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Percival Everett: An Abecedary

Sylvie Bauer

- 1 Percival Everett is the author of eighteen novels, three collections of poems, three collections of short stories, a book for children and an introduction to Jefferson's *Bible*. Originally a musician, he is also a painter, a woodworker and a fly fisherman fond of "traveling alone [and] camping out under the stars." As a young man, he traveled through the US and South America, worked as a ranch hand and later owned a ranch himself, training horses and mules on the edge of the Moreno Valley desert. A man of many trades, he is also a compulsive reader of Western philosophy and literature. Percival Everett sat for this interview in December 2012, while he was guest professor at the Sorbonne University.

Sylvie Bauer: **A IS FOR ALICE**, not just Alice Achitophel, the character in *Zulus*. I have a feeling that Lewis Carroll's Alice is present throughout your work, especially in *The Water Cure* maybe, but not only.

Percival Everett: I think that's right. I'm enormously influenced by nonsense. Carroll's *Alice* and *Through the Looking-Glass* but also his games and all the symbolic logic and Victorian nonsense in general. The logic, the play with logic and contradictions, are attractive to me. What I love about nonsense is that it has to adhere more rigidly to form than sense. Because that's how the trick works. You're tricked into believing that it means something because you recognize the structure. So I only figured out recently that I'm not so much interested in writing sense that sounds like nonsense, what I really want to do is write nonsense that actually does make sense. All this goes back to Sterne, with the infinite digressions of Shandy and the cataloging of narrative discourse in the novel. There is no story so, where is the story? We think we know the story. I think there's something theological in there too. There's a rudimentary mistake that writers who want to be so called experimental make. Every time somebody starts writing a novel that is not a genre which is not formulaic, it's an experiment necessarily. You're re-creating it, you're don't know what you're doing. If they're all experimental then none of them are experimental.

S.B.: There is a sense of not knowing in your books, for most of your characters. "I don't know" is a recurring sentence for the narrator in *The Water Cure* and it's interesting to have this landscape of possibilities, not knowing.

P.E.: Well, that's kind of what life is. If I'm going to practice some form of verisimilitude, then that's the one thing that has to be there. Life is not only a collection of choices but a collection of accidents. And nobody gets into their car thinking that they will have an accident. Well, some people do but most of us do not get in our cars thinking we're going to have a crash. We get into our cars talking about raking the leaves when we get home. When I start writing, I start conceiving a novel, I don't know what I'm doing. Because I'm a bad typist, I don't start writing anything until I have a picture of the whole. I see the shape of it, even though I may wander from my chosen path. I have a picture of what I'm doing. If I don't, I'm lost. Some writers can make it up as they go, but I can't make it up as I go.

2 B is for Boredom.

P. E.: *Yawns. Laughs.*

S.B.: You often say that you're easily bored and most of your characters are bored as well.

P.E.: Boredom is a good thing. If you don't get bored you don't do anything. How boring would that be?

S.B.: Is this what accounts for your being a man of so many trades? Your adventurous life in South America, raising mules on a ranch, playing the guitar, writing, woodworking...

P.E.: I guess. I haven't psychoanalyzed myself. I just do what's in front of me. I lived on a ranch, I bought a ranch. I had horses. I worked on a ranch, there were horses. I needed furniture, I made it. I like to fish. I had an instrument because I studied an instrument and I had to pay for college so I played an instrument.

S.B.: Your work is anything but boring. It's varied.

P.E.: You mean my fiction?

S.B.: And your poetry. Yes, your writing.

P.E.: You know my poetry is meant to prove that I can't write poetry, and it's pretty effective. Most people will agree with me. Art is art, whether I'm painting a picture or writing a story. They come differently and that's interesting. I have different relationships with them. But finally, they help me find some way to make meaning for myself in the world in which I live.

S.B.: And do you think only art can do that?

P.E.: Yes.

3 C is for the Contemporary

P.E.: *Laughs.* You mean the past?

S.B.: That's the way Agamben reads the contemporary.

