

**Mike Sacks:** All right, thank you for coming both days, and for remaining until the end. I've been saying this, and I said this too as well, I'm excited about everyone here, but this last writer is one of my absolute favorites. Even beyond being a great comic novelist, he's one of my favorite novelists. I think he's absolutely brilliant. Let me give you a bit of his background. He's the author of three novels, *The Subject Steve*, *Home Land*, and *The Ask*, I recommend you get every single one of those, they're amazing, and two collections of short stories, *Venus Drive* and *The Fun Parts*. *The Fun Parts* came out recently. Both of those books are fantastic. He's contributed to *The New Yorker*, *Harper's*, *Tin House*, *N+1*, *Slate*, *McSweeney's*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Bookforum*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Washington Post*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Paris Review*, and *Playboy*. He was the 2008 Guggenheim Fellow, and he now teaches writing at Columbia University's School of the Arts. This guy is the real deal, and I'm really, really happy to have him here today. So please welcome Sam Lipsyte. *(applause)* Thank you for coming, Sam.

**Sam Lipsyte:** My pleasure.

**MS:** We talked about this once, but I want to get into it, because I found it fascinating. To write one "Shouts and Murmurs" is difficult. But what does it take to sustain comedy for an entire novel?

**SL:** It takes...*(laughs)* a willingness to fail miserably until you get it right. It takes extraordinary self-delusion, I think, that you're being funny, or you're getting to something interesting.

**MS:** But even now, you've been doing it for so many years, does it get easier for you to know whether something is working in a comedic sense or not?

**SL:** Well, what you learn from writing a book is how to write *that* book. So by the time you're done, you know how to write *that* book. And then the next book presents its own problems. But you do learn a lot about where certain dead ends are. The first time you write a book, you take a lot of wrong turns, and hit the wall, and then as you keep doing it, I've found I can stop myself and say, "I know where this leads," and stay on a better road.

**MS:** That's interesting. So you know faster now whether something's going to work or not.

**SL:** Yeah, really quickly now I can see, "That's not going to work."

**MS:** So when you started, how long would it take you to know something didn't work versus now?

**SL:** Well, it used to take until it came out, and people told me. *(laughter)* It would take a lot longer. But I also found, and this is true equally then and now, that the best editor really is time. You put something away for a while, and then you pick it up months later, even a year later, but even a month later, and you lift it up and it's almost as though the shitty parts kind of fall off the page, and you really see what it's trying to be, and you really see what's working and what's not working.

**MS:** I guess that's the advantage of working on evergreen pieces rather than topical pieces.

**SL:** Absolutely. I always have ideas for “Shouts and Murmurs,” but it’s too late, probably, and it would take me too long. It wouldn’t be that funny by the time I finished it.

**MS:** You sort of answered this, what does it take to sustain comedy for an entire novel, but even bringing that further, what does it take to sustain the highest level of humor for an entire career? It must be, as you said, from book to book, it’s difficult, but to do it for years, you’ve been doing it now for twenty-four years or so. Has it gotten any easier?

**SL:** Well, more like fifteen, but if I thought about it like you just put it, I’d be frightened. *(laughter)* I really just try to stay in whatever project it is, and think about how to sustain it, but sustaining it in a piece, a long piece, is really the key to everything, and it’s hard. You have to keep holding yourself up to this standard, and you have to try to make everything as good as the best ten percent of what you’re working on. And you have to keep illuminating that bottom ten percent. You just keep doing that.

**MS:** But as opposed to working as a plumber or electrician, where it gets easier over the years, what I find with comedy writers is that pressure never leaves you. So there’s always a sense of wonder over whether it’s going to work or not, and I think it kind of drives some people mad.

**SL:** Yes. It does. *(laughter)* Or to drink.

**MS:** Or to drink. What’s your outlet?

**SL:** Drink. *(laughter)*

**MS:** Since you started some fifteen years ago, have you noticed a change since you started writing in both readers and editors, in that they can now more easily recognize that a piece of writing can be both tragic and comic at the same time?

**SL:** Yeah. I think that they're getting better at that. I grew up thinking that I wanted to write, but I thought all writing had to be very serious and ponderous. I mean in terms of novels and so forth. And it took me a long time to figure out that a novel or a short story could be serious and funny. Once I felt I was given some kind of permission to follow in that path by reading certain people, then I was off to the races. But it's still hard to sell that idea to editors sometimes.

**MS:** Really?

**SL:** It's not even editors, they get it, but sometimes marketing departments don't. They're trying to put you in a slot. I had a book, before the series came out, called *Home Land*. Two words, by the way. I was having a hell of a time selling it. Part of it had to do with the fact that my previous book had come out on 9/11, and was not the right book for that moment, and didn't do well, so they said, "Well, your last book didn't sell that well." There were a lot of young editors who liked it and wanted to publish it, but their bosses wouldn't let them. And so it just went to every publishing house around. Eventually I had to publish it in England first. It became like a Jimi Hendrix thing. *(laughter)* I remember my agent, in desperation, said, "This one publishing house doesn't know how to sell you. They don't understand what you're trying to do. You're this mixture of funny and sad, or funny and tragic," what I

thought a comic novel is. He said, “You have to tell them how to market you,” which seemed like an impossible thing to do. But I got on the phone with these people— *these people*, just kidding—and they asked, “Well, how would *you* market you?” And I hemmed and I hawed, and said all these things, and they kept pressing me, saying, “Give it to us in a phrase, give us something snappy.” And I said something like, “I don’t know, ‘the new dark funny guy.’” And there was this long pause (*laughter*), and they said, “We’ll be the judge of that.” (*laughter*) So yeah, sometimes it can be pretty tough.

