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Bordeaux, April 2016

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Pascale Antolin: Who are you Hollis Seamon?

Hollis Seamon: Oh, my—that’s a big question. Let’s go with the basics: I’m a woman of a certain age, a mother, a sister, a baker, a gardener, a reader, and a writer. I’m also a professor who teaches writing and literature. I’m on the edge of retirement from fulltime teaching, though, and looking forward to more time for reading, writing, gardening, and good food.

PA: Have you written other books—novels or short stories—than *Somebody Up There Hates You*?

HS: I’ve published four books, total, and many short stories. My first book was a collection of short stories called *Body Work* (Spring Harbor Press, 2000) and the second was a mystery novel, *Flesh* (Avocet Press, 2005). Most recently, I published another collection of short stories, *Corporeality* (Able Muse Press, 2013), which won the IPPY Award gold medal for short stories—that’s the Independent Publishers award, given annually here in the United States. *Corporeality* contains the original short story, “SUTHY¹ Syndrome,” which grew into my novel, *Somebody Up There Hates You* (Algonquin Young Readers, 2013). That novel is now out in Canadian, Spanish, German, French, and Portuguese editions.

PA: How did you happen to write a book like *Somebody Up There Hates You*, i.e. about adolescents at death’s door?

HS: That’s a long story—I suppose it’s really the story of my life, in many ways. Here’s the short version: my son Tobias, now a writer himself, who has published a number of books (www.tobiasseamon.com), spent many years in and out of hospitals, most often in what was then called Babies Hospital of Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center in New York City. I stayed with him during those long periods in the hospital and we met so many kids there—children with every imaginable kind of illness and wound. The kids who made the biggest impression on me were the teenagers. No matter how ill they were—and most were terribly, terribly ill—they remained stubbornly and bravely teenagers: rebellious, funny, foul-mouthed, angry, and full of

life, for whatever time they had. A few years ago, I realized that their voices, faces, and names have never left me, even all of these years later. I dream about them, I hear them whispering in my ear. Most people don't want to even acknowledge that kids are dying, every day—but as Richie says in *Somebody Up There Hates You*, “But we are, so I say, *deal with it*.” This book is my attempt to deal with it and to honor the memories of those heartbreaking, hilarious teenagers that I once knew.

PA: Many Americans when they have been confronted with illness—their own or relatives'—write memoirs. Why did you choose fiction instead?

HS: That's simple: I'm a fiction writer. I make stuff up. It's the only genre I can write and the only one I want to write. I'm a natural-born liar and not much interested in memoir, either as a writer or a reader, I have to admit.

I prefer imagination to “truth” and always have. Here's a perhaps-true fact: I used to make up stories to put into my diary when I was a kid. I couldn't even tell the truth there. Another sort-of-true fact: when I was very little, I used to tack the phrase “she said” onto the ends of things I had just said. As in, “Please pass the salt, she said.” Clearly, I thought I was a character in a story. Luckily my older sisters made so much fun of me for saying this that I learned not to. But I still sometimes *think* it.

PA: Considering the age of your main protagonist/narrator, did you mean your book—or do you consider it—to be “young adult literature”?

HS: This is an interesting and complicated question. My original “SUTHY Syndrome” story, which Richie narrates, was first published in *Bellevue Literary Review* (www.blreview.org), a literary magazine published by NYU Medical College and aimed at an adult audience. As I expanded that story into a novel, I never once gave a thought as to whether it was for young adult or adult readers. My wonderful agent, Gail Hochman, suggested that it might be young adult and when it was accepted for publication by Algonquin Young Readers, that seemed to have settled the question. I very much loved the wisdom and care that Algonquin Young Readers put into marketing the book for young adults. But, the novel has been published in France as *Dieu me déteste* by the La Belle Colère imprint of Anne Carrière and this imprint focuses on books for adult readers, books with young adult protagonists. See? It gets complicated. And where does all of that leave us? In the end, I think it doesn't really matter what we call it. All I wanted to do was write a good *novel*, period.

PA: Why did you choose a first person narrator—and above all a 17-year old boy narrator—when you are a woman writer?