P.E.: Yes, because it's gone. Well, do you know that expression: "be here now, it's be here then." I don't even know what it means to be acknowledged as one thing or another. To be acknowledged as contemporary? If I had a choice, I suppose I would rather be acknowledged as a painter of the forties. That would be interesting. What would really be interesting is that half the paintings exist without me at all. That would be fascinating to have them have an audience. I mean, I don't matter. It's not about promoting myself, it's about putting work into the world.

S.B.: Most of your work (*Zulus*, *The Water Cure*, *For Her Dark Skin*, *Frenzy*) shows that what was written before is the only heritage of mankind and the only thing that will remain. I'm thinking about the writings on the wall in *Zulus* for example, but also all the intertextual references.

P.E.: That's how we understand ourselves. If one had such contempt for things that have already been written, one wouldn't read. And to think that you're not influenced by it is, well, it's psychotic, it's not even arrogant. It's a dead end. It's a form of self-erasure as well. If it's cold out, you shiver. Which is why so much of that work is so bad.

S.B.: There's a beautiful homage to this in *For Her Dark Skin*, the very faithful rewriting of the myth of Medea you make in this story. What you said about disappearing behind your work reminds me of what you say every time you finish a book. When you finish a work of fiction or poetry, you just leave it aside and let it go.

P.E.: Yes. Do you know what a claymore mine is? It's used in war. It's a mine that has a directional blast. And the saying is, "if you can't remember which way you pointed it, it's pointed at you." And that's the thing about if you don't acknowledge the tradition in which you work, if you don't acknowledge the stories that have been told before, the stories that make up your understanding of the world, then you're destroying yourself. And even that is an act of acknowledgment. That's the past and you can't not do with it.

S.B.: **D IS FOR DISTANCE**. I was thinking about what you say about "fictive distance" and also alienation, estrangement, the need for distance. Most of your characters need this distance. And there seems to be failure when the distance is erased.

P.E.: The thing about distance is no picture makes sense until you achieve some kind of distance. If you're flat up against the mirror, you don't see your reflection. If you get right down to it, and the same thing as the size of the reflection being halved every time. I'm always fascinated with the mirror-stage. There's no acknowledgment, when Lacan is talking about the mirror-stage, that if you think about mirrors you never see your own self or your own face, you see your mirror-image which is a construction. So when you, this is kind of crazy, but as soon as you assume that construction, again you're constructing different selves, as a way of survival. Because if that's actually you... *Laughs*.

S.B.: The other **D** I had in mind is of course detective novels.

P.E.: I don't know anything about them.

S.B.: But you wrote *Assumption*.

P.E.: They tell me it's a detective novel.

S.B.: Is it a novel, by the way?

P.E.: Yes, I view it as a novel. But again, I'm not smart enough to say.

S.B.: But it's made of three different parts which connect and don't.

P.E.: A novel that, not erasing everything I ever read, I remember, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, is supposedly a novel. But it really isn't, it's a collage, an abstract collage at that.

S.B.: Some of your books work like collages as well.

P.E.: Yes, I do this fragmentation thing.

S.B.: **E IS FOR ERASURE.** More the concept than the book. I'm not asking you to talk about the novel.

P.E.: You know, the first title of the novel was *Modern Art*. That was my working title for the novel. That's the imagined scene with De Kooning and Rauschenberg. Though that wasn't written first, I can easily imagine that as the scene of the novel.

S.B.: There is a sense of erasure in several of your novels.

P.E.: There is a sense of fear of erasure. Or there is a sense of outrage about an attempt at erasure. In the same way that you were talking about writers trying to erase the past. That's not possible, and this is where art becomes important. You may well kill everyone in the village, no one will ever speak of this atrocity again. But if anyone paints a picture or writes it down, on either side, it still exists and it's still an atrocity.