**MS:** That book was a real hit among everyone I knew who was into comedy. It just hit really large. How many times was it rejected before it was accepted?

**SL:** Twenty-three times, or something like that.

**MS:** We were kind of dealing with this yesterday. There are a lot of humor books that are geared towards selling a hundred thousand copies. They have to have a very easy premise, wet cats or whatever it is. I can imagine this book, being so complicated and dense, was not an easy two-sentence sell. You’re not selling the plot to a movie here.

**SL:** Right. It’s these crazy letters written by this guy to his high school alumni newsletter, and he’s attacking everybody, but justifying his own failure, and also telling the story of what happened to everybody. It takes place in this New Jersey town that he hasn’t left.

**MS:** What I find, too, is that sometimes the comic sensibility of an editor or agent doesn't match those of the writer or those who are going to enjoy the book. When that book came out, it wasn't a mystery to us as to why it was funny, or how it was darkly funny. But it seems like oftentimes you have to get to that point, and as you were saying, sometimes the younger editors are for the piece or the book and the older editors are not. Because that sensibility has come on so strong since that book has been published.

**SL:** Yeah, and part of the thing is you have wait around until those younger editors get older and have positions of power. *(laughter)* And then things get easier. Part of it is, sometimes it's a generational thing. You kind of grow with editors, and so there's a shared sensibility, and then there comes a point where you can actually do something, publish a book.

**MS:** You come into your time. Are you working on a new book now?

**SL:** Yeah.

**MS:** Did you find it easier to sell?

**SL:** I haven't tried to sell it yet. I was under contract for the last one, but not for this one. So we'll see.

**MS:** Earlier, you mentioned people you influenced you. I was looking over the list, and these aren't necessarily writers who you would think of as being comic, but can you go through some of these people who influenced you to write comic novels?

**SL:** Do you have a list there?

**MS:** I do. *(laughter)*

**SL:** Let's go with your list.

**MS:** Bruce Jay Friedman. Can you talk about Bruce Jay Friedman and his novel *Stern*?

**SL:** *Stern* is a great book. I find that pretty comic, right? Do you?

**MS:** I would as well, but it's also very depressing.

**SL:** To me, a comic novel should be depressing, and it should have a lot of pain in it, and should be very human. I think that's where the deepest comedy comes from.

There are ways to be quick and clever and satirize what's already out there, and that's going to have its place and be brilliant, but I like it when it's also underneath that. As a writer, I always loved Harry Crews. I don't know if you've ever read him. It's really kind of grotesque comedy from Florida. Just dark, funny novels. He said what he's trying to depict is the crushing of the human heart, and he does it in a very funny way.

It's really about the deepest stuff. It's about one's filter, how you take in the world, and sometimes that filter kind of distorts things towards the comedy, that final place where you really just have to laugh, like there's nothing else to do but laugh. Things have gotten so bad that what other response is there? The world's so insane, what other response is there, really? But some people, they don't distort that way in their storytelling. They bend more towards a more dramatic kind of telling that doesn't really have room for humor, have room for that laugh. .

**MS:** You also mentioned Flannery O'Connor.

**SL:** Yeah. Hilarious. *(laughs)*

**MS:** A lot of these writers you mentioned are Southern. Is there a Southern bent to your comedic sensibility?

**SL:** Well, a touchstone for me is the writer Barry Hannah, especially that book *Airships*, but also *Ray*. You have the situation, right, which is where we get situation comedy, and that can be funny, but what really makes it funny in a book is going to be the language. That's the medium. A stand-up comic can do these big gestures, can do things with the face, can do things with voice and intonation to signal what's funny about what he or she is saying, but how do you do that on the page without those tools? And you do it with language, by exploring all the strange ways we talk to each other and to ourselves. And the weird poetry that comes from just riffing. And Barry Hannah, to me, was one of the masters of that.

**MS:** He taught at the University of Mississippi.

**SL:** Yeah, he was at Mississippi for a long time. Another writer was Stanley Elkin, who wrote some comic masterpieces.

**MS:** *The Magic Kingdom*.

**SL:** *The Magic Kingdom*, yeah.

**MS:** Can you talk a little bit about that book? I find that interesting, because it deals with subject matter that, in lesser hands, would've been kind of a disaster.



**SL:** Yeah, it's hard to pitch. You just have to write the books that you wouldn't be able to convince anyone (to buy).

**MS:** What was that book about?

**SL:** Well, this was at the dawn of taking dying children to Disneyland. So he created this cast of characters, all these kids with horrible diseases, which he described for pages and pages, all the things the diseases did to them, and then created these wonderful metaphors to dilate that even more. There's a main character, Eddy Bale, who's trying to raise money for it. I think at the beginning he goes to the Queen of England, and she writes him a check for like ten pounds or something. *(laughter)* And she says, "Don't cash it, just show it around, it'll make other people give money." And so it's just this very, very beautiful, twisted, heartbreaking, hilarious book that takes on all the things that we're supposed to not laugh about, not joke about. It gives the reader a certain catharsis about all of that stuff. And it also treats these kids, and the idea of mortality, with much more dignity than something very serious and self-important would. If you can do that like he did in that book, what more is there, really?

