



Enthymema XXIII 2019

Scrupulously Avoid the Desire for Results.
Interview with William T. Vollmann

Max McClure

Abstract – A shorter version of this interview was published in *The Claw*, Fall 2009, Vol 2, No 1. © by Max McClure. Reprinted by permission.

Keywords – William T. Vollmann; Interview.

McClure, Max. "Scrupulously Avoid the Desire for Results. Interview with William T. Vollmann." *Enthymema*, no. XXIII, 2019, pp. 110-22.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.13130/2037-2426/11925>

<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/enthymema>



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ISSN 2037-2426

Scrupulously Avoid the Desire for Results. Interview with William T. Vollmann

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The American literary class isn't sure what to do about William T. Vollmann. On the one hand, he has been called one of the "twenty most talented writers under forty," by *The New Yorker*, "a monster of talent, ambition, and accomplishment," by the *Los Angeles Times*, and "among the eight or ten greatest novelists America has produced," by the *Washington Post*. His most famous book to date is *Rising Up and Rising Down*, a 3000+ page book on justifiable violence, and he is currently writing a seven-novel "symbolic history" of North America that *The Independent* suggested would be "one of the major accomplishments of late 20th-century literature." He is also a sought-after war reporter who has traveled on assignment for the *BBC*, *LA Times*, and *GQ*. On the other hand, you haven't read him.

Perhaps this isn't fair. Many who have read his work simply don't like it. Critics profess confusion and dismay at the topics and length of his books. *The New York Times* has referred to Vollmann's recurrent theme of prostitution as "an obsession that disfigures several of his novels." He is often referred to as "prolific" and his books "mammoth," with the inescapable implication that these are not appropriate qualities for a major author. And nobody knows what to say about the fact that he smokes crack. Vollmann has become something of a controversial figure as a consequence, with each of his new books (twenty-four since 1987, if you count the seven volumes of *Rising Up and Rising Down* as independent works) starting another literary firefight between those who find him brilliant and those who find him transgressive, or simply unreadable.

What no one knows is that Vollmann just might be the nicest person alive.

My own introduction to Vollmann was *The Atlas*, a collection of interwoven stories and nonfiction pieces derived from his twentysomething years of globetrotting, and what struck me—what strikes anyone who reads it—was the almost inhuman intensity of his empathy. In *The Atlas*, gasoline-addled Inuit women rub shoulders with vacationing yuppies, Thai prostitutes, backpackers, and heroin addicts. While these characters are ruthlessly self-destructive, they are often utterly guileless. His narrators are frequently the sorts of young men who become enamored at the drop of a hat, who ask whores to let him draw them simply because they are beautiful.

This empathy, it turns out, also extends into his interaction with his subjects; he is well known for being accommodating to a fault, or even eager to please. During his interviews with sex workers in San Francisco's Tenderloin, he began smoking crack to put his subjects at ease. This need to empathize with all sides of the story is something he has been able to maintain through conversations with Afghan warlords, through watching two friends die from a Bosnian land mine he survived, and through *Rising Up and Rising Down*, undoubtedly the most comprehensive study of violence ever undertaken in literary history, and a project that brought him into contact with an infinite variation of mutually hostile approaches to the problem of bloodshed. He is a man who thinks about everything he does, and this awareness informs every book that he writes.

My own interview of Mr. Vollmann took place in his suburban Sacramento home, where he lives with his wife and daughter. I arrived almost a half-hour late because of traffic, vaguely paranoid about the impression this might make. He opened the door, which displayed a small

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sticker reading “WARNING: ARMED DRUG DEALER INSIDE.” I explained about the traffic. Vollmann responded by offering me a finger of Laphroaig. I apologized again, and he placed his daughter’s bearded dragon on my shoulder, which remained there, pulsating slowly, for much of the rest of the interview.

McClure: You lived in San Francisco for a while, as I remember.

Vollmann: Yeah, that’s right. And still go there pretty often.

Where did you live in San Francisco?

Oh, let’s see—I lived in right underneath Twin Peaks for a little while...

West Portal, or...

Stanyan and Parnassus. I lived on Filbert Street for a while, in North Beach, and in the Inner Sunset for a few years.

So you know the City pretty well then?

I’d say so.

I went to high school in the City. I went to UHS.