HS: And not only a woman but a much, much older-than-seventeen woman! (I'm exactly 50 years older than Richie, if anyone's counting.) And, yet, this choice of a far-different age/gender narrator never felt a bit strange to me. One day, I just heard this boy talking to me, telling me, in his own voice, that he had an illness called SUTHY syndrome, was stuck in hospice, and what he did about it. While writing the story and then the novel, I never lost the sound of his voice. It felt perfectly natural and still does. One might explain this by the fact that I raised two sons or that I have taught classrooms full of 17 and 18-year-olds for many years. Or, one might just hope that writers' imaginations are much, much bigger than our sexes or our ages or our life circumstances. That's what I choose to believe.

But, of course, that over-simplifies the mysterious and complex relationship that exists between any writer and a first-person narrator in a piece of fiction. Writing

from the mental, spiritual and bodily perspective of a character often feels like an act of radical empathy, like actually inhabiting the being of another person. (Or, perhaps, more like being inhabited by another being?). And, for me, in dealing with such difficult and emotionally-fraught topics as illness and death of young people, having Richie voice the story may have been a protective device, a mask or disguise, if you will, that made it possible for me to write this story. Richie's voice—young, rough, ironic and full of humor—tells the story in a way that, I hope, allows it to be entertaining and energetic, rather than devolving into pathos. Through Richie is the *only* way I could ever imagine telling this particular tale.

One other thing: hearing the audio version of the novel, as read by a young actor named Noah Galvin, was revelatory for me. Hearing an actual male, adolescent voice spinning the story out into the air was amazing and humbling. Now, when I read sections aloud, I can hear Noah's voice, somehow superimposed or joined with Richie's, and I find myself using his intonations.

PA: Isn't it unexpected, if not bold, to associate "kids" with death, in a hospice?

HS: I don't think it's bold at all—it's simple reality. Kids get sick. Kids die: in hospitals and at home, kids die. The use of a hospice unit in a hospital came from experiences I had been having just before I wrote the "SUTHY Syndrome" story: two close family members (both of them adults) had been in hospice. One died there; the other died at home. In one of those hospices, there was a harpist, sitting in the little lobby by the elevator, playing music. That freaked me out and when something does that to me, I start imagining a story about it. So, it was that harpist who started SUTHY story going in my head—and it's the harpist who appears on the first page of the novel. She became a much more important character in the novel than I ever expected: it turns out that she has personal reasons of her own for hanging around that particular hospice; she takes Richie outside at the crucial moment; she teaches him, in a good growing-up kind of way, that there are many things that he *doesn't* know. She goes from being someone Richie makes fun of, calling her a "harpy," to someone he respects. That's a major part of Richie's coming-of-age, I think—learning to really see and hear other people and realizing that everyone suffers, not just him.

Sadly, some critics and readers now talk about a whole all-too-common sub-genre of "kids-with-cancer" books. After the huge popularity of John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, it's hard to avoid that kind of categorization and I've come up against it with *Somebody Up There Hates You*. Some readers (mostly teens) have called my novel an "imitation" or "rip-off" of Green's, even though the books are not at all similar. And, I always feel compelled to point out that my "SUTHY Syndrome" story was published in 2009, years before *The Fault in Our Stars* came out. Enough said?

PA: Why did you choose this epigraph "Wait for death with a cheerful mind"?

HS: Really, I just love epigraphs. I like the reliance on another text, set right there at the beginning of one of my own, to put whatever I've written into a larger context and to connect to earlier and/or favorite writers. As a lifelong reader and student of literature, I naturally look to other writers for my inspiration and sense of connection. For my story collection, *Corporeality*, I searched far and wide until I remembered one of my favorite lines from Margaret Atwood's essay, "Alien Territory," in her wholly wonderful book, *Good Bones and Simple Murders*, and used it as an epigraph for the book: "Having a body is not altogether serious." That line has

just the right bit of flippancy that I wanted for my corporeal stories, tales that focus on both the pleasures and pains of living our lives in the flesh.

And, although you wouldn't think of Atwood and Aurelius as in any way similar, the epigraph I chose from him has, I think, just a touch of that same tone, that interesting mix of the serious and the sardonic. When I was writing *Somebody Up There Hates You*, I kept searching for an epigraph that truly captured the tone of the book and when I stumbled upon that Marcus Aurelius quote, I was delighted. I remember sitting on my couch at home, reading that meditation and that line, and saying to myself, "Here it is. This is perfect. Richie would love this." I still feel that way.

