



INTERVIEWS

DAVE EGGERS

Dave Eggers is a Pulitzer Prize-nominated author and founder of both *McSweeney's*, an independent publishing house in San Francisco, and the 826 Valencia volunteer centers nationwide. He collaborated with Valentino Achak Deng of Sudan on the book *What is the What*; much of his recent work has focused on the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation, which provides educational opportunities for Sudanese refugees.

He corresponded with the editors of WAG'S REVUE via email.

Will Litton, Wag's Revue: Can you tell us something about the lengthy and ongoing adventure of writing What is the What? What was it like to transform Valentino's narratives into a novel, and then transform that work of literature into a development project? How do you think this project speaks to the 'potential of literature' in our generation? Also, any anecdotes about your most recent trip to Valentino's hometown of Marial Bai?

Dave Eggers: I guess I've always kept myself open to fairly radical departures from whatever course I've been on. I'm not so interested in mining the same territory for too long. For a few years I'd been working on my own fiction, stories based on people sort of like myself in one way or another—Americans from a certain generation—and then one day I got a letter in the mail from Mary Williams, who had started the Lost Boys Foundation. She had been working with a young man, Valentino Deng, who wanted the story of the civil war in Sudan told by means of his biography. She offered me the job of biographer, and because I come from a journalism background, I was intrigued and thought I should at least look into the project. Valentino and I met in Atlanta and got along really well from the first day. Soon after that, we made a pact to get his story written, but had no idea that it would be quite the thing it turned out to be. That it would turn into a four-year project and would bring

me to Sudan many times, and would give rise to an educational complex in Valentino's hometown... Well, it was beyond our imagining.

At the same time, Valentino and I did plan to dedicate the proceeds to his hometown within the first few months of our working relationship. We hoped we'd bring about a wider recognition of what happened in Sudan, and we also hoped for something tangible to come of the book. I've gotten pretty hooked on the idea of concrete byproducts of whatever art we can make. I don't think books need to be decorative; they can be instrumental in actual results. 826 National has benefited from a bunch of books, too — edited by everyone from Zadie Smith to Michael Lewis. They've created books that have paid the rent on all seven 826 centers. So there can be real, three-dimensional good that can come out of a literary endeavor. Believing otherwise, that writers and books are outside the flow of life and the progress of a society, is proven wrong every day.

WL: With Valentino at the helm, how is your project unique? How would you describe the foundation's approach to development issues, how are community members being integrated into the process, and what are your long-term goals?

DE: Valentino is the Executive Director, the Educational Director (until he hires one), the contractor, the transportation director, the supreme being. During one of our trips to Sudan, back in 2006, we sat with dozens of elders and community leaders in Marial Bai, and let them know of the general plan — that Val's foundation would be building a school in town and would be paying teachers well, equipping the school in every way to be a model school for the region. At the same time, Valentino was very sure to be open to community input. So the elders said, "Sure, a school sounds good. But we have enough primary schools. What

we really need is a secondary school.” So the plan changed right there. So we said, “Okay, we’ll build a secondary school.” And then they said, “A secondary school will be great, but we also need a way to train teachers to teach secondary school.” The region has very few people qualified to teach secondary school. So a teacher-training college became part of the plan, too.

In a dozen ways the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation operates differently than most development projects. It wasn’t drawn up by well-intentioned NGO workers in the U.S. It’s run entirely by Sudanese, starting with Valentino, who has a unique ability to serve as bridge between U.S. donors, local parents and educators, builders, and the government of southern Sudan. Everyone knows and respects Valentino. So it’s the Sudanese helping the Sudanese, with expertise provided by Valentino, a Sudanese-American. It’s been a powerful model so far. And all I do is help make people aware of Valentino’s project, and help fundraise here in the U.S. Otherwise it’s an entirely local project.

Sandra Allen, Wag’s Revue: A lot of your work has striven to use your literary sensibilities and fame to do good, obviously with What is the What and the foundation, but also with the 826 volunteer centers, or the Voice of Witness series, which are novels created from interviews with human rights victims. Did all of these projects originate independently? What forces have influenced this shift in your work?

DE: I guess each project originated independently. Usually there’s some problem or issue that presents itself, and it’s natural to look at our little organization and wonder if we can address it. For example, McSweeney’s had been publishing books for about seven years when I got interested in oral history. My first time in Sudan, in 2003, Valentino and I interviewed three women

who had been abducted and enslaved during the war. We left the interviews thinking we needed to get their stories out into the world. And of course McSweeney's already publishes books, so it was natural and not-so-difficult to then create some kind of imprint that specialized in oral histories. And then there are just lucky coincidences — given that when I got back from Sudan, I was asked to introduce Studs Terkel, the father of modern oral history, at an event at Berkeley. He got me thinking more about oral history, and then, in the lobby after the event, I met Lola Vollen, a physician working with exonerated prisoners here in the U.S. She said, "These people need to be heard." I said, "Well, we have a publishing company. Let's do a book." So all these things aligned. That's how a lot of the projects happen—we stay open to new work, and keep ourselves nimble. And given we operate everything on a tiny scale—usually one staff member for any given project—it makes it all plausible. People don't always realize how little you need to start up any given project.

Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: I know a few people who know McSweeney's as 'that website with the funny lists,' who are astonished to find that it's also this beautifully printed, aesthetic marvel of a lit-mag. The Quarterly and the Internet Tendency are pretty different: one is an expertly crafted, painstakingly published magazine that publishes quite 'serious' literature; the other is a collection of jokes, loosely gathered on website. Why do these two share the McSweeney's name? Does the internet have built-in limitations as a medium that restrict it to frivolity?

DE: The internet site started just a few weeks before the journal, back in 1998. I'm not a huge web reader, so I extrapolated a bit and figured that most people wouldn't read long works of fiction on the website. So I decided that the website would be sort of a teaser, a window into the larger world of our books and

journals. But at this point we're becoming aware that people make assumptions about all our publishing via the humor site, which as you're indicating is very different — given we publish very little humor in the journal itself. So we're thinking about clarifying that distinction in some way.

SA: *You published Salvador Plascencia's People of Paper and Robert Coover's A Child Again, both of which experiment with the boundaries of a printed text—leaving holes in pages, printing pages sideways, printing stories on playing cards meant to be shuffled. The Quarterly also does this a lot, like Issue 17 (made to look like a bundle of mail). What is the role of such physical experimentation with the printed text? Is there a point at which*

'The critical consensus has gotten a collective case of amnesia'

such experimentation will exhaust itself? What possibilities do you see with the internet and experimental writing?

DE: Well, people have been experimenting with literary form since the Greeks, or probably earlier. Don Quixote is very experimental, of course, as are thousands of centuries-old texts. It's really a painful moment in American literature, right now, where the critical consensus has gotten a collective case of amnesia, forgetting or discounting Cervantes, Borges, Barthelme, Nabokov, and dozens of other highly experimental writers who were doing it long before any contemporary writers. We're pluralists at McSweeney's. We publish anything of great quality, whether that's experimental or very traditional or somewhere in between. There is and should always be room for all approaches to writing, and whenever anyone closes the door on one — by saying, for example, that experimentation might someday "exhaust itself" (not to put you on the hotseat), it's very saddening. And of course it ignores the entire history of

all art in every form, which is a history of constant innovation, experimentation and evolution. The person who says “Enough innovation, let’s stick with what we have and never change” is pretty much the sworn enemy of all art. Not to overstate it, of course.

