

GREATNESS STRIKES WHERE IT PLEASES

AN INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK REIKEN

Eric Wasserman

Bruce Springsteen once inhabited the voice of a man lamenting ten years he had burned with no foreseeable future. Novelist Frederick Reiken may share Garden State roots with The Boss but he is certainly not lamenting the time he spent on his new novel, *Day For Night*, which arrives a decade after his previous bestseller, *The Lost Legends of New Jersey*. And he takes his lead from the great American songwriting tradition, where great stories told in first person are not necessarily thinly veiled autobiographies. In *Day For Night*, Reiken plunges readers headfirst into ten interlinked and vastly different first-person narratives, taking on a complex array of voices that turns the novel-in-stories format into a whole new experience and which the *Los Angeles Times* salutes as “a thought-provoking, intricate portrait of the far-reaching, intergenerational implications of the Holocaust.” With *The London Daily Telegraph* already labeling him as one of the “10 rising stars of 2010,” Reiken’s haunting third act is proving to be one of this year’s not to miss literary events, with editions having been simultaneously published in the U.K. and Australia, and with translations forthcoming in French, Spanish, Dutch, and Hebrew. Today’s literary landscape is both more advantageous and more daunting than the one Reiken burst onto in 1998 with his award-winning debut novel, *The Odd Sea*, and literary fiction now has a readership that has become impossible to target with any degree of predictability. But readers’ memories are more lasting than many of the other arts. They have waited a decade for *Day For Night*, and that’s worth it when it comes to reconnecting with a writer that NPR’s Scott Simon calls “a master storyteller.”

ERIC WASSERMAN: You once told me that everything in your fiction starts with place, that you need to know where you’re writing about before you really get going. But I am particularly interested in the process of how this novel was written on a situation level. Each chapter hinges on specific situations characters are placed in. Was place still where you

began formulating each section or did situation play a more dominant role in this book's evolution?

FREDERICK REIKEN: For a long time I've been saying that place is where everything starts for me as a writer, and I guess this is as true as it has always been, since the book came to life as a result of the desire to re-imagine certain places I have known. The first chapter I wrote was what became chapter six, "The Ocean," which is set on the Caribbean island of St. John. I spent a summer there in college, taking a class in marine biology. We snorkeled and scuba dived two to three times a day, learned about coral reef ecology, and did our own independent projects (mine was on the bluehead wrasse). After college I spent a year working as a wildlife biology field technician in the Negev Desert, in southern Israel, which serves as the main backdrop for the book's last three chapters. I think I always knew the story would end up there. But there's another big factor with regard to the evolution of this book. Sometime about ten years ago I happened upon an anecdote in a history book about 534 Jewish intellectuals who were duped into thinking they had been selected for archival work in Kovno, Lithuania, during the Holocaust, and then, as is the case in so many stories like this, the men were rounded up and marched away and executed. That set off a series of hypothetical questions for me. What if one or two of them survived? Would that be possible and, if so, how? Regardless of whether anyone survived, might there be a story that people told about it? That was the deep seed of the novel and obviously this was not based on place at all. To speak directly to your question about the situation that drives each individual chapter – I was aware that the invented question about the fate of those Jewish intellectuals in Lithuania, particularly the protagonist Beverly Rabinowitz's relationship to it (in the novel, her father and uncle are two of those men), was not going to be perfectly answerable, and that to get anywhere near some kind of revelation about it, I was going to have to proceed indirectly. What I found was that if the immediate situation in each chapter possessed enough authority and specificity on its own, I could move through a series of different contexts and keep the reader engaged because half the mystery was how each new situation was going to fit into the larger whole, as well as how these varied situations would ultimately converge. I don't think the structure of the book could have succeeded if the situation in each chapter was not distinct from all the

others, and eventually I recognized that this approach was enabling me to write the kind of novel that I wanted to write, one with a wide net with regard to history and geography and subject matter and character perspectives. But discovering all this required first writing “The Ocean” and then figuring out how that story might relate to the story of those 534 Jewish men. In hindsight, I can see that the whole project hinged on the convergence of those two things.

EW: Can you be more specific about how those two very different things came to be connected? How long did it take from the time you began “The Ocean” until you knew where you were going with the larger novel?

