutely not'. Blah blah blah. Jealousy is quite another matter—and I don't

say the lament is stupid, just interesting, curious—jealousy is a real and wonderful matter. I want to have written *Island of Dr. Moreau* or *Doctor Glas* or *Growth Of The Soil*, knowing full well all the reasons I couldn't have, and in this the interesting truth is that if I had written them, they would be about how I interpret them as a reader of Wells or Soderberg or Hamusn—I want them to be about, definitively, what I say they are about as audience and somehow think that if I were the author they would be, you know?

SGJ: That's cool, that rewriting would be a way on insisting on this or that read—on your 'right' read. And—I wonder. Is this what we're all doing anyway, every single time? It could be. I read *Cuckoo's Nest*, say, and think that's great, that's over, then I'm eating buffalo wings with somebody one day and he says something about Chief Broom that completely gets under my skin, that tells me not only should I not be sharing a basket of animal meat with this guy, but quite possibly he should cease to exist. So I go home, close the door, get my mean face on, and try to write my read of Chief Broom true. In a way that's not going to look like taking a minor character from *Gone with the Wind*—or a kind of major character from *Lolita*—and capitalizing, but in a way that, pretty much, and I know this, have shared animal meat with this guy, he's going to get. Disguise it as I might, he's going to read this, and, should he say something to me about it, and it's in contradiction to what he said about Chief Broom, then I'm right, I'm kind of the world for five minutes. Which: I am completely that petty, yes. Completely that devious and self-destructive. But I've cartooned it up here too, of course. All the same, water this back down to reality,

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and, am I not always writing specifically to those people who thought Don Quixote the character was just stupid and deluded, not perfect and grand? I think I am. I'm trying to prove to them that he's our best self, put on paper. I'm just not doing it with windmills and donkeys, I'm doing it with Trans-Ams and Journey.

PD: I feel you. And it's a necessary pettiness, provided it doesn't become overtly whiney, provided the petty doesn't become Fitzcarraldo obsessiveness on getting your way, right?

SGJ: Yeah, you don't want to get petty, no doubt—like I'm not the single most petty person I know already—but Fitzcarraldo, man. What he did. It's like Kevin Costner's golfer character in *Tin Cup*, blasting away at that same shot over and over. How not to respect that kind of single-mindedness? That insistence that you're right? Sometimes you've got to be Coronado, going deeper and deeper for the gold you know's there, and if you burn out doing it, then hopefully you burn out enough that you never have to know there never was any gold.

PD: I'm taking this from the point of view of Writer, here, I'm just right with you about those awful moments in conversation where someone says something about a novel and...well, it kind of has to be over with them—extremely frustrating when a readership (or a single reader) doesn't at least read the work in the train of thought the argument is being made. For me, it's always 'Your characters are people who snap...go crazy...descend in to madness...' and this is often said with a great appreciation, as a vast compliment

but still it is jarring that my investigation was not meant to be any such thing.

SGJ: I had this woman show up to one my readings, and she kept raising her hand over and over, asking why there was so much throwing up in my books. And I kept trying to make up reasons, then started just saying 'I don't know, you mean there's a lot of throw-up, really?' All with the end result being that now I'm hyper-vigilant about any throwing up going on in my stories. Like I'm trying to keep count now, just because I don't want her arm stabbing up into the air again, please.

PD: But, there's the rub—I take myself to task, you know? I feel like I'm whining, even if it's not a complaint. One of the interesting conclusions, from both my petty little remarks about my own writing and your more interesting remarks about *Quixote* read wrong is that there is an exaggerated tendency in people to 'believe into a novel', a writing, a literature, to believe things in the novel that they do not at all believe in life—that the novel, because it is unreal, is an experience of unreality: people are just cartoonish and farcical, people do 'descend into madness', or people are saintly and pure—things get stuck in the symbolic rhetoric and don't drift back down to the reality from which they are birthed. Not to say that if one didn't know that Brett Ellis was writing a novel largely about his father (not a memoir, but a novel) with *American Psycho* they cannot get something larger from it, but to reduce it to 'Bateman is a crazy man who may or may not be a rapist/racist serial murdering nonentity' is a ludicrously sad way to read the thing—whether someone praises it for being that or not, it is ridiculous to chat about

whether ‘Bateman really did it’, you know? Whether *Quixote* was deranged. Readers too often reduce themselves to even-keeled, perfectly calibrated people, don’t approach writing with all their foibles and neurosis and faults at the forefront and so lose the point—I don’t know what someone is reading if they aren’t keeping it in mind that they are flawed and petty and imperfect and only a step away from being reprehensible, themselves. And I don’t mean that as nasty as it sounds—but each of us is only a half-inch from losing our humanity completely, while we’re miles, decades, mountains away from being sublime, you know? The goodness is what we’re all far from, the inhuman is what we’ve (maybe) just narrowly avoided.

SGJ: Yep. And, I wonder if those misreaders—a term I know I’m not comfortable with, as it’s setting up some proper alignment with ‘intent,’ and I suspect you’re not all for the term either—I wonder if what they’re really saying is that they came to this to escape, to see perfect people doing perfect things, they wanted just a few drops of happiness and goodness to suckle on, a place where things make sense, such that, trucking in BEE’s father and all that, it muddies things up, makes what’s on the page too much a version of what they’re wanting to escape *by* reading. I don’t know. I can’t explain that impulse, really. And it could be a failure on the story’s part, too, that it’s only getting the reader partway engaged, such that their critical mind’s still cranking in the background. If the story can shut that down, though, get the reader to completely identify, to engage the story deeply enough that it becomes a new and better kind of real, then there’s no time to question.

PD: Touching back of 'Do we, or ought we to, stamp Originality simply on what was done, timeline, first' mostly I feel the answer to that question would be 'No', mostly I feel there would be something pithy pointed out about how that makes something Universal—I think the opposite, feel that really this reinforces the isolation and lack of Universality, both in experience and in art. I think Universality is a crafted, conscious cobbling, not something born of the murk in whatever part of our brain dies last (the unconscious, pardon my dull attempt at poetry).

