

A CONVERSATION WITH [SHEILA HETI](#)

INTERVIEWER: [SPENCER GORDON](#)

*[Sheila Heti](#) is an internationally acclaimed fiction writer whose books have been translated into German, Spanish, French, Dutch and Serbian. In 2002, she published the story collection [The Middle Stories](#) (McSweeney's Books), and in 2006, she published the novella [Ticknor](#) (Farrar, Straus and Giroux). [Le Figaro](#) wrote of her, "Sheila Heti is a writer who resembles no other, triumphantly classical and discordant at the same time. She obeys no law but that of her own pleasure in literature." Her writing has appeared in [Esquire](#), [The New York Times](#), [Brick](#), and many other publications, and she regularly conducts interviews for [The Believer](#). She is the recipient of numerous awards, grants and residencies, both in Canada and abroad. She is also the creator of the popular lecture series, [Trampoline Hall](#), at which people speak on subjects outside their areas of expertise. It runs monthly in Toronto and has sold out every show since its inception in 2001. [The New Yorker](#) praised the event "for celebrating eccentricity and do-it-yourself inventiveness." She is also the creator of the blogs [I Dream of Hillary](#) and [I Dream of Barack](#), which collected hundreds of sleeping dreams people were having of the candidates during the primary season. Press for the project was extensive, and included [CNN](#), [The LA Times](#), [The New Yorker](#), [The Chicago Tribune](#) and [The Washington Post](#). She regularly collaborates with other artists: she played glockenspiel and korg during [The Hidden Cameras](#) 2007 European tour; appeared in [Margaux Williamson](#)'s 2006 film, [Teenager Hamlet](#); and played the role of Lenore Doolan in [Leanne Shapton](#)'s recent novel, [Important Artifacts](#) (FSG), a fake auction catalogue. She is currently completing several books, including *The Chairs are Where the People Go with Misha Glouberman*, a self-help book titled *Choose Your Own Past*, and the novel *How Should a Person Be?**

The following interview took place on December 15th, 2009, at Beaver Café in Toronto.

Spencer Gordon: Before I read your books or knew you as a fiction writer, I had read and enjoyed a number of your published interviews. What do you look for in a thoughtful, successful interview? Are there any models or journalists you admire and wish to emulate when researching and devising questions?

Sheila Heti: I definitely do a great deal of research. I read everything I can that's been written about the person, everything I can written by the person, if they're a writer—basically find out as much as I can about the subject first. That's the most important thing. Sometimes people conduct interviews and they don't know *anything* about you—that's awful. I just like asking questions in general, really; finding out how people think and how they approach or situate themselves in the world. With everyone I talk to, there's usually a very specific reason I have for wanting to talk to them. I interviewed actress [Charlyne Yi](#) earlier today, and in talking to her I felt that her work had something aesthetically in common with the work of people whom I admire in Toronto, and I

hadn't seen any Hollywood or mainstream celebrities or personalities expressing those same values. So my political motive in talking to her was to get her to express those things, to get her to be a mouth-piece for the people around me. It was like I was using her as a character, in some general way. It's different for everybody, but that's one way to think about it. One of the reasons I like interviews so much is because I read so many when I was younger—[The Paris Review](#) interviews in particular. When I was a teenager I read them constantly. I always loved the form. I like hearing a person speak for herself, as opposed to as in an article, where a person is spoken *for* by a journalist. But because I edit so heavily, and move things around, I really do end up *using* that person—there is a lot of fiction in it. It looks so pure, you think you're just getting the person, but just like in an article you're getting the interviewer's perspective on the person, though it's harder to see. It's more of a lie.

SG: Was this something that you saw at work even in *The Paris Review* interviews?

SH: No, in those interviews the interviewer isn't so much of a presence—they seem to be trying to make themselves less of a presence. But I like showing a conversation.

SG: I can see that appreciation of conversation in your *The Believer* interviews. Is that something the editors encourage? What kind of relationship do you have with *The Believer* in terms of how they edit your work, or who you end up interviewing for them?

SH: Usually they cut; they don't often re-order. I had read a number of their interviews before I began interviewing for them, so I knew they allowed a certain flexibility of style. I interviewed [Vendela Vida](#), the interviews editor at *The Believer*, when she was here in Toronto. After that I wrote her and asked and she said yes. But I worked really hard on that interview because I knew I would want to then interview for *The Believer*.