S.B.: That's what remains in *Zulus*. Human beings disappear, they're erased in the end. What remains is the scarred land and the works of art. Here again, it's a collage in the abecedary, a collage of references, sometimes cryptic. It reminds me of Abish's *99: The New Meaning*, it's the same kind of puzzling text that forces the reader to try to remember where the references come from. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's even impossible. Of course, you can google everything, but it's not fun.

P.E.: And it's often wrong. And if it's sometimes wrong, it's always wrong.

S.B.: **F IS FOR FRAGMENTS.** "This work is not fragmented, it is fragments." This is from *The Water Cure*. This notion that it's not fragmented, that it's not part of a whole taken to pieces, but fragments and they seem to interact or not, is interesting.

P.E.: Well that's what life is too, isn't it? If you start thinking back on your world, you don't remember continuously. You don't even remember chronologically.

S.B.: But some of your novels are more made of fragments than others. Sometimes you do create a sort of linear chronology. Or at least you can, as a reader, have the feeling that you get this linear structure.

P.E.: I'll believe you. I suppose *Wounded* is ostensibly linear. But I always read that as my most experimental, if I must use that word, novel.

S.B.: Why do you say it's your most experimental novel?

P.E.: Because I think it's in that hyperrealistic way, that's more distant from reality than a novel that is more fragmented, shaped out of less controlled circumstances.

S.B.: So, fragments are closer to reality. Your most mimetic novel is distant from reality.

P.E.: Yes, and that way, I don't see it as mimetic at all. *Laughs*.

S.B.: **G IS FOR GOD.** "There's only one God and we don't believe in him." This year, the annual conference of the French Association of American Studies will be about religion and spirituality. I was thinking about this question of transcendence that, as Brigitte Félix and Arnaud Regnaud put it, "seems to have shifted on other grounds and that bears on the possibility of the advent of the common world in its a-signifying materiality while religious discourse took charge of in the production of meaning as the promise of revelation."

P.E.: I think that's right. As soon as some controlling leader evoked the idea of a deity to enhance his power or to manipulate the people, thinking people were resisting it. Religion is about fear. Nobody wants to be a Christian because they want to help people. They want to be a Christian so they don't go to hell. And in order to do that, they help people. You might as well like it while you do it sometimes.

S.B.: Revelation is always flaunted in your work. There is never any revelation. There is no disclosure of truth. Alice Achitophel wanders and never gets anywhere. There is no

revelation of truth, even in *Assumption*, even though, as readers, we construct meaning. On the contrary, what seems to happen is more a movement from the transcendence of the word to a form of world of bodies, even if those bodies are dis-enacted.

P.E.: That might be what I want to say. Revelation exists in the reveler. There is not any advent. It exists in the person who sees it. And experiences a revelation. There is nothing objective about it. It's all subjective. I have a character in *God's Country* named Epiphany Jones. It's easy to have revelations in his case. You just forget everything. About religion, I'm an apath. That's my word for it. My grandfather was an atheist, my father was an agnostic and I simply don't care.

S.B.: And still, in *God's Country* or *American Desert* for example, you don't care but you integrate religion.

P.E.: It's part of my culture. It's like trees. I don't particularly like palm trees but if it's set in Miami, there will be palm trees. I have Mitt Romneys in my life. As sad as that sounds.

S.B.: **H IS FOR HUMOR**. I was thinking again about Deleuze and the distinction he makes between humor and irony. Basically he writes that the person using irony is looking for first principles. Here too there is a form of transcendence. Looking for primary causes, as opposed to humor in which consequences matter. I have the feeling that your work is more on the side of humor than on the side of irony. Deleuze adds at some point that humor is treacherous because it is imperceptible whereas irony is obvious.

P.E.: But they're tied up together. That's the ironic part of it. Or I could say that's what makes it funny. If I can have a part in a novel and almost in everything become really earnest, that's ironic; that isn't earnest at all. And then it becomes funny. Because I recognize the irony and then you can get my joke. Likewise, when you read irony that underscores a sadness in life, something about which we should be outraged, which you recognize the terror of, well it's no longer ironic, it becomes earnest. And even though it began as funny, it's not funny. It's like the limericks in *The Water Cure*. And ironically, they're bad limericks.

