

THE



INTERVIEW 2

Senior Editor Charles Pinch with Domenick Acocella

When the author submitted his story The Live and Dead Silenzios to us his cover letter included the cheeky line:

This piece has seen more rejection than all the speed-dating couplings in the history of speed dating.

Gawd, how bad is it? Joey, you first! And Tom, once he's finished throwing up, it's your turn! What? Me? You want me to read this piece of...well, let's just say 'this', that every publisher since Gutenberg has not only 'turned down'— not only 'declined' ...but booted it the real kick in the face with REJECTION!!!

*But before I read the story (procrastination improves with practice, folks) I went back to his cover letter. If nothing else, it shows the dude is not afraid to call a spade a hoe. Instead of obsequiously trying to worm his way into our good graces (which is easier than you might think), he comes right out and admits he's attached a **loser**. Talk about gall! Or...maybe...talk about BELIEVING in your work, down to the last particle! Oh, and one more thing. Read his line*

again. There is a natural rhythm, singular and strong, that transports those words into a sentence worth reading. So I started in. Yes! OMG! Terrific! I love it! What a talent! WTF have you been all my life? I won't say anything more about The Live and Dead Silenzios except: read it! So, the moral of this story is never give up. It's to be expected that many—probably most—publishers/editors won't like your writing. But thanks to our mitochondrial diversity as the apex(?) species, there is one who will. Domenick touchingly ended his letter with the hope that maybe his battle-scarred and world-weary story would find a home at Fleas. And look what happened. It did.

The author is Italian-American, and because parlo italiano (and love all things Italian) I'd say this 'coupling' hits your eye like a big pizza pie! Godetevi la sua storia e spero che questa intervista vi piaccia.

CP: *Welcome to FOTD, Domenick and thanks for agreeing to this interview. First question. What inspired you to become a writer? How old were you when you wrote your first story and do you remember what it was about?*

DA: I have been writing forever, it seems, and I have always had it in my plans to write and read and teach and in college I discovered that I was going to be an anthropologist. I even won an award for my thesis project. My idea was that I would become an anthropologist who taught and then took time away from teaching for fieldwork and publication. But graduate school turned out to be something I could pull off until, ironically enough, it came to finishing the final project after several attempts over the years.

While taking graduate courses, I started tutoring anthropology which really became helping students write clearer papers and I sort fell in like with the process and then I started teaching sociology and business writing at a business school. And, one quarter, I was given a literature course, convinced by my chair that I could help students read literature critically. And it was in that literature course that I came across the name Philip Roth by way of Woody Allen's "The Kugelmass Episode," a story in the anthology we were using. Who is The Monkey, I wondered. I bought the book and read it thinking, where have you been all my life? Man, what a read Roth's book was that first time. Reading Portnoy's Complaint is what moved me to take fiction seriously. The insanity of it, the love, the honesty, the rage, the sex! Before that, I was reading widely between political books of the day and the easy fiction of Stephen King and Dean Koontz and that ilk. King can tell a story—and his books move nicely and anyway he's Stephen King—but there is no reason to read his book if one is earnestly looking for humans and all our ugliness and ambiguity and loss. I read or watch something from King—but I cannot count The Shining because Kubrick is a god—to get away and ensconce myself in something light and fun.

My first story was "Jake, the Talking Pig," which I totally stole from Charlotte's Web. I was in third grade. I don't recall what the story is about (it been over forty years) beyond a talking pig. I like to think Mom threw the story away but I am sure I just never bothered to hold onto it. I think I created a booklet with illustrations. I'm sure it sucked. But one will never know.

CP: *Where do you get your ideas and what triggers your creative imagination? Who were your literary influences along the way? You mentioned Philip Roth in one of our communications as well as Joyce Carol Oates, who you described as ‘devastating’. In what way have they impacted your work and why, specifically, do these writers appeal to you?*

DA: I love Roth so much that my partner, for my fiftieth birthday, bought me signed first editions of nine of his novels, including *American Pastoral*. Roth used to visit this street vendor on the Upper West Side and ask if he, the vendor, had any books for him, Roth, to sign. How cool is that? And how cool is my partner—who, by the way, has asked some really good questions about my work and moved me to be way more serious than I ever thought I was capable of being—to

buy those books? I get my ideas from memory and from conversations—other people’s stories. I try to never make up *The Story* if there is one.