SG: Why were you interviewing Vendela Vida?

SH: She was launching a book—[Let the Northern Lights Erase Your Name](#) (HarperCollins 2007)—and her publicist asked me if I would interview her on stage, at [The Gladstone Hotel](#).

SG: I had always assumed it was through [McSweeney's](#). That there was some sort of land-bridge!

SH: No, not so much. Though possibly the reason the publicist asked me to interview Vendela was because of my connection to *McSweeney's*. Anyways, they don't tell me who to interview, they just ask me who I want to interview; or if I think of someone I want to interview, I come to them. The only time they gave me any direction is because of this film issue they have coming up, and they needed another woman interviewed. Then I thought, oh, Charlyne Yi, even though I probably wouldn't have considered her for an interview if they hadn't approached me.

SG: Who does Charlyne Yi remind you of here in Toronto, in terms of acting or theatre or film?

SH: Well, she's a comic ... my friend [Margaux Williamson](#), the work of [Amy C. Lam](#) and [Jon McCurley](#) ... she's not your typical Hollywood woman, for example; she doesn't share any of those typical values. Those were some of the people I was thinking of.

SG: Speaking of people like Margaux Williamson, I was wondering if you'd tell us a bit about [Production Front](#), and what you've been up to.

SH: Right now we're fundraising for [Ryan Kamstra's](#) band [Tomboyfriend](#). They've made and recorded an album, and they have to pay the sound engineer to mix it, but that costs two thousand dollars, and they don't have two thousand dollars. The basic premise behind The Production Front is that we don't just want to make our own work, but we want the artists that we like to be able to make their work, too. But not only that, because we did that [Lawrence Weschler](#) event and that wasn't about fundraising. It's a way for Margaux and I to have a conversation about art, in public. With other people, too ...

SG: Other performers, or audience members, or both?

SH: Both! The first show we did was in The Berskshires in Massachusetts, at the [Edith Wharton house](#). I was with [Misha Glouberman](#) in New York for some business, and I met this rich couple on a terrace at a café, and they started talking to me. After looking through my website they asked me if I'd like to perform at the Edith Wharton house. This rich man was the head of the board, or

something, and the Wharton house (this huge mansion) was losing money, and they somehow thought that reaching out to a younger audience would be great, so why don't I curate something?

SG: Was this the performance that everyone walked out on?

SH: Yeah, exactly, there were only three or four people who sat through to the end.

SG: So [Edith Wharton](#)'s ghost was hanging over the audience, quietly weeping?

SH: She might have enjoyed it, actually; I think her ghost would have liked it more than all the other hundred-year-old people in attendance.

SG: So was this mass walk-out simply due to age difference?

SH: It was an age difference as well as a class difference; these were rich people. And it was also a cultural difference. For them a night out of culture would have been a night at the opera, or a [Eugene O'Neill](#) play. I'm just assuming, though. Jon McCurley and Amy Lam—collectively known as [Life of a Craphhead](#)—did a comedy set that lasted forty-five minutes, which was *way* too long, and that's when everyone walked out. When we came back after intermission, everyone was gone.

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SG: It's been nearly nine years since your first book *The Middle Stories* (House of Anansi Press 2001) was published. How has your perspective on that particular work changed in the intervening period?

SH: I feel a bit more mystified by it now; reading it right after it came out, I only saw everything I didn't like about it. Now, I don't read those stories very often; I barely even look at them. But when I do, I get a weird sensation about that particular time in my life—it seems so clear to me. How different the factors were. It makes me realize that that time was never easier than it is now; there were just different factors, like different tones or smells. I'm aware of that, but the *me* in all that seems very opaque. I can see my world from the outside, and what I was engaged with, but I can't see me from the inside from reading the stories.

SG: So it's like a time capsule, but rather than emotional or interior, it's one that recalls the material *what* of your situation.

SH: Yeah, I can visualize myself on the street, and in my dad's basement, and all the various factors of my life, and even what mood I was in. But I don't really remember ... the stories don't give me access ... it's like looking into a mirror, but you can't quite see yourself—it's like looking into a mirror, and the only thing that you *can't* see is yourself. That's how I feel when I read those stories.

SG: What's the most major surprise that comes with re-reading? You said that at first you only saw its flaws—what's happened to your impression of the stories over the years?

