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An Interview with Jack Remick

by
Joel Chafetz

On Jack Remick's website his bio begins with the statement that he wrecked his VW Beetle on the way to meeting Robert J. Ray, a novelist who'd invited him to writing practice, a technique of timed writing developed by Natalie Goldberg. He goes on to say that timed writing changed his life and with this new technique in his pocket Jack Remick's writing transformed.

His new novel *Blood* (Camel Press 2011) is creating a stir in literary circles. Remick co-authored *The Weekend Novelist Writes a Mystery*, with Robert J. Ray and he has published a collection of short fiction, *Terminal Weird* (Black Heron Press), a novel, *The Stolen House* (Pig Iron Press) as well as work in *The Seattle Five Plus One*, an anthology (Pig Iron Press). His stories and poems have appeared in national magazines such as *Carolina Quarterly*, *Portland Review*, *Big Hammer*, *Café Noir Review*, and *Northwind*. His novel, *Blood* has received glowing and incisive reviews from Wayne Gunn and Amos Lassen. Following is an excerpt from Gunn's review:

***BLOOD* by Jack Remick**

"For an author to choose as his explicit models Camus's *L'Etranger*, Genet's *Notre Dame des Fleurs*, and Sade's *Les 120 Journées de Sodom* (all of which he has obviously read in French) and to earn the right to be mentioned in their company is quite a goal to strive for: one that only time will verify but that perhaps Jack Remick has indeed achieved."

Besides a varied career as a tunnel rat, Remick has been a social worker, a school teacher, a bus driver, a retail clerk, a turkey debeaker, and a house painter. He has traveled extensively in South America from Peru to Colombia. He has lived in Mexico where his family were silver miners. He studied piano and composition at the National Conservatory of Music in Quito, Ecuador. He has degrees from UC Berkeley, San Francisco State University, UC Davis and speaks fluent French and Spanish.

More recently he taught at the University of Washington Extension Certificate Programs in Screenwriting, Fiction, Science Fiction, and Story Development. Many of his students have become successful authors.

The interview was conducted in March 2011.

Joel Chafetz:

Blood, is not only a literary novel; it dissects a sociopath, relates a homoerotic love story and is at times as violent and disturbing as a slasher film. Yet, it is soothingly gentle and funny with a poetic narrator. How would you categorize Hank Mitchell, the subject and narrator?

Jack Remick:

The answer I think is that *Blood* isn't a text with an overt moral lesson. Mitch is, let's face it, ruined by his past. So ruined that he needs to get away and so he hides in prison on a silly pretext. He's so guilty he knows he can't find any kind of redemption or atonement. I see Mitch as the product of American greed. He was a corporate soldier. Mitch discovers who he is when, while in prison, he writes *The Patron Saint of Blood*, his story and his history of killing and he accepts what he is. He knows he's a killer; his big revelation is that he's been killing the wrong people. As I wrote this novel, I discovered a strong anti-colonial subtext that I hadn't anticipated. Like most writers I can't control, direct or anticipate what I'll get when I dive into the writing. This I do know—the art is always in the rewrite and discipline is the writer's obligation to the Gift. Anti-Colonialism is a big thorn in the side of this novel and it's not buried very deep. America as empire sees the world as its colony. Colonialism means that the Power takes resources from the colony, manufactures goods and then sells the goods back to the colony. Mitch was a tool of the colonial powers. He killed for them. At the end of the novel, he's got a different agenda. When I envision Mitch's future, I see a lot more blood.

Chafetz:

Blood is a very carefully written novel. It has crossing arcs, secrets, and startling revelations. It plays on fear and human sexuality. The subtext implies a complicated, even humorous look at the human condition. Mitch becomes a prison enforcer with an intellectual mind who must decipher the complications of intertwining knots he's created. The novel is dense. Did you plan it this way?

Remick:

To answer this question, I have to give you a sense of the way I work. I spend a lot of time rewriting. Once I have a draft, I use a technique we call the "Cut to:" to organize the story. To make the Cut To: work, I set aside the draft. I want to work now with the story that's in my head instead of picking and poking at the draft which is just a blue-print anyway. For the rewrite I sit down with my timer or at writing practice with my group and I write the Cut to's:

1. The story starts in a laundromat on Third Avenue in a City that might be San Francisco, but it's not important, where Mitch gets arrested when he steals a tubful of white women's underwear. Hooks to Apartment Scene with cops.
2. Cut to: Mitch's apartment. The objects are the underwear as varied as a Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue, but all white. The action is the tossing of Mitch's apartment by the police. The hook is to the courtroom scene.