SGJ: Man, but that 'they is' in Wolff's 'Bullet to the Brain?' There's a whole world packed into that last part of his brain to die, a whole life. We should all be so lucky. Or, this universality, this 'apply anywhere,' I don't at all doubt that it exists, that it happens, but I think trying to make it happen, that's kind of dooming yourself. Like Hornby said, when somebody asked if he was worried that all his pop-cult references were going to be lost ten years from now, making his novels these strange artifacts: 'So? I'm not writing for then, I'm writing for now.'

PD: That's a cool thing to say. Moreover, there comes that beautiful moment when a novel—separated by decades and countries etc—a novel we know had direct reference to its day and age, all of that becomes irrelevant. The references just become things—not charged with current attitude—the names are just names, the songs are just songs, might as well be make believe, inventions of the author—when I read foreign novels, that's just how I read them. In *Mysteries* (yeah, I like Hamsun in case you can't tell) there is that wonderful

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long argument about all the writers of the age and the thinkers, but it's one hundred years ago and it's in Norway and I don't have any feelings about any of them, don't have opinions, don't even know who they are, so it becomes perfect abstract music, I can read it as an argument about an argument, no sense of surface influence. Eventually, every book becomes a translation, becomes a derivation of its original.

SGJ: Yeah, and I'm so poorly informed, just about everything in general, that everything I read, it's like that. It's all made up, it's all just for the purposes of this story. I finally watched *All the President's Men* the other day, and when it cuts off at the end, I was leaning forward, waiting for more. Because I really really wanted to know what happened next. I mean, I know *X-Files* by heart, I can quote *Star Trek* however long I need to, but, during the movie, I had to sneak my phone out, Wikipedia Nixon up, to see if he was alive or dead, anymore. I pay great and close attention to all the fake things. The real things, not so much. Because they're always changing. I don't trust them.

PD: I don't fucking trust them either—to a point I used to (and it led to bad things and caused some hurt, you know?) treated reality as rhetoric—one opinion, one stance, one thought was as good and the same as any other, my own might as well be interchangeable with 'not my own' and somebody else's were just a fickle interpretation they had no business making. I've mellowed and got better in my head about that.

SGJ: Me too. Or, maybe it's not been so much a mellowing as learning to keep the mask on, keep what you know to be true in your head, not inflict it on people so much.

PD: I love that about *All The President's Men*, I'm really just like that most of the time. Not because, you know, it doesn't interest me, but when is that going to come into my sphere?—either that film, literally, or anything else—and shouldn't one be more concerned with a passionate investment of themselves in the world they know and see—even if that world is that pages of books and images on screens—the world they experience than (and rather haphazardly) choosing little historical moments to read lists of facts and commentary about?

SGJ: Definitely. I'm always so amazed when I see people religiously reading the newspaper each morning. I just want to ask them why, what are they getting, here? I mean, I understand that as you age you kind of want some context, and a newspaper can provide that, it can make you feel part of some larger story, but, man, there's so many good stories on the shelves. That they're made up doesn't make them even the smallest bit less real, either. They're more real for the truth in all the lies, even, I think. Because, yeah, like you say, it's the level of your investment that lends 'reality' to an experience.

PD: It is the leaning toward reality-as-expression rather than reality-as-fact, I think, that allows us—I'm paring us, hope you don't mind—to find profound, necessary truth and exploration in *Darmok*

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while making sure we ‘show up informed at the voting booth’ kind of secondary. Honestly, I dislike and distrust people who don’t have a firm grasp of Unreality, because it’s another necessary admission—the natural extension of ‘I am my own perceptions’ is not that ‘There is not a factual, stable world’ but merely that ‘I would be a liar if I claimed to see that stability.’

SGJ: It’s why discovering PKD was such a revelation for me. I suddenly felt less alone. There were other people out there with the same doubts, the same certainties, the same basic, lingering suspicions. It was like coming home.

PD: The mark of a piece of literature is that a reader will never understand it—and a reader, I think, going in should always know they are about to experience something indecipherable, something they cannot actually take meaning from.

SGJ: Yep, any meaning there’s what you bring to the text yourself. If the happy-faced stick-figure’s drawn sparsely enough, you step into that panel, look around.

PD: Certainly, become the conscious of the character’s unconscious for awhile—they choose where you go, but you choose what you think about it.

SGJ: Like those ‘books’ in *Rant*, where the writer’s not a writer at all, just kind of sketches out the skeleton of the experience, which you then plug into in your own way.

PD: Now, I will say, as you do, they can build meaning, but this meaning is their own and they should own it, should own their reactions, their thoughts of response, be they considered or from the hip. It's such a bloody yawn to say 'Wow, Gogol is brilliant, listen to what he thinks!' or 'Well Pater seems to suggest in his writing that X or Y or Z' or 'But you have to look at what Jelinek says here'.

SGJ: I love that, 'bloody yawn.' I want to start a magazine called *Bloody Yawn*. It'd be perfect. I mean, so long as it wasn't really me who started it, or tried to run it, or had anything to do with it.

PD: I've tried and tried to get a journal or a collaborative enterprise of some kind going that I would call *Pocketful of Scoundrel* (from Dylan's *Tarantula*) but it never gets a spark—something should be called that, though. Eventually it got to the point that I just named a journal in a story I wrote *Pocketful of Scoundrel*, just a peripheral detail, my way of saying 'This is never happening in real life'. A pity.

But now to return from my own aside—literature has nothing to do with communication and I've never been sure what people think it communicates—the closest I come is that certain basic iconographies are passed on, specks of something can be recognized and literature somehow gives this a sublimation, makes it seem as though 'Our stories are us and because our stories are similar we are the same'.

SGJ: Really? I guess the anthropologists would kind of say that our stories are where the culture lives, that's why we pass them on. Baby elephants get all the

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gut bacteria they need from eating their mother's dung, right? Or, maybe I should say that I always tell my students that, first and foremost, before any of the other clutter, what they write is communication. And, as such, it has to be clear, they've got to either take all the noise out of the lines they can or they've got to use that noise in a new way. And I also tell them that communication, talking to somebody on one of our eventual Saturn bases, that that's the basic magic *of* fiction. That Shakespeare's the most successful David Blaine ever, because he's still whispering to us from the grave. But I suspect I'm being too literal with 'communication' here, too—but, I should add, I don't buy into art as expression, as that feels like an excuse before the crime, a way of escaping the product from any kind of evaluation. So maybe I do necessarily default to the communication model, then. And, within that communication model, so much fun manipulation.