SH: If I'm surprised by anything, it's by how *good* they are. I remember reading at the time and thinking that it was a good manuscript, but not such a good book. But now I think it is a good book. I don't know what value it has for the world, but I certainly don't have any shame about it. There are points in your life when you write something and then later feel shame about it. I definitely don't feel that way about *The Middle Stories*. It's not like reading diary entries at all; sort of like the opposite of that.

SG: They're certainly not personal-sounding; they're not giving me a sense of who this person, this author, is. In that way they're sort of timeless.

SH: I'm happy about the fact that you read those stories and you didn't get a clear sense of who I was, or am. I'm proud of that.

SG: There's a huge change in the way you wrote between *The Middle Stories* and your second book, *Ticknor* (House of Anansi Press 2005). How do you think you improved as a writer between the two books? What did you learn about your own capabilities? Did you have any mentors or teachers who helped you improve your craft?

SH: I never had any mentors or teachers at the time. Now I do. I consider Margaux and Misha, who are both my collaborators, to be the closest things I've had to mentors or teachers. I interviewed

[Dave Hickey](#), and it was such a long interview. We're still in touch, and his words and advice repeat in my head all the time. That's the closest thing I've ever had to a mentor, but that came really late, like when I was twenty-eight or something. I've never studied writing, either. But somehow I learned how to make things better. When I wrote *The Middle Stories* I only knew how to make things, but through writing *Ticknor* I learned how to make things better.

SG: That reminds me of something you said in another interview: "It's a lot to say and write something at the same time. It's OK for authors not to say anything with their first book". Do you feel that with *Ticknor* you were saying something *more*, or that you had more to say than in *The Middle Stories*?

SH: Yes, I had a really specific question in mind. I don't know if it necessarily came out in the book, but my thought behind writing it was 'is this a life worth living?'—the life, that is, expressed through *Ticknor*. The more that I think about that book, the more that I think it could potentially say more than my first. I don't know if *The Middle Stories* said anything, but *Ticknor* can be seen as an allegory of Canada and the States, where *Ticknor* is Canada and Prescott is America. That just works so well. This was a realization that came out while editing. And you can't edit unless you have something to say. How can you decide which direction to take in your editing unless you have some sort of aesthetic and intellectual purpose behind it?

SG: Like you've clarified your intentions to yourself; that you know what you're doing beyond pure experimentation, beyond the desire to simply produce for its own sake?

SH: Well, in *The Middle Stories* I had a formal idea of what I wanted to do, but that was it—just a formal idea. And it's not to say that formal ideas don't say anything, I think they say a lot, but they don't say something succinct or articulate but something very complex.

SG: Can you list a few more examples of *first* books—novels or collections of stories—that follow this pattern, that don't seem to say as much as the books that follow them?

SH: I always think of [Jane Bowles'](#) *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), which was her first book, and sort of her last. Was *Alice in Wonderland* Lewis Carroll's first book? In any case, I was reading *Alice in*

Wonderland the other day, and it's just *so* Victorian, and I suddenly understood how it so perfectly expressed its own time. Here's this child who needs this kind of play and freedom because she lives in this Victorian household which is so restrictive. I saw it as the unconscious, un-lived life of Victorian children, as opposed to childhood in general. I think when people read the book now, they think, oh, that's what childhood is all about, it's full of fancy, but I don't think that that was the case when the book was written. The further away in time you get from any work, the more you can see the culture in it. When a book is written today, only the bad ones look like their culture, whereas the good ones look like their culture much later on.

SG: That reminds me of something [John Ashbery](#) said, along the lines of "the better your art is, the harder it is to talk about". When something is so purely cultural or historical, when we can explain it away to a degree by saying, *it's so early 80's* or even *it's so Victorian*, then there's a degree of bafflement and complexity lost from the work. So if you could rocket back in time, and have everything unfold as it did in terms of publication, would you delay the release of *The Middle Stories*?

SH: I think it was the right time ... why would I wait?

SG: Well, a friend of mine was listening to a talk by [Ken Babstock](#), and he told me he said that young writers should really relish and enjoy the time before they are a published writer, confined or pigeon-holed to a degree by what they've committed to print.

SH: I feel pretty free. I think for a year or two after the publication of *The Middle Stories* I didn't feel so free, but ever since then I've felt fine. I started writing very young, so I don't think I needed more time to experience what it's like to not have anyone read you. And the books aren't so insanely popular that I've felt a lack of personal privacy. When you write this type of stuff, it's not like being any sort of celebrity ...

