



Library podcast

2015 Seattle Reads - Peter Heller with Book-It Repertory Theatre present: *The Painter*

[0:00:05] Welcome to the Seattle Public Library's podcasts of author readings and Library events a series of readings, performances, lectures, and discussions. Library podcasts are brought to you by the Seattle Public Library and Foundation. To learn more about our programs and podcasts, visit our website at www.spl.org. To learn how you can help the library foundation support the Seattle Public Library go to Foundation.SPL.org.

[0:00:40] Good evening. I'm Marcellus Turner most often known as MT and I'm your City Librarian. Welcome to the 17th annual Seattle Reads. Our 2015 Seattle Reads main event is a special evening of Book-It Repertory Theater staged readings from *The Painter* by Peter Heller whom I've just had the pleasure of meeting. This is the 17th year of the Seattle Public Library's renowned Seattle Reads series. We are grateful to all of our Seattle Reads sponsors. They are the Wallace Foundation which funded Seattle Reads at its inception; the *Seattle Times* for generous promotional support for library programs; media sponsor KUOW public radio; Elliott Bay Book Company; Rick Simonson and Karen Maeda Allman for being our longtime partner in Seattle Reads. Do visit the Elliott Bay book table to see and buy Peter's books. Special thanks as well to Vintage Books for generous support. And finally special thanks to the Seattle Public Library Foundation and thousands of people in our community who make gifts to benefit our library.

[0:01:51] This private support makes possible Seattle Reads as well as hundreds of free library programs and services every year. Now, let me turn things over to Chris Higashi program manager of the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library who directs our annual Seattle Reads series to introduce the rest of the program. So Seattle Reads aims are to deepen appreciation of and engagement in literature through reading and discussion. To create community around reading a shared book, to invite people to voice differences of opinion from the shared foundation of reading the same book. We have loved our past two years of nonfiction, but I will say that it has been a real pleasure to read a novel together this year and for me to listen to readers reflect on those themes of the novel: good and evil, murder and revenge, redemption, love, art, poetry, the creative impulse. So we're excited to again present staged readings by Book-It Repertory Theater. Let me ask how many of you have seen a Book-It Repertory Theater production?

[0:03:18] Okay, so but those of you who haven't, so Book-It is different from other theater that you may have seen. Book-It style is for to use basically every word of, that the author has written, and so

the actors are going to speak both the narrative and the, and the dialogue. So, let's see. I don't think I need to say very much about the book because you're going to see this and sort of know what it's about. So it is based on a real-life, the character Jim Stegner is based on a real-life artist, Jim Wagner, who is an expressionist painter from Taos and a friend of Peter's. If you picked up the program booklet just know that those paintings are Jim Wagner's paintings courtesy of the gallery and the paintings private owners. I mean, they generously gave permission for their use. Okay, so with that, here is *The Painter* by Peter Heller.

[0:04:24] *The Painter* by Peter Heller, a Borzoi book published by Alfred A Knopf 2014.

Mayhem, oil on linen, 40 by 50 inches, collection of the artist.

[0:04:42] I never thought I'd be a painter. That art would be something I would not have any way of not doing. Never thought I'd be a father. Or that I'd have a daughter who was as beautiful and strong like they say my mother was. I never thought I'd shoot a man that afternoon at the Boxcar Pub in Taos. Lauder Simms, sitting at the next stool, nursing his fourth or fifth vodka tonic, the fucker who skated on a certain conviction for raping a 12 year old girl in his movie theater downtown.

"Jim, your daughter, Alce, is coming up nice."

"What. Alce?"

"Long-legged like her mom, Jim. I like seeing her at my theater. Not too skinny."

"What'd the hell you say?"

His leer, lips wet with tonic. "She's really interested in movies. Everything movies, Jim. I'm going to train her to be my little projectionist—" Without thought 'BANG', the concussion inside the windowless room was deafening. Johnny, my good friend and bartender lunging over the bar over Jim's arm to keep me from pulling the trigger again.

[0:05:53] I painted that moment, the explosion of colors, the faces. I also spend a little time in jail, too.

An Ocean of Women, Oil on canvas, 52 by 48 inches.

My house is three miles south of town. 40 acres of wheat grass and sage, small pond and a dock. The West Elk mountains rugged and rising up the back of my place. They tell me some years the snow never melts. I haven't seen that yet. This is my new home, nestled down and all this high rough country like a train set. After spending time doing time I needed some space. Forty acres ought to do it. Yeah, I need space to gather myself.

[0:07:00] [engine sounds] Sofia pulls up in the Subaru she calls Triceratops. It's that old. Rusted muffler caterwauling like a Harley. Very dramatic. Which she is. Twenty-eight, an age for drama. I

asked her to model for me five minutes after meeting her in line at the grocery store. About three months ago.

“Can I get an extra checker up here, please?”

She was wearing a short knit top and she had strong arms like someone who works out of doors. And a slightly crooked nose, scrappy like a fighter. Like me. And her breasts. Everybody notices those. [laughter]

[0:07:32] “You're an artist.” It's not a question.

She was cataloguing the colors on my paint-spattered clothes.

[0:07:41] “Exuberant, primitive, outsider.” Then her eyes went to the fishing flies stuck in my cap. “Artist fisherman, cool.”

“You model?”

“Nude?”

“Sure.”

“How much?”

“20 bucks an hour?”

“I've decided you're a creep. You're not a violent felon, are you?”

“I am.” [laughter]

“Really?”

“I shot a man in a bar. You're not going to back out the door like in a horror movie, are you? My second wife did that.”

She was laughing uninhibited, the kind of laugh that got everybody in the grocery store line laughing along.

[0:08:22] “Are you married?”

“Twice but not anymore.”

“I'll do it. 25. Danger pay. Nude modeling for a violent killer convict. Hah!”

“I didn't kill the guy. I just shot him. I was a little high and to the left.”

She was laughing again. Triceratops [engine sounds][unintelligible] slides onto my gravel driveway, mufflers getting worse.

[0:08:50] “I love my Triceratops.” Sofia drops her knapsack on the floor beside the easel and starts reheating coffee. “What are we painting today?”

“Something I've been thinking about, *An Ocean of Women*.”

“An ocean. Just me?”

“And me, swimming, all the women, the fish. I thought we could give it a try.”

“Fuck, Jim, you ask a lot of a girl.”

“You only have to make like an ocean just once.”

She cocks her head and fixes me with an eye. “Stormy or calm?”

[0:09:27] We begin. Sofia is a champ of an ocean. A natural. I paint fast; on her side, arched, swimming, breaststroke, willowing backwards, arms extended. Fish, more fish. Brilliant fish. A hungry dark shark looming up from below with a dog's pink boner. I'm lost in a sea of women, fish, and women. Sofia has the rhythm of a dancer changing positions as she feels the mood change. I love this. I'm painting myself into the canvas swimming. Big bearded man, Beard going white.

[0:10:00] I'm 45. It's been salt and pepper since I was 30. Swimming for my life and somehow enjoying it. Time passes. Sofia is leaning into me, watching over my shoulder. She doesn't say a word, but I can feel her smile. I've heard artists say that they are channeling God. Well, you have to have a Cracker Jack Gallery to be able to say that.

“It's been three hours. I'm gonna go,”

[0:10:32] She tugs my beard and disappears. From somewhere outside myself, Triceratops revs, and she's gone. I came to this valley four months ago and I am finally painting. I have a pretty good reputation in the art world. “Stegner's canvases swirl with an eclectic diversity.” Two books about me and my oeuvre commissioned by my dealer to raise the value on your work. The Stephen Lily Gallery, very high-end. Prison, it seems, increased my cachet.