PD: Aha—fantastic. I feel the opposite, but not in the sense of I disagree (isn't it neat when people think, really, the same thing but then the same thing is different?) I feel that *not* treating art as expression—treating it as built storytelling or something for commercial consumption...or 'anything but expression', I don't mean to try to get so specific—is an attempt to escape evaluation.

SGJ: I can see that, yeah. Get where you're coming from, I mean. It's like we're in different tunnels, but digging through the same mountain.

PD: You have it that if a piece (expression) were to come under fire the temptation would be to

shrug and say 'It's merely an expression, nothing more to say' while I feel that treating it as a Story, or an escapist writing or a Creation would lead to that—the creator gets a bit bothered by a critique and then it becomes 'It's just a story, it might not be for you, you know? I wrote it for someone who wants to take it as it is, there is no point in arguing or analyzing it, because it's just a jaunt, an escape—read it or don't.'

SGJ: Yeah, I so despise—that's the right word—those kinds of writers. Who feign—it has to be a ruse, right?—no injury when you don't much care for their work. If the work matters, then it's got your whole heart in, it's where you're living, and when somebody doesn't like it, that's a judgment on you every time. At which point you become an actor, trying to hold your face in place, at least until later. It destroys you every time, though. And then you hate that person, go write a novel against them.

PD: Truth. And I really do agree, even though I have peculiar bents myself with regard to reaction. When someone is seeking to be injurious with their reaction—not just that they 'don't like it', but they make it fucking personal that they don't like it, right?—you are fucking-A right it drives up hate, hate of primordial, misdirected ignorance. Jesus, some readers out there—and some writers, in response, to be even with this—they, in dead earnest, take their own personal aesthetic not being pleased as some fundamental grotesque on the part of the artist and this is ridiculous—it is not critique, it is not commentary, it is not 'reaction to art' it's an excuse to be an asshole and books are not excuses to be an asshole. I've hated books—hated books—and with

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pals, in hyperbolic conversation while having drinks and a laugh, all sorts of monstrous talk will be bandied about, time-to-time, but to *really* feel injured by a fiction is rather pathetic—it's a different thing to severely feel something, but, as Epictetus would remind us, our tempers and reactions are our own—someone who can hate—really hate and want to be lashing toward the originator of—a fiction, I'd worry, they must be a monster when faced with reality and actual situations that aren't over and done when the cover is closed.

SGJ: Guess it could be that fiction and books are a safe place for them to vent all the frustration they're evidently trucking around day to day. So they hate the world, and this or that book, being a distillation of it in some form or another, becomes 'the world' to them, and then gets the brunt of all their dissatisfaction. Which of course you can use in your marketing—I'd guess you can even target that bad attitude part of the audience, as, if they're burning your books, they're likely buying them somewhere first, and so, finally, you win, you're getting paid, are going to get more contracts, have more books for them to burn. Me, I've always thought I'd dig having one of my books go that viral kind of controversial, get banned by this or that group, all that, except, the way things tend to polarize, I fear my book might get held up as a torch by people I wouldn't necessarily agree with. And that would be scary. Same way Springsteen got co-opted into that election campaign. Be a hard thing to live down, especially since the first way the public sees is pretty much the only way they're going to keep seeing you.

PD: To me, why I say 'expression' etc. it's because it leaves it out there, shell-less, and because expression, to me, is desirous of all interpretation, does not prefer one more than another, asks for Analysis or Evaluation Ad Infinitum—to no end, to no purpose, but in every nuance, treating all as pertinent. Nothing to hide behind. But, I go on too much, here, I know—really, I think we mean the same thing, it's a matter of semantics(though if not so correct me or please just further the thought line).

SGJ: I had never thought of it like that, that expression's got a built-in invitation there. But, I mean, if I'm saying that the story's never complete until it's read, then I have to agree, yes? And I do think we're in sight of each other now, anyway, if not quite on the same path. I can hear you whistling, I mean.

PD: Whistling in the dark, anyway—it's the only one thing that I know how to do well.

As to communication—too literal or not, doesn't matter—I dig where you and anthropologists come from, I just take that kind of communication as 'there whether it is intended or not' it communicates like that across history because it does—if we didn't have stories, our petrified droppings would communicate across time, or how we buried each other, or what kind of buildings we constructed etc. Our icons do communicate us and our feelings, but always re-filtered through the eyes of even the strictest and most removed anthropologist—but I do not think (and from some things you say and reference get the feeling that maybe...maybe neither do you) that the reason any of us write is to communicate to

ages in the distant future, to make sure we have that kind of posterity.

SGJ: I don't think that's the way to write, no. It's the wrong angle to try to take. But I do think a lot of people are out there trying to be Hemingway, trying to write their thing in such a way that it sticks forever. And you can tell. First, because it takes them years to write even one book, but second, because they have such serious faces on at their readings. 'This matters,' they're saying, somehow not aware that if you have to say it, it doesn't.

PD: Right on. Or disguising it behind faux deprecation, yes. Literary celebrity—especially compounded by time—is such a curiosity. Again, when I think 'I want to be like Hamsun' I mean artistically, to have some quality 'like that' to my stuff. Don't you find that people who want to be 'like Hemmingway or Kerouac or whomever' really have the impression that 'all the good books are known, the things on the list are there because, mathematically, they are the best.' And that (other than them, maybe) unknown works are unknown for a reason.

