

*Sarah Coomber, Bridget Hildreth, and
Travis Manning*

A Conversation with Phillip Lopate *April 25, 2003*

Widely regarded as one of America's foremost living essayists, Phillip Lopate's publications include three books of personal essays (Bachelorhood, Against Joie de Vivre, and Portrait of My Body), two poetry collections, and other works on teaching and on film criticism. He is a frequent contributor to such periodicals as Harper's, The Paris Review, The Threepenny Review, and The New York Times Book Review, and has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, and other honors. Phillip Lopate is also known as a first-rate teacher of nonfiction writing: currently he holds the Adams Chair at Hofstra University, and also teaches for the MFA program at Bennington College. He visits with interviewers Sarah Coomber, Bridget Hildreth, and Travis Manning on a recent visit to Spokane.

HILDRETH

We are interested in your view of the state of creative nonfiction. What styles of literature are on their way out? What styles are on their way in? I know John Keeble, Eastern Washington University creative writing professor, hates the title "creative nonfiction," so if you want to address personal narrative instead. . .

LOPATE

I think I prefer the term "literary nonfiction." Creativity is such a strange thing, as though people would intentionally write uncreatively. It's a little bit like Robert Frost's line about the poet: "You don't call yourself a poet, others call you a poet." You don't call yourself a "creative nonfiction writer."

Certainly I think that the personal narrative has grown a lot in the last ten years. Part of what happened is that with composition, which is the service workhorse of English departments in the university, and the course that everybody has to take, freshman composition, you get to turn more toward personal narrative in the last fifteen years. It just

started in places like Stanford with the Voice Project (a program that brought professional writers to campus to teach freshman). There were people in the field who were saying the best way to turn students on to writing is to get them to tell their own stories and work from their experience. Before that it had mostly been taught as a kind of legal-brief way of summoning arguments, rhetoric and persuasion. I still think that is one of the dominant models, and deserves to be, but there began to be more of them for the personal narrative.

Then of course the vogue of the new memoir had a lot to do with it. And the textbooks that were adopted, not just mine (*The Art of the Personal Essay*, Anchor Books, 1994), which is really not a textbook dealing with the personal essay but which has had a long, popular run. But the real mammoth-selling textbooks began to use a lot of personal narratives, and they also covered the spectrum in terms of multicultural authors. So you started getting these kind of contemporary classics, like Richard Rodriguez for instance, which I think is excellent writing, but basically you have one of every thing: Leslie Marmon Silko, a Native American writer, Sonja Sanchez, Sandra Cisneros and so on and so forth. This became a way to placate political correctness.

HILDRETH

In the education field, textbooks were, especially following Birkets book, *The Gutenberg Elegies*, being forced into broadening their spectrum to become more inclusive.

LOPATE

One of the curious things that happened was that there was this market-driven emphasis on the contemporary. I think the reason why my *Art of the Personal Essay* has continued to have a niche is that I insisted on starting with the ancients and moving to the present. A lot of teachers wanted to be able to teach not just the contemporary. I think it is really strange to teach only the contemporary, to ignore the whole tradition. This is an old tradition. This is not something that is a recent vogue. As long as there have been writers, writers have been telling their personal stories. A writer has only his or her own experience to work with, however they may transform it. They could make it science fiction but they are still working with the motions that they observed themselves. Many times it's not science fiction, it's much closer than that. There have always been autobiographical novels like *Martin Eden* by Jack London or *The Way of All Flesh* by Samuel Butler or *Red Burn* by Herman Melville,

because people want to turn their experience into stories.

Of course, you go back to Cicero and St. Augustine, the personal witness, the attempt to develop a voice that's flexible and intelligent and sympathetic on the page. This is one of the grand traditions. I am particularly insistent on linking up with that, with that past. My only view is that personal essays, if not all personal narratives constitute a kind of conversation and that we are talking to our predecessors and ancestors as much as we are talking to the contemporary audience. Many writers will tell you that.

