

# I Want Edge

## An Interview with Timothy Findley

KRUK: I'd like to start by talking a bit about the short stories—a relatively neglected part of your canon. What draws you to the short story form? Do you know when you begin that you're working on a short story as opposed to a novel?

FINDLEY: I'm drawn to the short story by the fact that I guess that was the first thing I ever read. Children's stories, very often, come in that short form, where you encounter the whole story in one sitting. And then of course when you begin to read yourself, it's the most accessible form. There's something about the self-contained entity, that is taken at one dose....

K: Which is satisfying....

F: Yes. And the first things I wrote were short stories, basically: the first things I wrote with any sense that I was sitting down deliberately, to do something other than merely entertain myself, were short stories.... And they were the first things that got published.

In terms of form, the thing is what it is. And I know what it is I'm writing fairly quickly. Once or twice I've been appallingly wrong, of course—thinking I was writing a short story and then discovering I was writing a novel, and *then* not being able to finish the novel. Or vice versa: thinking I was writing a novel and discovering it was a short story. And mostly giving up where that mistake had been made, whether it was made in one direction or the other.

Basically, the stories in *Stones* and the stories in *Dinner Along the Amazon*

were stories from the start—with one exception that I can think of immediately. One, two, maybe three—are novellas, or *extremely* long short fiction, and one is lifted *holus bolus* from a novel.... “Lemonade” is almost a novella. Another is “Hello Cheeverland, Goodbye,” which is an extremely long piece of short fiction. And the other is “Dinner along the Amazon” itself, which is a portion from a novel—the novel that ended up being *Headhunter*. The first version of *Headhunter* got written in the early 1970s and two of its leading characters appear in “Dinner Along the Amazon”: Olivia, who carries the talking fetus, and Fabiana, the gallery owner.

κ: What really strikes me, when you talk about the different ways the stories develop, are the stories “Daybreak at Pisa” and “Out of the Silence,” which you call plays in progress, or ideas for plays.

F: And in fact they are.

κ: Did they ever become plays?

F: Yes, they did. The really sad thing about “Out of the Silence,” the T.S. Eliot piece, was that I got quite far along with it—it was originally called “Rat’s Alley”—and it was about Eliot and his first wife, Vivien. I think it was a very good piece of theatre. But just at that moment, along came a play called “Tom and Viv” and I was stopped in my tracks.

The “Pisa” piece, about Ezra Pound, became a radio play. So that worked out quite well.

κ: I suggest that “Daybreak at Pisa,” where you’ve included the stage directions, can be read as a meta-theatrical, meta-fictional piece, in that you’re dramatizing Ezra Pound’s *self*-dramatization....

F: Yes. I’m still fascinated by that idea: that writing is a performance art. And vice versa also: you mustn’t ignore the fact that the play is still the written word, and the eye can lift it into the mind, as well as the ear....

κ: In *Stones*, the Minna and Bragg stories [“Minna and Bragg,” “A Gift of Mercy”] are, I think, quite a departure for you, because you are dealing more explicitly with homosexuality.... And also relating aspects of your relationship with Marian Engel...and it’s interesting that you write *two* stories about them.

F: Yes, I want more of Bragg and Minna. And I think there will be more.... I think they’ll come out in story form first, but I also think that, at some point, if I have the energy to do this, their story would make a wonderful play. With elements of all of the unwritten Bragg and Minna stories, and the two written ones. There is a play out of those two people....

K: You also have two stories about Bud and Neil in *Stones*, “The Name’s the Same” and “Real Life Writes Real Bad.” We get two stories, back to back, about the brothers.

F: Aspects of Bud and Neil turn up in Gilbert and Hooker—the brothers in *Last of the Crazy People*. I’d never thought of that before, but it’s quite true. Those two brothers make their way—under a lot of different names—through a lot of my writing.

K: So this recurring pair, the two brothers, can be classed as one of your writerly obsessions....

F: Yes, and it is more apt to pop up in different forms, because you could say they are in “*Stones*,” too; there are two brothers there, who are very much in line with the other pair.

K: I was going to say, there’s a clear contrast established between your two brothers: one seems more obsessed with the traditional male role, and the other is a critic, looking on, the watcher....

