

# Joseph Heller on *Something Happened*: An Interview

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The Norwegian translation of Joseph Heller's second book, *Something Happened* (1974), was published in October 1975. On this occasion Joseph Heller visited Oslo. He lectured at the University of Oslo and kindly agreed to an interview after the lecture. The interview took place at the American Institute and lasted one hour. During the interview special emphasis was put on Heller's latest novel, and the following is an edited transcript of the conversation. I would like to thank Dosent Brita Seyersted and Universitetslektor Chester P. Sadowy for helpful advice during the editing of this interview.

*Interviewer*: You are often referred to as a Black Humor writer, Mr. Heller. Do you resent this label?

*Heller*: No, I don't resent it. I don't attach much importance to it. The term Black Humor was more prevalent in American literary criticism about 1964, '65, '66. I don't find it used much any more. I don't think it proved to be a valid term for classifying fiction. It never meant much to me when they were using it. Whenever some publication in America would do a piece on Black Humorists, they would group writers whom I felt had very little in common with each other. No, I don't resent it.

*Interviewer*: You have once stated that lying in bed thinking of Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* triggered off the opening lines of *Catch-22*. Is there any book that influenced *Something Happened* in the same way?

*Heller*: No.

*Interviewer*: I have seen copies of charts you used when you planned *Catch-22*. Did you use a similar set of charts in planning *Something Happened*? Did you work in the same way with that book?

Heller: I worked in the same way, but it was not necessary to go into such detail in my outlines because there were fewer characters in *Something Happened*, many fewer episodes, and I was able to keep all this in my mind so I didn't have to write any type of chronology. What I did instead, though, in *Something Happened*, was to write down lines or phrases or transitions that would occur to me, and that I did not want to forget. In *Something Happened* the characters are fewer than in *Catch-22* and the action is confined to such a small area; therefore I did not have to use charts in planning the sequence of this book.

*Interviewer*: So then maybe you improvised more in *Something Happened*?

Heller: Improvisations took place with both. Even though I had the outlines of *Catch-22*, when it came to writing it the imagination continued to throw up new possibilities. That happened with both.

*Interviewer*: Ralph Ellison has said that when he wrote *Invisible Man* he labored a lot over his transitions so that his "seams" would not show. He found it difficult to move from one subject to another. Portraying Bob Slocum certainly entailed moving from subject to subject very often. Was handling of transitions a problem for you too?

Heller: It was not a problem. I am very conscious of transitions, though. I almost never want to end a paragraph and begin a new paragraph that doesn't have some very tight connection with the last sentence of the preceding paragraph. Since both books don't proceed in chronological sequence, I would have to find inconspicuous ways of moving from one subject to another. In *Something Happened*, it's not stream of consciousness, but rather a free flow of ideas or an attempt to make the ideas seem like a free flow, but I would now want to leave a subject to go to another, and I'd have to find some rational way of getting there. Often I would use a word as a transition, a word in one sentence, repeat that word in a second sentence, or phrase; that would take me out of it.

*Interviewer*: You once mentioned that you were reading Faulkner when you started to write *Something Happened*, but then you put Faulkner away because you would not want Faulkner to influence your style at that point. Did Faulkner's writing influence your use of parentheses?

Heller: No. . .

*Interviewer*: There seem to be certain parallels.

Heller: If it did it was unconscious.

*Interviewer:* Is there any change in the way you use parentheses throughout the novel?

*Heller:* I think so.

*Interviewer:* It seems that toward the end the parentheses are shorter, maybe indicating a less rational mind.

*Heller:* That's it. It's not toward the end, though. The initial use of parentheses is very specific, very precise. I think you could find an explanation for them. It's a way of subordinating a clause, whispering a thought rather than stating it. But as the book progresses, the precision vanishes so there are places where there is really no reason for using them and often they are inverted, the function is inverted so that certain thoughts that might have been in parentheses in the beginning of the book because they are objectionable thoughts are out of parentheses. Occasionally the very inconspicuous ones, the jokes, are put inside them, and there is that one place well into the book where a parenthetical element goes on about four pages. Then I would guess that as Slocum regains control of himself he regains control of his punctuation and syntax, and, if I remember correctly, in the closing pages of the book the parentheses became more precise again, as the sentences become simpler, simple declarative sentences.

