



## A Reading at the Library

by Ron Singer

### **Prelude: Art Farms.**

Before I swore off them, I sojourned at four art farms, one of them, three times. I came to hate these places. Almost every “fellow” at the communal dinner table acted as if he or she were entitled to a blow-by-blow account of your day’s labors. You might think writers and other artists would be more imaginative in their table talk, but, no, they apparently saved their imaginations for the privacy of their studios. Not to overstate the point, but they seemed like social cretins. Of course, many visual artists and musicians are dyslexic.

“So how did it go today, John?” asked a stocky, bald, smiling young painter who came to the table every night wearing his palette on his sleeve –and on the rest of his clothes. (My name is John Roberts, like the judge *supremo*.) Since I had been at this particular farm for a week, the painter must already have asked his question four or five times.

“Not too bad.” (“I winged a few birds with my slingshot, indulged in several hours of sexual fantasy, and took a long nap,” John (I) would (not) add.)

“But what *are* you working on?” demanded a heavily made-up, bird-like woman, a fellow writer who resembled Joyce Carol Oates. “Come on, John, give us the goods!” The woman had butted in while I was mumbling my reply to the painter. She looked like she might be a plot thief.

“Thanks for asking. Well, today, I wrote 800 words and deleted 799 of them.” But she did not even hear this little joke, because she had already turned toward a music critic who was ticking off on his fingers the ten best Beethoven piano performances of the last hundred years.

### **At the Library.**

#### **A Cloud No Bigger than a Man’s Hand:**

By now it was 11:30, which felt like a good time for a break. Having eaten a large breakfast at the café, I thought I would just loiter by the riverside. So, packing my things, I exited the library. One of the two unpainted benches facing the river was already occupied. They were about two feet apart, parallel to each other, both in dappled sunlight. A cool breeze was blowing..

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“May I?” I pointed to the bench on the left.

“Please,” the occupant of the other one replied in a resonant baritone, making a “be my guest” gesture. I sat down. Using a brown paper bag for a placemat, he was eating what looked like a fish-salad sandwich on what looked like whole-grain bread. Beside him sat a big plastic water bottle.

“Beautiful day,” I said.

He swallowed, then took a swig from his bottle. “Hope you don’t mind...” He gestured to the sandwich.

“No, no, please.”

“Well, as we locals are fond of saying, this sure is an example of ‘weather like it used to be.’ ”

“Isn’t that the state tourism motto?”

He smiled. “You’re not from around here, are you? Actually, the motto is ‘Worth a Visit, Worth a Lifetime.’ ”

This led into a round of show-and-tell, starting with introductions. Although his manner was dry, it was cordial.

“Charlie Scovill.” (He spelled the surname.)

“John Roberts. Like the judge.”

Reaching across the gap between the benches, we shook on that. As we continued talking, Charlie finished his sandwich, wiped his mouth on an unbleached paper napkin, drank some more water and, closing the bottle tightly, put it in the bag.

“What do you do, Mr. Scovill?”

“ ‘Charlie,’ please. You mean, besides reading magazines in the library? I’m a retired newspaper man.”

“Huh! I had you pegged as a CEO, or something.”

“Well, my last job was Editor-in-Chief of the local paper. Four or five years ago, when I reached the mandatory retirement age, seventy-two --which, by the way, I had decreed, myself-- I became Editor Emeritus. You might say I was ‘hoist with my own petard.’ ”

“*Hamlet*. What does ‘Editor Emeritus’ mean?”

“It means that, when I get too exercised about the way the paper is being run, I go see the publisher and let off some steam.”

“How often does that happen?”

“Oh, about once every ten minutes –seriously, I limit myself to one

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visit every five or six weeks.”

“That must take forbearance.”

He laughed. “What about you, John? I thought I saw you working on a manuscript in there.” He gestured over his shoulder toward the library. “You mind if I ask...?”

“Not at all, A thriller about cyber-murder.”

“Hmm! Up-to-date.”

Since, as implied, I *did* mind talking about my work, I changed the subject. “You a family man, Charlie?”

“Widower, with grown children. You?”

“Amicably divorced, no children.”

It occurred to me that one reason we had already become so chatty might have been that we were both lonely. Of course, we were both also connected with “the writing game,” albeit in different ways.

“How long have you been a writer?”

“Well, it was always on the back burner. For thirty years, until I retired in 2007, I earned my bread as a clerk in a New York State government office.”

“Hmm. Which one?”

“Motor Vehicles. By the time I retired, I was a Unit Manager.”

“Quite a success story!” Was he being sarcastic? “So, then...” He stalled for a moment, fiddling with the paper bag. “Oh, yes, speaking of writers, did you happen to come across that big room in the basement?”

