

On maintaining your focus



Writer and editor Gordon Lish discusses aging, refusing to concede, accepting the efforts of legacy, and why nothing is more important than language.

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As told to Elle Nash, 1199 words.

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Do you ever delineate between writer Gordon and editor Gordon? Are they one and the same?

Anyone claiming the power to partition mind is nuts or a dissembler. I admit to being fractions of both, but [to] expect control of the schism, as a willed act, is piffle. Well, yes, as an editor, I am unforgiving, as I am as a reader, of myself, that is, and of the person in print. As a writer, ah, I suspect I have come to be shamelessly disordered, or is it disorderly?—how about lax?—this until I’ve had a decent look at my criminality, a procedure that is altogether trying for me because my vision is so far from reliable (there was in me the aptitude to take in the entire page at once, no shit, or so I persuaded myself was my competency)—and because, as I have aged (what else was I to do?), I’ve been progressively easy on my first- and second-round gaffs, believing they might conduct me to expression otherwise closed off to me by sense. Another approach to this question involves stamina. I have precious little of it remaining to me. Time was when I could work without letup four days running. By stamina, let’s agree I mean stamina in all its dispositions—body, mind, conscience.

How can one become as unforgiving and astute as you as an editor? Do you have advice for younger folks who love to obsess over language as much as you?

Listen hardest.

Did you ever find yourself 100% satisfied and sure of a piece you’ve written?

Never, not once—and the spread between sought-for and gotten naught but widens.

What’s driven you all these years, if you could name just one thing?

All the effects words can be made to contrive. The trap, lure, allure of the self—as subject and as object.

What’s your favorite work you’ve written?

No decent parent would play ball with this question. Well, ok, [I] just thought of the one hundred sermonettes for *A Man’s Work*, a project I devised and actualized for the Job Corps in the ’60s. Went around the U.S. with a Uher tape recorder and a Sennheiser mic and spoke with a hundred young men at their work. Stood chatting with a window washer on his platform outside the seventy-ninth floor of Boston’s Prudential building, and accompanied in Houston a natural gas wrangler on an emergency call underground, for example. These exchanges were followed by sermonettes, pep talks arousing enthusiasm for work in general. Of course, were the little comps here before me, I mightn’t be so apt to gaze smilingly upon them. But my memory of them is bewitching—not unlikely because I was young, the aim was clear, the winning voice of Bill Wahl (who recited the pieces for audition) inseparable from the experience of composing.

In "A Tale of a Horse," you say, "Writers often writing lesser books after having written greater books, and then, for reasons of most writers being hounded by being human, writers of such temperament not quitting while they're ahead." In this, you're referring to Ken Kesey. Do you feel you've written your greatest books? Have you ever felt that you should quit while you're ahead? What changed you?

I am old. This is a totalized and totalizing condition that chases the heart into retreat. In retreat, I (in reverie) rare back in dispute, refusing to concede, reckoning (puerilely) that I'll never. . . . Yes, do believe I could bring off the beaut of beaus (rival, equal, stand in the same circle where stand Cormac McCarthy, Don DeLillo, and Jason Schwartz), but (sob) know the belief, the willed delusion, to be a snare. For that matter, given their states of being, neither McCarthy nor DeLillo has it in them to surpass themselves anymore. Schwartz, who's in his fifties, can—and, I forecast, will.

Did you know, when you were first setting out on that first short story, that you would be creating a kind of legacy in American literature? How do you feel about it, looking back?

Tough question. Deserves a tough answer. What I knew, at the outset, in anticipation of "the day will come," was this: My work on the Carver pieces, was to constitute a (your word) "legacy." I suppose the sensation preexisted that episode. Felt it, felt thus, with *A Man's Work*, plus my labor on some other projects of the kind. Otherwise, thereafter, when I was netted for good, truth? Yes and no. Which of us can't instantiate for his entertainment feelings that presupposed . . . ? McCarthy and DeLillo and Schwartz, performers of that quality and posture, can't imagine they were uninformed of the outcome from the start. Looking back, in review? Failed, failed, failed—and not by reason of an inadequacy of effort. There's a factor here that cannot be trifled with—gift.

How does it feel to see variations of what you brought to the table post-war, basically, all over the place? Your word is nearly gospel in some circles.

This is a sucker punch. Okay, I am willing to fall for it. I did rather a lot of schvindling, a neologism I leave it to you to unpack. But, sure, I do think that, as an editor, as far back as *The Chrysalis Review*, I sponsored, by acts of selection and combat, change—among American writers younger than I. Certainly I taugth my head off to see a result I might imagine issuing, in some wise, from my exertions—yet I am heaps sure any evidence of success on such a score is more impression than substance—and, at all events, in transit in fugitive fury, so, uh, what the fuck?

What led you to minimalism, in the first place? When you first went to that place of the short story, what was it you wanted to unearth?

Minimalism? Ah, come on! Probably sloth.

Is philosophy as important as sound, in fiction?

There was a time when I was so engrossed in the work of this or that "philosopher," especially in that of no few girls and boys whose native idiom I neither knew nor would consent to read English'd fiction in. Yes, between idea and sound, if you were to put a gun to my head, I'd take the bullet for the acoustic and every last one of its relations in the domain of speech.

In choosing the acoustic—what seduces you to it?

The music, the cadence, the euphony that coerces coherence, unity, beauty.

Is there anything more important than language?

I get you. The answer is no, nothing—save, say, the power to hear it in all its particularity, which, the which, are infinite, a boundlessness I've devoted my bounded time (and tide) to.

What was the last book you read, what did you think of it?

Bone Rosary, by Thomas Lynch: great. *Antiquities*, by Cynthia Ozick: Let's see you do better at ninety-two.

Gordon Lish Recommends:

Otter wax

Pilot Precise V5 extra-fine point pens

Philip Larkin's poems

Kraft Singles

The miniatures of Hank Cheng

Name

Gordon Lish

Vocation

Writer and editor

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