

WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

WITH
CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

VOLUME 4

• Rose Tremain • Jane Urquhart •
Peter Ustinov
• David Leavitt
Penelope Lively
Javier Marias
Toni Morrison
Michael Ondaatje
Poliakoff •
Salman Rushdie • Nawal El
Saadawi • Jane Smiley • Alexander
McCall Smith • Tom Stoppard •
Graham Swift • Amy Tan • Colm
Tóibín • Claire Tomalin & Michael
Frayn • Rose Tremain • Jane
Urquhart • Peter Ustinov • Shirley
Williams • David Leavitt • Doris
Lessing • Penelope Lively • David
Lodge • Javier Marias • Blake
Morrison • Toni Morrison • John
Mortimer • Michael Ondaatje
Stephen Poliakoff • Irina
Ratushinskaya

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Writers in Conversation

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CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

VOLUME FOUR

[FREE SAMPLE]

ARTHUR MILLER CENTRE FOR AMERICAN STUDIES

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UNTHANK BOOKS

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Introduction

- Christopher Bigsby -

The interviews collected here were all conducted as part of the Arthur Miller Centre for American Studies International Literary Festival held every autumn at the University of East Anglia (UEA). The festival began in 1991 and in the succeeding years has brought major writers from around the world to the campus, although the audience is drawn from a wide area. In one season a couple even commuted from Germany.

UEA has a reputation not only for studying contemporary writers but also for producing them, or at least for nurturing them. Its creative writing programme is known around the world. Though the Arthur Miller Centre focuses on American Studies, as its title implies it has a wide remit. Any Centre with Arthur Miller's name on the masthead is likely to be catholic in its interests. The Festival itself reaches out not only to novelists, poets and playwrights but to memoirists, biographers, historians, politicians and scientists. The common factor is writing. The Festival was not established with a view to publication and the format was not originally based on interviews, these forming only part of the evening. Over time, however, the interview has become more central.

As discussions of the crisis facing writers have become commonplace – regrets about the disappearance of bookshops, problems in publishing houses, the power of the web – so, apparently paradoxically, we have seen a growth of literary festivals, book clubs and signings. Reading may

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be a private enterprise but people obviously like to come together to discuss literature, to listen to writers read from their work and to ask them questions. Publishers, of course, see this as a marketing opportunity and writers are frequently leant on to go on the road promoting in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation ago. The surprise, perhaps, is not simply that on the whole they have embraced the necessity, if not always the pleasure, of doing so but that they so often respond with generosity and honesty, exploring the roots of their craft and acknowledging aspects of their lives usually closed to the reader.

Writers are not actors, except in so far as they stage the world they create in their own heads. Some do speak aloud the words they write as they write. Performance, though, was never part of the contract. A few writers are not the best readers of their own work, yet most take pleasure in reading in public, in making apparent rhythms buried in their texts suddenly evident as the words sound out. They also take pleasure in meeting their readers and responding to questions which sometimes offer novel perspectives on their work. Solitude may be the necessary condition to write but it is a rare writer who does not welcome leaving the study to engage with those who know them only through the books they read in equal solitude.

Once or twice in what follows audience questions have been incorporated in my conversations rather than break the text. The conversations have also been edited because as anyone who has ever transcribed a recording knows a literal transcription can be difficult to follow. We are liable to abandon sentences half way through, make redundant asides and punctuate our language with 'sort ofs' and 'kind ofs.' When I worked for the BBC I watched what were then called studio managers 'de-um' tapes, sometimes gaining minutes by doing so. For the most part, though, what you read is what was said and those who write with such apparently fluency speak with the same respect for language observable in their texts. Some of the interviews are brief, because the evening was taken up with rather longer readings than usual. All, however, I trust add something to our understanding of who these writers are and how they created works which are as varied as they are compelling.