SA: *During the momentary optimism which followed Obama’s election, I found myself returning to a story from How We Are Hungry titled, “Your Mother and I.” It’s a long monologue written from a father to his son which recalls the incredible feats that he and his wife have achieved over the years, from permanently ending genocide, to converting all power to wind and sun, to redistricting school districts so that property taxes aren’t tied to school systems. He also recalls some of their funnier accomplishments, like covering Cleveland in Ivory or making penises better looking (“more streamlined, better color”). Would you call this story an optimistic one? Is it meant to inspire optimism?*

DE: It is an optimistic story, but it’s also a sad one, in a way. I’m always frustrated with the gap between what we know should happen to make the world a better place, and what we’re capable of personally and as a society. Right now, for example, in California, all sane beings know that gays and lesbians should have a right to marry. It’s so stupid and exasperating that it’s even being discussed, let alone fought about. And all sane beings also know that sooner or later they will be given the right to marry. But living in this in-between-time is frustrating. We know that public opinion eventually gets around to sanity, but the time when we’re waiting for that glacier to inch along is maddening. So “Your Mother and I” is a bit of fantasy wherein things are changed on the exact timetable they should be—which is to say, the speed of rational thought.

WL: *You're featured on the final track of Beck's album The Information. Your voice comes in at the end, and I think you're attempting to describe what the perfect album would be like. (Is it you or Spike Jonze who insists it must be capable of space travel?) Though you probably haven't encountered perfection yet, which albums do you think come closest to being perfect, and by expansion, which works of literature?*

DE: I don't remember who says what on that song. I'm too horrified by my own voice to listen to it. But you know, I can't think of perfect albums. There are a lot of great albums out there, but there are always songs on them I skip over. Bob Dylan's *Blonde on Blonde* is near-perfect. The Beatles' *White Album* is close. Lauren Hill's first album might be perfect. The Flaming Lips *Soft Bulletin* is near-perfect. The Replacements' *Tim*. The Smiths' first album, and REM's. Elvis Costello's *Imperial Bedroom*. That one, actually, might be perfect. XTC's *Skylarking*. Dr. Dog's *Easy Beat*. Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine*. John Legend's *Get Lifted*. I'm just thinking off the top of my head. I could go on all day. In terms of books, it's easier, I think, to make a perfect book, given it's a form that absorbs mistakes better. It's such a big thick soup that a bit extra of this or that is forgiven. *Lolita* is perfect, I think. Saul Bellow's *Herzog* is perfect. Ellison's *Invisible Man* is perfect even in its all-over-the-place-ness. I read a book recently by James Salter called *Last Night* which seemed flawless. Recently, Edward P. Jones wrote a perfect book, I think, in *The Known World*.

WG: *A 'wag' is a rascally, droll, witty individual. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character, or just a friend of yours.*

DE: Christopher Hitchens, whatever you think of his politics, is probably the smartest, drollest guy you'll ever hear at a cocktail

party. Daniel Handler is definitely a wag; he comes up with great bon mots without any effort. Sarah Vowell is like that, too. The best wag of all, probably, was Gore Vidal. I never knew him, but saw him speak a few times. And when he was at his best, he was astounding. Everything out of his mouth was quotable.

MARK GREIF

Mark Greif holds a Ph. D. in American Studies from Yale University. He is an essayist, an assistant professor at the Eugene Lang College of the New School of Liberal Arts, and the founding editor of *n+1* magazine. He sat down with Sandra Allen and Will Guzzardi at an empty Mexican restaurant in Tribeca to discuss the little magazine and the internet.

Sandra Allen, Wag's Revue: In 2005 A.O. Scott wrote a story about n+1 and The Believer, which more or less said, 'Look! There are two magazines that are printed even though the internet exists!' In it, he says, "A magazine is created as a bunch of ambitious like-minded friends get together to assemble pictures and words into a sensibility, a voice, an attitude, that they hope will resonate beyond their immediate circle." I wonder if you find that to be, in your own experience, true, or a little bit simplistic? And if you wouldn't mind, for our readers, delving a little bit into the n+1 creation myth, however briefly you want to.

MARK GREIF: I was thinking before I came to see you what advice I was given before we started *n+1*. One of the key pieces of advice is there's no reasonable way to start a magazine except by publishing people you're friends with. I was told by a poet I had grown up admiring in Boston, a guy named Bill Corbett, that it was folly to believe you could become editors and that magic would happen, people would arrive with things you wanted to read, and they would have things they needed to say and all the rest. That really you have to be thwarted and stifled and frustrated already and that you probably have to do a lot of the writing yourself. And I believe that that's true. We wrote most of the first issue ourselves. We wrote most of the second issue ourselves. We continue to write most of the magazine ourselves. And we've never regretted it. As for there being vibrations from

that material that somehow go out into the larger environment, it's hard to know. The degree to which people have imagined that *n+1* was a serious magazine when we had no phone, no office, no staff, no salary was always shocking. It turns out if you put out writing that's good, and if the design standards are minimally decent—I mean, no one has ever denied that *n+1* is, to many aesthetically-minded people, ugly—people will treat it like any other magazine.

‘We wrote most of the first issue ourselves. We continue to write most of the magazine ourselves. And we’ve never regretted it.’

Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: One of the pieces that really put n+1 on the map, in Issue One, was "The Regressive Avant-Garde," a vicious critique of what you call the Eggersard, the writing-circle whose nucleus is McSweeney's. It describes the editorial writing of that magazine as "wide-eyed, juvenile, faux-naïf," and the writers as "thoroughgoing, even prissy, moralists." It ends up with a biting critique of The Believer, wraps up with the line, "its overt criterion for inclusion is not expertise, but enthusiasm." The Believer itself, as you mention in the article, was started as a response to criticism, or "snarkiness," to criticism. So I wonder where you see the line between criticism and snark? And is there value in wide-eyed, unrepentant creation, this unmitigated belief?

MG: I see no value whatsoever in wide-eyed unrepentant belief, simply because it's so much on offer everywhere. I think that the idea that reading is in danger, reading is jeopardized—eh, I'm suspicious of this. The idea that it could be countered or helped by cheerleading for books could be misplaced. I do think *The Believer* has changed a lot since that early critique, partly because they've just published so many issues.

I do like *The Believer* a lot. I liked the fact that it exists and is so prolific. It's no longer a particularly well-focused magazine. And insofar as there were characteristic slots in the early issues where they would do a profile of a philosopher, a child and a tool, those things seem to be gone. It certainly owned-up to its status as a book review and that they now include these very short book reviews, which are nice. And then they sort of run middling pieces that would go into *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*. Precisely what it is that defines the current *Believer* would be interesting to say, and you'd have to be a much more devoted reader of it than I am to know.

I still do think that the snark business was somewhat misunderstood. What people took away from that early Heidi Julavitz essay, which was the programmatic essay of the first issue [of *The Believer*], was that she was against snark. Snark was something like cruelty in criticism, and that it would be the brief of *The Believer* to be the opposite of cruel—kind, I suppose. Even kindly, amicable.

If you actually read through the essay to the end it seemed that Julavitz was not, for good intellectual reasons, able to keep up the conceit that there was this thing snark, which is cruelty in criticism, and it could be healed by mere kindness. In fact, once she gets into actual historical cases of critics whom she believed were significant, great, role-models, worth reading in the present day, etc., she lands on people like Edmond Wilson, Mary McCarthy—people who were and are in fact famous for being unbelievably cruel critics.

The point which she winds up having to make in that essay, somewhat against her initial conceit, is that the great mistake is to be critical and unexpert. Critical and know-nothing. That is to say, the mistake is to be cruel without knowing what you're

talking about, or to pretend to be superior, when in fact you're not superior to the people you're dealing with.

And there's something to this. I mean, you know, to have a reviewer in *The New York Times* writing on the history of India, history of modern India, on the basis that they've once visited India on vacation, and then to attack or criticize the scholarly author of such a thing, this does make you mad, about *The New York Times*.

As I read [the Julavitz] essay, I thought 'Great. She's calling for a more knowledgeable and more intelligent criticism that won't pull its punches when it has something genuine to say in denunciation or attack. But also that I hope won't go around making nicey-nice for the sake of niceness.' And I actually don't think *The Believer* has done this as it moved on. It has problems. But probably the major problem has turned out to be just a kind of watery niceness.

WG: Magazines seem to undergo tremendous changes from what they promise to be at first to what they end up actually being. So given that we've just kind of made our promise, I wonder what you think influences those changes. Where is it acceptable to make changes and where are you violating your credo?

