

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEWITT HENRY

by Debra Leigh Scott, editor and publisher of Hidden River Press

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1. Can you talk about the journey of this book? Why did you decide to write it? What was the process like for you, digging so deep into your own family memories? What do you hope to accomplish by this project? What do you hope people will bring away from reading this book?

The section of SWEET DREAMS called "Distant Thunder" was published by BOULEVARD in 1988 and subsequently won the BOULEVARD Fiction Award and a Pushcart Prize. That was twenty-two years ago.

I began by writing fiction and believing with my mentor, Richard Yates, in the notion of the objective correlative—that to express your deepest emotions you need to imagine lives different from your own; as an artist, you need that distance on material. I worked for years on my novel, THE MARRIAGE OF ANNA MAYE POTTS, based on characters who were life-time workers in our family's Germantown candy factory, and about whom my older brothers told stories around our dinner table. It was pure fiction. But when I finished, I realized that the characters and conflicts of my imagined working class couple actually mythologized my own parents' struggle and that that struggle was the true epic in my emotional life.

The novel had taken years to write and when it wasn't published right away, no matter how praised by Yates and other writers, the rejections broke my heart—my belief in fiction—and I felt that there simply wasn't time in life to speak the truth in lies, as it were. That in my case, my family history, our WASP privileges and pretensions in the 1950s, the secret of my father's alcoholism, and my mother's martyrdom in staying with him for our sakes (while sacrificing her ambitions and dreams for "self"), were the true story I needed to tell. And there were other needs, also, as I had to teach for livelihood and compromise my ambitions for the sake of marriage and my children once I settled in Boston. I was also growing through the culture shocks of the 1970s—Civil Rights and the new Feminism, for instance—and lived by different and more enlightened values than my parents had or were (I thought). I felt the need to connect to a past that I had rebelled against and jettisoned, and which neither my wife and children, nor my friends really understood. I wanted to recover a lost self and add it to my present in order to feel whole. It was also at this point that my father died.

So I began with memories of my childhood up until age 8. I could remember everything except for the figure of my father, any memory of whom I had blanked out, presumably, from terror. Memories of my father only began after he had submitted to treatment, dried out, and become the caricature of a man. This was the father whom I loved and hated during my adolescence. My mother, older brothers, and sister, of course, all remembered both his "bad times," and the times before I was born—the time of his rising career in Boston before he had been summoned home to Wayne by my ailing grandfather to save the Henry candy business. According to them, before this as a father, he had been wholehearted and present.

As I wrote about my childhood, I projected a larger book, which would be a documentary novel—literally "true," and yet imagined as an epic. There would be three parts. The part I had just finished, about me, would be expanded into my autobiography, following the pattern of say, Gorki's "Childhood," and exploring the classic topics of school, sexuality, discipline, religion, friendship and social awakening. But it would be preceded by the "autobiography of my father"—an idea inspired a little by Rosellen Brown's novel, "The Autobiography of My Mother."

I gathered all the facts that I could about my father's childhood and adolescence; about his education, about his relation to his own parents; and about his marriage and early parenting. I was searching for the seeds of his eventual breakdown.

I tried to imagine and portray the man he had been before I was born. My mother helped by

answering questions and offering her own version of his past. But I also drew on photographs, letters, home movies, and personal artifacts. I studied literature about alcoholism as a disease. I studied local and national history from the 1920s to 1950s. Eventually this section wanted to be a separate book, so I cut it, and with it the overt and eerie parallels between my father's life and mine.

The third section in this grand design was to be the imagined autobiography of my daughter, literally eight at the time, but which I would set in 2020. I would imagine and speculate, as in science fiction, about her coming of age and adulthood, about her memories of me and my life, and about her adapting and growing partly in reaction to the future as history. But this proved to be so far beyond my reach that I never began it.

Twenty-two years have passed since then. I have grown. Our world has changed. My marriage and life have been enriched. I have had a career as an editor and teacher. My children have grown. I published *THE MARRIAGE OF ANNA MAYE POTTS*. I published the series of mid-life essays that became *SAFE SUICIDE*. And what I thought of as the future then has now become daily fact.

The first manuscript of *SWEET DREAMS* (then called *TRIBAL SCARS*), had been finished at some 400 pages many years ago without a part three. It ended with my mother's death when I was fifty-two, rather than with my children's growth, my own aging, and the recent deaths of my brothers. Through four or five drafts, each of which I submitted for publication, I continued to tighten the prose and distill the story. With added perspective, I left out parts about me that seemed more self-indulgent than objectively significant, more memories for memory's sake than for story's sake (the weakest of these were based on notebooks I kept in graduate school). Eventually, I also cut part one—my father's agon—and focused on my own autobiography.

The challenge of art, I think, is to leave things out without losing them: the Hemingway theory of three quarters of the iceberg remaining submerged. I hope that in addition to my autobiography the finished book succeeds as a family history, and as more than a family history. I hope it captures time in its flight. I hope it captures its culture and place. I hope that by using my own story in the foreground that in the background I am able to suggest the lives of each of my parents, each of my siblings, and of all those friends and figures through whose lives I have passed. The richness of the book is both lateral and linear, and invites the reader's imagination, along with my own, perhaps, to follow *all* lives that we only glimpse in passing.

2. Your background is an interesting one; you've spent so many years involved in publishing and teaching literature and creative writing. Can you talk about your life in those areas?