For would-be writers there are exemplary tales. Some of the authors on the pages that follow had immediate success. Others suffered multiple rejections until, suddenly, a first book was placed and a career launched. All those interviewed spoke freely of their lives and of their approach to their craft. What is the attraction of first as opposed to third person

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narration? Is there an ethics to the appropriation of others' experience and, indeed, lives? What is the attraction of history to the novelist? What is the distinction between biography and fiction? Why are some drawn to the stage at one moment and the novel at another? Do some countries offer the writer a greater freedom for the imagination than others?

For the most part those included in this book spoke to an audience of 500 or more (sometimes those turned away watched on large television screens in an adjoining lecture theatre). It is the essence of interviews, however, that they have an intimacy belied by their public circumstance and to me that has always been part of their fascination. And when the event is over I am as anxious as anyone else to have my books signed. Why? For the same reason that I would have treasured Charles Dickens's signature or Jane Austen's or Thomas Hardy's. I know that on some level the sense of connection forged by that signature is factitious but I feel it nonetheless. Once, in a Salzburg bookstore, I found a copy of the life of Nathaniel Hawthorne written by his daughter. It was signed by a Catholic nun. I subsequently discovered that that nun was his daughter. I gave the book to Arthur Miller on the grounds that Hawthorne's forebear was Judge Hathorne who had presided over the trials in Salem in 1692 which he dramatised in *The Crucible*. It was no doubt a sentimentality but that signature itself contained a story even as it introduced one. Sometimes books do not belong to the person who possesses them.

If you were not at the festival at which these writers appeared you missed the party but I still think you can hear the voices of those who make their appearance on the pages that follow. You cannot now get your book signed, but there is a signature of sorts in their words and words, of course, are their stock in trade and the source of their unique identities.

In Conversation With David Leavitt

- 18th October 2004 -

David Leavitt was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1961, and is a graduate of Yale University. He has taught at Princeton University and is currently a professor of creative writing at the University of Florida. His novels include *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986), *While England Sleeps* (1993), *Martin Bauman; or, A Sure Thing* (2000), *The Body of Jonah Boyd* (2004) and *The Indian Clerk* (2007). His book *The Man Who Knew Too Much: Alan Turing and the Invention of the Computer* appeared in 2005. He is also the author of three volumes of short stories.

Bigsby: When you went to Yale were you already thinking you wanted to be a writer?

Leavitt: Yes. I started off wanting to be a poet. That lasted for about a minute because I was a terrible poet. All the poems I wrote kept turning into stories and it gradually dawned on me that my impulses were probably too narrative to make me a poet. I tried to write a sestina once. That is such a complicated form and every stanza just kept getting longer and longer and longer and I realised I just didn't have the kind of discipline that was needed to be a poet. I was writing fiction pretty seriously from early on and in my second year at Yale I took a course with Gordon Lish, who was a legendary writing teacher. That was what really cemented the desire in me.

Bigsby: Were the teachers of literature at Yale receptive to the idea of creative writing?

Leavitt: Not terribly. In fact the great evidence of that was that if you were an English major as an undergraduate you could only credit two creative writing courses towards your major. You could credit three but then you would graduate with what they called a modified English major, and the term modified, I think, indicated the attitude of the faculty. I

remember that John Hollander, who was a poet and English professor at Yale, said to me once, very disdainfully, that writing is not like macramé. It cannot be taught on an introductory level. So there was actually a lot of disdain about the idea of teaching writing. There was a tolerance of it but it was considered at best to play a very limited role in an education and that students who wanted to be writers should study literature, which to a great extent I agree with, even though I teach creative writing.

As I said, I took some workshops when I was an undergraduate and the one with Gordon Lish was immensely influential and important not only because he was such a great teacher, but because he started me reading a lot of writers whose work I wasn't familiar with. I found it immensely exciting because this was a moment, in the early eighties, when there was this real renaissance in the American short story. We were reading Raymond Carver and Grace Paley and Mary Robison, who is now my colleague in Florida. Later on I was reading writers like William Trevor, Alice Munro, writers who were doing the most amazing things with short stories. It was thrilling to me to discover that there was so much that could be done with that form and that was what I began writing.