F: The sad thing is, the one who’s engrossed with the male role, is also the one who is more accomplished—

K: I question that—

F: Up to a point. I mean, in “*Stones*,” he definitely is the one who is in charge. But he’s also in charge when the father is in trouble and is causing trouble—it is Cy who takes control. He has to do the daring thing, the difficult thing. He has to confront the father. That was interesting to me....

K: What about influences on your short story writing?

F: You pass through stages; it’s hard to hold on to influences as you get further along—and I don’t just mean in the aging sense. As you pass through the various stages of writing, as you learn more about what you’re doing.... I have passed through an *enchantment* with Du Maupassant, O. Henry, the classics—Kipling—the people who told you a story that had an ending that left you closing the book and saying “Boy ... I never thought that!” or “What a marvellous revelation that was, or a twist.” And of course, short stories have changed since the days of those guys.... I went through a period where J. D. Salinger’s book, *Nine Short Stories* was very important to me. I think I read every one of those stories *eighty times* over a period of five years. (The book fell to pieces in my hands!) It was because *he* was my Raymond Carver; what Carver now is to young writers (and I hope it passes, by the way).... I suspect too much has been made of Carver for his own good. This over-adulation also happened to Salinger—and it stopped

him from writing. Carver's death was tragic. It brought a *growing* writer too soon to the end.

K: You don't approve of Carver?

F: Oh, it's not that I don't approve; he was a wonderful writer. It's just that you get awfully sick of reading imitations.... Could we leave the poor man alone to be himself, for one thing: stop the imitation, because imitation isn't getting anyone anywhere....

K: But it's where you start, perhaps.

F: Sure it is. I don't mean that as meanly as it sounds; it's just that—I think it's very dangerous that people settle in to Carver's style. Or Salinger's. Or anyone's. So far as I was concerned,

I had read these nine stories over and over until they were done unto death. I don't think I ever wrote like Salinger, but I think I set out to make the attempt.

K: Would you say you were trying to take the best from him—what he did in the short story form?

F: Yes, but ... I think I was ashamed of *stealing*.... Lest this sound noble, I mean I was afraid of being *found out*; I only mean it in that sense, I don't mean it in any other sense. Just—"Oh God, what if it sounded so much like Salinger they'll say 'Well, who the Hell is this Findley—why pay attention to him, he's only imitating Salinger.'" I wanted my own voice—but I hadn't found it.

K: Were there any Canadian writers you were imitating?

F: Not then; not in my late teens and early twenties—and not in my late twenties, either....

K: Although we have so many great short story writers....

F: Well, there were but I didn't know it, if you know what I mean. It's funny, I've just written a review for *Harrowsmith* of a book called *Wild Animals I have Known*; they're short stories by Ernest Thompson Seton, and I read those when I was a kid. I loved them.

And, of course, there was Morley Callaghan. He was the first writer I read—aside from Seton—who set his stories in my own world—and his—which was Toronto. You suddenly thought "My God, he's talking about Elm Street, and I know where Elm Street is." And he also wrote—*wonderfully* well. Interesting, classically structured—all kinds of good things can be said about Callaghan's novels, but the man was a short story writer, and I think he was a great one.

κ: Okay I'm going to shift the focus, to the theme of gender.

Here is a quote from critic Harry Brod: "While women have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the background, men have been obscured from our vision by being too much in the foreground." Do you agree?

F: I'd have to take it as a jumping-off point ... but it's very interesting. I think there is a lot of truth to it, but you can spread that truth further than "men." The truth is, there are things in the foreground that are so subtle, that they are totally missed—and I think, unfortunately, a lot of men who don't like women (and there's a huge difference between men who don't "like" women and men who are violent towards women)—I think they miss *themselves*. So it isn't just the observer, from the outside, who can't see them, it's the guy who's out there with the biceps, the hands, the gun. He could be staring in the mirror and he wouldn't see himself—he's too big! Too overwhelming....

