

A conversation with Blake Bailey, Philip Roth biographer and author of *Canceled Lives: My Father, My Scandal, and Me*: “I said ... I’m not going to take this lying down”

David Walsh

25 May 2025

In April 2021, Blake Bailey, author of several acclaimed literary biographies, came under vicious attack on unsubstantiated charges of sexual misconduct, including rape. Bailey strenuously denied the claims, calling them “categorically false and libelous.” Bailey *had* never been and still *has* never been charged with a crime, much less convicted of one. Nonetheless, W.W. Norton, in a historic act of censorship, “permanently” removed Bailey’s comprehensive study of American novelist Philip Roth (1933–2018), *Philip Roth: The Biography*, from print. Skyhorse Publishing subsequently put it out.

Bailey has now written and published a compelling reply to the slanderers, *Canceled Lives—My Father, My Scandal, and Me*, which deserves a broad audience. Unlike many of the #MeToo victims, Bailey has decided to fight and set the record straight. This is an entirely welcome and healthy development, a contribution to the cleansing of the cultural atmosphere.

The purging of Bailey’s book in 2021, as we explained at the time, in “Book-burning comes to America,” set

a sinister example, intended to intimidate artists, biographers and scholars alike. The message being sent is clear: any influential figure who rubs establishment public opinion the wrong way can be denounced and dispatched in like manner.

As we further noted,

with one Salem witch-trial-like outburst of hysteria, a respected biographer, author of a volume that was to become the standard work on the subject, vanishes into thin air.

The presence of Roth himself loomed large over the censorship of the biography and the exclusion of Bailey. The *New York Times*, whose snout was “busily at work in the affair,” as we noted,

let the filthy cat out of the bag in this regard. It observed that the controversy “that has engulfed Mr. Bailey erupted in part because of the publicity he has received for his Roth biography, which led some of the women accusing him of misconduct to come forward.”

In his *Canceled Lives*, Bailey discusses how the #MeToo

bomb exploded and the radioactive half-life set in. ... The peak of my success and the nadir of my fall overlapped within days or hours. *Philip Roth: The Biography* was published on April 6, 2021, when I was already aware of the forthcoming front-page rave by Cynthia Ozick (!) for the April 11 *New York Times* Book Review: “The 19th-century novel lives on. Its name today is Biography; its nature is that of Dostoyevskian magnitude. And Blake Bailey’s comprehensive life of Philip Roth—to tell it outright—is a narrative masterwork.”

Within days, thanks to various eager media outlets, including the *Times*, which passed on as fact various allegations, Bailey was a “pariah,” a “non-person,” his book, the product of a decade’s intellectual labor, “pulped.”

Bailey is a distinguished biographer. Indeed, a commentator argued in 2013 that “Blake Bailey has officially established himself as the preeminent biographer of American novelists.”

He is the author of four highly praised—and engrossing—studies. His first effort was a biography of American novelist Richard Yates (1926–1992), identified with the critique of American middle class life in particular and the author of *Revolutionary Road* (1961), *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (1962), a short story collection, and *The Easter Parade* (1976).

Bailey’s treatment of the remarkable American short story writer and novelist John Cheever (1912–1982), *Cheever: A Life*, appeared in 2009.

At the time, before the British newspaper discovered, as it did in 2021, that Bailey was “a man credibly accused of rape” and someone who understood Philip Roth’s “cruelty to women because, or so it seems, he understands it all too well,” the *Guardian* noted that Bailey’s Cheever biography was “almost 700 pages long, and so tirelessly detailed, even Cheever’s children have found surprises within its tidy bulk.” It further pointed out that Cheever’s daughter Susan, an acclaimed author in her own right, “loves the book; she thinks Bailey’s version of her father is truthful and unflinching, and that it captures him in some essential way.”

Bailey’s *Farther & Wilder: The Lost Weekends and Literary Dreams of Charles Jackson* (2013) took up the life and mostly hard times of a novelist, Charles R. Jackson (1903–1968), whose principal and most objectively enduring work is not identified with him by even a fraction of the American public. Jackson was the author of *The Lost Weekend* (1944), the best-selling study of a five-day drinking binge (based on personal experience, unhappily), turned into a 1945 Academy Award-winning film

by Billy Wilder with Ray Milland in the lead role.

Bailey then spent nearly a decade on the Philip Roth project, bringing to life one the country's most important postwar novelists.

In a recent video call, this writer spoke to Bailey about his new book, the sexual witch hunt and democratic rights and, briefly, the subject matter of his various biographies.