“Oh Jim, you're the Hemingway of the art world, no, the Johnny Cash. I have my trademark. Yes, see Stegner incorporating farmyard chickens against criterion, contrapuntal in objectivity. Chickens just made me laugh. Coal trains too. “You just can't disagree. He's God damned good.” [several people

talking] I'm famous, I guess, somewhat, which just which makes it harder and harder to just find a quiet place--

[0:11:41] where I can just slow down and—[sigh]

[0:11:47] The cell phone rings. Shit! The cell phone rings. This house is off the grid. The cell phone rings. There's no phone lines. The guy who built it was some sort of environmentalist. The cell phone rings.

"It's Steve, your dealer from Santa Fe. How's my clean and silver genius? How does a guy who's known me for 20 years talk to me like this? You are, aren't you clean?" I'm one of his top earners.

"Hi Steve."

"I've got good news and better news. You hear? Effy Sidell bought your painting *Fish swallowing all those houses*. What were you going to call it? *The Continuing Housing Crisis*? Anyway, he came in and saw it just as we were hanging it. I caught the gleam in his eye. Very casual to me he says 'So what is Jim working on these days?' Sounds like Eff. Then he gestured at the fish-slash-house thing and says offhand, 'That's interesting'. Instinct, Jim, instinct. Twenty grand, Jim. I tacked on 2,000 plus the 10% consideration I would remove because he was so decisive."

I look out the window. It's the perfect afternoon to throw off some flies on the Sulphur.

[0:12:58] "Here's the better news; Pim Pantela wants to fly you down here for a week. He's commissioning a large portrait of his daughters. We talked about size and we came to 50 by 80."

"What do you mean came to? I don't remember you asking me."

"Jim your phone's been off for ten days."

He's right. I lost the charger in the seat of my truck. "A week? I've met his kids, twins matching polka dots right? I can paint them in two hours."

"Jim he wants you to cut loose, be Jim, really be yourself, you know, throw in some chickens or something."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Steve, be Jim? I suppose he wants a coal train too. I'm just getting to work here Steve. I'm doing good work. Tell them another time." The silence is stony. "Pim has offered 35 grand. Since I made the commitment without asking you, I admit, I am willing to take a forty-sixty cut." His voice is cool the way it almost never is. "I'll think about it, gotta go." I hang up before I can blow my top. I dig a cigarillo from the foil pouch and stand out on the covered ramada. Steve! Just when

[0:14:16] I'm moving on something good and true he throws out some bullshit like a commission for two pan face little girls in polka-dots. A week? Throw in a chicken. Fuck that! If I finish in a day they can take it or leave it! *An Ocean of Women*. Damn it! It is the first big piece I've made it halfway through since coming up to these mountains. *An Ocean of Women*.

[0:14:43] Sofia is a great model. She knows when to disappear. I love that. I smoke. I breathe. I think. My daughter would be 18 now. I'll say be a better fishperson than me by now. Damn it at this fancy iPhone now. Steve made me get it so I can take photos of my new paintings. Don't ask me how it works. Now that I have this phone, I get to talk to people I might not have talked to again before I died. I'll say, ask for a phone. I'm such an asshole. 'No Pop, you're a dreamer. That's why you paint.' Okay. 'I'm a combination of you and Mom; a dreamer and a fighter.' Hold on a friggin minute. 'Glad you didn't say fucking like you always want to.' I kind of thought I was the fighter. Nope. 'You react that's why you're in the ER all the time.' No shit. Yeah, you're so damn smart. 'Don't worry Pop. We need dreamers more than we need fighters.' Four months later, she's dead. I better go fishing before my thoughts spiral. Fishing is always the best decision. I turn up Grand Avenue, elbow out the window. Smell the downpour that's just passed.

[0:16:07] Ozone. Grand Avenue; hardware store, two cafes, pizza shop, Mexican restaurant, ice cream, barber way off the main Highway only local traffic. I pass the gravel company, the orchard storage warehouse, trailer park by the river, quick stop for gas, two pumps, one for diesel. My buddy Bob tells me "You be careful, Jim, the woods will be thick with bow hunters." Bob's a fishermen, told me all the best places.

"Only told him a quarter of 'em. Archery season in two days might have to fish in an orange vest in case some son of a bitch from the Ozarks mistakes your white beard for the ass of a deer."

"What a way to go."

[0:16:54] On the other side of town it's just the river. Drops spatter the windshield, no matter. The wind from upstream will be in my face wanting to screw with my cast. I don't care. I'm ready for the cold current against the legs of my waders. I floor it on the straightaways, downshifting up the grade. Patchy white clouds moving fast. Dark, spicy scents of spruce and fir. Big heavy boughed branches trailing little flags of dry Spanish moss. I touch my hat, five of my special hand-tied flies 'Stegner killers'. The cutthroat are waiting. Up ahead, the horse trailer in the middle of the road and a pair of hunting outfitters in their rig, horse trailer gear piled haphazardly into an F-350 diesel. Short man and a big hat leather vests pushed open by his belly. A round chew tin in his breast pocket approaches my car and attempts to wave me through. He's got chew juice dribbling down his exposed gut. Farther up, a big man with a bigger gut is trying to load a little strawberry roan into a trailer. The horse's head is straining bad

[0:18:02] and he's jerking on it hard and yelling "yah!". He's scaring the mare I can see her terrified eyes rolling into the back of her head. "Yah, goddamnit rock-headed piece of shit. Yah!" The horse rears and tears the rope through his hand no gloves and the man roars like a bear. I'm staring,

astounded. The short Cowboy is staring too. The big man ties the rope in three quick moves to a ring at the back of the trailer. The mare's mouth is foaming. "You good-for-nothing balky shit factory." The man reaches into the back of the trailer unhitches a club. The first strike is with both hands down hard on the wither. The mare screams, her front legs buckle. I'm out the door shoving hard against the short man pushing him hard so he lands on his butt in the dirt. "Hey, hey!" I'm blind with rage just the same as the bar that day red, mad blindness. Delwood Siminoe hauls back and swings against the architecture of the mare's ribs like a thud of a hollow drum. The horse is screaming, high something human almost. I'm on the man. I topple him.

[0:18:58] They roll into the ditch. "Dell! Dell!" [confused yelling][unintelligible] great punching, he'll swing again. I feel something give, the pulp of his nose. He scrambles back up the embankment. What the fuck was this? He's looking down at me holding the club. I stand slowly. "Buddy, what the hell was that?" Dell is not particularly perturbed, which makes him a dangerous man.

"You're going to kill that horse."

"My horse, not yours. Headed for the glue factory, anyway."

"Dell, what are we going to do with her? She won't load."

"Cut her loose. Mister, I suggest you mind your own goddamn business now and evermore." The big man, the one called Dell, walks to the edge of the embankment his eyes flat with contempt and snorts a loud hawk and spits. The phlegm hits the side of my neck. Then he shows me his back. The metal door of the trailer clangs shut the engine revs and rattles is truck and trailer go down the road. The mare mews when I approached her. She's cut deep. When I touch her shoulder she flinches from my hand, but she doesn't step away. I stand beside her and breathe. Man and horse just standing there.

[0:20:36] Breathing breathing. I gentle the mare over to a tree and call my neighbor Willy, an elk rancher. Willy pulled up in his pickup with his blue six horse trailer. He loaded the feed bag with oats and spoke to her gently like a person who has been injured and aggrieved. He got the bag over her ears and let her eat and calm down.

[0:21:02] Willy spat on the road. Deep afternoon shade, the creek running below, a deer fly buzzing around us. Willy spat. We watched the mare shake the feed bag for the last oats raising her nose.

"Like to see your paintin' sometime. Won't hurt my feelings if that's not something you do."

