

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC LARSEN

Questions:

1. *The Book of Reading* is your fifth novel. Over the years of publishing novels, what have you learned that you wish you knew when you published your first novel, *An American Memory*, in 1988?

I think I'm one of those writers who's always writing in the dark, one who never really knows, or never quite knows, what they're doing. Every book, including the next one, is always the unknown, not a path leading somewhere but a darkness and chaos that somehow or other have to be tamed into a readable form of a kind that has meaning and that's able to reveal that meaning. For me, the task never gets easier, and I suppose if anything that's what I wish I'd known in the beginning—that being lost and afraid (but going forward anyway) is par for the course and never changes, although *maybe* it sometimes gets a little bit easier. I calculate that it took me seventeen years to write *An American Memory*. After that, I wrote *I Am Zoë Handke* in two or three. Same thing with *The End of the 19th Century*, although that doesn't mean that that book was *published* anytime soon, since it floated around from place to place for many years being rejected again and again before finally coming into print in 2011 via The Oliver Arts & Open Press, whose editor-in-chief happened to be me. Same thing with *The Decline and Fall of the American Nation*. I'd completed that novel, I remember, by August of 2001, but it didn't find its way into print until 2013. So in a certain way I haven't learned anything since *An American Memory* except *maybe* how to work a little bit faster and how to be a little bit less afraid. *Maybe*. But have I learned to know what I'm doing? No. If I knew what I was doing I'd be, say, a carpenter, roofer, or plumber, not an author. An author has to *invent* what he or she is doing. *The Book of Reading* was no easier to write than *An American Memory* was. It was just as satisfying but not easier, just as the path into it (through the darkness and chaos) wasn't easier. There are different kinds of novelists. The ones that my own education has led me to love the most, though, are those who—so I think and so it seems to me—don't ever *really* quite know what they're doing (like Virginia Woolf, say, or William Faulkner). That's because they're doing something that hasn't been done before. If it's been done before, it won't be unique, and in *that* sense won't be worth doing. Isn't there a story about Picasso being asked to name his favorite among all his own pieces of work—and his answering, "The next one"?

2. In addition to fiction, you've also penned nonfiction books. Do you have a preference between writing fiction and nonfiction? What's your favorite thing about one that you don't necessarily get when writing the other?

All writing is hard, or at least for me it is, and in fact I think it gets harder the older I get. Why that is, I'm not sure, but I secretly suspect it may be because I *know* more each time I take up a

project—even an email or a memo or a note—and so I know also how many—or how many *more*—chances there are for me to sound (or be) banal or imitative or vacant or foolish. Writing of any kind is painful, but *having* written is wonderful. That goes for letters, memos, book reviews, anything that’s *composed*. I remember in college the feeling of having finished my senior honors thesis. It was really quite poor, the thesis, but it was also a hundred typed pages long, and that fact, quality be damned, gave me a certain quietly delirious pleasure. I think I’m almost always in awe at the sheer fact of a piece of writing having come into existence—and I suppose I would define “writing” as a thing that’s been composed, to use that word again—in this case composed in words—in order to bring something meaningful into existence that wasn’t there before, and succeeding in that aim. A favorite among my own books is the book on Homer and the *Iliad*. It’s nonfiction but I think it succeeds in bringing *something into existence*, and so I remain excited and pleased by it. I’m reminded of the references to Lily Brisco’s painting in *To the Lighthouse* as an “attempt at something.” If Lily had known what that “something” was, she wouldn’t have needed to paint the painting—and is a painting like hers “fiction” or “nonfiction”? One of my favorite books is Cyril Connolly’s *The Unquiet Grave*, nonfiction, and much of what I love most in *Hamlet* is in the prose sections. Prose doesn’t make it nonfiction, but it’s certainly distinct from the poetry. It’s a hard question, this one about fiction and nonfiction. Some writing achieves magic and some doesn’t. As far as I can tell, with that as the aim, the precise genre doesn’t *really* much matter.

3. What does your writing process look like?

It looks awful, I think. In the beginning—before, say, 1970—I simply couldn’t write in any way except longhand because anything else seemed far, far too distant and removed and abstract and beyond my control. Then I finally took the plunge and began writing on a typewriter, which as it happened didn’t change things very much, really, at least not after I’d gotten used to it. I would still write things the way I had with pen and ink—the opening of a story, for example—over and over and over, keeping every draft, however slightly changed from the ones before it, in a pile of sheets that sometimes became two or more feet deep. Compulsive? Well, no more so than being lost at midnight in a relentlessly deep and absolutely dark forest and not daring move faster than a snail for fear of falling into an abyss or sliding your foot in the mouth of a sleeping bear. The unknown is a hard thing to race through for anyone who’s actually trying to figure out what it is. I stubbornly resisted computers at first, back in the early 1990’s, but I’m now fairly much at home with “word processing.” I still don’t go fast. When I was working on *A Nation Gone Blind* I was sometimes able to write as much as five hundred words a day. I felt like a race car driver.