Oddly enough, I got turned on to this aspect of men in writing—and men in life, though it came out of writing first—when I read a piece about men by Gertrude Stein. It's an absolutely incredible piece. In it, she writes about men in a bar in France, and the men she's writing about are in a bar where men gather exclusively—but only because they are all men who've just left the same factory, they've just left the same workplace and they've come in the same condition into this place. And she writes so *wonderfully* about their beauty, their tiredness—their grace, their gentleness. All those things you wouldn't expect to discover in a bunch of *guys* standing in a *bar*, doing the "guy thing!" And I thought, how does a woman write so wonderfully about this very male milieu? Stupid people will say: "Well—she was a lesbian," which has nothing to do with the price of eggs at all. She was looking totally objectively at these men, in this place, in this situation. Reading it, I was thrown back on the reality, and the memory, of when I went to work in a factory, as a very young man.... This was the 1940s and it *was* a hyper-masculine place. I thought I might be beaten to death! But having been told "Be ready for the 'guy stuff' to happen," what you get instead is a *wonderful* gentleness, and a sense of mutual protection. No come-ons, nobody putting the make on you, nothing! Whether it is that the pressure of the presence of women is taken away, they're not strutting, they're not doing all the things you think they would be doing, and they're not ... fearsome. Laughable caricatures of manhood very quickly evaporate.... Out of Stein's

writing, I got a sense of men I already knew, and it threw me back into that reality—behind the stereotypes. And I got that from a woman’s writing.

At the same time, having said *all* of that, I obviously have to address the fact that I have also met extremely violent men. Killers. I had a man try to kill me, and in the same way that he would try to kill a woman, because it was during a sexual encounter, and had to do with a particular use of force.

K: So you are saying that you were placed in a position parallel to a woman’s, in that you were being treated as the “feminine” object of his rage?

F: Yes, yes, but in a particularly insidious way.... I am willing to stand corrected on this, but this is what I suspect: that far more women are put in jeopardy by men whose “persuasive” powers are latent in the power of their masculine bodies. I was frightened into submission. I think there’s far more of that going on than actual pounding. Psychological intimidation, but it’s based on the physical possibility: “I can kill you.” Yes—he can. Because I was frightened just long enough to get in this corner ... and then, of course, once you’re in the corner, how do you get out.

K: Obviously, we’re talking about gender here, but we’re also talking about how that intersects with your “otherness” as a homosexual writer. That places you in a position, some of your writing suggests, analogous to a woman’s position—without creating homosexual stereotypes, or using effeminate language. So many of your characters in *Dinner* are women, for instance, and they seem to be associated with a certain type of perception, or perspective, that you identify with. Would you draw that parallel yourself?

F: Yes, but I’m very glad to hear you say that it is not—necessarily—a parody of femininity, and that I am not speaking in an effeminate voice as a consequence of that identification.

K: True. But as a writer, as a creator of characters, you do seem to ally yourself with women as “other”—

F: Oh, absolutely—no question. But I’ve never, equally, felt that I wanted to be identified as a feminist-sympathetic, or as a gay, writer ... simply because I think labels are confining. But I’m not turning my back on homosexuality. I’m perfectly happy to have it said, “He is a homosexual.” I just don’t think I want to be collected exclusively in gay anthologies.... I want my world to be wider than my sexuality.

K: I attended your Duthie lecture, in Vancouver this fall [October 1993], and in it you made a very impassioned plea for resisting the “word wardens.” I thought, “How interesting,” because you have this ability to be double in

your presentation. You were speaking as someone who has been stigmatized as a gay person, but you were also appealing to the larger, literary tradition. So you were speaking both from the margins *and* from the center.... Do you ever feel as though you might be part of a “gay” tradition of writers?

f: No, although there are voices in that tradition that I look at with particular respect. I will never recover from Tennessee Williams.... But I think it has to have something to do with the fact that he was there in my moment: as I was emerging into the world of sexuality, he was emerging into the world of writing, as a man of promise. When I turned sixteen was when I started having my whole life. A “sexually explicit” life—an actor’s life—et cetera—and that was the moment of *The Glass Menagerie* and consequently of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. And, of course, immediately I recognized the kinship between Blanche Dubois’ situation and what it was to be a homosexual, *in that moment*. It would be, I hope, different now. In that moment, Williams’ was the voice that defined my dilemma....

k: So there was an autobiographical element for Williams with Blanche DuBois....?