FR: The discovery took a long time, something like five years of letting it percolate, without really knowing that was what I was doing. But I can trace the process, more or less. I remember that one night in 1999 I started thinking about St. John, in particular the peninsula known as Yawzi Point, where you can walk out and stand as if floating above the sea, and then the image of two adolescent kids standing out on Yawzi Point appeared in my mind. I took out a notebook and scribbled maybe five sentences in the voice of Jordan Kahn, the narrator of that chapter, and put it down. About a year later, I happened to find the paragraph and wrote a little more, and maybe a few weeks after that I came up with the situation that carries the plot of “The Ocean.” I decided to make it a story about a boy whose father, a marine biologist who is in remission from leukemia, takes the boy to the a field station in the Caribbean to spend what may be their last summer together. The story of writing that story gets convoluted in itself. I worked on it for about three months during a hiatus from writing *The Lost Legends of New Jersey*. But the story wasn’t cohering, and after a while I realized I was kind of getting addicted to it, to the point that I wasn’t getting anything else done. I forced myself to stop working on it, and I didn’t try to send it out because I knew it had too many loose ends. I returned to working on *Lost Legends*, spent the next four months or so finishing that novel, and then took a break from writing altogether. When I got back to working again, I wrote about a hundred pages of something new. It was the beginning of a novel about a character from *Lost Legends*, Max Rubin, whose wife Doris is a Holocaust survivor—and it incorporated the anecdote about the five-hundred Jewish intellectuals who were executed in Kovno, Lithuania. It

went on and on and on with many, many digressions, and pretty soon I was back in the 1920s telling Max's entire life story. It didn't work, but I suspected that I had something. I just didn't know what it was yet. Then, for lack of anything to do, I started working on "The Ocean" again, spent another two months on it, and got stuck once more. I decided to put "The Ocean" in a drawer, but then an editor from *The New Yorker* who had read my first two novels called my agent and asked if I had any stories I might submit. The funny thing is that my agent told the editor he doubted I had any but that he'd check, and when he called me I said, "Guess what?" So, I sent in "The Ocean" and spent the better part of another year working on it with that editor. I wasn't sure that they'd ever run it, and I kept thinking it was a lot of time to be spending on one story. Eventually, to my great relief, they did run it. Then I began to think about how I could make it into something larger. I wrote the section entitled "Yesterday's Day." Then I got stuck again. I had those two pieces, plus the failed Max section, but I had no idea what to do with it all. I let it sit for another four years, and then finally, one day, I realized how I was going to connect the dots.

EW: Each of the chapters in *Day For Night* captures an individual voice of a particular character. What methods did you use to inhabit all of these various first-person narratives and, if so, is there one that comes closest to your own voice?

FR: I don't know precisely where the different voices of the different characters came from. What I can say is that I hit a limit—twelve—before voices started sounding similar. And in the end I cut one of the chapters and never incorporated another into the book. So that made ten, which seemed to me in the end to be the limit of what made artistic sense for the book. It's safe to say that finding each voice was another main factor in the construction of each chapter.

As for which comes closest to my own voice—well, that's one of those questions that, if I try to answer definitively, is going to sound like b.s. In fact, anything I say here will probably sound suspect, but I suppose that in some way each of the narrators is an exaggeration of some aspect of me. Beverly's voice in chapter one has a depressive, subdued precision that reminds me of myself when I get into one of those "after great pain a formal feeling comes" moods. Tim in chapter two has a young-

dude clueless quality that I feel strangely capable of inhabiting. The least exaggerated of the ten voices is probably Vicki, the veterinarian who narrates chapter eight, and I would say that she comes closest to my own voice. But perhaps I feel that way because her story also has the most autobiographical elements in it of any in the book. I had an exposure to a toxigenic mold in 2004 and came down with all sorts of crazy symptoms, which is what happens to Vicki in the novel. I didn't move to the Israeli desert to solve the problem, as she does, but it did take me more than two years to recover.

EW: I've always seen the novel comprised of interlinked story sections like a great classic rock concept album, which I know you grew up on. The ordering is essential for the cohesion of the piece as a whole. "The Ocean" became chapter six of ten chapters. Were the sections of *Day For Night* ever in a different order and if so what was most important to you in designing the story's progression?