S.B.: All this leads to satire.

P.E.: I suppose. I never think I'm writing satire. I really think that I'm making an abstract painting and it's a painting of paint.

S.B.: A painting of paint? So you leave it up to people to see what's in the painting.

P.E.: I have no choice. I can't tell anybody what anything means. That's all I care about. Everything else comes from meaning. That's why I write.

S.B.: **I IS FOR INFLUENCES**, literary influences. Also Philosophy, music, painting. You've just described your work as an abstract painting about paint. And this is somewhat what I felt with another one of your novels that seems more mimetic than others, *Cutting Lisa*. It looks like a painting; it reads like a painting.

P.E.: I am influenced by everything I read, even things I don't like influence me. They teach me what not to do but they also might do something that I like. Some things stay with me and I do quote. I love Joyce. And that shows, probably less so than Carroll. Maybe not less so, but maybe less obviously.

S.B.: There is a great pleasure in acknowledging these influences.

P.E.: That's why I don't hide them. They might show but I'm not aware that they're showing up.

S.B.: Music seems to inform your work as much as painting, in the rhythms, in the sounds.

P.E.: I'm always happy to hear that but I don't really think about it that much. It pleases me but I don't give it a lot of thought when I'm working.

S.B.: Do you listen to music when you're working?

P.E.: No. I could listen to baroque music because it's predictable. I might like some of it but it's predictable. It's not going to surprise me with anything, except for Bach. But I can listen to Haendel and work, because it kind of disappears, even though it might be pretty. When I listen to jazz, I'm always listening to the music so I can't work. Lately, what I like doing is watching Korean movies. I have a big computer screen, so I always hit it in when I type up for my notebooks. The acting is fantastic and the actors are just so beautiful.

S.B.: Your influences are pretty much European, apart from *Moby-Dick* and Ellison.

P.E.: There's a lot of Twain.

S.B.: Yes, *God's Country* is pretty much a re-writing of *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

P.E.: And *Roughing It* also. And in a weird way, Twain's overview of Cooper is so hilarious that the source of my madness of satirizing the western starts with reading Cooper.

S.B.: There is more an influence of those southern and western writers than the New England writers, apart from the cameo appearance of Whitman in *God's Country*.

P.E.: I love Whitman, but you can paraphrase him and it does not hurt the poem any.

S.B.: No Emerson, no Thoreau, hardly ever.

P.E.: Well, I've read them and so I'm sure. I find Thoreau somewhat disingenuous. If I think of Civil Disobedience the second person I think of is Martin Luther King, the third person is Ghandi and the first person is Bertrand Russell. And of course a huge influence is Chester Himes and his dealings with people. And he's as crazy.

S.B.: **J IS FOR THE JEFFERSON BIBLE.**

P.E.: I don't have much connection with *The Jefferson Bible*.

S.B.: But you wrote an introduction to this text.

P.E.: Somebody asked me to do it. And I said: "yeah! I've read it!" Obviously, I did not have to read the Bible, but I had a collection of Bibles, different versions of the Bible. Among them was Jefferson's *Bible*. You have to love Jefferson's *Bible* because he's agnostic and he's dismissing the divinity of Christ, accepting what teachings he wants. So, there's really no reason for him for being a Christian at all. Did I have to do it or did I have a burning desire to do it? No, but given the opportunity, it made sense to me in the same way that I never had a burning desire to address the state legislature in South Carolina. But given the opportunity... It's like asking somebody: "There's Hitler, do you want to shoot him?", Well, I don't want to shoot him, but it's Hitler, so, there's my opportunity.

S.B.: What about the political statement Jefferson made?

P.E.: Well, it's hard to make a positive political statement when you're endorsing slavery. And finally, he's an outstanding intellect, finally cowardly in some way because he cannot just say: "I don't believe."

S.B.: And you're saying that you're making a political statement too, writing this introduction. But you say at one point that you can't figure out what political statement.