MG: Yeah, I think they do change and they don't change. This is just on the basis of reading various magazines against their original manifestos. There are major changes in magazines when the editorial staff changes, right? Commentary when Norman Podhoretz edits it is a different magazine from when Eliot R. Cohen edited it. I do think if you go back and read the opening essays that editors proffer when they take over a magazine, no matter how much the magazine changes—I mean even after very dramatic changes—you know, if it started out as a Catholic

magazine and becomes like an S&M magazine by the end of its run—nevertheless if you read that basic Catholic manifesto, you will find that basic DNA of whatever else that editor does, or that editorial team does.

Now your manifesto is pretty short, so in a sense you've left yourself lots of room. The longer your manifesto is, the more you're going to reveal yourselves. People don't really change that much in their core approach to things. It tends to be more of the case that the thematic concerns of the journal alter. I don't know that the basic approach really does. And a lot of the journals, historically, that you wind up liking the best, if you read a lot of these things, are the ones that when they no longer do what they originally did, stop or die.

There's a separate category of these kinds of general interest magazines—*The Atlantic*—that survive for a hundred and fifty years. You say, 'What is *The Atlantic*?' and you say, 'I really have no idea.' Right? It's a little package of a certain length that has had interesting thing in it over time. But not that interesting, right? Whereas even *The New Yorker* seems always in peril whenever they switch editors.

SA: *The young magazine has a potential to do something like you did when you came on the scene and denounced 'Eggers, Boy Wonder'. Was that ability—to be fiery or to be really critical and even cruel—something that necessarily has to wane? Has this been true with $n+1$, that things get less impassioned with time?*

MG: I think the great enemy of honesty, even when honesty sometimes wears the clothes of cruelty, is getting to know people. In a way my greatest regret about $n+1$ was that we got to know people who were writers and editors and critics and

so forth. And the more you get to know people the less you can be honest about them. It was very exciting in the early days and then it came to creep me out how it was possible for people who seemed distant and famous, like stars in the sky, suddenly to be emailing you. So suddenly someone whose work you didn't really like, like Michael Chabon, would be in your email inbox. And you'd be like 'Oh my god Michael Chabon emails the likes of us. And he's, gosh, I guess he's probably a really nice person. And really, he's very thoughtful.' Right? That doesn't mean that you don't still hate his work. And I think that we've been compromised by that over time.

I would encourage anyone starting a magazine who really had the, I don't know, the balls to do so, not to get to know anybody. The ideal magazine would be one that stayed far, far away, somewhere in the center of the country or Latin America. And never spoke to anybody and didn't try to get blurbs and didn't email and all the rest. Because it is compromising to engage in the system of publicity.

I think the paradigm of generational overthrow turns out to be very fruitful in all kinds of writing. And one thing I really appreciated about your short manifesto as I read it was that by paragraph two I really felt quite obsolete. Like a dinosaur. And every time I read manifestos from people who are two, three, four, five, sometimes even ten years younger than I am, I think my god, what an advantage they have to be a few years younger. We live in an era of micro-generations. It seems that if just the length of any MTV series defines a distinction, an important distinction between generations—like Daria? Are you familiar with this person Daria?

WG: *Yeah, this is when we were very young.*

MG: I had never heard of this person. And it became clear that I had never seen Daria and in fact, you know, I'm irrevocably divided as if by a giant fissure in the earth from all the people who saw Daria. You know what I mean? And it's precisely the people who have Daria and whatever else goes along with Daria as a set of common cultural compass points who now have the opportunity to say 'We must destroy the old. Anyone over thirty is not to be trusted.'

SA: Do you really feel gutted by this sense of impending youth about to overthrow some establishment? Or do you think that's just the course of things? I mean, the magazine always needs to feel undercut somehow...

MG: Yes, well, what has become very difficult for us, especially in writing those Intellectual Scene pieces at the beginning of the magazine is that to really denounce a subject properly requires more and more and more research now. I do think in the first however many years it was—we're closing in on five years?—we burned out many of the things which most annoyed us, which we knew annoyed and knew like the back of our hands or the inside of our minds—the things that we talked about and argued about and were furious about day in and day out. And many of them had to do with the popular culture. And those are the things unfortunately about which we all have encyclopedic knowledge.

In the past couple of issues I've been working on this piece about evolutionary psychology. It takes a lot more reading. That is to say, in my off-time I can't turn on VH1 and get my material. Some people would call this a process of maturation. Ideally, yeah, I imagine our subjects for denunciation would be slightly different. But certainly in a world like this one there's no reason to not continue to be angry about many, many things and to try to articulate precisely what it is about them that's detestable.

SA: *You're a sometime scholar of the little magazine. I wondered if you could briefly articulate a general theory of the little magazine, as you understand it.*

'I imagined you would just sit above me in long back robes like a scary, scary bunch of inquisitors. And you would simply say the two words: "Why print?"'

MG: Well, we believe that as long as intellectual life and artistic life has been organized by little groupings and schools, which seek to make something new and to overthrow their immediate predecessors insofar as intellectual and artistic life have a belief in progress, this is a modernist story. They've often tried to accomplish that progress by creating some little organ, a journal, belonging to them, which would allow them to say who their enemies are, and those to be overthrown, describe their new program, and offer examples of it, right? And if you believe that this modern story starts in the 1850s or the 1860s then you see it from there forward and you care about things like the transcendentalist journal *The Dial* that Emerson and Fuller ran for only about three years. Or you care about the surrealist magazines of the twenties, so forth and so on.

The theory is that you don't actually need very many issues. And you don't need much money. And you don't need a lot of personnel or even a very wide initial readership, really, to force some kind of decisive change in terms of how people think of some progressive story of art or intellect, painting or dance or theatre or politics or writing etc. That's it.

SA: *In A.O. Scott's article he's basically presenting yourself, n+1,*

and The Believer, to the readership of The New York Times Magazine. And he juxtaposes the blog with the little magazine, saying that with the little magazine you have this team of editors that have such faith in the perfect publication that they're going to put together, these bound pages and they're going to put some money on the printing press. What I mean is, his definition of the little magazine is inextricably tied to the printed form.

MG: Yes.

SA: *And in our case, what we're thinking about is how to take the stricture, the scruples of printed publishing and bring it to the internet, and you know it's a lot cheaper there, a lot easier to disseminate. I wondered if you could speak to why n+1 is printed, what is your philosophy behind that, why your website has such a, you know, little cousin relationship with the real publication?*

MG: Yes. This was the question I expected you to ask me. I imagined you would just sit above me in long back robes like a scary, scary bunch of inquisitors. And you would simply say the two words: 'Why print?'

Well, I've become much less dogmatic about the necessity of print because I find that I feel more able to read books and pdfs online than I had anticipated. And the more blogs I read, and the more I see truly magnificent blogs. Blogs that seem to have some kind of naturalness within the form. Blogs written by the people who are correctly called digital natives, that is to say, people who have grown up online.

What I find is that I still don't read things that are formatted like web pages at any length—that online literature is not long

literature. That's the fundamental difference. Ask yourself what can be accomplished in a thousand words or two thousand words. I think mcsweeneys.net is just a humor website because there exists forms of a thousand words, two thousand words, that people are used to and deal well with, right? People are not really used to writing works of fiction that have any kind of emotional outcome at a thousand words or two thousand words. It's not believed that you can make someone cry in two thousand words. It is believed that you can make someone laugh in two thousand words. Actually a lot less. And insofar as *n+1* has this strong distinction between the print and the web components, the distinction is really just one of length. The reason we started *n+1* was to be able to publish long essays and very long articles. It wasn't for purposes of vanity. It was because there are certain kinds of effects you can get, and certain kinds of arguments that can only be run at great length.

SA: Then one question I have in discussing the issue of print versus internet is size of audience versus impact. Considering how small they are, what constitutes a successful little magazine? How do you know when there has been an impact made?