*Interviewer:* My immediate reaction to the question of point of view would be that *Something Happened* is a first person novel, and you yourself referred to it as such at the lecture today. But if you have not been misrepresented, you have said — this is in the interview which appeared in *Playboy* in June this year — that in your book you strive for a fusion of first person and third person point of view.

*Heller:* I don't think I said that. I'm either not understanding you or you're misunderstanding. . .

*Interviewer:* I think I have the exact line. According to the interview you said that in *Something Happened* "the first and third person are fused in a way I've never seen before. . ."

*Heller:* Out of context it doesn't mean anything to me. I have no explanation for that other than to suggest that Slocum sees himself from a schizophrenic viewpoint very often, as somebody separated from himself. He sees himself performing sexual intercourse. He very frequently talks about himself as being separated from himself. Maybe that was the intent. I'm not saying you're misquoting. Even the *Playboy* interview is a digest. I forget the context. However, there are ways in which I think the first person approach in *Some-*

*thing Happened* does differ from the traditional first person approach. Two ways come to mind. The one is that we have what I call an unreliable narrator. Bob Slocum is not being always entirely honest with himself or with the reader. As he tells the book he is in possession of information that he could very easily have given early in the book which he withholds, such as the fact that over the years he has continued to call this office in which he used to work as a young man and ask for himself. He has that information before the book begins but it is not until very late in the book that he discloses that. The second thing is this: most first person novels are told by a narrator who knows the ending before he begins. All the events have taken place before the time of telling. But in *Something Happened* they have not, events are happening as Slocum is telling them. For example he does not know at the beginning that he is going to get the job. He does not know what will happen to his son, whereas in a typical first person novel the narrator is in possession of all of the information before he begins telling.

*Interviewer* : How did you arrive at the name Bob Slocum?

*Heller*: That was suggested to me by my son, and believe it or not, I was *not* aware that it contained two English words till I read the reviews. My son was eight years old then and I told him I was looking for an American name and he said there was a boy in his playgroup called Joe Slocum. I said Slocum sounds fine and that's how I did it, and not until I read the reviews was I aware of the words "slow come."

*Interviewer*: That is much the same thing that happened with the miracle ingredient 2-247 that Yossarian speaks of in *Catch-22*, isn't it?

*Heller* : Yeah?

*Interviewer* : Well, 2-247 is actually a formula referring to the ingredient Einsteinium, but you took the formula out of the blue and did not learn about it until someone wrote to you and asked whether there was any connection between the formula and a reference to Einstein somewhere else in the book.

*Heller* : How did you know this?

*Interviewer*: You mentioned it in an interview.

*Heller*: Oh really? Yes, there is an element called Einsteinium. That's pure coincidence. "Slocum" can be an unconscious way of not recognizing it. It seems improbable with the attention I pay to words that I had not thought of it, but I accepted him in my mind so quickly as a person that I did not think about the name till

I read it. Had I thought about it, by the way, I probably would have changed it. I don't usually like names that contain words.

*Interviewer:* Nevertheless, you did give depersonalized names to the people working in the company.

*Heller:* Some of them, but those are names that Slocum tends to concentrate on often as a form of making his job more interesting, the color wheel; but he works with someone called Parker, he works with Kagle. . .

*Interviewer:* The name is *Red* Parker.

*Heller:* Yeah, well . . . that's right, but Arthur Baron . . . oh, I suppose that is a word . . . I don't know . . .

*Interviewer:* I see your point. This leads me to another question. You stated in your lecture today that you do not see Bob Slocum as Everyman. Nevertheless certain items in the novel seem to suggest a universal reference. For instance the function of the company is not mentioned. Depersonalized names appear in the novel. Slocum even invokes the decline of American Civilization.