f: Oh, there can’t be any question, there can’t be! Though I think he denied it.... People say that George and Martha in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are just a couple of guys—“fags”—two lovers who get off on beating up on each other .... But it isn’t true. What I’m saying is, when people say, about Blanche, that she’s really just a guy in drag: it’s not so. That is, as a character, she remains absolutely, totally female. Just as George and Martha remain totally male and female in their context. And it’s *not* a good idea to go off into....

k: —translating the sexes of the characters to fit their author’s—

f: —because that ain’t what’s happening. But at the same time, there is this kinship in situations where women and homosexual men encounter violent attitudes in men.

k: Maybe it’s more accurate to say that there is a submerged tradition of gay male writers, writers who are mainstream, but also gay, whether openly or not. Such as Tennessee Williams ... Somerset Maugham ... Proust ... and Oscar Wilde.

f: Or William Burroughs—another interesting figure. And, of course, John Cheever.

k: So, does that description fit your sense of your work more accurately?

F: Yes, it does.... Wilde and Cheever have been great heroes of mine.

K: Michael Kaufman says, "Masculinity is power. It is also exclusive heterosexuality, for the maintenance of masculinity requires the repression of homosexuality." How do you feel about that formulation?

F: I think he's wrong. It depends on how you define masculinity.... I would never define masculinity as power.... All the masculine qualities are not negative. I think there are wonderfully masculine men—and that's what I was saying before, about working in the factory, when I was in the position to be extremely vulnerable, and felt so: I was so wrong!

I think another important aspect of the question we just finished before starting this one is: there's something that has to be said, too, about the fact that both a Blanche Dubois and a Timothy Findley and a George and Martha and their homosexual counterparts, when they come in contact with men—either as women, or as homosexuals—they stand the chance of meeting every kind of men. But in the sensational sense, there is an acceptance of the stereotype and this is how the general subject of homosexuality is subsumed into the mass media. The stereotype becomes a part of the storyline, for the mass of people. Brute/fairy, brute/female [mimes simpering expression]; you know, Blanche Dubois languishing, falling backwards ... fainting in the presence of the "brute." What Michael Kaufman [who founded the White Ribbon Campaign, which Findley has joined] described feeds a certain prejudice. I'm a great admirer of his, but I think in this he is wrong. "Don't say that, Michael—that *masculinity* is power—because in saying that, you are saying that all men are bad—because *all* men are masculine."

K: Or: "Maybe we have to get rid of the word 'manhood.' It's done a lot of damage to both men and women." That's what you told Alan Twigg. You still agree?

F: Yes. I still think that because we load the words *manhood* and *manly* and *masculinity* with meanings that are ... killers. In themselves.

K: In your interview with Alan Twigg, you also mentioned "Men's terrible loneliness. Women also have loneliness, but it's not the same kind."

F: I don't think men have ever learned how to benefit from one's another's company in the way that women have learned to benefit from one another's company ... with no sexual connotations whatsoever. I'm always fascinated to see that, in so many photographs of men, if they are photographed together in any context, you always see the hand placed over the



shoulder, with the fingers curled against it. [demonstrates] The fingers aren't allowed to grip the other person. You aren't allowed to *hold* the other person.

K: This is a result of the restriction, or taboo, on demonstrations of affection between men, isn't it?

F: But there has to be built into that attitude the fact that men have a different physical reaction to holding, and being held, which is *purely* biological.... I think this whole subject of gender and sexuality, both as it touches social issues and moral issues, and the issues of writing and of art, has been muddied by a misinterpretation—sometimes deliberate—of the role biology plays in our behaviour as men and women.

Let me tell you a quick anecdote, because it has to do with the way I think about men, and it has to do partly with what Gertrude Stein said about the gentleness of men. This gentleness is sometimes generated by the bewilderment men feel in the “traitorous” aspect of their bodies. It also answers something about Michael Kaufman's statement—and the question of why men can't have casual contact....

This is some years ago, because I'm now sixty-five, so we're talking about around 1970. A friend and I were on a beach together, and we were talking about having reached this age (we both had achieved forty and were passing into a new area of our lives). We had been at one time lovers, and we were still extremely close, very good friends. And we talked about the burst of sexual energy that had happened in our lives—and he said, “You know, you mustn't be afraid of it”—because I had laughed about an increased daily masturbation count and the increased daily “lust” count—“A lot of it is pure biology,” he said. “Don't forget, you and I have now come to an age where our bodies are saying ‘It's nearly over,’ and from a purely biological standpoint—go straight to the science and nothing else—the thing is to broadcast as many seeds as far afield as possible.”