PA: Why did you choose such a closely-knit structure for your novel—three parts covering a very short timespan? Is it a reference to Aristotle's rule of the three unities?

HS: Ah, wouldn't it be grand to say that, yes, yes indeed, I had Aristotle in mind the whole time?! But... no. I do love structure and I do love subtitles and sections and I always try to have solid scaffolding on which to construct a novel (or even a short story) but I don't remember thinking of Aristotle's unities in particular. But, you know, now that you bring it up..... I have taught his theory of the unities of time, place and action to students who are reading/writing plays, so it may have been lurking, somewhere in the back of my mind, all the time. That's one of the many mysteries of writing, right? We honestly don't know where some of this stuff comes from.

I will say that I was always aware of the benefits of having such a short time span, for a couple of reasons. I wanted Richie's coming-of-age to have to happen very quickly, under the most extreme conditions; I wanted the drama of that kind of time pressure. I also was worried about tiring or boring readers, if the story went on too long. It's really claustrophobic in that hospice and I knew that readers, along with Richie, would be clawing at the walls to get out. (That's also why it was so important to allow Richie those moments of escape—his trip into the city on Halloween; the times he actually gets to go outside, even for a few minutes).

And, I have always loved Aristotle's ideas about reversal and moments of recognition in drama. I find those concepts hugely helpful to fiction writers. In *Somebody Up There Hates You*, as in any other story with tragedy bred in its bones, the moments of recognition come too late to change the outcome. (Like poor Oedipus, suddenly getting it: Jocasta is his mother as well as his wife; that guy he killed on the bridge is his father. Whoa! That kind of moment.) When Richie recognizes that having sex with Sylvie has harmed her, for example, he feels a terrible moment of recognition and believes that he *deserves* the beating he receives. And it might be a tiny bit significant that Richie experiences a level of physical blindness by the end, an echo of all of his emotional blind spots throughout the story.

Still, I hate to over-emphasize any possible allusive or symbolic meanings in this novel. First and foremost, it was my intent to have everything that happens to Richie and Sylvie and all of the characters be plausible, natural, and believable. If the events and structure also reveal some sort of deeper meaning, that's for readers to decide—or not. I'm not quite ready to issue as stern a warning as Mark Twain did in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that "persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished" but I'm in his camp. And, it just now occurs to me, that this might be one

difference between adult and teen readers: the teens, I think, are reading it as a kind of tragi-comic love story; the adults may see more.

Well, that was a long answer, wasn't it? You clearly struck a nerve with that question.

PA: This structure is highly dramatic, the anticlimactic third part being notably shorter than the other two. Why did you choose this strategy?

HS: The third section moves more quickly because, basically, Richie's time is running out and I wanted the structure/pace to match that sense of having very little time left. And, I hope that the third part isn't really anticlimactic. I guess it depends on what readers think are the real issues of the book: is it whether Richie and Sylvie have sex? Fall in love? Because, yes, those things happen earlier in the book. Or is the key issue whether or not Richie, in some way or another, actually manages to grow up? Or become something of a hero, just a little bit of the princely figure he dreams of being? Or is able to do something for his mother, something that might in some tiny way, help her after he's gone? I wanted all of that for Richie—the love, the sex, the growing up, the gift to his mother, and the heroic act of sacrificing something that's truly important to him, for Sylvie. All of that. The last section of the book is where many of those things are accomplished. And even if his sacrifice of the days he has won in the poker game is part of Richie's delusional state at that point, he *believes* that's what he's doing and that's what counts, right? He is giving the most precious thing he has—time, a little more time—to the girl he loves.

PA: Why did you set your novel in the fall? Is it a symbolic allusion to the end of life? Or rather due to Halloween?

