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An Interview with Howard Bahr

by Kevin Collins

Howard Bahr, the visiting writer for the 2009 Westview Writers' Festival, is a novelist renowned primarily for three novels set in what is still the most trying period of American history, the Civil War. We spoke with Mr. Bahr concerning the natures of fiction and of writers of fiction.

Westview: Of those life experiences seemingly unrelated to literature, which were most helpful in preparing you to be a novelist? Why?

Bahr: I was fortunate to be born in an old house in an old neighborhood in an old Southern town, to a family of musicians, freethinkers, storytellers, and artists, all of them a trifle peculiar, who taught me two important things: first, a person should be interested in everything; and, second, it is boring to be ordinary. These are good lessons for a writer. When my mother remarried—to Mr. Bahr, whose name I took—we lived in Dallas, Texas and East St. Louis, Illinois, which provided me with the exotic urban experience every novelist should suffer. In 1964, I joined the Navy, expecting to go to sea. I did go to sea, and I ended up in the Vietnam War. Though no one shot at me personally, I experienced some harrowing times and was witness to the great tragedy of that generation. After my discharge, I worked five years on the railroads in the twilight of that profession. Then I went to Ole Miss (1973) and was trained by a number of old-time professors—mostly men who had been to war and done things in the real world—who taught me writing, literature, and history in a context free from theories. These things made me a novelist, for good or ill.

Westview: Which are the most attractive aspects of a life of letters? Which are the least attractive?

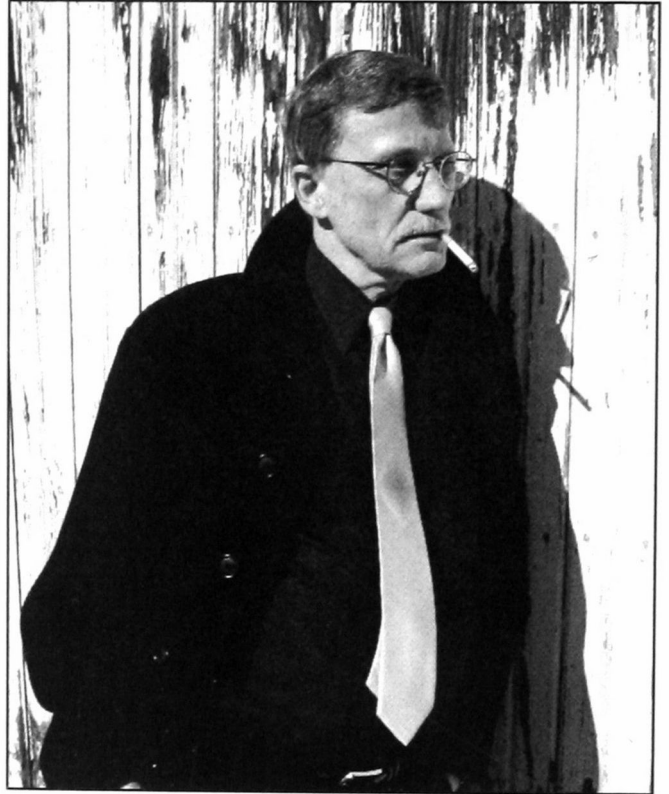


Photo by Erica Flannes

Bahr: As a writer, I am a fraud, of course. I became one only to solicit the attention of young, braless, loft-dwelling girls, which led to disappointment. For the most part, women who buy novels, underline passages, come to readings, etc. are good and sweet and kind. Some are pretty, but they all wear bras, live in the best part of town, and are married. They invite the writer to parties, which he attends purely on the chance that he might meet an artist girl there. News flash: artist girls are not invited to these affairs. They wear too much black, and they are apt to talk about death and angst. They make art that people do not understand. The Patronesses of the Arts do not like this. Especially, they want *their* writer to be cheerful. They do not want him to sulk in a corner. They do not want to be reminded of the lesson their writer has long

since learned: that art, like Vietnam, is lovely from the air—glamorous, exotic, mysterious—but down under the canopy, by the brown waters where the snakes live, it is a real bitch.