And I work the cut to's on the story line from beginning to end. It might take me a week to get this done, but I have to persist. Success for the writer has at least two components: persistence and persistence. Once a story grabs hold of your arm, you go where it takes you and complications develop.

Chafetz:

You're a proponent of Natalie Goldberg's timed writing techniques. Tell me more about how you used these techniques to write *Blood*?

Remick:

I owe my writing life to Natalie Goldberg and to Bob Ray who introduced me to timed writing—or as Natalie calls it, writing practice. I've learned to use her timed technique as a marker for progress in a scene. In thirty minutes, I can write an entire scene—here's how:

- 5 minutes on setting, place, time, season, temperature.
- 5 minutes on character description and problem

- 5 minutes on action and dialogue
- 5 minutes on Intruder
- 5 minutes on Climax, and Resolution
- 5 minutes on Hook to the next scene down the line.

This means you have to carry the story in your head. It's not easy to get to this point, but the more you practice, the easier it gets...what else is new?

If a writer works this way, in just a short while, you will be able to write any scene at any time and have it fit into the flow and ebb of the story without much dithering. Of course then the hard work begins—the rewrite.

Blood—yes, I wrote each scene or section of the novel in a thirty minute session. The start line is always—Today I'm writing about. Here's an example:

Today I'm writing about memory and how it feels when Mitch turns off the computer and the emptiness he feels as he stares at the screen and how do I get back into the steel and concrete—all those hard images, all that sweat, all the stench of bodies waking up....

Chafetz:

Bob Ray, your longtime friend and fellow writer, says with a wry smile that your encyclopedic mind comes from not watching television. Does he mean that you read a lot?

Remick:

There was a time when I read everything I could get my hands on. I've bought and sold five libraries. There's a scene in the first version of *The Manchurian Candidate* where Major Marco has a visitor. Marco's house is filled with books from fifty disciplines. What he doesn't know is that he's been brain-washed to read everything. He says to his visitor—I just happen to be interested in Contemporary French Theater and the Lives of Muslim Saints.

I understand that. I graduated from Cal Berkeley. I know I learned something in the classes I took, but my education there came from the hundreds, maybe thousands, of books I bought at Creed's Bookstore on Telegraph. I read every one of them. Lately I've become more focused. I still read a wide range but it's in anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, biology, genetics, and sociology. I tell my writing students that they can learn more about writing from Elias Canetti's *Crowds and Power* or from Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Mythologies* than they can from reading Cormac McCarthy—one of my writing gods to be sure. Why is this? When I taught screenwriting, I had students who saw movies and said they wanted to write screenplays. Well, you can't learn to write screenplays by watching movies. There are at least three stories in a screenplay—the one the writer puts on paper, the one the director shoots, and the final one—the great one—the story the film editor creates and that's what you see. But as a writer, that's not where you start. You start with a place, a character, you get the character embroiled in a problem. You start from the ground up. Read. Read. Read.

Chafetz:

The narrator of the novel, Hank Mitchell, is a cold blooded killer, an odd mix of intelligence and a man who appears not to need permission or absolution from anyone. But while in prison he writes a 4000 page tome about his life as an assassin and ends up leaving the manuscript hidden in an unused prison library behind great works of literature. I find this intriguing. It opens up a sense of confession but to the self, a catharsis from writing. Is this part of the meta-fictional aspect of the novel?

Remick:

Writing *Blood* was a difficult process because I knew right off that I couldn't write it in the standard three-act structure. I also knew that there had to be two stories—one in the present, the other in the past.

Despite what some of the reviewers say, Mitch doesn't write to atone for his sins rather in writing he forgets. He discovers that once his story's written down, he can't remember whether it tells what "really" happened to him or whether it's something he made up.

This is an issue all fiction writers struggle with—is it history? Is it fiction? Did it really happen? As I wrote, I was amazed to discover that Mitch's decision to abandon his magnum opus, the story that he calls *The Patron Saint of Blood* to oblivion is a metaphor for the demise of reading in 21st Century culture.