HS: Oh, it's all about Halloween. Sure, fall is the most evocative season of the year for me. But Halloween is truly the point, in the novel. It is, at least here in the northeastern part of the United States, the closest we come to celebrating the things we fear: monsters, ghosts, skeletons. It's the night when we thumb our noses at death. It's the one holiday that gives us costumes and masks and the freedom to knock on strangers' doors and demand sweets. I love Halloween. And I grew up in the suburbs of northern New Jersey, one of hordes of baby boomer kids, all of us freed to go out and wreak havoc on our neighbors on October 30, Cabbage Night, also called Mischief Night and Devil's Night. I share Richie's wonder, even now, that our parents allowed—even encouraged—such madness.

My sons, when they were kids, always went crazy on Halloween, too, planning their costumes months in advance. The werewolf costume that Richie remembers in such loving detail is based on one that my younger son Jacob wore when he was about eight. I still have the wolf mask and I hang it on my front porch every Halloween. It totally scares my cats. My son Tobias's most recent book, *The Fair Grounds* (P. S. Publishing, UK, 2013), also takes place in and around Halloween, with most of the action occurring in a fantastic cemetery/fair ground combo. No coincidence, I'm sure, that he and I are fascinated with this particular holiday. The boys grew up and I still live in Kinderhook, NY, a village that claims that it inspired, in part, Washington Irving's *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. We are steeped, around here, in Halloween lore and legends. It's in our blood.

And what better time to have a sick kid break out of the hospital to have a wild night on the town? It's the only day of the year when Richie could appear on the streets in public, in his current state, and not look like a total freak. It's the only night where he

can blend in with a crowd, not stand out as “the sick kid.” On this one night, he can ride a wheelchair, don a crown and cape and mask and hardly be noticed. It’s a raucous, out-of-control night, perfect for behaving badly. For Richie, Halloween is the only possible night when he can be free.

PA: No matter how weakened he may be, Richard never wants to tell others nor does he complain, yet he describes his impressions in funny or not so funny images such as being “hollowed out. Like a cantaloupe or something”? Why did you choose this metaphoric approach, when some critics like Susan Sontag and specialists in disability studies argue against the use of metaphors to refer to illness?

HS: I’m not a specialist in disability studies, obviously. I’m a fiction writer; ergo, I deal in metaphor. And I would contend that *all* descriptive imagery is metaphoric, anyway. Descriptions of illnesses are no different. When we say that someone has a “stabbing” pain, a “burning” ache or a “rosy” red rash, what else are those but metaphors? How else can anyone ever convey, in words, purely physical sensations? Even when we ask patients to assign a number for the depth of their pain—1-10—isn’t that a kind of metaphor, giving a symbolic numerical value to an otherwise indescribable sensation? In your introduction to the journal *Revue Française d’Etudes Américaines* 2015/2 (No 43), you quote that powerful line from Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain*: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it.” So all writers trying to convey the sensations of illness and pain are in for a challenge. I just can’t figure out any other way to write/talk about illness, other than through metaphor. And I hope that metaphors like the hollowed-out cantaloupe give readers a way to understand/feel Richie’s experiences.

And Richie doesn’t want to even name his disease, as if to name it would give it a power and dignity he refuses to acknowledge. Never in the whole book does he name what he has. So he has to find other ways to talk about it—and one of those ways is the ironic name “SUTHY Syndrome,” a kind of metaphor in itself.

PA: At one point, Richard’s uncle says, “I am entertained by the whole human comedy.” Is it also your case? Is it the reason why you used laughter and irony to deal with illness and death?

HS: It’s true that I often am entertained by the ironies of human life, even the painful ones. But it’s Richie who tells this story, in his own voice, and I am nowhere near as brave as he is. I could never whistle in the dark with his kind of insouciance, that’s for sure. I am more fearful and more worried, all the time. In fact, I write from my fears, hoping to imagine them so vividly that they no longer have the power to terrify. But I also come from a family where dark humor prevails; we see ourselves as a tough, no-nonsense lot, people who handle pain with sarcasm and hard laughter. And, in the hospitals where I spent so much of my life, I would say that laughter occurred more often than weeping. Dark laughter, to be sure, but still... Sometimes, of course, it’s hard to distinguish laughter from tears, anyway. As Richie says toward the end of the novel, “I hope I’m not crying. I mean, I don’t feel like I am, but maybe I can’t even tell anymore. Maybe I’m always crying.”

PA: You insist on smells a lot—whatever happens a smell is mentioned, can you explain that?

