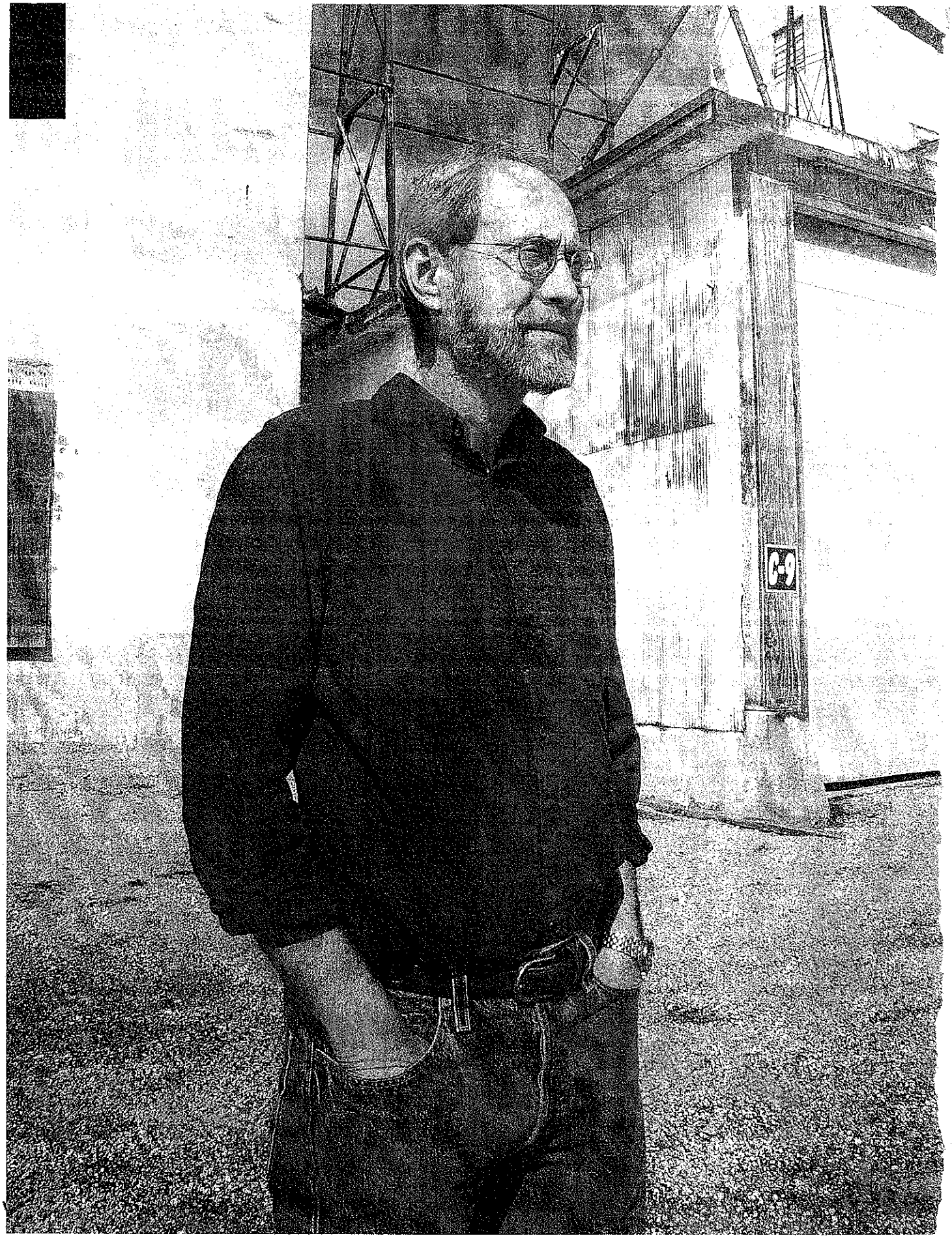


Poets & Writers May/June issue

WHERE THE REAL WORLD LIES

IN HIS THIRD NOVEL, THE FOLLOW-UP TO HIS PULITZER PRIZE FINALIST *THE BRIGHT FOREVER*, LEE MARTIN PORTRAYS HOW THE SECRETS OF OUR PAST COME TO DEFINE US.