“The Community Room?”

“Yep. Well, you may have missed the notice on the board to the left of to the door. A bi-weekly writers’ group convenes there.”

“Is that so?”

“Sort of an open-mike set-up. If you’re interested, there’s one Thursday, at 2:30. You don’t have to commit, sign up or anything, you can just show up.”

“Hmm. Does everyone who comes, read?”

“No, there are usually about ten of us, three or four readers, including a couple of regulars. The rest just listen, and there’s usually some Q & A. Last summer, a Boston lady read from a historical novel that I thought was exceptional --very suspenseful.

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I'm waiting for it to come out."

"What was the subject?"

"It was based on her life as a hidden child in the French countryside during the Nazi occupation. I know that doesn't sound very original, but the details were exquisite. Actually, she read twice. She must have been encouraged by our fulsome praise the first time."

At this point, the conversation flagged. I made some noncommittal noises about Thursday, and we shook hands and went back inside together.

Amanda Stallworth Reads. "Comments, Anyone?"

Squaring up the pages in front of her, Stallworth cleared her throat. She said she was working on an untitled novel about the Spanish Armada of 1588. You remember, the grand plan to overthrow the monstrous Protestant queen? The fleet of Spanish sailing ships that God dashed against the rocky Irish coast? She told us that, thus far, she had completed a draft of the first third of the book. Either from modesty or because she did not have one, she did not mention a publisher.

The chapter she read was from the point of view of one of the boys manning the huge Spanish cannon that were expected to blow the English to oblivion. She described the hour when the wind was unexpectedly starting to shift. The gunner boy was fully aware of the disastrous implications of the shift.

Stallworth read for eight minutes. I enjoyed her crisp, no-nonsense prose. Since her listeners/readers were presumably familiar with the broad outlines of the story, she had to deal with the problem of how to keep us engaged between dramatic incidents, which she tried to do by means of characterization and *obiter dicta*. In this regard, her vessel drew some water. The *obiter dicta* weren't bad: tidbits about currents, winds, navigation, and naval warfare in 1588 that sounded like they went well beyond Google. The characters were the problem.

I could tell this even from the single chapter she read. Her people were too obviously chosen, and mostly wooden, to boot. When she mentioned King Philip back on his knees at the Escorial, this reader, for one, was hoping she would depart from the historical record to visit him with a fatal lightning bolt. As for Elizabeth, although Stallworth would presumably allow the Queen a few bits of codpiece tearing, I knew she would keep cutting back to the big battle before anything really sadistic or salacious could happen.

As I listened, I became interested in what the ensuing discussion would be like. I also gained confidence in my own powers. My novel would seem funny and nasty, I anticipated, and the technical bits, I hoped, would measure up to the Stallworthian standard.

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When the chapter ended, Ms. Brooks, the Head Librarian and our moderator, opened the floor for discussion. Three hands were raised: the lumberman-poet, Gene Eaton's; Alicia Bernstein's (also non-fiction); and Charlie Scovill's. (Ms. Brooks had introduced everyone.) I was glad to see these hands, because I did not like the idea of commenting right before it was my turn to read. I would keep my powder dry.

Bernstein praised the historical details, provoking a murmur of assent around the table. Eaton generously alleged that he could smell the brine and gunpowder. Although his hand had not been raised, at this point, Mike Billings, the burly lobsterman (who was "only a reader") chimed in.

"Yessirree," he said, in a ringing tenor. "When things start airing up out there in the chapter, you feel like you're stuck on the ship, yourself. Hey, I don't envy those fellas!"

After everyone finished laughing, it was Charlie's turn. "Well, Ms. Stallworth," he said, folding his hands and looking down at them as he spoke. "That was nicely done, very professional. You've handled the central problem well: how to interest people in a story they already know. You've done quite a good job with that." Since, by this point, even I was waiting for the other shoe to fall, I glanced at Stallworth, who looked as if she had battened down the emotional hatches: her face was closed and expressionless.

The shoe fell. "Just one suggestion, if I may. The characters in a serious novel, which yours is --although one could quibble and call it genre fiction--have to vary a bit more than yours do." It was as if he had been reading my mind. "It's okay for the ones we already know from history to be predictable, a bit on the flat side. But, in a large cast like the one you've assembled, some of the characters that take turns occupying center stage should be more rounded, less predictable. The gunner boy, for instance: it shouldn't be too hard to individualize him, to make him more than a poor, scared kid in an impossible situation. You could give him a backstory that ..." Charlie drew breath and looked up. "But I'd better stop right there, before I hog all the time. Anyway, I'm sure you get the idea. You're the writer, and, I think, a good enough one to deal with this problem without my help."