We live in an age of screens and images—movies, videos, youtube, TV—but behind every image there is a writer's script feeding the image to the viewer. At the end of the novel one of the prison guards dumps on Mitch, his books, and his library—We got cable in the bull pen, he says. Mitch abandons his manuscript the way all script writers abandon their work to the actor, the director, the film editor.

Kindle versions of books might salvage some of the wreckage of book publishing, but in the long run we have become a nation of writers and viewers, no longer a nation of writers and readers. In the end of *Blood*, Mitch isn't redeemed or absolved. He can't escape from the river of blood, no one can. And besides—it's hard to find men such as he who are experts at what they do and do it without reservation.

Chafetz:

So Mitch is stuck in his current situation. He makes the only decision he can — Start over by riding the world of the powerful who would rape civilization for money?

Remick:

Colonialism demands that Third World resources flow back to the home power. To get those resources you have to shed some blood. And so we get what we need even if it means killing every one who stands in our way. Mitch wants to rectify that little problem so the implication at the end of the novel is that he will go about it in his own brutal way. Not many readers, however, are talking to me about the anti-colonial aspects of *Blood*.

Chafetz:

Your dialogues are generally short and easy to read. In a narrative sense, the reader hurtles over barriers of story movement. Each of the characters stubbornly pursues their own ends. The dialogue reads like hard boiled detective fiction, a cop in an interview room. The effect is electric and punctuated, but the scenes often end softly. What made you chose this method?

Remick:

Raymond Chandler taught us that good dialogue gives the illusion of a conversation. New writers today aren't always aware of the poetry in dialogue. Screen writers tend to pay attention to the kinship between the poetic line and the dialogue line because in the film world, time is money. Short, sweet, tight lines moving the story along fast. That's the goal.

One of my aims in writing *Blood* was to write a literary story in the poetry of violence. Sam Peckinpah is my guide here. The dialogue in *Blood*, I like to think, pays homage both to Chandler and to Peckinpah. I believe that a writer has to honor his predecessors. It was one of my goals to wed poetry and violence into an action-packed but literary narrative.

Mitch's monologue to Squeaky contains everything I know about poetry and a poem—it's loaded with cadences, rhythms, rhetorical devices. It's also loaded with violent subtext.

“For little guys like you, Squeaky, it always ends in a corner with your head cracked open and grit in your mouth...”

I am not ashamed to bow to the giants whose shoulders I stand on—Genet, de Sade, Burroughs, Camus, Kerouac. Genet in the choice of the name for the meta-fiction—*The Patron Saint of Blood*; de Sade in the choice of 120 sections; Burroughs in the unabashed writing about sex; Camus in the moral ambiguity of the prisoner; Kerouac in the long sentences and the peculiarity of the punctuation—notice the dashes.

Kerouac writes in his *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*-- *No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas—but the vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing*—and I tried to honor him for that. Kerouac showed us a new way to breathe in our writing. Younger writers sometimes re-invent the wheel Kerouac already had in production. It's a new language after Kerouac.

Chafetz:

Let's talk about standing on the shoulders of giants. When Mitch discovers Genet, he connects to the prisoner's writing – locked up – forbidden -- and he admires de Sade's honesty, takes both books as part of his past, part of himself, but they are illegible, not readable. Mimicking *120 Journées de Sodome, Blood* has 120 sections, almost saying to the reader, decipher me, read through the difficult blotted out and illegible illusions and analyze me, consider these words. The homage has become its own art. Am I reading into this or did you develop these subtexts as part of Mitch's brutal life?

Remick:

Simone de Beauvoir once asked—Faut-il brûler Sade? Should we burn Sade? Someone once defined poetry as the art of using ordinary words to say extra-ordinary things. Outlaw writers are outlaws for a reason. Genet, Burroughs, de Sade, D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller all write extra-ordinary things, things polite society doesn't want to hear.

When Mitch finds de Sade and Genet he recognizes them as pioneers shut away from the mundane—were they punished for what they did or for what they wrote? That recognition frees Mitch to write his own truth. The subtext is there—writing is salvation. More than that, however, these writers inspire Mitch to stand equal to his giants; he measures his worth by his writing. Without those writers to guide him, Mitch is just a killer. He knows that. The relationship between Mitch and the writers from the past is one of the structural loops—by loops I mean the themes and ideas that come back to refresh the reader's memory.