MG: Yeah. I think successful little magazines go into libraries. And I think the ability of little magazines to change people's minds, to change the way people write, etc., requires a long extension in time. What's striking about the web is that it's possible to have immediate, vast, kind of spatial extension, it feels, over an audience. Something can be read by many people in a short space of time. I think probably you would have to weigh these two phenomena against each other. You have a kind of instantaneous expansion in time potentially over a wide audience, reading quickly and reading many things, and with the small magazine, this long slow process of, in the ideal case, getting the writing into libraries, where it will be discovered

slowly, successively, by generations of people. At the moment, I still feel like people don't return to things on the web in the way that they do return to things in the library. But it may again be that the things on the web are not yet things you return to.

WG: I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your essay "On Food" in the Fall 2008 issue. In this essay, you talk about, among other things, Michael Pollan's books. You describe Pollan as "anti-progressive", as "little-c conservative." I wonder, what does a progressive food community look like? You mention in that article this idea of the non-dogmatic vegetarian. I wonder, is that the progressive foodster? Is vegetarianism—does it have to be vegetarianism? Is that progressive eating, or are there other ways to be progressive that don't go that route?

MG: Let me just say first what was meant by "little-c conservatism" with Pollan. I actually admire Pollan a lot. Little-c conservatism certainly takes up a large part of the left politically, and a large part of the democratic party. Little-c conservatism just means to place value upon whatever has already existed or existed for a long time, regardless of its particular consequences, etc., etc. Little-c conservatism believes that things which evolved are superior to things which are invented. It believes that practices longstanding in any community involving many people are superior to practices put together by a few, etc.

Progressive food practice, as described in that essay, "On Food," is meant to be one that would not particularly mind invention, not mind technology, and might put together a very ugly hybrid of things that are familiar with things that are unfamiliar in order to produce certain consequences, to get some kind of outcomes. And presumably those outcomes would be most of the same ones that Pollan would like, right? A less polluting

food culture, a less grotesque food culture, a less expensive food culture, a more egalitarian food supply. Now the vegetarian issue is tough, because I am not a vegetarian, and feel very strongly that I should be. And I suppose the non-dogmatic vegetarian, as I imagine him or her, would be the person who figured, well, it would really be best to stop eating animals, and whatever will make that easy, and widespread, is the best thing to pursue.

If it's gonna help for me to have weird-shaped tofu snacks, I like weird-shaped tofu snacks. Not everything has to be the same thing that was eaten by my forbears on the African savannah tens of thousands of years ago.

WG: *I guess that brings me to my other question about this same article, which is this question of health. There's this really kind of wonderful moment at the end of this essay, this kind of meditation about health. Yes, in the last paragraph of this essay, you write that "Health is our model of all things invisible and unfelt." And reading that, I wondered if it was a coincidence that now kind of when someone is on his deathbed, we don't bring in a priest, you know, more often we bring in this kind of like end-of-life specialist.*

MG: Sinister phrase.

WG: *So has health, I wonder, snuck in as kind of the new transcendental model of our time? Is health replacing religion? And isn't this kind of the ultimate telos of the enlightenment project of putting man in the place of God, and that human life is really kind of the transcendental goal? I don't know, this is disturbing, and this question comes up in the end of your essay, it's a disturbing question. I wonder what you think about it.*

MG: In a word, yes. What you've just described is basically what I

believe. I think the complicated feature is that if you think of the telos of the enlightenment project, right, and what it has to do with the human, or the kind of project of humanism which we associate with enlightenment, it had seemed likely that that sort of end point and goal was something like reason—the right application of human reason, and the transformation of the world through reason. Obviously the 20th century brought about all sorts of suspicion about what the real consequence of enlightened reason, instrumental reason of that kind, would be. What seems funny now is that I believe utopians of the past, looking forward to our present, with all the benefits that we have, all the technologies that we have, all the luxuries that we have, would have imagined that we would be living in a world where reason would have led us to philosophy, a different and better kind of political organization, leisure, music, thought—we would be sitting around playing our lyres on floating clouds, right?

And instead, it seems that a possible best use of reason for us, at this moment of total luxury, an end of necessity, etc., is grooming. Grooming not so far different from what monkeys do when they pick nits out of each other's fur and eat them. Care of our individual bodies, maximization of the possibilities of our individual bodies which we will never use, maximization of potential, which is not potential *for* anything particular, and a goal of immortality not as a single thing to be won by the discovery of some fountain of youth, but immortality just by a creeping pushing back of the term of life.

So you say, “I know I'm mortal, I know I have to die, but I certainly don't have to die now. Maybe I could just get one more year.” And somehow this oddity of never having to die at any particular time, I think has led us into a form of life in which all we really do is think about grooming. What we eat, and what

we're going to eat later. How much we should exercise, and how our muscles are. And then these very chancy, recondite, invisible facts about what sorts of substances might be in our body, whether our calcium will go better into our bones if we're having Vitamin C at the same time, but whether the Vitamin C will inhibit our iron, right? None of which have any very direct consequence, I think, in how long we actually do or don't live.

WG: *The utopia you were just describing in some ways isn't that far from the world we inhabit now. I think it's interesting that at least the material circumstances of the things that you were just talking about—I mean, you know, plucking our lyres on floating clouds isn't all that different from sitting on a 767 with our iPod in. I mean, that in some ways, we have achieved the material objectives of these utopias. And you talk about this in the article too, that the idea was an end of need, in terms of food, that scarcity would be over. And scarcity, at least in our culture, is over. We've gotten there in a lot of ways. But somehow it's no longer meaningful or desirable to be there.*

MG: Yes. In actually experiencing it, if that's right, if being on the 747 with your iPod is in fact like riding the clouds of heaven with your lyre, which I think may well be true. And if in fact this very basic grooming turns out really to be the real logical consequence of the end of necessity. It's very odd, because we would then be experiencing the end state of man, and none of it feels particularly transcendent.

WG: *It's kind of miserable at times actually.*

MG: You've picked out the two sides of my project, and why they link up. Because there's this one large project about the consequences of the end of necessity, and how health comes back in as this process of creating norms and requirements and

anxiety etc., when in fact we could just let go. We're done!

And on the other side, the problem of aestheticism. What do you do when all the time that you don't spend in grooming yourself is devoted to this world in which all things—all things real, all things behavioral, all tables and streets and the sky and everything—have become like art objects, somehow rendered up for our pleasure, framed and taken care of. What does that feel like? So yes. These are the two tracks I hope to pursue in the future.

SA: *After you write a piece like “On Exercise” or “On Food,” what do you do? Do you stop exercising?*

MG: What are the consequences? What are the personal consequences? I don't know. I really don't know. Since writing that essay [“On Exercise”], there have been periods in which I tried to exercise again. I didn't really succeed. I can't argue in favor of the life lived entirely in accord with your principles or the things you believe you've discovered through the movements of critique. I don't know what you would do! You'd just lock yourself in your room under such conditions. You wouldn't be able to function or deal with anyone.

Nor do I believe, however, in a strong distinction between what you think or write about and what you actually do every day. I can't imagine how you would separate that. So I suppose the consequence of writing these things, when they really work, I have the feeling that I've figured something out. Usually I'm able to put into words something that really bothered me anyway, made life very unpleasant. And somehow the unpleasant feeling is managed better. But it doesn't really solve practical issues of daily living.

SA: *You have two recent articles, one that came out right after Obama was elected, and another written after his inauguration, online in Dissent. In terms of Mark Greif writing, they're totally happy. They're kind of exultant. And it was really funny to read them and be like, "Wow, Mark's stoked about something!"*

MG: I am. Truly stoked.

SA: *I wanted to ask about the availability of criticism in this "Obamanation" moment, you know? If, perhaps, n+1 for example, was started in 2003. That's the real, you know, 'Oh crap what did we do?' moment with Bush —*

MG: Very true.