SG: Or your celebrity is confined to a very small group of people ...

SH: All the genuinely interested people!

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SG: I'm always interested in how writers approach their craft, in terms of discipline or routine or inspiration. In another interview from a few years ago, you were quoted as saying that you write when you feel like it. Is this still true now?

SH: No. Now I write every morning. I don't always write well, but I sit down every morning after I wake up and work.

SG: I was especially interested in asking you this question because of the attention paid to the idea of industry in *Ticknor*. In Prescott's diary, it says "Occupation with things, not self. Industry good." And of course Ticknor is completely envious of Prescott's ability to be so productive and industrious, even in the face of illness and injury, while he (Ticknor) sits at home working away at a single article for years.

SH: I think you run out of money if you don't produce. You're forced to produce at a certain point; otherwise you just start to feel insane, having so little money and yet be working so hard! At a certain point, you feel like you have to direct your work to some kind of opening out into the world.

SG: When you're not writing, are you worrying about not writing?

SH: Not really. The older I get, the more excited about writing I become; I get more ideas, there are more things I want to write about, and there's not enough time to finish all the books I want. That's also the reason why I write faster ... I don't want to take as long because there are so many things I want to write.

SG: You feel more realistic about your potential?

SH: Well if you work on a book for five years, then you've got to wait five years for the next one. Maybe it's better to spend six months on one—if of course you can make something good in six months. But if you can, then why not? You can have a decent love affair that lasts six months. Things can be short and still be good. You can make art that is good regardless of how long it is.

SG: Was that a major concern while you were writing *Ticknor*? Expediency?

SH: Yes, it was. It was a pain.

SG: Reading through *Ticknor* I got the definite impression that I was reading into a writer's mind—his attention to how messy or cluttered his apartment is, the threat of guests or callers that in reality is so humourously far-fetched—and that part of his inability to produce is related to his personal environment. Do you need order in order to produce? Or can you write anywhere, or exist in chaos?

SH: I can't really write if my apartment is messy, so it's always clean. I don't have much in the way of things, or things on the wall. I just don't like to see anything around or out of place—if I do, I have to put it away; otherwise, I can't work. I don't like any sort of distraction—no music or anything. I don't think it matters; it's just the way I am.

SG: You were also keeping up a blog about brain exercises ...

SH: I took that down ... I thought that people didn't need to read it.

SG: I thought it was cool!

SH: Why?

SG: Well, beyond the fact that I didn't know these exercises existed—maybe I don't roam around and explore the internet enough—I thought that a writer's blog dedicated to sharpening or improving her powers of perception and attentiveness was compelling. You weren't just letting yourself be, and I liked that sense of challenge, that you can always be that much better, or push yourself harder to produce something better. We sometimes feel like the first thing we write down is best—the whole “first time, best time” mantra. But is it? I mean, for me that whole issue causes a lot of anxiety. If we're always better, and we can always make things better, how do we marry that idea to what we produce spontaneously, or from a less filtered part of the brain?

SH: I think it's useful to work on improving yourself, but then to stop. I don't think that that's an occupation one should continue for one's whole life. I think you should give maybe ten years to the pursuit, and then stop. Because you just sort of have to accept yourself, and say this is who I am, and these are my limitations. You can't always be trying to make yourself better, because you stop seeing the world—you only see yourself.

SG: But why wouldn't people want to read that journal? Why take it down?

SH: The reason is because I'm reading a book called [*You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto*](#) (Knopf 2010) by [Jaron Lanier](#). It's not actually out yet—it'll be out in January—but I've got the galley proof. Jaron Lanier's the person who coined the term virtual reality. This book is a manifesto against certain directions the internet is taking, how these directions will have consequences for how we understand our humanity. He's very critical of Web 2.0—all the social networking, the wikipedia, wiki-stuff—the idea that there's a hive mind or brain that's more interesting or important than individual brains. One of his ideas is that you should never post anything on the internet without your name attached, because by doing so we're supporting the idea that the individual is important, for example. It's a reminder to think really hard before you post or write anything on the internet, to respect your individuality, your intelligence and creativity; to not simply throw things up there because in doing so we degrade ourselves and our communities. So I began to be very critical of my blog—I began asking myself, why am I putting up this thoughtless ... well ... not that it was thoughtless, I thought that it was actually quite thoughtful ... and it did have my name attached ... but nevertheless, I was under the spell of this book so I took the blog down.