All of these works, in fact, deserve the widest possible readership:

A Tragic Honesty—The Life and Work of Richard Yates (2003)

Cheever—A Life (2009)

Farther & Wilder—The Lost Weekends and Literary Dreams of Charles Jackson (2013)

The Splendid Things We Planned—A Family Portrait (2014)

Philip Roth: The Biography (2021)

Canceled Lives—My Father, My Scandal, and Me (2025)

Some of Blake Bailey's awards and accolades:

2000 Louisiana Humanities Teacher of the Year

2003 National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for *A Tragic Honesty: The Life and Work of Richard Yates*

2005 Guggenheim Fellowship for *Cheever: A Life*

2009 National Book Critics Circle Award winner for *Cheever: A Life*

2009 Francis Parkman Prize winner for *Cheever: A Life*

2009 Pulitzer Prize finalist for *Cheever: A Life*

2009 James Tait Black Memorial Prize finalist for *Cheever: A Life*

2010 Academy Award in Literature given by the American Academy of Arts and Letters

2014 National Book Critics Circle Award (Autobiography) finalist for *The Splendid Things We Planned*

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David Walsh: It was a terrible business in 2021, a terrible injustice, one of the most significant examples of this sort of sexual misconduct witch hunt. What was done to you, this slander campaign, was unfair and anti-democratic.

It was a serious blow to you personally, but it has wider implications, in our view. We all lose out because, first of all, your biographies are scrupulously researched, honest, objective, elegantly written and illuminating, and they provide an understanding not only of the figures under discussion, but of the wider cultural world, especially American postwar life, as well as the problems and challenges of writing fiction.

And if that work is suppressed, we're all the poorer. If people can be "disappeared" from intellectual life in this manner because of alleged and entirely unproven moral transgressions, what and who will be left? If we only have the blameless, conventional and uncontroversial, or those who meet with the approval of the identity politics fanatics, there won't be much of a cultural life left.

Blake Bailey: You could be speaking for me, and, in fact, you *did*, after everything blew up. I was enormously grateful for the courage of it. Very few people spoke up. People wrote me private notes expressing their outrage, or at least chagrin, about how viciously and relentlessly I was attacked. But I can't think of anyone offhand who was as outspoken publicly as you were. And if I didn't say it emphatically enough before, let me say now that I was very grateful for that.

DW: I certainly appreciate that. One of our advantages is that we don't give a damn about middle class public opinion, what the editorial board of the *New York Times* says and thinks.

You have a new book, *Canceled Lives: My Father, My Scandal, and Me*. Can you tell me something about its genesis and gestation?

BB: The prospect of writing about my sex life and discussing what was true and what was untrue, what was distorted, etc., was about as appealing to me as drinking my own urine.

But it had to be done. I have a daughter, and you'll be happy to know, we're doing fine. She doesn't want to read the new book, and I don't blame her, but for her sake, I could not let this stand.

And, again, some of it was so vicious and untrue and everyone—not everyone, but most people, certainly in the mainstream media, implicitly accepts it. For the rest of my life, I'll be a reputed rapist. I have to live with that.

So I wanted the book to exist. I wanted it to be out there. I didn't want people to say he never answered these accusations. No, I've answered them, and I'm done with it. Whatever publicity I'm offered, I will dutifully do. But after this, I am done with the whole subject.

DW: You take a particular approach to answering those accusations. I think it's effective. Yes, the prospect of having to defend yourself against this stuff is pretty atrocious. But I think you do it effectively in the course of discussing your life and your relations with your father and various other issues. You work back to these allegations, the reality of things, and reply to them very clearly.

BB: I appreciate that. I wrote an earlier version of the book, which was basically the story of my work with Philip Roth. Philip had kind of expected that something like this could happen to his biographer. Ever since his former wife, Claire Bloom, published her memoir, *Leaving a Doll's House* [1996], and trashed his personal reputation. He thought that any biography of him was going to be a risky business for the biographer. And so it proved to be.

It's a long story that I can't discuss publicly, but the Roth Estate quashed the earlier version of this book, whereupon my father became the main focus. He died seven months after my scandal blew up. I was very much living with that when I started to write *Canceled Lives* in the summer of 2022, about how he responded to this business. It made me reflect on our lifelong relationship. That was just the next logical approach for me, because that was the other very important context of my scandal.

I could not write about how this affected my wife and daughter. That was not for public consumption. So I wrote about my father.

DW: He came to terms with it ultimately?

BB: It could have gone either way. My father, as I write in in the book, always affected to be dismissive of my writing. He thought that American novelists, at least my American novelist subjects, were distasteful people—alcoholics, sexual deviants and so on. My father is from the small town of Vinita, Oklahoma. He fancied himself very straightforward and plain-spoken. I think he found me and my writing pretentious. These are just some of the issues that I grew up with vis a vis my father.

He could be very loving, but he was very judgmental. When my scandal blew up, there was the possibility that he might have been rejecting of me, which would have been the final straw, as it were. That would have been the coup de grace. I was just about done. But he didn't, he was very loving and accepting.