*Heller:* Well, I know that I wanted the company to function as a symbol for the upper level of American society, so that he talks about the company, or I talk about the company often the way one would talk about a country, a relationship, a sense of duty. When he is talking about sleeping with other girls he says he does it because he thinks the company and country expect him to. That is the society, not the government, it's the social milieu in which he lives, so I intended it to represent that. But what I did not intend was to say that everybody who lives in that society must necessarily be like Slocum. As Slocum indicates, most people on his level have been divorced, or would be divorced, so he is not typical. He is representative but he's not typical, he's not symbolic of every person.

*Interviewer:* Back to the question of names. Why did you give Derek a name and not the other members of the family?

*Heller:* First reason is, I felt it was right. I felt it would be effective. That's the first reason in anything I write. My feeling is it will be good literature. And then the second reason I found when I read a review of the book, and as soon as I read the review I realized that that was probably why the first reason seemed so good, and that is that Slocum does not name his two children or his wife: he does not give names to the three people closest to him. He would give a name to Derek because he wishes to disassociate himself from Derek, to separate himself from him. That's the reason he gives a name to him. Then there's another reason. Americans often don't talk about

their wives or children by name. They will talk about "the wife, the kids" and I also know from my own experience, when I think of my wife or my children I don't think of them by name, so I think that fits that pattern. And I had to contrive in the book to avoid any type of dialogue that would make the absence of the name seem to be a contrivance, so I had to guide the dialogue very carefully.

*Interviewer:* As an answer to the question "Why isn't Yossarian corrupted?" you once stated that "staying pure isn't so hard in this world." Yet in *Something Happened* this seems to be *the* big problem. What are the basic differences between Yossarian's predicament and that of Bob Slocum?

*Heller:* In Slocum I'm creating a corrupt character. It isn't so difficult to stay pure. If one is molded or motivated to live with good character, it's not so difficult. But Slocum is one who isn't. I'm getting letters now about Slocum which say that he's not nearly as bad as he says he is. If anything he's possibly the most decent character in the book. In the office he's aware of what he's doing but he's fair and ethical with everyone he works with and people are telling me, a few letters, anyway, say that in relations with his daughter he's much nicer to her, much more sensitive to her than she is to him.

*Interviewer:* I don't see that.

*Heller:* Well, there are two points in the chapter on the daughter where he reaches out to hug her, and each time she does exactly what he knows she will, she humiliates him.

*Interviewer:* Yes, that's right, but hasn't he somehow created this situation himself?

*Heller:* If he has, he hasn't done it intentionally. It's happened, that's why the word "happened" is used. To what degree he's responsible I couldn't say, I don't try to answer that question. There's no answer to it. If Slocum's children can be blamed on their parents, then their parents' personality could be blamed on their parents.

*Interviewer:* In the March 18 issue of *Newsweek* last year you are quoted as saying that you thought "Slocum was the most contemptible guy in all literature." Have you changed your opinion about him?

*Heller:* I have changed my opinion because he affects readers differently. He evokes sympathy, he evokes pity, he evokes compassion, and he creates very strong identifications with people. People recognize him as being all *too* human and all *too* familiar, so they're

responding to him with a sympathy which I personally did not feel, did not intend, although it's there. I put it there and would not remove it. I was writing about him as I saw him. *Now* I can better understand why he invokes these feelings, first identification, and a tremendous, tremendous compassion.

*Interviewer:* Slocum's puerile desire to make a speech seems to clash with his capacity for very honest introspection.

*Heller:* Yes, and he's aware of that. I mean, in several places he berates himself for wanting to make that damned speech. He knows it's not important, but in spite of himself he wants to. This is not the only instance in which Slocum's intelligence is in conflict with his emotions. He recognizes many infantile habits, many petty habits: the need to outwit his daughter, compulsion to bully his son when his son gives money away. Especially with his daughter he tries to absolve himself of responsibility by separating himself from the speaker. He objectifies the words he speaks as though they were entities of their own; he says, "I don't know where the words came from." He says so many cruel things to his daughter out of the need to outfox her, and then he dwells on it. "Why must I outfox her," he says, "she's only a girl of fifteen. Why do I feel as hurt by her as I would if Green would humiliate me?" So he knows as well as I know in creating it, as well as you know, that the ambition to make that three-minute speech is very trivial in terms of all that's happening to him.