"Come over anytime." I couldn't get it out of my head the man swinging with hatred, not caring if he killed or not. We watched the little mare. Willy spat.

[0:21:45] "So, what happened here?"

"Some hunting outfitter, Dell something, tridc to kill that roan. You know that guy Dell?"

Willy's eyes go blank, face gets stony "I can keep her at my place if you're okay with that."

"Well, whoever this fucker Dell is there's no way he's getting her back."

"Stay away from trouble like that."

This is supposed to be my time of peace, my gathering period. I pretty much fucked that up this afternoon. I drove back through town and stopped at Bob's at the gas station just before closing time sitting in the office with a 12-pack of Bud Light. What else, it's beer-thirty.

"Delwood Siminoe, Jesus, Jim, that guy could ruin anybody's day."

"Delwood?"

"I gather you traded words."

"How do you know that?"

"You got blood on your shirt. That Dell he's a mean SOB elk poacher. God knows what else. Half his horses are so broke down at the end of the season, he trucks the whole bunch down to his brother in Arizona who sells the used ones up to the killers."

"Fuck."

"You be good now. It's a small town, Jim. Better to stay out of other people's business."

"You reading my mind?"

"I'm reading your face."

[0:23:11] *The Digger*, oil on canvas, 20 by 30 inches.

[0:23:19] I get home and I squeeze out a tube of Mars black and a splotch of cobalt violet with a tint of white. I begin to feel...better. Then comes a bird, large and looming. What, a crane? No, a raven. A man in a garden digging. Four more birds, deep, black, violet. No, not a garden, a grave. A man digging a grave. That's what it is, and they're vultures, carrion feeders.

[0:23:53] When Alce died, I got out of Taos and moved closer to the Rio Grande. Back then I went fishing every day. Alce was gone I didn't know what else to do. Fishing was the only time I forget myself, forget my girl. Less than a year after Alce was...

[0:24:15] after she went and my first wife Christine left, I remarried. Wholesome Minnesota redhead who'd once been a Playboy bunny. We got along we moved back to Taos and I wondered 50 times a week, why I married her. Is that strange? To be able to feel so much tenderness for a person as I did and a powerful attraction and yet feel no...love?

[0:24:42] It's an engine, grief. It doesn't fade, what they say, with time. Sometimes it accelerates and sometimes, if you're lucky, you don't feel anything. I drank. She was only a teenager. 'Hey Pop!' 'Huh?' 'I snagged a 16-incher, a cutbow, I put them back.' 'No shit!' 'Fifty cents.' 'Oh shit!' 'A dollar!' 'Damn it!' 'A dollar-fifty' 'Pop, you keep swearing you'll go broke.'

[0:25:19] I painted that moment with a rod and reel, cut of the canyon, releasing a 16 inch cutbow. First and only good painting I made in the year after. You'll be good now. Nothing ever happens how you want it.

[0:25:38] [engine sounds] That morning, Sofia came over even though I told her I wouldn't be painting. "There you are, smoking away your breakfast."

[0:25:42] "You should knock."

"I'm hoping I'll catch you in flagrante delicto."

"With whom?"

"Your muse, wrestling an angel maybe."

"You should knock."

"You're serious today. Tell me?"

I tell her about Dell and the horse. We end up out back on the edge of the ramada overlooking the valley. She links my arm. We watch a big hawk fluttering low over the sage.

"I want to just kill the bastard, and I'm not even a violent felon."

We stand side-by-side watching the hawk, it's white rump flashing, rising. I'm almost breathing free and clear until her fingers migrate down my arm and slip onto my ... thigh.

"You see me naked all the time. Does that do anything for you?" Her head tipping downward quarter profile. It's the prettiest angle of the human head, a beautiful woman's head.

"Yes?" Don't answer. "Do you?"

"I get...when you're arching your back, I sometimes I get..."

“A boner?” Her hand stirs and finds me under the loose leg of my shorts. “Ha! Commando, I knew it.”

“Would this be workplace harassment?” Sofia takes his hand and leads him through the screen door and into the bedroom. I feel a surge of something simple and clean; relief, happiness, oxygen.

[0:27:22] There's a sliver of moon tonight. We used to fish at night, Alce and me under a moon, magical, throwing flies for fish we would never see until they leapt into the sheer lunar gaze. I slip out of bed, pull my arm from under Sofia and kiss the back of her head. I find my jeans, my flannel shirt, dress fast and go quietly out the screen door. It's the end of summer, with the chill scent of fall. There's a faint scent of rain in the air. With this moon, trout are probably wide awake. I don't remember much of the drive over the bridge, the sudden drumming of tires rolling over the planks, that sudden smell of water at the turnoff where I usually go, but tonight I swing right through a rutted opening into a clearing of willows and stop. Out of the truck, waders and boots, rod and cap, my signature flies Jim Stegner killers, and a shiny copper John. Into the water, up to my knees I began to cast. Wood smoke drifts down from upstream. I cast and cast, walking carefully upstream through the pools, a blip, a gulp, the

[0:28:43] double note of nose and tail, the rod bends hard, the old euphoria. You're all right. Come to me fish, careful. Come to me. Around the third bend I see fire light. Have I really gone a mile? A high, shifting flicker cutting across the shadows.

[0:29:08] [Laughter] And then laughter, the fire pops and stirs. A string of sparks as someone throws on a log.

“You fuckers are on good behavior. We might just see what Les knows about pussy. Sunday maybe.” It was him. “A couple of those gals from the mill might come up and party with us. This is pussy you fuckers only dream about. Dell, hey Dell. We think you should call one now. That skinny gal that likes to dance.”

“You all just place your orders this weekend. You'll get it when you get it.” He turned and swaggered down to the river to piss. I went still, barely breathing. I couldn't have moved if I tried. Dell dropped his beer can into the dirt. Big man in a dark Carhartt coat walking with a hitch. I watched his progress through the scrim of willows as a cat watches a bird. He got to the water's edge, an undercut bank maybe two feet above the current. He shrugged and unzipped. Someone turned on a boom box and started to sing. “Whoo!” He was less than 15 feet away. I could see his back, his left ear, the curve of his cheek and I

[0:30:12] could hear the stream of urine hitting the slow water. I heard the whimper of that mare in my head like a human baby. I leaned the rod against the branch, squatted and felt the fit of a smooth rock in my hand and stepped out fast. He turned “What the fuck?” piss splattering the leg of my waders. “You!” His hand went to his waist and came up with a hunting knife. I swung hard, as hard as he had swung at that little horse. The rock caught the side of his right eye at the temple a warm prickle

pattered my face. I shoved and the knife clattered onto the stone. Dell splashed face down into the creek. I pivoted and threw the rock as far downstream as I could. I watched until I was sure the only movement was the back and forth rocking of the posting current. Breathe, Jim. Breathe! Turn, pick up your rod. Walk away. I kept to the game and fisherman's trail along the bank through the thick brush and dark open groves virgin firs and pines. At a pool he knelt and dunked his head into the icy water scrubbing and scrubbing

[0:31:16] his face and hair with both hands. He waded in up to his waist and let the current wash the waders. Then he picked up his rod and walked. Can I pretend this never happened? Driving through town. No one. He passed the turnoff to Grand Avenue and took the back road. Breathe, Jim. God damn it, breathe. I turned my truck onto the pavement pulling on the headlights. A bright shape fills the windshield, an owl. Swerving, Jesus! A big white owl wings as white as the truck, soundless, swift, and gone. Alce. It flew and it was silent. That's what I thought. Alce. It was a spirit. I had not one doubt in the world. He crawled into bed and curled around Sofia. Sleep came stubborn and slow, but it came and carried him into the dark. Storm swept in and it rained hard. Inside the roar I spooned her and we floated slowly. Cradling her breasts, pressing my cheek into her hair, curling around her, warm, and letting it wash me and then I was gone.