P.E.: No, I wouldn't say that. For me, to say what my political statement is would be first of all to lose faith in language. And more importantly to lose faith in the reader's capacity to create what meaning is necessary for that text.

S.B.: **K IS FOR KANT** (and Metaphysics). So, you being a philosopher at the beginning, I wanted to know a little bit about your relation to Metaphysics.

P.E.: I don't know my relation to metaphysics. I have a pretty firm footing in the world of the material. Talking about *a priori* and *a posteriori* statements, I have to acknowledge that my beginning to understanding that kind of thing comes out of Kant. Though I finally don't agree with him. But that was my introduction to that. And, around the same time, I have very little use for people like him. But someone like Spinoza, or the ever-grim Schopenhauer. Yeah, I like those guys. *Laughs*.

S.B.: **L IS FOR LANGUAGE**. Language is central to your work: you play with it, you distort it, you manipulate it; it manipulates and puzzles the reader. But mainly, the question of language is almost always a philosophical one. Wittgenstein's work on language in particular informs your novels.

P.E.: Well, I appreciate Wittgenstein but there's a failure to practice what he preached. That's the latter Wittgenstein. The early Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* is beautiful. But the part of Wittgenstein that is attractive to me is the part that comes back and refutes what he thought was the answer to raw philosophical questions, that being the *Tractatus*. But when you start reading the *Philosophical Investigations*, though it's a wonderful book to give you headaches, you think about both the limits and the limitlessness of language. He attempts to indict philosophers for failing to speak their own languages. And in so doing, commits the same failure.

S.B.: So, it's also about the limitations of theory.

P.E.: Yes, insofar as any metalanguage is a theory. And that's where I agree with him. Language doesn't need any help. Language works pretty well. Actually, there's a part near the end of the new novel that addresses language, essentially saying language is the only god we have.

S.B.: Another man-made god?

P.E.: Language was certainly not invented, certainly not discovered. It was waiting to be discovered. And we manipulate it, we change it, we do all sorts of things to it, we add words to it, we take words from it but it's still language. Language creates religion, it refutes religion. It refutes itself. But in so doing, reaffirms itself. We cannot exist without it. It's responsible for our existence.

S.B.: **M IS FOR MEMORY**. Memory is an essential part of your work, with its counterpart, oblivion.

P.E.: Well, I was thinking about binaries. You can't forget without memory. Again, memory doesn't mean *real* either. Memory means what you remember. You can be all wrong, but it informs one's behavior, or it makes someone a different person if they believe their memory is infallible. And no memory is infallible. That's what writing is: constructing memory.

S.B.: Hence the writings on the wall in *Zulus*. Hence again the re-writing of *Medea* and Dionysus (*Frenzy*). Much of your work is about this, including part of *American Desert*.

Memory that goes through sensations as being part of the world, the character's acuteness to the world. There's something like being in the world.

P.E.: We're not new to the world and every time something feels good, it's measured against other things that felt good.

S.B.: But it's one of the problems with history. There's this double movement of forgetting things, erasing them so to speak and creating a sort of collective memory based on myth.

P.E.: It's nothing new. We do it with ourselves all the time. It's when it's done agonistically that there's obviously a danger. Memory does not change organically; it changes by manipulation. That's really diabolical and frightening. There is always a form of manipulation. Every time you remember something, you are re-constructing it and that's why our memories change. Well, it's the way we belong in the world. I wish I had a euro for every time I have said to myself: "I'm looking for a book and the name of the author starts with L," and it's Zora Neale Hurston. But I know that its starts with L. And then I see it but I recognize the book that I want. So my memory is completely fallible. But, I still recognize the thing that I need; that's amazing to me.

S.B.: **N IS FOR NATURE.** I am thinking about landscapes more than anything else. There is a relation to Nature in your work and to particular landscapes, the landscapes of the West.