The best part of a life of letters is not the *Writing* but the *Having Written*. To see a novel accomplished and in print is a wonder to behold, something I never get used to. Then I go out and sign books and talk to nice people who ask interesting questions. For that little time, I can swell around and act like I know something. Eventually, however, I have to get back to the hard part, the solitary torture of writing, showing up every night, failing and failing, worrying and pacing, drinking too many beers, smoking too much, while the Night Watchman whispers in my ear what a silly fraud I am. During the process of composition, there are many times when I wish I had been born an accountant. However, that delusion is usually dispelled by the morning's light. Then, out of some unaccountable masochistic compulsion, I long to get back to the blank page. Something to remember: what a writer *has done* doesn't matter. The only book that's important is the next one.

Westview: Some of the most important themes in your novels, e.g., those concerning human decency and indecency, would be appropriate to a contemporary urban setting—or to a twenty-fifth-century setting three galaxies over—yet three of your novels have Civil War settings. What is it about that setting that strikes you as particularly conducive to illustrating the experience of being human?

Bahr: My first novel, *The Black Flower*, started out as a simple attempt to paint a realistic picture of the common soldier's life, based on my many voluntary hardships as a Civil War reenactor. I quickly discovered that I was not writing about the Civil War at all, but about people in a bad situation, trying to overcome it with honor and love and sacrifice. The Civil War setting served me well,

as I could show the realities of the soldiers' lives as well as those of civilians, and (unlike, say, a World War Two novel) romance between soldiers and maids could blossom on the same ground, the two of them brought together in the midst of great sorrow and tragedy. This was a combination I could not resist. Furthermore, I never lost sight of my original goal, and I labored to dispel the mythic aura of so many Civil War tales. Finally, I was able to work through all the themes peculiar to that era that had engaged me for years. With the final novel, *The Judas Field*, I had said all I could about the conflict while—I hope—making some comment about the universal human heart in times of trouble.

Westview: Since writers of historical fiction or fictional history can't be accurate in all historical details, they necessarily betray their own biases. What are some of your biases concerning the Civil War, and how do they show themselves in the novels?

Bahr: My greatest bias regarding the American Civil War has to do not with regionalism, but with the war itself: its waste, its stupidity, its brutality, and its eventual romanticization, some of which borders on the criminal. Death and War are the real enemies in my novels, and they are the enemies of Rebels and Yankees alike. I write about Southern men, for I feel most comfortable among them, but I have been careful to cast the other side not as villains, but as human beings caught up, like their Rebel counterparts, in circumstances awful beyond imagination. Having said that, I have no doubt that, had I been of age in 1861, I would have joined the Confederate army.

Westview: *Pelican Road* is strikingly similar and dissimilar to the Civil War trilogy. What did you gain and lose with the mid-twentieth-century setting for that novel?



Bahr: The blessing of *Pelican Road* is that it allowed me to escape the constant presence of Thanatos that accompanies the writing of a Civil War novel. To write the Civil War truly, an author has to go into some dark places where most folks are unwilling to venture; at least, that was my experience. I had a good time writing *Pelican Road*, for I was able to tell at last a story that I'd wanted to tell since I was a railroad man myself. Some readers have told me that the novel is "bleak," but I do not think it is. Surely there are many of the same themes that arise in the Civil War books—danger, alienation, loneliness—but, as in the other novels, these difficulties are redeemed by love, comradeship, courage, and sacrifice. One of the joys of *Pelican Road* was that I could have characters smoking cigarettes, listening to the radio, driving motorcars and motorcycles. This was new ground for me, and I had a big time. I also got to explore one of my favorite periods of American history, just before the Second World War, when the world was about to change forever, another way that *Pelican Road* is linked to the Civil War novels.