SA: *And right now, if you turn on The Daily Show, they're—a lot of the satirists are losing some of their footing, without having such a wonderful thing to throw shoes at. Do you think the political situation affects the amount of rabble-raising that something like n+1 or yourself as an intellectual can do?*

MG: I'm laughing first of all because I'm so happy that shoe-throwing has become the preferred figure for all forms of criticism. It used to be rock, or brick-throwing at one point. Iraqi culture has at last penetrated American culture.

WG: *Well it's sabotage finally come back to its literal roots.*

MG: Yeah—is that what sabotage is? It's actually like a sabot?

WG: *Sabots, like the wooden shoes, yeah. People would throw their sabots in protest.*

MG: I didn't know that. I laughed again because I do think this is

a great moment for writing because at least potentially, at last, there's the opportunity to write all of the defenses and encomia and paeans, however you say that word, which you had always wanted to, but which would have just seemed too preposterous. For example, an Ode to the Progressive Income Tax. I've always felt that, you know, really, if I would just get down to what mattered, I would just write a long piece in n+1 about how great the income tax is. One of the great achievements of American democracy, the progressive income tax. And you know, the other day, apparently Chris Dodd managed to get this thing into the stimulus bill that will limit bonuses from financiers to, what, like a percentage of their already several-million dollars

'Writing is a lot like breathing or walking. People just do it, and if necessary, they'll nail these to doors.'

a year salaries? What a great day this is! But there actually still would be great value, considering the way discourse goes at like the Wall Street Journal and even most major newspapers, to

really cheering for the capping of bonuses. Because if you read the newspapers there are these ludicrous ideas, like the possibility that it would somehow be a bad thing if there were a brain-drain from finance, of very bright people so insanely greedy that they would no longer work in finance if they could no longer have their billions of dollars. But in fact that would be the best possible thing that could happen for society, right? We really should be, as much as possible, draining the brightest people away from finance and into things like teaching, and sewage allocation, or whatever one does.

WG: *Whatever one does.*

MG: *Whatever one does.*

SA: *I teach, and the rest, I don't know, you move around poop?*

MG: How are you going to allocate your sewage? Will it go to this community or that community? *[Laughs.]* I see no reason that we shouldn't be sitting down and writing those articles. And there are all forms of, longstanding literary forms, which are not satire, which come, you know, spring from the same sorts of roots, which have great value. And I think this may be a time for the ode.

And I'm also very glad that America has not forgotten about black people. Because it really seemed for a while as if the country had, as if we had genuinely adopted this preposterous ethnic model in which everybody would get a hyphenated last name, and it was no more significant to be black in America than to be Korean-American or Jewish-American or anything else, right? And I always thought there was great value, in, like the middle of the 20th century, to the story that there was something essential about being a black American as being the one true creator and inheritor of America. These weird Europeans showed up, they murdered a lot Indians and so forth, they had imported these slaves who had created most of the only unique and great American cultures. In entertainment and the arts, in the building of cities and all the rest, and somehow that story had been lost. And I feel like Obama, once again, we are back to a properly black-and-white world, and I feel grateful for that.

SA: *When is print gonna die?*

MG: I think the New York Times may no longer print paper except for luxury readers or on weekends pretty soon, that's what I'm hearing. I don't see the book going anywhere in print.

SA: *And what does that mean for the writer? You have a fairly astute historical understating of writers in America and where they can go. Do you think it changes the situation of the writer, or this is kind of always the deal, the writer always doesn't really have a place to properly be heard, now that the mega-giants of newspapers are losing their grasp?*

MG: I would not be worried about people not being heard, or not having a place to publish writing, a place to present writing. Writing is a lot like breathing or walking. People just do it, and if necessary, they'll nail theses to doors, right? The worry is about how people will get paid, in that the structure of payment for your writing has always varied in all sorts of different ways. At certain times the issue has not been being paid for your writing but being paid to do something else, like educate the children of noblemen, while you do your writing for free. We seem to be at another moment where the ways in which people can try to make a living while writing, for writing, are becoming radically unsettled—happens to coincide at the moment with a seeming depression in which all sorts of people's wages will be temporarily unsettled. So I think it's very hard to predict.

WG: *Puns on your name: do you get "grief" puns a lot?*

MG: Always.

WG: *Yeah? How so? Give a couple of examples.*

MG: Well, grief was always the standard mispronunciation and misspelling, more common than Greif obviously. I was called by a grade-school teacher "Charlie Brown" by some long associative track that involved "Greif—grief—good

grief, Charlie Brown—Charlie Brown.” I never liked this.

The most interesting thing that used to happen was that when I would order Chinese food, the only place I felt really happy and at ease with mispronunciation, because the last name was always taken to be Rice over the telephone.

WG: *Your last name was Rice?*

MG: No it was Greif, but to them—I would be like, “For Greif.” And they would be like, “Rice?” I would say “No, Greif.” “Rice?”

WG: *Who is your favorite wag? Wag—I’m sure you’re familiar with the word—it’s a lively joker, a jestful figure.*

MG: This is an answer I never could have or would have given before, and will never give again. I saw *Pineapple Express* last night, and I was very taken with the character of Red. Un-fucking-believable. I mean, that is one of the great comic performances I’ve ever seen. And a way of talking which I—it was odd. I knew it, but I still can’t say what it is or where it’s from. Just amazing.

WELLS TOWER

Wells Tower is a writer living in New York City. His first collection of short stories, *Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned* was released by FSG on March 17th. Will Guzzardi and Will Litton spoke with Tower at a little Greek joint in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Will Guzzardi, Wag's Revue: It's possible that some of our readers aren't familiar with your name, so the first question will also be kind of a mini bio of you.

Wells Tower: Sure.

WG: So according to my cursory internet research, you were published in the Paris Review, in November of 2001. Was that your first—

WT: Yeah, that was my first fiction publication.

WG: And that was your story "Down to the Valley." You were an MFA student at Columbia at the time. Since then you've been published all over the place—travel writing in The New York Times, in Outside Magazine; nonfiction in Harper's, The Washington Post; fiction in The New Yorker and McSweeney's. You even had a hardware review in The Believer, if I'm not mistaken.

WT: Yeah, yeah, I did—the stud finder. I remember it well.

WG: My question is: do you feel like you've made it as a writer at this point? And if so, was there a moment, one moment of these laurels in particular that made you feel like, 'Man, I've really made it now?'

WT: No, I think this—the idea of ‘making it’—I think that only happens when you’re just getting started. The *Paris Review* publication was kind of incredible for me. When I was first going to Columbia, the first two short stories I wrote—which were basically the first two fully-fledged pieces of short fiction that I’d ever put the final period on—I just sent into the *Paris Review*’s slush pile.

Actually, I’d had an agent. I’d done a piece—my first piece of serious nonfiction—for the *Washington Post Magazine*, where I’d went and got a job at a traveling carnival, traveled around as a carnie for a week, and wrote a piece of nonfiction about it. After that some New York agent got in touch with me, and that felt awfully special—that I had this agent and everything. That happened really early on. I sent her my first two stories from the Columbia fiction workshop and she basically said, ‘I’m not interested in sending these out.’

So I sent them to the *Paris Review* myself, and they picked them out of the slush pile. I don’t think I quite knew what a weird deal that was. Just the other day I was looking at their website and they were talking about how they get fifteen to twenty thousand unsolicited manuscripts a year. It’s just this huge sea of manila envelopes. Anyway, they took the first two stories. When they called me to tell me they’d accepted them, they put me right on the phone to George Plimpton, who’d always been a huge hero of mine, and I thought, ‘I can’t believe this. This is absolutely amazing. I’ve made it.’ I made five hundred bucks or something for selling the story.

But then, everything, the rest of the career stuff happened so slowly. I had a contract with the *Washington Post Sunday Magazine* for years, where I would do three cover stories a year for them. The first time I did a cover for them I thought, ‘Wow,

I've made it.' But then I realized, 'You didn't make it, you just made it to another not extremely important tier of the ziggurat of getting your work out there.' And so it—I don't know—it all happened so slowly. I've got this book coming out, but it's literally nine years of short stories. It's this crazy grab bag of pieces of fiction I've worked on over the years.