SGJ: Marshall Herskovitz, on one of the *The Dialogue* interviews, he says that, talking Hollywood, there's hundreds if not thousands of star-quality actors in LA, all just waiting for their chance to be Nicole Kidman or Robert Downey, Jr., but getting passed over for stupid reasons, and then there's probably ten or twenty directors who are every bit as talented as Nolan or Aronofsky or whoever—I'm putting names in Herskovitz's mouth, here—but, when it comes to

screenwriters, there's not even one who's as-yet undiscovered. Because writing is the field in which talent rises. This is very alluring to me, too, this idea, if for no other reason than I want to believe it simply because my knee-jerk reaction's to resist it—and my knee-jerk reaction to things I reject without processing is that I'm doing it for defensive reasons. That, if talent truly rises, then, because I'm not on top of the field right now, I'm not talented, so it's either buy into that or say this explanatory model's fundamentally broken. All the same, though, some of the stuff I get to read in advance of the crowd, or just stuff I pluck off a shelf at random, some of that's so, so beautiful and perfect and wonderful, but it's not any less wonderful just because I'm the only one looking at it now, I don't guess. Like that trunk of PKD we were talking about earlier: the quality of the work is integral to the work. It's just maybe not complete without me plucking it off the shelf. Which is to say that, sure, talent rises, but at the same time, sometimes you write this beautiful work, and you're, I don't know, ten years late, ten years early, you miss that *Carrie* window for whatever reason, and it sucks for you, sucks for that book, but at the same time, even though you know that's as good as you can do, you've got to do it again, and better. And try to believe that, yes, talent and quality rises. That, instead of being left behind like Herskovitz says, rather than being left behind for good reason, you've got to believe that these are the initial steps of getting there. Nevermind that the escalator's going the other way under you. You've just got to run harder. Write better.

PD: Sure—these people I was referring to, that think there is only this one moment and that what is

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unknown in this one moment is unknown forever and rightfully, no sense of time or history, no taking it in, really taking it in, that things that are immortal (for all we know, anyway) scarcely made most of their creator's household bloody names in their day. I've said elsewhere and would like to touch on it with you—both as its own thing and another slight return to my take on having a distance from marketplace—that literature, storytelling, fiction, all of it predates the notion of doing it to be in stores, to sell, to be known the world over: literature predates literature-as-commodity, especially on a vast scale. It's glibly taken for granted that if technologies were the same now X or Y number of years ago, the artists we admire would have utilized them fully to achieve a wider fame and I just don't understand why people think this so flatly, so inarguably. That Dostoyevsky would have made sure to sign up for a fucking Twitter account (not deriding Twitter, understand) or that Moliere would have guest written an episode of *Ally McBeal* or whatever. I, for myself, doubt the face of artists who will be timeless have changed at all—because what they do is timeless, not topical and not based on the topical availability of exposure. I mean, for every masterpiece we know of I cannot help but imagine there are fifty that no one will ever know of and that is just because it's how it is, not because people don't spend enough time popping in on message boards, dig? And just because I have you here and I got sidetracked there in my ranting, a moment, let me say that I do despise exactly the writers you mention you despise and find that a lot of them are savvy enough to realize—'Hey, maybe I should utilize these social networks to give myself a kinder face, an easy, noncommittal show of support' when, come on, who

starts a Twitter account or makes sure to message around, to market themselves if they aren't more or less putting on the serious face and saying 'This matters—I'll talk about your mag or the game last night, but then with artistry and tact let me bring it around to how much my work matters.' If your work matters and you want me to think so, give it to me, I'll have a look. If you want to spend all day long crafting a teaser that matters enough I'll buy your book, okay. But remember, Camus isn't Camus because he was a fucking bestseller, nor is Blake nor Milton nor Miller nor Joyce nor Dick nor Wells nor Lovecraft nor Melville. We don't remember forever how well the book we loved sold, we remember forever the book we loved.

SGJ: Yeah, we do remember the ones we loved, but I guess if there are more artifacts of them left over from Lovecraft's day, say, then there's a better chance it'll get to matter to me. But then there's stuff like...like George Schuyler's *Black No More*, which predates Ishmael Reed by forever, but's doing such a similar thing (to take nothing away from Reed), and in that same glib kind of narrative stride West was hitting with *Day of of the Locust*. But *Black No More* was a gone-book for so, so long, and undeservedly so, I think. But literature does predate the commodification process, I agree. Or, 'fiction' is the term I'd use. Just figurative language. You're some tribal dude dealing with mastodons and stuff, and one day you slip across the mountain, to this other valley, see these giant sloths, sloths which aren't in your valley and never have been. When you come back then, sit around the fire and tell your story, you have to tell it terms of what your audience already knows. You use the mastodon and the dire wolf to try to get across

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not just what this sloth looked like, but what it felt like to *see* that sloth, and to have that sloth look back at you. You whisper when you say it because it's a sacred experience, one with beings which might as well be magical, and your audience, these other people around the fire, they're right there with you, and you're not doing this for money or attention or better breeding privileges, you're doing it because you've become infused with this experience, and it's too big for your chest, you have to get it out. You have to tell the story of it. And so you reach deeper and deeper into your word-horde, and, when there are no terms, you use style to get across what you feel inside, you use intonation and reverence and humor, and you discover a structure inside your story, almost like a mnemonic device, and the audience reacts to this, goes along with it, and pretty soon you get addicted to them listening to you, and so you maybe even start making up stories, about this 'other' valley, with these other, similarly 'magic' creatures, and you find you can port over the conventions you've learned to this made-up valley, and, yes, by then, the marketplace you're working in, it uses the audience's favor as currency, I guess, and so fiction's become a commodity. But it's such a beautiful process, I think. And the fiction isn't at all harmed by that process, either. Some people will be good at a lobbing a spear through a donut at a hundred yards, and some people are born liars. The tribe needs both.

PD: We can talk about this, it'd be fun, I don't want to press it though. All I mean is 'Yes our writing communicates that way, having nothing to do with us as writers—our ideas, our feelings, our wishes'. If we communicate with the future it is by accident and of no

consequence—there might be ten thousand civilizations that have lived on earth and that literally we have no record of—and we would not be the poorer for not knowing what they felt about themselves or their world, what stories they told, we feel no void in not knowing if we know.

SGJ: Yeah, it's all accident, can be of no consequence to us, definitely. Just write what's true, push it out onto the water, see if it floats. And don't watch it too long, either. Turn around, write the next thing, and the next.