BY AMOS MAGLIOCCO • PHOTOGRAPHS BY WILLIAM BRYANT ROZIER

ONE afternoon in April 2006, during a break from observing student teachers at Ohio State University, Lee Martin strolled back to his office to check e-mail and the box score for his beloved Yankees. Sitting down in front of his computer, he noticed that one message, from a current MFA student, carried a particularly intriguing subject line: "Way to go!"

"Did you know *The Bright Forever* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize?" his student had written.

"I said to myself, 'Why, no, I didn't,'" Martin recalls.

He didn't know that his publisher, Shaye Areheart Books, had submitted the novel, let alone that it remained standing as one of three finalists for the prize. He leaned back in his chair and pondered the chances. "I was a finalist," Martin remembers thinking, "which was remarkable enough. But I had to consider the possibility I might *win* the thing." Martin was already deep into the writing of his next novel, and the prospect of extra attention for *The Bright Forever* (2005) was an exciting development. The year was going well, with an appointment as director of Ohio State's creative writing program followed by the school's Alumni Distinguished Teaching Award, announced in the middle of a writing workshop by a surprise visit from his wife, Deb, accompanied by a group of colleagues, students, and school administrators led by the alumni president, football star Archie Griffin.

For a novelist accustomed to the long rhythms of the form, it was a lot of good news in a short period of time. Emerging from his reverie, Martin took a breath and remembered his students, the evaluations he still had to complete. He checked his watch and opened another e-mail, this one with the subject: "Just heard the news."

"My dear Lee," the sender consoled, "I would of course prefer to hear you'd

University of Massachusetts Amherst

JUNIPER SUMMER WRITING INSTITUTE

JUNE 22–28, 2008

POETRY FICTION MEMOIR

JAMES TATE
LYDIA DAVIS
MARK DOTY
CHARLES D'AMBROSIO
DARA WIER
NOY HOLLAND
NICK FLYNN
PAUL LISICKY
MATTHEW ZAPRUDER
CHRIS BACHELDER
THOMAS SAYERS ELLIS
PAUL FATTARUSO
LISA OLSTEIN
LENI ZUMAS
ALEX PHILLIPS

Workshops ❖ Craft Sessions
Manuscript Consultation
Q & As ❖ Readings

Announcing the 3rd Annual
JUNIPER INSTITUTE FOR YOUNG WRITERS
See website for details

SCHOLARSHIPS AVAILABLE
www.umass.edu/juniperinstitute
juniperinstitute@hfa.umass.edu
TEL: (413) 545-5510

JUNIPER INITIATIVE

won the Pulitzer! But in no way does not having won diminish the honor."

"And just like that," Martin says, "it was over. At least I'd enjoyed a moment to contemplate my chances. But I felt like I'd won. I'd never been so happy to lose anything in my life."

It's no surprise that Martin's anecdote turns on a moment of possibility. His stories examine the choices people make under duress and chart the unruly paths their lives can travel between critical moments, frequently recognized too late. Always compelling, his characters are often dark and rarely simple, their lives haunted by the past and love's unpredictable itinerary. In *The Bright Forever*, Martin crafts one of the more simultaneously engaging and creepy characters in recent memory: Henry Dees, a lonesome schoolteacher drawn to the crystalline laughter and innocence of nine-year-old Katie Mackey. The novel depicts Dees's tangled compulsions and sets about pursuing his humanity, as he struggles to find it himself.

Martin's third novel, *River of Heaven*, released last month, also from Shaye Areheart Books, introduces his most complex character yet. Sam Brady is an older gay man in a narrow-minded midwestern community, whose fragile and unsatisfying daily life unravels when he inadvertently calls attention to himself in the local paper. The novel explores how the past can resurface, unwanted and unexpected, even when we've tried so hard to submerge it. Brady's story depicts the futility of trying to escape our transgressions, asking whether redemption is possible.

