

A Conversation with Larry Heinemann

February 9, 2006

Larry Heinemann never expected to be a writer. In Black Virgin Mountain, his most recent publication (2005), he tells us, "I came to writing... because I had a story to tell—a story that simply would not be denied and wasn't going away anytime soon." That story began publicly in 1977 with Close Quarters, a novel in which readers go "in country" for a year as they follow the life of Philip Dosier and witness the Vietnam War from the front lines. That story continued in 1986 with Paco's Story, Heinemann's second novel and winner of the 1987 National Book Award. Paco's Story appears to take up where Close Quarters left off. Philip Dosier is now Paco Sullivan, a wounded vet just back from Vietnam, trying to reclaim agency after the trauma of war and in the midst of alienation at home. Setting these two novels side by side, one might think that Heinemann had finished telling that story. He had, after all, captured the Vietnam veteran's experience, from combat to homecoming. And Heinemann's third book, a comic novel set in his hometown of Chicago, seemed to confirm this. Cooler by the Lake (1992) has nothing to do with Vietnam. But apparently, for all the power of writing, one thing it cannot do is neatly wrap up our lives with a beginning, middle, and end. Heinemann, it turned out, was not done with that story, or perhaps that story was not done with him. And so in Black Virgin Mountain, Heinemann's first book of nonfiction, he returns to Vietnam because, as he asserts, "it is clear that there is much, still, to talk about." Larry Heinemann was interviewed at the Fairfield Inn, in Valparaiso Indiana.

ALLISON SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Why *Black Virgin Mountain* now? And why nonfiction now?
Did you ever consider doing this book as fiction?

LARRY HEINEMANN

No. The impulse for the story began in 1990 when I went back to Vietnam with a delegation of Vietnam veterans, writers and poets like Larry Rottmann, Philip Caputo, Bruce Weigl, and Yusef Komunyakaa. I was invited to join this delegation for a literary conference in Hanoi, the first of its kind. We spent two or three days in Hanoi and then we traveled to Haiphong and Hue and Danang and Saigon, and then up to Cu Chi, where we crawled through the famous tunnels.

Afterwards, the poets got to write poetry, the magazine guys got to write articles, but the guys who write books were sort of stuck. Any book you could write would amount to the literary version of “What I Did on My Summer Vacation.”

Rottmann and I are both train buffs, and it turns out that Vietnam has this funky little railroad—French built, one meter narrow gauge. They still had steam locomotives, about ten that worked and three they still used. Vintage equipment. That’s about the kindest thing you can say. I said, “Well, you know I do want to write a book about this—what Vietnam is today and who the Vietnamese are. I know a little bit about how a train system operates” (and I’ve learned from Studs Terkel that when you talk to people about their work, you get all these other interesting stories). “Ok, then, Rottmann and I, we’ll go to Vietnam, we’ll ride the train, we’ll talk to the train guys and I’ll do a train travel book.”

The train guys have this great phrase—it’s a literal sign—End of Track. That’s what I wanted to call the book in the first place; it was just gonna be a quick and dirty train travel book. But if you go to Vietnam there’s no way that you can write about it and not have some reflection about the war: about your participation, the politics—Vietnamese and American, North and South. How can you not write about those things as you’re making it down the line?

And how can you, at least from my point of view, not include the trip that you take from Saigon, up Highway One to Cu Chi and Tay Ninh and Nui Ba Den, the Black Virgin Mountain? That was a place straight in the middle of the area where I operated. And during the war it always had a tremendous impact on everybody. As I say in the memoir, it gave us something we didn’t even know we needed. The image was absolutely, totally disengaged from anything happening around us, a beautiful, beautiful place to look at, whether it’s ten miles away or two miles away or right next to you. Everyone I have talked to who served in that neck of the woods remembers the Black Virgin Mountain with extraordinary clarity, and at the very least, some warmth.