COOMBER

You mentioned the new memoir, is that supplanting something else? Is there anything that is getting thrown to the wayside?

LOPATE

I do think that the new memoir has undergone a kind of mutation from the old autobiography, or what they call "memoirs," plural. It used to be that you sat down to write your life, usually when you had lived a large part of it. There were the memoirs of old generals and actresses whose stardom derived from their popularity as public figures or as politicians, rather than because they were writers. The writer's memoirs, which is a kind of separate form, also tended to look at the rhythms and the rises and falls of a life, so the subject matter became development. In the new memoir there tended to be a shrinkage of chronology, so that thirty-year-olds were writing about their experience up to age 18 or something, and it became much more a form about the crucible of adolescence. And of course even if they wrote into their forties there was a tendency to pitch the memoir toward a single afternoon talk-show theme, like physical disability, sexual abuse, incest, alcoholism, addiction--and this was a reductive approach which also tended to emphasize the autobiographical protagonist as a victim who got over this problem. You see, if you are writing a long autobiography there is no one problem you get over. It's life. You have to keep living it. You may start off with some difficulty, but you have to keep going even after you succeed.

It's a curiosity of many autobiographies that often the first third is better than the rest. For instance, if you look at a book like *History of My Life* by Charlie Chaplin, his period of being knocked from pillar to post as a kid and trying to develop a sense of self and professional self and making forays into early film-making, all that is quite exciting. All that is the construction of a self. Once he became a big star it tended to

be, “Then I had lunch with the Duke of Windsor and then I saw Lady So and So afterwards,” and it becomes much more boring, it becomes now a period of being with other wildly successful people. The major issue has been solved.

The new memoir has tended to focus on one issue and also the new memoir has tended to bring in a lot of techniques from fiction and poetry. This probably has to do with the genesis of nonfiction in MFA programs. In the beginning God created fiction and poetry (laughter).

MANNING

And drama somewhere back there.

LOPATE

Somewhere drama. In fact, now there is a magazine called *The Fourth Genre*, dedicated to essays. Which is a nice magazine and the title is wittingly saying: “We’re the last ones.” Nonfiction was the Hagar and Ishmael of the literary biblical family.

A lot of writers who began in poetry or fiction began by writing memoirs. They found that they could actually get a book of memoirs signed up more easily. Mary Carr, or Lucy Greely both began in poetry, for instance, and took their MFA degrees in poetry. What I have found is that the prose of the new memoir is affected by the techniques of fiction and poetry. There tends to be a greater emphasis on lyrical language, and some of the invidious notions of “show, don’t tell” have even percolated into the nonfiction sense of the craft of nonfiction. “Show, don’t tell,” it seems to me, is far too broad a rule even in fiction since a lot of great eighteenth, or nineteenth-century fiction certainly does show and tell. It’s a crude formulation, which has a greater truth in it. Of course if the teller has a wonderfully modulated voice and mind, I can see it in any method of telling. When Stendhal is on a roll, who cares if he’s showing or telling? I don’t want to fight that battle. What I want to say is that this interdiction against telling began to percolate into the craft of contemporary nonfiction, so that in workshops that I teach I’ll often hear students say, “Well I think you should do this as scenes,” and I’ll think, well, maybe yes, maybe no. The issue is not to do it as scenes or not as scenes. The issue is to bring a lively understanding or intelligence to voice in the material.

My idea, and it’s not just my idea--it’s the cornerstone of Vivian Gornicks’ book *The Situation and the Story*: It’s not so important what the experience was you want to tell, it’s what you make of the experi-

ence. People think they are entitled to tell the story because they have suffered. Emily Dickinson who would sit in her room and hardly go out and have a universe at her disposal. I remember saying to this class in Minneapolis: "It's not enough to have cancer and have been sexually abused as a child. You've got to make it interesting on the page." There is nothing intrinsically interesting about any material. If your mother was a prostitute, and your father was a drug pusher, that might just play as tawdry. It's really what you do with the material.

