

## INTERVIEW: Anthony Doerr: A Person of Letters

Kevin Breen



Every few years a young writer comes along whose debut collection of stories creates a sensation. Rick Bass's *The Watch* in 1989 and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* in 1999 come to mind. I would add a third to this recent list: Anthony Doerr's *The Shell Collector*, published in 2002. The stories in this remarkable collection have already vaulted Doerr, at the age of thirty, to the top ranks of short fiction writers. The stories are impressive for their maturity, their energy, and their precise, original language, as well as for their settings—a small island near Kenya, the Oregon coast, remote fishing locations in Sweden and Poland, the drabness of Ohio, small-town Idaho, and the wilds of Montana; their mastery of technical matters—he tells one story in first-person plural, tells another in which all characters are described en masse without names or descriptions; and their diverse tones—humorous, tender, searching, heartbreaking.

His stories have been published in *The Paris Review*, *The North American Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, and *The Black Warrior Review*, and have been anthologized in *The O. Henry Awards* of 2002 and 2003, and *The Best American Short Stories* of 2003. His first novel, *About Grace*, will be released by Scribners in the fall of 2004. Doerr served a fellowship at Princeton University, and was recently awarded the prestigious Rome Prize. He has even managed to get mentioned now and then in mainstream culture, an oddity for a writer of literary fiction: he was on *Martha Stewart Living*, and in an interview, first lady Laura Bush mentioned Doerr's *The Shell Collector* as one of the books she had on her nightstand.

Doerr attended Bowdoin College from 1991 to 1995, and received his M.F.A. from Bowling Green University in 1998. He currently lives with his wife, Shauna, in Boise, Idaho, and the couple recently became the parents of twin sons, Henry and Owen. This interview was conducted by phone, while Doerr stood holding one of his sleeping sons.



*Your prose, on the sentence level, is very impressive. Often it is readily apparent why: unusual and arresting word choice, precise verbs, no unneeded words, varied syntax. Could you talk a little about your approach to writing on the sentence level?*

No doubt, I spend the bulk of my time worrying about the larger narrative strategies in my stories—plot and characters, etc.—but the sentences are a labor of love for me. I can go over sentences a hundred times, just trying to make sure they sound right. And after a while, of course, you can get tired of the sound of your own prose. When I read over my stuff, I always pretty much want to make changes to it. My first drafts are not really clean, and for me a lot of the revisions are taking things out, and then I am trying to make the picture cleaner, for both myself and for the reader. I try to sharpen my vision, and then transfer it to the reader. First helping me to see it more clearly and then having the reader see it.

I don't really do exercises to improve my sentence work, but I have always kept a journal that has

always been a kind of proving ground for me. I have never even shown it to anyone. I used to try and describe something ten different ways, to invent a new way of describing things, so I wasn't using language that was already there.

*In several of your stories, you are writing about unlikely events. From the implausibility of a blind man handling very venomous cone shells, to a character chopping the hearts out of stranded sperm whales and then burying them in the sand, to watching a man consume huge amounts of metal. And yet these scenes are believable, because we sense no doubt in the writer. Can you describe the importance of the commitment of the writer to his story?*

For me, I use the tried and true method of magic realism in that you try to make the details pervasive, as when the hunter's wife dreams of animals. So I wanted to make it as real as, or even realer than, say, a countertop in a store. I've gotten letters and e-mails from people who have said they have had similar experiences, especially regarding "The Hunter's Wife," though that

doesn't mean that I necessarily believe it in my stories. As for the belief in the story, what I tell my students is that you really have to want to tell that story. And that is just as true for a simple, realistic story.

