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Sarah Fay

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A LOWLY, HUMBLE BOOKWORM

A Conversation with Michael Silverblatt

SARAH FAY

On the surface, Michael Silverblatt's Bookworm is a nationally syndicated weekly radio show that hosts fiction writers and poets. But after listening to it once, anyone with an ear knows that it is an opportunity to learn how to read, listen, and engage with print culture via Silverblatt, the show's perspicacious and endearing host. Silverblatt created Bookworm in 1989 and has conducted what he calls "interview occasions" with thousands of writers, including Joyce Carol Oates, Carlos Fuentes, Maxine Hong Kingston, Salman Rushdie, Susan Sontag, Alice Walker, and Kurt Vonnegut.

In October, he visited the University of Iowa for a week of lectures, seminars, and discussions. Students hung on his every word and followed him around as if his love of books and reading were the life raft they'd been waiting for. He and I spent a rainy afternoon on a couch offered to us by a poetry student in the Writers' Workshop. For two-and-a-half hours, we discussed the future of reading in what the media refers to as our "post-literate" age. After being privy to his insights and enthusiasm, I left feeling that we shouldn't believe what we read in the press and that Silverblatt and Bookworm are strong evidence we live in a culture that's more than willing to sit down, take a deep breath, and enter the world a book creates for us.

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Sarah Fay: *Do you carry books with you everywhere you go?*

Michael Silverblatt: I carry books most places I go. Nothing stops me from reading. There was a period when I didn't want to bring so many books along with me because I've got a tendency to engage in a process that's kind of nutty. I'll start with the book I'm reading, but if it's a novel I'll say, "But what if I want to read some short stories?" So I'll bring along a collection of short stories. And then I'll think, "But what if I want to read a poem?" Then I'll bring a book of poems. And then usually I'll bring a magazine too. I'll also stock books in the pile in case I have to wait somewhere. It was a little bit odd to be carrying so many books places, so I stopped doing it for a while. But then I discovered

that there would be five or six matchbooks in my pocket. It was the unconscious: My life is built around reading, so when I was no longer carrying books I had to replace it with something else. I would take matchbooks to keep up the practice of carrying so many books.

SF: *Norman Mailer famously called you “the best reader in America.” What’s distinctive about the way you read?*

MS: I’m not alert to what’s going to happen. Because reading is such an immediate experience for me, I read what’s on the page without anticipating what’s going to be on the next page. I don’t anticipate turns in the plot that would be obvious to someone else pages ahead of time.

SF: *Do you think people in our culture in the twenty-first century have the attention span for that?*

MS: Whether people think a lot of their intelligence or very little of their intelligence, both types are unwilling to read without comprehension. People have a low tolerance for it. But so much of literature requires that you understand what you’re reading later or gradually, if at all.

SF: *How did you develop that tolerance?*

MS: That happened to me through Gertrude Stein. I had a fascination with a musical that was based on her text called *A Circular Play: A Play in Circles*. I saw it in junior high, and it was completely bewildering. It alluded to content that never defined itself. I wanted to read her right away. I went to the library and borrowed an anthology that included *Four Saints in Three Acts*. I read it to my father and he sat still even though it was, in many ways, nonsense. I enjoyed reading to him something we both didn’t understand. We couldn’t fight with each other if we were talking nonsense. We couldn’t say anything that would rile or upset one another. He was an awfully good sport. In addition to taking me to the library, he actually listened as I read, “There’s pigeons on the grass alas,” or the section that goes, “Letting

pin in letting let in let in let in wed in dead in dead wed led in led.” I’m not quoting directly—we can look at the passage—it’s so great and so beautiful. And neither of us knew what it was.

Gertrude Stein introduced me to the experience of reading hundreds of pages without having to involve myself in the sense of them. They were delightful and funny and you came to know them gradually and some came into great clarity and relief as you knew them. Others would never be resolved into clarity but were fascinating nonetheless. It was my first experience—and a very good one—with difficult literature. But unlike in “The Wasteland” or Joyce, there’s no work to be done. No references to track down. You come to understand it by letting it roll over you, letting it happen. It’s an unrolling panorama of language and it’s just spectacularly pleasant to experience.