Well, it's time we accepted that there is a biological factor in some of this behaviour. And because men get erections, they find that they can't press in close against another warm body with *quite* the same freedom that women can. And that's part of why the fingers are closed, which I think is sad. Because I have immense sympathy for men. Immense. And I cringe when I see what men go through sometimes and think how sad it is that women only think of men as fumbling bastards who have nothing on their minds but sex when often what they are trying to achieve is grace in the face of biology.

There's an amusing side to this in the theatre that I noticed when I was a young actor and watching other young actors. When you embrace in the theatre, your bum always sticks out! And directors are always having to say to the actors, "Come on, bring the bum in." But of course there's a reason your bum is sticking out: you're *terrified* of making pelvic contact. Well, when we come to the moment when we can say, "Hey guys—women—everybody—this poses a problem for males that we can solve so simply by saying—'It's a fact.'" Maybe if men stopped being afraid of the embarrassment factor of "inappropriate" erections, "inappropriate" erections would stop being a problem.

K: So, you're saying: we shouldn't make more of our sexual and physical differences than they are, but we should acknowledge their existence also.

F: You have to acknowledge it, and it is true of women as it is of men.

K: In her interview with you, Barbara Gabriel suggested that the homosexual is in a privileged position for understanding the myths of gender a society promotes.

F: Yes, I do think there are places where—probably because one is a homosexual—I do have the opportunity of seeing what it is women *are* enduring, that other men have failed to see; failed to see because there isn't the combination of close friend, lover, *plus* the homosexual.

And I think now that situation is being acknowledged, although in a very strange way, because people talk about this [1993] as being the year of lesbians and gay men. And about how there's been a lot of gender-bending, as they say, in the movies and plays recently.... A lot of to-do has been made of k. d. lang, and Boy George's comeback, and so on. I just think that a lot of that is superficial.... What I mean is, the perception is that we've solved a problem, or that it's over, or that we don't need to worry about the problems of homophobia and discrimination anymore. I think the problem basically still exists. Because we all seem to be willing to accept what k. d. lang is about doesn't mean there is any less masking of reaction to lesbians. It's a commercialized acceptance, not a true one.

K: I would like to tie this issue of commercialization in, if I can, with your discussion—in interviews with Barbara Gabriel and Terry Goldie—of cultural icons, especially with regard to *Famous Last Words*. What do you mean by cultural icon? Is a cultural icon simply a celebrity?

F: No, because I think increasingly, and this is sad, everyone, and everything, will become iconic, in the Andy Warhol "fifteen minutes of fame"

sense. But not necessarily in a bid—not right off the top—to be iconic, but simply in a bid to rule, in a bid to be the King or the Queen of the moment.

What I'm saying is that people like Lana Turner, Ava Gardner, Elizabeth Taylor—people of that era—were thought of as public whores. Well, today, someone like Madonna touts herself as a public whore.

κ: But she's her own whore....

F: She's her own whore ... but she's more than that. No matter what one discovers about her, the damage I perceive her as doing—and this is the danger of the icons of this time—is that it is pure iconography with no substance. Nobody deserves six million dollars a year: *no one*.

κ: Would you describe yourself as being a postmodernist writer?

F: I honestly don't know what that means.... With all due respect to Linda Hutcheon and people like that, who have delved greatly in that whole world, I have to find it in other books and discover what it means....

κ: Does "realist writer" seem a more apt label to you?

F: No, and I hope not.... Taken with its literary face, I would hope I'm not a realist, because a realist is probably the dumbest thing you can be.

κ: Could you elaborate on that?

F: Yes, but only to a degree. As we came out of the 1950s into the 1960s, there was this extraordinary revolution which took place. We entered this revolution through the medium of writers who started being known as Angry Young Men, and then the "kitchen-sink" school and so forth. And you got this "realist" aspect of writing which invaded the world of fiction and of theatre and films and everything became very grungy and very dark and very gritty and we explored a lot of so-called real lives. It was just like saying, "Of course, up until now we have *not* been exploring real life" [sarcastic chuckle]. Just because it was theatrical or satirical, it wasn't real.