FR: If "The Ocean" was the hit song that started it all, then "Yesterday's Day," which eventually became chapter one, was the follow-up that never made the charts. But writing that piece, as I've suggested, was a big step forward in the evolution of the book. I wrote it about six months after "The Ocean" was published. When I sent it in to *The New Yorker*, the response was that it seemed more like a chapter of a novel than a story. Unfortunately, the editor who had worked with me on "The Ocean" had left the magazine. But although the editor who responded to "Yesterday's Day" did not express interest in working further with me on it, this was about as useful a rejection as I have ever received. That was when I first began to envision Beverly Rabinowitz as a protagonist with some deep, lurking secrets. Soon after that I became ill, due to the mold exposure, and I didn't think about these two pieces much during the period in which I was recovering from being allergic to almost everything in the universe. But finally the larger idea came together in what seemed like a cosmic alignment of, well, finally being healthy again and also having some time to write, in the summer of 2007. When I first had the idea for the chapter entitled "Close You Are," I tried it out as an experiment. My plan was to inhabit the voice of Tim Birdsey, who is a character that Beverly encounters in "Yesterday's Day," and see what came of it. It took two or three days to write the first draft of that chapter. I then

wrote chapters three, four, and five in a matter of weeks, inserted “The Ocean” as chapter six, and was on my way. I had a full draft of the book by Thanksgiving. Other than the first two pieces, the only chapter that didn’t come out in order was chapter seven, “Shadow,” which was the last section that I wrote, once I realized there was a hole to fill in the storyline. So, most of the ordering was entirely organic. It’s just that there was a multi-year gap between those first two pieces I wrote as stories and the rest of the book. Now that I think about it, I spent twice as long on “The Ocean” as I did on everything else combined.

EW: In the closing chapter of *Day For Night*, entitled “This World,” the character Amnon Grossman claims that “even our books must eventually lose their meaning.” The Survey for Public Arts Participation recently reported that arts participation by the United States public is diminishing. Likewise, writer Nicholas Carr recently expressed on NPR that he doesn’t know whether traditional books will retain influence. He wonders if they will be shoved to the margins of our culture rather than remain at its center. Do you share that concern?

FR: It’s hard not to. At the same time, it’s not something anyone—with maybe the exception of the CEOs of Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, etc.—can control. Clearly we’re heading toward or perhaps are already amidst a paradigm shift that is possibly as radical as the beginning of alphabetic writing itself. I was recently reading about how Plato was very dubious of the new technology of alphabetic writing, as were others in 400 B.C. Socrates, as you may know, was illiterate, and he scoffed at the idea of written text and its negative consequences, possibly in the way that some of us who grew up in the generation that watched typewriters become obsolete, saw the beginning of video games as kids and, two decades later, the beginning of the Internet, groan at the idea of e-books. Every time I see one, I think to myself that I can’t imagine reading a novel on an Etch-a-Sketch. But more than my own habits, my concern is that books will cease to be seen as art objects and become lumped together with all the other forms of electronic information. Still, it’s impossible to know where it will all land. Some of my grad students who work as assistants in publishing houses say that everyone is preparing for the end of books and others, who don’t work in publishing houses, argue that books cannot ever end because—it’s the standard and somewhat

naïve argument—people will always want to hold something solid in their hands, something that can go on their bookshelves, with artwork on the covers, etc. The reason it's naïve is that as soon as some company discovers exactly how to triple their profits by going entirely electronic, others will follow and traditional books may be relegated to the margins of the industry. But, it's all relative. You could say that serious works of literary fiction are already relegated to the margins. Only a handful of books—usually big prize winners—become bestsellers and the rest languish in warehouses. Actually, as Jonathan Franzen noted more than a decade ago in a well-known article in *Harper's*, books have long ceased to command the collective imagination of culture the way a novel like *Catch-22* once did. One of his main points in that article was that nothing he could ever write, no matter how successful, would have that kind of influence on society. Six or seven years later, he published *The Corrections*, which became both an Oprah pick and the winner of the National Book Award. It's hard to imagine a better set of circumstances for capturing collective cultural imagination. He sold millions of copies, but he also may have proven his own point. A lot of us, myself included, greatly admired *The Corrections*. I would go so far as to say that it is one of the best novels written during my lifetime, but the book did not enter cultural consciousness in the manner of *Catch-22*. I guess we'll see what happens with his new novel, *Freedom*, which has just been released and seems to be receiving even more attention than *The Corrections*, if that is possible.