HS: Ah, that’s an interesting insight, something I never really noticed. But, yes, I do believe that smell is perhaps our most powerful and evocative sense. We all know the experience of suddenly being cast into the past, transported into a different place

and time, when we encounter a certain scent. I remember once following an older woman through a grocery store because she smelled of Youth Dew by Estee Lauder—the perfume my mother had once worn. My mother had recently died and I could hardly bear to let that scent escape—as if it brought her back to me, for just a moment. I’m sure I acted like a crazy person, stalking that woman as she bought her fruit and milk and bread. I managed—but only barely—not to follow her out to her car. I stayed in the store, my own shopping forgotten, crying like the orphan I was. A fully grown, middle-aged orphan whose grief had been re-ignited by Youth Dew.

I find that when I’m teaching writing, I often have to remind students that their characters have bodies, that they aren’t all mind. Young writers often use what we call “talking heads” dialogue, for example, just line after line of back-and-forth repartee, with no sensory imagery to make the scene visual and vivid for the reader. It’s as if their characters are nothing but disembodied voices. I often give them writing prompts that ask them to describe what their scenes’ settings smell like and to make sure that their characters are aware of and touched by certain scents. I don’t want them to forget about this most basic human sense.

And Richie, of course, as the book goes on, is losing his other senses. By the final scenes he has lost the hearing in one ear and has a constant humming roar in the other. His eyesight is greatly diminished, filled with hallucinatory colors and movements. Pain and weakness have dulled his sense of touch—and he eats almost nothing, so taste has gone, too. The last sense available for him, really, is smell and so it comes to the forefront of his perceptions.

PA: Your novel immediately suggested to me the carnivalesque, as it was defined by Bakhtin, all the more as it is scattered with episodes suggesting carnival chaos and breaks of conventional social rules. Take “cabbage night” for instance. You write: “Grandma says her folks figured, what the hey, better the kids get this shit out of their systems once a year than dribble out bits of badness every other day on the calendar.” Is it the reason why you chose that particular approach?

HS: I love your ideas about the carnivalesque aspects of the novel; you’ve given me some wonderful new insights into the book. My approach, I’ll admit, in writing the novel, was more instinctive than intellectual—I just somehow felt that what Richie would crave, at this stage of his life, would be exactly that kind of rule-breaking chaos. It may be what most teenagers crave, after all, on some level, right? And Richie has missed out on experiencing it. He’s been subjected to the routines and inflexibility of living in and out of hospitals since he was eleven years old; he is furious, in many ways, about the loss of freedom he’s experienced. And here at the eleventh hour, he is set free from parental supervision and he is determined to make the most of every second.

And, yes, as I said earlier, Cabbage Night and Halloween are the closest we come to carnivalesque occasions here in the northeastern part of the United States. (We are not, alas, New Orleans and do not have Mardi Gras revelry in our streets.) So, for Richie, the fates kind of align: it’s coming up on his 18th birthday; it’s the season of Halloween; and, for once, his mother is not standing guard over him—and, in all sorts of ways, he makes chaos happen. His adventures in Hudson on Halloween night with his rule-smashing Uncle Phil send him into a carnival atmosphere where almost anything goes. On Cabbage Night, the prank he pulls with Sylvie is steeped in carnival themes, too. They paint death masks onto their faces, at the same time defying and

flaunting their terminal diagnoses. They showcase the fears of the hospice visitors—and their own fears—with a kind of manic intensity. They bring the elements of death and damnation, things often spoken only in whispers, into the open, blasting “death metal” music, wearing Black Sabbath tee-shirts, and—in Sylvie’s case—lighting little token hell-fires. In that moment, I believe that these kids are *insisting* that everyone around them acknowledge the presence of Death, with a capital D.

For me, another important aspect of carnival is masking, the use of disguise. People are set free from societal norms, in part, because they are anonymous and/or representing something other than their day-to-day selves. When Richie dons a cheesy paper crown, for example, and turns his blanket into a cape, he becomes something other than a sick kid, he becomes a kind of super-hero. When Sylvie dresses in her school uniform, she is defying her illness, too, by assuming the garb of her once-healthy self. When Kelly is dressed as Marie-Antoinette, she says she “could be much braver, more, uh, bold as Marie than as me.” So much of the book, really, is about the power of this kind of defiant use of disguise.