SF: *Have you always had an affinity for difficult literature?*

MS: I didn’t mind writers who never needed you to know, like Gertrude Stein, but I resented writers who wouldn’t tell you what you needed to know. It took me a good seven years to read Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* because it seemed like you could only read it by having read it. You’d have to get to the end of it and then go back to Benjy’s section.

SF: *How did you develop patience for those kinds of books?*

MS: It came slowly. I learned that it was a different kind of reading than the Gertrude Stein kind of reading. Instead of unrolling before your eyes, with Faulkner you had to read in anticipation of an understanding that would arrive gradually and then require that you go back to the beginning.

SF: *Do you often reread books?*

MS: I’ll reread a book to see how well constructed it had been, so that everything that came as such a surprise before is now inevitable. I like to see how it’s all been foreshadowed, how the structure has been

built to accommodate what will eventually break the surface to reveal what has been subterranean.

SF: *Bookworm's popularity seems like an anomaly in what people call our post-literate age. How did it start?*

MS: I was never thinking about this as a job or career. I was at dinner one night and got to talking to a woman named Ruth Hershman, now Ruth Seymour. She'd just come back from Russia, and we started talking about Russian literature—Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Pushkin. The other dinner guests were showbiz people, and they couldn't believe what we were chatting about. A publicity manager said, "I don't fucking believe it. There's Mikey Silverblatt from Brooklyn and Ruthie Hershman from the Bronx, and they're talking fucking Russian literature." And we were! And at the end Ruth said to me, "You know, we've always wanted a book show on KCRW, but every time we've tried we either get someone who knows everything and they're dull as dust, or we find someone who's passionate but knows nothing. You seem to be encyclopedic and passionate. Would you be interested?" And I honestly would have said no, except that I said, "Let me think about it, and we'll talk." While I thought about it, I began to realize that the public relations job that I had and which wasn't right for me was also preventing me from reading. The reason I'd gone so crazy talking about Russian literature with Ruth was that I hadn't had a literary conversation in months and months and months. I thought I was going to die. Well, not die, but I thought that without literature my life wasn't really meaningful to me. I really couldn't stand to live that way.

SF: *Did you ever worry that the show wouldn't last?*

MS: Everyone said this show couldn't possibly last. Even I didn't think it would. But we were immediately on the web and we had archives and pretty soon anyone could hear it at any time. And then lo and behold, magic, presto, there's the iPod and the iPhone, and people are getting the show in more and more places, all over the world. Who'd

have thought a bookworm, a bookworm! A lowly, humble bookworm, like the mice in Cinderella trying to carry that key up the stairs and being pounced upon by Lucifer the cat. I know my sensibility is way too Disney, but that's when I grew up.

SF: *Why do you think Ruth Seymour was willing to take a chance on you?*

MS: If I didn't have that crazy yarning ability to speak in winding and full sentences that can nevertheless be understood by people, I wouldn't be on radio. I don't have a radio voice. If the general manager of my station had not taken the content as being more important than the sound, she wouldn't have offered me the show. And if it weren't for KCRW all of this wouldn't have happened. They won't spend more money on the show, but they've been diligent about widening the possibilities of how it's received.

You might not be aware of this, but radio has something called Arbitron that rates the audiences we attract. NPR has a demographic above forty years old, ours went down to above thirty, then down to above twenty, and now our station has a demographic of teenagers too. At fundraising parties, I'd meet people who were in their fifties and sixties, and they'd be saying to me things like, "You make my life a little bit more worth living." And I thought, "Don't hold me responsible for that." But now it's young, old, white, black, Latino, Asian, gay, straight. It's amazing. It's thrilling. Once I substitute-taught a class that John D'Agata was teaching at Cal Arts, and one of the kids said to me, "I've been listening to you for as long as I've known how to read." And I thought, "Wow, that's probably true!"