Mitch says it this way—

“I need to write about destruction. I recall a line from a poet—funny I can't recall his name—was it a he? Maybe it was a woman. The poet wrote that without poetry we're a tribe of expert killers.... I am of that tribe, the tribe without the poetry although maybe the poetry of my life is in the lies. Maybe the poetry of my life is in the deceit, in the weapons, in the sweet arc of blood spraying from a slit throat...as I sit on my bunk I count my corpses, each one etched in my mind, each one positioned like a piece of meaty sculpture and I want to know what they mean. I know they are the absence of poetry, they are the artifacts of the human being without grace—without poetry and grace we are efficient killing machines—I search through Camus for meaning. I look at Genet but see only the bars, the grill that separates the free from the not and yet I know that those on the outside looking in have no advantage other than a larger cell—they can move, but there is a limit to their movement. They can dream, but they can never escape. I don't try to escape. Escape? To what? Back out there to the killing and the slaughter? Back out to the abattoir where all that remains is to sever the left ear of each victim, to put each ear in your little savings sack that you then plop on the desk of your master in order to get your puny little reward? And what is your left ear? How do you

kill? Who do you butcher to get your puny little bonus? What is the ear you lay on your master's desk out there? No thank you. I'll serve my time..."

Chafetz:

You have no quotation marks in your dialogue and yet we know it is dialogue and follow it without much attribution. Why did you adopt this convention?

Remick:

I spend a lot of my writing time breaking conventions. The quotation mark issue however is my indirect way of paying homage to, perhaps, the greatest writer of our time—Cormac McCarthy who has dismissed the convention of quotation marks from the beginning. I'm also reminded of the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire and his problem with punctuation in his collection—*Alcools*. The editor didn't like the way Apollinaire used commas and so jiggered the text. Apollinaire, being the rebel he was, said you're nuts, take them all out. So *Alcools*, a very important event in French poetry, was issued without commas. I pay homage to a whole string of writers in ways that I can. Cormac and Guillaume—two worlds, one style.

Chafetz: A lot of your descriptions seem to be built on contradictory images. Here's a sample:

"In the ground in front of me a small flowerbed lies, its plants in rows exuding the smell of marigolds, gleaming with the bright sky blue shine of asters, arrayed in the brilliant rainbow of chrysanthemums. Blossoms the color of orange sunsets. Green and fresh as morning mist."

In the next paragraph you write:

"And beyond the bed, close to the fence with its razor wire tangled like angry black adders, I watch two cons face to face nose to nose, hands still at their sides."

Polar images. Life and death. These polar images run through the book. What's going on here?

Remick:

Your question gets us to the idea of the spine of a novel. Screenwriters talk about the spine or the armature. The way I work, I see the spine as a system of polarities. This isn't an idea I originated because it's embedded in story-telling around the globe.

I became aware of it after reading Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist. In his *Structural Anthropology* he wrote an essay titled The Structural Study of Myth in which he details how myths are built on polar opposites and the mediation of those opposites. Because Lévi-Strauss has a background in linguistics he also works the idea of pattern and transformation. What this means is that each metaphor for the spine contains its own opposite—open implies closed; cooked implies raw; inside implies outside. In the description you quote we see one of many pairs of polar opposites in *Blood--Life* implies death. For a writer not to read Lévi-Strauss is to deny oneself a brain-bending experience that will change the writing forever.

The second answer to your question has to do with the nature of the image. Poetry wants us to write lines that contain at least one image, lines that contain at least one action. String them together and you get a breathless story told with action and image. You use dialogue to expose character. In the passage you quote, Mitch sets out the *Life* images, then cuts to the *Death* images. Each one given its equal due. In the development of the story line those same polarities come back again and again but transformed. Push to the end, the final scene—my god, it's a phantasmagoria of life IN death images and those im-

ages have a history—as you have shown in your example. So, as a novelist-poet I try not to short circuit any aspect of the picture. Show it all. Go deep every time. As Annie Dillard says, Leave nothing in the vault...

Chafetz:

The spine is a film term. Is the novel built around a skeleton and the spine adds either direction or stability?

Remick:

The spine doesn't "add" anything, it is the central image or set of polarities the story is built on. One thing I know about spines is that they aren't easy to get.

I once listened to Sidney Pollack, the director, actor, man of all things Hollywood talk about the spine in *Out of Africa*. He said he didn't get the spine until he was shooting the third reel then it came to him—the spine in *Out of Africa* is "possession".