Our final months together were, for the most part, very mutually supportive.

DW: Has the new book been reviewed or has it been ignored?

BB: It's been largely ignored. I assume that that neglect is supposed to be contemptuous, and that's fine. It's certainly not in the interest of the *New York Times*, for example, to give any publicity to the book because their senior book reviewer is implicated in the story.

Let's see, the publicity has consisted of a positive review in the *New York Journal of Books*—not to be confused with the *New York Review of Books*—plus a very good piece in *Tablet* by the young man, Sheluyang Peng, and that piece in *UnHerd* by Valerie Stivers, which was also fine.

She quoted me as saying, "I'm very fucking angry." She quoted me correctly, and it's true. Oh, and I was also on the Bret Easton Ellis podcast, and he is fearless. We did a two-part, almost three-hour interview and I felt completely at ease with him. He was knowledgeable. He was receptive, non-judgmental.

But that's most of the publicity this book has gotten. It could have been worse and I could have been viciously attacked again. That hasn't happened yet.

DW: I know the answer to this question, but I'll ask it anyway. No one has suggested having second thoughts, much less offered apologies for what happened in 2021?

BB: No, nobody has suggested that. But I think just as tellingly, nobody has indignantly tried to deny what I say in the book.

When we were planning to publish that earlier version of the book in 2022, people seemed angrier by my impulse to defend myself than they had been about what I was accused of in the first place. Because what you're supposed to do is put on your sackcloth and ashes, wander off into the desert and get pecked by birds.

But I said, to hell with that, I'm not taking this lying down. The worst of the allegations are absolutely untrue.

So here we are in 2025 and the media's approach has changed. The approach is just ignore him and he'll go away. Well, that's fine, I will go away soon enough. But in the meantime, I've said my piece, and what I've said is true. And I don't hear anyone loudly denying any of it. So there you have it.

DW: I think that has a certain significance. I think the mood is changing. Can I ask about your background and how you came to be a literary biographer?

BB: What happened basically is I wanted to write fiction. I had written these unpublished novels, and finally I wrote a novel that was good enough to interest a literary agent. She said, "You're a good writer, but I can't sell this. Why don't you write me a nonfiction proposal about anything that particularly interests you?"

What happened to interest me at that moment was whatever had become of the writer Richard Yates. These Vintage Contemporary reprints of *Revolutionary Road*, *The Easter Parade* and *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* came out a few years before his death in 1992. But as of the late '90s, everything by Yates was out of print!

I just wondered, what about this guy? So I called Monica, his daughter and literary executor, and it was amazing. She told me, for example, that her father was the sole speechwriter for Bobby Kennedy when he was attorney general, at the nadir of Yates's own mental illness, when he was in and out of institutions.

Yates was also a pioneering patient for psychotropic drugs. He was bipolar, he was badly alcoholic. He was the subject of a *Seinfeld* episode, because Monica had dated Larry David in the 1980s. Elaine Benes on the *Seinfeld* show was based on Monica Yates. They did this episode, "The Jacket," that was inspired by a disastrous encounter between Larry David and Monica's father.

All this piqued my curiosity, to put it mildly. And it just kept getting better. So that was kind of a dream project. I could never work that hard again.

DW: How many years did that take?

BB: See, that was the rub, because Picador, the publisher, basically gave me gum money and all of 14 months to write that book. Fourteen months to research and write what became a 600-plus-page book. I think it was Emerson who said something along the lines of, if you approach a task with great enthusiasm, you will surprise yourself. You will do great things. And I had great enthusiasm for this project, and I had waited a long time to get my shot. I didn't throw away my shot in the case of the Yates book. It was insane. I could not possibly ever, ever do that again. Nor would I want to.

DW: In those 20 years of trying to write fiction, you obviously developed certain abilities, because these books are enormous efforts involving the interweaving of facts, psychological and aesthetic assessments. It's an extraordinary accomplishment. They are fascinating and rich books.

They do give the impression you have an insatiable curiosity about human beings, artistic figures in particular, and how they act. Would that be a just comment?

BB: Yes, it would be an eminently just comment. I'm also very curious about the difference between a person's inner and outer life.

In the case of John Cheever, for example. There was that 4,300-page, single-spaced typed journal, in 28 volumes—four linear feet. There it all was. The contrast between the jaunty, charming, public Cheever—this suburban squire image that he cultivated, this paterfamilias—and what was in the journal could not have been more stark and disconcerting.

This disparity between a private and public self is writ large in the case of Cheever, and it's especially interesting because Cheever was an interesting artist. How do you take this dichotomy and how does it feed into your art?

DW: Back to Yates for a second. What's your overall feeling about his work?

