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*Shelle Barton, Sheylene Foster Heller,  
and Jennifer Henderson*

## “We Were Such a Generation”— Memoir, Truthfulness, and History

*An Interview with Patricia Hampl*

*Patricia Hampl is the author of several books of nonfiction, including the memoirs *A Romantic Education*, *Virgin Time*, and, most recently, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory*. All three were New York Times Notable Books of the Year, and *I Could Tell You Stories* was a National Book Critics Circle Awards Finalist. She has received MacArthur, Fulbright, Ingram Merrill, Guggenheim, Bush, and NEA fellowships. A long-time poet, her books include *Spillville* and *Woman Before an Aquarium*. Hampl's writing has appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *New York Times Book Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Antaeus* and *Kenyon Review*. Her next book, *The Silken Chamber*, an exploration of the odalisque figure in Western art, is due for release in 2004. Hampl is Regents' Professor at the University of Minnesota where she teaches both poetry and prose.*

SHELLE BARTON: You started your career as a poet and then moved into writing nonfiction with *A Romantic Education*. I'm curious about what the difference is in process for you as a writer, since you work in several genres, and what you bring at the outset to a poem versus an essay versus a short story.

PATRICIA HAMPL: In a way I started as a poet and a journalist because I made my living as a journalist. That's often lost because there's no book, but that was my daily life, so that I had those two pieces of the puzzle. I never took a prose-writing course in school. I was signed up in the Writer's Workshop at Iowa, so I was a poet and they didn't let you cross over. If you said you were a poet, then you had to write in those funny lines. You couldn't switch. But when I started writing nonfiction, memoir, and the

kind of prose that I'm better known for, I didn't really feel that much difference at the heart of it. At the real center of the enterprise, I felt like they were rather similar but that the requirements of my inquiry demanded that I go into long prose rather than something having to do with the genre itself. In other words, when you think about it, a lot of people's first books of poetry—like mine—are autobiographical. They're very much about using the self as an investigator or as a voice for what you see out there: my grandma, my grandpa, my mom, my dad. And really it has to do not just with what happened to me, when that "I" happens in the poetry, but about the consciousness that's taking in the world. So really the move from poetry to memoir wasn't this big leap; it was this very small turning of the angle of attention. It let me do things that the poem typically doesn't let a person do. The difference has to do with the way you want to go about writing something, rather than something intrinsic about the material. I still feel the heart of things for me is the poetic impulse, or the lyric impulse, even though I'm maybe not writing as many poems.

The question of fiction is another one altogether. I think the relationship between poetry and the kind of nonfiction we're talking about is small. The leap between those two forms and fiction is maybe a little more significant because you really are allowing yourself to be more synthetic. You're allowing yourself to take pieces of puzzles and put them together not where they fit exactly but to make a whole new puzzle. Even though memoir and the novel are both the same thickness on the book—they're both in chapters and they both have a narrative impulse—there's a bigger difference between them for me.

JENNIFER HENDERSON: In an interview with *Creative Nonfiction* Jonathan Holden says the personal essay seems to him to be "the genre most similar to lyric poetry when the poetry is personal, confessional—but it differs from poetry in that, whereas the conventions of poetry encourage condensation, the conventions of prose encourage digression." As a result, "prose may be superior to poetry because of the permission prose gives the writer to digress and supply context that, in a lyric poem, would attenuate its integrity." Do you agree?

PH: I would agree with everything except the judgment about superior/inferior. I absolutely don't subscribe to that. And I wouldn't if it were the opposite way, if someone were to say poetry is superior—that used to be a kind of bromide of criticism, that poetry was superior because it con-