*Interviewer:* So it is in character?

*Heller:* It's in his character. He's extremely sensitive, he's extremely infantile. And he knows it. That's what separates him. Another character might be described as the same type as him, yet very deep inside of himself he looks at himself more honestly perhaps than other people might be able to.

*Interviewer:* Did you admire him for his honesty when you wrote the novel?

*Heller:* No, I neither admired him nor did not admire him, it was a characteristic I gave him. He would be obsessive in his ruminations about himself and his past, and the obsessiveness would take the form of a minute, but selective inspection of what he's feeling. Usually, what he regards as his weaknesses — the fears of inadequacy he remembers as a child are still with him — he thinks he detects in his own son.

*Interviewer:* One critic has complained — this is a British critic — that it is inconceivable that anyone who is suffering from such a total

angst or fear as Slocum is could be a competent lover and sexually attractive the way he seems to be.

*Heller:* It was probably a woman who wrote that. . .

*Interviewer:* True.

*Heller:* . . . and he is a type that's very familiar. He would be sexually attractive, he can make jokes, he picks his women carefully. As he says, he picks women who have low self-images, he never goes after a woman who is very attractive. They intimidate him. He drinks a lot and can make a type of badinage with girls that's very easy.

*Interviewer:* And he protects himself too, doesn't he, so that they do not know him the way we do.

*Heller:* Exactly. So the English critic is mistaken then. I can introduce her to several men in New York who are exactly like Slocum, immensely successful. It's also not that hard to be successful with women any more if one wants to be. There's an abundance of women and there's a change in sexual attitude.

*Interviewer:* The title may be read as referring to something which happened to Bob Slocum in the past, turning him into the kind of man you describe in your book. This is, I think, the usual way of interpreting it.

*Heller:* Yes, that's what I intended.

*Interviewer:* Nevertheless, when Slocum's son has the accident you give the line "something happened" to a couple of kids, so the title might also be seen as a foreshadowing of this accident?

*Heller:* That is a new use of the term "something happened," but it's not the original use. On the first page of the book, Slocum uses the phrase, "Something must have happened to me some time to make me the way I am." I've broken the sentence up, but he uses the phrases "something" and "happened" more times than I can count before the episode with the son, so it does refer to that mysterious thing that made him the way he is. And he says at one point, when he asks his children what they want to be, "I'll help you, you don't have to be a boy scout or a baseball player." The son says, "I want to be a boy scout and play baseball." Then Slocum says, "My God, has it happened to them already? When did it happen, where was I?" He is mystified by this process that makes people into the type of persons they become, and that is the something that happened to him of the title.

*Interviewer:* So you did not have any type of ambiguity in mind when you chose that title?



*Heller:* No, also it's a phrase that is used in English when there is an accident of some kind. There seems to be an accident, the crowd gathers, and the kids shout, "Something happened."

*Interviewer:* What made me ask was actually the back cover of the English paper back edition, which plays up this second interpretation. They first tell the readers what kind of life Slocum is leading, and then, they say, "Something happened."

*Heller:* That is the British edition. They also describe the book, either on their jacket or in their catalogue, as a completely American type of book or phenomenon, which was not to my mind a good sales technique, and also it's not accurate, because the book has meaning, very quick meaning. Sweden was the first country to publish it, they published it before England and the reception in Sweden was tremendous, and it's tremendous in Italy now, among critics and in sales as well, so it's not American." But that's their jacket. There's also an inaccuracy on the jacket of the American paperback edition, and I've asked to have them change it. Those things happen. I could show you on the first page of the book; he says, "Something must have happened to me some time."

*Interviewer:* At what point in the writing, or in the planning of the novel rather, did you decide that Slocum's son was to die?