Unlike *The Bright Forever*'s Dees, Brady is deeply sympathetic, an introspective man whose life has settled into a lonely but comfortable solitude. He's an affable guy with a quick smile and a basset hound named Stump, but he's separated from his neighbors and estranged even from his brother, Cal. It is his past more than his sexuality that makes him a solitary figure in the small town of Mt. Gilead, Illinois. While Dees was part monster, Brady lives with the aftershocks of a single, monstrous event, a violent night long ago when the death of a boy named Dewey Finn taught him how we could "fail to love someone enough."

Brady upends his own anonymity when he builds Stump an elaborate doghouse in the shape of a sailing ship, complete with mast, crow's nest, and even cannon ports. The spectacle attracts interest from neighbors such as the recently widowed Arthur Pope; even the local newspaper sends a young man to write about Brady and his creation. The reporter, it turns out, is a descendant of the Finns, and stumbles onto the long-forgotten relationship between Brady and Dewey Finn. Cal appears soon afterward and together they confront their frayed relationship, and the secret they've shared since childhood. "It's easier," Brady reflects, "at least it has been for me, to lock away the truth and live quietly with my dogs. It may be a stupid way to live—cowardly, even—but such is the truth of the matter. I've given up companionship for fear of losing it."

But the novel doesn't let him off so easily. "In Sam's case," Martin says, "though he says he's accepted this solitary life, the plot forces him into a place where he has to acknowledge that this isn't the complete truth; if he could only put his guilt and regrets behind him, and if he could come to terms with his sexual orientation, he'd be perfectly happy to be more social, to remember, as he says at one point, 'what it is to have a family.'" And Brady's idea of family changes as he accepts the embraces and burdens of other lonely souls, such as Arthur Pope's teenage granddaughter, Maddie.

AMOS MAGLIOCCO is a writer living in North Texas. His fiction and nonfiction have recently appeared in the *Missouri Review* and *Yemassee*, among other journals, and the anthology *The Habit of Art* (Indiana University Press, 2005). He's currently working on his first novel.

MARTIN returns frequently in his work to the tangled bonds of family. Born on a farm in southern Illinois, growing up he was a little like the outsiders in his novels—a sensitive, bookish boy whose parents, then in their forties, hadn't expected their first and only child. When Martin was a year old, his father lost both hands in a farming accident, a moment that resonates throughout the author's critically acclaimed memoir, *From Our House* (Dutton, 2000).

Imagining the accident he was too young to remember, Martin writes about his father's choice to leave the tractor running while he cleared the shucking box on a corn picker, and how, but for that decision, everything might have been different. "When I look at photographs of my father before his accident, my eyes go immediately to his hands. I try to figure out whether they resemble my own, but I can never really decide.... All I can be certain of is the sadness that comes over me whenever I look at those photographs. I want to tell my father about that moment in the cornfield. '*Shut off the tractor*,' I want to tell him, but, of course, I can't."

While he learned to admire seasonal rhythms and the language of rural life, Martin was no farmer. He nurtured a rebellious streak and a love for music and acting. Mechanically disinclined, he was easily bored with the agricultural routine.

Early in their courtship, his future wife Deb asked if he might follow in his father's footsteps like so many young men in the region. "No chance," he said without hesitation. It was the right answer, the first of many exchanged by the couple, who recently celebrated their thirty-second anniversary.

"I call Deb my first great listener," Martin says. He often reads her chapters-in-progress. "Deb listens, and then, because she has a healthy streak of skepticism, she starts to question. She calls to task certain things that characters do or say. She points out that a certain plot move will require things down the road. Her training and background is in the theater, both acting and directing, so she understands well the intricacies of character development, of pattern and emphasis, of cause and effect."