Westview: Apart from innate talent, what are the essential qualities of a professional imaginative writer? Which of these, if any, can be acquired in a creative writing workshop? Among those not available in the classroom, how might an aspiring writer go about acquiring them?

Bahr: The first goal of a professional imaginative writer should be to gain experience in the world. To paraphrase Mr. Faulkner, the writer must get down out of the ivory tower and see what goes on at street level. He must pay attention to what

goes on around him—the ways people talk, the ways they work out their relationships, the ways in which they fail and in which they triumph. Walker Percy talked about "the holiness of the ordinary"—this is where real stories come from. I believe that aspiring writers should put themselves at risk: join the Army, join the Navy, ride a motorcycle to California, work in a steel mill. Without worldly experience, academic accomplishments are pretty much irrelevant. Obviously, this kind of experience cannot be gained in a writing workshop, in an air-conditioned room where everyone is safe.

The second goal of writers should be to read everything they can: novels, histories, essays, comic books. They should watch movies. All the while, they should be studying how the other fellow does it: how he builds dramatic tension, how he develops relationships, how his characters talk, how they find redemption or fail to find it. By reading and watching, young writers can come to understand the complexities in every character; they can learn to love them all, even if they don't like them all, even the characters who fail. Writers should learn never—never—to make fun of their characters, but to offer them all a chance, even those who don't deserve a chance.

I think that workshops can be useful in that the student is availed of the comments of peers, which can be insightful and which trains them to accept criticism. More important are the comments of the teacher, hopefully a person with experience. In a workshop, students learn to handle the tools of the craft, and if they are lucky, they learn that writing is art, and therefore difficult. Beyond these things, students must fashion outside of the classroom résumés of experience that prepare them for



the serious work of writing.

Westview: What is it that distinguishes American fiction from the fictions of other nations? All things considered, do these differences amount to an advantage or a disadvantage for American writers? Why?

Bahr: If you want to see what distinguishes American writing from that of other nations—I mean, the old, settled European nations—all you have to do is read Walt Whitman’s *Song of Myself*. Nobody but an American—and one who consciously *acknowledged* himself as an American—could have written that work. It’s all in the materialism, the newness, the brashness, the recklessness, the phenomena of the wilderness and the frontier. We are still writing about that. Personally, I can see no disadvantage in the differences. American writers were set free from the old conventions; plus, they could steal what was best from French, Germans, English, and Russians while developing a tradition of their own. It is a commonplace that art moves from east to west across the Atlantic. That is a good thing, I think.

Westview: Some of the most enjoyable passages of your books—some dialogues and some descriptions—can be called poetic because of the ways that they force active readers to cooperate with you in the construction of meaning. To what extent are you aware of the burden you are placing on your readers in these passages?

Bahr: This is the best question of the lot, but I’m not sure how to answer. Speaking generally, and without specific examples to address, I would say that the situation you describe is one of the things that distinguish *literary* novels from those in a more “popular” vein. I do not mean to imply that one genre is superior to the other, only that the literary novel demands more from its readers. I think it is a mean trick for a writer to be purposely obscure; on the other hand, I admire writers who use language in unexpected and beautiful ways. I think that Thomas Wolfe, in *Look Homeward, Angel*, is a good example: “A leaf, a stone, an unfound door—O lost, and by the wind grieved ghost, come back again.” Readers might well ask, “What the hell does *that* mean?” Then they realize that the meaning lies in the words themselves, the beauty, the poignancy. Readers are touched by something sublime; they can *feel* it, and it doesn’t really matter if they can’t paraphrase it.

I am always pleased beyond measure when someone calls my writing “poetic.” I take it as a high compliment. However, I try hard not to obfuscate or call attention to myself as a stylist. I always have respect for readers’ intelligence, knowing they will come along with me and help me figure out what I mean. If, in dialogue or exposition, I place any burden on readers (and I’m not convinced that I do), it is done in a collaborative way, so that, through the words, they feel what I feel and see what I see. If it takes a little work on their part, so much the better.