PD: Let them sink. The world is built on sunken things—civilizations, artworks, bodies. Let the work sink, it won't keep more from coming.

SGJ: Might even be one of those sea changes out there, so that your piece floats back to you, has fins now.

PD: And perhaps our stories are us, I don't know that I disagree with that, but they are Us (plural) while our literature is Us (singular)—that is, Stories are 'Us'

SGJ: *Another* great title: Stories 'r Us. Man.

PD: Naw, not so good, I appreciate your saying so but no no—I'd be accused of trying for a poor man's P.K. Dick—it seems a drab version of *We Can Remember It For You Wholesale* or something. Or like something Lethem would write, now. What happened to Lethem?

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He was a great, great hero of mine, for a time, but now he just fucking bugs me. You ever read the short piece ‘Glasses’, from back in the day? One of the finest pieces of short fiction I have ever come across—no hyperbole, one of my favorites.

SGJ: I don’t remember ‘Glasses,’ no, but’ll look for it now, thanks. But yeah, Lethem was a hero of mine as well, back when. Even showed up on the back cover of *House of Leaves*, right? As Vincent Price with a fly’s body. One of the better blurbs ever.

PD: Do check out ‘Glasses’. And though you probably have, read and re-read *As She Climbed Across The Table*—what a fucking masterpiece, the contemporary exemplar of ‘literature/genre/escapist/philosophic’.

SGJ: I dug that one, yeah, though not nearly so much as *Gun*. I read *Table* all in one sitting, too, in a doctor’s office. Lethem used to write ‘thin’ like that, where you can read it no time flat. But something changed. I mean, I seriously dug *Motherless Brooklyn* as well, don’t get me wrong, but when he shifted gears, for some reason I couldn’t tag along. Hopefully it’s not a result of him getting important, established, thus having all that pressure to ‘have something to say.’ He’s better than that, I hope.

PD: I hope so and in my heart I think so, he’s just gone from surefire to dubious. But what was I saying about Stories are Us? Ah, Stories are ‘Us’, plural (me and you and him and her, together) while literature is ‘Us’, singular (me and you and him and her, separate and incapable of joining). It is something we all have, but

it is not a commonality, it is a gulf. I know when I write—and feel I can fairly say it about a few others—no matter what I might say a writing is about, no matter how I might investigate the matter, the expression is finally and irrefutably just Me, it's a book about me, it is some unconscious mumbling of myself, full stop, and for whatever reason I call myself by twenty different names in it, talk about things I did by mentioning things the opposite or as seemingly unconnected (only unconnected in that while writing I don't bother to wonder if there is a connection, I'll find out soon enough that there is).

SGJ: Yep.

PD: Once the piece is written, I, the writer, can interpret it just as much as anyone, see all of these little stories and explanations and reflections I can make it into, but these all come after—and the stories, explanations, reflections that some other reader sees or concocts are just a pertinent and valid and 'It' as whatever mine are.

SGJ: Definitely. I so, so hate those writers who sit on pedestals and say to the crowd that 'You're getting warmer, you're getting warmer, you're almost there, you're almost reading it right'. There is no 'right.' If you're holding the book where the serifs are all 'down', then you're reading it right, I say.

PD: Indeed. And yeah—I have a disdain for the same in essays and moreso for the folks who pay lip service to the idea of 'creative audience' or whatever we want to term it, but still try to reference it all back to

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their point of view on their work. My wife—ten million times more brilliant than I and surprisingly at times even more hardcore severe—has it that a writer, the author, is actually *less* capable of participating meaningfully with their written work—I say they are exactly equal to any other audience, once it's out, they can have an opinion on equal footing with the opinion and insight and analysis of anyone else.

SGJ: Yeah, only thing that makes me any kind of 'authority' on my own stuff is that I can sometimes remember it kind of well. In that basal ganglia way, though, of 'I remember this happening', not that 'I remember writing it'. And I only remember it happening because the character in there's a thinly-veiled me.

PD: Right right—just as you said before, you know some in-jokes and where some of the seams are. It would be a beautiful world—here's another story concept—if the author unpacking himself into a book, if once the work was done those thoughts and all that formulated them vanished, literally, from the individual, a profound and perfect disappearance into the work, a genuine posterity. But *moreso*, I think it's only right for artists to forget their work, their motivations, the details—because if you aren't a different person two years later, if everything you think hasn't fundamentally shifted—what's going on? Always start with yourself—if your work doesn't effect, alter, differentiate, change you, why would it do those things to anyone else? Or why would it matter to you if it did? The most honest thing I can say about anything I wrote—novel, poetry, play, whatever—if asked 'Why did you write this?' is that 'I wrote it because I don't believe it anymore.'

SGJ: Exactly. So when I'm answering questions about that stuff I wrote whenever-ago, I have to kind of play-act like I'm the me from back then, as well. Which I can do, somewhat, sometimes. Or, I can at least chart a path from where I am now to where I was then. It gives me no privilege into the work, really, but hopefully it lets me come off as less dismissive. Because I do, I think, still believe in that old stuff, even though it's alien and strange and all coded-up, I just believe in it as something I did then. Not something I'm ever going to be able to pull off again. One of my novels, *The Bird is Gone*—that's never happening anymore. At least not from me. The circuits that were lit up, writing that, they all turned the lights off after they were done. However, those books I know I can never write again, I'm often the most nostalgic for them.

PD: Honestly, I really wish I felt the way my wife does, I know my mind just doesn't quite get there, it's odd—it seems like I recognize she is correct, know she is, yet there is a mechanism in me that, though I know it, it won't let me know it. But, this is a fine place to point out that 'technique in reading' is just as much a debate amongst readers as 'technique in writing' is amongst writers—really impassioned, almost vicious stances on both ends sometimes.

SGJ: Man, I've completely missed the 'technique in reading' debate, I guess. Unless I'm preaching it already. Living it, maybe. My technique, anyway, it's just this completely innocent sort of gullibility. I believe wholeheartedly in the story, each and every time. I invest everything in it, and have a very difficult time extracting

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myself, and encode the memories all wrong, such that I can never remember what I read, for sure, and what I actually did.