BB: I've a very high regard for Yates's work. I think he got the most out of what raw talent he had. For what it's worth, the only thing that matters is the objective accomplishment. I think that Yates's objective accomplishment, given all his many burdens as a human being, was the utmost of what he was capable of. I think that's a triumph. I think he wrote two novels that deserve to be called great, *Revolutionary Road* and *The Easter Parade*. He also wrote two collections of short stories that deserve to be called great and I think that's very impressive. I think Yates knew something about how middle class Americans conduct their lives. That was uniquely expressed in his work.

DW: This is a valuable comment. You cite it and Yates says what he thinks pretty bluntly:

"I meant it [*Revolutionary Road*] more as an indictment of American life in the nineteen-fifties," said Yates. "Because during the Fifties there was a general lust for conformity over this country, by no means only in the suburbs—a kind of blind, desperate clinging to safety and security at any price, as exemplified politically in the Eisenhower administration and the McCarthy witch-hunts.... I meant the title to suggest that the revolutionary road of 1776 had come to something very much like a dead end in the Fifties."

That's a pretty strong and thoughtful statement. It's impressive.

BB: So he's not indicting the suburbs per se. Everyone wants to have basic creature comforts, wants to have a nice roof over their head. What's wrong with that? But material comfort came relatively easily in the postwar era, at least for some.

Middle class America was very prosperous, and you had certain people in that milieu who liked to believe they were better than all this. They were better than their dumb jobs. They were better than the banality of their everyday life. They weren't defined by their paycheck, etc., etc., and basically, Yates said, in most cases this just wasn't true—in fact, they'd gotten pretty much exactly what they deserved out of life.

We are sort of fundamentally self-deceiving, pathetic creatures like Yates's mother, who fancied herself a sculptor, and who was not without talent. Her children and herself suffered a great deal while she pursued this bohemian pipe dream in the context of middle-class trappings that she couldn't afford. So people, to come to terms with the banality of their middle-class suburban lives, told themselves a lot of romantic things about themselves that weren't true. Finding out that they're not true is what happens in Yates's work. It's a grindingly depressing thing to watch.

DW: It's sometimes grindingly depressing to read about his alcoholism and his life. You make it interesting and entertaining, but it is a kind of a grim horror story in certain regards.

Alcoholism is not fun and it's not pretty and it's not romantic.

BB: No, certainly not in Yates's case. I want to make a point in all my

books and this applies to my father as well, and it applies to me in the context of *Canceled Lives*, my latest memoir. You can have these various character defects, whether they be Yates's alcoholism, Roth's narcissism and obsessiveness, Cheever's narcissism and obsessiveness and alcoholism. My father was something of a philanderer when I was growing up and my mother was quite freewheeling in her own right, and yet at bottom they were decent people. They weren't horrible human beings. You can have these flaws. You can be lecherous and also a decent person. My father had a deservedly superb reputation in his professional life. Nobody has come to replace him, arguably, as the preeminent figure in the legal profession here in Oklahoma.

For my part I was a good biographer. Did I sleep around on my wife? I did. Does that mean I need to get the shit kicked out of me for the rest of my life and be turned into something monstrous? So now I'm not just a philanderer, but a rapist and "groomer" and so forth, you know? Why this relentless need to demonize?

DW: You speak of an objective contribution. People do this in relation to artists. They don't tend to do it in relation to physicists or mathematicians. What if we discovered Einstein mistreated his wife or his children, would that put the theory of relativity into question?

BB: I would aver that it would not reflect remotely on the theory of relativity and its validity. The fact is, Einstein was unkind to his wife. But we don't judge him as a physicist in those terms.

DW: Artists and biographers make objective contributions as well as scientists and mathematicians.

BB: True. Obviously, I didn't relish the ass-stomping I got, especially when it was based largely on distortions. But I want to make the point that all of us human beings have fatal, terrible flaws. And that should not prevent us from having an essential sympathy with every individual human being. In my biographies, I put it all out there, and let the chips fall where they may, but it's not tendentious—I'm letting *you* decide, and ultimately the enterprise is a sympathetic one on my part. I'm fond of all my biographical subjects without fail. I knew Philip very well for the six years before he died and spent a lot of time with him. I saw his faults, and they were considerable, but at bottom he was an adorable, darling man.

DW: The biographies are very objective accounts. They're not uncritical, but sympathetic. The material is there, the research and the effort you've made is there, to make these complex, difficult people come to life. They are works of art. If you'll pardon me for saying that.

BB: [Laughs] Say it by all means.

If something is not representative of the evidence, it doesn't make its way into my book. Again, the emphasis that I give to individual themes in a particular life is entirely evidence-based. It's not remotely conjectural. It's not me wanting to impose any thesis on my subjects' lives.