**MS:** The margin of error is so thin for something like that.

**SL:** Right. Then you fall into a vat of bad taste, right? And boil alive. And you should, because if you mess it up, you should be punished.

**MS:** What you just said I find fascinating, is that what you're doing for the page, someone can do onstage in a matter of a moment and can be very effective.

Everything you want the reader to feel has to be written out for them. So it's a very specific process, down to the comma, down to the rhythm.

**SL:** Yeah. That's why I think it's really through language. It's not just describing something that would be funny visually, and trying to just write it out on the page as though that's the same thing. It's not. You have to do other things to make something, not just funny, but to create any emotion in a reader.

**MS:** Do you think it's a deeper connect for you to do that through a comic novel than it would be for you to write for a performer or for a stage play or a movie?

**SL:** I just think it would be different. I wouldn't be using the same strategies with language if I had the visual part to work with.

**MS:** Why do you concentrate on the page? Why is a comic novel and a short story and a "Shouts" more effective for you or more personal to you than it would be to write something else in another format?

**SL:** Well, I have written in other formats. I've just found that's where my strength is, in writing more for the ear.

**MS:** The inner ear.

**SL:** The inner ear and the outer ear.

**MS:** So the internal.

**SL:** But also how we hear things, how we hear speech, all the ways that we try to talk past each other or not try to talk past each other, all the ways we misinterpret each

other, all the ways we use euphemisms or business-speak, or customer greetings language, to get through moments. I'm also very interested in freezing those moments, and playing with these kinds of semi-official cants that people use just to get through the day without going crazy. The shield language that we all use, that we walk around with. And I think there's incredible opportunity to play in that area. I'm interested in that as well.

**MS:** You teach at Columbia, and I've heard you talk about some of the mistakes people make trying to implement comedy into either a book or a short piece, and you said it's in the piece's DNA that the comedy should exist. It shouldn't just be lacquered on top.

**SL:** Yeah. People sometimes ask me, "Do you throw that on at the end?" Like you write a straight story and then you try to comedy it up or something. And the answer, obviously, would be, "No." The comedy comes from wherever the story is coming from. It's the feeling that's generating the piece. And it's just a way that I happen to look at the world. Some writers look at the world and it comes out that way, and some writers look at the world and it comes out in a different way.

**MS:** Is there a difference between an author being funny with the character, and the situation being funny?

**SL:** Possibly. That can be part of it. Barry Hannah, who I was just talking about, apparently once a student came up to him and asked, "How can I write a better story?" And he said, "Become a more interesting person." (*laughter*) That's a horrible thing to say, and I don't necessarily think it's true in all cases, but it's how

you take the world, and how it comes back out of you through language. That's all very organic, and it can't be added on at the end. It's not, "Are you funny at dinner parties," or "Are you the person who makes everybody laugh at the office?" It's "Does the world come through that kind of filter in you, and are you able to find the language to make it come alive on the page?" You might be that kind of person or you might not, but it's hard to force yourself to be a certain kind of writer.

I once had a student who wanted to be Samuel Beckett, and he was writing bad Beckett stories. And then one day he came in with a story that was completely different, more of a conventional short story, and it was really good. We all praised him, and then he complained later, saying, "I don't want to be that kind of writer." And that's a terrible place to be, if you have this ideal or notion that you fit into this certain tradition, this certain way of being on the page, but in fact, when you write, it comes out another way. So a lot of it is making peace with yourself about who you are and how it comes out of you. I know a writer who's internationally celebrated for writing very kind of short pieces, half a page, and they're very chiseled and witty. And she said, "Well, if I could, I would write big, five hundred page novels, but I can't. And I've made peace with how it happens for me." That's why you can't force something to be funny. It's funny because the world looks funny to you on some deep level, and it comes out of you that way.

**MS:** And if it comes out honestly, readers will recognize it. If you're trying to be Beckett and you're not, that's a lot of weight on your shoulders, and it'll come out, I would guess, more stilted than it should.

**SL:** And also, there's the part where it's like, "I don't think it's that funny, but other people do," or "I think it's really funny, but no one else does." I think it's El Greco, the painter, who painted people in a different way than anyone else had because he had eye problems. So they thought it was this great stylistic decision, and part of it was just problems with his retina. So sometimes I feel like that, *(laughter)* like, "What do you mean? I'm being serious here!"

**MS:** But if that happens, that's a great thing, right?

**SL:** I don't think that happens a *lot*...

**MS:** But what you're saying is true. You have to be true to yourself, and you have to put it out there and hope they like it. You can't go out there and take polls, especially when it comes to comedy and to humor.

**SL:** No. You can't have some kind of compromised version of it, this consensus version. You can't really do that. You have to always be off to one side and taking your chance from the margins. One thing you can't be is funny and powerful at the same time.