Here's an aside: Native Americans speak of this place or that place or the other place as a power spot, where you can go—and it's always an individual choice—and somehow your spirit is close to heaven or the Great Spirit or the grandmothers and grandfathers. For you, it is a spiritual place. And to know that the Black Virgin Mountain is a power spot for me is a considerable irony. And undeniably true. The terrain, in that part of Vietnam, is as flat as the back of your hand, and Nui Ba Den is 996 meters above sea level. It's as if someone put Mt. McKinley in the middle of Kansas. You stand at the temple and you look out and you can see every place you ever camped, every ambush. You can see your war year spread out in front of you in a way that is dramatic and elegant and poignant. It was remarkable and that is when the train travel book turned into a memoir.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

I'm curious about how you decided to structure the book. You begin in the first chapter with your personal history of the war: being drafted, going through basic training with your brother, how it affected your family, being in Vietnam, coming home. Why did you choose to frontload your personal history and then take us in the last four chapters on the train ride, instead of just having the train ride be the structure of the book and then do flashbacks? Because you do use flashbacks in the later chapters.

HEINEMANN

Part of it had to do with why I became a writer and where I came from. I wanted to tell readers what it was like to be a soldier, a draftee; I wanted to capture that extraordinary six or seven months at Ft. Knox before I went overseas. These guys coming back from Vietnam would transfer in and they looked just dreadful. And all of us who had orders from the levy—orders to be transferred overseas—looked at these guys and said, "Oh, Jesus fucking Christ. This is gonna be just awful." Because these guys did not look healthy at all. They had a literal black look. Like I say in the memoir, it wasn't as if they had an attitude about anything. These guys didn't give a shit. And I wanted to write about it, but not a novel. This was a subject and a topic that a novel wouldn't get at. Just to tell the story itself.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

What did nonfiction allow you to do that fiction wouldn't?

HEINEMANN

Telling it as a memoir allowed me to say things about the government, about lifers, about the USO and Bob Hope and some of the things about the dynamic of the war and how it developed and who was responsible. It allowed me to stand up absolutely, to step forward and name names. To say as unambiguously as I could, “I think these people betrayed us with such egregious lies,” and to say that as large and blunt as I possibly could. One of the things I say about William Westmoreland is that if there was a dumber person in Southeast Asia I have yet to hear his name.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Obviously you had the current war in Iraq and Afghanistan on your mind. Did that also influence your choice to frontload the material about your time in Vietnam as a soldier? Because many of the details you choose to include—for example, that soldiers really didn’t have the best or most proper equipment—often serve as a social and political critique of the current wars.

HEINEMANN

That was part of it. Initially, I thought frontloading the memoir with the personal stuff was selfish and arrogant because when you’re writing fiction, you get to step back from the story. But when it’s a memoir the story is right here. The storyteller really gets to step forward. I learned that from the nonfiction Norman Mailer was writing in the late ’60s and early ’70s. He also taught me you could say the most outrageous things out loud and really get away with it. The interesting thing about Mailer is that when he was an undergrad at Harvard, he began in engineering. He quickly dumped that, but he always had an engineer’s kind of take on things. His imagination was connected with that and not simply mechanical things, but how things actually work.

In *Of a Fire on the Moon*, his book about the Apollo 11 shot and Neil Armstrong, he had a very complicated story to tell. And then there’s *The Armies of the Night*, which he subtitled *History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. In other words, story is not clean cut and there are always elements of nonfiction and essay forms in a novel, and there are always fiction forms in nonfiction. As a novelist trying, *trying*, to write a memoir, you’re looking at the story as a novelist and it’s never a straightforward story. That’s the not easy part of writing, trying to get it all in and have it make sense.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

I'd like to talk about the persona of the narrator in *Black Virgin Mountain* by asking you to compare him to the protagonists of your novels. In *Close Quarters*, you present Philip Dossier as a character overwhelmed by history. He's never completely a victim, but he struggles with the fact that he loses a lot of his agency. You put him in this chronological narrative, so it really feels like history is rolling over him. On the other hand, in *Paco's Story*, you spend a lot more time on the interiority of Paco, like you're working on the idea of reclaiming agency after serious trauma. It seems much more an exploration of subjectivity than an exploration of what happens to somebody when history—the “objective” world—rolls over them. What about the narrator of *Black Virgin Mountain*—is he more like Philip Dossier or Paco?