[0:32:29] I woke with the rain. [rain sounds] With the first halting tattoo on the metal roof, tentative, a few scattered drops, then a clatter like someone throwing handfuls of seeds until the beats run together into a dark flood that silences all thought. *An Ocean of Women* on the easel, a dead man in the creek and my friend in my arms. My only thought; I could die now. And then oblivion again.

[knocking] "Jim Stegner?" I was expecting it. I untangled myself from Sofia and pulled on a pair of paint-spattered khaki shorts. There were two of them, when I shot Lauder Sims, it was just a sheriff who was a friend of mine because everyone knew what I had done. This time, there were two of them because they were not here to arrest me.

"Jim Stegner."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. Did we wake you?" Very polite he held up a wallet badge. Detective Craig Gaskill, Delta County Sheriff's Department." We'll just call him Sport, and a rookie kid with a fade and a flattop. I was standing holding the door open with my right arm and smelling my fishing vest hanging on

[0:33:41] a hook two feet from my head. It was spattered with blood. The kid could see it and Sport could too. "Mister Stegner. Are you okay?"

In the rush to cover myself I hear myself asking, "You boys want some coffee?"

Sofia called out from the bedroom door. "Jim?"

“It's all right, honey, we have guests.” Honey? Seriously? We bullshitted about the rain and the weather and the smell of fresh coffee until Sofia slammed the bedroom door.

[0:34:14] “She's not social this early in the morning.” [he laughs] I gave Detective Sport the elk mug. I was going to say bull and then I gave Flattop a choice between the bucking bronco or the NASCAR cow, a happy Holstein framed by the border of black and white racing checks. For myself, I took the ugly mug.

[0:34:44] “You often fish in the middle of the night Mr. Stegner?”

“Yeah, my daughter and I used to pretty often, when there was a moon.”

“Oh, where's your daughter now?”

“She was murdered.”

“I'm sorry.” That appeared genuine.

“She was 15.” We all looked into our mugs.

“Wasn't there a moon last night, before the rain?”

“I guess there was.”

“Did you go fishing last night?”

“Last night I slept.”

“Well your wading boots are puddling by the front door.”

“Must've been the rain.”

“There in under the roof. Nothing else under there got wet.”

“That's right. I put my whole kid out on the grass to dry. And when I got up to pee, I thought oh fuck, so I went out and I put them away.”

“This is good coffee. What is it?”

“Folgers.”

“No.”

“Tastes better when you put in fancy jar.”

“I'll have to try that. But you brought your vest inside, that vest by the door is flecked with the old blood. Fish blood, I'm guessing.”

“No, that's man's blood tell you the truth. Recent.” Flattop stared at me. And then at the detective like he was watching a tennis match.

“Man's blood. You don't say.”

[0:36:00] “Yep, hunting outfitter named Dell Siminoe.”

[coughing] “Dell Siminoe you say?”

“Yeah. The fight? Because I assaulted him day before yesterday, gave him a bloody nose because he's just a big pussy. Now he's filing charges. He probably didn't tell you that he was in the middle of killing a little mare.”

“Dell Siminoe is dead.” I was wearing that fishing vest when I attack...murdered in cold blood.

“What the hell did you say?”

“Middle of last night. Would you mind telling us where you were last night? All of last night?”

“Certainly, you you think I killed him because I was mad enough to give the man a bloody nose?”

“I don't think a thing. I just want to eliminate you as a suspect.” I'll bet. Detective Gaskill pulled out his pencil and pad. “Why don't you start by telling us what you were doing starting say Thursday morning.” I was getting good at telling this story, painting, going fishing, big man killing that little mare, rolling in the ditch, his nose bleeding. I made sure not to leave that part out.

“The girl in the bedroom. She's your

[0:37:08] model? Her name is, let's see...”

“Sofia.”

“Right, Sofia.”

“Her last name?”

“Don't know.”

“Okay. She was modeling for a painting yesterday morning. Is that the painting? Can I take a look at it?”

“You may.” I moved around beside the easel like a kid at a judged show waiting for my ribbon. Detective Gaskill's eyes moved over the canvas, as the picture overcame him the way light trails a cloud shadow overtaking a hillside.

“Have a name yet?”

“Yeah, *An Ocean of Women*.”

“There's a shark in there.” Detective Sport admiring smile, it turned into a big grin.

“That make a man happy all those women?” Flattop stood before the easel his hand on his holstered gun, blinking.

“Hehe, heh. This here, It's the first original painting I ever saw except for the western paint-by-number scene my aunt has hanging in her den. And this one here. Before I could stop him, Sport lifted the grave digger painting, the one I hadn't even shared with Sofia.

“Wow.” Carefully by the edges as if it were covered in fresh blood. “Diverse. My my, dark. I don't see your girlfriend

[0:38:36] in this one. Is she your muse?”

“She's my model. I sometimes I paint from imagination.”

“That's a man, isn't it? Hunched over and digging a grave? Is that the kind of thing that's on your mind Mr. Stegner? Is that what you see, Dan?”

“Um, Those look like blackbirds right there, but I'm no artist expert.”

“Ravens, Mister Stegner? Or maybe vultures. Oh, yeah them could be vultures. Smells fresh. What do you call this one?”

[0:39:13] “*Gravedigger with Carrion Feeders*.”

“And the paint's not as dry on this one as *An Ocean of Women*. When did you paint this, Mister Stegner? Before or after your altercation with Mister Siminoe?”

I let go my breath. There was no point in lying. “Yesterday.”

“About what time?”

“Maybe it's time I get a lawyer.”

“That's your right if that's something you feel you need to do.”

“I feel I'd like to ask you both to leave.”

“Understood.” Detective Gaskill returned *Grave Digger with Carrion Feeders* to the empty place along the wall where he'd found it, flipping it backside and leaning it carefully so the paint wouldn't smear.

“Would you ask the young lady Sofia to come out and talk to us for a second?”

“No, I think you'd better leave.” Detective Gaskill took one last long look at *An Ocean of Women* and an even longer look at me just like one of those TV detective shows.

[0:40:11] “I wanted to be an artist when I was growing up. Then I got married.” He said like he'd made the right choice after all. “Thanks for the coffee.” He left the way he came in, me guilty, him with all the proof in the world. Flattop followed him, tipping his head as we passed looking like he'd been hit in the face with a cow.

The second they left, the bedroom door flew open and Sofia burst out, naked and on fire, a whirlwind, all tossing dark hair and curves and huge eyes flashing. “You killed that son of a bitch last night?” She stood just beyond arm's length, just out of reach. “I felt you In the middle of the night, but I went back to sleep. I thought you were peeing or some kind of insomniac.

“God, you are beautiful.”

“I heard your truck pull up, start the rain. Did you kill him what with a knife with your bare hands?” she shook her head like trying to clear water from her ear. “Look at me.” She was looking with all of her, her eyes, her breasts, hips, the sparse thatch of dark hair. “You didn't kill him. You got up to pee once and to get the gear out

[0:41:10] of your truck, out of the rain, to hang it up. You were in my arms all night, right? I don't remember much else about it. Do I? Because we were sleeping.”

“We were sleeping.”

“Well, you better have a good fuck. You better store some up. Who knows how long it'll be before they get serious about you.” I stood there transfixed. “Come on.” She turned and walked bare-assed into the bedroom.

The search warrant was executed that afternoon. The bloody vest was more than enough for any judge. I had be a fool not to expect it, so I was careful to leave the vest alone.

“You got up to pee. Once. You get the gear out of your truck.” They didn't take much; rod and reel, boots, waders, and of course the vest. Took photos of the two paintings, first separately and then side-by-side. I thought was pretty sophisticated of them.