**MS:** Meaning what?

**SL:** Well, the guy standing in the middle of the room with the looks and the money who everyone wants to be friends with is probably not going to be that funny. It's not a useful perspective for him, and he's not angry either. *(laughter)*

**MS:** He's happy in life.

**SL:** A lot of it is, you all have your wound, right? You all have this whatever it is, something, that you don't sit right with, probably. If you are funny, you probably don't feel that comfortable. I'm not saying you're just bitter all the time, but you're a little pissed off about some stuff. And you are naturally someone who likes to stand at the edge and say, "Look at that jerk." But also, at the same time, recognize, "But I'm really the jerk." There's no free critique. You can't just stand in the corner and point to the people who look happy and say that they're deluded, and not recognize that you also have your own delusions and that you're also damaged in your own way. A teacher of mine said, "You want the disease, you don't want the cure." Meaning that whatever it is, if it is working for you, whatever it is that bothers you is also the thing that is generating what's good in your work. You have to be careful about all of that. You can really sink into some despair. But it's there, it's undeniable.

**MS:** And to pull off a character like that, while also making them likable, is very difficult. I know that a lot of critics, maybe not a lot but maybe a few, took issue with some of your characters, calling them losers. And you took issue with that.

**SL:** If you really want to look at it, everybody but the so-called one percent is a loser. We're all losers. *(laughter)* So I don't know why they were picking on these particular characters that much. I knew what they were saying, but a loser, to me, is someone who's fully invested in some idea of success, and then doesn't achieve it. Whereas a lot of these characters are people who, some of them were invested and some of them weren't. Some of them had made peace with where they were and what they were doing, but they were still pissed off about the world and they were

pissed off about things that had happened to them, and also full of regret for things they had done.

This whole likability thing is a really interesting topic, and it comes up everywhere. Of course, I don't care about whether a character is likable, I care about whether I want to listen to that character, whether I want to be with that character. If something about that character is fascinating, it might just be his or her use of language, or his or her behavior. And I don't have to like it, but it has to seize me, it has to scare me a little bit. And then, when I'm writing, and when I'm reading, it can be unpredictable. So likability, that doesn't really matter to me in books.

**MS:** It also seemed, too, that the stuckness of these characters, the fact that they were stuck, and weren't going anywhere, it almost seemed to annoy some of the critics.

**SL:** Right. Maybe they saw themselves too much. *(laughs)*

**MS:** Even going back to when you were a kid, you were fifteen, one of your stories was about a middle-aged man who was a shot putter in high school. What is it about the middle-aged character who's stuck that intrigues you?

**SL:** Well, it's the time when you really kind of stop thinking that there's a lot of time to make things OK. I think that when you're younger, and there is a lot of time when you're younger, but you think, "I'm stuck in this now, but there's this whole future, and I'll turn it around." And then you get to a certain point, and you're like, "Wow, it's going to be really hard to turn around now." And you also think that you may be

shackled by your personality in some ways, but you sort of feel, when you're younger, "I can shake off these habits and these ways of being, and I'll be in the clear." And sometimes you can, and sometimes you can't. By middle age you begin to really see the gulf between what you want and what you've got, and you have a better sense of how the world works, and you probably feel a lot smaller in it, in some ways. I think those characters are interesting because they have a more nuanced view of things, and they're not just bowling through and hoping for the best. They're tired.

**MS:** You talked about Barry Hannah before, and what he said. You did a lot before you became a writer full-time. You were a musician, and you experienced life. Do you think that that helped you eventually to make your writing richer?

**SL:** Everything you do adds texture to your work, to your fiction, and to your life. I think that the idea that you have to go have some grand adventure before you can write is not really the point. Probably most writers have been writing since they were pretty young, or at least thinking about it. They were readers or something. Flannery O'Connor said, I think she said, that you kind of have all your experiences by the time you're twelve, or something. I don't think it's really experiences that you have by the time you're twelve, but you have a lot of your feelings. A lot of the spectrum of feelings you're going to respond to the world with. So I do think it helps to do other things, and talk to all kinds of people. I feel like when I'm writing, I'm the swirl of everything, every conversation I've had, every book I've read, every song I've listened to, every film I've watched, all the things my parents said when I was a



kid, or didn't say when I was a kid, all the stories I heard about other people I didn't know from friends, things that happened to my friends. It's a long list, but it's like one of those lottery bubbles with the ping-pong balls...

**MS:** And a few float up. Any questions? Andrew.

**Audience member:** I'd be curious to know what you learned about writing from teaching. Was there anything about teaching writing that helped your own writing?

**SL:** Yeah. I teach writing workshops, so if any of you have been in them, you know what they're like. I think this is true for everybody, you learn more in a workshop when someone else is being discussed than you do when your own story or novel is being discussed. You can be cooler-headed, you can sit back and really think about craft, your heart's not in your throat. I get to be in that position every week. We're just talking about someone's work, and always, and I think other people do too, I'm always recognizing things that I do, or have done, and I can finally see why they work or don't work, or what context these devices flourish in, and what context they don't. Sometimes I come to the conclusion that I really fucked up something in one of my past works, or I missed an opportunity. I talked to one writer who said that when he reads from his work, all he sees are missed opportunities. He's sitting there, and he's reading it, and everyone in the audience is listening, but he's just thinking, "Oh, why did I do that, I could've done this." I've had that experience too, not necessarily while reading to an audience, but yeah, you learn a lot about what you've done, and it helps shape what you're going to do.

**MS:** One of the things you said about teaching is that one thing that cannot be taught when it comes to writing is touch. What does “touch” mean, exactly?

