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80

AN INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK BUSCH

Michael Cunningham

CUNNINGHAM: You've mentioned two types of prose writers: the frustrated poet and the storyteller. I know that's a generalization, but could you place yourself, roughly, in relation to those two poles?

BUSCH: I know I certainly started out as a frustrated poet, and I detect in my own work a gradual development toward an affection for stories. It has always been my belief that writers ought to write stories as if they were writing poems, and novels as if they were writing stories: to use the tactics of economy, synecdoche, and concision in general, that I would identify specifically with the poem and the story. I think that makes for wonderful language. I've also noticed in my own work, particularly with my most recent novel, which will be published in January. It's called *Rounds*, and it's a fairly big book which tells quite a few stories at the same time. I've noticed that I was having one hell of a good time telling the stories. And so the challenge for me now is to try to tell wonderful, exciting, and vaguely subversive, and at the same time thoroughly enriching, stories while trying to use the kind of language that I'd want to read. I guess what I'm saying is that I think I'm still learning how to write. I'm learning how to write novels.

CUNNINGHAM: You've called *Manual Labor* a short story that turned into a novel.

BUSCH: *Manual Labor* was in fact a 40-page short story, and six months after it was done, I continued to think of the characters, and decided that I had to do something about them. And so I wrote more about them. But it surely began as a short story. My novel *The Mutual Friend* began as a long short story about Dickens, and months later, my agent said, "This really must be a novel." And it turned out that she was right. Every time I write a story, I wonder if it's going to turn out to be a novel.

CUNNINGHAM: You use the word "music" a lot in reference to prose. I felt that *Domestic Particulars* had a musical quality to it.

BUSCH: I think that's very flattering. *Domestic Particulars*, in general, is a series of short stories, all about the same family, arranged chronologically. If by "musical" you mean the way the stories create certain meditations on certain aspects of family life, then I agree with you. At least, that's what I wanted it to do. I thought of the book in sculptural terms. I thought of the family in the center as an enormous, sloppy, three-dimensional sculptural object, and I imagined the book as an eye, seeing that object from every direction I could think of, every point of view, every tense, every maneuver I knew as a fiction writer at the time of the writing, in 1975 and

1976. When I think of music, I'm afraid I mean it on a more brutal and less intelligent level. I think of music the way Gregor Sampsa thought of his sister's atrocious violin music in *Metamorphosis:* it was ugly to the people in the boarding house and to his family, but to him it was the only source of nourishment available. When I think of music, I think of what sounds nice, what sounds beautiful, whether it is a description of a particularly ugly event, such as the cruelty of one human being to another, or an avoidable death, or an *un*avoidable death. The music of the language is what I'm concerned with, certainly in large part, because I believe that the way our senses are affected by what we read, the way our throat muscles want to move, the way, without our really noticing it, our lips tighten or loosen as we read, that kinetic response to language, is what I would describe as a musical transaction. I want all my writing, I want everybody's writing, to be in that sense musical. To make lovely sounds. Of course, also to make first-rate sense, to be scrupulously brilliant, penetrating, witty, analytic, and tell the ultimate truth about human life. Among other small matters.

CUNNINGHAM: Sherwood Anderson likened Gertrude Stein's work to "nails rattled in a box." That, then, would qualify as a kind of music.

BUSCH: Yes. Hers was a particularly ugly music, very often, although there are passages in *The Making of Americans*, her enormous novel, that are quite attractive. Now, music can sound like the rattling of nails in a box, it can set our hair on end, it can be unpretty, but, to a writer, extremely useful; and there are moments when you are writing that must be extremely unpretty, but captivating. I'm talking, finally, about making words, and sentences, and their sounds and their rhythms, serve the purpose of the writer as he confronts the people in his fiction.

CUNNINGHAM: Do you have a favorite among your own work?

BUSCH: I surely like *Domestic Particulars* very much. It's a book that I think, finally, is quite successful. Far more successful as a piece of writing than I had dreamed it would be. I love parts of *Manual Labor*, and parts of *The Mutual Friend*, and much of the new novel, *Rounds*. I like some of my stories a lot. In general, though, I don't enjoy my work a whole lot. It's only recently that I've been able to go back and look at *Domestic Particulars*, for example, and enjoy it. I usually hate what I've written for a long time after I've written it. I like some of it. Yeah, I like some of it.