densed. And I think these two statements—the one that says “poetry is superior because it condenses” and “prose is superior because it allows for digression”—tells us about the cultural times we live in more than about the relative superiority of either of those genres. So I agree absolutely, and I think he’s very articulate and exact about the fact of the matter: prose does encourage the digression, but I think that if there is a superiority, it has to do with the value we now bring to the idea of being able to “natter” on about something. We like the personal essay not just because it tells us about a person’s life, but because it allows an individual—the poor, unarmed, unguarded, individual self—an opportunity to investigate something much larger. What we’re interested in is not just the story but the ability of that self to contend with something that’s bigger, more difficult, and in some ways, maybe that requires expert information to understand. If I’m Chris Cokinos, I might say, “I don’t have expert information about birds. I don’t know anything about birds, but I’m going to write about this,” so I learn about it. What we get is this quest of a person learning something from the experts and making himself knowledgeable. Chris mentioned to me that the most important praise he received for his book [*Hope is the Thing With Feathers*], which has been very well received, was from an ornithologist who said he got it right. His pleasure had to do with being able to translate for the rest of us material that no one else was translating. That’s my only quibble with Jonathan’s point, and it may be out of context so that he’s not saying it in some kind of absolute terms about superiority.

SHEYENE FOSTER HELLER: Considering the intersection of these genres, I’m curious about the use of poetic conventions in nonfiction. I’ve talked to some writers, Judith Kitchen, for instance, who started out as a poet then moved to nonfiction, and she believes that sometimes you can get away with using more poetic conventions in nonfiction than you could in an actual poem because you can push the envelope a little bit in the prose. Do you think that’s true?

PH: Well, I haven’t thought about that before, but I guess I would say that there are certain conventions in poetry that have become kind of reified, or they’ve become so recognizable as conventions that you can’t use them any more. A good example would be the poetic conceit, which in metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century was great. They adored playing out a single image. For instance, in “The Pulley,” the famous poem by

[John] Donne, he takes an image of the pulley and plays it out every which way. You see this in other poets of that age. If we see that happening in a poem, we think, “Let go already!” What we want is scattershot images. We want to see a pile-up of images. Why? Because we’re postmodern. We like the fragmentary. We don’t like to see a single continuation of an image. We don’t trust it. It feels mechanistic to us. It doesn’t feel authentic. That doesn’t mean it *isn’t* authentic, it just reflects our sense of convention; we want to have fragments hurling out, each one sending a glistening facet of whatever the reality is. In nonfiction, I would say there’s some truth to the notion of sticking with a metaphor (in what poetry would be called a conceit) and working it out over a long space, that it has a satisfaction because there’s an inevitable digression—as Holden pointed out—that happens anyway. So, as we are constantly coming back to this central image, we have a feeling of satisfaction about it. That would be an example where I could say, yes, a seventeenth-century model that doesn’t work any longer in poetry probably does work in nonfiction.

SFH: Do you think it’s true at the word level? For instance, using alliteration in prose versus using alliteration in poetry?

PH: That I don’t know about because I do think that we’re still living very much within the tradition of free verse. In other words, free verse is not a revolutionary modality; it’s a tradition. And it’s been a tradition for a century. In that modality we had to find something other than end rhymes, and one of the things that came about was the excessive use of repetition, or alliteration. Even the word “the” at the beginning of a line can actually be a formal element: “The birds of the field . . . The flowers of the meadow . . . the . . . the . . . the . . . the”—that holds the poem together. Internal rhyme. So I don’t know that I would say that about alliteration. I don’t find that formula as satisfying in nonfiction. It can be more irritating. You could probably show me an example and I would agree, but it doesn’t seem likely.

SB: I was reading your essay “A Week in the Word,” and there was a Buddhist saying, “We are only here now.” And you say, “We are here *for* now. My conception of this is not of a heaven (and hell) in the future, but rather of an understanding of existence which encompasses history as well as being.” Could you expand on this?

PH: That was an example of those little poetic moments where language rather than thinking was leading me. In other words, for a long time I’ve

heard that phrase, “Be here now. Be here now.” And it’s a nice phrase. It brings you right back to being here, to really having every moment you can have as its own self. At the same time, I kept thinking, “Be here now.” And then it popped into my head, “Be here for now.” And there’s something a little cute about that. It’s like one of those seventeenth-century language games. But it did attract me. When it popped into my head, I thought, “Oh, that’s interesting. That changes it. Just one little word, one little preposition changes it.” I thought for a while, “Do I really believe that? Does that speak to my truth even more than ‘Be here now.’” And I realized, in fact, it was cute and it was sort of a word trick, but I did believe it. I’m a history person. I’m very compelled by the relationship of now to the past and how that streams forward. History is important to me. In a Buddhist tradition, which is so riveted to history and tradition, one wouldn’t even imagine that “Be here now” meant anything else but be here within the moment of this ongoing tradition. You say to an American, “Be here now,” and they can trash anything because we’ve already got this thing about individualism. That phrase as a catch phrase for my generation, who started all this nonsense after all in the sixties, is maybe dangerous. For me it was more accurate to say, “Be here for now,” because it makes you feel connected to what was and what will be.

