

## A Conversation with David Shields

March 1, 2007

**D**avid Shields is one of today's most controversial writers and also one of the most passionate. Jonathan Lethem says of Shields: "While on the one hand I feel the urge to compare Shields to the very most incisive and smart contemporary essayists I know—Phillip Lopate and Vivian Gornick and Geoff Dyer—in another sense he's accomplished something here so pure and wide in its implications that I almost think of it as a secular, unsentimental Kahlil Gibran: a textbook for the acceptance of our fate on earth."

In addition to his new book, *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead*, Shields is the author of eight previous books, including *Black Planet: Facing Race During an NBA Season*, a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *Remote: Reflections on Life in the Shadow of Celebrity*, winner of the PEN/Revson Award; and *Dead Languages: A Novel*, winner of the PEN Syndicated Fiction Award. His essays and stories have appeared in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Harper's*, *Yale Review*, *Village Voice*, *Salon*, *Slate*, *McSweeney's*, and *Utne Reader*; he's written reviews for *The New York Times Book Review*, *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *Boston Globe*, and *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Shields has received a Guggenheim Fellowship, two NEA Fellowships, an Ingram Merrill Foundation Award, a Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation grant, and a New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. He lives with his wife and daughter in Seattle, where he teaches at the University of Washington. Since 1996, he has also been a member of the faculty at Warren Wilson College's low-residency MFA program in Asheville, North Carolina. His work has been translated into French, Dutch, Norwegian, Japanese, and Farsi. He was the chair of the 2007 National Book Awards nonfiction panel.

We interviewed Mr. Shields on two occasions, and this printed version is a combination of those interviews. The first meeting was over lunch at the Palm Court Grill in Spokane, on May 19, 2006. We met again at Hsu's restaurant in downtown Atlanta, during AWP's annual conference, on March 1, 2007.

SAMUEL LIGON

Your two upcoming books, *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead* and *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*, have similar structures. Were you working on them simultaneously?

DAVID SHIELDS

I see the connection between those two books. So much of them is trying to argue my view for a kind of nakedness or a kind of rawness. In each case, I'm trying to get either to the primitive body or to the primary text. I'm trying to strip the body of defenses or the text of fictional apparatus. I see them as corollary texts in this interest in what I would call nakedness, stripping the body of false spiritual consolations. They have similar opinions toward what I've come to regard as the groaning contrivance of the fictional apparatus. There's a drive for what I would call the raw or the naked in both books.

LIGON

You talk in these upcoming books about becoming conscious of taking risks. When you mention rawness and nakedness, you're talking about a kind of risk-taking. Can you address artistic risk-taking?

SHIELDS

My first novel, *Heroes*, is probably my least risk-taking book. The book is back in print and I'm proud of it, but it's not my favorite, because the whole idea of embarrassment matters a lot to me, the idea of nervous discomfort, nervous-making. To me, the best way of doing that is some level of psychic risk on the writer's part. Obviously not literal risk; compared with actual physical risk, it's certainly different. But I guess part of my drive from fiction to nonfiction, if you want to call it that, is that the temperature of the room seems to go up in my nonfiction. The nervousness goes up when there's a sense that things

you're talking about aren't under the guise of fictional apparatus, because you can't hide behind that.

For instance, in *Black Planet*, the narrator/author, who I call myself—but who to me is a fictional projection or exaggeration of my real self—says that while having sex with his wife, he basically imagines that he's Gary Payton, the basketball star. There's a review in *The Washington Post* by Jonathan Yardley that suggests my wife should divorce me. To me, that's just the highest praise. The book got under his skin that bad. It made him that nervous. So many books bore people to death. In reality, I never felt exactly what I wrote, but I said I did because I wanted the book to channel white guilt, white insanity. All these things. Have I ever felt that? I don't know. Maybe I thought it. I must have thought it on some level because I wrote it down.

All these ideas are so interconnected—embarrassment, nervousness, risk-taking, rawness, primitiveness, nakedness. These are my watchwords as a writer and reader.

#### LIGON

But to get to what? You're talking about creating this emotional state in the reader and writer—to get where?