When I graduated from Amherst College, where I had edited the literary magazine and written a novella as one of the college's first "creative theses," I was at risk to be drafted for the Vietnam War. I went on to graduate English at Harvard, and when I felt stifled there, to the Iowa Writers' Workshop, hoping to continue draft deferments until the magical age of 26. At Iowa, I worked with Richard Yates, who became a lifetime friend. I started *THE MARRIAGE OF ANNA MAYE POTTS*. When Yates left for Hollywood, I next worked with Nelson Algren, who saw me as a sheltered Ivy Leaguer and discouraged me. I got writers block. I returned to Harvard to finish my PhD (inspired by T.S. Eliot's example, I specialized in the English Renaissance and worked with Reuben Brower). I taught fiction writing for the first time there and struggled to keep writing the novel. By the time I finished my dissertation on *ROMEO AND JULIET*, the job market in the humanities had crashed, and it would be

another ten years before I found a full-time appointment.

Meanwhile, I taught composition part-time at Harvard, Simmons and Northeastern. I was living like Roskolnikoff in Harvard Square, when I encountered other young writers in the Plough and the Stars pub, where the bartender, Peter O'Malley (a classical music composer and law student just over from Dublin) suggested starting a literary magazine. This became PLOUGHSHARES, where I served as the editorial director and O'Malley as the publisher. Initially, we raised money from the bar itself, donors, and ads; then later from grants. I also married my life's partner, Connie, who worked as a head start teacher while I looked for work. Professor James Randall, publisher of his own small press, Pym-Randall, hired me as Prose-Writer-in-Residence at Emerson College in 1973. He had changed the English department into a department of Writing, Literature, and Publishing. This was a school that put creative writing first, and saw literature as serving imagination and style. However, I wouldn't be hired full-time there 1983. By then, mostly as a volunteer, I had built up PLOUGHSHARES. I had gotten grants for my own writing. I had started a state-funded trade association for literary publishers called Book Affair. I saw myself as a reformer of literary culture.

After Emerson's MFA degree in Creative Writing was accredited in 1986, Randall, who had been the architect both of the undergraduate BFA and the new MFA, stepped down. I served as acting chair, then as chair for four crucial years, during which time I brought PLOUGHSHARES to campus, with my former student Don Lee as Managing Editor and later as Editor. I had a free hand in making hires, both in the writing and literature faculty, designing curriculum, and developing the graduate program. We joined AWP, where I served on the Board and as President. I was a part of a larger transformation of Emerson from its primarily vocational emphasis in communications to an emphasis more on its liberal arts core.

After my return to teaching and writing in 1993, the WLP program has continued to grow and flourish under successive chairs (John Skoyles, Daniel Tobin), as has the school. I have taught, and still teach in all three areas: workshops in fiction and memoir, literature courses in Shakespeare and American Short Story, publishing courses in Literary Editing and Magazine Publishing. I can't separate these areas, which all involve a love of literature and what literature stands for, a way of making sense of each other and our lives.

3. Can you offer any advice to emerging writers, as they face this new and more hostile publishing environment? What are their best methods of making their work strong and unique, and in getting that work out into the world?

First of all write. Summon the music that only you can hear. Find peers, in and out of MFA programs, whose work you admire, and who share your dedication. Build a list of friends on Facebook and Good Reads, Linked In, and other social/professional media. Try to establish a publication record in print and on-line literary magazines. When you have a book manuscript, look for a good agent by networking with established writers, especially at such writers' conferences as Squaw Valley, Bread Loaf, and Sewanee. Settle down for the long haul (and meanwhile keep writing new work). If lightning doesn't strike with big trade publishers within a year, focus on small literary presses and university presses, send queries, and keep sending. Also try the first book contests, such as the AWP and Bakeless series. With small presses, be braced to become your own marketing and publicity department, rather than expecting them to have in-house resources. Prose writers, who in the old days expected to sell 2000-10,000 copies of a trade-marketed book, should now think like poets and set a realistic goal of selling 1000. Book in hand, you have to be resourceful and shameless in personally

marketing it. As a side-note, I have been telling students for years NOT to put their writing energy into starting their own literary magazines and small presses, but, bless them, many have. The motive has been selfless: to help others and to become a small part of the solution. For inspiration, I also recommend my anthology, **BREAKING INTO PRINT: EARLY STORIES AND INSIGHTS INTO GETTING PUBLISHED**.

4. What's next? Do you have another project on the horizon?

Near-term, I am guest editing the 40th anniversary issue of **PLOUGHSHARES** for fall 2011. Other than that, I like surprising myself. But I have a stalled novel-in-progress that I hope to revive about figures in the town government of Watertown, the Boston suburb where we've lived and raised our children. I have finished novella-length memoirs of each of my brothers, which combined with a revision of the imagined autobiography of my father, is the heart of a new collection called **FAMILY MATTERS**. Again I am treating our family's history like the House of Atrius, telling and retelling the outcomes of our lives, and experimenting with form.

5. The book launches in early 2011. Can you talk a bit about your plans for the launch? Are you available for readings and interviews?

I am going to AWP in Washington, D.C., at the end of January. Hidden River is planning a reading and celebration. I will also be on a panel about **PLOUGHSHARES**. After that I will be looking for readings in the Boston area, Philadelphia, Amherst, and Los Angeles. Of course, I teach full time until June, so traveling may prove challenging. I especially look forward to returning to the Philadelphia area, and to some sort of reading in Wayne, where much of this book is set.

6. Is there anything else you would like to say? Any words of wisdom from a long-time sojourner in this writing world?

I feel blessed to have partnered with Hidden River Press with **SWEET DREAMS**, as I did with Red Hen Press for my previous memoir, **SAFE SUICIDE**. I am particularly grateful for your close editorial attention, which prompted some small adjustments to style and clarifications of key points. For all my own teaching and editing, I have never been more expertly edited before. The result is a sharpened book.

Trust your nuttiness. Trust your talent and be tenacious above all. Put life above art, but art above self-gratification, pride, material gain or fame. You write because you have to.