CUNNINGHAM: I'd like to sidestep the one about "who has most influenced your work."

BUSCH: I can tell you absolutely.

CUNNINGHAM: Let's hear it, then. Why bother to sidestep?

BUSCH: Ernest Hemingway, who wrote some of the best dialogue ever

written, I suppose. He was in certain ways a writing jock, as I think of myself: neither of us awfully smart, both of us in love with writing and making things happen on the page. I learned enormously from Faulkner, whose shuffling of time and withholding of information *he* learned, I guess, from writers like Dickens and Emily Brontë, who are two writers I happen to adore. Dickens I consider the greatest English writer after Shakespeare. I am always impressed and inspirited by the work of Reynolds Price, a contemporary novelist who, both directly, in hortatory letters to me, and through the example of his work, helped me to open myself up to the idea of storytelling in a significant way. Hemingway, Faulkner, Dickens. That's not a bad pantheon.

CUNNINGHAM: Do you read reviews of your own work?

BUSCH: Less and less. I used to read them all the time, and be full of joy when they were nice, and heartbroken when they weren't. I'm learning to read them a good deal less, because there's always somebody going to say something cruel, and who wants to be treated cruelly? Except by one's friends, whom we assume mean it in a lovely way. I received a fairly nasty review, recently, from a man who attacked me for attacking him, because he had attacked John Hawkes. I didn't enjoy being lynched on Jack Hawkes's behalf, much as I like Jack. No, I try not to read them very often. I'm sometimes successful.

CUNNINGHAM: You're very active as a critic yourself.

BUSCH: I wouldn't say that. I have written one book about a writer I like, John Hawkes, and five or six literary essays that sometimes, dare I say, even verge on the scholarly, about Dickens and Melville and Malcolm Lowry and other writers whom I very much admire. But I don't think I know enough, and I don't think I write enough *of* it, to call my work criticism. I would like to call them essays, and just think that it's a writer waiting for fiction to happen, and so turning his attention to the work of his betters.

CUNNINGHAM: Angus Wilson used to talk about "that worst of all possible fates, the campus novel." You teach for a living. Do you try to keep the campus from seeping into your fiction?

BUSCH: My first novel, written not too long after I'd been out of college, was a campus novel. I guess you'd call it that, since it was about two college professors. Hell, it was about my two *favorite* college professors. And it was quite bad. But it wasn't bad because it was set on a campus. It was bad because I wrote it badly. It's never been published, and it never will be. John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* is a campus novel, I guess, and it reflects for me—much as I admire a lot of Barth's work and his charm—it reflects the abyss into which an academic can fall when he actually has the arrogance, as Barth had, or let us say, the *urge*, to make the campus the whole world. Literally. Now I hope it was a parody, but I've never been sure.

I think, very often, novels about college professors, by writers who are college professors, are bad because they're done by bad writers. And a bad writer could write *Robinson Crusoe,* or "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and make it bad. A bad writer taints everything he touches, and a bad writer is such because he has no imagination. A writer who has no imagination can't transform the realities he's confronting. So if you can't transform the college that you're writing about, or at, then you're going to write the usual story about committees, and deans, and petty adulteries, or *major* adulteries, and the small conflicts, which to anybody who lives on a campus are interesting, but are not one's whole life. The good writer, the writer with a significant imagination and a transforming prose, can make the college campus into a very magical place. I think *Lucky Jim* is an example of a so-called campus novel that's pretty good. And Pamela Hansford Johnson, whose prose I surely don't always admire, wrote a book called *Night and Silence, Who is There?* about a college campus, and it was pretty good. Amis confronting American colleges in a book called *One Fat Englishman* did it pretty nicely. Austin Wright wrote a book called *First Persons* set on a college campus, which was thrilling and fascinating. And Barth's *The End of the Road* is cruelly good. Oh, I think it can be done. And I think it could be done more successfully if the smart-mouth critics would stop saying things like "yet another campus novel." They don't say "yet another novel about merchant banking," or "yet another novel about rape or about espionage." But they always have time to say "yet another campus novel." I think if we all stopped saying that, and said, "Here is a novel that is good or bad, because of its transforming, magical prose," we could find some very good novels about college life. I guess some of the reviewers, who never hesitate to take our money for readings or lectures, need us as straw men. I don't know why. And I try not to care too much.