So that puts a premium on mind and style. I do think that the personal narrative taps more directly into powers of thinking and reasoning than, let's say, fiction and poetry. Or to put it another way, the unconscious plays less of a role. For instance, in fiction it may be important to develop a narrative where unconscious symbols resonate inside the narrative. That may not be important at all in a personal essay. I think that part of the resistance the fledgling autobiographical writers have to working in the form, is they use it kind of as a resistance to the mind. Because in our culture, the heart is privileged over the mind.

For instance, I was teaching a workshop and there was a presentation by one student who had earlier in the term written a very good narrative about her early years. In fact, her mother was a prostitute and drug addict, but she had done a brilliant job in making it interesting and showing how she thinks about it now as well as how she experienced it then. The second presentation she made was filled with a kind of confusion and myopia, because she wanted to get into the immediate sensation of what it felt like to be so confused. I said: "This will not do," and several students defended her and said it recaptured her vulnerability.

I thought this was a misunderstanding of form. That you don't just replicate the vulnerability and confusion, that you have an obligation to access as much understanding and wisdom that you can. That used to be the attraction of the personal essay and autobiographical narrative: that you were in the presence of somebody who was not dumbing down, who was trying to share as much worldly understanding as he or she could.

HILDRETH

Can we look at how that's been received. I think about Loren Eiseley, who was definitely influenced by Montaigne's rambling Sallies of the mind. He was also influenced by the affects of Edgar Allen Poe's application of story and myth, and applied this to his personal essay.

LOPATE

But do you know the wonderful memoir by Eiseley, *All the Strange Hours*? Eiseley led a kind of gothic life.

HILDRETH

Well, he was not received well and so he did kind of turn inward. He wrote to no audience, is what he said.

LOPATE

He wrote to no audience. His mother was deaf and he was a hobo for a while, riding the rails, very poor. He witnessed his father's tragic death. He had a lot of those sensational deficits going for him. But he had one of the most intelligent profiles of the twentieth century. Every sentence of his is modulated and he is drawing on whole centuries of formal writing. He's not only trying to situate you in the moment of confusion and make you feel that confusion; he's trying to give the emotion of it, but also his understanding of it. I'll go farther and say that in Eiseley's case, his use of metaphor and myth has real resonance because you don't feel that it is coming out of Creative Writing 101. You feel that he is somebody that has extreme difficulty in making relationships with other human beings. He has to look to fossils, to creatures, to the stars in order to feel out his relationships.

COOMBER

Turning the questions back to your work in particular I'm wondering if you can tell us about the vulnerability that there is in being a well-read personal essayist. People know your family dynamics, parts of your body, your relationships. When you walk into a room of readers, do you feel overexposed? And do you care?

LOPATE

I don't care. What's surprising is that people read and forget. I'm sure the most attentive readers don't, but in a way they read for the pleasure of the moment, and they'll remember some things but not others. So you know, I'll meet a reader and it will come up that I'm Jewish and they are surprised, and I'll say: "Well, didn't you read the book." But they are not reading to compile a dossier on me; they are reading for something else.

Also, I don't entirely identify who I think I am with this person. It's not that I'm lying—essentially I've told the truth—it's that it's one

experience to know the page and another to be in a social situation. Montaigne said something like, “Friends of mine who I wouldn’t dream of telling things to can go to any local bookstore and find out any of that stuff.” I am to some degree a reserved person, a little shy, certainly not somebody who rattles on about my self socially. Most of the time I would rather get somebody else to talk about themselves. I don’t need to hear my story; in fact, before I remarried, it was a problem in dating because I would get bored having to tell this stuff over again. I really felt like saying: “Why don’t you go to the bookstore and you can find all this stuff out.”

When I’ve written an experience satisfactorily to my mind, then I don’t think about it much more. It’s a strange using up of one’s experience. The written account comes to replace the memory.