SFH: You say in *A Romantic Education*, “The self-absorption that seems to be the impetus and embarrassment of autobiography turns into (and perhaps always was) a hunger for the world” or the hunger for “a world.” I’m interested in this because you talk about our remembering as a historical act. In terms of your work, I find that you use several personal anecdotes and stories, but also you do a lot of direct analyzing using explicit reflection of what’s going on. So I was wondering, is it the storytelling or this analysis that really makes remembering a historical act?

PH: For me, it’s the exact intersection of those two things that you’ve identified. I think that the reason memoir is a dynamic form today is not because we happen to be a tell-all society—of course there are examples of that. But there are also romance novels. We have all kinds of genre novels and we don’t say that’s what the novel is. What I think really has given torque to the genre, has made universities suddenly make room for this genre, has to do with what you’ve identified. Namely, that there’s this thing called a story, a narrative that has got that “Then what?” and “Oh that’s an interesting character.” It’s got all this stuff we connect with fiction, which is

then interrupted or connected to a need to talk about the material. The big fiction advice is “Show, don’t tell,” but this is not what memoirists are embroidering on their pillows and sleeping on. It’s instead “Show *and* Tell.” It’s the idea that you can’t tell unless you can show, but you don’t just show. You have to talk about it. You have to somehow reflect upon it. You have to track or respond to it, this thing that’s happening. And in the intersection of these two things is the excitement we feel about this genre. Too much show and, “Why aren’t you writing fiction?” Too much tell and, “I’m not going to listen to you because you’re boring.” The narration is the thing that lets you do the other. Sometimes the equation is off. Take a memoirist like Mary Karr, who I love, but a lot of people who would say what I just said wouldn’t like her. Not a lot of analysis. Very narrative. But the language is so great, so fantastic. The sheer writerly ability is so great that we don’t care. We feel that a revelation of her generation is happening in that narration, and as a result her experience becomes historical even though she doesn’t go on about history. So it isn’t like a formula: “Make sure to have 30 percent of this followed by 30 percent of that.” There is room for people like her, and then there’s room for people like Czeslaw Milosz, in *Native Realm*, who gives you precious little story, thank you. In fact, I don’t think he gives you quite enough, but never mind. He doesn’t mind. He is going to give you mainly analysis and just a primer coat of personal narration. We don’t find out if he sleeps around; we don’t find out much about his mom and dad; we don’t find out much about him at all. He positions himself as an intellectual in his era, and then he’s off with his era. And then you have Mary Karr telling us everything she can about her personal life. Both of them, I would argue, are doing historical work, one of them far more narratively than the other.

Now, there are some people who would criticize Mary Karr, “How could she remember all of this. She’s making this up.” And this brings up one of the other big questions about memoir, which has to do with veracity, as well as ethical and moral issues related to the genre, which are insoluble to my mind. I don’t know that we can ever resolve these issues because if we are working with consciousness itself, not with fact, we’re dealing with not what “happened” but with what “has happened.” That is to say not *what* happened out there—we all agree that happened—but rather something happened and then “I” reflect on it and perceive it, and I don’t just think about it, I actually constellate it as an act, which in narra-