CUNNINGHAM: Could you talk a little about the research you did for *Rounds*?

BUSCH: *Rounds* is a novel about a pediatrician who, through malpractice, inadvertence, accident, and panic, permitted his child to die in a car crash. After the car crashed, he had to make a quick choice about whom to rescue first, his wife or his child, and he panicked. He worked on his wife first. She didn't need his help as much as the child, who he did not realize, he was permitting to die of internal bleeding.

I have a good friend in New York state, who is a pediatrician, to whom this, thank goodness, did not happen, but who was kind enough to let me spend days and days with him, on his own rounds. From early in the morning until late at night, visiting hospital wards and seeing patients in clinics and seeing patients dying of cancer. All children. It was horrible to go through. I never want to go through it again. But it was a crucial kind of research, which makes for a very cold-blooded kind of schizophrenia, ultimately. You go around gagging and sobbing and choking back tears as

you see little babies who are disfigured and in pain, and then you sit down at your desk, and you have them battered, and bleeding, and dying, and suffering because you need them to do that for your book—and you do it *coldly*. Which is finally, I think, what a writer does. He sacrifices a whole lot of lives for the book, fortunately, only figuratively—if he's lucky.

CUNNINGHAM: How much would you hate a question about why you chose that topic to write about?

BUSCH: It chose me. I've never chosen a topic for a novel. I don't do computer runs on topics that will attract readers, which some writers have been known to do. I write about what engages me, so *it* selects *me*. The practice of medicine, and the care of children, and the heroism of people I love, all came together and the topic said, "Now it's time." As the novel proceeded, it became less of a topic, and more of a fundamental aspect of the characters themselves. The book is, in a sense, about the fact of biology, and how people live with it, sexually, historically—how we behave as creatures who come from a gene pool. People who live in biological families, people who are part of animal life-cycles.

CUNNINGHAM: I wonder if we could tie that into Pynchon, and his notion of science as the final truth.

BUSCH: That's his vision. Pynchon's overweening vision is that one can make sense of contemporary life by seeing it in terms of scientific truth. I think there's much to be said for that synthesis of science and art, and I think more writers ought to be doing it, because Three Mile Island, and other small events in our lives, like Nagasaki, and Nazi Germany, and those nifty devices the CIA devised for making Castro's hair fall out, and their exploding cigars—all have taught us that we're living in an age that is dominated, not really by science, but by technology. It's a fact that we must deal with. We can no longer separate ourselves from the truths of science, or the madness of technology. I, fortunately, know nothing about science, and will not be the writer to help Pynchon in that major effort. Truly, my novel, *Rounds*, is not a scientific novel. I know about four and a half scientific facts. The rest was simply research and hard work. I lived with *Grey's Anatomy* and Nelson's pediatrics textbook for six or eight months, and what I couldn't find from them, or from calling friends or physicians, I made up.

CUNNINGHAM: You caused something of a stir in a recent workshop class of yours by suggesting there was a certain bogusness in the works of Flannery O'Connor. That's a good way to get hung in effigy at the Writers' Workshop.

BUSCH: I postulated that to see how my workshop would respond. They responded with all the anger and dismay and brilliant argument that I expected of them. I thought that on that day my class was spectacular. I was devil's advocate that day, in part, by suggesting—I'll use your word for

a moment—there was something "bogus" about her. I want to state that I think she's a great writer, with a capital G, and that, had she lived, she might even have questioned her beliefs. Had she done so, she would have become a writer for all time. She would have joined the constellation of great American writers. She still may get there anyhow. She's a marvelous writer and I love to read her. I was speaking of one story in particular that day, but I think that my remarks might extend to considerably more of her work. She has an easy out from life's contumelies. Surely she needed it, and I'm not the one to deny it to her. She had a system with which to confront the chaos of existence. I suppose part of what I said was based upon my envy; I have no such system. Like most people, I live a very shaggy life, and nothing organizes it except good luck and good will. I don't have her belief, and think, at times, her fiction may go awry in depending on religious vision to patch together existential irregularities, randomnesses, that could not otherwise be resolved. That's a mouthful.

CUNNINGHAM: Some critics of the Workshop like to point out how few major American writers ever formally studied writing. You, for instance, never did.