So I'm saying all of this to get to that point: if by realist you actually mean an anchor in the *real* heart, the *real* spirit and the *real* turmoil of *real* life: then yes. Alice Munro is a realist in that sense, but ... a great artist in the writerly sense (and artist is a word she would absolutely loathe, I suspect, but it has to be used because that's what she is). There is art and there isn't, the touch is there or it isn't, and that's what catches you.... I guess it's those who write in the world of Alice Munro and Margaret Laurence but who fail to do it with their artistry, who are left—stranded—in mere reality. And that's what I mean by realism, and that would worry me—

κ: You wouldn't want to be considered in that category—

F: Not only that, but it doesn't interest me as reading material, it doesn't interest me as an exploration of life. I want edge. And I'm delighted by the theatricality of what's happening in theatre now—and in the largeness of, for instance, Atwood's last book *The Robber Bride*, which I have not yet completed. The bigness of those people, and the bigness of the gestures. It gives both comic edge and tragic dimensions.

K: So you see a certain theatricality coming out in recent literature—

F: Yes—theatricality being a very positive thing. The story has to hit you, and it can only do that with its theatricality—and so does a book when you open it—"All happy families are alike..."—or whatever it is that grabs you. Or what about John Irving's *The World According to Garp*, that marvellous opening line, walking with Garp's mother into the movie theatre and taking out a razor and doing terrible things to a man who molested her in the theatre—God!! [screams] Wonderful—it's time it happened! But ... you don't stop reading. Because it's theatrical.

K: Maybe "theatrical realism" is a good way to describe what you're doing, then—

F: It's an *interpretation* of reality. That's what fiction *is*—that's what novels and stories and plays *are* ... and that's what *art* is. It is the articulation of the ordinary in a way that makes the ordinary seem cohesive, when in fact it's not. It *clarifies* the messed-up lack of cohesiveness in real life.

Have you ever read *Camille, La Dame aux Camellias*, the novel? It begins with Armand coming back, from Egypt, where his father has sent him to get rid of him. Marguerite—or Camille—has died and the boy comes back, that's where it begins. And do you know what he does? He digs up her body ... to prove that she is dead. And that's how it opens.

K: Quite hair-raising.

F: It is hair-raising. *Now* when they do *Camille*... [he mimes a delicate cough]. I mean, when people think that someone dying of tuberculosis, has a slight cough—"We wouldn't want to over-do it, dear, catch their attention." Well, Marguerite Gauthier caught a lot of people's attention, and she's stayed in the imagination ever since she was created. For a reason: she has *edge*. I've just stolen one of Dumas' images. There's a little girl in my novel that I'm writing now, who, when she's eleven, has her first period. And when she goes to school the next day, she wears a red ribbon in her hair, which is a signal to her friends...that it's started. She's menstruating. Well, Marguerite Gauthier—and this is back in the 1840s—was a courtesan. And

Dumas wrote this wonderful thing: when she appeared at the opera, she always carried camellias, and the camellias were usually white. But when she was having her period, they were red, and that meant men were to stay away now. And I thought, God, that's very daring, for that period in time, to write that.... And I stole the signal. But it isn't just that detail.... It's the fact that Dumas got so close to her.

K: You drew on some aspects of your own growing up in your writing, and you have said that some family members saw it as a kind of invasion of privacy. How does the writer navigate that dilemma?

F: Well, the stories [in *Dinner and Stones*] about Bud and Neil are fairly close to the stories about me and my brother. And "Real Life Writes Real Bad" is my attempt to articulate my reaction to what happened to my brother. That is to say, to lay it to rest to some degree ... to lay the *unrest* in a place where I could look at it objectively and say, "That's what happened." And if you write about it, there are different ways of writing about it. You write about it in your journal, and that can be cathartic. But I don't think that there are aspects of making fiction that are cathartic. Fiction mustn't be written for that reason; there are rules. Somebody said—I think it may have been Thornton Wilder—"The worst reason to write of all is vengeance." Don't ever use your writing simply to get back at someone who did you wrong or at life for being difficult. Don't cheapen what you're making by founding it on motives such as "I'm going to seek revenge." When Thomas Wolfe wrote *You Can't Go Home Again* and *Look Homeward, Angel*, he was trying to exorcise the past. Trying to exorcise the process of growing up in this very difficult family situation, with very sad circumstances. But what happens in those books, even when he tried to get back at his mother, and wanted to expose his mother as being destructive: he writes this incredible character! She becomes one of the great figures of modern American literature. So the creative impulse overrides the spirit of revenge. If you really are an artist, as Thomas Wolfe was, vengeance loses its face.