#### SHIELDS

To what it feels like to be alive. I can't know what it's like inside you and you can't know what it's like inside me. We're existentially alone. One of the great values of art, especially writing, is that it actually allows conversation. The loneliness that we feel as human beings is bridged through extremely serious literature. It definitely doesn't get bridged, in my view, through well-made stories. I watch you create narratives, like I'm watching you build bridges, and I applaud that bridge-making. But I don't get to know you in a thrillingly intimate way. And when someone writes about how his father used to beat him and that's how he came to become a heroin addict at twenty-one, I'm not interested, even if it's not done in some boring, bloodletting way. I'm interested in knowing the deepest secrets that connect human beings. At the very deepest level, all our secrets really are the same.

We all have demons within us that we project as fears of insanity. And that's what creates the moment when the narrator of *Black Planet* projects a Gary Payton-esque sex doppelganger. Some guy from a magazine happened to interview me a couple days ago about that book,

then he sent me links to his blog. During the interview, he seemed to like the book, but in his blog, he criticized it. All these other readers were typing in, saying, Yeah, you go man! or whatever. One guy wrote that he expected, at some point in *Black Planet*, for me to ask Gary Payton to “Do my wife.” That was so interesting because it told me that my book made this guy so uncomfortable he had to fight off the insight by projecting those insights onto me. In those moments, you’re actually getting to something. So he thinks he’s trying to fight off my insights with a kind of, It’s your problem man, not mine, whereas a more serious reader, a more adult reader, would wrestle with it.

There’s also an opposite example from that same book, another line people talk about a lot. In the book, I say sort of embarrassingly that I’m not the type of person who, out of politeness, opens the door for people. But if the person behind me happens to be black, I tend to open the door, I tend to not want to be racist, and I also tend to open the door for women, playing like, you know, the polite usher. I definitely debated a thousand times whether to put the line in or take it out.

In an indirect way, that line is more embarrassing than the other line, and so many people have come up to me, a lot of black people, saying, Thank you for writing that. And white people say they’ve felt that all the time. I didn’t think anyone else was as crazy as I am. Black people told me, You have no idea how many times I’ve felt that. And in those moments, human beings are actually connecting in a really interesting way. Conversation gets deeper. Human beings get to know each other slightly better. The loneliness of the human condition, to put it grandly, is slightly dislodged. And writing is no longer some time-killing activity, it’s actually connecting human beings. That’s what I’m about.

#### LIGON

I see that in fiction, as well. I’m thinking of “A Small, Good Thing” by Carver, where we see that connection occur. We also feel it in Carver’s “Cathedral.” The end of “The Dead.” Chekhov’s story, “Gusev,” in which readers see and feel that connection. Are you saying nonfiction creates more opportunity for connection than fiction?

#### SHIELDS

Yes. But obviously it’s subjective. It would be absurd to say that *Black Planet* matters, but “The Dead” doesn’t. I’m not going to put myself in a totally ridiculous position. Who knows why, after writing three

novels, but fiction has gone slightly flat for me. I find Carver hopelessly sentimental. “A Small, Good Thing” is terrible and “Cathedral” is really bad. Those are just very sentimental works. He’s a hack. He wants you to love him for loving humanity. Talk to Tess Gallagher about how Carver appropriated “Cathedral” from her. You know that was her story, her visitor. I’m interested in that story. Carver, this loving guy. He stole that story. But in the fiction, he presents himself as Mr. Enlightened—Look at how I love humanity.

#### LIGON

Although that protagonist does not come off as somebody who loves humanity. He comes off as a misanthrope.

#### SHIELDS

At the end, he does. And everyone talks about the Chekhov story, “Gusev.” I almost always love fiction writers’ nonfiction more. For instance, Chekhov’s diaries interest me far more than any Chekhov story. Cheever’s journals are by far the best book Cheever wrote. Fitzgerald’s *The Crack Up* interests me more than any Fitzgerald novel. J.M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello* is to me Coetzee’s best book, an amazing mix of lecture and confession and quasi-novel. “The Custom House,” the preface to *The Scarlet Letter*, is better than *The Scarlet Letter*.

#### LIGON

Are you more interested in those works because they provide insight or connection to artistic process?