And, as a writer, I believe that I donned a kind of disguise, when I wrote in Richie’s voice, so different from my own. This freed me to write about this whole topic of sick and dying kids without crippling self-consciousness. My own mask was the character of Richie. In this guise, I could, like Kelly-Marie, be much braver and more bold.

PA: Your narrative is full of animal imagery—which is also typical of the carnivalesque—why did you use it? What effect did you mean to create?

HS: Well, here’s something else I didn’t notice, myself. It’s interesting because I have been accused of having way too many dogs in *Corporeality*. But I’m not sure there is all that much animal imagery in *Somebody Up There Hates You*—is there? Most of the creatures that enter the story seem to be of the mythical sort: werewolf and dragon. Are there other animals in the book?

PA: Why did you choose to portray such “tough” women in your novel—from the young Sylvie, to Richard’s mother and grandmother, to the nurses?

HS: It’s certainly true that the women in the book are tough. Partly by nature as well as by nurture (or lack of it). Richie’s grandmother is described as “a tough Jersey girl,” for example, pregnant at the age of sixteen. (Note: By the way, that’s the rough-and-tumble state of New Jersey where I grew up. I, however, was *not* a tough Jersey girl, in any way. I was shy, skinny, bookish, and pretty much terrified of the truly tough Jersey girls I knew. And there were a lot of them: teased-hair, heavy-smoking, black-mascara, smack-you-as-soon-as-look-at-you girls. Secretly, I admired them very much, from afar.) But, mostly, the women in the book have been put into incredibly tough situations and I think that they have grown strong, in part, because of what life has brought to them. Think of Richie’s mother: an unmarried teenage mother who has never revealed who Richie’s father is, who has worked multiple jobs to support herself and her son, who has been by his side for years and years of terrible illness, and who, now, faces the death of that son. She has *had* to be tough. Although I fear that once Richie is gone and she no longer can take care of him, she is going to fall apart, badly.

And, partly, with both Richie’s grandmother and mother, toughness is a matter of class. These women have always been poor, always had to work hard. It is very, very difficult in this country for working class women to hold jobs—usually low-paying,

low-status, incredibly hard jobs—while also raising children. We have no decent system for childcare; we have a healthcare system that makes it almost impossible for anyone who isn't rich to maintain decent health insurance; we do almost nothing to help a working woman balance caring for a sick child with her need to be on the job. Simply from who they are and how they have been forced to survive, these women have grown tough outer skins. Inside, they are much softer, kinder, and much more afraid. But they will not show the inside self.

The nurses—yes, they are tough, too. But they are also full of compassion. Who could work as a nurse in a hospice without that kind of balance? Their compassion comes out, at times, as weakness or lack of professionalism, as when Jeannette allows Richie and Uncle Phil to walk out of the hospital. At their most human and vulnerable, confronting the imminent deaths of these young patients, the nurses' humanity sometimes overcomes their professional training and discipline. And for that, I came to love them.

And, Sylvie. Ah, as Richie says, that girl is *fierce*. When faced with “flight or fight” reactions, there is simply no flight in her. She is all fight. And when dealing with her own terrible illness, she chooses not to believe her diagnosis; she is completely defiant. She can be mean; she is certainly impetuous and bossy, sometimes cruel. She has, after all, dragon blood running in her veins.

PA: By contrast, all your male characters seem weaker, if not imbalanced—from Richard himself, the gay nurse Edward, Phil (Richard's uncle) to Sylvie's father. What message are you trying to convey?

HS: I disagree that the male characters are weaker. I think Richie is incredibly strong. By the end of the book, he has achieved a kind of triumphant manhood, under the most difficult of conditions. He's not, obviously, physically strong but he is amazingly resilient. I also see no weakness in Edward. He is a wonderful, caring nurse—who, like the female nurses, occasionally lets his heart override his head, in regard to the young lovers. But, for me, that is a kind of strength, not weakness.