Martin appreciates the variety of combined effects that can emerge from seemingly isolated causes. "One of my jobs is to let a character's actions lead to surprising consequences, which give way to a causal chain of events and exert so much pressure on the character that he or she can't help but feel drawn toward a contrary aspect of his or her essence." Martin's characters confront their own shadowed inner lives through some surprising turns, always developments arising from their own choices, past or present. Sam Brady is nonplussed at the attention his customized doghouse brings: the cars driving past, nosy neighbors, and the reporter whose story reaches far enough to draw his brother back home. Still, the attention is ultimately the result of Brady's own doing, his doghouse as a message in a bottle.

Sally Kim, who acquired and edited *The Bright Forever* and *River of Heaven* (before recently moving to HarperCollins), says Martin's books involve risk. "You'd never guess it at first glance—his narrators initially strike you as quiet, self-effacing types—but it never fails to amaze me how Lee will pull back the curtain and show these characters' utter fallibility, their ugliness, the darkest parts of their souls that they've even hidden from themselves. He's not afraid to do that. Sam makes a horrible mistake in this story, but instead of hating him for it, we weep for him. That's an incredible thing to feel, as a reader."

EXCERPT

River of Heaven

It's October, and the leaves have started to fall. Here in Mt. Gilead, our small town in southern Illinois, we can burn them on Saturdays, air quality and the ozone layer be damned. We rake our leaves to the sides of our streets or onto our backyard gardens, and set them to burn. The air smells of the must and the smoke the way it has this time of year as long as I can recall since I was a kid in Rat Town—that's what we've always called the neighborhood in the lowlands on the south edge of Mt. Gilead, a mess of tumbledown houses. Each spring there, when the Wabash River rises, the floodwaters still come up to the doorsteps. I'm glad to be safe and dry here in Orchard Farms, this modest gathering of ranch homes on streets with names like Apple Blossom and Cherry Blossom and Peach Tree.

Arthur thinks he knows my life—me, Sam Brady, a bachelor all my sixty-five years—and I wish I could believe that he does. He thinks he knows it because his dear wife, Bess, is now six months gone, and he imagines that we share the misery of men living alone. "You and me," he said once not long after she died. He laid his hand on my shoulder. "Jesus, Sammy. We're a pair."

But my life is not his. I'd tell him this if I had the heart. I'd tell him I have no idea what it is to love someone all that time—nearly forty years he and Bess were married—and to lose them one day without warning. An aneurysm in her brain. "Arthur, my head hurts," she said, and then the next instant, she fell to the kitchen floor, already gone. All my adult life I've lived alone, except for the dogs, the latest being Stump, who stands now at the screen door waiting for his duck and potato.

From *River of Heaven* by Lee Martin. Copyright © 2008 by Lee Martin. Published by Shaye Areheart Books, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc.

DEADLINE FOR SUBMISSIONS:
SEPT. 30, 2008

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE IN POETRY

2008 COMPETITION JUDGE:
DORIANNE LAUX

$1500 PRIZE
AND BOOK PUBLICATION BY
ANHINGA PRESS

ACCEPTING MANUSCRIPTS OF ORIGINAL POETRY, NOT PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED IN BOOK FORM, 48-80 PAGES, NO MORE THAN ONE POEM PER PAGE. INCLUDE TWO MANUSCRIPT TITLE PAGES: ONE WITH NAME AND CONTACT INFORMATION AND ONE WITH MANUSCRIPT TITLE **ONLY**.

ENTRY FEE: $25. MAKE CHECKS OUT TO "CSU FRESNO LEVINE PRIZE." MULTIPLE SUBMISSIONS ARE ALLOWED, BUT EACH IS CONSIDERED A SEPARATE ENTRY AND MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY A $25 FEE. MAIL BY 9/30/08 POSTMARK DEADLINE, TO:

PHILIP LEVINE PRIZE IN POETRY
CSUF ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
5245 N. BACKER AVE. MS PB98
FRESNO, CA 93740-8001

Sponsored by:
MFA IN Creative Writing
California State University, Fresno
ANHINGA PRESS