#### SHIELDS

I’m not saying I’m right. I’m just saying this is what interests me. For instance, the other day I was teaching Stephen Frears, the British director. He directed *The Queen* and was doing promotional interviews hoping to get the Academy Award. The interviewer was talking to him about his previous movies, and *High Fidelity* came up, which Frears directed, and they were talking about the Nick Hornby novel on which the film is based, the voiceover work in the film, and how Frears worked to try to translate the best moments from the book into the film. Frears found, to his surprise, that the best moments were the voiceovers, and especially

the direct speeches of John Cusack to the camera, not just voiceover, but actual direct address. He said something very interesting, something like, “What we realized was that the novel was this machine to sort of get to these twelve crucial speeches in the book about romance and masculinity and art and music and list-making, and masculine distance, and masculine drive for art, masculine trouble with intimacy, blah, blah, blah.” And I realized that is the way I experience almost all novels. You have to read seven hundred pages and then you get these insights that were the whole point the book was written for and the apparatus of the novel is there as this elaborate, huge, overbuilt scaffolding.

ADAM O’CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you think fiction should go away?

SHIELDS

For me, I mean obviously everyone should write and read what they write and read. If you want to be Bell and write these huge novels about Haiti, more power to you. You probably have far more readers than I have. I’m just trying to stay alive as a writer and reader. Ninety-nine percent of stuff, I cannot get a toehold on—so many books that people praise, endless books, books that win prizes. If you put a gun to my head, I could not read Jonathan Franzen’s book *The Corrections*.

LIGON

What about his nonfiction?

SHIELDS

It’s not good either. I’m just trying to read stuff I actually love. Most readers are bored. I don’t want to read out of duty, I want to read out of love. There are hundreds of books in the history of the world that I love to death. They form a tradition which D’Agata calls the lyric essay. And I just want to go to the mat for those books because I really love them. They sustain me and nourish me, and some of them happen to be quasi-novels, like *Tristram Shandy* or Proust. Or V.S. Naipaul’s *A Way in the World*, which is published as fiction in the U.K. and as nonfiction here, which is interesting. Or Julian Barnes’s *Flaubert’s Parrot*, the only bad parts of which are the novelistic moments; the parts which are pure,

gorgeous meditation about Flaubert I really love. I'm trying to stay alive and awake and not bored and not rote. I don't know if you know the new, young nonfiction writer, Eula Biss. She's at Northwestern.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

*The Balloonists.*

SHIELDS

I love that book; it's beautiful. I'm meeting with her because she has friends publishing short, book-length works of poetic nonfiction. It's a wonderful crowd. I think *The Balloonists* is really strong work.

To answer your question, Adam, about what I want to do with fiction: There are a lot of works of fiction which I love, primarily because they retard the narrative impulse. Their motor is not "Guess what happens next." Their motor is "Watch me think deeply about human existence, watch me take you as the reader deeper into the human predicament." And maybe they have a very slight novelistic frame, very slight, like Camus's *The Fall*, say. I feel like, Why are we here on the planet—to tell each other stories? For me, no. For many people, yes. I want to try to understand slightly better who we are as a species. The energy of storytelling is, "Guess who is behind the closet?" I don't care who's behind the closet.

LIGON

Yet there is a lot of narrative in your work. Not anecdotes, but narratives from your own life—

SHIELDS

But it's subservient to a larger investigation. There's a wonderful line which I probably appropriated in *Reality Hunger*. It's a line from Alain Robbe-Grillet. He says something like, "The anecdote is not dead. The innocence of the anecdote is dead, that we can no longer tell stories naively." Stories are still told. And I definitely still tell stories, but I would say I tell stories not naively, like I'm aware of who is telling them. I try to undermine them. I try to ironize them. I try to put them in triplicate quotations marks. I try to marry them to the larger investigation. There's a story in *A Handbook for Drowning* called "A Brief Survey of Ideal Desire," which to me is sort of the crucial break in my work. And my sister books,

*Heroes and Dead Languages*, are to varying degrees relatively traditional novels. *A Handbook for Drowning* mixes the essay and story and brings a collage from the pieces some read as quasi-confessional, personal essay, some read as relatively traditional story. And the pieces that interest me the most kind of blur forms. “Brief Survey” is the first time I did that. There’s a critical reading of Joyce’s “The Dead.” There’s a third person account of obsessive basketball playing. There’s a discussion of looking at pornography. There’s a discussion of the protagonist visiting a massage parlor. It’s like six or eight different little things, and you’re supposed to figure out how they’re all connected. I think it is a short story. There’s a character named Walter in it. It felt like something popped open for me in that story, where the loyalty of the fiction is not “Guess what happens to Walter next,” but “Watch me investigate how platonic desire works. Watch how fucked up you can be when you’re always projecting desire out—some absolute outside yourself—rather than some desire you actually feel for real.” In ten short pages, I’m actually investigating something about desire—and the stories are part of that investigation, as opposed to the other way around.