HEINEMANN

First of all you have to understand that Philip Dossier and I share a great many things. I know everything about him; he doesn't know anything about me. He really doesn't know what the next thing will be. He just responds on the spur of the moment. The narrator in *Black Virgin Mountain* is old enough to be Philip Dossier's grandfather, and so has at least two generations on him. The voice is much more reflective. *Black Virgin Mountain* is probably the closest someone's going to come to listening to me tell a story.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

You do address the reader directly, establishing a certain intimacy, something nonfiction writers talk about when speaking of the persona created in memoir or personal essay. But you've also created an angry, bitter voice in your attempt to be “clean and direct,” creating a strong tension with that intimacy. Did you consider the effect such a blunt narrator might have on the reader?

HEINEMANN

Yes, but only for a moment. When I started writing in the late '60s, I came into the writing trade, into the craft, with war stories. At the time, it was possible to use language that simply didn't exist in print before then. There was extraordinary permission for language and subject matter and point of view. In the 1960s I was pissed off enough to say, “Okay, I'm going to tell you a war story, a body count story, a fuck-you story, and it's my job as the storyteller not to leave anything out and

let you know exactly, *exactly* what it was like so you can imaginatively participate.” There was no reason to leave anything out, including attitude. You’re passing the story on., This is oral literature from day one. I’m gonna tell you a story and you’re gonna deal with it the best way you know how.

It’s a challenge: Can you keep up with the story? When I was working on *Paco’s Story* in the 1980s, I would send my editor, Pat Strachan, chapters of the book, and she would call back and say, “I’m offended by this. I’m offended by that. I’m offended by this.” Now, Pat Strachan is one of the few people in the world I actually love. She’s a wonderful editor and did nothing but nurture my career. But I finally said, “Listen Pat, I’m sorry. I truly apologize. But the people I wish to offend, I want them to know that they’re offended. I want to tell people like Kissinger and Johnson and McNamara, any of the lifers that had anything to do with the war that I am really pissed off. And I’m not going to make any bones about it to anybody.”

I used to feel like I was the only one. Then I started listening. Tim O’Brien is pissed off. Bruce Weigl is pissed off. Yusef Komunyakaa is still pissed off. I was fortunate on a number of occasions to meet and talk with the war literature scholar, Paul Fussell. His book, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, had a tremendous impact on me and other writers who came out of the war. I was at a reading he gave once in Chicago and he said out loud, flat out loud, that he’s reminded of World War II and his time as a soldier every month when his disability check comes. And he looked around the room and he said, “I will always look at the world through the eyes of a pissed off infantryman.” That alone is a kind of permission. At one time in the writing of *Paco’s Story*, it became clear between Pat and me that I wanted to take the war, the whole fucking thing, and shove it straight up somebody’s ass. In *Close Quarters*, I didn’t know who to be pissed off at, so I was pissed off at everybody. But when I sat down to write *Paco’s Story*, I knew exactly who I was pissed off at. And in *Black Virgin Mountain*, I made sure to really nail the people I thought should be nailed once and for all. And now I don’t have to talk about it anymore. As far as I’m concerned as a writer, that time in my life is ended. Everything I’ve ever had to say about it, in thirty-five years, is said: good, bad and indifferent.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Do you think, then, that writers have a political responsibility? And do you have a particular ethic that you’ve formulated as a writer these last forty years?

HEINEMANN

You have to be honest. As a writer, as an artist, as an intelligent citizen in a democracy, it is your responsibility to say what is on your mind. Whether anybody pays attention or not is another matter. But your responsibility as a human being is to speak up, particularly about those things that get the hair up on the back of your neck. And this has to do with everything from a woman's right to choose, to open communication between the government and its citizens, to specific and particular things like how the American people are going to deal with the rebuilding of New Orleans and that whole region of the country after Hurricane Rita and Hurricane Katrina. Yes, I feel a political responsibility. Plus, now I feel old enough to know that there's no reason just to shut up. Things are too serious.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Has your working class background particularly influenced who you are as a writer?