P.E.: Well, I have spent most of my adult life in the West. It's the landscape I know. Once I saw it, I knew I had to live in it, from Oregon, Wyoming, to New Mexico. The sky is larger, the land is harsher, there are fewer people. And I love the desert because it requires a certain amount of attention. It always drives me crazy when people from the East come to California and say they miss the seasons. I say "ok, well I can't help it if you're inattentive. There are seasons. They're not the ones you are used to, but to say that you miss seasons is to betray your ability to live in a place."

S.B. But you live in Los Angeles, and right now in Paris.

P.E.: I like places.

S.B.: Even when they are cluttered with people?

P.E.: It's not my first choice, but I'm always fascinated. Part of the landscape is Paris is an urban landscape too. I can go to a museum anytime I want to. It's always a few steps away. And the other thing that I love to look at after the rivers and mountains are paintings.

S.B.: **O IS FOR ORNITHOLOGY.** *Suder* seems like a fusion between Charlie Parker's music and the way the character turns into a bird.

P.E.: You know what no one ever asked me? Why the elephant is named Renoir. Isn't that curious? Why is the elephant there? It's kind of the elephant in the room, isn't it?

S.B.: But once you accept the elephant in the room ...

P.E.: ...You have an elephant in the room.

S.B.: ... you have a structure again. You get something that is logical. Accept the nonsense of something, and it builds up into a structure that works.

P.E.: Yes, and I have nothing to do with it.

Ornithology is first a great piece of music. And I love a version of Bud Powell playing it that I had when I was a kid. That's why this song is special to me. Bud Powell had trouble, he was disturbed and in his solos, you can just hear that. And just try to

imagine what is going on in his mind. He is part of the novel; he is the one who releases the dog.

S.B.: And he is the one who nicknames the character "Birdie." **P IS FOR POLITICS**, the link between writing and politics, the link between literature and politics.

P.E.: Every work of art is necessarily political. Even if you try not to put politics in the work that's a political statement. Because it addresses one's relationship to the world. And that's a sense of what politics is. I don't know if it matters that it be performative. Again, the act itself is necessarily political and in the Austinian sense. It's even a political act if I write something that's overtly highly political and hide it in my closet.

S.B.: You link the political with something very personal.

P.E.: Well, if it influences you, it influences the world around you. But it's true if I choose not to write something, if someone said to me "I want you to write a piece about Obama," and I said "no," my saying no is a political statement. Every action in the world is necessarily political. It says something about your relationship to the world. Now if you mean by "politics" a more narrow thing, then the discussion changes. One cannot hide from one's own beliefs. I challenge my students all the time. I say: "Write your five most profound fears. If you can write me a story in which I cannot find these five fears, you can have an A, you don't have to do anything else." They can't do it. But also, they are going to work so hard trying to do it, they'll do what I want them to do. The same is true with politics: absence speaks as well as presence in the work. When your characters speak to each other, they'll speak to each other in a certain way. "Why did you choose blue for the boy baby? What are you trying to say?"

S.B.: Yet, you do include political figures, in *The Water Cure*, for example.

P.E.: *The Water Cure* was meant as a protest novel.

S.B.: Some of your works read like political statements. *Erasure* for example. There seems to have been an urge to write the book.

P.E.: Well, it shows up but it wasn't really the source of the book. Every work of art is political. That novel was about the culture interfering with making a work of art, the impediments placed in the way of the artist. That's right, there's a sense about the nonsense of Nazis and abstract art. But I can't believe I remember the book.

S.B.: I had the feeling you had written the novel at a time when you were very angry.

P.E.: I was more amused. Anger is for suckers.

S.B.: Why's that?

P.E.: Well, it's not the same as outrage. You can experience outrage and see injustice, but as soon as you are swallowed by your anger, you stop thinking.

S.B.: And when people stop thinking,

P.E.: ... they don't make art. *Laughs*. They make diatribe. There are always levels to our displeasure about things.

S.B.: Does outrage lead to action more than anger?

P.E.: It should. Though in recent history, outrage leads to complacency. Once someone feels outraged, they think, "oh! I have felt the outrage, now I've done my part!" The absence of anger should not mean the absence of passion about change.