Really the earliest inspiration for me was reading. I would read these people and think, I want to do that too. I want to create short stories that are as good as these even though these writers were very different. It was the fact that they were doing such a huge variety of different things with the short story form that really got me excited.

My university started teaching creative writing in 1949, but there was the creative writing programme at the University of Iowa from, I think, the thirties. Flannery O'Connor was at Iowa in the nineteen forties. The question of why is an interesting one. I think principally there was a feeling among the people who started these programmes that as writers we had a duty to pass on the craft in the same way that say a pianist will take on pupils. It was an attempt to create a workshop environment, as opposed to a more strictly academic environment, in which students could bring their work and it could be looked at very much from a point of view of craft. You wouldn't be talking about the work in the way you would in a traditional academic literature class. You would be talking about punctuation and white space and point of view and whether you are going to write in the past tense or present tense, a very kind of nuts-and-bolts, craft-oriented approach. It was really out of that impulse, I think, that the writing programmes began and then flourished because there was a great hunger for that kind of approach.

The question that then began was whether you could study writing without also studying literature and my feeling was that the two were inseparable, though there are those who would argue that they aren't. My background, though, is as a student of literature and I always make my students read an enormous amount, often more than they want to, whereas I know other people who don't emphasise reading to the same degree. They really focus on just the student's work and nothing else.

Bigsby: One of the accusations is that there is a creative writing novel, that there is a kind of standard identifiable novel that people believe they know came out of a creative writing school. Do you see that?

Leavitt: I think that is absolutely true, unfortunately. I will say it doesn't come out of my programme.

Bigsby: It doesn't come out of ours, either, so where does it come from?.

Leavitt: Iowa. People talk about the Iowa story and the Iowa novel. Editors of magazines talk about that. I think the problem is that creative writing is taught in the form of a workshop. You have a workshop with seven or eight young writers and a professor who is presumably a more experienced writer. Each week you take one or two stories by the students which are read in advance. The student whose work is being discussed has to stay completely silent and everybody else picks the story apart. The danger of that is that a certain kind of workshop style ends up emerging out of the programme because each week you are doing this to another story and another story and another story. Certain kinds of criticism, certain objections, certain suggestions are made over and over again and the danger is a certain homogenisation where the student writer loses his or her voice. That is a real danger. The only way to fight it is to have to have a professor who doesn't let it happen. You also have to make sure you are not encouraging the group toward any particular kind of writing. I always consider my job as a teacher to help my students be the best versions of themselves that they can be, not to try to mould them in my image. But it is a real danger, and it does happen.

I don't think the problem is even necessarily who the teacher is. I think the problem is that the group itself ends up generating a group style, just as a result of working so closely, because there is so much intimacy involved in having eight or nine people through the course of a semester sharing each other's work in such an intense way. That is what you have to fight against. It has never happened in my classes. I haven't

noticed it happen. My students usually have a fairly strong sense of their voices to begin with, but I think it is a real danger.

I must say there are times when I read stories and I think this is such a workshop story. You balance the risks against the advantages and I think the advantages by far outweigh the risks because writing is such an isolated business and to be able to share work in an early stage with good readers helps you so much in the long run because it means you are able to correct a lot of the mistakes you are making before you send the work out to be read by editors who aren't going to be nearly as generous with their time as the other members of the workshop will.

Bigby: It was while you were a student that you published a short story in *The New Yorker*, which I presume made you admired and hated in equal amounts by your fellow students. There must have been a certain amount of jealousy?

Leavitt: Yes, I would say so.

Bigby: Am I right in thinking that was the first time *The New Yorker* had published a story with a gay character?

Leavitt: That has always been the story. In fact there was one other story before. Allan Gurganus's *Minor Heroism* had predated mine, but that was a story that didn't deal quite as openly or as frankly with the subject matter.

Bigby: One aspect of your story is that the young man at the heart of it has to confront his parents and come out. Was that something you did before you wrote the story or did you publish the story and then have to do that?