This approach is not something I came to from years of introspection, though. During one of our many office-hour conferences, my first fiction workshop professor, Mark Mirsky, asked me when I was going to start telling my own stories in my own voice. He argued that fiction comes from within and from without, from memories of experience and thoughts, stagnant and changing, at peace and at war with each other. I had written a story retelling the Great Flood and submitted for workshop. He did not care for the story or for the other work I was producing. It was not my story. “Where’s your accent, your voice,” he asked. And I said I didn’t have an accent. “What about your father? Does he have one?” And I answered, dropping my voice, that my father speaks “this way,” and that he and I don’t really talk and that he stopped talking to me years ago. (This was an exaggeration in that, of course, we talk but we don’t really talk in the way that goes beyond surface talk.) And my professor told me to stop talking to him, get to a typewriter or computer, and start writing that story with that line. That story, “Talking to My Father,” is published in *Voices in Italian Americana*. That story, by the way, is fiction but I made very little of it up and tried my best to recall the events in that story.

When I read Roth or Oates, very different reading practices and experiences, by the way, I am looking for, in Roth, the insanity and control his narrators exhibit. What always draws me to Roth is his diction and syntax. My copies—the paperbacks—are filled with underlined sentences, underlined just because the sentence is a brilliant example of how scrumptious a sentence can be. And, of course, the stories are amazingly rich and layered—the stories within the stories. With Oates, each story is a marvel of voice. No two stories can be called *Oates-esque*. She is just such a master of capturing a voice that is nothing like the previous one. I am trying to read all of her novels and I have a long way to go but it’s not easy because the stories are so tough on the soul and mind, you know? What a treasure she is. Seriously.

CP: *The Live and Dead Silenzios is a beautifully written, complex and layered, character driven narrative and we watch the personality of the ‘author’ unfold and develop, not through specific actions but by a carefully curated escalating density of incident and nuance. Interaction between*

characters is largely dialogue but the information yielded is vetted through the self-conscious lens of the 'protagonist'. We hear the 'voice' in his head instructing him in what to say. Can you expand upon this for us? Is 'character' primal to your writing, as opposed to 'story line'?

DA: You are so kind to call the story beautifully written. As you can see from the story, not much at all happens. Some windows are scraped clean of paint spatter, seltzer is purchased, a summer afternoon ruined. I am really unconcerned with plot. Storyline to me doesn't matter so much. Motive, individual and collective, matters. Why do we not commit suicide as often as many of us, given just how terrible life is and how many little acts of violence and neglect appear from out of nowhere or out of no one, perhaps should or would had we not been raised to see the act of ending one's life not as a rebellion or refusal but as an act of giving up? I am not suicidal—but I am curious. Why, on a lighter note, do we try at all at anything? Why does this man, my uncle, insist on scraping windows—that really happened, by the way—and why am I involved? Why me? Why do we write or read or sing or play or go to work or care at all about anything?

This particular story is more about the character Donato Silenzio than about his uncle or anyone else. Dan, as a character, is someone I like to put into meandering-mind mode. He does talk to himself, mostly silently but sometimes out loud. He believes he's a thinker, a deep thinker. He is potentially suicidal. He is a writer and has a character he's created for his own attempts at writing fiction, a character named Frank who is id-like. The two of them have lived and worked in South Korea as English teachers. The two of them love to sit in the public library and "write" or read student work. Right now, both characters are waiting and I am trying to figure out what their next thought journey will take them.

CP: *You stated that you are 'a lapsed Catholic' with the 'guilt' that comes with it. Was this statement more tongue and cheek or does the condition of being unmoored from your cultural and hereditary religion play a role in your writing?*

DA: The statement reflects both. I am sort of kidding when I say I am a lapsed Catholic—for those who care to converse, that phrase invites conversation. When I am not aiming for a fight—when I am looking to talk—I am a lapsed Catholic. When I feel like throwing some punches, I am an atheist. These are very different people, right? But I am allowed to be seemingly contradictory—I contain multitudes too.

To me, there is no way to undo how being brought up in the church—a place I recall every holiday and the weekly attendance of mass, a place in which I was an altar boy, a system through which I made it to confirmation, a place which I will every so often attend wakes, a place which has the lingering scent of incense and uneasy serenity—shaped me. I try to load the guilt and shame onto my characters—though that always depends on the character. Frank, Donato Silenzio's doppelganger, is Donato's shameless, guiltless version. I have a story—too many—but one in which they are in a Catholic church in South Korea and Frank delivers a sermon, in English, and it's supposed to be funny. When I had written, I thought it humorous. These days, years later, I am not so sure.