**SL:** Well, I guess I thought of it as the way, say in tennis, to use a sports metaphor, the way John McEnroe was at the net. That’s touch. It feels as though you can’t be instructed in that, that’s just something you can do because your reflexes are like that. Writing, then you get to a certain point, is a very physical activity. The whole body is involved, in a way. And also, if you’ve been writing a while, you’re making decisions at this level sometimes. You’re writing, and I’m not necessarily stopping and thinking, “What should the next word be? Hmm. What should the next word be after that? Hmm. How should I write a word that somehow has some kind of acoustic resonance with the word earlier in a sentence? What sounds am I working with? What’s building here? What pattern am I creating?” Because that’s what you’re doing, you’re creating different patterns, and then you’re distorting them, or twisting them, and making new patterns. But when you’re really writing, you’re not thinking it through. You do when you edit, but when you’re writing, when you’re in the act of composition, there is this sort of flow, and you have this sense of touch, I think. You’re making a million tiny decisions about what word goes next, and what word goes next, and you’re hearing it. You’re hearing it almost as a song.

**MS:** So what to do, and also what not to do.

**SL:** Yeah, and you’re making these tiny decisions, and I used a sports metaphor because it is kind of muscle memory, in a way.

**MS:** So can you teach yourself touch?

**SL:** You have to go through, which I did, a really bad-mannered phase for a long time, where you're thinking too much. And I always tell my students, it's not an anti-intellectual stance, but I tell them, "Don't have ideas. Don't have an idea, don't think." Because that can all come later, that's what editing's for, that's what revision's for. You write to find out what you're writing, and then, if you really want to do this, then you spend a lot of time revising, and a lot of time editing, and that's what some people don't do.

**MS:** So it's almost like when baseball or football players talk about getting into the zone. If you overthink hitting, it can counteract what you know.

**SL:** Right, but those guys still spend hours watching themselves swing, and talking to everybody, and getting all the tips they can, and filling themselves with knowledge. But when they're up there (at the plate), they can't be thinking about it. And it's the same thing. When you're in a little spurt of writing, and it's going well, it's kind of like that.

**MS:** You lose track of time.

**SL:** That's the other thing. It stops time. That's the only thing that still works.

*(laughter)* It stops time.

**MS:** *(to audience)* Any other questions? Yes.

**Audience member:** I'm just curious if you have any thoughts on writer's block. I had an experience with pitching a TV series that was going fairly well, and then discovered that ABC was coming out with pretty much exactly what I'd written a

couple months later. And I felt like I'd hit a metaphorical deer. Is writer's block kind of psychosomatic?

**SL:** Well, I think that you can certainly psych yourself out. I think that what you have to do is start a lot of things sometimes. That sounds like it was a really terrible experience, and you could just dwell on that and sit there in front of the blank screen and not know what to do or say next. But if you can just start to write anything and say, "This is not something for TV, for a network to see, this is just something I'm going to write, and fuck ABC," and just go off, you may get somewhere even better than you were before. So I think you can just tell yourself, "This is the thing that nobody can read. This is the thing that, if someone read it, their head would explode." And then that might lead you out. I think writer's block is really just you psyching yourself out. That's what I was saying before about trying not to have an idea. If you can just start writing and just see what ideas can come up from your writing, you don't know what it is, but just start writing two people talking in a room, or write a description of something. The block comes from, "Well, now this better pay off, because ABC fucked me, and now this one's got to be the big one." I think that's deadly.

**MS:** It's like the writer you were talking about earlier who wanted to write like Beckett. That's a lot of pressure. And how can you be free when you have that on your shoulders?

**SL:** Yep.

**MS:** *(to audience)* Any other questions? Yep.

**Audience member:** Do you ever self-censor? Do you ever think, “That’s really funny, but I shouldn’t go there, other people aren’t going to like that”?

**SL:** Yes, and then I have to kill that voice and go forward, because that’s the worst thing you can do. You might write something and say, “It’s not quite right, it’s horrible *and* it’s not quite right.” But if it’s horrible and right...*(laughter)* You have to risk the ire of people around you. That’s all you probably should care about, the fact that the people who love you, and have invested parts of their lives in you, might get angry, might feel really betrayed. I always like to think of the whole enterprise as a murder-suicide. As long as you’re taking yourself out, then everyone’s game.

*(laughter)* As long as you never have the feeling of superiority, really, I think that’s the key to it all. You can say whatever you want to say, whatever you think needs to be said, but you just don’t feel that you’re above it. You’re not. You’re right there at the same level. You’re a human just like everybody else. And if you can remember that, then there’s no reason to censor yourself.

**MS:** I don’t know many other writers who deal with subjects like you do. A lot of other writers wouldn’t dare touch them. The fact that you go after this stuff is amazing.

**SL:** They can’t put you in jail for it, really.

**MS:** What’s the worst that can happen?

**SL:** Yeah. I just feel you have to go out as far as you can and see.

**MS:** Well, that’s the pressure.

**SL:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** What about when you write something non-fiction about someone. Can they sue you, even if it's the truth?