SF: *You try to read the complete works of every author you interview. How long have you been doing that?*

MS: I wanted the show to be a real exchange about books. I didn't want to wing it, and I became very aware of how much reading I had to get done. For the first five years, the guarantee was that I would have read the book at hand. I was working full-time jobs and did the

show the way a person does as a volunteer for the local public radio station, with occasional expenses covered but no salary, almost entirely as community service. I didn't start reading the complete works of each guest until the Lannan Foundation grant gave me the freedom to do that kind of reading.

SF: *Which author did you first read the complete works of?*

MS: Dickens was the first.

SF: *Was this in college?*

MS: I was around twelve. I was very impressionable, and I read that someone had died laughing while reading *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens himself was proud of this. I would pick up *The Pickwick Papers* and I would laugh and laugh, hoping that I wouldn't be able to stop laughing. It was forced, but I did fall in love with *The Pickwick Papers*. Then at a summer job for the post office in Gracie Station I earned enough money, with my parents chipping in, to buy a complete Gadshill Dickens. It was bound in Half Morocco. I never was someone who went in for antiquarian books. It was an anomaly. I don't have a library of expensive and rare editions, except for that one Dickens. I read everything that was in the Gadshill edition. There's more Dickens still, but I didn't know that at the time.

SF: *Were you upset when you found out?*

MS: Over the years you come to know that what we consider The Complete Anyone doesn't include what was published posthumously, or what was discovered later, or all of the stories published in newspapers or magazines.

SF: *Who was next?*

MS: Dostoevsky—in high school.

SF: *So, have you been teaching yourself to read more deeply over the years?*

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MS: I've been teaching myself how to have the stamina to sit still. When I'm starting a book, I try not to read in bed. I read a hundred pages at a time and don't get up. At the end of a hundred pages, I'll go and have lunch. But I feel that it takes a hundred pages to be gripped by a book, so I try to read them in one sitting.

SF: *How did you discover that?*

MS: Trial and error. I didn't know anything about it. I was a good student but not a diligent one. For many people, that kind of diligence comes when they prepare to take their oral exams. But I left graduate school before I had to take an oral exam, so I never had to find out if I could do concentrated stints of more-reading-than-is-humanly-possible. It wasn't until I had the show that I read voluminously, and that was how I trained myself. First, a hundred pages at a time. Then I would see if I could read two hundred pages at a time. Then I'd see if I could read *War and Peace* in four or five days, because wouldn't that give me a really thrilling and unusual aerial view of the whole of the book, a book many people stretch over an entire summer vacation or two or three months? I thought that would really give me a sense of the shape of the novel. I'm aware that my experience as a reader is not like other people's. I don't know how someone carries a book in his or her mind over the period of several weeks to a month. I get too hungry and excited.

SF: *We keep hearing how we live in a post-literate age and no one reads anymore. Do you ever worry that one of your guests won't draw a large enough audience?*

MS: There had been a tribute to the great Polish Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz at a nearby college, and all sorts of people were brought in: other Polish poets, critics like Helen Vendler, American poets like W.S. Merwin, Robert Hass, Robert Pinsky. And I thought it would be interesting to do a four-part series on the life of Czeslaw Milosz narrated with his voice reading poems and with different people telling parts of the story: his childhood in Poland; the arrival of the Communists; his move to Paris; his interactions with the surrealists

and his breaking with them over issues of party politics; his move to Washington DC, and the years of dealing with diplomacy during which he wrote the first major book that said “the left is wrong”; and his move to Berkeley, where he published poems clandestinely and was awarded the Nobel Prize. I thought this was a super show, an amazing thing to be able to bring to people about a whole life, fully lived, with fascinating aspects about religion and politics and truth, and the obligation to speak it, and when to hide and when not to hide. “Michael,” said my general manager, “you do a great show. Do you really think you have an audience for four weeks with a Polish poet?” I said, “Listen to the show and see if it will interest people for four successive weeks.” And even before she got the tape she called me on the phone and said, “What am I thinking? You know your audience. I trust you. I’m sorry to have said that to you.”