Sylvie's father certainly becomes unbalanced, more and more so, as the novel progresses. I think that this is because he has assumed the traditional, successful patriarchal male role, as society defines it: he is a high-earning lawyer; he is used to taking care of his family; he is used to being the boss. When confronted with utter loss of control over his daughter's life and death, he tips over into a kind of madness. He behaves very badly and he does some despicable things. But I believe that, as Jeannette says when Richie calls him a demon, “No. That man's in hell, is all. He's not in charge of the place, he's just been thrown in there.” And Richie, toward the end of the novel, comes to understand Sylvie's father, perhaps better than anyone else. He thinks, “I could love him, too. I mean think about it. Isn't that how a father should be? I mean, what wouldn't you do, if Sylvie was your child?” I hope that readers, without excusing any of the awful things he does, see Sylvie's father's torment and understand, at least a little, why he acts as he does.

Phil? Well, sure, Phil isn't exactly a solid citizen, is he? But Phil is *there*. He isn't avoiding the pain of seeing Richie so ill; he hasn't skipped out. He's fighting as hard as he can, in his own way, to give Richie some kind of life in the time left to him. He's also an artist, perceptive and talented; as Richie notices, “...once he goes into artist mode, Phil's a different guy.”

Two other male characters are minor, but do I admire them: the old guys in Room 304. World War II vets. Old soldiers. They seem strong to me, even here in their last days.

So, are all of the men in the book flawed? Sure. So are all of the women. I mean, really, who isn't?

PA: Your characters play cards recurrently throughout the novel, particularly at the end. Why? What do these card games mean?

HS: Games of chance, for me, echo the whole randomness of who happens to become ill and who dies young. I don't believe this is some kind of divine curse or divine will; it's simply the luck of the draw. Sure, there's skill involved, in life as in poker, but you've still got to work with the hand you're dealt, right? In the original "SUTHY Syndrome" story, I ended with the poker game simply because I saw, in my head, the main characters of the story gathered around a bedside table, gambling for that most precious of stakes, days of life. Once I launched into the novel version, I knew that if the book was going to end with a card game, there should be earlier card games as well. I've been influenced, in creating this kind of parallel or echo-effect scene structure, by writer Charles Baxter's terrific essay called "Rhyming Action," in his book *Burning Down the House*. So I was aware of trying to create the kind of fictional "rhyme" that Baxter describes in having a couple of card games. The earlier game of gin, which Sylvie's father gloatingly wins, kind of foreshadows the final game.

And, on the most basic level, I've seen lots of people playing cards in hospital rooms, passing the time and injecting a bit of play into the hospital routine. These days, people probably just play solitaire on their phones rather than gathering around tables in waiting rooms and at bedsides. That seems sadder to me—even lonelier.

PA: Why this recurrent image of the dragon, associated with Sylvie's father? Is there any symbolic meaning?

HS: Dragons! There are two wonderful archetypal dragons that I have always loved: the sly, philosophical dragon in John Gardner's novel *Grendel* and, of course, Tolkien's gold-encrusted Smaug. For Richie's visions of Sylvie's father as a dragon, I wanted that imagery to be associated with Richie's dream of becoming a fairy tale prince, that heroic guy who rescues the fair maiden from her imprisoning tower by defeating the dragon that guards her. Richie knows, on one level, how silly this fantasy is but in another way, he wants to believe it. Just as he knows that his story about the "science geeks" coming up with a cure for his illness is a fantasy but also almost believes it. He tells this story to Kelly-Marie and to his mother. And, perhaps, to himself, both as a kind of fairy tale and a desperate hope. When Richie goes to Sylvie's room, where she lies in bed unmoving and unconscious, he sees her as a fairy tale princess under a spell and wishes, with all of his heart, that he could wake her with a kiss. But he's also honest enough—with himself and with the reader—to report the real outcome of his kiss: "It would be nice to say that she opened her eyes and said, 'Hey, Rich-man.' That my princely kiss brought her back to life.

But I'm not going to start lying, not now.

She didn't move and she didn't speak. That's the truth."

It's important, somehow, that Richie carries this basic contradiction with him, all of the time, that he clings to fantasies that he really doesn't even believe in. But they

comfort him, nevertheless. He can mock and honor these things, simultaneously. This seems true to human nature: don't we often choose to believe—and to disbelieve—both at the same time? That's part of why, I think, we are so drawn to fairy tales, always and forever. The story itself, the telling of it, the recurring characters and motifs, those are our slim comforts. They are not real but, still, they strike us as somehow *true*. Truer than true.