tive terms means that I change it. Now, conscious invention is a whole other thing. We sometimes run into that as a problem, too. Maybe you know the memoir by Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan woman who won the Nobel Peace Prize. A large part of the reason she won this was because it was a document that told this unbelievable story in *I, Rigoberta Menchú*. She says, “I’m an Indian in Guatemala, and here’s what happens to my people.” And she describes graphically the governmental murders of members of her family. Big bestseller. Enormous regard for her. It turns out that at least one of the deaths, her brother’s, is not true. He’s alive and well and living somewhere else. What happens? Well, they don’t take her Nobel Prize away. Her defense is a very interesting one: “How can anyone dare to question me about the way I choose to use the experience of my people to make a true case?” Her father, in fact, was killed. There were members of her family killed. She says, “How dare you deny me the right to make this story?” It’s an interesting defense. It goes way outside of our tidy little conventions that we like to say have to do with morality and the truth. Part of the excitement of this form is that we are living in the middle of deciding what it’s going to be and learning not only how to write it but how to read it. How do we read this form? We may have made a big mistake when we put memoir into that big, baggy category of nonfiction. Once we did that, we put it right next to the newspaper, and we pretty much all know what we want the newspaper to be. If they say, “George Bush dropped dead,” we don’t want to find out tomorrow that he’s alive, right? We want to think he’s gone. If we put those same exact strictures on memoir, if we think the rules are exactly the same, we’re going to be disappointed.

JH: In your book *I Could Tell You Stories*, and in other interviews I’ve read, you’ve talked about the American memoir being somewhat like psychoanalysis or psychotherapy—free association—and I’m wondering if this is what you’re getting at in terms of there being no tenable line: “What is true? What isn’t?” Is it because we are dealing with consciousness?

PH: I think that’s it. And I go back to Keats in this regard because my line is really through poetry rather than through memoir. When I think about my relationship to literature, I go back to Keats and actually no further. If I go back to Wordsworth, I need all those footnotes. I don’t feel I’m dealing with a guy who’s engaged in the same enterprise, quite. There’s something about Keats; he seems to be the first person who completely understands that the tool is consciousness itself. He is the figure I go back

to in looking at this relationship. I'm not too interested in psychoanalysis in my own writing, but at the same time I would say that American literature is more given to paying attention to that than some other literatures are. Think about the abstruse formula for psychology, the Freudian model, which grew up in the hotbed of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in the early part of the twentieth century: Where would you expect that to find its fertile growing place? America? It feels very strange in this kind of extraordinarily other culture. But it fits because we are so much a people of the self. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. What a goofy thing to form a country on. No other country is formed on the pursuit of happiness, which presumes individuality. That's the great, astonishing, radical gift of America to human history. It's also our curse. It's the reason we don't have any decent railroads in this country; we won't all go on the same timetable. We all want to get in our car and cram ourselves onto these freeways and use up our gas and smell up our environment and screw up everything because we're after the pursuit of happiness. So I think that whole psychoanalytic underlay has to do with something quite simple, which is that we really trust or want to know about the individual self.

I'm thinking about the roots of memoir, too: autobiography. Let's take Augustine's *Confessions*, from 397, over sixteen hundred years ago. That book is filled with all kinds of scriptural language because in Augustine's time—I tried to write about that in *I Could Tell You Stories*—the idea that you would only write your own words was strange. Why would you do that? It had to do with being written. You would, of course, show that you had within you (and you didn't look it up, you had it memorized) the *Psalms*, in particular. But also other scriptural things, and other things from secular sources, like the Greeks. You would take those lines and feed them into your own text. And what would happen would be that instead of a reader saying, "Uh-uh! Plagiarism. Stole that," the reader would feel a sort of chamber music effect that we're not just hearing this one solo read saying it's language, but we're getting all these other voices in there. That's the job of a writer in that era. Whereas we would say plagiarism, they would wonder what you were talking about. It's like the example of Rigoberta Menchú saying, Wait a minute. I never said this was just about me. I've found a narrative way to represent things that really did happen in my culture. The other thing to say to us—to be really simple about this—the real rule is make your contract clear with the reader. For example, no-

body got after Maxine Hong Kingston for creating fictional elements in her memoir. Why? Because she made it very clear that it was part of the whole cultural world she was investigating. So they didn't say, "Well, did that really happen?" or "That sounds like magical realism. I mean, how come you put that in here." She made it clear that she was representing the myths and stories that affected her and her family and her whole culture. The rules were clear, and those of us who are deadhead, flat-footed realists could read the book and see exactly how those things were functioning and didn't find ourselves saying, "She made it up."