BUSCH: I sometimes wonder why people who are critics of the Writers' Workshop bother to be critics of the Writers' Workshop. I often wish they would devote their energies to feeding people in Biafra, and to helping arrange for armistices, and if they can't get up the energy to do that, then perhaps to see that students who pay good money for instruction receive it. To spend one's time being a critic of the Workshop seems to me to be wasting one's time. The Workshop has existed for forty years, and it's going to exist for forty more years, because it does its job very, very well, and it is a job that young writers wish it to do. As soon as they tell us to stop doing it, we will stop doing it.

Now, to respond directly to your question—no, I never took any writing courses. I didn't know that you could do such a thing. When I was in college, there was a fiction-writing course, but I wasn't writing fiction, I was writing poetry, and I never thought I would write narrative fiction. When it came time to go to graduate school, I went to Columbia to study 17th-century poetry, because I thought I was going to spend my life discussing 17th-century poetry with people. I didn't know there was such a thing as the Writers' Workshop. I didn't know that Iowa existed. Had I known, then, I would have quit graduate school and come here, because when I was at Columbia I was beginning to write fiction, and wanted very much to get some help. I really could have used it, and I think it might have saved me a few years of a rather oppressive loneliness: I knew no other writers. The Workshop is really good for people who want it. And the people who come here find that they want it and they stay here, or they find that they don't want it, and they go away. There is no intrinsic need, in

the soul of every writer, to go to one of the 104 graduate-level writing workshops in America. Certain people benefit from them, though. It would be like saying that there are many, many systematic and useful thinkers who never got a degree in philosophy. Yes, that's true, and so what?

CUNNINGHAM: You've suggested that the Workshop raise its expectations of its students, both in terms of work output and literature courses.

BUSCH: Yes. I am a Puritan, and I think that, *A*, since so many of our students must support themselves by being teachers, since the world is no longer in favor of paying writers to write, if it ever was, that we ought to help our students to know more, so that they can teach more courses. And we ought to, eventually, be helping them to learn better how to teach. That's a practical notion. *B.*, because I'm a Puritan, I believe in work. And I think the more a writer works, the more he grows. By work, I don't mean only writing, although I surely mean that; but I also mean reading, talking about literature, subjecting oneself to intellectual rigors that great fiction, and some significant criticism and biography, can afford. I think, that if I were a student in the Writers' Workshop, I would be asking my instructors to give me another year here. To give me an opportunity to take more literature courses. And then I would say, as one of the instructors to the student making that request, "The opportunity is here." We have a first-rate English department. There are a lot of wonderful courses that we can benefit from. So many students here write short stories. Well, there's an English Department course in the history of the short story, and it might not be a bad idea for a lot of the people here to take it. There are courses in criticism that might be useful. There are courses in the history of the novel that surely would be useful. I guess what I'm saying is that it's important for writers to remind themselves, from time to time, that the romantic notion of the artist who wanders around the world, thinking and suffering and, occasionally, writing a poem for us, or a story, is an insufficient idea. I think an artist is a laborer. That, incidentally, is the reason I called one of my books *Manual Labor.* I believe in writing as a form of manual labor. I think the harder we work, the more rewarding our work becomes, and the more rewarded we are.

Let me hasten to add that the good students in the Workshop, and most of them fall into that category, work awfully damned hard. I think we can, maybe, be useful to them, by suggesting things for them to read that will challenge them intellectually, just as what they work so hard at writing challenges them in terms of their talent.

CUNNINGHAM: Rosellen Brown, when she was out here, expressed some doubts about immersing yourself in writing, to the point where you run out of things to write about because what you do all day is either write or teach other people how to write.

BUSCH: I wish I had the opportunity to immerse myself so thoroughly in writing that I ran out of things to write. I think the problem for most writers is not that they sometimes don't have things to write about—sometimes you're arid, sometimes you're dry, for a month or a year—I think the principal problem for a writer is time to write. That's first. Second is the money to buy paper with. And, third, is not destroying his personal life in order to foster his art. But I think that's a problem all obsessed people share.

So I disagree with Rosellen, whom I revere in all ways. But what she defined was the way in which she wishes to live. I have great respect for the way she lives, because it produces a wonderful person, and wonderful writing. I like living in this environment. I also like going away from it, to refresh myself so that I can come back to it and not be stale at it. I can't imagine a rule about the way writers ought to live.