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SF: *But do you ever worry that Bookworm is an endangered species?*

MS: I’ve been told so many times by people at NPR that in order to get an arts story covered during any time when there’s big news, it has to compete with the big news. So if a country is being invaded, the arts story had better be about artists painting in AIDS-infected blood or it’s not going to get on the air. There are people who work at NPR whose work I respect a lot, but I do feel about the arts what William Carlos Williams said: “Men die every day for lack of what is found there.” I believe that. I believe that if you are working in a place where they say, “No, there’s too much news today. No arts coverage,” you either protest or you quit the job. I believe that what I do is try to create something that might be beautiful or what passes for beauty in a difficult time, and that bringing this kind of news demonstrates to people how one can cope in the midst of nearly constant catastrophe.

SF: *Have you ever been disappointed in an interview?*

MS: I did an interview by phone with Toni Morrison because there was no other way at that time. Since the Nobel Prize, she had to con-

trol her private life and couldn't go to an NPR station or use an ISDN line or let an engineer come to her house, so we had to talk on the phone. She'd essentially refused everyone else. I called her and I said, "I don't care about the film *Beloved*. What I'm interested in is the aspect of the novel that you would never expect to make into a film. In other words, what is there in a novel that wouldn't come to a film except under the most extraordinary, sensitive, artistic circumstances?" She said, "That's a great subject. I would love to talk about that." It was a wonderful interview, but you can hear all kinds of sounds that might have been dangling earrings or ice in her drink. Under any other circumstances—that is, if it weren't Toni Morrison—the interview would have been un-airable.

SF: *Have you ever felt like you completely blew an interview?*

MS: Once I did an interview with people who were putting together a book of writings by people with AIDS, and the book was being published as a loose-leaf notebook in tacit acknowledgement that it couldn't be finally bound yet, that there'd be a lot more writing. And I lost it. Tim Miller was there, and I choked. I believe in dead air, in silence, but I did get called in afterwards—one of two times I've been called in to my general manager—and she said to me, "Michael, on some level it's show business, and the show must go on. You can't get so moved that you can't speak. It just won't work." She suggested that I wait before doing more things on social issues. I was perfectly fine with fiction and poetry of all sorts of intensities, but this seemed to stymie me.

SF: *Is there a writer you wish you'd interviewed?*

MS: I would love to have spoken to Eudora Welty before she died, I really would have. But by and large, most of the people I've wanted to interview have made their way to the station, or I've been in New York when they've been in New York. Most of the people I would like to talk to are available to me eventually.

SF: *It's fortunate that NPR exists and that Bookworm is downloadable on the Web. Why isn't the show syndicated on every public radio station in the country?*

MS: I know you think—and I think too—that NPR is the most literate thing around and the most articulate. They are, but they're not confident that they have an audience for a show like mine. I try to tell them that the talk is what's interesting, not the particular book, that the person doesn't have to read the book, that it's like an imaginative adventure. Many stations have picked up the show, but many more haven't. It's strangely much more likely to be picked up by a small town than by a city. I don't know why. I know in New York there's a difficulty because they like to think that a literate book program couldn't possibly be coming from Los Angeles when they themselves don't have one. But in L.A. you're constantly in your car, constantly traveling, and you constantly have the radio on. When you get back to the office, you turn it on on the computer. But in New York, most people listen to the radio in the morning to hear about traffic and weather. It's not a ritual the way it is in L.A. L.A. has some of the best radio in the country, and I'd say that KCRW is the best radio in L.A.

SF: *Do you feel like the show has an impact on the American reading public?*

MS: People listen to it. People in publishing care about it, and it has proven to sell books and create an audience for a book. To my mind, these are all part of the story. I feel like I'm in Oz when Glinda kisses Dorothy, because I never knew what to do or what to be or how to be anything, and none of the stuff that I'm describing to you involved more than being, than diligently developing, this strange person I am.