“Get a clay sample from the undercarriage of the truck and an imprint of the treads on those tires.”

“All four?”

“All four.” All in all it took maybe 20 minutes, the whole thing. There. They didn't toss the place. Mr. Stegner. Ma'am.

[0:42:19] “Am I under arrest now?”

“No.”

“Can I go fishing up to the Sulfur?”

“The Sulfur, where you fought with Mr. Siminoe? You can, but I wouldn't recommend it. Dell's brother is flying in from Tucson this afternoon. I'd rather not have any more...fights.”

“What about New Mexico?”

“Were you planning on going there?”

“I have a commission in Santa Fe. A portrait.”

“I can't keep you from going anywhere. But do me a favor. Keep me posted.”

“Right.”

He handed his card to Sofia. “Would you come down to the office and make a statement?”

“No.” No. “He was with me all night. That's all I've got to say. We fucked twice, once fast, slept spooned.”

“I understand.”

“Then we fucked again, really slow. Two orgasms that time. Two more, that is. [laughter]

[0:43:12] That was fresh. Slept tangled in each others arms until two assholes came knocking on the door. That's my statement.” Sofia handed the detective back his card, turned, and walked into the house.

[0:43:29] That evening I tried a new fishing spot. Sun had gone over the canyon and the wide run of slow water reflected the green banks silvering the dark surface. Before I did anything I stood knee-deep in the cold water and closed my eyes. In the silence of the evening I could hear the chortle of current and the tiny blips and gulps of trout rising, spreading silent rings across the mirrored edge without leaving a wake. 'You're a killer.' Perhaps. Maybe. 'You leave any behind, anything important?' A few paintings. 'Right. Anything worthwhile?' I'm a father. 'Were, she's dead too.' Am, still am. 'Shit a lot of dead in your wake. You're a killer twice over. You miss the first time by a hair, but you got the heart of a killer. Be careful around that pretty one with the nice tits. She's got your balls in a vice. In the cop shows they always talk about motive and murder weapon and hard evidence and eyewitnesses to build a solid case. They want facts that are beyond dispute. They want black and white. Maybe that's just what

[0:44:45] the TV audience wants but there are so many colors, tones, and shadings to consider. Murder weapon? None, that rock is gone. Motive? Sure. A lot of people have some motive to murder Dell Siminoe. Hard evidence? Aside from my brain, aside from the brains on my fishing vest, tire tracks, road dust. I fished there at least twice a week. Alibi? "I had two orgasms and we slept till morning. Two more, that is." That I have. 'Balls in a vise, my man. So you say.

I waited two weeks, but I didn't hear from Detective Sport. I decided to drive down to Santa Fe to paint those two pasty-faced little girls in their polka dots. In the meanwhile I spent my mornings drinking coffee with Sofia, fishing, and a lot of not painting. You know, I hold your nut sack in my strong little fist."

"Oh yes, I know."

"I don't want your nuts. No matter what, your nuts are your nuts, I will never change my story." I believed her. "Sure you don't want to paint today? It's been a while." Sofia leaned forward, wearing one of her signature spaghetti

[0:45:58] strap tops and squeezed her biceps into the sides of her chest. "I'll model for ya."
"Today I think I need to paint alone."

"Oh. Okay, call me later if you want to swim with any naked girls." She tugged at my beard. If I didn't play this right, my nutsack will be spending time behind bars.

[0:46:21] I put a 24 by 36 pre-stretched canvas on the easel squeezed and squeezed 10 measures of pigment onto a piece of plastic covered fiberboard lifted a medium stiff brush out of a glass of spirits and began. I painted a road. Cracked tarmac running over the desert hills, burnt brush, cracked clay, with washes of white alkaline lowlights. Hot, hot on the road. No relief in the shade. Asters, blue and purple leaching out the last color. Moisture, brush to spirits, palette to canvas moving faster without pause. Palette knife, rag, spirits, then a bush. The shape of a girl's arm, her body at the base of the

bush. Four birds on a rock, perched, watching, black and huge, ever-present with the unrelated heat and relentless sky. The phone rings. “Huh?” Static on the line, voice scratching, deep, familiar.

[0:47:20] “Stegner?”

“Who is this?”

“Stegner, I want my horse.”

“Whoever this is, it's not your horse.”

“You cracked my skull and left me for dead.”

“What the fuck?”

“Good job. Tossed me in the creek, like the rock to my head.

Who the fuck is this?”

“Ooo, tough guy using a lot of grown-up cuss words! He he, well, it sure as shit the fuck ain't Dell thanks to you.”

“I'm hanging up.”

“You hang up, you'll be dead like Dell. Cross my heart.”

I hung up. The phone rang four more times. I let it. Blocked number, silence. I went to the armoire and pulled out my old Smith & Wesson, a 41 Magnum, the one I shot Lauder Sims with. I thumbed the cylinder. Loaded. Good. Laid it next to my tubes of paint. I dug my short-barreled Winchester 12-gauge pump, The Marine, because you could drop it in the swamp and it would still fire, and I loaded it with buckshot. But at close range it could ruin someone's day. I picked up the iPhone and punched in Sofia's number.

“Hey, don't come by here. I was just threatened on the phone.”

“Jim?”

“Get yourself out of town. Stay with friends. Just get out for a week or so.”

“Wait. Who? What did he say?”

[0:48:32] “It was bad. Go now, soon as you can. I'll call you –

“Did you call the...”

“Go! Promise me.”

“I will.”

I dialed Willy. “It's Jim. I better come get that horse.”

“You too? Everybody wants that little roan today.”

“He called you too.”

“Yep just now. Said he was coming over to take her.”

“Who?”

“Grant Siminoe, Delwoods brother. I told him the horse was no longer his or his brother's and that if he set foot in my place, I'd put a new button hole in his shirt. He told me I would dearly regret my attitude. Jim, I've been regretting my attitude my whole life. I wish I'd thought to tell him that. I meant to tell you that I didn't hear your truck start up in the middle of the night and rattle back up your drive about three hours later before the storm.”

“You tell Detective Gaskill about what you don't hear?”

“Yeah, Craig came by here the other day asking about your fishing gear from when I picked up the little mare in my trailer. Kept asking about a vest.”

“My fishing vest?”

“It seemed to me, if he was so concerned, it must be some kind of

[0:49:39] evidence. I told him as far as I could recollect that you were wearing that vest when you gave Dell a bloody nose. He got real pissy after that. So I said to him ‘Craig the blood on that vest made a deep and vivid impression on me and I would be sure to mention it in court if it ever came to that.’” [laughter]

“Probably makes you a suspect as much as me.”

“Jim, Dellwood Siminoe was a snake, but his brother Grant is a meaner snake than him by far. You get out of town for a while. Take a vacation. You'd be in jail right now if the police had anything on you.”

I resolved right then and there to give Willy a painting, one that Stephen Lily would never know about. But I didn't take the vacation Willy suggested. I pulled out another canvas and started to paint. This one, a road coming toward me. No blackbirds, but a single horned owl. On the road, a horse. A little mare. And then a second horse, an appaloosa, an Indian spirit horse with shadows and long light, the ponies stepping in tandem, dancing, almost as if set to music.

[0:50:58] And then I see it. Across their withers, bundled, balanced, the body of a girl.

[0:51:13] I seized, and then I paint through it, breathing in, out. No ropes. Balanced, held only by the complete attention of the horses by love that painting could bring her this close. Alce. 'Hey, looks good Pop. Like the clouds that look like birds. I know you're mad at me. I'm just trying to figure stuff out too. Boys are weird. You know, it's just that I wondered if I could have a phone, you know, so I can coordinate' – "You've got to be fucking kidding me. This is the boy who gave you ecstasy?" "I like him. Jeremiah. He's finding his way" "Have you been using birth control? What about school? Are you studying? Jesus fucking Christ, Alce!"