*Heller:* Almost from the beginning. I would say within a five-minute period, or let's change it to a fifteen-minute period, I got the opening lines of the section on the company. I saw the man, decided he would be married and have children and for some reason one of them would be brain damaged. He wished he didn't have that one, and he would be very strongly attached to the other one. He would lose the one he's attached to and be stuck with the one he did not want. That was there from the beginning.

*Interviewer:* When Slocum goes to see his son's teacher, Forgione, they get into a discussion over success. Then Slocum sides with his son and says, "I feel sorry for the next fellow." Nevertheless he is so conditioned to Forgione's way of thinking that he takes Kagle's job, and Andy Kagle then becomes "the next fellow." Almost right after he has accepted Kagle's job, his son dies. It seems almost as if there is a pattern here, a pattern of retribution?

*Heller:* I did not intend it. I also think this about Slocum in relation to Kagle's job that he had nothing to be ashamed of in that,

\* The book was published in Sweden six weeks before it appeared in America; see Bengt Holmqvist, "Livrad för det mesta," *Dagens Nyheter*, September 2, 1974, p. 4 — *Interviewer's note.*

except, perhaps, keeping confidential the information that he has been asked to keep confidential. He did nothing to cause Kagle to lose his job. To what extent he could, he tried to give him good advice. He does not want Kagle's job at the beginning. It isn't till late in the book that he begins to want it very much, and then he finds himself hating Kagle for certain more physical characteristics, notwithstanding that he has done nothing. Kagle loses his job because he is going to lose it, so I did not have that in mind.

*Interviewer:* I also thought I detected a pattern in Slocum's relation to his mother and Derek. At one point you have Slocum say: "As my mother faded away speechless in one direction, Derek emerged, speechless, from the other." This also led my thoughts to a pattern of retribution. Is this a punishment?

*Heller:* No, not retribution. It's one of the thematic devices I use to unify the book, one of the symbolic devices, both related to his wish to make a speech. Many of his fantasies, many of his dreams involve an inability to speak. In a dream he has a fear of stuttering. For one reason or another — I don't know why I did this and if I knew I have forgotten it — I chose the episode of the three-minute speech . . . well, I know why I chose that, that came from the beginning, but then I began elaborating on it thematically. I think the *one* symptom I give of Derek's disability is that he can't speak. Derek can't speak, the mother loses the power of speech, and he says, I mean, it's not mystifyingly symbolic, "I'm not able to speak." He can't speak at the convention, so speech is associated with ability, not necessarily sexual although that's one association I make in the book. Slocum has a whole range of areas in which he feels inadequate, and sex is one of them. He has a fear of homosexuality, and he relates that to speech somehow, to stuttering. I don't know if he ever makes it explicit, but almost within the same paragraph he talks of fear of stuttering, fear of homosexuality.

*Interviewer:* What finally saves Yossarian, it seems, is his willingness to act.

*Heller:* Yes.

*Interviewer:* Would you say that Bob Slocum's basic flaw is inability to act?

*Heller:* Inability to act, unwillingness to act. What causes his misery is that his intelligence tells him he should act. He never gives the reason, I never give the reason why he can't leave that company and move to a small town and open a bookstore. He is inert. He is passive. I use passive images for him throughout the book. That's,

the way he is. There is nothing to stop him from leaving that company, the company gives no explanation. He is a person who is willing to let happen to him whatever will happen to him.

*Interviewer:* Yes, and this is part of a wider pattern of inertia, isn't it? For instance, Andy Kagle will leave town when problems arise and hope that everything will be settled by the time he comes back, and Bob Slocum has the same urge throughout.

*Heller:* Yes. One of the characteristics Bob Slocum has is that he wants to avoid dealing with anything troublesome, anything painful, whether it's a brain damaged child, whether it's a blind person on the street. He does not like arguments, he does not like distress. He overreacts, and his son does also.

*Interviewer:* So there is a basic irony in that when he finally does act, it's an act of destruction; he kills his son, and this he does simply because he cannot stand to see his son in pain.