"Well," said Ms. Brooks, blowing out some air, "if I may say so, that was vintage Charlie Scovill. Are you okay with that, Ms. Stallworth? Everyone? Are we ready to move on? Mr. Roberts, please." Stallworth tried not to look shattered.

### **Selected Works, Past & Present.**

**Novel #1 (completed 2003, unpublished): *Teach Her a Lesson*:** In the milieu of New York's East Village, a corrupt police detective murders a prostitute and tries to pin the blame on a former English teacher who became homeless when he suffered a nervous breakdown. The murderer leaves many false clues, all of

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which are details from *Macbeth*. For instance, he slices open the corpse and cuts off her head. *Macbeth*-ophiles (of which I am one) will recall that, early in the play, the protagonist dispatches the traitorous Thane of Cawdor by “unseaming” him “from the nave unto the chops,” and impaling “his head upon our battlements.” Since the demented ex-teacher roams the neighborhood alternately muttering or shouting snatches from Shakespeare ... you get the idea. Probably out of some perverseness of my own, I won’t reveal any more about this novel, except to say that there is, indeed, a Macduff figure, a nemesis that settles the murderous cop’s hash.

**Novel #2 (WIP, begun Winter, 2011-12): *An On-Line Offing*.**

WIP is a thriller. The protagonist uses the Internet to try to murder a hated cousin who repeatedly humiliated him in childhood. His “inspiration” is the recent case of a college student who caused his gay roommate’s suicide by posting on Facebook a hidden home video of the roommate’s encounter with another man. In my novel, the protagonist mounts his campaign against the cousin (who faintly resembles my ex-brother-in-law) by videotaping a motel tryst with his secretary. He posts a copy of the video on Facebook (or, as he jokes, “Dickbook”). Since the killer can’t assume that a video showing a fat, bald middle-aged man bonking a thin, plain woman in a generic motel will go viral, he also sends copies to the cousin’s wife, children, and ailing parents. The idea is to induce a fatal coronary in the cousin, who has already had two un-fatal ones.

**My Turn to Read.**

“Um,” I said, “since this is my first appearance, perhaps the other readers should have precedence, in case we run out of time. Suppose I defer and read last, if there’s any time left?” Did I detect a flickering grin from Charlie?

“No, please,” said Ms. Brooks, glancing at her watch. “That’s very generous of you, Mr. ---John—but we’re right on schedule. So ...” She gestured, inviting me to begin.

Girding my loins, I picked up the pages I had set aside while Stallworth was reading. Although it took me a few sentences to get the tremor out of my voice, I thought it went well. I had chosen excerpts from two chapters. The first was sort of technical, the part where the protagonist hatches his scheme and begins to figure out how best to record and disseminate his cousin’s indiscretion. The second describes a few of the childhood humiliations. People laughed at my jokes and seemed absorbed by the narrative and cyber-details. When I finished, I was relieved to see that only two hands were raised.

Billings, the lobsterman said, “Well, that was very good. I can’t wait for the —excuse me, everyone—for that bastard to get his

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come-uppance!” It was unclear which bastard he meant, but no one asked. Alicia Bernstein complimented me on the “mix,” as she called it, of technical detail and absorbing narrative. Since she had not yet read from her own work, it crossed my mind that she might be recruiting me to her corner. Charlie sat looking down at his folded hands. Was there a hint of another little smile?

### **The Scovill Verdict:**

After the last readings, by Bernstein and Eaton (the lumberman), Ms. Brooks thanked and dismissed us. Charlie held the door of the conference room open for me.

“John,” he said, with a little bow, “have you got a few minutes? I’d like to chat about your book.”

“Sure,” I said. “Thanks.” I was being counter-phobic. “Shall we go outside?”

He agreed, and we walked upstairs together. As we crossed the lobby, I noticed that Ms. Brooks was back at her post already, speaking on the phone. She did not look up. Charlie and I silently exited the library and headed for the riverside, where there was a moment’s hesitation while we decided whether to share a bench or each to take his own. We settled on the latter, with him on the right again. We each leaned an arm across the back of our bench, so we were more or less facing one another. I put my folder down on my bench.

“Shoot,” I said, opting for directness. “What did you think?”

“Well.” He cleared his throat and cracked two knuckles on his right hand. “First, let me say that you’re a live wire, John, a very entertaining writer. But I’m afraid your book has a problem.”

“Oh?” I tried to sound unfazed.

“Yes.” He frowned. “Actually, there are two, related problems.” He cleared his throat. “May I be blunt?” He looked me in the eye.

“You certainly may not,” I did not say. “Suppose I kick your ass, instead, or punch you in your ugly face?” Actually, I raised my right hand a few inches off the top of my bench, in a “be my guest” gesture.