DW: Did you derive something from your father's work as a lawyer? The "fact-based," systematic working through of objective problems ...

BB: How to put this? One of the reasons that I was not as good a fiction writer and enjoyed success as a literary biographer is because I am more comfortable and more successful in an objective mode than I am in a subjective mode.

I think fiction is mostly a subjective exercise. However much you manage to detach yourself from your material, you're essentially writing about yourself and writing from the inside. I'm not good at that. I'm not comfortable with that, seeing myself so much on the page.

One of the problems with writing that first memoir, *The Splendid Things We Planned: A Family Portrait* [2014], was that at first it was all about my brother: Scott did this, he did that, and so on. That sort of thing gets to be a grind. It's monotonous. But I couldn't comfortably put myself into the picture. Finally I had to, but it was excruciating. Our family was the context for what happened to Scott and vice versa.

Both my father and I had a sort of personal waywardness, which accounts for our occasional lechery and so forth, our personal defects, but

we were very comfortable approaching an objective task, be it a legal case or somebody else's life, some life other than mine. We're methodical and disciplined about that and comfortable with it.

DW: What about Cheever? What a complicated figure! I have somewhat ambivalent feelings about his work. Obviously a brilliant guy and very funny. The comments from letters and such that you cite are wonderfully funny. For the benefit of the reader, can you give the general outlines of his life and career?

BB: Sure. John Cheever was born in Quincy, Massachusetts in 1912. Very puritan, very middle class genteel. And his father, quite early in his childhood, lost all their money.

So the mother had to open this gift shop, go into trade. Cheever's childhood was this long mortification of losing the protective shell of his gentility. Meanwhile, he had this athletic older brother, and he himself was a sissy. And that was mortifying. He was rejected by his parents because of that.

It cannot be stressed enough how much Cheever hated being gay and hated being lesser in a class sense. It was very important to Cheever to be ... He was a snob. He was an arch snob. He wanted friends who were from the upper crust. Whatever they did, that's the milieu that he intensely coveted.

So at first, as a young man, Cheever plays the bohemian genius. It's the Depression. He doesn't have any choice. He sort of affects to embrace bohemianism in the Village and the lifestyle, going from one flophouse to the other, but once he starts to kind of make it as a writer, he has two ambitions. One is to have a family so he doesn't have to live a gay life, and two is to be accepted into a genteel world. So Cheever was a snob who was kind of a spy among these people. He wanted to write about their inner lives. He wanted to write about their own suffering and contradictions and whatnot. So he needed to insinuate himself into that world.

But at the same time, he intensely coveted that world. So it's complicated.

DW: I'm a little surprised in his case, because he's such a bright man that he was so concerned with all that, that he wanted to be the gentleman squire.

BB: Look, it wasn't an intellectual aspiration. Cheever knew better. He knew there were higher things to aspire to. And he lampooned, he excoriated that whole world in his work.

And in his life, he cultivated, on the one hand, people who came out of Harvard and Groton and so on, while, on the other, he hung out with Donald Lang, this emaciated ex-con from Sing Sing.

And they would hang out in the Ossining "Soul No. 4 Bar," these black bars and whatnot. So Cheever was the proverbial divided personality. He loathed the conventional genteel world, and he hankered and hankered for it. That's what made Cheever a very unhappy person.

DW: Another tormented soul.

BB: Tormented, totally. Yates was also a bit of snob, with his suits and ties and whatnot. He wanted to cover up his dishevelment, inner and outer. This was what made these people artists in part, reconciling the paradoxes of their own nature and finding a way to express that on the page.

DW: Presumably, in Cheever's case, it was bound up with suppressing his homosexuality and covering it up.

BB: Oh my God, yes.

DW: So talk to me about Cheever's novel *Falconer*. I found it disturbing, hallucinatory. It struck me as a courageous book, with its prison setting and gay themes.

BB: It certainly was at the time because, for the rest of his life, the five years remaining to him, everyone was sort of on the scent that he was probably gay. But, you know, once Cheever got sober, as he did in 1975, *Falconer* was published in 1977, all he really thought about and practically all he wrote about, what little writing he did after that, was

about being gay. In *Oh What a Paradise It Seems*, the 1982 novella, what he wanted to tell the world or what he thought he wanted to tell the world was: This is okay. I've come to terms with it. A person can have a wife and still have larky sex with the gardener, or whatever.

Did he feel that in his gut? Absolutely not. He was more tormented than ever, because he couldn't even have recourse to alcohol to kill the pain. In his last, sober years, he wanted to have as much gay sex as he could possibly manage, because this is what he'd been repressing all his life.

So that was hard. Anyone who thinks Cheever's life is this redemptive fable, where he stopped drinking and came to terms with his homosexuality, is on the wrong track. That's what a previous biographer, Scott Donaldson, thought, but he didn't have Cheever's journal and did not see all that stuff, expressed on every page.