*Heller:* Yes, that's the reason why he does act. That's true. I had not thought of that, but it is true.

*Interviewer:* Marriage fares badly in your book. Do you regard it as an antiquated institution in America today? I'm not thinking in personal terms now of course.

*Heller:* I think it's antiquated and necessary. People are entering into marriages or into relationships which approximate marriage so closely that it's almost the traditional marriage. I think there's a practical and psychological need for most people to have a family. Having a family means stability. I think the romantic elements have altered, the chivalric elements, where the man was the patron, the protector, and the woman was the housekeeper. That has altered dramatically. But I sense that with people who have had experience with it, there seems to be a need. Most people don't like to live alone. Most people do want a certain pattern to their lives. They don't want monotony, but without that pattern too much time and energy is spent in arranging each day's events.

*Interviewer:* Bob Slocum is concerned with the question of identity a number of times. When he dresses he feels he's copying someone; he has Tom's handwriting. Also at one point Slocum comes right out and says, "Who am I?" Ralph Ellison has said that identity is *the* American theme. Do you agree with that?

*Heller:* Well, I don't know as much as Ellison does about America or American themes, so I would not disagree with it. I know it's true of Slocum. I know I handle it as, again, a symptom of schizophrenia. I am consciously using many of the symptoms of a schizoid

personality, of schizophrenia. One is this mixed identity or feeling of not knowing who I am or who I am supposed to be. I do not think it is necessarily American, I think it's probably true of any culture that does not have a way of defining a person's position. America is an open society, so much so that many people who are self-made men never feel socially secure. They don't know how they are judged. Money is often one way they use to judge themselves, but that does not work, will not work often with their own children. The fact that a man is making that many dollars will get him respect from certain people, but it will not get him respect from other people. Identity might be one word for it. I think another word might be lack of social definition. Absence of a caste system creates a great deal of insecurity.

*Interviewer:* *Catch-22* is a moral book in that it depicts Yossarian developing towards a moral stance. *Something Happened* is not moral in that sense. Do you conceive of it as a moral book?

*Heller:* I would disagree. I would say that both books are written against a background of morality, and it's the background of conventional morality, a morality that's almost universally accepted. It's of course subjective as all morality must be. That's one of the reasons why Slocum suffers so much from a stricken conscience, from pangs of regret. He knows when he has misbehaved, he knows when he has been cruel. He knows when he has been deceptive, and he does not feel comfortable about it. So I think the moral background is the same in both books, and I think it's an orthodox morality, with one possible exception in *Catch-22* as *Catch-22* condones lechery and promiscuity.

*Interviewer:* You afford Yossarian with a possibility of protest: his desertion. In *Something Happened* you let Bob Slocum say that if he disobeyed instructions, for instance the ones printed on his paycheck, nothing would happen, his rebellion would be futile. Does this coincide with your own view of the role of protest in American society today?

*Heller:* No. It depends on the situation. For Yossarian time has run out. He has to make one of the four decisions I enumerated at the lecture today: obey and keep his mouth shut, join the establishment, disobey and go to prison, or reject it all. He has to act one way or the other, he can't remain in a situation the way Slocum can. Slocum uses the term "floating with his crowd." Slocum in his context, speaking about the company, knows that nothing he can do will affect it either way. That's true of the gigantic corporations,

it's almost true of most of the government. It's very little the President of the United States can do to affect world conditions. He can make war, or hesitate to make war, and that's pretty much it. Economically he's impotent. I mean, other countries, other factors, actions of lending institutions in America, they are not coordinated, so what is produced is accidental, but they are more important. They would determine things more than a President can. Slocum says about the corporation that nothing he will do will affect the corporation, it will go on. He is always referring, or regressing to childhood, and I remember this line because I was trying to select passages to read today. I think he says, "I've lost the power to upset things that I had as a child. I can no longer affect my environment." Well, a child can affect his environment by crying; the mother will pick him up and feed him. In other words, Slocum feels he had more power to affect his environment when he was a child than he has now, and he's correct. Benevolent as the corporation is, there's nothing one man can do to the corporation that's going to affect it.