#### LIGON

Would the statements or ideas have weight without the narrative?

#### SHIELDS

That’s the objection most people raise, and I think it’s legitimate. When you just want the insights—where Nick Hornby stands, his essay on the male animal. And that’s not probably what we want. I’m not interested in psychobabble either. Or street philosophy. I’ve talked about the war without and the war within. People have different aesthetics. And for me, the way that a novel works, say, the war is generally without. Which is to say that characters do battle with each other. King Lear has an argument with Cordelia and they are sort of butting heads, then at the end, there is some resolution. The essay form, the lyric essay, the personal essay, is just as full of conflict, and the conflict goes inside—the writer at war with himself. I find the intimacy of that discussion takes me to a deeper psychic place. I find the intimacy of that more naked-making, more strip-mining, more primitive, raw, embarrassing, et cetera. Someone else—say you or Jess Walter or whoever—would find the form I espouse solipsistic, narcissistic, navel-gazing, or whatever. And that’s okay. But I prefer the war within. I find the level of discussion, potentially—not

by any means always—but potentially thrillingly higher. When that’s good, nothing’s better. A lot of it is horrible, memoir or journalism, or woe is me stuff, but when it really is at the highest level, it is really important to me. Maybe the war within is my own self-enclosure.

LIGON

Do you want to consciously articulate these truths or realities in a way that a painting might not let you? We have a response to painting or music that might be emotional, that might be just as true but difficult to articulate. Are you interested in clear, conscious articulation of truth?

SHIELDS

That’s a very good point. I think I am. There’s this line by Yeats that I disagree with, which is, “You can’t articulate the truth, you can only embody it.” That’s wrong. You can articulate the truth. I really believe in language above all else. It goes back, as so many of my tropes do, to stuttering. I grew up with a stutter, still stutter slightly sometimes. I wrote a novel about it. In a way, it’s sort of the core of my being. So many of my theories unconsciously draw from it. I love articulation. I love saying—telling, not showing, that workshop bromide. Bromide of bromides: Show don’t tell. I so adore telling. Showing bores me to tears. It always has. When I think about my favorite moments from *Huck Finn*, they aren’t like, Oh look at this plot turn or this dialogue. It’s just Huck saying something. Those are the moments that I live for. I am drawn toward articulation as revenge on stuttering.

LIGON

I’m guessing that you don’t care for Flannery O’Connor’s stories—

SHIELDS

I did a brutal thing to Flannery O’Connor once. I was trapped in some cabin for a long weekend and I read the collected O’Connor front to back. That is one formulaic writer, I promise you. Every single story is exactly the same story. Obviously she was a master crafter of stories. I went through a phase where I very much admired O’Connor. I think “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” an awfully well-made story. But she doesn’t interest me. I couldn’t imagine reading her. She is a religious writer. I

think so much of my work is founded on a godless meaninglessness. There is no meaning. We are lost. We are existentially alone. How do we get through the next hundred years of our lives, or the next fifty? If, finally, your vision is underwritten by religious salvation, we're on very different sides of the path to hell. But who am I to criticize O'Connor? She is a quintessential example of someone who is by all accounts a great writer who holds zero interest for me. Especially the third person. I'm just allergic to the third person. To the degree I can read fiction, almost by definition it has to be first person, because at least we're pushing toward some authorial "I." The moment that we're in the storytelling mode, I tend to be not interested. But who am I to end the world of fiction? Obviously a fiction writer and a poet and a nonfiction writer are all trying to get to the same stuff.

LIGON

I see *Reality Hunger* as an artist struggling to be vital, to be born, in effect. And this is an artist who is already alive, who has already been an artist for some time—

SHIELDS

And this artist is me? This is me struggling to be born?

LIGON

Yes.

SHIELDS

How so?

LIGON

I see you creating systems of belief about art in the entire book and then examining them, arguing with these beliefs, building them up, tearing them down, looking to other artists for insight.

SHIELDS

That's exactly right. This friend of mine read it and he said that it's the most personal book I've ever written. But obviously my friend

was being sort of coy. By most accounts it will not be thought of as my most personal book.

