

NOTE: This interview was conducted by independent filmmaker Peter Oliver in November, 2009.

INTERVIEWER

You started out as a screenwriter and were also a film editor. What do movies teach the novelist?

ERIC COYOTE

To put it bluntly, how to be entertaining. How to keep the story moving forward with dramatic scenes and interesting dialogue. A dull scene in a movie is far more noticeable than a dull scene on the page, mostly because in a movie you're forced to actually sit through it. In fiction, if you write something boring, the reader will probably just stop reading and go do something else. My film background has also allowed me to be a ruthless editor. If something isn't working, I'm not afraid to throw it out. I learned not fall in love with my own material. Cut, cut, cut. Trim, trim, trim. Don't be afraid to play around. That's the life of an editor and I think it translates well to writing fiction.

INTERVIEWER

When you're writing, is there an ideal audience that you write for?

COYOTE

I follow Kurt Vonnegut's advice and write for an audience of one. What he called "the secret of artistic unity." My audience of one is a friend I met at USC film school over twenty years ago. We were screenwriters and in the process of criticizing each other's work and writing a number of scripts together, we developed a complicated shorthand to savagely rip each other apart and perfect our writing. We were brutally honest and all praise was hard won. That makes him the perfect audience-of-one. To impress such an exacting critic, you have to be on the top of your game.

INTERVIEWER

What sort of discussions do you have with your friends about your work when it's in progress?

COYOTE

I will obsessively discuss my projects with my audience-of-one while I'm working on something. It's helpful to have another creative mind you respect to bounce ideas off of so you don't spend years going in the wrong direction. But other than him, I don't like talking about my work to anyone else. That's something I learned as a screenwriter. The problem with discussing your work with your friends or in writing groups is you have to listen to their lame ideas on how to "improve" it. Other people start telling you about the version of the story they want to write, not about the version you're writing. When you constantly talk about your project with too many people, you kill the magic of creation. I need to be alone at the keyboard channeling the ether. It's called writing, not talking. Real writers sit alone in a room and write. To do it any other way isn't writing, it's stenography.

INTERVIEWER

Why is *The Long Drunk* book one of a trilogy? Why not make your homeless detective a series character instead?

COYOTE

My decision boiled down to a choice between the Aristotelian Three Act Structure and Beverly Houston's film-theoretical model of readers engaging in "endless consumption" like babies sucking at a media-saturated breast-of-plenty. I opted for the classical approach because I find the idea of a finite story far more appealing than a never ending narrative. It's also a question of believability. I believe a character going a big, long adventure -- think Homer or Frodo. But for a non-professional detective to continually solve a series of unrelated crimes in five or ten books? That stretches credibility pretty quickly, especially when the protagonist is a homeless drunk.

INTERVIEWER

How did you begin *The Long Drunk*? How did you come up the idea of a homeless man trying to solve a murder?

COYOTE

I was walking an old dog in a Venice Beach one day and saw a homeless man reading a flier stapled to a telephone pole. The flier offered a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of a murder suspect. It was one of those eureka moments for me. It all clicked. I have a lot of those moments, but this one I chose to pursue.

INTERVIEWER

Did you have any idea what the end of the novel was going to be when you began?

COYOTE

Yeah. But the ending I envisioned changed drastically. Multiple times, in fact. I'm not too hung up about realizing some idealized version of the story in my head. To me, the creative process is about being open to change and seeing where the story takes you naturally. I enjoy using the Japanese wabi-sabi "found beauty" approach in my work.

INTERVIEWER

So you don't plot anything out before you begin to write?

COYOTE

When I was writing screenplays, I never plotted anything out. But with *The Long Drunk*, since it was a mystery/detective novel, I needed to make sure the plot was logical and, more importantly, believable, otherwise the whole thing would fall apart. I initially did a forty-five page outline detailing every chapter and scene, along with bits of dialogue. Of course, I began to deviate from the specifics of my outline pretty quickly, but it was still a good jumping off point and it also kept me on track to hit all the major beats I needed to hit.

INTERVIEWER

Did the theme or characters also change as you went along?

COYOTE

Yes and no. I don't write theme in my first draft, per se. I concentrate on telling the story. Theme comes later in all the incidental stuff surrounding the plot. To me, theme is derived from putting in the correct accents, like in a painting. I feel when you pick up my book, you're agreeing to a contract. My obligation to you the reader is to tell you an entertaining story, but part of that deal is that occasionally I'll interject just enough provocative red meat to challenge you intellectually and make you think about the world we live in.