Leavitt: No, I wrote the story and then I had to explain to my parents that I was coming out in *The New Yorker* in more than one way. I suppose I was trying to soften the blow by saying, 'Well Mom, Dad, I'm gay, but I am also about to publish this story in *The New Yorker* so that makes it a little bit better.' Actually I did a version of that scene in my novel *Martin Bauman* because it was irresistible.

Bigby: Bookstores have a way of categorising writers. If you go into a bookstore you have to think do I go to the black section, the women's section, the fiction section, the literature section? Where do your books appear? Is it in the gay section, the literature section, the fiction section?

Leavitt: It depends on the store. I have a perpetual quarrel with Borders because Borders always puts my book under gay and lesbian fiction, which annoys me. It is arbitrary. I went to the local Borders where I live and looked up a bunch of writers to see who was where and Edmund White, I and Alan Hollinghurst were all under gay fiction, but Michael Cunningham was not, which I didn't totally understand. James Baldwin was neither under literature nor under gay fiction. He was under African American fiction. So when I saw that I thought this is ridiculous, this categorisation, and had a big argument with a friend who said, 'It is very useful for young gay men and women who don't know where else to find books that speak to their experience.' I said, 'Yes, that's true, but at the same time the price you pay for that is that you end up creating this idea that the only things that are good to read are things that in some literal sense reflect your own life.' That is the absolute opposite of what reading is all about. Reading to me has always been about discovering the commonality between all kinds of different experiences.

Bigsby: So you began with that story in *The New Yorker*. You then had a short story collection, but nemesis was waiting for you down the road in the form of the curious experience you had with *While England Sleeps*?

Leavitt: It was a total shock. I had written this novel based on an episode in the life of Stephen Spender. I told everyone this. It was no secret. I didn't call the character Stephen Spender, but it was so obvious to me that it was based on an episode from his life that I didn't think there was any question about it. He got very upset and sued me. It was a very complicated, strange episode that maybe some day I will be able to make more sense out of. What it was really about was this very tricky question of whether you can lay claim to own your own life. The thing I have noticed is that writers are much more sensitive about this question than anyone else. Writers, who habitually appropriate the lives of everyone they know, if they find themselves made into characters in other people's books are always going to explode much more quickly than would a non writer. A good example is Susan Sontag's response after Edmund White put an admittedly pretty mean portrayal of her into one of his books.

Spender's claim was that I didn't have the right to use this story, that it somehow belonged to him, but I think under the surface what was really going on was that Spender and his wife were trying very, very hard to control how his homosexuality was discussed. They didn't want to suppress it. They knew there was no way they could hide the fact that he had been homosexual for most of his life but they wanted to control it. I

think my novel threatened that plan in a very profound way, and that was why he leapt to the attack.

Bigsby: In fact it was withdrawn. Was it pulped?

Leavitt: Yes, Penguin caved, that is the only way I can put it, before it ever went to trial. It was pulped. I subsequently made some changes to it and it was republished.

Bigsby: How substantial were the changes?

Leavitt: There were plot changes. They were designed to distance it from the actual story of Spender's trip to Spain during the war to rescue Tony Hyndman, which was what the novel was based on. I had to change anything that too closely resembled what actually happened and that probably made the novel better, to be perfectly honest, though I resisted it mightily.

Bigsby: There is a story in *Arkansas*, your collection of three novellas, which makes a reference to the writing of that book, unsurprisingly because the character is named David Leavitt. You spoke about the appropriating of other people's lives. Here you seem to appropriate your own. What led you to have a character called David Leavitt whose life mirrored your own?