That single word gives you whole strings of images and metaphors. Karen owns the land. She possesses it. In the end the polarity of the spine shows up—she's dispossessed. She dresses her porters in a uniform. She possesses them. She wants to possess Denys, but he refuses to be possessed. So the spine doesn't add anything, it is everything.

As I said, screenwriters talk about the spine or the armature of a script.

Novelists usually don't have a clue. But once you know the spine, your writing goes deeper, the characters get better, and the story wraps itself up in itself like a great big birthday present. It's odd but the spine often doesn't reveal itself until you start rewriting.

So, how do you get to the spine? Once you have a draft, you search your story for polar opposites like Rich/Poor (*Cinderella*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Working Girl*, or *Pretty Woman*) and Innocence/Evil (*The Silence of the Lambs*). As you rewrite, the polarities will give you strings or sets of metaphors. Knowing the spine of your story makes re-writing not only more fun, but also more complete. Your salvation as a writer is in knowing that the spine is already there, you just have to find it.

Some writers say the spine should be in every sentence. Others settle for every scene. I'm one of the latter. I think the spine has to give you the metaphors in each scene or you wander. One way to grab the spine is to work an analysis of the metaphors. The metaphor with the most transformations is probably the spine. The spine in *Blood* is Inside/Outside. Once I discovered that, the story-line took a turn and led to Mitch's big decision—to stay Inside or go back Outside. If you carry that notion in mind when you read Mitch's scenes with the warden, you'll see how it plays out. Here's an example of the spine in dialogue:

"He rattled a sheaf of papers, blue pages with red and white seals on them, official seals, the kinds of seals you see on government documents or on classified tapes, the kinds of seals that lock up secrets for a lifetime, the kinds of seals whose keys have been thrown away. He said,

These bastards want you out, so out you go.

I told you already sir, I don't want to leave.

Your buddy Fairweather had pull but the son of a bitch behind this request has a thousand ton come-along and the balls to make it work. So I'm telling you—this is the third time these papers have landed here and every time I've covered for you, but these bastards are powers so you leave or I lose my job and I'm not losing my job."

And here's an example of the spine working in a short narrative passage:

“I remember the decay out there. What will happen in the collapse—what will they do with all of us? Unlock the doors? Turn us back out into their destroyed and dangerous world? Back out into the slaughterhouse? Back out into the river of blood?”

We are not the dangerous ones. I think about the small men lying in the mud and rain, throats slit and that is why I am in here—not for stealing a tubful of women’s underwear, no, I am in here in some twist of divine injustice not for killing those little men but for refusing any longer to kill them.”

So the spine can be elusive but if you do get the spine of a story early you can speed along, but I think the spine is a high-order rewriting tool.

Chafetz:

The story flows with seamless convoluted revelations. By the end of the book we understand Mitch quite well. Perhaps because his words are poetic, rhythmic and easy to follow we still accept him. Is this why it’s such a quick read?

Remick:

Another question requiring two answers. Bob Ray—co-author of *The Weekend Novelist Writes a Mystery*—and I have developed some ideas about writing that we like to share with other writers. We talk about the Three S’s-- Story, Structure, Style. We think of Story as a competition for a Resource Base; we think of Structure as the arrangement of the parts of the story—straight chronology or flashback or scenes or narration; and then, we come to Style.

In writing *Blood*, I decided—and it was a decision—not to use either a straight line structure or a dramatic, cinematic style, but to create each moment in the novel on two or more “loops” in a pattern. The biggest pattern is the Inside/Outside polarity but there are, by my count, sixty-two loops. One of them is the Knife. The knife comes back in many transformations—a machete, the edge of a book, a zipper, a broken button—all of which can be used to kill.

I’d be happy to give you the complete list if you want to see it. But the most important structural element is that Inside/Outside polarity. There are two stories in *Blood*: the Inside story Mitch tells us about his time in prison, and the Outside story that is *The Patron Saint of Blood*, the story Mitch writes in prison to tell about his past life. These ideas cross each other at various times and disclose more of Mitch’s secrets, past and present.

This idea of loops spins out of the notion of the Twelve Tone Row composers, usually called the atonalists. The idea is to set up a row of notes (or loops as in *Blood*) and bring each one back at some interval. As each moment or scene develops, one or more of those loops melds back into play in the same way the atonalists bring back the row and that happens to be the same way Bach brings back the subjects in his fugues.