INTERVIEWER

You raise an interesting point here. Your view of the world in *The Long Drunk* is pretty bleak, and in particular, Los Angeles is a nasty place. Is your own world view as bleak as those of your characters?

COYOTE

Not really. I'm a pretty happy guy. The thing is, I think as bad as times have been, times have always been shitty for some segment of society. Chandler's portrait of Los Angeles wasn't exactly puppies and flying-rainbow unicorns. There are two separate cities in Los Angeles, one rich and the other poor. And they coexist side-by-side, sometimes right on top of each other. Venice is a microcosm of America as a whole.

INTERVIEWER

What are the artistic advantages of setting *The Long Drunk* in a Dickensian landscape?

COYOTE

First off, it's a lot of fun to write. Dealing with the sub-Darwinian social classes gives you a lot of freedom to explore various points of view and divergent political discourse while still being true to your characters and story. People who are drunk and crazy can believably say and do just about anything. Also, by showing the disparity that exists in Venice between the wealthiest of the wealthy and poorest of the poor allows you to make poignant social commentary while still being entertaining. If you're not entertaining, it doesn't matter how brilliant you are at deconstructing popular culture and tearing apart the dominant corporate ideology. Nobody is going to read your book. People won't have the patience. It's that simple.

INTERVIEWER

Your entire novel takes place primarily among the homeless and lowlifes. What is your experience with homelessness?

COYOTE

Homeless people are a fact of life in a beach community like Venice. You can choose to either engage with them, or ignore them. In my case, walking around the streets for ten years, I was like an anthropologist. I certainly don't pass judgement on the homeless, either in my novel

or in my personal life. I merely observe and report. Okay, that's a lie. I make a lot of shit up, too. But even the stuff I make up is drawn from real life.

INTERVIEWER

So is your work autobiographical?

COYOTE

I think it's impossible to consider yourself an artist of any stripe and not have your work be autobiographical in some sense. But no, *The Long Drunk* is not autobiographical. It's not a fictionalized memoir about my own neuroses. I'm not one of those writers who is so narcissistic that the only subject I can write about is myself. My main focus was trying to tell a fun -- albeit realistic story.

INTERVIEWER

What writers have influenced you the most?

COYOTE

Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett, of course. You can't be a serious detective writer or hardboiled novelist without being influenced by them. I would also add John D. MacDonald to the crime writer's pantheon of must-read-writers. He's the master of clear, concise language, the master of telling a rollicking story minus all that Iowa Workshop bullshit. J.K. Rowling and Stephen Hunter are also big influences, especially for their plot machinations and the way they keep you turning pages. I admire Stephen King's ability to paint realistic portraits of everyday America. Studying how Bob Dylan, Faulkner, Bukowski, and Quentin Tarantino write has also been invaluable. Scenes, descriptions, dialogue, pacing. I steal from all of them.

INTERVIEWER

As Yeats famously said, one must choose between the life and the work. What is your take?

COYOTE

I have no desire to a public person or celebrity. For me, the most important creation is the work, not the Eric Coyote persona. I'd rather be creating enjoyable, enduring fiction instead of tabloid fodder. I'm just not into going around telling everyone how great I am. That said, writing is a lifestyle. It's like being a dog walker. It's not a career or job, but a way of living.

INTERVIEWER

Finally, some might read *The Long Drunk* and accuse you of being a "macho" writer. Anything to say about that one?

COYOTE

Guilty as charged. I've always excelled at sports, whether it's lacrosse, basketball, or kendo. I think my competitive fire is reflected in my writing. In my quest to become the second best writer of my generation, I obsessively rewrite and rewrite to get every word exactly right and to make every sentence clear, clean, and completely understandable. I don't want the reader doing

any mental gymnastics that could potentially take them out of the story. My terse, easy-to-read style is actually the result of many years of hard work, buckets of sweat, and my relentless drive to continually hone my craft. 10,000 hours, a million words, learning by failure, all that crap. Practice, practice, practice. Champions are made at practice, same with writing. As a result, I gravitate to characters who display a similar tenacity and I'm interested in telling stories about men who actually do things and embody a physical reality. I want the reader to readily grasp what's going on, but also be entertained in the process. Sure, there are a lot layers in what I write and multiple subtexts are always hidden beneath my stories, but I couldn't give a crap about jerking around with complex sentence structures and playing silly linguistic games with my prose. I'm economically straight forward by design. Get the job done as directly as possible, simple as a hand grenade, boom! So if that's the definition of being "macho", I'll take it as a compliment.