DW: But *Falconer* is also striking for other reasons. There's the prison setting, first of all, the various accounts of the other prisoners, the various personalities he encounters. Then there's the prison riot at another prison. I assume that's an echo of the Attica riot in 1971.

BB: It was. Cheever was teaching writing at Sing Sing when the Attica riot erupted. These hard-boiled cons that he was sitting in a room with said "You would make a good hostage."

So that was very much based on what was happening to him. The whole novel was based on his experience at Sing Sing. In its physical characteristics. At the same time, the book is an allegory and the setting is, as you say, rather hallucinatory.

DW: There is a hallucinatory, out of time, out of space quality to *Falconer*.

BB: Cheever would be delighted to hear you say that. That was very much the nature of Cheever's mature enterprise as a writer. He would tell his students this—especially students who fancied themselves as experimental, and indulged in a lot of surreal effects—Cheever would tell them to put in little signposts to anchor their work in the real world.

But Cheever did that magnificently, especially in *Falconer*. You're in a symbolic world of a sort, but at the same time, it is recognizably a prison. The various episodes—the slaughter of the cats and so forth—seem to be taking place in this world beyond time and space.

DW: The Charles Jackson book is an interesting one. How did you come up with him?

BB: Ha, well, essentially, I was totally burnt out after I finished the Cheever book. I had worked on it obsessively for five or six years, and I wanted to have a little fun. I wanted to give myself a break. I didn't want to write about another great American novelist. I wanted to write about a funny character who appealed to me on a quirky human level. That was Charlie Jackson, who wrote *The Lost Weekend* [1944]. I'm also intrigued by how transitory and finicky American cultural tastes are.

The Lost Weekend was a big deal at the time. It sold half a million copies in its various editions within its first five years. It changed the way we perceive addiction and alcoholism in this country. But you say "Charles Jackson" now, nobody knows who Charles Jackson was.

DW: I'd never heard of him. I didn't even know the Billy Wilder-Ray Milland film was based on a book.

BB: How did he go from sobering up, after utterly disastrous, suicidal alcoholism, writing this book—a masterpiece in its time, part of the Modern Library and so forth—and after years of being a celebrated speaker at AA meetings, a devoted father to two adoring daughters, he ends up dying of a drug overdose at the Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan, where he was living with this Czechoslovakian laborer?

That's an interesting trajectory. I wanted to see how this happened exactly, in terms of cause and effect. And I think I pulled that off. I found his suicide note! His own kids didn't know that a suicide note existed. Though I say it myself, that was pretty brilliant detective work on my part. It was in an attic somewhere in Englewood, New Jersey.

As a cultural artifact, *The Lost Weekend* as a novel was completely

supplanted by the movie, and what made it even worse was that the movie came out within a year of the novel. It completely overshadowed the book. That was the great disaster in Charlie's life.

DW: I'm fascinated by his correspondence with Thomas Mann.

BB: Those two, they loved each other.

DW: How did that come about?

BB: Mann was very susceptible to well-informed flattery. And Charlie gave him that by the shovelful. You know, he was Charlie's "*Cher maître*." I love that little scene in the unpublished Mary McCarthy novel, which was based on Charles Jackson, and the Charlie character meets Thomas Mann. In real life, Mary McCarthy was there at that party in Pacific Palisades, where those two met.

Thomas Mann was blowing everybody off. He was Thomas Mann, after all: he didn't have to talk to these ridiculous Hollywood types. Then Charles Jackson comes up to him and suddenly Thomas Mann lights up: "You wrote *The Lost Weekend*!" In her aborted novel, McCarthy calls *The Lost Weekend* something like *Another Short One*, so the Mann character says "You wrote *A Short Vun*!"

So everyone is afraid to even get near Thomas Mann. And suddenly they hear him say, "*The Lost Weekend*, *The Lost Weekend*, I love that book!"

DW: For that matter, his correspondence with Mary McCarthy itself is interesting.

BB: Mary McCarthy was part of an intellectually intimidating group for Charlie. You see those photographs of this little balding guy, and you can imagine him being browbeaten by these people.

It was pure delight working on my Charlie book from start to finish, and I'm glad I did it. It sold nothing, as you can imagine.

DW: Which was your most commercially successful book?

BB: Oh, in terms of copies sold, the Roth biography by far. And it was only out there three weeks before Norton had it pulped.

I still remember the moment, after my scandal broke. Here I am, practically catatonic. Everything's blown up. I've been called a rapist on the front page of the *New York Times*. And my friend, who will go unnamed, helpfully says, "Your sales ranking is number ten on Amazon." "Well, that's something!"