SG: That's understandable. There's a terrible unease about publishing on the internet. To me it's because here we have this enormous blank page, and everything we post or write upon it is then indelible ...

SH: It's not indelible ...

SG: But indelible in the sense of what other people can take. I could have taken all the information from your blog, saved it or copied it or whatever, and then published it again and again on the internet. And we seem so cavalier about what could potentially be forever ...

SH: It's not forever! I think it's the opposite of forever.

SG: Doesn't it have the potential to be? We're still using words that other can take, and save, and archive later in print, or use in other ways that we never intended them to be used. Let me re-phrase what I've said—of course it's not forever, because it's intangible and electronic and lost as soon as you pull the plug. But more in line with perhaps what Lanier is saying ... why are we so willing to throw things up on the web, to assume no one's responsible, to assume that it doesn't matter? Why do we think this way?

SH: I don't know; we're stupid ... you know what it's like? I was reading this criticism of nineteenth-century Parisian café culture—maybe it was by the [Goncourt Brothers](#), in a journal, I can't remember—but in any case it said “how can people sit out in the cafes, to be *seen* by anybody? To *speak* and be *overheard* by *anybody*?” People back then just weren't that public; you would speak in your home to your friends, but you wouldn't go out to a café to speak to strangers among strangers, to be seen in your clothes. The whole controversy of the flâneur arose—that impulse to parade and be on display. And so I think there was an anxiety about that then. Of course now that we're so comfortable about being in a café, but perhaps the internet is the next café. There's all this anxiety over how humans can put themselves out there, but that's just life, it's just an extension of being in the world.

SG: It's like the domain of privacy is slowly expanding, onward and outwards. This is interesting to see in a work like *Ticknor* because the character is so interior, confined to himself, almost claustrophobic, and we as readers don't get a sense of how others feel about him—it's a very Victorian sense of privacy.

SH: You think it's Victorian? Because he's saying everything he thinks.

SG: True ... in that way, it's very Modernist—as in, let's show his thought process, that ongoing stream-of-consciousness, but of course you do that very neatly with periods.

SH: So you think it's private because you don't know his emotions? Where is the privacy beyond not seeing other eyes on him?

SG: Well, maybe we can see Ticknor as the anti-café, the anti-flâneur; he'd be the last person to be seen in a café blabbing. And if we could imagine him living today, you'd never find him on Twitter. He's very reserved in his emotions, and he's obviously so self-conscious of propriety, so concerned with what he allows others to see. We don't get a sense of his voice, either; I'm not sure if we ever actually hear him speak. This is all who he is as a character, and I'm not talking about structure or style.

SH: That's interesting. I hadn't thought about that before, that you aren't allowed to hear Ticknor speak. The last two men I've been involved with haven't been on Facebook or Twitter or anything. Maybe there's something about that kind of person ... something noble, or respectable. Or there's the feeling that, you know, who they are is just for you, not for the whole world.

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SG: What other collaborative projects have you doing lately?

SH: Well Misha Glouberman and I just wrote a book together. I took down what he was saying, so it's in the form of monologues. I originally wanted to write a book called "The Moral Development of Misha". What I wrote was something that was fiction as well as reality, but it just felt too far away from him. So a few years later I came back to him with this idea. We came up with about 150 topics that he could speak on. He'd come over to my house, I'd type while he spoke, and we'd do about three topics a day. And now Faber and Faber is going to publish him, which is kind of insane to both of us, because it's just this guy, who for all intents and purposes no one knows—I mean *I* know him, and people around here know him—but he's not a famous guy. He's just so intelligent, and that's enough, which is so reassuring: that this non-celebrity, who's intelligent, with strange things to say about improvisation and structures and the world, can dictate and be the subject of a book. It's conforms to the classic idea of the sort of person who writes books—someone intelligent with something to say. On the other hand, many of the people who get books published now are people who are already celebrities for some other reason.

SG: In the past you've said that "the essential joy of making art is that it has nothing to do with anyone else." What is it like to make art with other people, if art has nothing to do with anyone else?

SH: It's like you're adding one more person to that solitude, is all. You just open the borders a bit. It's interesting because you two have to arrive somewhere in the middle. For example, Margaux and I have been collaborating for five years, and we're still trying to get to that middle.