COMPLETE GUIDELINES:
EMAIL
CONNIEH@CSUFRESNO.EDU

Martin accomplishes this in large part through the way he crafts Brady's narrative voice; it is one rich with regret and acceptance:

> Once upon a time, I was the boy who sat on the railroad trestle singing songs with Dewey Finn. I loved him, but I didn't have the words for what I felt. Or maybe I had them but I couldn't let them out because I didn't know who I was. But he knew. He knew all along. He risked that kiss in the alley, and to him it was the most natural thing in the world. *Sammy, sweetheart,* he said, and for just an instant, before I let my heart turn black and shrivel, the purest light of my essence flickered and flamed. I was *that* boy, the one in the alley who wanted to kiss Dewey back—just that brief moment, and then that boy was gone.

While Brady is haunted by his past, his story's strength is in the present and how things have become, as Maddie declares, "so fucked up." Martin's books often create an initial sense of security that they purposefully and gradually disrupt; the reader experiences a sort of incremental vertigo. Martin equates the novelist's task to building a wall, brick by brick, and removing just the right number of bricks to bring the whole thing crashing down. He has spent a lifetime watching these walls rise up around the inner lives people try so hard to conceal.

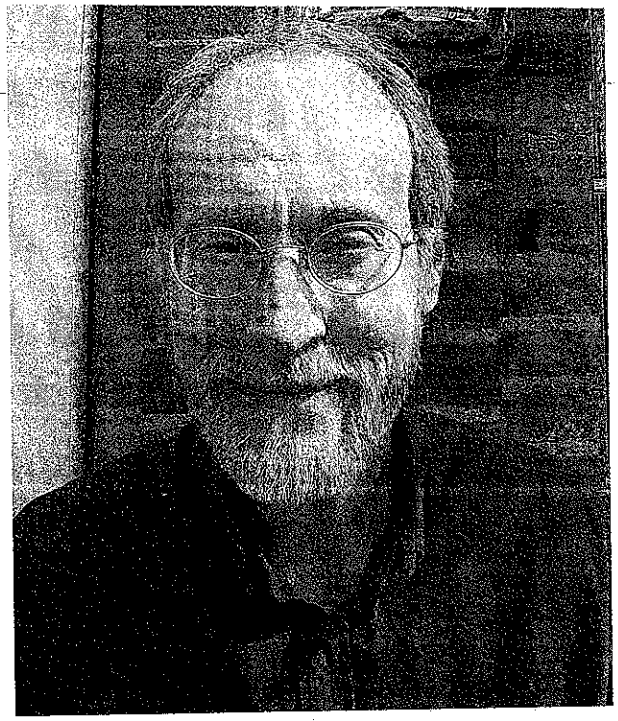
As a young man, Martin dropped out of college to work at a factory, making plugs and patches for tires. There he observed how people provided for their families under hard circumstances, and the ways they protected their identities from the indignities of their working lives. "It was hot work," says Martin, "and I burned my arms all the time and breathed in all sorts of nasty fumes. It didn't take long for me to understand that I had to save enough money to get back to Eastern Illinois [University]."

Martin returned to school and started writing stories. After earning an MFA from the University of Arkansas and teaching at the University of Memphis, Martin finished a PhD at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. In 1995, Amy Bloom selected his collection, *The Least You Need to Know*, for Sarabande Books' Mary McCarthy Prize. Martin followed his successful memoir with his first novel, *Quakertown* (Dutton, 2001) and then another memoir, *Turning Bones* (University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

LEE Martin had come a long way from the tire factory when I met him the first time. The lanky former basketball player strode into our graduate workshop at the University of North Texas and fished a suitable piece of chalk from the tray. He began scrawling a single word across the board. Our seminar room was in the oldest building on campus, practically obsolete by the late 1990s, but still standing because of a fragile and enormous pipe organ in the central auditorium, one of only a handful like it in the world. We would come to appreciate the bizarre serendipity of having our discussions set to the dirges and haunted melodies that echoed through the hallway. Our chalkboard, while not quite one hundred years old, was cloudy and scarred. So Martin etched his opening idea in giant letters: "vulnerability." He told us a character's vulnerability was accessible through the writer's own risk, her willingness to reveal "more truth than the reader thought he had a right to know." The sessions that term were filled with levity created by puns and clever turns of phrase—releases from typical workshop tension, and a less destructive form of writerly competition.