**SL:** Yeah.

**Audience member:** Do you write that then?

**SL:** Well, I write fiction. I call everything fiction. And yeah, a good amount of it is not fiction. *(laughter)* But I just say, "Well, I made it up, I don't know what you're talking about." *(laughter)* But I get to do that. If you call it non-fiction, you're in a very different territory. And if you write a memoir, then something like that, where you're talking about people, then I don't even have any advice for that. Call it a novel. *(laughter)*

**MS:** David Sedaris wants his books to be known as fiction. He doesn't want them to be known as memoir, but it's the marketing department that makes it known as memoir. So he's gotten in trouble over the years by going after certain people. *(to audience)* Any other questions? *(to Sam Lipsyte)* Let's talk about some of the technical aspects of what you do. I love your first lines to stories and books. This is the first line from *The Ask*: "America, said Horace, the office temp, was a run-down demented pimp." *(laughter)* I thought, "What a great way to start the book." How important is it to you as a writer to draw in a reader with that first sentence?

**SL:** It's really important. I remember I once heard someone call it the "attack sentence," as though you're coming at the reader. But you're saying to someone,

“Listen to me. You’ve gotta hear this.” It doesn’t have to be an aggressive sentence. It could be a quite, seductive sentence. It could be an oddly-phrased sentence, some kind of strangeness to it, something alluring to it. Or it can be a kind of tough, “listen to this shit motherfucker” kind of sentence. People still go to bookstores, to some degree, but you can sample things online too. I go to a bookstore, I open a book, and really what I’m looking to know from those first few sentences is that the author is in control, that the author isn’t just a slave to ordinary language, and just a slave to worn-out ideas, but that there’s something happening right here that is dynamic and different and calls me to attention. And as I said, there are many ways to do that, but you have to think about that. We’re all looking for an excuse not to read the book, not to see the movie. We really need something strong or arresting or inviting in some way to keep us there.

**MS:** There’s a lot of competition.

**SL:** Yeah, there’s the next book on the shelf.

**MS:** Right. And to ask someone to take four days or however long it takes to read it, that’s a lot to ask.

**SL:** Right. So what I’m looking for is, OK, this person sounds different, and is in control. I can see that that sentence follows that sentence for a reason. They’re weaving something, they’re making something. With a good book, you should be able to open to any page, and it’s not that you’ll know what’s going on, but you’ll be able to read those sentences and say, “Wow, this is really good.” Why, you’re not

even sure, maybe, but you can feel the energy and the precision and the control, and there's a stance that is a little askew, and it seems fresh.

**MS:** I think that's really important when it comes to control. Maybe it's similar to a comedian; when you can sense their embarrassment, you're embarrassed, but when you know you're in good hands, it's a very satisfying feeling. You just go with wherever they'll take you.

**SL:** And that's why you can go to all those places that might seem too dangerous. It's a weird word to use for the way a book is written, but charisma, the prose has to have a certain charisma. There are different ways to do that, obviously. You can have this wild, effervescent language, or it can be spare and stripped down, or it can have this plain, quite authority. It can be done in different ways, but it has to have something we want to be around, something we want to listen to, or images that draw us in too.

**MS:** You've talked about compression in writing. How does that work for you?

**SL:** Sometimes in short stories, and certain sections of novels, but with novels there are more compressed moments, and then moments where you really dilate something and open it up. So one scene happens very quickly, and the next scene is one where they're really going to expand and get into some rich detail about things. But the compression part, for me is something that I found in editing, where you can just be quicker about it. It's not necessarily stripping things away and making it very minimalist, necessarily, but getting more bang for your buck, getting things to be very quick and nimble, with a kind of nice density to it, a nice richness to it.



**MS:** You've spoken about the importance of a writer to just be aware. What does that mean, exactly, "being aware"?

**SL:** When did I say that to you? *(laughter)*

**MS:** In a gigantic interview years ago.

**SL:** It means a couple of things to me. It obviously means being aware of what's around you. People talk about writers being good noticers. Some are good noticers, some are good listeners. It's good to be both. There's that kind of awareness, and also aware of yourself, aware of how—we talk about this filter, and how things come through you—to be attuned to that. I think part of it is also, if you walk around writing sentences in your head, that's a great thing to do. They won't necessarily even go with what you're working on, they might, but just sort of being aware of your surroundings, listening to what's going on, and turning it into some kind of prose.

**MS:** So that's a form of writing right there. You don't have to be at your desk.

**SL:** No, you're writing all the time.

**MS:** Some critics have taken you to task over your style and your lack of plot. Does that bother you?

**SL:** No, not really. I don't really read for plot. I think (my novels) have more plot than they may get credit for, but that's just me. I don't spend a lot of time trying to make something very intricate in terms of plot. Sometimes I just call it the semblance of motion. I just want it to feel like we're moving. I don't want to sit still. And I want it

to have this kind of unpredictable feeling to it as well. And that maybe sometimes feels more like life. You could be sitting here thinking, “This guy’s talking, and I’ve had enough, and when this is over I’m gonna go get a coffee, and then I’m gonna call my friend...”

**MS:** Are *you* thinking that?

**SL:** Well, right now, yes, (*laughter*) as I’m creating this scenario. But as you’re walking out, the “EXIT” sign could fall on your head and you might have to go to the hospital. So you don’t really know what’s going to happen. And so when I’m writing that first draft, I really like to not forecast too much. You can’t help it. You start planning. You start saying, “Well, now this character is going to go to the gas station.” And then later on, he might have to go there again. I’m trying not to do too much of that. I’m trying to let the sentences sort of unfurl. And so, whenever I ask, “How do I go forward?” I’m thinking, “Well, what’s behind me? What did I already put into motion?” Because that’s the thing that stops a lot of writers. They get to this point like, “What now? What’s going to happen now?” as though they’re standing on the edge of a cliff looking to grab something out of the air that’s going to be the next thing.