Leavitt: In some ways the story was written as a response to something that Stephen Spender said in an interview. He said that I had turned his life into pornography and he doubted I would be as relaxed about it if someone turned my life into pornography. So I thought, well, would I? Maybe I will do it myself. It is not really a pornographic story but it is about a writer named David Leavitt who has been sued by a famous English poet and is very depressed. He is having a major writer's block and he starts to write term papers for UCLA undergraduate boys in exchange for sex. He writes their papers for them and they pay him with sex. This was such an outrageous and funny idea to me, especially had it been me, that it was a very liberating, fun story to write. But I was in a sense trying to turn the tables on the whole idea that essentially writers disguise their lives as fiction. There is a point in which I give the game away. I write the line, 'Writers are always disguising their lives as fiction, what they never do is disguise fiction as their lives,' which is what I was trying to do in that story.

Bigsby: Although this story itself got into trouble?

Leavitt: This was an extraordinary thing. It was supposed to be published in *Esquire*. *Esquire* bought it and was going to publish it with a great fanfare because it was pretty long, about seventy-five pages, which was long for *Esquire*. They had already edited it and the graphics had been done when I got a fax from Ed Kosner, the then editor of *Esquire*, who had also been the editor of *New York Magazine*, saying, 'We regret to inform you that we have decided not to publish your story. You may of course keep the money you have been paid,' etc, etc. And it turned out what had happened was that the publisher had flipped out upon reading the story because she was afraid that Chrysler was going to withdraw its advertising. In fact Chrysler had never seen the story. I thought it was all because there was a sex scene in a Jeep. I don't know if this actually was the case, but it was one of those instances in which this effort on the part of the publisher to save herself trouble ended up causing the magazine infinitely more trouble because the fiction editor resigned in protest. Big scandal. All the newspapers picked up on the story and a huge article was written about it in the *Columbia Journalism Review* saying that this was the thin end of the wedge. The editor eventually resigned for this and other reasons and it completely blew up in *Esquire's* face. Of course my publishers were delighted. They thought this was great and immediately slapped all these stickers on the book that said, 'Too hot to handle.' So it was a very, very curious chain of events that the story led to. Then at a certain point someone very cleverly interviewed Lady Spender about it and she said of me, 'I think he must be insane.'

Bigsby: In *Martin Bauman* there is a young man who has a story published in a famous magazine, clearly *The New Yorker*, who goes on to work for a publisher. So once again you appear in a work of fiction, though this time not under the name of David Leavitt. What is going on?

Leavitt: I don't know. When I wrote it the first thing that came to me was the name, Martin Bauman, and I wanted to call this character Martin Bauman because I wanted to do the opposite of what I had done when I had the David Leavitt character doing all sorts of things that I had never done. I wanted to write a novel that, at least as its jumping off point, used my own experience, but I didn't want to write a memoir. I wanted to be able to change things and I changed a lot. This book is less autobiographical than it appears. I was going back to doing the very old-fashioned thing of disguising my life as fiction and trying to do what I tell

my students to do when they write autobiographical fiction. I always say write about yourself as if you are someone else, as if you are a different person. On whether or not I succeeded the jury is still out, at least my personal jury because I still don't have enough distance on that book to know whether it is a successful work of fiction based on my life, or whether it is kind of undigested mush of autobiography and fiction. I will decide in a few years what I think. In the meantime other people can decide what they think.

Bigby: Jodie Foster makes an appearance in *Martin Bauman*. Was she at Yale with you?

Leavitt: Jodie Foster was my classmate.

Bigby: I stood at the back of the room at Yale when Jodie Foster was on the stage. I just happened to be there giving a lecture.

Leavitt: You know the other actress in that play was Becca Lish, the daughter of Gordon Lish, my writing teacher, who is also the model for the character of Stanley Flint in the novel. I was at that performance too. It was Marsha Norman's *Getting Out*.

Bigby: There is an organic connection between what we have been talking about and an aspect of *The Body of Jonah Boyd*. I suppose in the Stephen Spender case you were effectively being accused of plagiarism.

Leavitt: The phrase that kept coming up was that I had plagiarised his life. I thought that was a very odd phrase because to me plagiarism has a very literal meaning. Plagiarism is when you steal someone's prose, and it was never about that. It was about stealing his life. *The Body of Jonah Boyd* is about literal plagiarism, at least part of it is about a case of actual honest-to-God plagiarism.