EW: What should a writer do to prepare for the possibility of this paradigm shift?

FR: I don't think there's much you can do. The purists and faux-purists among us will just keep writing and find whatever venues remain and the chameleons among us will adapt to whatever changes are imposed. As for readers, some will adjust and some will insist on reading non-electronic books until we die. Recently my father purchased a Sony Reader, and the first book he read on it was a pdf file that I sent him of *Day For Night*. I was sure he wouldn't get through it and would ask for a hard copy. But he read the entire book in two plane rides this past March and seemed quite pleased with the new technology. He later showed it to me and I could barely tolerate reading one page of my own book. He has since purchased and downloaded the e-book version of *Atlas Shrugged*.

EW: You're a former news reporter and nature writer. Naturally that specific type of writing requires factual accuracy. But I am wondering, since the natural world is incorporated into all of your novels, as a fiction writer, do you ever feel the desire to drift from the hard facts when building natural environments or do you stay true to the actual places in this book?

FR: My habitual practice is to stay true to the actual places, sometimes to the point of perhaps being too specific, as it leads some readers to think mistakenly that the stories in the novels are also true. There are also always certain invented geographical details, usually because I'm trying to make sure no one sues me, and one result of this is that I sometimes receive letters from readers who want to tell me that I got my facts wrong. Recently, I saw on Wikipedia that someone wrote that *Lost Legends* was a novel based on my childhood, despite the fact that none of the events in the novel are things that ever happened to me and that I went to a private school rather than the public high school that the protagonist attends and that I didn't even live in Livingston, where the book is set, beyond tenth grade. But because the place details are identifiable and certain bits of fairly well-known New Jersey lore are threaded through the story, people seem to want to read it as a memoir. I suppose I'm okay with that, as the main character was certainly a better, wiser person than I was as a teenager. He was also taller and got to have an exciting fling with his bad-girl neighbor.

EW: *The Odd Sea* seemed to center on very contained domestic complexities, whereas *The Lost Legends of New Jersey* seemed to focus more on communal complexities. In *Day For Night* I notice you shifting to more individualistic, almost philosophical and psychological complexities. Did it require any study on your part?

FR: I wouldn't say it required study so much as a coming to terms with things I have been thinking about for a long time. The philosophical questions that are raised—about things like binary oppositions such as presence/absence, the human tendency to make patterns and meaning out of whatever narrative threads are available, the nature of memory, the conception of time and space in western civilization—these are

things I've been thinking about, at some level, for as long as I can remember, long before I read any of the formal treatises on these topics. I think the form in this book, the way each narrative is subsumed by the next and the way each successive chapter shifts the overall perspective of the book, was particularly conducive to the exploration of these philosophical ideas, which naturally become part of the fabric of the book. I did, in fact, do a lot of research and study, but that research tended to be focused on historical aspects of the book, such as World War II and the Holocaust.

EW: You use period references in *Day For Night*, particularly concerning the 1980s, that are rather subtle. For instance, mentioning a Sony Walkman or Skee-Ball strikes me as more interesting than simply naming a popular song of the time. How can writers use subtle detail to ground the reader not only in a place but what is often more difficult to capture, a time?

FR: I think you shouldn't do it consciously as a writer. If you are trying too hard to incorporate period references then chances are good that you're just giving a catalogue of details, in which case the best you will do is evoke the time and place, rather than grounding the reader in it. I think what I am saying is that as a writer you need to be able to inhabit a time and place with your imagination if you want to create a compelling sense of it for the reader, to the extent the reader forgets that he or she is reading and just feels transported to another time and place. It's easiest to do this if you've actually lived through that other time but you can also do it with thorough research. Ultimately, it's a matter of being able to take either what you remember or have gathered and project it as a vividly imagined reality for yourself—a kind of guided fantasy that you are writing down as you have it. The subtle details should just find their way in of their own accord, in the same way that the best metaphors are not things you plan.

EW: Thoughtful symbolism often gets a bad wrap for being overly artsy. If you could be with readers when they encounter the image of the sunken carousel in the water in *Day For Night* what would you want them to take away from it?