PD: Then if you're in the debate you're on my side. I mean, not to be simplistic, but everyone who reads, reads alone—make notes in the margins, look up words you don't know, whatever, you're reading all by yourself, all by yourself, having an experience of personal thought that is inexpressible to anyone else. When you're done reading you can talk about what you read, but bring someone else into the conversation and you're both talking, it's its own thing—reading is isolation, a shared isolation maybe, but that semantic trick doesn't mean it's done any less alone.

SGJ: Oh, yeah. Talking lit crit stuff, theory, the only two that ever made anything even approaching sense to me are either Reader Response or New Critical—each of which are what you're talking about: me, so alone with the text, who cares what the next person's getting out of it. Or, what the next person's getting doesn't impinge at all on my experience, except to often make me feel more right, like I'm the one with the true path into the story. Hard to avoid that feeling, I think, especially when the story's written right.

PD: Good place to retouch on our somewhere earlier started chat about Story versus Literature, or at least my silly attempt at delineating the two. Literature can birth from story, but it's better that it be the other way around. That is, I can think of any one of these simple stories, those matrixes 'A man murders someone

in a rage and his life unravels' or whatever, some story everyone knows and TV Guide can synopsise in two sentences 'A guy commits a crime, tries to get away with it, but he doesn't' for example—this is no more imaginative than 'A guy concocts an elaborate crime and gets away with it through this cleverness and that'—and then I can express Literature from this story, but it is better to begin with a literature someone wrote, to read it and to create stories from it, think the abstract into some personal concrete.

SGJ: I don't follow this, quite. But I guess it's in maybe in keeping with me saying we're all writing some *Don Quixote*? That is, we're all palimpsest artists, to some extent. But, I'll go for the TV guide logline of a story years before I'll try to ramp off Eugenides or Chabon or Lethem or Zadie Smith. Not because they're not good or I don't like them, but because, who knows? I might be James Cain, I might be Dashiell Hammett. I might be able to extract the universal from the mundane, the tried and tired.

PD: It's good you didn't quite follow me, because I want to restate a bit and re-tack. Bear with me—Camus quite famously said that when he wrote *L'etranger* he was writing a story about 'How in our society a man could be put to death for not crying at his mother's funeral.' Fucking brilliant statement and if such a novel were written it would be out of sight. That's the TV Guide line, that's the one or two sentence germ a writer begins with. You tell someone you have an idea and an idea is like that, a literature can be birthed from it (before I go on, let me say I have always wanted to write a little comedy where Camus is chatting with a pal, tells

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them that idea, the pal is excited and waits for Camus to finish—Camus hands him *L'etranger*, pal reads it and is disappointed. Camus asks 'What's the matter?' Pal says 'I thought this was gonna be bout a guy put to death for not crying at his mother's funeral.' Perplexed, Camus says '...it is'. And after a pause the pal says 'Sure...for that and because he murdered a complete stranger in cold blood for no reason whatsoever. Harharhar).

SGJ: That'd be great. Do it on xtranormal, I say.

PD: Anyway, you get that little few sentence germ and just run with it, something along the lines of what I consider literature is likely to birth. But if you get an idea like (continue bearing with me) 'This guy goes around, living his life, we watch him go to work, see a film, with his girlfriend, have dinner at home, talk to a friend etc etc follow him for a whole day and then after he showers and is in his pajamas he sits on the bed and we see his head has a hinge on it, like the top swivels open and he swivels it open and his body slumps over and out crawls this plump little slug thing. Now, this slug thing glumps over to this pile of trash on the kitchen floor, humps onto some rotten orange slices and sucks them all night, crawls back into the guy's head and he starts his day. We watch him live awhile longer and then one night he is drunk and ends up going to his friend's house, he has a key, lets himself in and there is one of these slugs sucking trash in the friend's kitchen. Our guy sees it crawl back into his friends open head and is terrified—even though he is one of these things, he has no idea these things exist (Christ, sorry, this was all for a point, I promise).'

SGJ: Love that. Reminds of Brian Aldiss's old short stories.

PD: Oh cheers, Remind me to tell you the one about The Man Who Was Fed The Whole World, one of these days. There's some quiet desire in me to be Richard Matheson, I'll admit—I'd club a stranger to death in exchange for having my name replace his on the byline of *Duel or Button*, *Button* (the original, though the *Twilight Zone* reworking is decent) or...fuck, most anything...anything but *Stir Of Echoes*, I guess.

SGJ: Yeah, *Echoes*, in spite of how cool the ghost girl looked in the movie, still, it failed as horror. The exact same way so much horror fails: by letting the horror just be a dramatic convenience by which to get at some human wrongdoing. Like in that *American Haunting* movie: once you realize the source of the girl's 'possession,' that explanation, it strips all the scare away, when it's supposed to be smuggling it into our heads and our chests, for later.

PD: I agree, but we'll drift off again—thing about the guy with the slug in his head: neat idea, but if it occurs with such details and complexities built in, already, it will likely stick in 'Story only' realm, because if further meaning, unconscious ideas are injected, they are too squirmed into a frame work, seem and likely are quite forced. But, and here is the tie in, say the long story was *L'etranger* as Camus wrote it and then in reaction to the story a TV Guide idea is found ('Guy killed for literally not crying at mother's funeral') that would be a way of smuggling literature out of non-literature. Wow...is there even a point in what I just said—do your

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best, have at it. I'm not even quite sure I mean what I meant, there.

SGJ: Lots of the time, that's how my ideas come at me, though. All completely formed, already voiced, it's just a matter of jamming it down onto the page fast enough. But, you're saying what if *The Stranger* was that slug story, existing just on the idea plane, floating around in Camus' head, and then his trigger, his—this is PKD—disinhibiting symbol, is some corny TV Guide logline, and he then tries to shuttle his grand idea through that seemingly ridiculous premise? If so, that's beautiful, I think, if anything's going to be literature, it's that. Stanislaw Lem has some big essay on PKD, even—really, I can go longer than two sentences without dropping his name—talking about how he's writing gold from the trash heap, something like that. But better. And, while I don't quite agree with the 'trash heap' part—just a knee-jerk, defensive reaction, I'm sure—I do believe that the stuff that really works, the stuff that maybe has a chance of lasting, it's not made solely from the ethereal, and not solely from the base. Rather, it's one shuttled through the other. It's a random husbandry experiment that somehow births a unicorn.