I had been on *Morning Joe*, the talk show, a few days before the shit hit the fan, and they revisited the story a few days later, after my scandal blew up. They reported that Norton was pulling my Roth book, so people thought, "Well, if we're going to read it, we better get it now!" So it sold.

The Roth book debuted at number 12 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. Who knows where it would have gone? The Cheever book made the lower rungs of the bestseller list, and that's it.

I'm very proud of my Cheever biography, but it didn't really help his reputation. Nobody's reading Cheever these days. Nobody. I did my part. I wrote that biography, I edited the Library of America Cheever. I did what I could for Cheever, but it just didn't take.

On the other hand, Sam Mendes, the director of the film adaptation of Yates's *Revolutionary Road* [2008]—well, maybe he was only being flattering, he's a nice guy. I visited the set of *Revolutionary Road*, and he said, "What really did it for me was reading your book. I thought, this is really fascinating ..." I do think that I pushed Yates back into the public eye. *Revolutionary Road*, the movie tie-in edition, sold a million copies! It was number one on the *New York Times* paperback best-seller list. So that's pretty impressive. It didn't help my bottom line at all. My Yates biography certainly was not on any bestseller list. But I think the right people read it.

DW: How long did the Roth enterprise take?

BB: Let's see here. I wrote my first letter to Philip in April of 2012. He canvassed a couple of his friends and they said, "Yeah, it's the guy who wrote the Cheever book. This may be the right guy for you." So Philip interviewed me for about three hours. That was interesting.

DW: What did he ask you?

BB: His first question was, "Why should a gentile from Oklahoma write the only authorized biography of Philip Roth?" I said, "I'm not a bisexual alcoholic with an ancient puritan lineage, but I wrote a biography of John Cheever." And it went from there.

As I wrote in my Acknowledgments to the Roth book, after our interview had gone on for two or three hours I went to the toilet, and when I came back, there was a photo album in my chair.

It was Philip's girlfriend album. It was chronological. So in the early part of the album, you had two good-looking young people, Philip Roth and whoever was his girlfriend at the time. And as you keep turning pages, Philip Roth is getting older and older and older, and the women are staying the same age!

While I looked at the album, Philip was watching me very closely. He was watching me to see how I'd respond to that, his being with these younger and younger women. At one point I just casually commented, "What about Ali MacGraw?" Because Ali MacGraw had played Brenda Patimkin in the movie version of *Goodbye, Columbus* [1969]. "You know, I could have met her," said Philip, and I said something like, "My God, man, why didn't you?"

So Parul Sehgal, in her deplored review of my Roth biography in the daily *New York Times*, acted like this was the smoking gun, right? Because in the Acknowledgments at the end of my Roth biography, I mentioned the photo album but didn't mention our exchange about Ali MacGraw. Parul had found a video online of my telling the Ali MacGraw story on a panel at CUNY [City University of New York]. I told that story *many* times publicly. I didn't have any problem with telling that story. I didn't think that it afforded some damning insight into the blackness of my soul.

But Parul Sehgal did. So she implied I was hiding that when I wrote about the photo album in my Acknowledgments but didn't mention Ali MacGraw, which proved I was a misogynist and so forth.

So to this day, people refer to Parul Sehgal and Laura Marsh, who wrote a similarly deplored review for the *New Republic*, as "prescient." Prescient about my true degeneracy.

DW: Let's take this head-on. This claim that Roth is a misogynist, how would you respond to that?

BB: I don't think Philip was a misogynist. Philip did not have any constitutional hatred of women. I would say—and he would say—that the problem was, if anything, quite the opposite.

He just wasn't monogamous. He slept around on Claire Bloom. She resented it. She wrote her book. He didn't want to be married to Claire. He didn't want to be married to his first wife, Maggie [Margaret Martinson Williams]. He was sort of railroaded into both those marriages, and he resented it. And he was not going to be faithful, ever. So, yeah, my heart goes out to all concerned. Maggie and Claire didn't get a good bargain, and neither did Philip.

But did he hate women? No. As he said on his own behalf, his lawyers tended to be women. His first agent was a woman, before Andrew Wylie. Etcetera. It's just ridiculous.

DW: What do you think was Roth's best work?

BB: That's a good question. Roth's favorite book was *Sabbath's Theater* [1995], but it's not mine. When you write 31 books, there can be a lot of disagreement about that.

I think *The Ghost Writer* [1979] is Roth's soundest work of art. It works on every level. It is a compelling human story. It is craftsmanly. The prose is Jamesian and lapidary. It's architecturally sound. It has big themes. But it's a short book, it doesn't have the heft of, say, *American Pastoral* [1997].