“Good,” he said. “I hope these comments will be useful.” He frowned again. “The problem is, well, I’m afraid you don’t quite know what you’re doing. The related problem—the underlying one—is that you don’t really have a book here.” His expression was pained.

“Oh?” My voice sounded tremulous.

“Actually, you have two books—sort of—--the thriller with the tech

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stuff and the thinly disguised memoir. I don't mean to impugn your credentials, but how much do you really know about the Internet? Even a codger like me, too old to be much of an authority, can tell you're faking the tech stuff. The malice towards the cousin is plausible enough --that was the part I enjoyed most-- but the tech stuff... I mean, what it really evokes is an image of you anxiously surfing the web for tidbits to use in your book. Take that video of the gay roommate. It was on YouTube, not Facebook. Not good. As for ...” I could feel my face growing hot. Luckily, we were in shade.

“...the memoir?” I interrupted. This may sound as if I was putting a big “kick me” sign on my backside, but what I really wanted was to get this hazing over with.

“Yes, the humiliation rings true enough, but there's a big problem here, too. Again, to be blunt, this sort of stuff has been written to death. You skirt the problem by turning a real-life situation into the backstory for a thriller, or something like that. But you wind up falling between the stools of genre fiction and literary memoir. I hate to say it, John, but that's a beginner's problem. Not only do you fail to ...”

At this point, I tuned Charlie out. He nattered on for a while, but I was no longer listening. I was trying *not* to listen. My mind darted in twenty directions: Hemingway's dictum, to write only about what you know (my thirty-year day job issuing learners' permits at the DMV?); what the other writers had just read --clinging to the shreds of *schadenfreude*, I focused on Gene Eaton, the mediocre poet. My mind raced on: I was back in bed with my ex-; back in my childhood, when my grandfather had saved me from being snatched by a passing pedophile; playing Store in my grandparents' grape arbor with my little cousins; how much money there was in my checking and money-market accounts; and, finally, what had made Charlie Scovill such a sour old fuck.

The reader is free to find the common thread in these desperate flights of thought. Maybe, the thread was actually a point, to which I kept returning like a moth to flame. I think I had already sensed that Charlie's devastating criticism of my WIP (RIP) was equally true of my *Macbeth* novel. In both, from a grain of reality, I had sown vast fields of mendacious, strained prose. In both, ill-matching parts were jammed together like jagged halves of a broken eggshell.

When Charlie muttered some nonsense about “no hard feelings,” the torture session was finally over. He stood up and extended his hand. In a fog, I stood up, too, grabbed my folder in my left hand, and shook his cool hand with my clammy right one. Muttering something about lingering at the riverside, he said goodbye and sat back down. I fled the scene, hurrying past the library entrance, back toward the parking lot.

“Thank God *that's* over!” remarked either my good or bad angel. “But it was all true,” said the other one. “You're finished.”

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“Why,” you may ask, “did Mr. Scovill choose to demolish Mr. Roberts, a relative stranger who had never caused him the slightest bit of harm?” Well, *you* may ask that reasonable question. I was beyond reason.

***Postlude: Back at the Cottage.***

By the time I pulled out of the parking lot, it was four thirty-seven. I was not sure how to spend what was left of the afternoon (or the day, or, possibly, my life). I thought of going to the café for a late-afternoon snack, but, as always, I was chary of fleeing to food. So I drove –slowly and cautiously-- back to the cottage.

As soon as I was inside, I tapped the computer and was greeted by my faithful screen-saver, a garish Marsden Hartley sunset in several of nature’s least natural colors. Dropping the folder on the table, for about two minutes I stood staring at the screen.

Then, without even checking my email or changing my clothes, I walked slowly down to the dock. After reassuring myself that I had no intention of jumping into the depths of the pond, I spent the rest of the afternoon drifting around in my rowboat. Even when the mosquitoes started to bite, I did not want to go back inside. But, eventually, I did.

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Fiction by **Ron Singer** ([www.ronsinger.net](http://www.ronsinger.net)) has appeared in many publications. His books are *A Voice for My Grandmother*, *The Second Kingdom*, *The Rented Pet*, *Look to Mountains*, *Look to Sea* (Editor's Chap/Book Choice, *The Aureorean* [Spring/Summer 2014]), and *From a Small Fish in the Floating World*. In 2011-11, he made three trips to Africa for *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, forthcoming). Both his serial thriller, *Geistmann*, and serial farce, *The Parents We Deserve*, are available at [jukepopserials.com](http://jukepopserials.com), Singer's work has twice been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. This is his fifth story in *SNReview*..

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