SFH: Actually, a few people have talked about issues of truthfulness in the case of *The Woman Warrior* because after the book came out and after it was reviewed, Maxine Hong Kingston wrote this very long essay talking about all the misreadings by white reviewers and how they were reading these myths as exoticizations, when really she was intending something else because she was changing the myths in the book. But she didn't tell you she was consciously changing the myths in the book. She told you that in interviews later on. For instance, she transfers the scars of a general, Ngak Fei, to the back of Fa Mu Lan when she tells the Fa Mu Lan story, but she doesn't indicate that in the book. You have to find that out on your own. In interviews she says, "I took his power for women. That's why I changed it." Which makes sense. But it makes one wonder how the reader is supposed to read that myth and whether there isn't something maybe a little dangerous, or even something lost rather than gained, by the author not acknowledging these changes within the book.

PH: That's a really good example, which I didn't know. But let me say this, there's a book that came out early 2001 by Carol Bly, and in it are two chapters: "Lying in Memoir" and "Lying in Poetry." She's an old friend of mine, and she's always on my case about these issues because she thinks I'm a liar, too. When I'm responding to these issues, I sometimes am speaking to her. She is very hard-lined about fact and fiction. She would have no trouble in saying to you, "That's a lie. That is a simple lie and should not be done." I find it hard in some ways to argue with that. But the question would be, "What would have happened if [Kingston had] just stuck with the original myth? Why did she do that? Was it a simple technical thing?" In my own experience, let me show you a way in which I have lied so that you can then decide if you think I've lied. I'll give you two examples.

One is kind of simple. If you read *A Romantic Education*, the original

book that was published in 1981, it becomes clear that I encourage you to think that there are two trips. I say I went, and then in 1970-something I went back. So you hear that I went back. I make it clear that I went and I went back. In fact, I went three times. I divide the experiences of those three trips into two, purely for narrative purposes. There was a reason for me to go back, in narrative terms, which had to do with the idea that this person couldn't stay away, she needed to go back. If I went back a third time, it would lose that sense of the power of going back the second time. It would be like, "OK, she went a third time. Did she go a fourth time? A fifth?" Also in one occasion—only on one—I had a companion, and I didn't write him into the text at all because he had no connection with anything, and, in fact, he was not there for most of what I was doing. So that's a case of a sin of omission. I've got one of synthesis (of synthesizing time) and one of omission.

I've got another one, in *Virgin Time*—my Catholic background book—where I took five trips and made it into one. That's honest. Nobody would have any argument with that. But in one part of that book there's a trip I take, a sort of pilgrimage with a bunch of nuns. There were about forty of them. There's no way, in narrative terms, you can contend with forty individuals. Indeed, in real life, when you go on such a trip, you don't get to know forty of them. But every now and again, one of the forty you don't make [into] your main character says something that is indicative of the entire group. Inconveniently, a non-character makes a comment that stands for something that is good for everybody. Take the comment, give it to one of my characters. Lie! That's what's called creating a composite character. I did do that, which is absolutely verboten in journalism. You get your Pulitzer Prize taken away if you do that. Admittedly, in my case, it was a very minor statement. But there are people, and I think Carol Bly would be one, who would say, "Slippery Slope! You start doing that and you're in big trouble." You read a book like *Running in the Family* by Michael Ondaatje, the author of *The English Patient*. At one point in this book, he says, "If anybody wonders about the veracity of this book"—and he says it very nicely—"all I can say is that in Sri Lanka," which is where his memoir takes place, "no one would let the truth stand in the way of a good story." Or something like that. Now this would also probably enrage Carol Bly. What bothers me is that the people who think all you need to do is to locate where a fact has been produced that, by limiting what can be done in