COOMBER

Do you think you are losing your memories, almost, by putting them down?

LOPATE

No, because so much happens to a person in a lifetime that you can never write about everything. There is always going to be much more that you haven’t written about than you have written about.

HILDRETH

And always things that are unresolved.

LOPATE

And always things that are unresolved. So I get pleasure in confiding on the page, or pushing myself to a point where I feel like I’ve gone deeper or I’ve gone further. That’s a reward. I’m looking to get to those passages. So it doesn’t bother me, because it doesn’t affect my interactions at the moment. I still have to feel my way through my defenses and another person’s defenses when I meet a stranger. The same awkward catch-as-catch-can experience.

COOMBER

How about another part of this issue. You write very personal things about people you’ve known: family, lovers or whoever. Do you run these things by them before they go to print, or is everything that happens to you fair game and it just goes without saying?

LOPATE

Well, I don't run it by them; I don't want them to have censorship rights on my material. I don't think everything is fair game and I don't feel entirely justified. That is, I don't have a single ethical formula I can apply. It's true that by yourself you can portray other people, and it's true that writing personal narrative, you are going to write about other people because nobody is an isolate. So you define your own personality by projecting through other people to a certain extent. I think that there are ethical questions that need to be decided on a case-by-case basis. What I try to do is not to use my writing as a vendetta, to get back at someone or to prove that I was right and they were wrong. But obviously I am more vivid to myself than other people are to me, so to some level what I am doing is conveying what it feels like for life to come at this particular individual.

COOMBER

What you said a few minutes ago is that you don't feel completely justified in what you do. It sounds a bit like your credo: You won't use it as a vendetta, but you are trying to show how your consciousness perceives the world.

LOPATE

If people are looking for a nonfiction license issued by me, in the same way that a poetic license works, I am not the one to give it to them. I continue to have ambivalent feelings. I continue to hold back material that I don't write about. I don't write about everything. I do protect some people. It all depends. I have hurt people by the things I've written, so I can't offer myself as a model on the safe way to do this. All I can say is that if you are going to be a writer, you are probably going to have to accept the guilt of articulating your visions which may not suit other people.

HILDRETH

And would you say that that is also a distinctive character in your personal narrative, the Montaigne's concept of apologist? That you formulate an apology on the page for what's about to be said?

LOPATE

I think you have to reflect on your practice. I think that you can't

start out with the assumption that you are a good man, or the last good man. If you are observing yourself, you have a need to be prepared to find dislikable evidence. So it's a form both of self-justification and self-condemnation, perhaps.

MANNING

What thoughts do you give to audience as you are writing the personal essay? Are you writing to a specific person? A demographic? An aspect of your own personality? How does that imagined audience affect how you write various personal pieces?

LOPATE

I would say that I take audience into consideration in a few ways. On one level I don't take audience into consideration; I just try to write as close to the thoughts that are being dictated to me through my brain as I can. The first draft, I'm trying to get my thoughts down. I try to write for the illustrious dead who will be forgiving and understand that I am trying to walk in their footsteps. So I write to the shades of Lamb. "How's that, Montaigne, Stevenson saying, "Here's my little missive, I'm trying to do what you guys have done." I know they will understand some of the gadgets I'm using because I do see myself in the literary tradition. So some people might say they are writing for God. Since I'm never sure if I believe in God, or doubt I do, I would say I am writing for someone who's smarter than I am, who will at least be tolerant of my flaws. If you write down, you're going to get in trouble, so try to write up. That's my understanding of my practice.

The other thing that I do is I try to keep my audience in mind to the degree that I anticipate the audience's boredom or irritation. So it isn't so much placating the audience as just trying to keep the audience engrossed. Cynthia Ozick once paid me a compliment in that she found my writing to be engrossing. I thought that's as much as I want. Engrossing is good. If I can just keep it engrossing, a person can disagree, but at least they don't go into a zone, the flat-line boredom. When I read another personal essayist and I feel that basically I know what is going to come from the next five pages because I'm just going to tromp through the expected positions, I just want to skip. So you want to keep it engrossing.