We all stand on the shoulders of giants. The writing as a result has a musical quality to it. Melodic but violent. Image filled, but not static.

The second answer to your question is, of course, in the speed. I think of a novel as a train—get your passengers on it and don’t let them off until they get to the end. Mesmerize them with the speed and the poetry. Pack the language (the Style) with images and action, create pictures in your reader’s mind and the speed and story come so clear that you read fifty pages without stopping. This is, as you know, the definition of a page-turner.

Chafetz:

I read a story in your Terminal Weird short story collection over a decade ago. It was entitled *Roach*, a somewhat surrealistic story where a man eats himself. Fascinating stuff, echoing Kafka. At the same time, I remember reveling in its comedic aspect. The story is brutal and with a beat, like the

Beat poets. At your novel-launch party you read sections of *Blood* and the audience kept the beat, a nod of the head, a tap of the foot, a clenching of fists on the stress points. I did it. It's compelling. How important is that beat to the writing?

Remick :

When I was at Berkeley, I took a course in Racine, the great French playwright. The professor spent 14 weeks showing us how Racine used rhetorical devices in his dialogue. The professor called these devices by their Greek names: anaphora, epistrophe, anadiplosis, zeugma, polysyndeton, asyndeton. That course changed my life because for the first time I got exposed to the power of rhetoric the way the Greeks envisioned and practiced it. Since then I've modeled a lot of what I do on Racine—it's not enough to put the words down, that's information. You have to make the words dance and rhetoric can make your words dance. Most people dismiss rhetoric but rhetoric cannot be dismissed. Rhetoric can give you rhythm, rhetoric can give you cadence, rhetoric can give your writing new life. So the writing in *Blood* is thick with rhetorical devices. And that's what you're picking up—the poetry of violence couched in rhetorical devices driving images at full speed so the story spins out ahead of you, drawing you along with each one. Here's another example that's running several rhetorical devices:

“I **scoop** up the brown envelope with its four **stamps** and, **sitting** on my **bunk**, **slit** the **belly** of the little **beast** with my thumbnail. I pull a white sheet of folded paper from the wound. Wrapped in it, there are four photographs. There is a note in Geraldine's hand, in her *flowing florid script* with its curlicues and slanted crossed T's, not in the hurried, jagged writing of her *note pad*, *the pad* she used instead of a voice, and in the flowery script there is **no pain, no hurt, no tears**, just her own sweet voice, the voice I remember from **times when** she was pure and I was innocent, **times before** I had ever witnessed our father fucking Mrs. Wilson, **times before** Catharin ran away, times when our mother was not ashamed to look us in the eye.”

The rhetorical devices—alliteration, anaphora, anadiplosis, conduplicatio, asyndeton, zeugma all work to give a cadence to the passage Here's how:

Alliteration: scoop up, stamps, sitting, slit; bunk belly beast.

Conduplicatio/anaphora: remember from times...times before, times before, times when...

Anadiplosis (repetition of a word in the middle of a sentence: note pad, the pad

Asyndeton (no conjunctions): there is no pain, no hurt, no tears.

The asyndeton works with the **zeugma** (linking multiple nouns or verbs off of a single noun or verb) a note in her hand..in her flowing florid script...not in the hurried, jagged writing...

Here both clauses hinge on the prepositional phrase: note in her hand...

When you put all that together, you get a thick passage that works on a lot of levels, the least important one being information.

Chafetz:

I couldn't help noticing the dearth of adverbs in *Blood*.

Remick:

Adverbs. I hate adverbs for a lot of reasons. One reason is that it pisses me off when a writer tells me what to feel instead of slamming me in the gut with a good, strong Anglo-Saxon verb. And that's what adverbs are—a lazy way to get to emotion. When I read something like this—“Get out of here, she said sternly.”—I think right away of Elmore Leonard's warning—Never use an -ly adverb after said. If the writer doesn't want to write “she said”, then show me something deeper—Get your butt out of here, she growled.

Reason Two: adverbs hide images. The poet in me bristles when a writer gives me this—“He dug furiously at the dirt covering the furtively buried corpse...” Come on. Furtively buried? Dug furiously? You can do better than that. Rip out that adverb and you leave a hole in the sentence. Fill the hole with a strong verb and you get an image: He scraped handfuls of dirt from the pus-filled wounds...