So, yes, here there be dragons. All I have to do, right this minute, is glance behind the screen of my laptop and I'll see a picture I've kept propped up on my various writing desks for many, many years—forty, at least. It's a copy of a pen-and-ink drawing by Lois Allen. It shows a little girl serving a cup of tea to a large, dark, spiky, sweet-faced dragon. I don't know why, exactly, that picture is so important to me. But it is.

And I've just recalled that Gardner's *Grendel* also has a character who is a harpist—the enigmatic storyteller in Beowulf's court called The Shaper. Curiouser and curiouser, the connections that these questions reveal.....

PA: Your narrator "speaks" to his readers and the novel suggests some kind of tall tale, why did you choose this approach?

HS: Again, because this is just the way I first *heard* the story, in that opening boast, "I shit you not." Whenever somebody says that, stand back, because some kind of bullshit, inevitably, is on its way. When I heard Richie's voice proclaiming himself to be "The Incredible Dying Boy," I understood the tone this book would take. And the tall tale is another way of telling the truth, isn't it, but telling it, as Emily Dickinson says, "slant"? Exaggeration, boasting and hyperbole allow us to touch on difficult matters in an over-the-top way that entertains rather than depresses. Most of Richie's voice depends on this whole element of ironic braggadocio that, I think, is also quite natural for an adolescent boy.

A tall tale element that I didn't include here is any kind of supernatural or superhuman occurrence. No *deus ex machina* will appear at the last moment to snatch Richie from the arms of death. What's "tall" about this tale is mostly Richie's habit of hyperbole about the things he considers fun and boastworthy, like his sexual adventures. What Richie plays down, of course, are his pain, growing weakness, and fear. He prefers to shape his tale around the extraordinary rather than the mundane.

PA: What role do Phil's drawings play in the novel? Why did you introduce them? Do they represent some kind of metafictional discourse?

HS: First, I'd recommend that anyone who's interested take a look at the Planeta website, where, for the Spanish-language edition of the book, someone has taken the time to create Phil's drawings with wonderful care and precision:

<http://planetadelibrosmexico.com/tag/alguien-alla-arriba-te-odia/>.

And then I'd say that, yes, there's a touch of metafiction here, as the drawings provide a slightly skewed commentary on the story. And there is more than a touch of intertextuality: visual blending with verbal. But mostly, I just wanted to give Uncle Phil a talent of his own, something that might help to offset some of his more black-sheepish characteristics. It's important to Richie that someone in his family actually *see* the hospice and recognize its realities and oddities. He needs someone to understand the world he's living in. His mother can't even admit to herself that Richie is in hospice; she pretends that it's just another hospitalization for him. But

Richie desperately wants *someone* to “deal with it,” as he is trying to do. And Uncle Phil does exactly that; he deals, through his drawings. They prove that Phil has been paying attention to everything Richie shows him and that he recognizes the humanity that lies inside and behind even the most diminished patients.

It’s also important, I think, that Richie can’t see all of the details of that Phil puts into the drawings. So he is surprised when some of these little things are revealed to him. It’s another example of things he didn’t know, something else he has to learn. The drawings also represent a gift for his mother. When, finally, Richie runs out of words and his voice goes silent, there will still be these drawings, something she can hold in her hands.

PA: Are you preparing another book? What is it about?

Yes, always. But this next novel is just barely begun, so I can’t give you any details. What I can tell you is that this one moves to the opposite end of the age spectrum from *Somebody Up There Hates You*. The main character is coming to the end of a long career as a professor in a college that is falling apart, an institution descending into the all-too-common pit of greed-driven corporatization and chaos. The story will be, essentially, an academic comedy, but one, I hope with real heart. And a whole lot of carnival. Working title, at the moment, is *The Short Timer*.

ABSTRACTS

Hollis Seamon was invited to Bordeaux Montaigne University in April 2016 to give a lecture entitled “Mask, Cape and Crown: Disguise and Dis-ease in *Somebody Up There Hates You*” (2013), her latest novel. A remarkable success on both sides of the Atlantic, this novel associates illness with youth and laughter.

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