In fiction, when I sit to write these days and particularly when I am revising (and have had time to sober up and look at the work honestly), I try to steer clear of creating a hostile air toward religion from an atheist's or lapsed Catholic's point of view. Sometimes, though, Donato Silenzio goes there and picks a fight. I cannot stop him.

I am still trying to figure out for myself the role of art. Are we supposed to rectify injustices, avenge loved ones, beautify the world or are we supposed to show these horrible qualities in all their ugly glory and beautiful horror? I stopped practicing—that is, going to church or uttering a quick prayer after every cuss word I uttered—sometime in high school and became hostile to my hereditary religion during my college and graduate school years—I still have the hostility toward the institution, of course, but I try to keep that out of the narrator's concerns. But those characters will say the damndest things.

CP: *You may have heard us rag on FOTD about the duplicitous nature of MFA programs. Do you think good writing can be taught in the classroom? What's your personal feeling about Creative Writing courses and how do you feel they impact on emerging writers today?*

DA: I teach creative writing and fiction at BMCC. I get to teach the workshop this fall and in spring a fiction workshop. I also teach a foundations in creative writing class. They are delights to

teach—indeed, I should not use “teach.” I sit—and sometimes, stand—there and facilitate conversation about the form the students might be interested in trying out. I suggest some works to read. I show a short film that does interesting things that might help students think more about a narrator's focus. Good writing to me means it can be read and understood, sometimes requiring re-reading and maybe even re-re-reading. It helps when the writer is aware of and uses conventions of punctuation and uses spelling effectively.

Can I teach someone the elements of a story? I guess. There are tons of books out there that can do a far better job than I—start with Roth or Oates or Rushdie or Saunders or Baxter or Prose or Atwood or Dreiser or Baldwin or Alexie or Faulkner or Heller. I learned some things from reading really slowly some of the best and nowhere near the best works out there. But the programs are out there and I think the atmosphere can often be very helpful—not always but sometimes. What my professors did, often, and my classmates did also in those workshops, too, is give my work attention, offering often helpful comments as writers. Did I listen to everyone? No. Did I appreciate their comments? Yes. Always. Back then, I wanted someone to read my work who was not family or friend or colleague. I wanted to hear what they thought. When I read their work, my focus was on whether the writer accomplishes something like showing me something and saying to me “hey, this matters—take a look.” When I read for Fiction magazine at The City College, I start with voice and space—can I see where I am?

Can I teach someone how to write? Maybe. I can show someone how to write long sentences that are not run-on sentences—the number of teachers who accuse, incorrectly, their students of writing too many run-on sentences is criminal, by the way—talk about the need for an intervention. I can show anyone how to use a semicolon correctly—right before I, taking from Vonnegut, tell them it's ugly and unnecessary in almost all cases. I can help with grammar and

sentence structure. Those are not writing as we mean it. All I can help them with is providing the eyes and ears to read their work closely and offer suggestions that might help them get where they want to be.

And, yes, creative writing degrees do help keep English Departments afloat. I pursued my degree because I knew that it would help me land a full-time gig teaching at a community college because I really do find meaning in what I do when working with students. But my tuition helped my college pay its bills. When we stop funding education unconditionally, when we put in power people who kneel at the altar of austerity so that the elites don't have to pay the taxes they should pay to support the military-industrial complex that protects the elite's interests at home and abroad, departments at colleges have to rely on tuition and the "generosity" of donors who will build up that endowment.

The City University of New York is a fine institution, severely underfunded. It's terrible. But I recall when I would sign-in to register for classes, the line for creative writing majors was easily ten times the size of the line for literature or language and literacy (composition and rhetoric). I have a colleague who attended a really good creative writing program at a private college and he told me that that program emphasized publication, that that program would train writers to write so that they can publish. That's quite a learning outcome! I don't recall any of my professors talking too much about getting published. Indeed, I recall my mentor telling us that his was not the workshop to take if we were fixed too hard on getting published.

CP: *What do find the most difficult when it comes to writing, and what is easiest? Do you have a routine when you write? Do you know what you want to say before you begin or do new ideas and directions emerge during the process? Do you frequently revise?*

DA: Avoiding overly political or cultural messages is really tough for me. I would love to write stories that argue for animal and human liberation or against totalitarianism or against the state, right? But I am not sure that I want the concern I have for character to succumb to edification of the masses and denunciations of the powerful. There is, to me, nothing easy about writing. I revise only when I have had enough time away from something I'd written in a moment of need to get some image down. I don't count editing as part of writing. There are times when I or someone else I know experiences something weird or hilarious or terrifying and what I often do is write it down in my daily journal—I revived that practice on 31 December 2021 and have been more or less ranting into it three or four times a week. It's not quite free writing but close. I cannot write without punctuation and refuse to move on to the next sentence when the sentence before me is missing something or makes no sense or says something stupid. And, worse, I have this constant worry about posterity. What if I die, right at the computer, with the journal open, and someone should read that poorly crafted sentence and ask "huh?"