COOMBER

When you say you're trying to keep it engrossing, are you talking

about for an audience, like Montaigne? Ivy Leagues? Readers in the working class?

LOPATE

Not Montaigne. I mean what Virginia Woolf called the common reader, which I think of as somebody who is educated. They don't have to be Ivy League--my father had a high school education and tried to go to night college, and it didn't work out, but he read a lot. There used to be much more of this understanding of the working-class autodidact. It really doesn't matter the level of formal education. What matters is how much someone is willing to open himself or herself to a book.

I can't write to the bottom level of the typical magazine editor. That's like a grasshopper. I fortunately had the experience of being a book writer before being a journalist or magazine writer. So now when I write for magazines, they know to expect a certain thing from me and I'll never be entirely able to be processed into their extraordinarily quick attention spans. If they're going to publish me, it's because they like the idea of having some other kind of voice coming in. They like to think they can tolerate a certain amount of literary, "old-timey" voice. But I can't write for that short attention span. It's so inhibiting. I have to feel like I can at least develop some points.

MANNING

Do you think that the audience for a personal essay or memoir is still growing? In the 1996 *Writer's Chronicle* article with John Bennion, you said that your attempt with *The Art of the Personal Essay* was to reestablish the genre of the personal essay. Do you think the book has done that, looking back seven years now, and is the personal essay genre or subgenre continuing to grow up?

LOPATE

I don't think that my book did that, but I do think that my book contributed in however a slightest way. There was a hunger in the culture at large for personal narrative. Not very different from the hunger people have when they watch the Oprah Winfrey show when somebody says, "My mother was shot to death by a killer and then he put a bullet in me and then I almost died." I mean, there's a curiosity about authentic experience, and with that a kind of impatience with the artifactual, fictive plot. I think that fiction has lost a certain claim of intensity. There's always pulp fiction and genre fiction, but I think that the whole culture

has wanted to hear people stand up and testify. I think that speaks to a certain religious inclination in American culture.

MANNING

Like the sermon.

LOPATE

The sermon has a connection to the personal essay and not just the sermon but the revival meeting, where someone stands up and says: “I was a drunk, I was a gambler.” Also the media magazines, newspapers, have a constant need for copy that is readable and that they don’t have to edit much. There are tons of hybrid, semi-essay articles. Someone begins by talking about himself or herself to establish and determine authenticity. Let’s say the author knows someone who was bulimic, for instance. And then, the author interviews the experts in bulimia, and then goes to a different party. This is a kind of hybrid, semi-personal essay, semi-article: The person goes out and gets some facts. This isn’t the practice of the art at its highest. We have to look at the fact that magazines, newspapers have an endless appetite for topical articles and that one of the ways of approaching topical articles is the personal experience. And they also have these niches like the back-of-the-book, the six hundred-word article; there are even newspapers where somebody not on staff can send in something, as long as its six hundred to a thousand words for the op-ed pages.

MANNING

How about the other forms of media—Internet, TV, radio—how is the personal essay creeping into those media?

LOPATE

On NPR, you see essayists on TV, Andy Rooney. Certainly the Internet has encouraged many more people. There’s a big market and appetite for the watered-down product, but there may be no greater market for the most literary examples. I think it’s just as hard to get a collection of personal essays published now as it was ten years ago. I don’t think there’s any further market. I think what you have is a kind of disguised collection of personal essays: Somebody writes a self-help book, somebody writes of his experiences, like Lee Iococca, basically in a series of essays. Nobody thinks of it as a series of personal essays; basically it is.