[0:52:07] She wouldn't look at me. I don't know how long she stood there, waiting.

[0:52:16] And then she was gone.

[0:52:20] Two. Three. Four. Five.

[0:52:30] I got to get away from here.

[0:52:34] On my way out of town I stopped at Bob's to fill up. He's colder than a spring melt, not a word. When he cleans the window he won't meet my eye. He stopped the pump at forty-zero-zero, no need for change.

Takes my two bills and turns away. Stops, takes a deep breath, turns back and leans against the side of Jim's truck facing the pumps. "Look Jim, if anyone deserved an early demise it was that son of a bitch Dell. But Jim, you know we we can't just go around killing each other." I can see his adam's apple bobbing in the side mirror. "Be good Jim. You've got to be good!" A reprieve, an indictment? I don't know. I was 50 miles down the highway before I could breathe normally. I was in no hurry to get to Santa Fe with a Smith & Wesson on the seat under my coat.

Just Before Fishing, oil on canvas, 20 by 30 inches, private collection

"Hey Pop." "Yeah?" "Don't get so excited about everything. Gets you in trouble. You're always leaping like a chicken. You're a rooster, right?" "Right." "Pop?" "Yes Alce." "Maybe you should stop now. Just paint. Everything will work out." "It will?" "Sure it will."

[0:54:04] I pull over. I don't usually paint en plein. I like to imagine my setting but this was for Alce. I set up at the river's edge with a blank canvas on the easel and place the revolver amongst the

handful of tubes and brushes. Take no chances, I think. I stand and breathe. My little girl left in a vacant lot didn't have a chance. You got to breathe, Jim. Got to be good. I breathe. I've got to, it's all I can do. Not a single car passes. I paint and sun climbs over the ridge. I feel the vibration of a hay truck blasting past me with a sweet grass smelling wind, then air brakes hissing and the double down shifting to stop at the shoulder in front of my truck. His hand comes up in a wave when he still 20 yards off, not like the city folk when they're right on top of you. The proverbial tin outline bulges in his shirt pocket.

"Morning." The stranger twists open his chew. "Dip?"

"Naw, it took me five years to quit."

"You a painter?"

"I fish."

"The fishermen painter, now there's a lie. I like your fish and how you've got

[0:55:23] them jumping, even though they ain't jumping. I'm Jason."

"Jim."

"Pleasure."

"Likewise."

"You expecting company?"

"Not really."

"You got a 41 Magnum stuck in your easel. Maybe for bear, a lot of lions in these hills, maybe for lions. You like to fish the Sulphur River back in Delta County?"

"Excuse me?"

"I do. I fished it the other day too. Not in the middle of the night though. Amazing that's legal. Fishing, hunting, stalking at night. I was thinking of doing some fishing kill an hour or two."

Sometimes in a bar fight just before it erupts you feel the way things are going to end. So you strike pre-emptive.

"You deliver hay to a hunting camp, seven or eight guys."

It was eight guys, now it's seven. One of them is on a slab."

My hand goes to the shelf inches away from the gun. "Maybe the fishing isn't too good here now."

"Dell is family. We don't choose them. So whoever fucks with them, the law might not take care of it. But one of us always does. I think I will fish. How about you?"

"Sure." I say without thinking. We fish for over an hour

[0:56:51] keeping each other in sight the whole time. I had the gun tucked into my waistband. At first it wasn't fun. Jason might have a gun too. I was side casting after a rise and I let myself get lost in thought when I looked up, he was nowhere in sight. I circled quickly around the bank. Gone. If he had wanted the advantage, he had it. A whisk of branches. He was right there on the shallow edge of the pool less than 15 feet away from me with something in his hand.

"Hey!"

"Whoa there!" My right hand dropped to the gun in my belt.

"Hey, pops. Slow down." That smile amazingly white for someone who chews. "I caught three on this here lure. Thought you'd like to try it." The proper fishing fly looked like a big ant with half a dozen rubber legs. Ugly. If it had looked more like a Glock I might have plugged him.

"No, I think I'm done fishing." We walked up the bank at double arms distance keeping our eyes on each other the whole time.

"Hold on. I have something for ya. One of the ranchers gave it to me a week ago." He reached slowly and obviously to the

[0:57:55] pocket of his coat.

"My my. Montecristo Number Two, classic Cuban."

"Pretty good, I guess."

"It is." He pulled out a lighter and lit my smoke. I took a drag on a very fine Montecristo cigar.

"We might as well enjoy ourselves." He lit his own Monte Cristo. Sun bounces off the slow running creek.

"One of us for sure is going down."

[0:58:28] Like threats are threats and violence is violence. Two don't go together more than half the time. I watched him turn in a reading of grey smoke and walked back to his cab. Put my rod in the bed of the truck and in his side view mirror I could see him talking to someone on his cell, look back and talk some more. Finally, the grind of the low gear and the loud rev as he pulled out, laying two short blasts on the horn. I held the cigar up in the early evening light.

[0:59:06] "Might as well enjoy ourselves," I said out loud. "One of us is going down." [applause]

[0:59:31] Okay, first I want to ask the actors to introduce themselves.

[0:59:40] Hey, I'm Hannah Mootz. I'm Tom Dewey. My name is Alex Matthews. I'm Keith Dahlgren. [applause]

[0:59:48] And Brian Burch who did the adaptation. Why don't you come down also. [applause]

[0:59:56] And David Quicksall who directed the performance you just saw and has just... [applause]

[1:00:02] has rushed down here from the Seattle Children's Theater where he was performing in *Robin Hood*. Tonight. Twice.

[1:00:12] Okay, now it is my great pleasure to welcome Peter Heller to this, the main event of 2015 Seattle Reads. We have had a pretty amazing three days. Meeting rooms full, standing room only. Close readers, questions, deep conversation. And every time there's been one that has, I'd say, taken Peter aback.

[1:00:48] So Peter Heller made his living with his adventure writing for many years. The whole time wanting to write fiction since he was 11, and a librarian put Hemingway in his hands. And so he's done it. And what he has said is, "Writing fiction at last was like coming home." So I first met Peter Heller three years ago at a pre-publication dinner for *The Dog Stars*. And you know, whoa, just taken with Higgs voice and with Peters writing.

[1:01:32] And last year, I read an advance copy of *The Painter*. You know I was just knocked out again. So I wrote Peter, and I said golly you don't, you've done it again, created this complicated character with this, you know, a certain kind of exterior, but to me anyway, really clearly sensitive inside. And then Peter answered me. He said from Paonia, Jim's cabin, where last night on the Gunnison, he caught the biggest trout he had ever caught, and was feeling really close to Jim, which I thought was just wonderful that one could, the writer could, feel so close to his character. So you should know that Peter and his place, the place he built in Paonia was featured in *The New York Times* last June. I opened my paper on a Thursday morning when the Home section existed, and I thought whoa, that's Peter Heller. And so there's a big feature and photos. And so if you go on *The New York Times* website, you can see the place that Peter saw as he was writing this this story. So following... well, obviously you're invited

[1:02:58] to ask the adapter, the director, the actors, and Peter, any questions that you have. So, a wonderful writer and my friend Peter Heller. [applause]

[1:03:20] Wow, what a trip. [laughter]

[1:03:26] I got the mic, I think I just want to thank you guys. That was really moving for me. And I've never seen a performance of anything I've written. So that's just neat.