But I try to write when I am stuck. And I am stuck way too often. So there is the writing I do to just tap the keys and writing I do to document a recollection. For instance, somewhere in early 2022, Richard was born. He's a character who started as a caricature of a colleague at the college where I teach full-time. But then something seriously life-altering happened in Richard's life and now I am trying to get him into a world that might be a novel. That world I revise as I go and I

usually don't let something that does not work stay on the page until I can see it working out somehow. I probably should spend more time revising—I can always think of it as my penance.

CP: *Is there any type of writing or style you don't like? On the flip side, what kind of writing fires your imagination?*

DA: I cannot stand recipes written with flair. I don't want to be drawn in, damn it. I just want to bake a freaking birthday cake, you know? The memoir, you know, a work of fiction passing itself off as nonfiction? Too many of those and too often taken too seriously, taken at face value. I keep a daily journal, as I've noted, and I do not go into detail about the daily stuff in my life. And yet we are supposed to accept that someone who drank copious ounces of hard liquor daily recalls all that detail?

I don't like my style from when I first started, overwrought, idiotically self-conscious, and ignorable. I was consumed with becoming—this is embarrassing—the next Roth and so I thought I can at least start with mastering and playing around with syntax and writing gorgeously complex and unnecessarily compound-laden sentences. For me, a good sentence that explores and illustrates what words can do together when the right conductor is waving the baton is what good writing is. But you are asking about writing and not writing. I am not a fan of self-help books. Is that writing? I care very little for stories that intend to uplift. (I am sure you are asking about fiction and so I am answering that way.) There are these books out there in which the hero wins and evil is defeated. I cannot stand that stuff. I like being left wondering, worrying, and working to imagine “and then...?” Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* is a book that I have read the hell

out of. In fact, I wrote, in graduate school, a long, overwritten essay showing how that book takes on *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad* and says, yes, life is an epic and it is a quest and life is war but don't think, John Yossarian shows us, these challenges ever end and if they do end it's because you're dead or you've hidden yourself really well. My copy is filled with notes and rants. Fire me up? If you were sitting across the table from me, you'd see that I am still smoldering from it. So writing that leaves me with more questions, or leaves me depressed that it's over—that the writer has stopped the story where the writer has stopped the story—is writing that fires me up.

CP: *How do you see the future of literature, especially fiction?*

DA: I don't know how to answer. I do but... I have two answers. (There is this constant refrain that people don't read anymore. I see fewer people on the subway reading from books, true—but I don't spend enough time on all the trains watching everyone. And I am usually reading, from a book, during my hour-long train ride to Tribeca. But when I do look up and around at my fellow passengers, many appear to be staring at their phones and, I presume, some are reading words.)

My first answer is that I see the writing of fiction changing in terms of how and who but not what. Social media and internet in general have made publication far easier—the gatekeepers in publishing and mass media have lost so much of their control. So we can publish—maybe not as widely and maybe not with the fiscal support a traditional publisher has—and that has democratized writing, somewhat. How we tell those stories and whom they are about will change

interestingly and necessarily because the voices will start to reflect more the glorious diversity of this country. But the what, the human condition, the themes, the anxieties, the triumphs pulled out of the rubble, will not change much. War, disease, poverty, famine, existential and physical-visual horror, love, envy, rage, hate, horror, family, suspicion, idiocy, lunacy, depravation, evil—our fellow writers and typists will continue to show those conditions and traits and ideas in their tales.

My second answer, which I think of first, is that literature's going to (still) be at war, my friend. We are at war against fascists and puritans who hate and don't understand what that dude in the sandals was all about two thousand five (or so) years ago. We will have to deal with people who do not really read well or enough or carefully or—worse—they do read but with an eye toward “appropriateness for [name your category]” As I write this, the president of France has decided to say, out loud, that the police-brutality protests in France, the way the protesters are protesting, is fueled by violent video games. (I do tell my students that there is no need to imagine the unbelievable to tell a tale that is almost impossible—read a newspaper and listen to our leaders and leading thinkers and you will have more than enough unbelievably absurdity to put on the page.) How many books have been banned this year alone?