FR: I've been asked a lot about that image, and a number of people

have offered good suggestions. Someone suggested that the carousel represents the novel's ever-shifting story, part of which is submerged. Another person suggested that the carousel represented a kind of ruin, from which wonder can arise. I liked both of those interpretations, but to be honest, I was not conscious of any symbolism when I wrote it. I have no idea where the image came from and anything I can offer as explanation would be akin to secondary elaboration about the content or meaning of a dream. If I could be with readers when they hit that paragraph, I think I'd tell them that I'm open to all interpretations but also urge readers not to attempt to literalize or seek some perfectly coherent meaning.

EW: Your decision to present the third chapter, "Monster," as a direct transcript of FBI Special Agent Leopold Sachs' testimony is where *Day For Night* completely opens up for me as a reader. The explosion of narrative space there, the real opening of possibility for where the story might go, went up so many notches. I once heard Jonathan Safran Foer say that writers need to change the way novels are written or people are going to stop reading them. This particular chapter reminded me of that and I wonder if you share his sentiment?

FR: I agree in the sense that I do gravitate to novels that invent something new, but I would add that even the most cutting edge novels will have formal underpinnings. If a novel is being described as engaging and satisfying by large quantities of readers, you can bet that there is going to be a formal logic to the style, even if that style breaks certain expectations and boundaries, and to some degree establishes its own set of rules. That much said, I still enjoy a good, conventionally story-oriented novel of the Richard Russo or Zadie Smith variety, and I think people will always want to read novels like those because, unlike any other art form other than cinema, realistic novels will always in some way resemble our real lives—or at least our hopes and fears and wishes and fantasies about our real lives. However, I suppose that what Safran Foer is getting at is that there is less of an attention span and less of a familiarity, particularly for the generation that is now addicted to Facebook and Twitter, with long novels that do not have, for lack of a better term, a streamlined approach, in which the characters or storyline is lighting up the imagination on every page. Try suggesting that your students read *Moby-Dick* or *Bleak*

House over the summer, and you'll see what I mean.

EW: Near the end of the novel, in the chapter entitled “The Ancient Forest,” the narrator, Max Rubin, actually speaks to his dead son, Daniel. It’s difficult to capture this psychology and yet you do. Did this section of the novel go through multiple trials and errors to get it right? Likewise, Max is the one major character who also appeared in *The Lost Legends of New Jersey* and I am wondering if your previous construction of his character assisted or produced challenges for this story?

FR: As I mentioned, I tried in 2001 to begin a novel in which Max and Doris were the main characters, and it failed. But I had that material in my head—the story of Doris’s miraculous survival and the anecdote that is at the center of the novel, about the shooting of five-hundred Jewish intellectual in Lithuania in 1941. He talks to his son Daniel in *Lost Legends*, so naturally that was a continuous aspect of his character, as was his marriage to Doris, which was dramatized in that previous book. But I think the immediate attempt to turn him into the protagonist of a novel was problematic, because he wasn’t really conceived as a protagonist in that way. To be honest, I wasn’t even sure I was going to use him as one of the narrators in *Day For Night* until I got to his chapter. But then it clicked, and several of the revelations in Max’s chapter were ultimately what the ending of the novel, if not the entire novel, came to hinge upon. The most important thing is that if I had never written those hundred-plus failed pages about Max, I never would have had the material to get me through the book. I think that’s what people mean when they say no material is ever wasted for fiction writers. You may not be able to make use of it in the form that you initially wrote it in, but usually the subconscious machinery from which fiction arises will find a way to recycle it.

EW: One of the most pleasing decisions you make in this novel is to not tie up all the loose ends in perfect bows. In a way, you are probably not providing readers what they desire but more so what they need. Is it a risk for a literary author to refrain from wrapping up all narrative threads these days or can you trust that readers can fill in the blanks? *Day For Night* of course addresses this right near its end with the line “what we comprehend about this world may always be called into question.”

FR: That's my own philosophy, both artistically and in my life in general. And with regard to literature, I think it's important that readers don't get too cozy with an easy resolution or moral. It's important that a novel force the reader into the awareness that they are still part of the real world and that they do need to formulate their own explorations of things and not rely on books or pundits to tell them how to think. I wouldn't say that the decision not to tie up all loose ends is a risk so much as a sensibility issue. You create a different kind of reading experience, depending on which way you go. What I'm most interested in as a writer are the undertones and overtones and ambiguities inherent in things, because I think these more subliminal aspects of how we process the world are far more relevant than we give them credit for. One of the challenges I'm always facing has to do with how to keep a story grounded and engaging and at the same time incorporate those resonant ambiguities that create a sense of mystery.