[1:03:37] I was afraid that I didn't realize that my characters curse so much. [laughter] I hope that didn't offend anybody and I didn't realize it was such a western. I mean, guns and rough talk and fights and stuff. I kinda thought I was... When I finished it I thought I'd written a story about art. [laughter] So, go figure. Anyway, it was really, really, cool watching you guys, thank you. Thanks for that. Really an adaptation. Oh, okay. Here's a question.

[1:04:15] [Inaudible] Okay, so I don't know if you could hear her but she said there was a lot in the book of the about the interplay, the interplay of the the artist and the art world and she thought there was a lot of humor in it, but that it was kind of dead on and how did you come by that knowledge? So, you know my, my, I had a lot of artists in my family. My mom is a sculptor and she was a trained painter. My dad painted, and his wife is a serious oil painter and they live in Santa Fe. And so I've been to a lot of gallery openings and I've been up and down Canyon Road just like Jim did you know at all hours of the day and night and I've seen those galleries when they were open. I've seen them. I've looked through the windows when they were closed and you know, I've met gallery owners that were really pompous and I thought that were, that had fake English accents and you knew they grew up in North Philadelphia. [laughter] And you know wore bow ties and stuff. I mean and but then I met gallery owners who really, really loved their painters

[1:05:23] and their art, and I just thought how what a crazy world that is and it's based, you know, I mean, the wellspring of it, is the creativity and you know that the force, the force, the life force that creativity to artist brings all this whole infrastructure about. And some of its really authentic and some of it isn't. And so it's something that I'll always entertains me. [laughter]

[1:05:51] It's a great question. Thank you. Here's one here. [inaudible] Yes. So Jim, so so just to let you know, Jim Stegner, the character in the book, is based on a real guy named Jim Wagner and he's just a really wonderful, wonderful person. And I spent, he was my fishing buddy for nine years. He had finished the, when I started writing the book I wrote few weeks into it I was like, yeah this really seems like Jim Wagner. This Stegner guy, and you might have heard me say this before, but I thought I have to call him up and I said, 'Hey Jim, you know, I'm writing about a Taos expressionist painter.' He's like 'Oh, cool.' I'm "Yeah, he shot a guy in a bar just like you did for making a comment about his kid. He's like there's this silence, you know, and he you know, I said he kind of looks like you and he loves to fish just like you and you know, they call them Hemingway At The River just like you, and his paintings are a lot like yours, you know, it was like I went on and on and and he did lose his his kid, and you know his

[1:06:54] life fell apart and he did come up to this valley and we became friends and he just loved to fish and he loved to paint those were the things that soothed him. And so...

[1:07:09] Now... God... Now I lost track of the question I'm so so moved by... Oh! So I watched him paint a lot and and what always struck me about Jim was he often, the way I started the novel was with the first line, I didn't want to know it was going to happen because I've written a lot of non-fiction, I always knew the ending and I knew what was going to happen next. And so I just start with the first line and follow the music of the language and that's a voice and that's a character. That was Jim. What I loved about watching Jim paint was when he approached the canvas, he most of the time unless he had a commission which he got sometimes but most of the time he didn't know what he was going to paint and he would just set out to his mood and then he would just start in and then, you know, I'd watch it and you know. There'd be clouds and there'd be hills and there might be a coal train and often there was a chicken because he just love chickens. He couldn't resist them. And it was fascinating and

[1:08:05] he painted at all times of day and night. I mean he would interrupt, go fishing. He'd make me a meal because I was always hungry - I was a starving poet - and and then he would watch a cop show. He love those shows where, you know, the cam from the cop car where they're chasing and watch that and then he'd go paint some more and it was really integrated and wonderful to see that. So yeah, yeah.

[1:08:32] [inaudible] Why did I choose the name Stegner? So I wanted a name that rhymed with Wagner because I want I really wanted to honor him and I wanted people to sort of know that that was him. I didn't realize till I finish the book I could just dedicate the book to them. [laughter]

[1:08:48] You learn stuff as a writer, you know as you go. But so anyway, I pick Stegner and I thought that's neat because you know Stegner's one of my favorite short story writers. I think his short stories are masterpieces and, you know, it's a nice tip of the hat to the dean of western literature. So yeah.

[1:09:19] [inaudible][laughter] You know, there's something in the law like called 'the fifth', I think. [laughter]

[1:09:26] I might invoke that. I listen. I think I think that we all experience, you know at moments, I think we experience blind red rage. I mean, I don't know. [laughter]

[1:09:39] I'm looking for backup.

Absolutely. Once [unintelligible]

You know a person who is well adjusted and doesn't spend time in jail. Sort of lets it go, takes a deep breath, and tries to put stuff in perspective, but some of us don't do so well.

[1:10:01] Yep. Yeah, did you guys hear that? He he he said that there was you when when Jim was violent and reacted there was a, you know, a provocation, except in one case during that radio show

where he crushes the guy's hand for saying something condescending or a bunch of stuff that's conde, condescending, and the reader thought that there was quite a disparity between those kinds of violence, you know. And I just have to tell you something interesting about that scene. Can, I got to do something really fun? Because I got to take a picture. [laughter]

[1:10:42] Okay, how many people have read the book? Oh my god. [laughter][inaudible]

[1:10:54] I want a selfie. Wow, that's like so cool. Usually you're trying to sell the book you know, I do readings at bookstores. I'm trying to entice people to read it. This is awesome. I don't have to do anything. I'll see you guys later. [laughter]

[1:11:11] So when I've been on tour, I read three or four scenes from the book. I try not to read too much. I like Q&A but one of the scenes I read is that scene on the Embarcadero in the ferry building during the radio show where he crushes the guy's hand, and it is so interesting seeing how people respond around different parts of the country to that scene. When I read that scene in the south, in Mississippi and Oxford and Jackson, Mississippi, in Nashville and Atlanta, people love it. [laughter] They're on the edge of their seats you know, they're like whooping and they're laughing when we crushes the guy's hand everybody's laughing and like. And what I realized is that you know in the south they have a real sense of you know, what it's like to be dishonored and dismissed, and they have a finely honed sense of honor and and revenge. And when I read it in Boulder, Colorado is like everyone looks like they want to crawl under their chair. It's like Namaste. [laughter]

[1:12:25] I read it in a little town in Minnesota just a couple months ago and in like a blinding blizzard and all these hearty Minnesotans came out in this like thick snow, to hear the reading and it was like fly fishing country, and I read that scene and they all just kinda looked puzzled. Like well, that wasn't very nice. [laughter] You know, we get why he was mad and I'd be mad too, but I wasn't nice so it's really interesting and I read, I just want to tell you I read it, I read it here on demand at a library and I thought everybody reacted really well. [laughter]

[1:13:02] I'm not going to tell you how.

[1:13:09] Right there. Yeah.