S.B.: It seems to echo a little bit "The Appropriation of Cultures." Is there the same gesture in those two stories?

P.E.: I'm sure. Again I'm the last person that can speak with any kind of authority about the work but I'm the same person and so the same concerns are floating around me. You can't hide from what's inside you.

S.B.: Except that between the two there seems to be an optimistic one and a pessimistic one, a bitter happy one in the end, I'm thinking about "The Appropriation of Cultures," which is a sort of reversal, with the confederate flag taken away from the Capitol Building, whereas *Erasure* ends up in a loss of identity, a total loss of identity for the character.

P. E.: Maybe. The wonderful thing about reading is I could read "appropriation" as an appropriation of cultures and think: What a sad world that it has to be taken away. What kind of a loss of identity is inheriting and assuming a symbol that has been so toxic for so long? What does assuming it do to the person? It might be finally detrimental to the person who is controlling that. But you know, I'm just an old cowboy.

S.B.: **Q IS FOR QUEST.**

P.E.: One of my fascinations is with the western figure. But it doesn't start there but with Cervantes, all those novels of chivalry. *The Bible*: nothing but quest stories. In fact, we have nothing but quest stories. Some fail, some don't: George slays the dragon. In my novels, it depends on what you mean by failure.

S.B.: In *Suder*, there is in the end a sense of emancipation, of freedom.

P.E.: Even in *The Water Cure*, there is an answer to his final questions. In *Zulus*, Alice wanders but she finds her way to the event that will end it all. A happy ending, maybe: you get rid of the pestilence. I'm an environmentalist! (*laughs*). I remember working the end of the novel. It is an environmental statement.

S.B.: **R IS FOR THE REAL AND REALITY.** Is writing a way to create reality?

P.E.: It's as real as anything else. Who is to say what is real? I can say what is real right now for me. A lie is real. It may not be the truth, but a lie could be real.

S.B.: It's a matter of language again.

P.E.: Even more than that. It's a question of language's inextricable tie to us. And that goes back to Wittgenstein. That language is as much a part of human history as walking. We rely on language for reality. If we didn't speak, we would just find some way to have language.

S.B.: There would be no history without language.

P.E.: There would be no us. Because you can't continue to exist without it. We would all kill each other. There would be no love, because you cannot love something with which you're not familiar. The other question, and that too goes back to Wittgenstein again is: "is a private language possible?" If you're the only person, is there language? How long will the memory of the language you might have had with others last?

S.B.: **S IS FOR SILENCE.**

Your characters are often silent and solitary. And this is opposed to sound in your work, the sound of music in particular.

P.E.: Again, we like what we know. I'm usually fairly quiet. You don't get to see anything if you're not silent. If you don't become quiet, and disappear, the animals don't show up.

S.B.: **T IS FOR TRUTH.**

P.E.: Truth is interesting to me because truth is more faithfulness to something and not to facts, but to context and understanding. It's also amorphous. We need things to be true in different ways at different times. Maybe, for me, speaking about truth and fiction is closer to speaking about truth and life. It's not about being factual. It's about fairness. Fairness and also a rejection of one's own agenda.

S.B.: Hence the problem with truth and politics.

P.E.: I don't really know if you can put those two together. But that would be the problem. It's interesting, though I think much to his credit, Barack Obama has been truthful as a politician. That's what doesn't make sense and is kind of wonderful. Now, does that mean he tells all of the story? Well, no, but he doesn't lie. And neither did Jimmy Carter and you saw what happened. George Bush lied all the time and he was elected, well, he was in office twice. Bill Clinton, who lied famously, was probably pretty honest. Lies are part of truth. Because you can't know all of the facts. You can't know everything everyone is thinking. It takes some fabrication and if the fabrication is a lie, it takes some lie to understand the truth. Good history contains in it an element of fiction. Language doesn't lie.

S.B.: Yet, the narrator in *The Water Cure* says that "language is an immoral universe."