HEINEMANN

Absolutely. You can't not reflect your upbringing—four sons in a very small house. I've never lived alone. I shared a bedroom with my brothers, then I was in the army, then I got married. I do not have a class-A education; I went to a small city, private arts college.

One of the first things my father taught me: when I was twelve years old, I became a caddy, and on Mondays—this was a WASP country club—the course was closed so they could do maintenance. That was the day called “caddy day” and the caddies could go in and play golf. When my father found out I was gonna go in on caddy day, he looked at me and said, “Only a jackass goes to work on his day off.”

I never did learn how to play golf.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

One of the consistent traits in all your books, even *Cooler by the Lake*, is your direct, conversational tone, bolstered by a lot of asides or parenthetical comments. Is that related to your upbringing?

HEINEMANN

I haven't made a study of it, but it wouldn't surprise me. For me, it's a serious waste of time to try and figure out how I do this, rather than just doing it.

As a writer your tools are very simple: something to write with and language. I tell my students if you want to be a writer, you really have to become a master of language. That means reading all kinds of writing. It means taking a course in linguistics or the history of English and getting yourself a really good dictionary. Hit up your old man and have him get you a copy of the *OED* and a copy of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the latest edition. As far as I'm considered the *American Heritage* is the dictionary of the American language. Everything's in it—slang and all. You gotta be a student of language and a student of American English. You need to know how language changes and how it *has* changed, like jargon and slang and bureaucratic language and how to hide an image in a phrase, hide meaning in a phrase. Writing is a craft like any other craft of the hand, and if you're serious about it, you have to study the whole thing and take it all the way through and not be afraid of story. Even those things that may turn your stomach. You have to be able to tell the story in such a way that the person who is listening or reading has the same response that you did and you can't shy away from that. I think that separates the writers from the hobbyists.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

I can't help but notice how dear Samuel Clemens is to you—

HEINEMANN

It is one of the serious regrets of my life that I never got to meet him. Having dinner with Mark Twain must have been a hell of an evening. What a wise man. He's probably the dictionary definition of an American writer who's also a humanist. And a great heart. He and Whitman and Melville—those three guys are the bedrock of 19th century American literature. If you want to be a writer and you don't read and understand Melville, Twain and Whitman, you will always have a hole in your work.

Samuel Clemens brought ordinary, everyday, garden variety American speech into story. And that I celebrate. He got the gag, as my friend Riley says. And he grew as an artist. He was raised Missouri-comma-Southern racist, and by the end of his life, he was this completely different person, one of the great voices of American literature. And his outrage about stupidities and foolishness and selfishness and arrogance? Spot on. He got off some real daisies. What a wealth of one-liners. When my students and I are talking about precision in language, I always quote Twain. "The difference between the right word and the almost right

word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” One of my great heroes.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Because *Black Virgin Mountain* is your first foray into nonfiction, at least as a book, did you draw from Twain in any particular way?

HEINEMANN

I went back and reread parts of *Life on the Mississippi*. He wanted to set the record straight on what it was like to be a riverboat pilot. He says in that book that it was an unfettered profession demanding serious craftsmanship. What a sense of place you had to have to pilot a boat up and down the Mississippi. You had to memorize the whole goddamn thing from St. Louis to New Orleans. Twain enjoyed piloting much more than any other work he'd ever done. And spoke of it with nostalgia and pride. Generally, he spoke of things in a wry way. From Twain I learned that everything contains its own irony. You get that from Burroughs, too, but Twain really nailed it.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

That speaks to the end of your book, which you've called ironic as well. In describing the epiphany at Black Virgin Mountain, you seem sheepish, as if you're apologizing for this insight, this feeling of being home.