The Shell Collector *is filled with fascinating settings. The eastern coast of Africa. Liberia. The Oregon coast. Do you sometimes go to a place looking for a story, or does the story usually come after you have visited a place? Do you ever find the need to go back to a place for research?*

In almost every case I have been to the place. In *The Shell Collector*, I had been to every setting, except Liberia (featured in "The Caretaker"), and that was because at the time you couldn't get into Liberia. When I went to a place, I didn't really have a story framed, except maybe in the back of my mind. And then after I had been to a place and then started writing about it, I would supplement what I experienced with research and imagination. Sometimes a setting is as much a product of my imagination as it is a real place.

Some of that has changed, especially in terms of the novel, *About*

*Grace*. I went to Alaska three different times, and I named specific places—Anchorage and Eagle, for example. And I went back to the Caribbean after the shape of the novel was already written, but I never name the island in the Caribbean, which I think gives me a little more room to create. I don't feel I have to get everything exactly right—for example, I don't feel like I have to match a big storm in the novel to a real storm in a certain year on a certain date—but I least try to get the details, the botany, etc., right.

It is really interesting to me when a writer decides to pick a place, and then they try to build a landscape. I don't know if I do it in a real systematic way. But I do enjoy getting to travel and having the great privilege of reflecting on that travel and trying to recreate that world. It is a way to keep myself curious about the world. I do feel that sometimes a place can be too real, especially in a high-sensory impact area like New York City, and you can get too much information. Sometimes it is better to be away from the place and then you can fill in what you need.

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Interview

*“The Shell Collector,” for all of its effectiveness and apparent ease of telling, could not have been an easy story to write. It seems as though you had many potentially tricky artistic decisions to make. The point of view, for example, seems omniscient, yet limited to the mind of the Shell Collector. You never name the character; he is always the Shell Collector. Can you tell us a little about your process when it comes to making difficult decisions in a story? Do you let a story sit for a while? Do you let others read the story and comment?*

I wish I had a better answer, but I deal with it in agony. Every story kills me. I get to a point where I am stuck, writing seems like a horrible chore, and I have to grope in the darkness, through trial and error, and a lot of pages have to be thrown away. Early on, I was showing my work to more people, but I show it to less people now. Maybe it's because I am an instructor and there are less

people for me to show my work to.

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There seems to be less opportunity, and when you are writing a 450-page novel, I'm not sure how many people would want to look at it, aside from my wife and my mom. But I think it's pretty instinctual and you do develop a sense of what is right and wrong; it's something you just feel and might not be able to articulate.

I'm learning to sense what's wrong.

Now I'm in the fortunate position where I have an editor in New York and she does that. But I don't send her anything until I make sure that I have made every change in it, every improvement, that I can. I feel like I want to be proud of it before I send it to her. And usually for me sitting on it doesn't help. I'm usually working best when the story is really fresh and wet.

*Your stories, like Rick Bass's, are sometimes called mythic. Sometimes this is a compliment, and sometimes this is meant as a criticism, as though the characters aren't real, the dialogue isn't natural and the characters aren't fully fleshed out. Describe some of your thoughts about energy and passion in a story versus the desire by some readers to know every little thing about a character.*

It's not something I think about, in that way. I'm just trying to write the story I feel strongest about. I really

do like Rick Bass's stories, their energy and their

mythic power, and oftentimes I enjoy having the blank places in the story. I just read one of his new stories, “The Skull Gatherer,” in *Zoetrope*, and it's clearly not set in a real place, and I think that works for a lot of Bass's stories, like “The Hermit's Story,” which takes place under a frozen lake, with the swamp

gas igniting. Sometimes his stories work better on a metaphoric level, and I just don't see the world in that much of a metaphoric way.

*Is there anything particularly unique about the way you go about putting words down on paper? Do you need to be in a certain place, using a certain pen on a certain type of paper?*

I once read that Italo Calvino could write anywhere: on the bus, in doctors' offices, and I told myself that I needed to be like that. I try not to have a certain talisman that I need to write. When I am traveling, I like to go into public libraries and write. In Boise, I rent a small room

away from my home for \$300 a month and I go there to write, and it makes me feel as

though I am going off to work. And when I come home, then my wife knows it's okay to bother me. I guess I do like to work in the morning, when my brain is sharper and I feel less tired.