But for someone who is enamored of Didion or Baldwin or Lamb or Hazlitt, Montaigne or Stevenson, to be writing a collection and then trying to get it published, I counsel patience and forbearance because it may be just as difficult. I happen to be one of few lucky writers who can publish collections of my essays. Most writers who publish collections of their essays are famous already as novelists, let's say, an Updike or Ozick or Saul Bellow can get a collection of essays published. But to not have established distinction in another area and try to achieve it directly as a personal essayist is difficult. There are collections that continue to be published, sometimes by small presses and sometimes by very small presses (laughter). I'm trying to make a distinction between the very large, broad area of demand, which made some people say, "This is the age of the essay", and on the other hand a very small demand for the art of the personal essay at its most refined.

MANNING

How many copies of *The Art of the Personal Essay* have been sold?

LOPATE

The Art of the Personal Essay has done very well. I can't count the number of copies, but I can tell you that I continue to get royalty checks and was able to buy a car, make other purchases, basically it's been a good story for me. I'm now attempting to do another thing like that, which is I'm editing an anthology of American movie criticism from the silent era to the present, which will attempt to assert a canon of the best American criticism, which I hope will be adopted by film programs and English programs. Occasionally I experience a twinge of chagrin that my most popular book is an anthology and not one of my own one hundred percent Phillip Lopate books. We take what we can get.

COOMBER

I'm interested in your view of truth in the personal essay. It stems from an earlier discussion we had about "The Moody Traveler" (in a collection of essays, *A Portrait of My Body*) It was about a situation you encountered in the past and when you described your writing process, you mentioned that after writing it, you went back to notes taken at the time of the actual event and found that they differed, somewhat substantially, from the essay that you wrote. You opted not to change it then, and went forward. How do you justify that as practitioner of the personal essay?

LOPATE

I guess that because I consider the personal essay a story, and consider myself a story-teller, I do feel sometimes that I can take liberties. For the most part, I don't take liberties. I'm a great believer in purity. It doesn't bother me so much to break the rule in that way. It's not as though I was describing the negotiations for the end of the Vietnam War, where it would really be important not to distort the truth. This is something that I don't lose a lot of sleep over. I try to work from factual materials as much as possible because I enjoy the idea of shaping what actually happened into a narrative. But I'm aware that I'm slicing and shaping, and I'm leaving out so much, so I'm already distorting. This is another acceptance of guilt on my part. You almost have to be a little shameless to be a personal essayist.

COOMBER

Do you feel that in a case such as this, where it doesn't matter that much because it's your story, does that impinge on your credibility for other nonfiction pieces?

LOPATE

Is someone going to say, "This person admitted that he changed one detail in one of his pieces, therefore we can't believe him in another piece?" No, I don't think so. I don't think this issue has ever really come up, where someone has challenged the veracity of something I've written. Maybe because I'm writing about such insignificant people, including myself, that it's not really an issue. But also it is because whenever possible, I do tell the truth. This is an interesting issue. There is honesty, candor, the truth, facts . . . I try to be as honest as I can. I like the sound of honesty. Sometimes when you're having a conversation you exchange small talk for a while and then your friend says something or you say something that comes from a different place, a more honest place, and it is as though in the soundtrack of your life, the music changes keys at that moment. I like that changing of keys. I like that moment of honesty.

HILDRETH

In your forthcoming book, *The Waterfront*, you are dealing with a lot more factual information and research-oriented topics, and it seems like a slight departure from what you have been doing in the past. How do you go about putting that into a story format and how do you keep the story from "flat-lining"?

LOPATE

What I had to do in *The Waterfront* was find stories all along the New York City waterfront, and go with them and try to convey my enthusiasm for the story. For instance, I have a long chapter on public housing in my book because in New York the projects were built on the waterfront due to the fact that a lot of that land had been abandoned. The land in parts was quite decrepit, sometimes toxic, and so the projects were easy to assemble, particularly above 96th Street where you get into Harlem. So there are all sorts of issues of race and class, but what interested me is that it all began so idealistically. There was this tremendous movement of reformance to build public housing. I know that I still believe in public housing, and that the federal government should go back to funding public housing.