SG: Speaking of others ... one of the things you've talked about in other interviews is the state of Canadian fiction. You've said that "there's this strangely Canadian thing about not wanting anyone to be *too* interesting, or too *anything*." Furthermore, you've said that "we haven't really made that many great works of literature", in part because we're simply not that old as a culture, but also because we haven't opened or looked outside our borders enough to other great works. I notice among my peers, or writers and readers my age, that so many seem to have read so much more Canadian fiction and poetry than I have. But I always thought when growing up, you should try to read the great works ... Why are we looking so closely at ourselves? Why aren't we looking over the ocean, or back in time?

SH: Maybe people like gossip! And you like to gossip about whomever's closest to you, whomever you have some access to. So, for example, why would I talk about [Kafka](#) when I could talk about say, [Emily Schultz](#)? Because I saw Emily Schultz read the other day. I think humans are really local creatures, despite everything, don't you think? I think to me, to you, a lot of people maybe, the writers who are most local are the writers who (throughout time, from any country) most touch your heart. Those are the ones who feel most local to me. I read them because they feel local to me. I mentioned Jane Bowles earlier—she feels more local to me than, say, [Lisa Moore](#), because she's local to my heart. But maybe a lot of people care about a physical kind of locality; they want to be physically located in a kind of space ...

SG: Why does this seem so Canadian? Do you think there's some sort of national or civic project at work?

SH: It's not just Canadian. When you read the Americans ... they have no idea of what's going on outside of their country.

SG: Is it North America?

SH: It's with any country—there's always a nationalist project at work. The older I get, the more I see America, for example, in this different light. They go insane with praise over these writers who aren't necessarily that good, but are *theirs*. It's the same thing that we do; only when the Americans do it, it seems so much grander, on such a larger scale, even though simply loving your own isn't grand at all.

SG: We just notice the Americans more, because of the money and the power and so on ...

SH: Yes. And the American MFA programs contribute to this as well. Say [Padget Powell](#) is your teacher. When you become a teacher, you teach Padget Powell because he was your teacher, and so on. It's like an aristocracy—you're the son of your MFA instructor, and once you become the instructor you teach your father's wisdom to your children

SG: It's a system of consecration ... when you're young, not necessarily in terms of age but in terms of publishing experience or reputation, you pay homage to the older or respected writers. But simultaneously, they're consecrating you, talking about you or honouring you, letting you piggy-back for the ride.

SH: It's great *not* to have a teacher. It means you're free.

SG: You've spoken against MFA or creative writing programs in the past, too, saying you wouldn't want to go to school to learn to write, in the same way that you wouldn't want to go to school to learn how to have sex. I'm currently finishing up my MA in creative writing at the University of Toronto. I enrolled in the course because it gave me a Masters degree, but also because while completing the academic portion I could have some fun, too. I realize there's a host of problems with creative writing programs, but I've also taken to heart some things my instructor [Jeff Parker](#) has said about the concept. Basically, that the creative writing degrees replicate similar mentor/student

relationships that exist naturally outside the school; that [Hemingway](#) learning from [Stein](#) or [Eliot](#) learning from [Pound](#) is in many ways the same thing, they're deferring to one another ...

SH: But they were friends—their relationships weren't institutional. They were both young, too. Most importantly, they're not giving each other any money! You're giving such an incredible amount of money for your education, and what are you getting in return? Nothing. To give someone your poems doesn't mean you have to give them money. Outside of the school, you *choose* that one person who means something to you, and they choose you back. That's a real relationship, but in the schools it's artificial—you just choose the school, they give you your teacher. And that teacher may not even like you or have any affinity with you or your work. How can they be useful to you?

SG: Unless you're lucky.

SH: Well, once in a while there can be an affinity, but you're lucky if that ever happens. It certainly doesn't happen to everybody. Besides, why should the young be kissing the asses of the old? Unless of course there's a specific ass ...

SG: One you *need* to kiss.

SH: Yeah. It's careerist in some way; you sell the most private part of yourself for connections. You give up your freedom as an artist. At least it looks that way to me.

SG: I purposely avoided an MFA because my first impulse was to pursue an academic degree, so it would open the doors to PhD. The creative writing was like a welcome bonus. I should also say, from the inside it doesn't necessarily feel like such an inauthentic transaction. But maybe that's a lucky thing; maybe it's just that the writers I've encountered seem genuinely interested in assisting, as long as everyone recognizes that one can only peddle one's own biases. Another large component is the workshops with your peers ...