Is he—I mean, am I—born or am I dead?

#### LIGON

The conversation is ongoing, I think. When you talked before about Cheever's journals, it seems that you're interested in how that artist exists. For me, *Reality Hunger* shows an artist struggling with who he is, struggling to create meaning in his life and out of his life.

#### SHIELDS

I was listening to this show on public radio recently. It's basically three or four stories read aloud by actors on a Broadway stage called "Stories on Stage," something like that. Again, I'm sort of making an easy case. Some guy was reading a Cheever story. It wasn't "The Housebreaker of Shady Hill," but it was very close. Basically a story about a guy who is somewhat estranged from his wife. He's living in Rome, and he writes a sort of fantasy version about how they'll actually connect. It was a beautiful story and fun to listen to when I was driving around. So beautiful that when I got home, I ran to my radio so I could hear the end. But it pales compared to the journals. I probably sound like I'm kidding, but they are far and away Cheever's best book. They're basically journals he kept from 1940 until he died. They're very consciously written—written for publication, it's obvious. They're so sculpted. There are scenes that come in and out and leitmotifs. It's an amazing work of art. But hearing the fiction story, as well done as it was, was the sketchiest investigation. You're comparing a twenty-page story to a 300,000-word journal, but still, the fiction felt like gossamer compared to the depth of the journal. The journal let him get away with absolutely nothing. He was relentless toward himself, and in so doing, connects himself with us. The fiction is full of grandiosity of logic, and he gets away with murder. I was constantly listening, going You lying sack of shit, I read the journals. I know what it's like at ground level for you. Don't give me these happy coincidences and sweet endings. Not that the fiction by any means has to have a sweet ending. The groaning contrivance of the story compared to the electrifying rawness of the journals, there was no comparison. To me it was a really instructive example.

LIGON

*Reality Hunger* contains dozens of unattributed quotes from various writers, filmmakers, philosophers, and other people. Are you getting any noise from Knopf on the legal end?

SHIELDS

They're publishing *The Thing About Life* first, to my shock and dismay because to me, *Reality Hunger* is a more timely book. I was pushing for a Vintage Paperback Original published maybe in September—just go. Forget the galleys, forget everything. But for some reason, they insisted that *The Thing About Life* come out first. And *Reality Hunger* will follow in September of 2009. So in a way that book is, frankly, not really on their radar yet. They bought both books together, a two-book thing. So I'm just developing all my legal arguments.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What if they ask you to include an acknowledgements page?

SHIELDS

At one point in the book, I say, "You get a brownie point for every different quote you identify." That pretty much tells it. They'll either deal with it later, or—I don't know.

Jonathan Lethem is a good friend and we have a sort of pact that when it comes time to make that argument, we're going to go in and just argue the case to the hilt. And I'm probably going to lose the debate, to be honest.

There are quite a few quotes from John D'Agata in there. And John said, "Promise me you won't ruin the book by putting a bunch of sources in the back." Everyone has been amazingly generous in the spirit of the book. I have quite a few quotes from my friend Michael Logan. From a former student, James Nugent. Paul Bravermann. Friends are the main quotes. A lot of them, I've remade. Some are my own. So much of the argument of the book depends on learning those boundaries. The moment you've said page twenty-one is from Vivian Gornick and page twenty-nine is from Coleridge, the book is over. It's not over, but it's considering domestication.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

*Remote* has an acknowledgments page—

SHIELDS

The paperback does, and it's kind of cool because all those footnotes are in the back.

LIGON

What about a page that simply says, "The following works were considered or used as part of this collage." In effect, the acknowledgments page. That's it.

SHIELDS

I'll probably be thrilled if I can get away with putting something like that in the back. I'm talking brave now, but we'll see how far I get when it comes down to it. I would love it if there was something elegant about silence. You remember in the end of *The Wasteland* when Eliot tells you where every quote was from? I hate that whole idea. If you recognize the quote, fine. If you don't, fine. But the idea of turning it into this kind of snarly apparatus—

LIGON

Why do you think Eliot did that?