Fiction and other forms of literature will grow and change and reflect the times and challenge the times, I hope. I repeat: we have fascists, clothed in the crass cloaks of “parental rights” and “religious freedom,” and puritans, dreadful they are, who do, for us writers, make life so much more interesting and dangerous. Is it the job of fiction to fight fascism? I don't know. I cannot speak for all writers. But we can certainly depict the horror of these control freaks as we see them. My goal is to show some aspect of the world and we can leave the rectifying of that aspect to politicians—which I don't suggest at all—or we can hope that the movements today

insisting on all forms of equality and equity continue to fight for those things. What I do personally is my duty to society as someone who thinks the US can be much better for way more people and animals—especially animals. But I don't want to write those stories or, at least, I don't want those themes in my fiction. I am not sure what themes I want to explore when I write—in fact, I suggest to my students in creative writing workshops to let the literature majors figure out and argue themes. Ours is to put the art on the page. I hope fiction continues to explore and show the world, ugly and beautiful and all that appears in between.

CP: *E' ora. Ti chiami Acocella. La tua famiglia parlava italiano quando eri piccolo? Parli italiano oggi? La cultura italiana ha avuto qualche influenza sulla tua scrittura? Da dove viene la tua famiglia in Italia? Rispondi in italiano o in inglese, come preferisci.*

DA: I would love to answer in Italian but I would have to either use some sort of translation tool—Italian-English dictionary or some website—or have my mother help me. The first way would render grammatically correct and syntactically plausible responses, vapid and bereft of human voice. The second would be fun and dangerous. Mom and I would probably argue over what it means to be influenced and what my influences should be and how if I had just practiced my Italian when I was young, I just might be fluent. And she and my dad tried to get us—I have three sisters—to use Italian at home but they also did not want us to struggle as they had and so English at home was the default and as a result I am terribly inept in that language. I cannot think

in Italian and therefore I'd have to write and think in English and then translate—and though I have no problem with translation, I know that I would lose something.

I am a first-generation Italian-American who does not identify much with that label. I identify, when asked, as human. I do not pledge allegiance to any flag. I do think there are some fascinating and endearing elements that I can recall of Mom's and Dad's towns and the peninsula's troubles with governance and provincial nature. Indeed, Mom and Dad, like many before and after them, became Italian when they migrated from their towns. My mom is *bisaccesse* and my dad is *andrettesse*. They grew up in these small towns. And those towns have such wonderful tales embedded in their stone homes and narrow alleyways. My parents migrated north, Mom to Milano and Dad to Switzerland, for work. I know these stories—and by no means do I really know these stories with the detail I'd like—and these stories sit in my consciousness whenever I sit to write a story. I don't have any particular love or hate for Italy.

But, as an anarchist, I cannot help but wish for Italy's dismemberment into its smaller components. The same goes for the United States and Russia and Pakistan and Chile and so on and so forth. But from that troubled peninsula hails a rich anarchist tradition, necessary to fight those other odious traditions of feudalism and fascism, which I think is one of its wonderful aspects. As a typist (I borrow this from David Sedaris), I try not to think too big. I like little. A snapshot, a moment of hesitation, a catch in one's throat, old love manifest in a couple's hand-holding as they cross a busy intersection. I like the nuance of nuttiness that one person can show, much to the chagrin or consternation of others, in daily actions. And to that end, the culture of my parents is a bottomless well of stories. (I wish you'd imposed a word limit.)

CP: *And finally, the question we've all been waiting for. If you could have only three books what would they be?*

DA: I hate this question. So here is my process of (regrettable) elimination:

Ulysses

~~*Operation Shylock*~~

Crime and Punishment

~~*War and Peace*~~

Blond

~~*A Brief History of Seven Killings*~~

Foucault's Pendulum

~~*Oryx and Crake*~~

~~*Brave New World*~~

~~*(Is The Collected Plays of Shakespeare a book?)*~~

~~*The Hebrew and Christian Bibles*~~

~~*Song of Solomon*~~

~~*The Alchemist* —just kidding!~~

~~*A Fine Balance*~~

~~*The Dinner Koch*~~

~~*Ibid.*~~

The Overstory and The Time of Our Singing Powers

The Sympathizer

The Public Burning Coover

Mulligan Stew Sorrento

Underworld Dilillo

Bill Bathgate Doctorow

Thanks again, Domenick, for your utterly engaging and enlightening views and all the interesting take-aways. I know our readers will thoroughly enjoy this interview. Keep writing, dude! Alla prossima!