SH: But they're not your peers. You don't choose your peers in this context. Real peers are real affinities; these are people who you're thrown together with. I think it's a total scam; no one really

needs an education to become a writer. It's just a contemporary custom that we've bought into. How many people graduating these programs are going to get published?

SG: Maybe a lot of people come out of these programs thinking that this is all the training they'll need, or that now it's time to pay up in terms of recognition or publication.

SH: Yeah. Your apprenticeship doesn't happen in school; it actually begins after you graduate, on your own, so you're just delaying your real apprenticeship. A real apprenticeship is writing alone, not in a school for grades.

SG: When you were writing in your early twenties, or when you first began to write seriously, was there a group of people you shared your work with?

SH: There was this one guy in the office I worked in named Christian Bailey, and I remember showing him some early stories. I showed it to my boyfriend at the time. There weren't many people, but yeah, it was still useful.

SG: Over the years, has this number grown?

SH: Yeah, [Lee Henderson](#) and I have helped each other out. Margaux, but she's not a writer. Yeah, there are certain people you can trust. But you have to have that inside you. You can't rely on other people to do the deep criticism for you. You have to figure that out for yourself. I just fundamentally don't trust the whole concept of institutional workshops or degrees. You trade in your independence—either you're dependent on your teachers or on the other students in your class.

SG: So tell me how you felt sitting in and guest-workshopping in Jeff Parker's current creative writing class.

SH: I felt ... why were you all listening to this guy? Why are you listening to each other? I said this doesn't make sense to me. What everyone seems to be saying to each other is how to make something less strange, how to make something more good.

SG: More good, less strange?

SH: I want to say more good. That's what everyone's trying to help you achieve: if you do this at the beginning, then your story will be more good, say; there will be more good in it. But the best writing isn't the writing with the most good in it. And that's the problem with that kind of criticism.

SG: I've definitely noticed a tendency in the workshop environment to eliminate the strange, to push for the conventional, to eliminate any roughness ...

SH: But that's the human element; a human is rough. You don't want to always be eliminating the failure. Often the thing that sticks in your mind about something is how it's bad, which strangely makes it good. If you take away all the bad, and you just have the good, then you end up with nothing. I think that every really great writer has something that he or she simply doesn't know how to do. They become great by devising very ingenious ways of distracting the reader from noticing that one poorly-done thing. The writer's body changes; you grow different appendages. If you just try to make everything good, nothing happens.

SG: Speaking of strangeness, or roughness, in the past you've said that you don't want to be constrained by character, or by narrative. Do you still feel the same way?

SH: I care more about narrative than I used to; I really care about story now.

SG: What was your original indifference or hostility toward narrative motivated by?

SH: It was probably because I couldn't do it. I didn't properly understand it; I didn't understand why it was necessary, this insistence that you had to have a narrative. I thought, why? I had to figure it out for myself, and again, that's the sort of understanding that has to come from within you.

SG: Your next book—I know nothing about it. Can you talk about it?

SH: I don't know what to say ...

SG: Tell me what it's about.

SH: It's about the title, about living with that question—*How Should a Person Be?*

SG: Are you focusing on one person, a la *Ticknor*?

SH: No, Margaux and I are the main characters. There's an ongoing conversation between us. We use our own names and it's based on our own lives, but it's also quite fictional. It's sort of a mix.

SG: Did you have any other books in mind while you were writing? Any writers or works serving as models?

SH: Yeah, lots. One I was thinking about was [*The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again*](#) (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2001). [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*](#), too. I love that book.

SG: What were you taking from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*?

SH: Well it's an extended essay about art, in narrative. It's an idea book, the question of what happens if one cares a lot about beauty. And the answer's so dark.

SG: So it's you, but not you ... are you or Margaux representatives of different sides of an argument, like Basil or Lord Henry?

SH: A little. It's not quite as obvious as in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I wanted to maintain a sense of realism, so people weren't too symbolic or quite so one-dimensional.

SG: Anything else?

SH: [*Sheltering Sky*](#) (1949) by Paul Bowles. When I started writing the book I was reading various business biographies, books about the running of different companies. Tons of different things, really.

SG: When will we see it, and who's publishing it?

SH: Fall 2010 is the idea. I haven't tried to sell it elsewhere, but Anansi will be publishing it here ...

THANK YOU, SHEILA.