SHIELDS

I think he was trying to raise the mystery of the work. People went into Eliot's library. What was that book of his called, by that lady? Jessie Weston? *From Ritual to Romance*? Something like that. They went into Eliot's library and it still had the cellophane wrapped around it, a book he was supposed to have been quoting from. The point being that so many contemporary poets will give you every line. Like, "Line twelve is a translation of..." That's such a dead gesture of quasi-scholarship, of good citizenship. I feel strongly—as do so many friends who are quoted in the book—that citing everything would hurt the book's intent. I feel strongly about it. I'm going to argue strong. Obviously I'm not going to say, Well, forget it. I'm not going to rip up the contract. I'll deal with it

as I deal with it. Why do we need all these citations of sources that pretty much anyone can find on the web? The biology of acne or something like that? Why do we need that snarly apparatus?

LIGON

When is it appropriate to attribute credit?

SHIELDS

I think John D'Agata is really good about this issue. It's almost like an art form struggling to be reborn itself. John has this feeling that if we're going to look at nonfiction as art, we've got to stop sourcing it. And if you're writing a work that has no aspirations to be art, let's say a biography about Thomas Jefferson or something—it's a work of history. I don't read that; I don't write it; I'm not interested in it. You're going to source the fact that someone else found a document about Jefferson as a slave owner or something like that. And you're writing this history of Thomas Jefferson. In that kind of work, you have the whole snarly apparatus. But in the kind of work that I'm trying to champion, that I'm trying to write and read and love, you find a feeling that if a work has any chance of existing as a work of art, as a liberating thought experiment, we have to get away from the idea of sourcing things. It establishes a pedestrian or journalistic and/or scholarly context. It takes away the whole aura of a work of art which is crucial to the planet. Look at painters, the way they approach art. Look at Rauschenberg and Warhol. Do they say, 'This comes from the Campbell Soup Company?' They just go and do it. Until all the lawyers got involved. Look at how musicians and hip-hop artists come in and just slash and burn. And turntablists go in and remake stuff. The moment you get lawyers involved, the moment you get journalistic and scholarly good citizenship involved, you're dead. If anyone wants to take my work and remake it, they're more than welcome. If anyone wants to take *Black Planet* and make it into, whatever, an opera—it'd make a great opera; if they want to take *Remote* and turn it inside out—they're welcome to it. If it's aspiring to be art, it's crucial we remove the rubric of non-art in my view.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Why is *Reality Hunger* structured the way it is, in 563 sections?

#### SHIELDS

The fact that we all teach, that I'm not up on some Vermont mountaintop with twelve hours to write every day of the week, that I'm checking the Web every five minutes for gossip of some kind. We live in an attention deficit age. I'm influenced by collage artists from the last hundred years. I think it's totally congruent with what I argue. It'd be absurd for me to have a three-hundred-page essay that's smoothly lucid and coherent. It's the way I think. There are twenty-six categories from A–Z. That's a sort of funny idea of the alphabet. There's a pretext of being thorough. We've got the A–Z, the explanation that explains nothing. The categories mean relatively little except you're supposed to realize how much turnstile jumping there is in the categories. Sometimes something's in the wrong category. The A–Z stuff feels fairly arbitrary at times. The quotation. You can't tell what the "I" espouses. You ask, Who is saying this? David Shields? Robert Lowell? George Orwell? Who is saying this? Categories are break-downable. I even argue for the virtue of brevity in the book. Drawn to collage, aphorism, sound bite.

#### LIGON

Many of your books are broken into similar short sections—

#### SHIELDS

A friend of mine called it "Aphorism sent through radiation." I just love that idea. *Remote* is not quite as fragmented, but it's pretty montage-like. *Enough About You* is somewhat. *Body Politic* is somewhat. But this pushes it further. Collage—to piss off some more people—collage is the evolution beyond narrative. It's the next step. I've written ten books and there's almost a direct movement from very grounded, well-made, linear, realistic novels. The first is a four-hundred-page book and each chapter's forty pages, and boy is it grounded in the real, in narrative. Now I'm onto a book like *Reality Hunger*, where there's no section longer than a page. I don't know what to say other than that's how my mind thinks. The books I seem to love the most are often what I would call speedy and they cut to the chase. There's very little furniture moving. There's very little table setting, just bursts of language and of insight. A fiction writer might ask, "Okay, we've got a bunch of insight, but where's the context?" There is a context. The book is nothing but 563 insights, but they keep building upon one another. The context needn't be narrative. The context could be contemplative. That's what I'm drawn toward now.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Should people still read your fiction?