EW: Most writers will admit that they have a sweet spot for a certain character, that there is a character in a book project they really love writing for. Is there a character in *Day For Night* that became that for you during the writing process?

FR: I probably had the most fun writing Jennifer's chapter, so I suppose I have a sweet spot for her angry, witty, self-reflective, and sometimes rueful hyper-intellectualism. Flaubert was once asked who Emma Bovary was modeled after and his answer was supposedly *C'est moi*. While I wouldn't go so far as to say Jennifer is me, I think she is the character I take the most delight in or perhaps feel the most connection with. The other character I feel that way about is Amnon, the narrator of final chapter. That character has been with me for a long time, in various forms.

EW: Only a few years ago author Hal Niedzviecki wrote a provocative piece called "Nothing Is Illuminated: Jewish Fiction Writers Must Let Go of the Holocaust." There are plenty of loaded subjects in literature and the Holocaust is certainly one of them. Is there a conundrum involved with depicting the Holocaust in fiction, even an unspoken responsibility of sorts placed on the author who chooses to do so?

FR: This was something that I grappled with around the time I started

making those first forays into this material, given that I was not an authority on the subject of the Holocaust, even if I had done a lot of reading and visited Yad Vashem multiple times and personally known several Holocaust survivors. But I was drawn to this material and it would not let go of me, which for me is always the final litmus test, and I tried very hard to make sure everything that pertained to the Holocaust was extremely relevant to the story. My perspective is that I do think this is a topic that needs to continue being discussed forever. And I do think there are and will always be stories to be told about it. Often nothing is illuminated, but just as often, a great deal that is illuminated. As with most things, you have to take the good with the bad. As for the writer who chooses to depict the Holocaust in fiction, I do think there are unspoken responsibilities, but mostly these have to do with not exploiting or exoticizing, which requires knowing the topic in various dimensions—factually, psychologically, philosophically, visually—and being able to find a lens that will render it in precise rather than general or stock terms.

EW: At one point in *Day For Night* you write, “I do not understand what it is about seeing a person portrayed by a narrative that is simultaneously visual, but it can cause reactions that we do not think about very much. It can cause us to worship movie actors, and it can cause us to feel intimacy with a person who is not so much a person as an illusion.” Is it simply impossible for readers to not intimately associate the author himself with his characters and refuse to release themselves to an imagined world?

FR: Most of us, whether we mean to or not, look for correspondences between the author and the protagonist of the novel. Why that matters is hard to explain—but it accounts somewhat for the recent spate of false memoirs. I’m still thinking about all this, and I’d recommend David Shields’s recent book *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, which deals explicitly with this topic. But forgetting about memoirs for the moment, I think the extent to which you actually start to envision the protagonist of a novel as the textual correlate of the author varies from book to book, and it often depends on the extent to which the author, whether consciously or subconsciously has helped the reader to make the correlation. For instance, we tend to see the protagonist of most Hemingway novels as Hemingway, even if he’s a character named Jake who can’t get it up.

Likewise, who wouldn't imagine that Nick Carraway is F. Scott Fitzgerald in *The Great Gatsby*? In both of those cases, the correspondence is about as natural as seeing Nathan Zuckerman as Philip Roth. The author, I think we would agree, is complicit in the imagined merger. But it's ultimately a moot point, so long as the author has created a strong enough situation and a compelling enough story, and if that happens, I do think that a reader ultimately will forget about any literal correlations and release into the imagined world. In a fully realized work of fiction, the author is everywhere and nowhere. That becomes easy to understand I think if you consider Gabriel Garcia Marquez's novels such as *A Hundred Years of Solitude*. As a more complicated example, I had the experience of reading Philip Roth's *I Married a Communist* and forgetting that it was supposedly a rant about Claire Bloom, his former wife, which caused many people not to take that book as seriously as *American Pastoral* and *The Human Stain*, the trilogy of which comprise what I think of as Roth's most masterful accomplishment. My own opinion is that, regardless of whatever his subtext might have been, he was able to sublimate it enough so that I wasn't just stuck thinking about Roth and his ex-wife while I read the novel. As a final thought on this, I will add that there is a lot of pressure, particularly from the media, for writers to be synonymous with their protagonists and to some extent with the books themselves, which is very strange to me. I warn my students that, whenever they do manage to break through and publish a first novel, it's important to resist that pressure because it can really screw you up. You can start to think you have to be a sort of walking, talking version of your novel, and if you comply you may find yourself pigeonholed as someone or something that you may not necessarily want to be. Of course, that's exactly what some authors do want, in which case, good luck.