memoir, you have then gotten to the truth. That's what I think is the second-generation problem. The first-generation problem is really to decide how much leeway we're going to allow and what rules we're going to apply. I think it's up for grabs right now. I don't think that we know, and part of the reason we don't know is that the genre is only now defining itself as a genre. It's not what it used to be. It's not the memoirs of an old, famous, venerable person still left standing who gets to tell the tale at the end and settle scores. It's now become the quest literature of midlife, and with that in mind, it's going to make new rules. What are the rules? I'm not sure what they are yet, but I do feel that those people who decide they know, while they may have a first-generation answer, they don't have an ongoing second-generation answer to the real question of, "What are the conventions that we're building willy-nilly here?" So I guess I'd go on case-by-case instances. If somebody is really inventing, I'd say to them, "Why the heck aren't you writing a novel?" or "Why aren't you revealing to us that you're inventing?" I think it would be interesting to find out why they're doing it.

On the other hand, if someone denies a writer the right to make certain incremental changes, I guess I feel that that's a mistake, too, because when I read a memoir and I feel the fluency of narration, I know that that writer is telling me, "I've collapsed time, I've done this, I've done that," but basically we're on target.

SFH: Would you say that if it's in a memoir it's OK to do some changing around, whereas maybe in the essay, which is a shorter examination, you might be required to give explicit cues to reader? What I'm thinking of is "Memory and Imagination." You start out with an anecdote, and later in the essay you say that thinking about it now, you know that some things were changed. For instance, the music book wasn't the red Thompson Music Book that you wanted it to be. In your essay, you say that you wouldn't publish the essay, but not because of the lies. This isn't supposed to be an accusatory question, but what I'm wondering is what's accomplished by just putting those altered facts out there and not reflecting on them versus putting those out there and saying, "OK, I realize it wasn't really the red Thompson Music Book, but that was the book I really wanted, the book with pictures, the book that was some symbol of what I desired at that time"?

PH: Well, narrative needs to be declarative. It needs to say x rather than y.

So *where* you tell that you didn't actually have the red Thompson Book is important. If the reader hasn't had time to absorb the fact, the visual fact of the Thompson Book, in that moment of time that's being narrated, you can't make those turns just willy-nilly and expect the reader to even know what your agenda is. It really is as if you're singing in a different voice. I took it seriously that I would not choose to publish that memoir as a memoir, just as if it were the way it was. It is partly because of the lies that I wouldn't do it. Once you know that it is inaccurate, then you're drawn to figuring out exactly what you did in that essay.

There's a sort of game going on in the essay. The fact of the matter is I really did write that in order to write the thing that follows. In other words, it wasn't like afterwards I discovered, "Oh, my, my! Who could have imagined this?" I actually wrote it, and as I was writing it, I recognized what I was doing, and so I used it for that purpose and that purpose only. That's why it's where it is. I do think though—and I'm not saying anything original—that memory is a great falsifier, and that's why it's a great fascinator. It's our most intimate and unbidden narrative power. The other one is dreams. Dreams don't interest me as much. Memory is fascinating to me partly because it does connect things in a story form. Stop and think about how incredible that is. Here we go to school to learn how to write narrative, but in fact memory is an automatic formulator of story. Everybody does it. Illiterates do it. My dog probably does it. She remembers exactly where I gave her that last treat. It's an extraordinary faculty of mind.

But notice the assurance with which people make these critiques. That's to me the worrisome part. Not that they're entirely wrong, but that they're so assured that there is this thing called a "fact" and that it can be found like a lost sock, and that once you've found it that's all you've got to do, state a fact. I think that misrepresents entirely the way the faculty of memory works, no matter what you subscribe to. "It was a pearly gray day" is very different from saying, "It's a horse-shit day out there." "It's a pearly gray day" is very different, even from saying, "It's a rainy day." All of a sudden, we know, "Oh, I guess it's beautiful. There must be something soft and lovely about it." That is so important, and it has to do with style and voice. I guess you can tell that these things do matter to me. A lot. I do care about the truth. I'm personally bothered, as if I was on trial—not by you but by whomever—on this issue of truth versus invention.

JH: In "Czeslaw Milosz and Memory" from *I Could Tell You Stories*, you

articulate the differences between American memoir—the notion “that the personal or family past, plumbed and reabsorbed as conscious narrative [. . .] clarifies, even reveals ‘the present moment’”—and the European memoir, in which a memoir’s “worth lies in the power [one’s origin] gives one to detach oneself from the present moment.” Do you see that there’s some happy medium between the two? And do you see your work fitting into an American-type memoir or a European type?