4. The main players in *The Book of Reading*, Eveline and Malcolm, meet in graduate school in Iowa City. Your bio mentions that you received your doctorate degree from the University of Iowa in Iowa City. Was the initial setting of *The Book of Reading* meant to be an homage to the place where you spent your graduate school years?

I was in Iowa City for the 1963-64 academic year, then back again—this time with my wife, Anne—from 1966-1968 and once more in 1970-71. Grad school was the first time I'd left home, so Iowa City was exotic and new to me in spite of its not being so very different, really, from the college-town of Northfield, Minnesota, where I'd grown up. But, yes, the place was formative in certain important ways and I'm happy to think of myself as paying it a kind of homage. Anne and I, also, did live for a time in an ancient and gorgeous house (now gone) that serves as model for the house Eveline lived in. And the "seed" for *The Book of Reading* came from a real experience my first day in town—rendered early in the book in the scene where Malcolm sees the all-girl band in practise. I did the same, in the very first few hours I was in town, toward the end of a perfect autumn afternoon. There was something about that moment that I was never able to forget, and I do think it may have been the seed of the book.

5. Is there a particular passage or chapter in *The Book of Reading* that you cherish? If so, can you share it with us?

Really hard to choose. But here's one:

"The river of blood had been there from the beginning. *We* knew that. Eveline and I both knew that. But we also knew that the river of blood had not been the *only* river. In the four-hundred-fifty-five years leading up to the fatal turning point, there had been other rivers also. There had been the river of grass, the river of the seasons, the river of planting, the river of harvest, the river of hope, the river of birth, the river of poetry. There had been the river of apples, the river of music, the river of others, the river of desire, the river of song, the river of firesides, the river of home, the river of union, the river of medicine, the river of care, the river of kindness.

"But after the fatal turning point and the start of the collapse, there was only the river of blood."
(p. 232)

6. Who (or what) are your writing inspirations?

I broke my teeth on and came of age among varied ancients and moderns, hardly all of them now always in the greatest of favor. But here goes: A list, chaotic and partial, of writers I've learned from in one way or another:

Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Geoffrey Chaucer, William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, John Donne, Jonathan Swift, Charles Dickens, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emily Dickinson, Willa Cather, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway, John dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Faulkner, Grace Paley, Ray Carver. And then a number of others, some of them less known, whose books have helped renew or affirm my faith in the possibilities and significance of fiction: Julia Blackburn (*The Book of Color*), Ron Block (*The Dirty Shame Hotel* and *Other Stories*), Tracy Chevalier, (*Girl with a Pearl Earring*), Michael Cunningham (*The Hours*), Alice Thomas Ellis (*The Sin Eater*, *The 27th Kingdom*, *Pillars of Gold*), Sebastian Faulks (*Birdsong*, *Charlotte Gray*), Ross

Feld (*Zwilling's Dream*), Penelope Fitzgerald (*The Blue Flower, The Bookshop, Human Voices*), Denis Guedj (*The Parrot's Theorem, The Measure of the World*), Julie Hecht (*Do the Windows Open?*), Richard Klein (*Jewelry Talks*), John Lanchester (*Mr. Phillips*), Gordon Lish, (*Epigraph; Arcade or How To Write A Novel*), David Markson (*Reader's Block; This Is Not a Novel*), Mark Maxwell (*Nixoncarver*), Alison McGhee (*Shadow Baby*), Kevin McIlvoy (*Hyssop*), Hugh Nissenson (*The Tree of Life; The Song of the Earth*), Jason Schwartz (*A German Picturesque*), Ben Marcus (*The Age of Wire and String*), Susan Vreeland (*Girl in Hyacinth Blue*), Michael Westlake (*The Triumph of Love" and Other Paintings*).

7. Do you have any advice for writers just starting their careers?

Read and read and read as independently and as alone as you possibly can. Write. Share your writing with someone you trust. Read and read and read as independently and as alone as you possibly can. Write. Share your writing with someone you trust. Do everything you can to see through the falsehoods and to understand the truth of the aesthetics, politics, and social politics of the society you live in and of society in general. Be as independent both socially and intellectually—and aesthetically—as you conceivably can, short of becoming a hermit. It's possible that going to college nowadays is a counterproductive or even bad idea. Better might be to find someone intelligent, sympathetic, sufficiently learned and of good character—possibly someone who once taught in the humanities and now misses it—and read with them. Finally, read Eric Larsen's book, *A Nation Gone Blind: America in an Age of Simplification and Defeat*.

8. What's next for you as a writer?

I wish I knew. To continue. Somehow. In good faith.