OK.

The City was actually one of the things that first attracted me to your work. I feel like there aren’t a lot of people who write the City well.

I love San Francisco. Wonderful place. I could go back there and everything would be new or a lot would be new. That’s pretty exciting.

A lot of your books—not that I’ve read all of your books—but it seems like in a lot of your books, the San Francisco you talk about is not necessarily...it’s not Pacific Heights you’re talking about. Typically, it’s the Tenderloin, and a little of the Haight.

That’s right.

When you use these—what are typically not considered the most picturesque aspects of San Francisco—are you still pretty much in love with those places?

Oh, yeah. The unique thing about San Francisco is that, because it’s bounded by water, the various neighborhoods can’t spread out, so they have to remain quite distinct. And, say, if you’re looking for prostitution, drugs in New York City, the borders of what’s safe and the red light district, or whatever, is quite vague, whereas you can go in and out of the Tenderloin sometimes in half a block. This part is the financial district, and this part right here is skid row, or crack row or whatever. And it’s fascinating. It makes me think a lot about, what are boundaries? I just finished writing a book called *Imperial*. It’s about Mexico and California [*here the lizard escapes*.] Yeah, if it gets away just grab it. The whole idea of delineation, of where the US took half of Mexico and suddenly things started to look different. It’s strange to think that a boundary is something that is just in the mind in the way that money is. And people respect it long enough, and suddenly the two worlds, the two sides of the boundary start to look substantially different. It’s really mind over matter.

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So you think that the Mexico-US border is similar in terms of how distinct one side is over the other to San Francisco neighborhoods? Because people always comment on how much mixing there is, especially when you get into Southern California.

Well, yeah, there's mixing everywhere, but you can go to, say, Calexico, and you can look across, through the holes in the fence, into Mexicali. The Imperial Valley and the Mexicali Valley are all one valley, it's just that there's been a line drawn across, and somehow there are two valleys, or three—the Coachella Valley and Palm Springs is part of that same valley. And they look very, very distinct. You can see from the air that this part is green, this part is desert, this part here has a lot of city and a lot of slum, pressing right up against the wall, and this other side is just empty desert. It's bizarre, and the San Francisco neighborhoods are a bit like that. Over on this side of the street, you look down and you see some tall, skinny guys pimping out their women, and on the other side you see people going into some nice Japanese restaurant. Of course they're aware of each other, but they don't invade each other's space.

So, do you feel like this has been a running theme in all your stuff, or is this an interest that's come out of your US-Mexico study?

My work is basically about empathy. Trying to see who or what the other is. And the more foreign to me, the more I have to work at it. So there's always some sort of boundary, crossing a boundary. That's probably the most important thing to me. It's a necessary component of a human relationship, of our relationship to the entire world, to our interior world and the larger world that we exist in. And so it's this fundamental ontological aspect of consciousness.

It's very interesting that you say empathy is the defining theme of your work, because I was looking at a bunch of other interviews people have done with you, and I feel like people, and with good reason, tend to gravitate towards some of the more shocking stuff that's in the books, because there's a lot of violence and sex and drugs, but you are one of the most empathetic writers that I've seen. You have a lot of very generous portrayals of characters, and I'm particularly struck by that just in terms of a lot of the stuff that could be termed travel writing that you do. And I don't know if you consider yourself a travel writer at all, but it's very hard, it seems to me, to convincingly portray someone of another culture in either a positive or a negative light without being seen as sort of an imperialist, especially in the US. I feel like you do it very successfully, and I'm wondering how you do that.

I guess I try to always remember that I'm ignorant about anybody who I haven't met before, and possibly people who I have met before, and that the knowledge of ignorance is actually very, very helpful. And Thoreau says something about that, too. He says "How can anyone hope to get anywhere if constrained by his knowledge? He can only forget his knowledge and accept his ignorance. Then he can actually journey somewhere and learn something." And it's precisely when we decide in advance that we know what something is or who something is, or if we decide too soon, or too definitively that we're probably going to box ourselves in. And one very good example, I think, is gender. I just finished a book about Japanese Noh drama. I was going over to Japan quite often for that, and viewing these kabuki female impersonators, hiring geisha dancers, and pretty soon I got interested in transgender stuff. I was spending time with transgender women, and when you think about what is a man, what is a woman, it's very, very confusing. But most of us think we know, because we see somebody in the street we've never met before, and one of the first things we do is say, "OK, this person is a man, or this person is a woman." And it used to be, say, in turn-of-the-century Vienna, you could tell a woman from far away by her shape, because she would probably have an hourglass figure thanks to the corset and a skirt that came out kind of like a bell. But if you say, "This is how I