If anyone asked me what Roth books you should read, I would say, read *Goodbye, Columbus* [1959], *Portnoy's Complaint* [1969], *The Ghost Writer*, *Patrimony* [1991], *American Pastoral*, *The Human Stain* [2000]

and *Everyman* [2006]. There are other good books, but those are the best for my money.

DW: Roth's angry liberalism has its limitations. In *American Pastoral*, in my view, he couldn't really capture the character of the left-wing "terrorist" because he couldn't conceive of someone totally rejecting this social order, even in a disoriented manner. The character was a caricature.

BB: I think that Roth, to his credit, would welcome your polemical pushback. Because that's very much the sort of dialog he was hoping to encourage with that book.

Some readers of *American Pastoral* thought Roth was becoming a cultural reactionary, that he'd done a 180 from his previous ideology. That's what Norman Podhoretz said: He's come over to our side! Philip would have denied it, but he'd welcome the controversy. To him, it was quite ambiguous and quite unresolved in his own mind.

DW: He obviously was an extraordinary writer. There are brilliant things, brilliant passages. He had the ability to be laceratingly honest about other people and about himself, which is unusual.

Where do you think we are culturally? Are there contemporary novelists you admire?

BB: Identity politics seems mercifully to be on the descendant. What I think is not going to come to the fore again is a robust literary culture. That is a lost world, the world where the novel occupied a sovereign place in Western culture. Roth himself, if anything, was a little hyperbolic on this point. He said, the day will come and not too long from now, when reading novels will be as cultic an activity as reading Latin poetry in the original.

I think that's overstating things, but there are too many distractions, too many screens. What's the incentive to be a novelist these days? What's the incentive, the prestige of it all? All the money you can make? [Laughs] Again, Richard Yates was this mousy poor kid, going to schools his mother couldn't really afford, and like all of us, he wanted to be a heroic figure. Well, in those days, if you wanted to be a heroic figure, you wrote the great American novel.

It's what drove all of them. Cheever constantly talked about this aspiration to greatness. And it was a heroic endeavor to write fiction. It's not a heroic endeavor anymore. Nobody's paying attention. There's not a lot of money to be made out of it one way or the other.

You asked me about writers today. I think the last great generation of fiction writers has died off. They died off with Philip, they died off with Alice Munro. That's the end of that. Again, novelists like DeLillo and Updike and Styron and Roth, who were flogging themselves to keep up with each other and to emerge triumphant. That's Atlantis. That's dead and gone.

DW: Who are some of the other figures you would like to write about, if you had the chance?

BB: I'm writing about James Salter [1925-2015] now, the author of *A Sport and a Pastime*, and people are going, "Oh, no, Jim Salter." He wrote these pieces for *Esquire*, about the attraction between older men and younger women, and how that's such a good thing. Which just doesn't fly nowadays. But look, I'm sorry, he was a terrific writer. He was also an eminently decent man by most accounts, more uncomplicatedly so than my previous subjects, I think. And he had a fascinating life. He went to West Point. He was a fighter pilot in the Korean War. Then he quit the military and became a full-time novelist and screenwriter. He worked with Robert Redford on *Downhill Racer* [1969]. Eventually he became one of our two or three great American prose stylists of the postwar era. It is so exemplary of our cultural moment that Salter is already forgotten, already off the radar screen.

He finally got all this acclaim in his last years. He died in 2015, and he was getting all these awards. People were saying, Salter is the last head on the Mount Rushmore of postwar American literature. And then boom!

Look, in 2009, my Cheever biography was one of *Publishers Weekly's* 10 best books of the year. And there was a mild stink because all 10 books were written by men. Subsequently, the *New York Times*'s list of the 10 best books of that year was conscientiously half women, half men.

For that to happen today—men taking every slot of a Ten Best Books list—would be like drawing an inside straight in poker.

I doubt my Salter book will sell much. I'm mainly doing it as a labor of love, but it has little place in the present cultural environment.

DW: This too will pass. I do promise you it will. The cultural situation will change, because other things will come to the fore. And this identity politics mania will be looked at with contempt. Your own “scandal” will be looked at as a disgusting episode and a shameful one. I can't promise you how quickly.

BB: The silence that has greeted *Canceled Lives* is certainly a contemptuous silence, but I like to think it's also a sheepish silence. I think people realize that what happened to me was a hysterically overblown response. And maybe—maybe—they're a little appalled by the overkill? I had a wife of 22 years who I adored. I had a daughter who was just devastated. I hope people feel, I don't know, a little sympathetic ruefulness?

DW: I don't necessarily mean that those people will change their minds. I just think it won't matter. It won't matter what they think.

BB: The peace that *Canceled Lives* affords me is that it's honest. It's not self-flattering. I engaged in some bad behavior. My only point vis-a-vis my worst tormentors is that I did nothing vicious or illegal. Anyway, I've made my statement and that will have to do.



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