For me 'making it,' I guess, would be getting to a place where I feel like I'm consistently writing things that I feel really, really happy about. And I don't think that's ever going to happen. It certainly hasn't happened yet. The moments of joy in writing are so fleeting. You might write a sentence you're pleased with or a scene you're happy about and you feel happy for the rest of the afternoon, and then when you sit down the next morning to work on it, you're like, 'This is just cold pudding. It's just terrible.' I don't know what making it would be. I think if I were a lot better and a lot smarter and were writing things that constantly were astounding me, that would feel like making it. But it's work, it's just work. It's always just work.

Will Litton, Wag's Revue: You mentioned your stint as a carnie. My first encounter with your fiction was the Harper's piece "On the Show"—a terrific short story about a twenty-one year old guy who runs off to work at the fair. Was that inspired by the—

'You might write a sentence you like, and the next morning you're like, "This is just cold pudding. It's just terrible."'

WT: Yeah, that was directly inspired by that. Essentially, I spent a week doing this crazy thing at the carnival. It was funny, I'd pitched this story—well, let me back up to some bio stuff to preface all this. I grew up in Chapel Hill. Then I went to college at Wesleyan.

After that I moved to the West Coast, to Portland, Oregon, where I had a bunch of awful right-out-of-college sort of jobs.

I had a data entry gig, which was so unbelievably dehumanizing. I just had huge stacks of invoices with obscure numbers that corresponded to obscure electronics parts. Even if they'd describe the electronics parts with actual language instead of numbers, I still would have had no idea what I was keying into the computer. It was me and my boss, who was this kind of satanic woman with oversized sweaters and stirrup pants. She was just constantly cracking the whip on me. I could never enter enough invoices to make her happy. It was terrible.

So anyway, I was doing that, then I had some warehouse gigs, and then I moved back to North Carolina when I was twenty-two or twenty-three, and I started doing a little pick-up work for the independent weekly. Whatever I could write, whatever assignments they were willing to give me, I would do. I was doing restaurant stuff and just anything.

The only real game in town at the point was *Doubletake* magazine. So I went over there and just said, 'whatever job you're willing to give me I will take that job.' And that job was basically the night watchman job. I would go over there at six o'clock and hang around and wait until everybody left the building and then lock up and set the alarm and that was my deal there. Then I managed to start writing some press releases for them, and somehow got a gig running their website.

Then, when the magazine fell apart, my boss there went and got a job at *Washington Post Magazine*. So I pitched him this story to go travel with the carnival. And the pitch was that, you know, carnies were this misunderstood class, that everybody thought that they were these lawless gypsies, crackheads, murderers

and that sort of thing. And I was going to do this undercover thing where I would get a job in the carnival and penetrate all of those stereotypes.

Well, I got the job and immediately discovered that all of those stereotypes were totally, one hundred percent spot-on. I didn't meet anyone who hadn't done extensive prison time. It was kind of a scary experience. So I got out of there. It was a good journalistic boot camp, though, just because it really trained me how to observe things. Your powers of observation are much keener and more finely tuned when you're scared for your own hide. I couldn't actually take notes in front of the guys I was working with, so I'd do these little mnemonics. Something would happen and I'd think of how I'd want to describe it and I'd concoct this paragraph in my mind and just repeat it to myself enough so that I could jot it down when I'd get on break. Then I'd go running off to the port-a-john and try to write the thing down.

Anyway, I got out of that thing with 20,000 words of notes. And most of my notes were in a more polished and linear form than my nonfiction notes tend to be these days. I really wrote the notes as a story. It was easier to do because it was basically memoir. I basically just charted the arc of my experience that week. The *Post* piece ran at 5,000 words so I had all of this extra stuff, all of these sorts of cutting room floor goodies, that I had really wanted to put to better use. So the carnie fiction story was basically just a way to use those things that were very dear to me as nonfiction leavings.

I'm not nearly so precious about it now. Since that was my first story it was really painful to have stuff cut. I wasn't used to having things cut. But now when I sit down to do a piece of nonfiction I can pretty much assume straight off the top that the

things I love most will be the first things to fall under the axe.

WL: *Several moments of dialogue in “On the Show” are just absolutely hilarious. Here’s my favorite line right here:*

“Would you?” Ellis asks me, nodding at the woman.

“Yes,” I say.

“God if I wouldn’t,” says Ellis. “I’d eat her whole damn child just to taste the thing he squeezed out of.”

WT: *Oh right, that line. That I did not hear while I was doing that job. I heard that from a friend who worked on a fishing boat. But the line—if you’ll pardon me—that he heard from one of his coworkers was, ‘I’d drink a gallon of her piss just to see where it ran out of,’ or something like that.*

But yeah, I think that those sorts of dialogue tics and things like that—maybe people from all over the country get excited about that sort of thing—but I think that might be one kind of enthusiasm that comes from growing up in the South. You know, having those terrible summer jobs, laying brick or carrying concrete, and you’re working with these guys from the outer counties who probably dropped out of school in sixth grade, but have this incredible raconteurial style and great, great natural poetics.

WG: *I wanted to go to nonfiction for a quick second. One of the pieces that, as far as I could tell, really helped put you on the map was “Bird-Dogging the Bush Vote” in Harpers. That was published in 2005 but it’s about your time, undercover again, volunteering with the Bush campaign in Florida in 2004. So, I have a couple of questions about it. First of all, you express some guilt in the essay about winning votes for the other team. Have you done anything to expurgate yourself?*

WT: To atone for that? Well, to be totally honest—I don't know if this should be off the record or not—I think I did more harm to the campaign than good when I was down there. I was actually sort of scuttling their phone lists and things like that. I was having to do a lot of phone banking and they'd give me a huge stack of numbers and I'd basically pretend to call 80% of them. What have I done? I don't think I really have. I did a fair amount of volunteering for Barack in this last year.

WG: *You were writing it at a time when it really seemed like the energy, the political momentum, was with the conservative movement in this country. And it seemed like we the liberals were kind of lost in the trees, and the future of America was on the right. And it's the same feeling you have in "The Kids Are Far Right" where you go to the national conservative student conference in 2006. It's fascinating to me how much that narrative has flipped in these three or four years since that. Do you think this is a real change afoot in the American political climate, or is it just Obama? What's going to happen to all those kids who you met?*

WT: Those two pieces actually capture pretty different political moments. With the "Bird-Dogging" piece, it was actually kind of incredible to me that it got the attention that it did, and even that it got published, seeing as the emotional core of the story was really one of horror and disgust and personal terror. It was similar to the carnie story in that way. I guess it was a portrait of the Boschian landscape of Florida in 2004 and just how crazily polarized we all were.

Going to the John Kerry rally with Bush hecklers was amazing, because the left was just as horrific and just as vile as we'd like to think the Republicans are. We were spit on and cussed at, and there was this outpouring of hatred and invective. We had no

greater claims to grace than the right did, barring the fact that we hadn't been in power and actively destroying the country for four years at that point.

The thing that was incredible about that moment was that people didn't seem to be able to articulate why they liked George Bush. Somehow at all of these rallies that I went to, the dominant rhetorical attack with Bush, with all of Bush's acolytes—I think I saw him appear a couple of times during the reporting of that story—the dominant rhetorical strategy was, 'John Kerry and Osama bin Laden are the same person and they both want to kill as many of your children as possible.'

And we were still under the spell of 9/11. Nobody who I was spending time with really made a case for why Bush was a good president or why he was going to run the country well. It was that terrorist mumbo-jumbo and the nonsense about gay marriage and abortion—which were these empty vessels that nobody cared about—that they could pour their sympathies with the Right and their culture war animosities into.