PH: Well, it’s interesting that you’d pick out that particular passage. My husband hates that passage. He’s always said, “I don’t understand why you have to dump on the Americans. Why do you think Europeans are better?” I tell him it’s not that I think they are better, but I think they have something we need. It’s almost like a vitamin that they’ve got. Mind you, I think they could use some of what we’ve got. Oh, I’m an American writer. There’s no question about that, end of story. There’s no way I’m a European writer at all. But I do like this ability to lose the self in the representative. My particular generation easily lost ourselves in that because we were such a generation. I think I even say that somewhere in *A Romantic Education*: “We were such a generation.” We are still such a generation. Everywhere we go, the big bulge of us demographically, with our petulance and our youth, and our indulgence in our middle years. Probably we’re going to be very demanding in old age; as you wheel us around, we’re going to be kvetching right to the nursing home. Even my ophthalmologist said to me as I was complaining about needing bifocals, “Well, you know you won’t have to wait too long. The baby boomers won’t put up with bifocals. There’s huge research going on to make very useful bifocal contact lenses.” I guess they already exist, but they’re not as good as they’re going to be. Wherever we are, we’re constantly reinforced that we’re this generation. Then we have these three huge events or movements that we also (like Al Gore) take credit for. The first is the Civil Rights Movement; the second is the Women’s Movement; and of course then the big, dramatic arena of the Vietnam War. You put all three of those together, and it was very easy for somebody like me to see myself as a member of a generation, as a point in history, rather than just as me with my mom and my dad and my story.

SB: In the past few years, you’ve mentioned that you’re turning towards fiction and are working on a collection of short stories. Why fiction now after so much time?

PH: First of all, I have written a story or two now and again, so it isn’t as

if I suddenly woke up and thought, “Hmm, there’s this thing called fiction.” Part of it is practical. I’m not writing a novel because my life probably wouldn’t allow me to finish it in any reasonable time because of certain responsibilities I have and the way my life is organized. I happen to adore the short story. I suppose there is a poetic connection here. There’s a way in which a short story can end in the same way a poem can end. There’s a way in which the end of a short story can have this kind of “Click” that doesn’t just close things down but opens things up, the same way the end of a poem can be. You know that famous James Wright poem, “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm at Pine Island, Minnesota” that ends with “I have wasted my life”? Everything is about lying in a hammock and looking at a chicken hawk and noticing a cow pie, and it’s a very short poem that seems to be looking for something, and the last line, disconnected from everything else it would seem, is “I have wasted my life.” Talk about “Be here now.” You’re in this moment and all his life is filtered through that instant. It’s absolutely gorgeous. Stories can do that, too. So maybe I’m heading towards a lyric thing again. The other thing is that I’m having a wonderful time making things up: If I say someone’s divorced, they’re divorced. End of story. I’ve really been let out of the cage of this question about fact and fiction, and now I’m just making things up and using them any which way. It’s kind of fun. I’m really loving writing them.

The piece I’m reading tonight is “What She Couldn’t Tell,” which is the one about my Czech teacher. In this essay, there’s a scene with an actress, and at the end of this important conversation, it says, “her lovely eyes, wistful and wry, knowing she would never play opposite Albert Finney again. ‘He used to call me cupcake,’ she said. ‘We joked around.’” In this story, I start out with a scene in which this Czech actress is going to the location for the scene she’s playing with the American actor, and he walks by her and says, “Hi, cupcake.” And for my own amusement I linked one of my last pieces of memoir—not to say that I’ll never write memoir again—and I gave the same exchange in real life to the story. That’s the fun for me. Just in practical terms, I know I could finish these, so I can hope to have a book in a year or so, which I want to do. My old friend and classmate, Garrison Keeler, called me about a few years ago and he said, “You’ve got to stop writing these memoirs. You don’t want to be known as a memoirist do you? You’ve got to write some fiction.” So maybe I’m obeying his command.