*"The Shell Collector" is omniscient. "For a Long Time This Was Griselda's Story" is told in the fairly rare first-person plural. In "A Tangle by the Rapid River," you have the more traditional third-person present-tense*

*story. Do you enjoy experimenting with different forms, and how much energy do you put into deciding POV? Does the story dictate how you are going to tell it?*

I guess three or four stories in, I started thinking about the shape of the story collection. Publishers nowadays are always trying to urge writers to make some kind of cohesive collection that they can market in some way as a novel, because novels sell better. I started to feel the strength of a story collection is that it can range and range widely, in terms of its delivery, the characters' ethnicities, etc., which seems harder to do in a novel. So, at some

point I made a conscious decision to make the collection as diverse as possible. I thought it

would make it more appealing.

A big influence was the book compiled by Anne Charters, *The Story and Its Writers*, which I was reading at the time. I really enjoyed reading all the different stories. It has everyone in it from Conrad to Kafka and so many others. It was such a joy that every time you started a new story, you had a new setting and you had to relearn to see the world, so I wanted to make my collection more like that and less

like a coordinated story-novel collection.

I frequently tell my students that there can't be any rules in writing, because every time you state a rule, some writer will break it and you will love the story. That's how "July Fourth" came to be written. A student asked me if it was possible to write a story where there wasn't a main character. So that was the start of "July Fourth," although, collectively, the Americans are the main character. I was also reading *The Virgin Suicides*, by Jeffrey Eugenides, around this time, which is told in the collective first-person POV, and that inspired "For A Long Time This Was Griselda's Story."

As I teach, I try to get the students to understand POV from sentence to sentence, even within a sentence: there can be tons of second-person sentences in a third-person story. How, for example, in one sentence you are in a reader's head, and then the next sentence you are outside that character's head. I think that is a more effective way to think about POV. I'm trying to learn that.

This approach also helps me in looking over students' stories. I can see if there are abrupt changes in the narrative distance from sentence to sentence, and this might be a clue why something isn't working. The student might wish to make

these abrupt changes, but at the least they need to be aware of how they are changing the narrative distance sentence to sentence.

*Upon first reading The Shell Collector, I heard echoes of both Rick Bass and Andrea Barrett. Bass because of some of the mythic elements and characters in the stories and because of the subject matter—nature and wilderness—and some of the settings. Barrett because of the use of science, as well as the precise quality of the prose. Could you talk a little bit about influences, what types of stories and writing you admire, and what you might have learned from reading certain writers?*

Yes, they (Bass and Barrett) were both huge influences on me, and reading helps me understand what kinds of stories are possible. When you read Kafka's "Metamorphosis," and then "Girl" by Jamaica Kinkaid, and then a Raymond Carver story, you see all the amazing diversity that is available to a writer. I just to love to read and some writers work their way more into your head. James Coetzee—he is such a clean writer—and Cormac McCarthy are two of the writers I keep on my bookshelf so I can read a few paragraphs to remind me why I want to be a writer. And there are many others that I wish I could write like. I can't quite say what influence those writers have on me, but some

definitely follow closer to my sensibility.

Reading is always a way for me to recharge myself. After sending in *About Grace*, after working on it for so long, it is such a joy to be able to read. I'm so glad it doesn't take three years to *read* a book.

*Some writers don't produce their best work until they are in their forties or later. I wonder if you could talk about finding your voice at a relatively youthful age.*

These are questions I sometimes talk about with my students. What percentage of your talent are you born with? What percentage is discipline? I do feel like I am getting better, that when I am fifty I will be writing stuff that is much better. I am flattered when a reviewer says that I am gifted, but I always think that story took a ton of work, and the amount of time I am putting into that story certainly doesn't make me feel gifted.