Bigby: And this is the first book told through a woman's voice?

Leavitt: It is also I think the first book I have ever written that basically has no gay or lesbian characters, which was a big shift for me.

Bigby: Where did it start? Did it begin with her voice or with the notion of plagiarism?

Leavitt: It had basically two sources. The first was Edmund White, who is an old friend of mine. I was visiting him a couple of years ago when he

was writing his novel *Fanny*. He was writing it in these leather-bound notebooks. He said he could only write in these notebooks. I said, 'Edmund, do you make copies of those?' He said, 'No, no.' And I said, 'Don't you worry about losing them? It is your only copy.' He shrugged off the question as if it wasn't really worth his time. But it stuck in my head and I thought, that is an awfully dangerous way of writing. I am incredibly paranoid and I make multiple backups of everything I write and leave them all over the place because I am so afraid of computer crashes. I print everything fifty times, whereas Edmund was very blasé. I got this idea in my head, the idea of a writer who was constantly tempting fate, who writes in these notebooks and is constantly misplacing them.

That was one origin. The other had to do with my childhood. I had grown up on a campus at Stanford University where my father taught. In those years there was this very strange arrangement that the university had with the faculty. There was a neighbourhood that was unofficially known as the faculty ghetto. It was actually on the campus and the university owned the land but the professors owned the houses. You would buy the house and the land would be leased to you for ninety-nine years for a dollar. If you lived longer than that the lease would be renewed and though the lease could be inherited by a wife or a husband, a widow or a widower, it couldn't be passed on to the children which meant that there was no possibility of inheritance. The house could but, of course, you couldn't have the house without the land. I remember when I was growing up this was a source of real anxiety for my mother because she had this idea that she wanted to leave the house to my sister but the only way my sister could get the house would be if she became a member of the faculty at Stanford.

This idea fascinated me because one of my two favourite novels in the world is *Howard's End* and that is of course about the inheritance of a house. In that novel the question of who will inherit Howard's End becomes a metaphor for the larger question that Forster was asking which was who will inherit England. I had always wanted to write a novel about a house and suddenly it occurred to me that this was my opportunity, that this strange situation could provide me with exactly the plot I needed.

So the two ideas came together and the result was *Jonah Boyd*. And of course the third was Danny, her voice and the idea of having the story narrated by an outsider who was at the same time very intimately involved in the family, but who was never allowed to forget her status as

an outsider. I suppose in that regard Danny is a sort of proto-gay character.

Bigby: I came across an interesting piece that you wrote about yourself when young in which you suggest that you had suffered from a form of Asperger's Syndrome. Was there a connection of any kind between that and writing?

Leavitt: That was a piece really about obsession and writing. I was specifically talking about Asperger's Syndrome, which is this syndrome related to autism. The example in an article which I read was of a child who was completely obsessed with washing machines. It was all he ever wanted to think about. He was constantly drawing pictures and making little models of washing machines. I was a little bit like that as a child and my particular obsession, because my family lived in London for a time, was the London underground. During the year we lived in London I was constantly making my mother take me to the end of the various underground lines. So we would go to places like Stanmore and Cockfosters because I wanted to say that I had ridden to the end of the line. Then, when we got back to the States, I would spend hours and hours drawing these imaginary underground maps, imaginary cities, and as I looked back on it I thought there was something Aspergic about that. But I also realised it was the beginning of whatever made me become a writer, this desire to create an alternative world. The underground thing became a metaphor for trying all the connections under the surface.

Bigby: And I am inclined to say, almost inevitably, that comes into one of your books.

Leavitt: *While England Sleeps*, the original title of which was *The Train to Cockfosters*. Now mathematics is a new interest of mine.

Bigby: Is that because you are working on Alan Turing?

Leavitt: I just finished the book on Alan Turing which is a non-fiction book. Now I am contemplating a novel about a mathematician, but that is in the very earliest stages.



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