So what I tried to do was to disentangle the past and try to figure out how it began so idealistically, how that dream was deferred and became rather grim so that a writer like James Baldwin could write about the projects and Harlem as a kind of nightmare. And then, to give it another twist, these projects were not destroyed the way they were in other parts of the country, but they continued to work. To find what was still reclaimable about them is to understand the current optimism of the New York Housing Authority to improve them, to complicate a story because most middle-class people regard the projects as unredeemably awful. And I was coming from a different place. I was coming from having grown up poor and asking myself, “Don’t they continue to perform a good function by giving decent, affordable housing?”

The fact is that nobody picking up my new book *The Waterfront* would think they would find a chapter on public housing. It’s just not what you would think. I like the idea of finding a story that was unexpected and carrying it out so its vicissitudes about idealism, cynicism, despair, more idealism, come to a kind of stand-off, you might say.

MANNING

What sorts of research did you do for that chapter?

LOPATE

I did a lot of library research, read the controversies and arguments of the time. There was no one book that had a history, so I had to go to articles. For instance, the initial idea of building towers was seen as progressive because you have more green space around it. The [project] towers were originally coming from that “towers-in-the-park-notion,”

which has since to a large degree been discredited. There was this impulse to tear down the slums and build these clean spanking towers. Of course, you've got people arguing, "Well, maybe those tenements have more vitality and are more comfortable than these towers in the park." You go through a lot of ironies and ambiguities. Everyone is proceeding to some degree from a good heart, but it plays out in very different ways.

There's an example of researching. And then I walked around with people from the New York City Housing Authority and they took me through the places and I got over my initial fear and came to see them in a different way.

HILDRETH

I'm initially curious: Not knowing the terrain myself but from having spoken with friends who grew up near the waterfront and grew in the seascout program. It was free for every child. Children who have grown up in the projects have access to a geography that many adults have no idea about.

LOPATE

Would they have access to that geography? Because highways were built around the waterfront in Manhattan, they would have had to cross these major highways to get to that waterfront. That's one of the great tragedies of New York is that the highways cut people off from the water. A lot of what I'm doing, in effect, is to question the knee-jerk politics of my peer-group and to say, "What do I really think?" and not "What am I supposed to think?" Actually, there's a lot of politics in this book. It's the equivalent of asking yourself about the Afghanistan War and the Iraq War: "What do I think about this?" and not "What am I supposed to say?"

HILDRETH

So you've embedded the politics with story?

LOPATE

Yes. For instance, there's this very important figure in New York history, Robert Moses, who was kind of a master builder of New York. Moses has become an archvillain in the mass narrative of New York and I went back and looked at some revisionist takes saying actually he did an incredible number of great things. He did some bad things,

and we think of [him] because it's paralyzed us from doing anything new and bold.

We're so afraid of planning in general. I'm trying to assert my own view of the city and the city in the making. That interests me. At one point in America, it seemed easy to make cities. People seemed to know how to do it. Now whatever they do, they feel like they're acting in bad faith: They feel clumsy. And that happens in Spokane (Washington) as well as in New York.

MANNING

So which narrator is going to walk the pages of this book? Which Phillip Lopate persona have you chosen?

LOPATE

A middle-aged Phillip Lopate. Because I say at one point, when I was younger, all I needed to do was walk around and I would be filled with poetic lyricism. And I can no longer pretend to have that sense of the younger man walking around and turning everything into writing. So it is, in effect, a more disenchanted observer, but there are positives to disenchantment as well as negatives. It's somebody who has a lot of affection for my native city and has seen so many ambiguous developments: good plans that didn't get built, bad plans that did get built. Things that have had different results.

I'm trying to explore a place because a lot of me is that place. I consider myself, my identity, as a New Yorker almost more central than my identity as what, as a Jew? Probably I'm more New Yorker. It's a central part of who I am.

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