Then in 2006 I went and spent a week with these young Republicans at the Young Americas Foundation conference in Washington. And the thing that was really intriguing there was that, at that point, the Bush administration was in flames. It was pretty clear that the historical verdict on Bush's presidency was that it had been a certified disaster. So the thing that was really intriguing was that I couldn't find a single kid—or maybe one out of five, six hundred kids—who'd admit to being a Republican. They'd all admit to being conservatives. They really wanted to get back to the Goldwater-style conservatism that Bush had basically run rough-shod over. George Bush destroyed the Republican brand, and for them to come back it's going to take a whole lot of work to reinvent themselves. And the thing that was

stunning about John McCain's campaign was that he tried to do the same old garbage, you know: 'Obama's a terrorist, he's got this thing with Bill Ayers, they're terrorists.' And it just didn't really work. You just can't pull that same stupid hustle forever.

WG: *You mentioned 9/11 just then, in terms of the spell that it had cast on us at that time. You mentioned it also briefly in passing in "Bird-Dogging." It's a real—it's a kind of a harrowing moment in that story. You describe being here in downtown Manhattan on September 11th. After you got out of school when you finished at Columbia, from what I can gather, you lived all over the country. What brought you back to New York and how do you carry that experience?*

WT: The 9/11 thing? It's a very, very strange kind of memory for anybody who was here on that day. I was living in the West Village on Carmine Street and 7th Avenue, so my window gave

'To even say, "Oh, I was in New York on 9/11," it's as if you're bragging about having seen the Beatles' last show.'

onto the towers. And I was just coming back from the coffee shop on my street and I saw that the first plane had hit, and I guess we all thought it was a news copter or something. I called a friend of mine

who was a photographer who lived right around the corner and said, 'Hey this thing happened, maybe we should go check it out,' not knowing what had gone on.

We got pretty far south. I think we got down a little bit past, or right around Battery Park City, and it was slowly dawning. At some point the second plane had hit and then it seemed clear that it was a terrorist attack. And then we, you know, we were

close enough to see people jumping out of the towers. It was this moment where, I mean there's nothing like that kind of horror, that you're a witness to mass murder. There's nothing in our, in my lifetime, as a middle-class American, that can approximate the experience of seeing that.

And so we both, actually it was interesting, we both burst into tears, this friend and I, and we hugged each other and then almost immediately—because this is a guy that I don't have a very huggy relationship with—almost immediately the awkwardness of the embrace trumped the hideousness of the moment.

Then, right at the moment the first tower fell, it was really scary because we got that sort of parallax thing, where it would look like there was only one tower when there were actually two. So we didn't think it was the tower falling, we thought it was some other building just because there was dust all over the place, there was noise, and we started running. It was just this terrible, terrible day. We were both in hysterics all day, like most people, and it was an experience of profound personal horror.

The thing that was interesting was how quickly the personal quality of being there got subsumed by the generic sensation of “being part of history.” It just became this thing that you say, ‘Oh yeah I was in New York on 9/11,’ like, ‘Oh, I was at Woodstock.’ And whatever 9/11 meant in a personal sense quickly became an emblem of this pivot point in history that is kind of hard to have any personal purchase on. I mean, to even say ‘Oh, I was in New York on 9/11’—there's something that feels really kind of gross and stupid about that. As if you're bragging about having seen the Beatles' last show.

WG: *You also have a personal connection to the other great domestic tragedy of my lifetime, which is Hurricane Katrina,*

of course. You lived in New Orleans for a couple years before the storm, and you go back regularly to write about it. You called it once, "The most intoxicatingly vital, intriguing place I've ever been." What drew you to New Orleans in the first place? And what do you see there when you go back now?

WT: A good friend of mine from Chapel Hill had moved down to New Orleans, and I thought that it be an interesting place to go and to live pretty cheaply and to work. And it wound up being this incredible experience living there for a couple of years.

There's no city that's as troubled and fascinating as New Orleans. From its really, really complicated racial politics, to the food and the culture—just the bizarre quality of life there. I remember right when I showed up there were two hurricanes in a week and I was terrified. So I went and got plywood and was boarding up the windows and everything. And I looked up the block and everybody else was really busy too, but they were just carting in cases of liquor and oysters. Clearly the way to deal with a hurricane there is to just stay drunk the whole time.

And, yeah, I left six months or so before Katrina. I was doing a teaching residency down at the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, which is an arts magnet school. I've been back I think at least a couple of times every year since. It's still in pretty rough shape.

But at the same time the thing that is really encouraging about it is that it's really local people that are rebuilding the cities, and volunteer college kids with Habitat who are flocking there and who are going house to house and gutting these ruined properties and putting people in habitable places again. It's not the Feds, it's not the local government, it's not the state, it's really this incredible grassroots movement of black and white

people, rich and poor people, who are making that city work again.

The city was really so bound up in race hatred and class animosity, but there's really a wonderful kind of spirit in the city right now. I mean, it's really a shame that Katrina had to happen to foster what feels like a really generous time in New Orleans' history now. I think there's a possibility the city could wind up better for it, I don't know.

WL: Let's turn back to the fiction side of this. The title story of your forthcoming book, "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned," is the unlikely account of sentimental Vikings marauding a foreign adversary but upset with the senseless violence that surrounds them. You mentioned earlier the intent of your carnie piece was sort of penetrating stereotypes. I have a question kind of regarding your process in writing. Did you sit down to write "Everything Ravaged, Everything Burned" really intent on exploding the Viking caricature with genuine emotion and depth, or did all the sentiment and pathos sort of emerge from an exploratory process?

WT: It was much more of the second thing you said. The genesis for the story, the blood eagle scene—if people haven't read it, there's this really gross thing that this guy does where he butchers this poor priest in this grueling way: he cuts open the guys back and then hauls his lungs out while the guy's still alive, so he's still breathing, and the lungs are kind of expanding and contracting, and it sort of looks like he has these gory wings coming out of his back. It's called a blood eagle.

Anyway, that is a real thing that the Vikings did, or at least it's something that me and a friend came across and were intrigued by. And we were saying, 'Do you think there were moments with

the Vikings where they'd beaten somebody into submission and somebody was thinking, "Well, I guess we should do a blood eagle on this guy," and somebody else is like, "Blah, God, a blood eagle really? I got to beat it back the ship, man. I really don't want to do that." It just seemed like such a baroque torture technique.

But anyway, I was thinking about the slacker Vikings who wouldn't be all that keen on a blood eagle. So I decided to write this story with these guys that would be like Raymond Carver characters. You know, they're approaching middle age, and

‘When I sit down to revise, I approach it from a place of really sincere self-hatred.’

they're kind of ground-down by the world, and they're not getting as much satisfaction out of the job anymore.

And the idea was that it was going to be this funny story where I'd use this as a gag. It was going to be a Carver parody with Vikings.

And the thing that happened with that one was it accrued this really emotional core to it, and it ended up in this sincere, super sentimental place. The ending's very sentimental. It's the kind of sentimentality that I would really like to try to find my way back to. When I went for that it felt really genuine. I felt like there had been enough blood and gore and sorrow in the story that I could get away with a nice moment at the end.

That was an early story, and I think I made myself available to it in a way that I have a harder time doing now. I think now I'm more cautious and calculating and careful. I keep trying ways to stop being careful but it's sort of tough. Once you start, once you get into a place where you're published enough that even if you write something that's kind of crappy you can probably find

some sad magazine that will take it—

WL: *That's us!*

WT: *[Laughs.] It's hard to kind of get back to that place where you think I'm going to write this for me and no one else is ever going to see it. I'm going to make all the mistakes I'm afraid to make. No, you get more and more cautious. Anyway, it's nice to have one of those moments on record where there's a soaring sentimentality in the story. I'm glad it's there.*

WL: *Which goes directly into my next question: I think part of what you're good at in your fiction is blending hilarity and melancholy, and getting us to laugh at things that are vile, such as the sort of comically violent encounter between the narrator and the stepfather in "On the Show", where the stepfather's like biting him and he's bleeding everywhere and it's just kind of over-the-top, but in a way that's believable and funny at the same time. And also the blood eagle that we just talked about. How do you conceive of the relationship between humor and sorrow, the hilarious and the terrible, in fiction?*

WT: It's a good question. I think that in terms of fiction at least, my work is always born out of acting on totally contradictory kinds of faith and conviction about how a short story should be written. It seems like every time I sit down to write, or work myself into a headspace where I feel capable of writing, it's always with some new really sincere faith that I've finally figured out how to write a short story.