About adverbs in *Blood*—there are some—for the most part in the dialogue because I can’t control the way the characters speak. If they want to chant strings of adverbs all day long, well, that’s what characters do.

Chafetz:

For many years you taught at the University of Washington’s Writers Extension Program. Now that you’ve stopped, do you miss it?

Remick:

I love to teach. But I’m an obsessive person who gets caught up in anything I do so that I dream it, live it, speak it. When I teach, I obsess on teaching and it exhausts me. Here’s an example—because I’m obsessive I tend to store every writer’s story so that when a question gets asked, I’ve got the thing right there—instant recall. That’s great for the student asking about her work, but it plays hell with my own writing.

And then I started to lose my hearing. In class you can’t be wrong and you can’t be tainted. In our culture if you’re hard of hearing, most people think you’re also stupid. So I had to get out of the classroom. I found that when I did, I had more time for my own stories and my productivity picked up a lot.

These days I work one on one with writers. This is better for both me and the writer because I tend to be very intense. Some I work with say that I exhaust them. Turn-about is fair play, don’t you think?

Chafetz:

What is your writing life like?

Remick:

Writing is my obsession. I have a cartoon over my desk that says, “When not writing, I get weird.” There are a lot of people out there who are ready kick your teeth out. I don’t want to be one of them. Writers are fragile creatures who need guidance and who appreciate any insights into the craft and the trade.

My first mentor was the poet Jack Moodey. He helped me along the poet’s path while reading some of the god-awful stuff I was writing and believe me it was terrible. He coached me in the art of finding my poetic line, he made me read everything I should, he showed me his genius that shone like a G-class sun, and guided me out of ignorance. I can still quote his poems. As I move along the time line, I meet writers who need that kind of guidance; they don’t need someone pounding on them with a big hammer. I just try to be a messenger from Jack Moodey.

Chafetz:

You work with many other fiction writers, poets, artists and screenwriters. What do you learn from them?

Remick:

What I learn from my fellow writers is not to close off too soon. Keep open. Put pages on the table, open your mind, and listen. Sometimes what you hear isn’t the part that needs work, but it suggests something that does. I’ve got a novel called *The Virgin of Tepeñixtlahuaca* in rewrite, and just the other day I was working a toenail clipping scene with my group—yes, my character gets her toenails clipped

and she hoards them. One of my readers pointed out that I could plug the scene into the spine of the novel if I had the toenail clippings kept in a container because, as he noted, there are lots of boxes in this novel. Just that little note changed the whole scene—the spine, by the way, of that novel is Thick/Thin. So, I learn to be a better writer by listening to my critics. What I have also learned is that when a reader's pencil moves on the page, even if she doesn't know why, there's a little genie in her brain saying "hmmm...something's not right here." So my advice, if you want it, is—listen to the genie. He's never wrong.

Chafetz:

You've written a book of poetry, an anthology with five compatriot poets. You've written a novella, dozens of short stories and have many poems in print. You've written non-fiction and now the novel, *Blood*. This is a wide array for most of us that stick to one meager calling. What kind of a writer do you consider yourself?

Remick:

Disciplined. When Bob Ray introduced me to Natalie Goldberg's writing practice technique I was an uptight, academic, stylized pseudo-poet with ridiculous literary aspirations. One day I wrote a crazy poem called Breathless in writing practice and the doors opened to a new way of writing—Go where the pen takes you.

When I sit down to write, I never know what will come out. And that's the joy of writing now. Let me qualify that with an explanation—writing practice is the motor that cranks up the engine that drives the wheels of this train. Once I get a story going, I don't like to let it spin off into space. Natalie, in the first session I attended with her said: follow your mind, finish what you start. If you set the timer for thirty minutes, keep your hand moving for thirty minutes. Extending that principle—when you start a novel, finish it. A screenplay? Finish it. A poem? Finish it. A collection of short stories? Finish it. So, at this stage of my writing life, I think I'm a writer who finishes what I start. My epitaph? When he died, he left no book unfinished.

Joel Chafetz is a short story writer and former instructor at the University of Washington Extension Certificate Program. His credits include, The Southeast Review, Mangrove, African Voices, Gulf Stream, Kimera, Byline, Boy's Life, Cricket, and others. He is presently enjoying his wife and eleven year old daughter while writing a novel about how hominines became human.