

## Introduction

I WAS MAD FOR LITERATURE. Drunk to be steeped in it, interpreting it, creating it. I, the would-be younger brother or surrogate son or even poor cousin to Saul Bellow—he being the kind of writer, as that writer’s writer Cynthia Ozick once told me, who comes to us every thousand years or so, if we are in luck. If I couldn’t be Bellow’s younger brother or surrogate son or even his poor cousin, then I would earn the authorship mantle from whatever talent I might hold and wherever drive would lead. This book, in part, is about that quest.

I didn’t make it as a writer, but it wasn’t for lack of trying. I was as driven to write as any writer I know, as willing to put in the hours alone pushing out words and turning them around. I also worked hard to become a well-read man, a man of letters. For some reason I came to believe that feeding the hungry mind would make me a better person, and I wanted to live a life that could answer Bellow’s primary question: How should a good man live?

“Goodness is achieved not in a vacuum, but in the company of other men, attended by love.” That was how Bellow defined being good in his first novel, *Dangling Man*. But the demonic can be magnetic. When I was young, I was a miscreant, a would-be tough guy with a slight and wavering moral compass. In Bellow’s oeuvre, goodness is tied to idealism and social conscience, to a kind heart and giving meaning to life’s chaos. I felt as a young man in metamorphosis from high school that I would find it, this goodness—like his character Augie March—by going at things as I taught myself and as I learned, free-style.

But my drive to write did not grant me success. Stymied as a writer, I developed as an educator, a classroom teacher and, later, accidentally, as an interviewer.

My first interview, a baptism of fire, happened by fluke: in 1976, the AudioVisual head at San Francisco State University asked if I might be interested in interviewing Gore Vidal on the campus's new-at-the-time intracampus television network. I jumped at what seemed like a serendipitous opportunity. It was an interview that would cast me as nervous, deferential neophyte and Vidal as sour, condescending, inebriated and mean.

Heading into the interview, I was sure—both of us being literary types with left-wing politics—that we would become fast friends. I wanted to do a professional job and ask good, thoughtful, intelligent questions. I read as much as I could on Vidal and reread early works of his like *Myra Breckinridge* and *The City and the Pillar*, as well as his newest novel at the time, *Kalki*. More impressed by Vidal's essays than his fiction, I still felt certain that the two of us would have much to talk about and would get on well.

When we met briefly before going to the television studio set to begin the interview, Vidal seemed world weary, as if afflicted with terminal *weltschmerz*, but more important, he smelled of liquor and his voice was thick with booze. I noticed a copy next to him of James Atlas's biography of Delmore Schwartz. I asked what he thought of the book, hoping to initiate a bit of literary conversation before we went on the set. What did he think about Schwartz, a gifted Jewish writer and lifetime friend of Saul Bellow, the prototype for Bellow's novel *Humboldt's Gift*? Vidal's response shocked me and felt like a blow. "Schwartz thought he was better than we *goyim*," Vidal replied acidly. Then he added offhandedly, "The Jews really think they run New York."

Was Vidal baiting me, sensing my Jewishness and trying to gore me with it? How could one with such radical sympathies sound like such a rank, bloody anti-Semite? He must not have meant what he said. How could he? Well, I did know a few Jews who acted like they thought they ran New York, and I shunted Vidal's remarks aside. I was on my maiden voyage. I had a job to do.

Now the amazing thing about the interview was that once we were on the air, Vidal was "on" in a way that took me as much by surprise as

his prior world-weariness, condescension and anti-Semitism. The lights and cameras rolled, and he was a different man: he sounded sober and was all performer. I gave him a short but flattering introduction that I had memorized, mentioning that I was an English professor and that Vidal's real name was Eugene Luther Gore Vidal. He quickly ripped into me for bringing up what he archly called "my Christian name," adding that, unlike our born-again president, Jimmy Carter, he, Vidal, was a born-again atheist.

In the first part of our interview Vidal made me squirm by derogating English professors as a pack of pedants who wanted nothing more than to write reams of useless criticism that no one but other English professors would ever want to read. We were all a bunch of Dryasdusts who longed to create something as obscure as endless annotations of *Finnegan's Wake*. Before the interview, I had felt as though I needed to defend my tribe. Now it was my profession.

Vidal was animated and electrified, palpably alive as he proceeded to skewer his favorite targets—*The New York Times*, Republicans, corporations, Reagan, Nixon, President Jimmy Carter. Some of it was clever stuff, refined and caustic humor that I might have enjoyed were it not for the anti-Semitic cracks and the invective against English profs.

I was trying to hang on during the interview, to keep the dialogue flowing without losing my temper or cool, without being cowed by the realization that I was conversing with the larger than life, literary Gore Vidal. As the interview moved into politics and I asked Vidal about his social concerns, another self emerged. Vidal was suddenly benign, casting himself in the role of munificent socialist. When the interview ended and the cameras were off, he once again became world-weary, cold and aloof, the man I had met before the interview, as sterile as I'd found his apocalyptic novel *Kalki*.

There was not, I felt, anything particularly distinguished about my performance that afternoon, though I knew that I was professional. Anyway, how was one supposed to measure performance in something as difficult to judge as interviewing?

It was, however, quite a performance on Vidal's part, and it was the sort of interview that might have turned someone else away from interviewing, especially since he lit out without so much as a *thank you*

or *nice talking to you*. But other things later converged that drew me to interviewing and set me on a path. Trying to meld life into art, as I read and interpreted and taught and wrote about writers, I went on to talk and talk and talk with writers until I had interviewed more writers, perhaps, than anyone ever has or will or should. I was on the road, my own road to literary Damascus.

I am in some ways what I wanted to be. I am a learned man and a literary figure of sorts. I am also a public intellectual and a maestro for educated radio listeners who prefer their discourse high and civil. I am a writer's interviewer. Publishers vie for a slot for their authors because we sell more books than any local radio program in the country. I am a broadcaster who has been on both the commercial and public sides of the radio and television dials, as different as the moon's two sides. A babbling bibliophile. I'm the inverse of Saul Bellow, who said he was a bird and not an ornithologist. But does all of it make me a better human being? It has taught me how little I know.