PD: Yeah, that's it about the TV Guide thing—you actually put it better than me, there. And also that's it about the husbandry—or maybe it's vivisection. We can mention PDK every sentence if you want, fine with me. He's a beauty, like Matheson, can actually express with narrative something it seems narrative has no business with, it's like he can trick someone into thought.

SGJ: I think Vonnegut had that, too. He'd distract with diction and off-world fun, all that, but while we were looking away, he was hammering spikes in through our tear ducts, and not even breathing hard from the effort. I'd have liked to have seen him and Nabokov in some kind of literary face-off, really. I honestly don't know who'd be standing at the end of the day.

PD: It's strange to me how 'unexpectedness' (and often circumstantial and superficial unexpectedness) is synonymed with creativity—I didn't expect that to happen' equals Creative or Clever, Inventive or Imaginative. But look at it, really: (one) such a reaction and statement is principally as subjective a thing as you can get and (two) it was a reaction elicited from something that, for all you know, some individual had all the time in the world to mull over before they wrote it—maybe you 'Didn't see it coming' in five minutes, but neither did the person who wrote it, probably. Creativity, to my way of thinking, is a part of actual living, in going about, thinking, moment by moment—one can be creative and can write, it is something one can do while they go around living, but literature is the abandonment of the concern to create, is a completely pointless jotting down of some residue of what has already been created.

SGJ: That's kind of why I don't try to read 'Literature,' really.

PD: And why I don't either, anymore—or not what is, as we are saying, passing for modern 'literature'—literature that 'decides it is literature' before it is even written—ridiculous. And it's pointless—the

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struggle to give purpose to literature is a watered down version of the struggle to assert purpose into life.

SGJ: Most definitely, yes. It's our basic human concern: to try to matter, in whatever venue.

PD: Nothing lengthy here, but this quick thing is asked with deep sincerity, not a whiff of cynicism—Do you think that?

SGJ: I do, yeah. I think the smart, aware part of our brains are completely aware that we don't matter at all. But what makes us so human, it's that we insist on trying to matter, on trying to find meaning. On seeing faces in spilled jelly, letters in cereal, providence in who you happened to park by on this or that day. And we take that impulse to matter to our reading, to our writing. Just as we take it everywhere. And, just in trying, I think—it's very noble, to insist that you mean something, that you matter, that all of this matters. To insist upon it in the face of everything telling you this is foolish. I don't know if you read *Secret Wars* back when, but there's a point late in the series where Dr. Doom, instead of fighting the good guys on this Battlefield Planet, he turns his gaze higher, to the Beyonder—the game-master here, the 'god' of this reality. And, not only does Doom look up, he nods to himself, says he wants some of *that*. Or, Ez-E, I don't know which song anymore, but there's some point between choruses somewhere where he says 'Why not take it *all*,' which I've never stopped agreeing with. Or, I know: it's Robert Duvall in *Colors*, right? The joke about the cows? I'm trying to hit this from all angles because I believe in it so much, think it's why we have religion, why we have art—

why society and civilization is what it is. It's what makes us human, finally. When the aliens settle down to autopsy us, what they're going to be digging deeper for with their probes, it's that insistence Kirk always had, that he would never let go of: That there's a way out of this. And maybe there is.

PD: I like all of that very much and can only nod in agreement. Or, I'll nod in agreement and then do my pesky blathering, riff on those very fine thoughts. Because what you say is very true, and it leads to our baseness as well as our betterness—like *They Might Be Giants* saying 'I don't want the world, I just want your half'—it's an urge to matter, even when the urge is that of the obliterator—Dr. Doom. We want to matter where it seems it matters the most and this is someplace other than just 'in us', we need to inhabit each other. Sometimes we do it as homicide detectives and sometimes we do it as opera singers, but I agree we need to make ourselves matter, it's pure to want to matter.

SGJ: And sometimes I think the only people who finally do matter are the ones who aren't selfish, who say 'Yeah, I'm clocking in at seven in the morning, making it home at seven, I'm doing my thing, and this means something'. Whereas me, say, I have all these Doom dreams and aspirations, which I suspect are finally selfish, trying to impose myself into people's heads, into their lives, like what I think's that important. But I'd far rather be Doom than Captain America, too. Doom's free, Cap's not.

PD: I just agree, now I feel clumsy for how I put it. What did I say? '...it's pointless—the struggle to

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give purpose to literature is a watered down version of the struggle to assert purpose into life? It's in the one, but not the other, maybe, but maybe if it could be found in one it could then be smeared into the other—create meaning-on-paper and try to smuggle it into life.

SGJ: Hey, that's my 'Theory of Art,' if I can be said to have one. That a good story—okay, okay, the theater. You go see a play, and in that play, in that story, everything matters, everything's charged with meaning. A magical experience, and then it's over . . . but. You walk outside, a newspaper blows up against your leg, and now, through the power of art, which inheres craft but isn't made of craft—you're more likely to snatch that paper up, scan the headline, see if it's somehow, in a story way, important to you. If this isn't just chance. So now, what that play's done, it's opened your eyes, made you see the world in a different way. A better way, one in which there *can* be meaning. Now all you've got to do is engage that world, parse it out, feel your way through the story happening all around. Try to find the happy ending.

PD: I like that, I like that. But gadfly I am, I have to press—again not bullying—on Happy Ending. Not even to say 'Does there have to be one?' as I find that endlessly rhetorical, but to ask distinctly your feelings on Ending—happy, sad, indifferent I don't care—just about the ending-as-a-thing. To me, to give a kind of example of what I mean by the question, I think many writers make a book far too 'end heavy', almost even accepting that it will likely only be read once, so there is no point of thinking about latent, secondary build to what was read—it might be reflected on, at best,

but not fully re-read. And because of this—and it might be true, who really even thinks books ought to be read more than once, these days? doing so is relegated as a ‘special indulgence’, something that can be done, but as a nostalgic sort of ‘Hello again, dear friend’—

SGJ: —I’ve got lots of friends, I guess.