Everything that should be in this novel or story or whatever you’re writing is back in the beginning, in those first pages. You put a couple of things in motion. There was a guy with a dog, there was a coffee shop, the threat of rain. All of those things you mentioned, but you haven’t gone back to them. They’re there; they’re just sitting there. So you go back, and you think, “Well, yeah, whatever happened with the rain?”

What's the deal with the coffee shop?" And you start pulling these things forward and braiding them together, and I don't know if you get a plot, but you get a story. You get a series of events that then have consequences, and once you start seeing those consequences, then new problems arise. Basically, what you always want to be doing is putting pressure on these characters, and on the prose in some way, but you want to keep putting things under pressure. It should lead you to a new conflict, a new thing you need to resolve.

**MS:** Which can be just as fascinating as a heavily plotted Elmore Leonard book.

**SL:** Exactly, yeah.

**MS:** (to audience) Any other questions? Yeah.

**Audience member:** Back to the fiction/non-fiction thing. Do most fiction writers base their stories on themselves and the people around them?

**SL:** It's hard to generalize that, because there are so many different approaches. Right now, I don't know if you've read any (Karl Ove) Knausgaard, this Norwegian writer who people are very excited about. He calls it fiction. *My Struggle* it's called. It's six volumes. He calls it fiction, but there's very little that's fictional in it, except that he's probably making up how many times he smoke a cigarette that day, or what he had for breakfast that day. But it's really just his life. I think some writers write in a way where they almost want you to think it's their real life. They're calling it fiction, but they wouldn't want you to think they're making it up, and some of the power comes from the fact that they're drawing so heavily from their lives. And then

there are fiction writers who really just make up entirely new worlds that have nothing to do with their everyday lives. But their experiences, their feelings, their structures of thought, all feed into these things. It becomes them anyway. So there's a vast spectrum to it all. *(to audience)* Um, yep?

**Audience member:** A couple of people have said to me, "I don't know what my character's going to do next." And I'm like, "What do you mean, you don't?"

**SL:** The Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk was giving a lecture up at Columbia, where I work, last week. He talked about how that's an old argument, and E.M. Forster said, "Your characters can take over, and they might whisper in your ear about where they want to go." And Nabokov said, "That's crazy, that's bullshit. My characters are galley slaves." I think that when we say the characters took over, it's kind of a way to say, "Something's going on, and I don't know what it is, and it's scaring me. I'm writing about something I wasn't planning on writing about. I'm going into this digression that seems to be taking over. I'm fascinated by this one aspect of the story. Every time I sit down, that's what I want to write about. And the other part is boring me now." And that's a character taking over. You might be the kind of writer who wants to stick to the plan, like, "I made a plan and I'm going to stick to it," and you would stop that from happening. I think that it sometimes helps to follow it a little bit and see where it takes you.

Sometimes you have to be willing to abandon what you thought it was and follow the new idea. If you're obsessed with it, and it's scaring you in some way, and if it's making you feel vulnerable and weird writing it, and not necessarily because it's a

personal thing, like “My mother might find out I’m doing these things” or something like that, or “My husband might find out I’m cheating on him,” then that’s a kind of danger or jeopardy. But the other kind is, if I describe a coffee cup for too long, people will start to think there’s something wrong with me.” *(laughter)* And that’s the real jeopardy. You show people where your fascinations are, and that’s weird. “Dude, why are you going on about this so much?” “Because I’m obsessed with it. Because that’s what I think about, because when I look at it, words come out.” And that’s your object, in a way. Your object might be a coffee cup, or it might be the relationship you had with your father, or it might be the way the birds fly over a lake. It could be anything, but it’s the thing that’s holding your gaze, that you are fascinated with, that feels strange or alluring to you, that’s what you should be writing about. That’s what we’re going to be moved by. We’ll be moved by the thing that’s moving you. Now, you might think “Well, it’s too painful to write directly about my relationship with my father, so I’ll just call him Darth Vader.” *(laughter)* That’s something that people do too. Ultimately, if it’s working, it’s because that fascination is there.

**MS:** And I would think that’s a good sign. If you’re surprising yourself with what the character’s doing, it can only surprise the reader.

**SL:** Right. That’s really true, actually. If you’re staying surprised, you’re in a very good place.

**MS:** *(to audience)* Yep.

**Audience member:** So do you make an outline?

**SL:** Once I'm right into something. Like I said, you can't hold off the forecast forever, so yes, once I see characters and the situation and where things could go, I try to corral it a bit with an outline. Just so I'll know what to do the next day, or during that week. I usually, if I'm in the first fifteen pages, I always read from the beginning before I start working. If it's a novel, you get to know it after time. When I know I'm done, it's not that I think it's great or anything, but it's just that I can't do anything more to it, and I'm just moving commas, putting commas in and taking them out. By that point, I know where most words that aren't "the," "and," "of," even scrolling on my laptop, I know where stuff is, not only where scenes happen, but where certain words occur, where certain phrases happen. So you get that intimate with it. Before that point, but after that initial exploration, I do start to make little outlines, and they change constantly. And I'll write the scene, and that changes everything, so I have to revise the outline. But sometimes it's just to get me through the next twenty-five pages, rather than the next ten pages, rather than really knowing the end. Some people say, "Write the last sentence and then write your way to it," but I've never really been able to do that.