It's like, 'Oh okay, a short story is about being really sincere about human feeling, really trying to write a story about sincere human feeling, with as much depth and honesty as possible. No smart ass tricks. I'm going to write a really important short

story right now.' And you kind of crack your knuckles and go at it. But it ends up sucking.

So I'll go, alright, that's bullshit, I'm not going to write like that. I can write a funny story, and I know I can describe some things in some funny ways. So I'm going to write a story where I make people laugh and it'll be a good, fun read and that's all I'm going to try to do. And then I do that, and I'll think, 'This is terrible. It's this stupid kind of hat and cane routine where I'm just trying to get readers to laugh.'

But I think with stories if you go through enough cycles of those contradictory impulses and you're trying to layer humor and sincerity and sorrow, each with a new draft, that you're layering that stuff like shellac, hopefully, hopefully, you end up in a place where the story works. For me I think the key is not having too much faith in one technique, but at the same time being really suspicious and really enthusiastic about all techniques. Yeah, as you can see I haven't really figured out how to write a short story yet.

But most of the stories in the collection have gone through these total slash and burn revisions, where it might take, I don't know, four or five or six months to come up with the final draft of a piece. It's really, really about going through and being really suspicious about the motives of each writerly impulse and trying to correct it and trying to salvage what felt right and good. I guess that's where that tension comes from.

WL: *Longer question: Your most recent piece of fiction in The New Yorker, "Leopard," is a story about a loserish young boy who feigns illness to avoid school. In it, you use the second person present, a pretty rare narrative technique. The narrator occupies a strange space, opening the piece with, "Good*

morning. You have not slept well,” as if it were a lieutenant of the inner monologue, beginning a brief. It slips into moments, rendered as commands, that read like echoes of the boy’s own thoughts: “Don’t go to school today. Play sick.” But it also offers occasional insights that would seem impossible for a child to have, and so resonate from a source entirely distinct from the psyche of the main character: “You are eleven years old, the age that our essences begin revealing themselves, irremediably, to us and to the world.” Why did you choose to use the second person in this piece? What did it help you accomplish that a standard first or third person perhaps could not have? Why do you think so many authors shy away from the second person?

WT: The second person is really chancy. When you’re writing in the second person, you’re telling a reader what to think, and I think it’s very easy for readers to kind of say, ‘Fuck you, you can’t tell me how to read this story, it’s not me.’

But with that story I tried it both I think with the first person and the third person. And with first person, it was feeling as though it was getting easier, a kind of sentimentality was coming in the story. I decided I was going to try earnestly to capture the headspace of a kid. But the narrator was treasuring the story too much, because it was his story, and it felt kind of icky.

And then with the third person—the third person is nice because you can move your characters around like chess pieces and you’re in control and you’ve got this distance where, you can make fun of them and not take them totally seriously and you get to determine the resonances of the story with a bit more control in the third person. But then the third person felt too snarky. I mean, I felt like I was taking on this kid too much. And I felt like I had too much remove and that I had gotten away

from my mission with the story, which was really to get inside this kid's head and to try to approximate the sensation and the emotional space of being eleven-years-old and not very happy.

Somehow the second person just seemed like the perfect middle ground. That it was a perfect way to convey the details of the story without caring for the narrator too much or caring for him too little. That it seemed like a way to simply lay these details out, and to lay out the meat of the story. Somehow it just felt right. Neither too sentimental nor too 'a writer being cruel to his character.'

But if you read somebody like Flannery O'Connor, she always writes in the third person and she always beats the living shit out of her characters. [*Laughs.*] It's much easier to look down on them from a throne of a smart-ass God.

But yeah, that was a weird choice. It was really strange to me that *The New Yorker* took that story, too, because that's sort of the least clever story I've ever written. And that came after I was revising my collection. I'd sort of been going through and adding jokes and slickness to different stories. And I thought, 'What would happen if I just try to write a story that was totally sincere? Where I didn't rely on my standard bag of tricks? You know, of having people say funny things, of coming up with really complicated descriptions of stuff.' So it was really a kind of emotionally naked story and it sort of blew me away that they thought it was worth publishing.

WG: *On the subject of revisions, tell us a little bit about some of the stories in the upcoming collection. For instance, 'Retreat,' it appeared in McSweeney's recently. Have you revised it at all for the book?*

WT: That one actually had sort of a good post-publication life. It, along with a couple of other stories from *McSweeney's*, got into the final rounds for the National Magazine Awards for fiction. We lost out to *Harper's*. But it got a Pushcart Prize too. But by that time, I'd rewritten the story from the point of view of the older brother. It just felt like the first way was too smart-assed. We ultimately decided to go with the revision, and now I think in the next *McSweeney's* they're publishing both versions of the story, the younger brother and the older brother, and then I've got a little essay about the process of revision.

But probably a good three, four, maybe more other stories in the collection, I did the same sort of insane revision, which kind of freaked out my editor, just because after she gave me the initial notes on the book, the draft I sent back to her was substantially different from the book that they'd bought. So that was strange. I don't know what the best way to revise is. I tend to be really, really crazy about it, you know, that when I sit down to revise, I approach it from a place of really sincere self-hatred.

WL: *[Laughs.]*

WT: Kind of too much, often. But I'll go through, and I'll say, "there's just one thing that's good in this story." Like, this one description is the only thing that's at all good in this story, and I'll keep that, but I'm going to totally rewrite this story into the story it really ought to be.

I would like to see somebody get into publishing writers' radical revisions, just as a teaching tool. And actually, FSG published a little chapbook with both versions of 'Retreat', with the essay in there. But then when *McSweeney's* decided to publish the thing, I've then since decided to revise the revisions. But yeah, I think it would be a really good thing for young writers to look at.

WL: *I told my friend I was interviewing Wells Tower, and he said, “What is that, like a brokerage firm?” You do have a fairly odd name.*

WT: *It’s ridiculous.*

WL: *Is it a real name? A pen-name?*

WT: *No, no, no, it’s really my actual absurd name. Yeah, I’ve gotten this question from a few people lately, how did I come up with this name that seems like it should be either, right, a brokerage firm or a porn star or a soap opera character or something. I think it’s just happenstance. My mom came up with it. And I was named after a friend of the family. But, yeah, I was talking to her the other day and I said, ‘Were you trying to do something deliberately grandiose with this name?’ And she said, ‘I don’t know, I thought it would work.’*

WL: *Any badass nicknames? Like Tower of Power?*

WT: *Tower of Power, no, no. My mother calls me Wellsy, that’s pretty much it.*

WG: *That’s badass.*

WT: *Yeah, it’s pretty—when I join the Hell’s Angels, that’s what I’ll get, in the little spikes, over the kidney.*

WL: *A wag is a droll rascally wit. Who is your favorite wag and why? It could be a historical figure, a fictional character...*

WT: *My favorite wag. I think it’s probably Bertie Wooster from the P.G. Wodehouse novels. I think he was a bit of a wag.*

Did you guys read the Wodehouse novels at all? They all follow the same kind of template: that Bertie Wooster, this sort of well-to-do bachelor in the 1920s or so gets into some kind of scrape where the daughter of some earl is trying to marry him and he has to get his genius butler to get him out of the situation. But there's something that's just incredibly entertaining and compelling about those novels. I think that—was it Kinglsey Amis who just had the book out about drinking? Maybe. Don't quote me on that. I think it might have been. But his reading P.G. Wodehouse, the Jeeves novels, I think is one of his stand-bys for a bad hangover day. It's just going to immediately make you feel right about the world. I think Wooster qualifies as a wag. He'd probably be my pick.