To use a sports analogy, Michael Jordan is 6'6", and there is nothing you can do to develop that, but at the same time he was always the last one in the gym. And then there are always those people, like Harriet Doerr—no relation to me—who

had her success much later in life. And then there is Coleridge, who wrote a lot of his best poems in his twenties. I'm not really sure that it is age-dependent, when the best work happens.

*You seem comfortable, even in your short stories, with longer, more complex works. "The Shell Collector," "The Caretaker," and "Mkondo" are all long, fairly complicated stories. Many short fiction writers struggle with the transition from stories to a novel. How at home did you feel in writing your novel, About Grace?*

They are just totally different challenges. For the novel, the first year was spent in total, abject fear. What if the thing collapses and I've wasted a whole year? What if it is flawed and you have to abandon it? The level of commitment is scarier;

you're definitely getting married, you're not dating. But I also loved working on something that long, where there is always

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something you can work on. You can work on just describing a table, or you can work on page 300 later in the book, where you may know what is going to happen. Or you can write a letter in the novel that may or may not find its way into

the final product.

I really enjoyed being in the longer narrative. In a short story you can read it in one sitting, which really keeps it more of a whole. When I would reread portions of the novel, I might not remember that the character was wearing a wristwatch, or I might not remember writing a portion. But then that's true for the reader, too, since they won't read the novel all at once.

Finishing the novel was such a challenge; it was such exhilarating joy when I turned it in, even though I will probably still go back to it and make changes. There's something about completing a novel. The whole experience was such a great challenge.

*In About Grace, your gifts as a writer—sensitivity to language, keenness of observation, awareness of the natural world—are on full display. I was wondering if you could talk a little about the natural gifts of the writer and those gifts that a writer must work to develop.*

Yes, definitely. I want to become like one of those accomplished pianists that can handle all styles. I want to someday write a love story. Or something really funny. Or a really good first-person story. I have all of these weaknesses that I want to shore up. After I have finished writing, and revising the manuscript, it almost becomes like I

never learned anything. I feel like I have to relearn how to do it again. It's almost like someone else did that. Confidence, I never really feel that. There are tricks I know, and things I have learned, and I can more quickly get myself to start up a new narrative, but in some ways I feel like I have to learn to write every time I start something new.

*The main character in About Grace, David Winkler, is a hydrologist who has dreams that see into the future, and he is a haunted, deeply troubled man, who, in spite of his education, is inarticulate when it comes to matters of the heart. Please talk about his creation, and the importance of choosing a character that will keep you interested as a writer.*

It wouldn't necessarily intimidate me if I didn't like my main character. You don't have to like your character, and forcing yourself to like him, I think, could create writer's block, where you are always worried that something is wrong. For me it was more organic, working out his character. David Winkler first appeared in a short story I wrote called "The Weatherman," and the novel became a challenge in developing his problems, his situation, that it could be extended over 400 pages.

*You were recently awarded the Rome Prize, which allows you to work for a*



*sustained period of time in Europe, and your next book is going to be a novel. Does this mean that you are less likely to write short stories and that you will be concentrating more on novels in the future?*

I don't know. I wish I could say. The Rome Prize allows me to work in Europe for about ten months. It is similar to the Princeton Fellowship, in that I will have an office and I will be teaching, too. I think it is going to be a novel, but

I've only got forty pages so far and it's lousy. I have published stories since *The Shell Collector*, and I could probably pull them all together to make a collection, but I want it to be cohesive in some way. *The Shell Collector*, in spite of its diversity, was all related around the natural world, and the next story collection will have its own theme.

There is such a challenge to writing the novel that I know I am going to go back and do that.



**Kevin Breen** has published stories in about a dozen journals. His stories are forthcoming or have recently appeared in *Other Voices*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Moment Magazine*, and *Natural Bridge*. He has published interviews with Charles Baxter, Rick Bass, and Jack Driscoll, and he received a Creative Artist Grant from the State of Michigan in 2000.