SHIELDS

That's a great question. I'm doing this sort of easy thing where I'm like nah-nah-ing at fiction as a way to boost the assignment of nonfiction, but I've got three books of fiction out there that on some sort of trivial level, I want people to read.

LIGON

Is it a trivial level?

SHIELDS

I'm just saying trivial level of, Let's go out and buy those books or something, as if those book sales will change my life in some substantial way. I still love those books. Those books still matter to me, especially *Dead Languages* and *Handbook for Drowning*. *Heroes* to me, less so because it's so traditional and so conventional. There's very little of my aesthetic driving it. It was influenced by a University of Iowa aesthetic. I was trying to write in a realistic way, a traditional way, a conventional way that probably doesn't play to my strengths.

But *Dead Languages* is so clearly the forerunner of what I'm doing now. The reason it is ten times a better book than *Heroes* is that I'm making all the gestures I'm making now, but further still. *Dead Languages* talks about stuttering. It talks about masochism to a certain degree, it talks about self-destruction, my love-hate affair with language. It's phrased in fictional context, but it's the evolution of my artistic aesthetic. I think that book holds up really well. And I really like *Handbook for Drowning* quite a lot, too. The pieces I love the most are the most collagelike—"The War on Poverty," "Brief Survey of Ideal Desire." Those books are not very far from my current work. I'm encouraged by the idea that you're supposed to change as an artist. Part of me is stupidly nostalgic for my early fictional writer self. Somehow calling yourself a novelist still has a slight glamour to it. I mean, it doesn't really have any glamour in the culture, but in literary culture it somehow still seems slightly more respectable. Whereas the stuff I do doesn't even have a goddamned name.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Do you have a name for it?

SHIELDS

I like John D'Agata's term, "lyric essay." It's sort of a mouthful, but I despise this "creative nonfiction" term. It's absolutely meaningless. I don't mind "personal essay." But a book-length essay, what do you call it? What do you think of it as?

LIGON

You call *Reality Hunger* a manifesto.

SHIELDS

Manifesto is a very specific-book word. *The Thing About Life*—what would you call that? A collage?

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

It's less a collage than even *Enough About You*. It seems like a struggle between the personal story and scientific research, those two things playing against each other.

SHIELDS

But then there are the quotations from all the sources. I hope there's a relatively complex play. Tolstoy weighing in, quotes from Lucretius to Coetzee, me and my dad. Somehow those play off each other in what I hope is an interesting way. Do you have a term for those kind of works? I think lyric essay seems to be catching on. Someone will be crowned a genius if they can come up with a term for this. I don't know. It's such a shame, though, to be working in a form. Literary nonfiction sounds sort of self-congratulatory and self-marginalizing, as if somehow you're writing an essay on Shakespeare or something. And creative nonfiction?

Creative as opposed to what? Destructive? Destructive nonfiction? Maybe that's what I write. Destructive nonfiction. That would be good. I swear that's it.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

If you have one book coming out that's a meditation on death and one that's a manifesto, what could you possibly do after that?

SHIELDS

I'm starting a book about sex. Part of me feels like that's sort of the goal. I'm deeply middle-aged, so I want to make sure to cover a lot of big topics.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

Sex, death, and life.

SHIELDS

Exactly. Sometimes I'll get an idea for some book, like from the guy who runs the mailing place around the corner, who's from Iraq, and we always talk about the war. Part of me wants to do a book with him about Iraq or something. I have all these ideas, dozens of ideas for books. You want to make sure that they are essential topics. You kind of want to get down what life feels like to you. It's a good question. I feel like writing *The Thing About Life* changed my outlook. It made me both very morbid and completely free from morbidity. On the one hand, I feel like, My God, we're just animals and there's no point to anything. Okay, if there's no point to anything, you might as well try to enjoy life on some level. Dark fluid entered my body through that book in some really serious way. Though I think the book is not heavy. It feels sort of light.

We are just nerve endings. And that book does feel like some end game on some level. The manifesto's saying, Here's what I believe about art. So I agree, I'm at a weird impasse. After I finished those two books, I couldn't do anything for a couple months. I just sort of reorganized my files. I threw a bunch of stuff out. It was like some weird death thing. I threw out all these old clothes. I cleaned up my computer files. This weird cleansing. I had really gone through these two crucial discourses which I'd been dying to write for my whole life, death and art. Destructive nonfiction.