PD: I’m taking that to mean you’re a re-reader, in which case I say Good and even ‘Thank you’ on behalf of the written word. I sometimes feel a jerk putting a book I love on the shelf, you know? Like it’s looking up at me saying ‘Hey, are you kidding me...this is the thanks I get for what I just gave you?’ Like I’m consigning it to hell or something—like it’s tantamount to locking the person wrote it in a room until I want to speak to him again. If I were a better person, donation boxes would be stuffed with all my favorite reads. If I’m making sense. I feel a hypocrite sometimes for not giving away a book I bought and then, if I want it again finding it again (through whatever means). I consider it priceless, but I really only want to buy it once, you know? I’m a little more than half serious, even though I note the paradoxical contradiction this honest statement is in the face of everything else I’ve said.

SGJ: I feel the same way, though. I’m constantly giving books away, even ones people have signed away. Just because bookshelves are graveyards, they’re where you park battleships that have done their duty, fought the good fight, but their day’s over now. But, yeah, the paradox. I bet I’ve got five, eight thousand books all around here. It’s ridiculous. I fear an avalanche. But, what better avalanche to get to smother under, right?

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PD: Now, back to where we were about Endings, mid-thought—This end-heaviness writers give, maybe built from belief that readers have no thought, no thought that a novel is literally meant to be different, as is your reaction to it, every time it is read—endings are made almost into a separate entity than the rest of a book. To me, personally, as a writer, endings are of no more gravity than the beginning and of less gravity than the content of the middle—beginning and end should serve as paddles, knocking a reader back and forth through the middle. Do you find a ‘Search for ending’ to be part of what you do as a writer, part of what you expect other writers have done, when you are in the capacity of reader? What is an ‘Ending’ to Stephen Graham Jones?

SGJ: That paddle model, I like it. Or, I like to think about it. Because there are novels like that, definitely. And maybe even the best novels are like that. You never really finish reading them. Which is to say maybe I wasn’t charitable enough to MZD, before, because we are always mired in that book. In the good way. But, yeah, endings. Wish I could Kermode out some theory or another, but, yeah. I believe in endings, anyway, and think that they’re absolutely what matters most in a story. Or, no, I do have a theory of endings, I’ve just never tried to phrase it in terms *of* endings, am always talking about it as the central magic of a good story. But, yeah. Here. Reading—and this isn’t unrelated to that blown-against-the-leg newspaper—what you’re doing is moving through all these scenes, all this junk, all this unattached junk, and it’s all collecting in this buffer pattern in your head, this staging area where you put

things until they can be properly applied. So, to make this suddenly two-dimensional, there's all these checker pieces spread out on the table of your mind, all these poker chips just scattered, like dropped, but what a good end can do, it can be that PKD disinhibiting symbol, the one that, when found, when inserted, when activated, it lights up a single glowing back-path through all those checkers, one that's not remotely about sequence, but about argument, about premises snowballing and building, leading to their final release provided by the end, if the end's done right. So, the story, the front the middle, right up to the last line, it's all set-up, you the reader don't know how to apply it, sure, maybe you have different suspicions, models you're trying on, gambles you want to make, but you can't know for sure until Marquez gives you that perfect, perfect end, releases all the tensions the novel's built up, tells you how to apply all that random data in your RAM. *That's* what I'm always reaching for, what I want when I say I want to elicit a response from the reader she can't articulate. So, yeah, endings to me are the absolute most vital thing in any story, and are the single thing most obviously absent from a cool ninety-five percent of the stuff out there. *Where the Red Fern Grows?* That's got it, that's my model. And *Annie Hall*. But, um . . . *Martin Dressler*. misses completely. And it had so much in the buffer pattern, could have been so, so wonderful. But I think *Kavalier & Clay* misses too, and I think it misses because Chabon fell too in love with those guys, couldn't be the kind of brutal you have to be at the very very end.

PD: Oh, now I don't disagree with you, not at all, in fact—wish I'd layered a lot of that in with what I'd been saying about the paddles, because I think I sideways

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stated myself. Yes, Beginning and End should be iconoclast, should be those two vicious points that have to be there—the paddles should be thunderclaps, like Lars von Trier films. Yes, works should contain origination and culmination, though they need to have these things so imperatively and finally there (even non-narrative work needs them in some sense) in order to work. The beginning and the end, I guess, should be like saying ‘Fucking listen to me’ and ‘Hey, did you fucking hear me?’

SGJ: Yeah, it’s not catch-and-release, it’s catch and filet.

PD: I sometimes wonder why the almost atomic imperative some people suggest that one should care about literature—‘Oh, you should care about it, you should care about some particular piece of writing and here are umpteen reasons why’ but in the end this is just like telling someone who doesn’t care for the color green that there are a million reasons that they should, that it’s such a great colour. Understand, I am fervently passionate (very nearly consumed) by literature and this is where these thoughts birth from—every moment I spend caring about literature is a moment I am away from it, a moment I am not allowing it to actually be; every time I like one thought more than another I need to remind myself it’s fine to like that thought, but it’s no more grave than any other and contains nothing more and nothing less. In my dreams, I create a literature I myself dislike, that does not tempt me away from it, something that is a clean line away from myself and in waking I know there is no way to be certain I create such a thing, I just might or I might not and there is never a

way to determine it and any step toward finding assurance in it is really just a step toward not doing anything at all.

SGJ: That's why so many writers get jammed up with their sophomore novel. They write the first, had, sure, twenty-four years to write it, but then they wait until it goes to paperback to start the next. And you can't do that. You're shooting yourself in the foot. As soon as you're done with one, go celebrate with some coconut shrimp, or dropping a reasonable number of kittens from the bridge, whatever you do, and then get back into it. Keep going. Never stop. It's the only way.