[1:13:15] [inaudible] Are they neurotic? [laughter]

[1:13:23] Well, there's certain things about I mean the thing about yeah. Oh, I'm sorry. What did all this life of adventure doing, you know adventure journalism and stuff did that was that helpful in writing fiction and was I as neurotic as all the other writers? Maybe. That's... did I have the same fears that I have? The same. So I, so there's one thing about, you know, doing some of those adventures. I mean like, you know, I remember taking a, the first assignment that I got from *Outside* magazine. I realized that God, I called up out of the blue, you know the 800 number, and I said, and I picked, I picked the name off a masthead that sounded nice, a senior editor, you know, Laura Arnold. I was like Laura Arnold please, and they patch me through and that's a great thing about being young

and dumb. You don't know what you can't do, and she picked up and I started talking really fast and I said, you know, like a Class Five and I've been published in *Harper's* which was sort of true. And it was a just

[1:14:25] in the reading section of front a little reprint of a journal are but it was in there, and and I said I think you should send me the Tibetan Plateau to do this first descent, kayak this thing and, she did. And I and I realized later is because I was expendable. [laughter] They didn't have a writer that they didn't care about, and a guy died on the first day and he died in my arms in a logjam and he was stuck and I was trying to get him off and we had already pulled one guy off, me and this other kayaker, and there was a Chinese guy, he was still alive, and we went back for the other guy. We couldn't, we put a Z-drag on him and tried and we held his head as the river rose over his head and he was on his honeymoon. And you know, I came back and I was traumatized and grief-stricken and you know, I told her I can't write it, and she asked, you know... Anyway, I ended up writing the article and it was their submission for the national magazine award that year and I knew that if I didn't write another, if I didn't get back

[1:15:29] on the river right away and kayak something hard, I probably never would again. So I took an assignment to go with a Russian-Kiwi expedition to the Everest of rivers in the Soviet Union, had never been successfully run. It was in the high premiers, and the last team that had tried it lost five of their eleven guys, and I was supposed to kayak it with a Kiwi out in of front of the Russian float raft and the other rafts, and and it was the perfect antidote to that that first trip because Russians and Kiwis, I mean, they're like oil and water. They're like, I mean you get to a tough rapid in a canyon, big water in a canyon, the Russian squat. They get all grim and they start chain-smoking and it's like the weight of history and it's like Tolstoy, you know. And and the Kiwis was, are hopping around the bank and they're going 'oh, she'll be right, no worries', you know and 'see a line', and the guy that had to navigate between them, the translator Vonnice, had learned his English from Frank Zappa records. He could

[1:16:31] sing *Quinn the Eskimo* and all that, and he told me one night, he's like 'Ah! Pete, I am guiding expedition same area last year and geology expedition. And on other side of ridge and other [drainage?] is international team of scientists looking for Yeti. So, led by French guy. So I get a raft deck, you know, plywood. I take my little Swiss Army saw. I cut out foot and I put handle and then you know, rock [creek] and snow and I make like track, like big! Next day they discovered the tracks. Made international headlines and you guys probably remember was like 1989, they found Yeti independent and he said but only one problem Pete, was all left feet. [laughter] So that was the antidote to that trip. Nobody died. We all made it. And you know, that launched this career in adventure and I have to tell you coming, I always wanted to write fiction since I was little, and coming home, you know on that expedition every time I put the spray suit over my cockpit in the morning, sometimes I thought this might be the last time I ever do that

[1:17:43] and when you're, I mean when you're doing that, you know, you come to write fiction you maybe you're a little less neurotic because you realize you know, you're just making up a story. What's to be scared of? [laughter] I mean, so I really I mean, I just try and be humble to the craft. It's

a job, you know, it's a craft. I go to work every day. I write a thousand words a day. And you know, I just realized I'm probably going to have to throw out half of it. That's fine. You know, it's just go to work. Yep. So I wrote a novel a couple months ago. I finished it too, a Castaway novel in the coast of Maine, and then I'm third of the way through the next one which is a detective story with a the lead character's a woman. I'm going to try that and and try and you know... [laughter]

[1:18:35] Listen, I get a lot of comments, you know from you guys about women characters. I'm going to do my best now. Keep you quiet.

[1:18:46] You were wonderful, by the way. [applause]

[1:18:56] Someone had oh, yeah. Yeah, the nut of it for me was when Jim has that realization that you did so beautifully like fishing and this other voice is going you know, what have you left? What's in your wake or you know and Jim says to himself, "I feel like a gentle man." I feel like you know, he feels like a good man, but sometimes he doesn't act good, and to me that was sort of the nut of it. I mean, how do you be a good person and sometimes maybe a good person doesn't act well and sometimes people that you think are bad, actually have grace and actually can offer the deepest redemption because I think, I think Jason at the end offers a real gift and has a real grace at the end. So that's really surprised me. You know, that that's what it was about, and about art and about loss and grief. But yeah, I did, I sort of like, I sort of like as the novel progressed, I began, I became more and more sort of...

[1:20:14] I became more and more fascinated with it and surprised. So, yeah, thanks. Oh, sorry.

[1:20:25] [unintelligible] No, oh when I started the story did I know how it was going to end? No, I ended the story, when I first wrote the book, I ended at the party scene where he leave, you know, he makes that little speech to the party then leaves. He says, you know, I went, you know, we went fishing where you know, I fish with Alce and I caught a few fish and I fished till dawn and I ended I thought that was a pretty good ending. And I sent it to my editor, and we got on a conference call with my agent and my editor and she said, you know, this is a really really good book. It's going to be great. But we're 80% of the way there and I bet you know. She said you need a prologue and you need an epilogue and you need a scene 80 percent of the way through - this is the way top editors apparently in New York talk - you need to scene 80 percent of the way through that acts as the control tower seat in *The Dog Stars* worked, which was a very violent sort of awful cathartic white-knuckle scene. So I said 'Well what would the prologue look

[1:21:26] like?' And my agent said, I think it's the way he shoots the guy in the bar because that's part of the back story. And I thought that would just resonate. I thought that was perfect. I was like, okay. What does the epilogue look like? Jenny Jackson, my editor, said it should be you know, Jason should come back, and I thought wow he's going to come to the creek. He's got to come back to the creek. And she said yeah, he's got to be Jim has to be in his power because there has to be some justice. She didn't want him just to skate, you know at the end of the party and I thought that's right. Jason is going to come back and he's going to have a gun and I said, 'Okay see you guys.' [laughter]

[1:22:09] And I wrote those scenes, you know, really fast and and the scene 80% through is the flash flood scene. And and what was so wonderful about that was in the flash flood scene, the end of it there's a cathartic moment where Jim forgives himself. He's standing in the pouring rain. He's just survived a flash flood. He's just save Jason's life by telling him to get out of the way, and he he's crying his tears are mixing with the rain, and he thinks I loved her, I loved her as well as I could. I loved her. And I, you know, I think that is so neat when you have people helping you that the get it and it's like having three mines instead of one. It was really wonderful. So... Yes?

[1:22:53] [inaudible] Did writing the book change me in some way. You know, it always does. I think because I carry those characters around as if they were real. I mean like in *The Dog Stars*, Jasper the dog, he lives in my heart like a dog that I've had, that I've had, isn't that crazy? I mean, I actually think of Jasper like my dog. And I think of Jim and Jason and those guys as real people that are out there living their lives. It's it's I don't know. I mean in the old days, I'd probably be in an insane asylum. I got to tell you guys a story, I told this at the library earlier, but you know how the mores change about what's insane and you know. A guy who goes the coffee shop and hears voices and write 'em down. You know, a hundred fifty years ago really might be locked up, right? Aand I get to come and speak to you guys. And my uncle was an architect in Vermont, he's one of my favorite people and his his great friend was an architect in Norway who had been given the commission to change the name of the insane asylum

[1:23:50] in Oslo because over the lintle, carved in granite, and block letters, it said insane asylum. And they want to update it, make it more PC and you know, like you know Oslo is [due for the medal?], you know, whatever. So George's friend figured the cheapest way to do would be to pull the block out, flip it around and recarved the back. So they pulled the big, big block of stone out and they flipped it around and it's on the back it said 'lunatic asylum'. [laughter]

[1:24:28] I don't know, I almost think we ought to end it there. [applause]

[1:24:35] Okay, so first thank you, you know bravo all of you. [applause]

[1:24:45] And thank you again to Elliott Bay Book Company, and Karen and Jon for just being our great partners to this program. So thanks very much for joining us for Seattle Reads. {applause}

[1:25:05] Thanks so much. [piano music] This podcast was presented by the Seattle Public Library and foundation and made possible by your contributions to the Seattle Public Library Foundation. Thanks for listening.