HEINEMANN

I remember the moment exactly. It was a true surprise. It makes my beard tingle to think about it. This is a place that I know I can come to: this temple, this woman, this story of Ba Den, this place. I can stand here and look at this and be renewed. Finally. Finally. Finally. Finally. I'm home. In contrast, the first dozen years I was back from the war, I felt alienated. Even though I was married, had kids, had a house, a home, had a career, found something to do that I love more than anything I've ever done, but I never felt at home. And feeling like an alien in your own country? Not comfortable.

In the book I say I don't go to Vietnam to heal. I don't go there to have a good old fashioned cry. A lot of Americans were killed—60,000 Americans—tens and tens and scores of tens of thousands of Vietnamese were put to death, so you can't even with any conscience grieve about the Americans because the Vietnamese suffered much more than we did.

Much more. So why is it that I can go there and feel at home? Because the Vietnamese always made me feel welcome. They're not the only culture that puts an emphasis on family, but the Vietnamese emphasis is a serious matter. For all the political differences among the Vietnamese, there is this brother-sister attitude. The way they speak to me or welcome me when I go there, or how glad they are to see me when they come here, makes me feel like a family member of the distant cousin kind. I know for a fact that if I really fuck it up here and I have to get out of town tomorrow, I can go to Hanoi and I know the house. From the airport, I can give the guy directions to the house and when I get there know for a fact that they will take me in.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

Did you have to struggle with how you wrote that final moment, because an epiphany is usually apprehended rather than rationally understood. Was it difficult to communicate that moment?

HEINEMANN

Absolutely not. By the time I got to that part of the book, it was, I'm home. Now it's time to just turn my hat around and lean on the handlebars, no more hard pedaling. No, that's the whole point. I'm home.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

You write in your book: "I don't come back to heal, but I can only speak of it this way." The second part of the line feels like you're wrestling to express that the emotional work of the book is there and it's happening, but you don't want to give it this name of healing.

HEINEMANN

The word "healing"—we can put it in quotes—we've been able to put it in quotes for twenty or thirty years now. "Healing" is one of those buzz words like "Closure." There are some things in the world that are so important and so monstrous that you're never gonna get closure on them. Ever. How can anybody ever declare closure on the Holocaust? How can you possibly declare closure on the life and times of Josef Stalin? How can you possibly declare closure on the holocaust that happened in Cambodia? The Khmer Rouge murdered people because they wore glasses. There are some things that don't heal.

The image that comes right after that line, "I can only speak of it this way," is that little scene from *Moby-Dick* between Ahab and the

blacksmith where the blacksmith is pounding out these one-of-a-kind harpoon tips that are made from Swedish steel razors and steel horse-shoe nails. There's sparks all over and the guy's really banging it out and Ahab comes up to him with his ivory leg, comes pounding up to the guy and says, "Aren't you afraid of getting burned or scalded?" And the blacksmith speaks for everybody who ever made his living by the swing of his arm, "You cannot scorch a scar." How can you possibly cauterize something like that? To be a soldier was an astonishing time in my life, and I'm old enough to know that all of it is going to remain vivid, up to and including my wholehearted participation. And how do you apologize to anybody for that? You don't. How do you come out of any of that in one piece? You actually don't. The one thing that you can do—and this is maybe trivial or trite or cliché—live your life like you mean it. And don't be afraid. It's not as if you have to make up for anything. You've been given back a great gift and now you have this awareness of what the gift is.

SCHUETTE-HOFFMAN

That you made it back.

HEINEMANN

In one piece. And something of your spirit intact. That counts for a lot. To be a writer is to look at the world in a much different way than other folks. You're obliged to look at the world as a humanist, to take the largest possible view and be honest with yourself. At the moment of the telling of the story you put your personal feelings and politics aside as much as you can. Your whole responsibility is to the story. Sometimes it takes you to places in your imagination you would rather not be or visit, but wherever the story takes you, that's where you go.

To be a humanist. That's what you strive for. I think all the great writers, all the great storytellers had this, this broadest possible view of what the fuck is going on here.

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