**MS:** *(to audience)* Yep.

**Joe Kertes:** There's a quotation on this pillar right in front of me that says, "Follow your fear." Do you think you do that as a novelist too? Do you go these dark places and work things out?

**SL:** It's never that cathartic for me. I don't think of it as therapeutic. But yeah, you have to follow the fear, and you hope that by doing that, you'll get to something that

moves other people. Like I said, when it's scary to you, when you feel like you're in jeopardy, that's the place to be. And if it's boring you, it's going to bore the hell out of everybody else. If there's a section where you're like, "Well, this is boring, but I need to get through it because there's all this important information that'll pay off later," then you've just got to get rid of that. There can't be a boring part.

**MS:** We had an editor for a major publishing house here yesterday, and an agent. And I think some of that information may have been a little depressing. It was very realistic information about getting a book published.

**SL:** Oh yeah, that's not gonna happen.

**MS:** Right. *(laughter)* But what you said I think may make them feel a little better, hopefully, that big publishing is "shitting the bed," and that the best writing has gotten out of the mindset that there's a nice living to be made writing serious fiction. So did you mean that you could write what you want, how you wanted to write it, for smaller publishing houses?

**SL:** Yeah. You know, if you're writing good stuff that's really taking chances, and I said this to some people recently, students I guess, I said, "Now is a time where you can be one of the great writers of the moment," and I'm not just saying in your mind, *(laughter)* I mean others think so as well, "and yet you're not making a living, you're not paying your rent." And so, most of the writers I know, and I'm talking about ones that are really well known, have jobs. They teach, or some of them have gotten Hollywood gigs. It's hard to make it on just writing serious fiction right now, and the big publishing houses will throw ten million at Hillary Clinton or something for a

book, but they're not necessarily going to pay fiction writers an amount that can support them. And so you've got to find other things to do and write. I always think of it as, you have these two things, and there's only one you can control. There's publishing and there's writing. You can't control publishing, but you can control writing. You can write and write and write, and occasionally publishing and writing intersect when you publish something. But then they go their separate ways, and they're running parallel again, and you can't control publishing whenever it's doing whatever it's doing. But here you are, writing and creating a body of work. It's better for it to be recognized early and published in a good way early, but sometimes you have to wait.

**MS:** I think that's an amazing lesson. If George Saunders teaches, if Lorrie Moore teaches, if you teach, and you're at your level, it's virtually impossible to make a career out of writing fiction. But what you get to do is write what you want, how you want to do it, so there's a tremendous sense of freedom there.

**SL:** Yes. That's absolutely true. Nobody's going to tell us you can't do that, or that's too crazy. Even with the big publishing houses, it's not like a Hollywood movie that can cost hundreds of millions of dollars, so there's no power there, because everything is just finely tuned for some demographic. Here (in publishing), the stakes are low enough. No editor has ever said to me, "Take that out because people will be upset." They might say, "Take it out because it sucks," but not, "Take it out because we can't have that here."

**MS:** Or because there's a lot of money attached to it.



**SL:** Right.

**MS:** So for any of these people in the audience who want to write a book, or a comic novel, what would your advice be? A lot of beginning writers struggle to get agents, and that almost seems to be their main goal at first. Would you agree with that or not agree with that?

**SL:** A lot of people want to get an agent before they've written anything. And I think that you can waste your time trying just so you can say, "I have an agent." So what? There's nothing for that agent to do, really. Yeah, you impressed the agent with twenty pages, and then the agent says, "Well, when you have something, I'll try to sell it." And then you'll go around saying, "I have an agent," and then you get blocked because you feel that this agent is waiting, and that's freaking you out. Time is going by, you're thinking, "Maybe the agent doesn't like me anymore, maybe the agent is bored with me, maybe the agent is no longer excited about me as a person, maybe that time we had drinks didn't go as well as I thought." *(laughter)* And all the agent wants is some pages. The agent wants something to sell. I think you're better served spending your time writing something.

This is a thing that's happened in publishing: to a certain degree in the old days, it's a romantic notion of the old days, but it was true to a certain degree, you could come in with your thousand-page crazy manuscript, and some editor would say, "I see genius in here," and carve out (a book). Nobody's going to do that anymore. You've really got to come in with something that's diamond-sharp yourself, and then they're excited, then they can do something with it. So you're better served spending

your time right now writing the thing and getting it as sharp as you can, and then going out and get an agent. You'll find that if you've really spent all your time getting it to be great, it's no problem finding an agent. And that agent will feel proud to be selling your manuscript, and a lot of things can happen. I just see so many people do this, it goes on for years, like, "I'm working on the thing for the agent." And then "The agent wants me to make these changes," and "the agent thinks it'd be better if I called it 'non-fiction'." You're writing to somebody's idea of what should be brought to market, whereas you should just be writing the thing that changes what could be brought to market. You want to be writing the thing where they say, "We never thought this could work, but boy does it work." And then everything shifts, and everyone's looking for the next you. So I would say, don't worry about the agent until you have something that's really the best you can do.

**MS:** I think that's a great way to end it. Sam Lipsyte. If you don't have his books, get them. They'll be instant favorites. Thanks, Sam.

**SL:** Thanks so much. *(applause)*