EW: *Day For Night* arrives a decade after your previous novel. Sometimes I look at writers I greatly admire who publish prolifically and their misses seem to be stories they wanted in print as opposed to wanting to have something published that they are truly proud of. Isn't patience one of the most crucial attributes a writer can embrace?

FR: No writer embraces patience but I think you do have to accept that as an artist you may not be able to achieve everything on the timetable you'd ideally want. In fact, many a great artist does not succeed, in the

worldly sense, at all. The most important thing is that, to the best of your ability, you incorporate writing as a steady practice into your life, which may entail certain sacrifices. There is that old saying that greatness strikes where it pleases, and that is as true as ever, but if you want to have a chance of having it strike, it means that you have to keep the lines open and cultivate your art and craft.

EW: Your new novel concludes with an expectant father's letter to his unborn child. You are a new father and recently told me that your daughter has delighted in the books you read to her. You mentioned such great works of literature as *Hippos Go Berserk!* and *Baby Owls*. As a storyteller yourself, does her reaction to these tales tell you anything about our most basic response to the power of story?

FR: I have noticed that my daughter will sometimes learn things in books before she sees them in the actual world. Her first spoken word was literally "Moo," which she started to say when she was about a year old, which was when we started reading the book *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type*. I've been glad that there are a lot of farm animals as well as wild animals in the rural area where I live so that she can see actual animals in addition to those she sees in picture books. But she still loves owls and has not yet seen a real one. Likewise, she developed a fascination with the walrus in the book *Baby Beluga*, and the stuffed animal that she insisted on sleeping with for a while was an elephant. More amusing, she used to insist on going outside and literally saying good-night to the moon—which was obviously a textual abstraction from the book *Goodnight Moon*, though she does love seeing the actual moon and still gets excited when she does. So, the mix of actual and textual is very apparent with a two-year-old, since it's still relatively easy to tell what has come from where. To go on with this (how can I not?)—we often visit a horse named Eve who lives on our street and we bring her apples or carrots, but now, in the last month, she has started asking if we can feed an apple to the moon when we go out to say good-night to it. What I am getting at is that we learn to understand the world through narratives and storytelling, and this is still going to be true for a 21st-century kid whose parents are busy with their 21st-century gadgets. We make sense of the world through narratives and that is not going to change. What may change, of course, is the form narratives take, but one thing that has recently occurred to me is that we will probably always need board books and picture books,

because I don't think toddlers are ever going to stop chewing on them and spitting on them and putting them in the toilet, and so it's not going to ever make sense, at least I hope not, to read *Hippos Go Berserk!* on e-book. So long as kids have picture books, they will always have the formative experience of holding a book in their hands and turning actual pages and getting used to reading books in this manner. When e-readers cost ten dollars and are BPA-free is when I'll really start to worry.

EW: Right now there are more graduate programs than ever for aspiring writers to choose from. You direct Emerson College's. A very talented MFA student of my own recently told me that she has come to despise the workshop environment because the very nature of it implies that one is supposed to find something wrong. It was difficult for me to respond to this. What would you say?

FR: I would say that ninety percent of the time there *is* something wrong. I would also say that workshops are good only insofar as they help cultivate your own critical instinct, so that you can learn to recognize—either on your own or with a minimum of feedback—where your story or novel isn't working. As I am always saying, it's important for students in a workshop environment to be able to assimilate the criticism that's useful and it's also important that they be smart enough to ignore a lot of it. Readers will often make very basic, unusable suggestions about things that are in fact legitimate problems with the work, so what you're mostly getting is feedback that can identify where the problem is. Then it's up to the writer to find a solution or decide to move on to something else.

Some of the more common workshop approaches I have noticed are—

Good approaches:

1. The "I'm going to test this out" approach, in which a student is willing to consider everything that is suggested toward an end of determining what seems most artistically sound. This approach requires an openness to the criticism and also requires that you take a week or two after the workshop to let the suggestions settle. By then most will be forgotten and the ones that still resonate will be the ones to pay attention to.