P.E.: That was part of his world. Language is necessary for the justification of his behavior. An assumed language. The language that one uses isn't necessarily language. The notion of language is not my usage of language. It's not the language I think. And I wouldn't even say it's an ideal. It might be the only thing that has a simple and pure existence. Even more so than numbers. Because numbers are constructions. We don't really construct language. We use it. It was waiting for us. In fact, I was on the train one day and I noticed the fact people had noses and that's one of the things that remind me that we are animals and the thing that makes us different is our arrogance. We think that other animals don't feel the way we do. We think we're special. Other animals, as far as we know, simply don't assume these things. It's like the fifty monkeys with fifty typewriters: if you let the fifty monkeys type forever, they will finally write *Macbeth*.

S.B.: **U IS FOR THE U.S.A.**

P.E.: I just don't think that there should be flags anymore. Flags are a bad thing. We're only sticking them in things and tying up the people who don't have a flag. And this idea of patriotism! And the myth of our soldiers! Everybody thinks our soldiers are great. They might be young and they might be brave. But there are a lot of brave criminals too. History becomes mythology. Flags limit territories. I don't know how an artist can abide by boundaries. If you're a painter, what you hate the most is the edge of the canvas. What you want to do is create a work that speaks to the world around it, so that there is no edge to the canvas. Even though I live in my house with my family, even though I choose, if I can, to be away from everyone, I want to seriously blend in with the world around me, to participate and the edges or the flags that categorize and separate tend to prevent me from doing that. The world around me doesn't necessarily mean people. It's the seasons, it's the birds. Because to tell the truth, people have just begun to bore me. They're so repetitive. And not in good ways.

S.B.: **V IS FOR VIOLENCE.** There is a lot of violence in your work. It's extremely violent.

P.E.: That's pretty true. The world is a violent place. In the fiction of a large world of human beings sadly, necessarily there is violence, whether it's psychic or physical. The physical is sometimes easiest to abide. Because it can be more easily controlled. It's easier to stop it. Look at those boys playing video games. The violence is not in the games. The violence is what it's doing to their ability to think. And that's what's pernicious about it. I don't think they're going to be necessarily more violent people, but what it does is make violence acceptable to them. It makes them less compassionate, and it just hurts the imagination. Music videos. When I was growing up, music conjured images in my head. No one supplied them. And music would do whatever it was going to do. Music videos: people didn't have to come up with what the songs suggested; it was given to them. So there's a level of imagination taken away. Not to mention the level of addiction to games and videos that closes down the frame. What's amazing to me is that American television and movies, they'd rather cut up sixteen people in front of you than show you a penis. And that's more pornographic. You would think a gun should feel like it weighs a hundred pounds in a hand. It should feel unnatural.

S.B.: **W IS FOR WOUNDED.** It seems to be a word that sums up pretty much most of your work. People are wounded, nature is wounded.

P.E.: That's what makes us human. It's what makes us individuals, dealing with our pleasure and wounds. We mostly survive. If you've been wounded, you've been wounded. And if you haven't been, then you've been wounded in a different way. It's not a good thing; it's not a bad thing. It is.

S.B.: **X IS FOR XENOPHANES.** And the Presocratics, especially in *The Water Cure*.

P.E.: The character is trying to get back to the roots of thought in his culture. How do we get from there to here? His enterprise of reconstructing ancient philosophy is all bad thinking. As much as I hate Hume, he's right that the philosophy employed with some kind of scientific method is near pronouncements and there is no reason to believe in them. But, if someone thinks it, it has been thought. So it's worthy of consideration. Awfully silly things turn out to be pretty close to the truth. Science fiction turns out to be pretty close to the world we have now.

S.B.: **Y is for You Choose.**

P.E.: Yelp. I just like that word. Because if you yelp, you get help.

S.B.: **Z IS FOR ZULUS.** Where does the title of the novel come from?

P.E.: Can't tell anybody. It's because of the reference to Blood River. It's really also a private inside joke.

S.B.: Now, why is the elephant in *Suder* called Renoir?

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