*Interviewer:* You did say at the lecture today that in your view *Something Happened* is very pessimistic . . .

*Heller:* Well, it's a book that looks at the dark side of an individual's life. Slocum could, if he wanted to, describe a good many of his experiences with a great deal of joy and ebullience. His frame of mind is to ignore the parties at Red Parker's house, for example. I think the only sex scenes that are done in detail are those with his wife. They are usually done conversationally. Every once in a while he is almost a little surprised that the family is getting along together and having a good time. At one point he mentions that his daughter and son hug him occasionally, and he says, "Maybe I'm not as bad as I think I am." It's his way of looking at himself. It's not my way of looking at myself, and it's not my way of looking at someone in Slocum's position, although it would be my way of looking at someone in Slocum's position who has the mental attitude Slocum has, and I know many, many people like that. I think John Cheever writes about similar types more frequently. He does not delve into them the way I did, but it's a type that's very familiar to me from John Cheever's executive.

*Interviewer:* So on a personal level you don't share Slocum's pessimism?

*Heller:* No, I am a successful novelist. I have given this answer before in interviews. If I had been Slocum, Slocum would have

written *Catch-22* and would have been out of the job. However, I do feel that the outlook is pessimistic for many people of intelligence, even though they have successful positions. I know many of them, they are not happy. I didn't know this then, but there was a discussion of *Something Happened* in an American business publication mentioning that a number of psychological consulting firms exist to deal only with this problem of executive depression, that successful people in large corporations lose interest in their work, lose interest in women, and try to find out what approach is best to keep them stimulated. I did not know this when I wrote the book, but I have a . . . a gift, a pathetic way of sensing what's going on, or writing about things that are going on way beyond my realm of knowledge.

Interviewer: This partly answers my next question possibly. Kurt Vonnegut says in his review of your book that it is "astonishingly pessimistic," and that "it can be called a daring experiment" in that "depictions of utter hopelessness in literature so far have been acceptable only in small doses." Did you have a sense of breaking new ground so to speak when you were writing the novel?

*Heller*: Yes, but not in that area. I think that Samuel Beckett's three novels are the same way, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*. I think the bleakness of Beckett exceeds even mine. The difference is of course that I'm trying to take this horrible grotesque life and deal with it in thoroughly familiar terms, whereas Beckett doesn't and Kafka doesn't. I am concerned with the minutiae, like I take something that almost every American has experienced himself as a child, tonsillitis, tonsillectomy, and that's one of the recurring themes that keeps returning to Slocum. He remembers when his own tonsils were taken out, his daughter's, and his son's. He remembers the shocking effect it had on him. The second one is dentistry. In the beginning he talks about his teeth decaying and he knows some day he will need periodontal work. Every once in a while he will describe the instruments, the pricking sensation, and the blood from the gums. These are two very familiar, ordinary experiences to which people never devote much attention but which I think anybody in psychotherapy will tell you are traumatic. So I try to deal almost with a world as horrifying as it is to Kafka's characters but to keep that world familiar. And I think that's a little different from Beckett's characters.

Interviewer: One final question, which I hope you will not regard as flippant. You have said in an interview that you put everything you knew about the external world into *Catch-22* and everything you

knew about the internal world into *Something Happened*. I learned only yesterday that you *are* writing a new book, but your statement intrigued me and I would still like to ask: how will you be able to write a new book?

*Heller* : The new book will be different than both. Let me rephrase those early quotations. I did say them. I put everything I knew about each that I felt would serve the purpose of the book. I know much more about the inner world that would not be appropriate to Slocum. The new book will be different. I don't know what my new book will be, but Henry Kissinger suggested it to me, and it's going to be a funny and obscene book because I think he is funny and obscene.

*Interviewer*: And he is going to be in it, I understand?

*Heller* : Yes, he is going to be in it if he is still around.

*Interviewer*: I look forward to that book. Thank you very much, Mr. Heller.

## Authors in this issue

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