For instance, I have taken a physical aspect from someone I know.... This woman, a favourite aunt, has passed through all of my fiction. She'd had a stroke when she was in her thirties, so one side of her face was frozen and she spoke out of the other side [imitating], in this kind of 1930s "tough guy" way, so everything she said had this kind of....

K: Edge.

F: Edge to it.... She was a theatrical being, whether she wanted to be or

not, because it was part of her physical makeup. Well, my aunt turns into all kinds of people: she's Rosetta in *Crazy People*, other characters. And she responded with great wisdom to the canon of Findley writing. She said to me, "You know, dear"—holding one of my books—"I've never read any of your books." She said "I don't think I know any of those people and I'm not sure I really care to. And I don't know what a homosexual is ... and I don't really care." Then her eyes sort of wandered over toward the window, and she said, "I really am proud of you." I think she was saying, "I know what you're doing.... This is what you *make* of us, but it isn't us." She had read it, and she was saying "You don't have to worry about what I know, about what aspects of this of are true. This is fiction." Whereas my mother and my brother and my father were always saying "What are you revealing about us now?" Well ... NOTHING! [laughs] How can you think that all these people are you? But on the other hand, the base is there, and why shouldn't it be? That's where the reality is....

κ: One last quote: you said to Graeme Gibson some time ago, "I've often sat down and tried to write a love scene between a completely normal man and a completely normal woman. And there's no way I'm going to do that without it turning out to be the biggest laugh of all time." Can you explain what you mean by this provocative statement?

ϕ: I think so. Basically all it means is: that as soon as sex becomes "literature," it starts taking on this other aspect. The sexiest thing is sex itself, but how do you describe it without falling back on synonyms and all this imagery of other stuff (because it's so screamingly funny) like waves crashing on the shore ... and the iconery of sexual pleasure. It all starts turning into "Her skin was like...", "His mouth was like..."

κ: There's such a stock of clichés—

ϕ: Yes, but as you fight your way through this jungle of clichés, trying to get to two people actually *doing* something together in bed—and be honest about it—then you very quickly come up against all kinds of barriers. Particularly back then, in 1971, when that comment was made. Which was when we were all trying to be more honest about the sexual revolution that had begun. Which meant people had to actually acknowledge who they were ... you couldn't hide behind all that imagery—it wasn't going to help you anymore. Either in real life, or in books.... So I just used to collapse—literally—across the table screaming with laughter and frustration: "There's no way I can describe this!" It was like those wonderful monologues that

Bob Newhart used to do. You know the marvellous one about tobacco? “You roll it up in a piece of paper and then you put it in your mouth, and then—what?! You set it on fire? Oh, sure, Bob!”

So, if you think, now I’m going to write about sex—male-female, male-male, female-female, dog-dog or whatever, whatever!—it’s only going to be Bob Newhart funny. Then, unfortunately, it took on a hideous look, because all the sex you got, in novels, short stories and in movies, was violent sex, because it was the only excuse to have sex ... grab the reader by the short hairs and say “I’ve gotcha, and you’re in here until this is over.” So then sex took on an ugly face. First it had this romantic face, then it had this chaste face of poetry, then it got this ugly face.

Now, I think sex is beginning to emerge as what it is, which is to say it is something real you can write about. I think I’ve come closest to succeeding in *Headhunter*, where it has both the horrifying edge of the clinically pornographic—and also the much sparser, sparer description of passionate sex. The best book for depictions of *real* sex between men and women, since about 1986, is Michael Ondaatje’s *In the Skin of a Lion*. It’s erotic and it’s never denigrating and yet it never *lingers* over the thing. It does what writing should do about all aspects of life: it puts it in front of you to the degree *only* that the story requires it ... and that’s where the artistry comes in.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who provided funding for this research in the form of a Post-Doctoral Fellowship. LK