During a recent phone conversation, I used a phrase stolen from David Milch's *Deadwood* antihero, Al Swearengen. Describing some matter of frequent annoyance, I remarked: "It puts me off my feed."

"What did you say?" Martin interrupted. "Puts you off your *what*?"



Martin's reaction to my appropriation of that phrase reminds me of how his interest in the way people wield language is an important part of his work. "In my neck of the woods—southeastern Illinois—I grew up among working-class people who had colorful ways of saying what they meant," Martin says. "These farmers, oil field roughnecks, refinery workers, etcetera—men who worked with their hands—understood that language is power and one way we express our membership in a community. If you couldn't successfully navigate the verbal waters—if you couldn't hold your own in that give and take—then you were at the mercy of those who could." It is precisely Martin's attention to voice and language that lends his characters their authenticity. Along with how people speak, Martin is also deeply interested in what's being said: "I'm often looking for those moments when the idiomatic is useless, when someone digs beneath its façade and calls up the hard thing to say, the thing that shoots straight to the heart of the matter."

Martin equates the novelist's task to building a wall, brick by brick, and removing just the right number of bricks to bring the whole thing crashing down.

Martin himself has a directness that is often startling. At the end of our course, as the last workshop ended, he grew quiet. He said that if things in our lives went bad—if trouble came—it wouldn't be the worst thing for our writing. We were stunned.

Martin remembers the odd send-off as something he'd heard years before. "One of my teachers at Arkansas, John Clellon Holmes, told us on the last day of a workshop something like, 'Well, I hope all your lives go to hell.' I can't claim that these were his exact words, but in my memory that's what he said. So I often pass along a form of the same to my students. Life will test you, I tell them. It will test you as a writer, and it will test you as a person. The two are never separate."

This was, I realized later, a telegram to our older selves, deliverable in the sleepless nights that follow life's coarser days. It was directing us toward our own dark corners, where the real stories might lie.

His dedication to understanding the human psyche aside, Martin welcomes the challenges of craft and those revelations earned by a full engagement with the writing process. "Once you have a draft of a novel and you make a cut anywhere it often causes a ripple effect through the rest of the book. It all gets very exciting when you see that cutting an element will force you to make other adjustments that will open up the characters and situations in ways you wouldn't have found otherwise." While drafting *River of Heaven*, he chose to remove an entire narrative thread, a storyline that seemed to accomplish little more than its own end. By opening space in the narrative substructure Martin offered his characters more freedom to confront their own guarded interiors.

"Back in the 1980s, I took a workshop with James Leo Herlihy, author of *Midnight Cowboy*, and he used to talk about how our first drafts give us little boxes—presents if you will—to open up so we can see what's inside. The highest compliment he could pay one of his student writers was to say with glee, 'Ah, now you've earned a job,' meaning, of course, that your draft had presented some intriguing boxes, and all you had to do was be open to where looking inside those boxes might take you."

Martin earned his stripes as a novelist by looking into those private spaces where true lives are hidden. Reading *River of Heaven*, we stand face-to-face with Sam Brady, whose story of self-exile is one not often told; and we look him in the eye until we see not an odd neighbor, but a man so "precious in his grief" that it's ourselves we find and are the better for it.

Now, at least in part because of that good news back in 2006, Martin's stories will reach a wider audience. Sonia Pabley, one of Martin's agents with the Gersh Agency, says of his newfound recognition, "Lee always had tremendous reviews, but now the visibility increases. It means higher print runs, bigger advances, more marketing emphasis; it makes the house proud to be associated with you, as you would expect."

"For me," Martin says, "it means I have to write another book." For his readers, it means another reunion with a forgotten member of our common family.