2. The “I got stuck – I need some help” approach, for which the process is similar.

3. The “I’m going to show only my best, most finished work” approach. This is for students who feel like they have a strong handle on what they’re doing and just want to get reactions to what they see, at the moment, as a potentially final product. Sometimes there’s not a whole lot to say beyond the fact that the story is great and that it works. Other times there may be site-specific revisions that are necessary. Other times it turns out that there is a flaw in the story that the writer has not noticed.

Bad approaches:

1. The “Tell me what to do” approach. A surprising number of students approach workshop with this kind of passivity. When they try to incorporate almost every suggestion made, confusion ensues.

2. The “I am not willing to revise this and will only be happy if you tell me why I’m great” approach, which is more conducive to being worked out in a course of psychotherapy. In my opinion, the best approach to a workshop is a proactive one, in which, even if you can’t speak, you feel like you are an agent in the process. A workshop will never give you the exact answer, and students who come in thinking that way get frustrated, especially when half of the people in the class say one thing and the other half say another. I would also suggest that after a while you need to move beyond the workshop environment entirely. Four or five semesters of workshop are, in my mind, about as much as is useful for a lifetime. Still, it’s important to remember that you will probably never have twelve people paying as much attention to the nuances of a story as you will get from a workshop, so it is a relatively unique and potentially very useful experience. But in the long run it’s more of a practicum that prepares you for many years, if you stick with it, of learning how to do it on your own.

EW: A friend of mine who graduated from a graduate writing program told me that his degree got him nothing. Of course he was speaking about industry success, which has eluded him. Do MFA programs need to adjust to the reality of student expectations and offer professional

guidance?

FR: Absolutely not. Creative writing itself is not an industry, even if MFA programs seem to have become one and even if a writer's ultimate goal is the industry success of being published. MFA programs can still only make one promise, which is that they will help writers to cultivate their art and craft. Sometimes when I encounter a talented student, I find that I am able to offer advice or help regarding the publishing world as well, but that will only come after a student has embraced the process of becoming an artist and has found that he or she is capable of producing a book or story that could in fact be publishable. In that sense an MFA program can be a stepping stone, but it's important not to put the cart before the horse. There is no amount of success that can come from advice or guidance unless a writer is talented, motivated, and deeply committed to the discovery process that will enable him or her to produce a work of high-quality fiction. In my own experience, getting to where I could produce a publishable novel took eight years of total immersion. I can't remember doing much during my twenties other than writing or thinking about writing and I am amazed when students think it can be any other way. Once in a blue moon a wunderkind comes along, but it's uncommon, and those writers are most likely going to succeed anyway, with or without an MFA.

EW: I saw Salman Rushdie speak a few years back and he said he was reading a lot of Czeslaw Milosz's poetry during the process of writing his novel, *Shalamar the Clown*. I know that you too admire Milosz and have a particular attachment to his poem, "Faith." What can fiction writers gain from reading poetry; how can it serve their own work?

FR: I could read that Milosz poem a thousand times and never stop feeling the ineffable thing that it taps into. Some poems are like prayers and some poems are like transporting devices, and while fiction has the capacity to be these things as well, it's often much more potent within the discourse of poetry. Rilke, for instance, manages in the twelve lines of his poem "Evening" (translated by Stephen Mitchell) to sum up half of what I'm trying to get at with my new book. John Berger wrote that the labor of poetry is that it reassembles what has been scattered. He also says that poetry can restore no loss but that it defies the space of

separation. I am always shooting for that in my fiction, and while fiction has other aims, such as characters that the reader can inhabit within a logically flowing storyline, I think that my understanding of poetry is ultimately what enables me to locate the deep matter of any story I may write.

EW: You definitely seem to be a fiction writer who focuses on book projects. Are you involved with another right now and if so how can you sum it up in just a few vague words that don't give away the goods?

FR: I've determined that the only time you should ever talk publicly about the book you're working on is when you've finished it already. That's not the case for me at the moment.

EW: National Book Award nominee Salvator Scibona told me he wants novelists to write for people who actually read. He was not deriding movies or television and said there is nothing wrong with writing for that audience, but what do you think about his position on writers writing for those who actually read?

FR: I can't imagine who else I would be writing for.