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define a woman today, someone shaped like an hourglass,” it’s preposterous. And anything that we can say now about what defines a woman is probably going to be preposterous a hundred years from now. That doesn’t mean that women don’t exist or that we can’t say something about who they are or what they are but it means that we have to be cautious and deferential and try to have a rounded picture as opposed to saying it’s definitely this and this and this. And it’s very strange to have to do that. It’s not really natural. I would love as much as anybody to have certainty about things, and say, “OK, I can tell you exactly what makes a person a Mexican, why Mexico is different from the US, what precisely defines the Tenderloin for all time, and where its boundary is and where its boundary will always be.”

Is this basically a larger philosophical aversion to assigning definitions to things, or do you just think things change?

I think that if I said that everything was relative, that would be a failure on my part, and if I said that everything was absolute and I could spell it out, that would be a real hubris on my part and would probably turn out to be wrong. I wrote this book called *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

I’m in the middle of it—it’s very long.

Yeah, that is a long one. If you’re in the middle of it, you might be in the moral calculus part.

I’ve looked at that part on the side, yes.

If someone says, “Is female circumcision wrong?” the easy answer here is, of course it’s wrong. But that’s not good enough, because we can say from a standpoint of defense of children, perhaps defense of gender, it’s wrong to mutilate some girl’s body, but from a standpoint of defense of culture, it might be appropriate to do it, and we would be, as you were saying, the imperialists, the cultural imperialists by saying you can’t do it. Does that mean you can’t say that it’s right or wrong? I don’t think that’s what it means. I think it means that you can say we might agree to disagree depending on whether we think defense of gender or defense of culture is more important. But we can say that it’s probably wrong from a standpoint of defense of gender and right from a standpoint of defense of culture, and so we have to figure out who weighs what to what extent. So that’s how I look at everything.

So, are you satisfied then with the calculus that you came up with?

Yes, I think I’m satisfied because I could apply the calculus and misapply it as I’m sure that I have and will, and come up with an answer on a given topic but I could explain my answer and you could accept it or not, but you would probably say, “Alright, it seems like Bill has considered most or all of the relevant terms in this disagreement that we had.” And so it’s a start, it gives people some way to talk about their disagreements and decide what’s important. And hopefully, certain disagreements will be considered just unacceptable by most people, like the idea that the self has some kind of sovereignty. I think most people in the world, deep down, would feel that. To what extent that trumps other things depends on the culture, and we Americans are more likely to say that it’s everything, and someone in Japan might say, “OK, of course you have to respect the group that you’re with, too.” But if there’s some sort of general zone where we all, or most of us can fall into, and say certain things outside that zone are unacceptable, then we might have a chance to make the world a slightly better place or to try to keep it from being a worse place, if we say, “Well, we tend to agree that the self has the right to defend itself or not, or defend another self or not, and therefore, if some murderer comes along and says I can do x, y, and z, then we can say, no, I don’t think that’s right.” And that’s very, very important. I think one of the reason that these wicked torturers in the Bush administration got away with so much is because there wasn’t any sort of general

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calculus that anyone could publicly invoke. So they could say, “Alright, we think it’s OK to send people off to black prisons and have people tortured and maybe kill people and there were not enough citizens saying, no, of course that’s wrong: do you, Mr. President, agree with these basic principles about the rights of the self or don’t you?” And that debate never occurred, unfortunately.

Regarding having this balance between making certain concrete statements about what’s right and what’s wrong and allowing for these differences between cultures: it’s very hard to tell in print whether someone’s being sarcastic or not, but you’ve described yourself in print as pro-death. So I was wondering if you could talk about that in relation to your outspoken criticism of the Bush administration.

Well, when I said that, I went on to say that I was pro-suicide, pro-euthanasia, pro-abortion, and, possibly, pro-capital punishment. I’m not against it, and I’m fascinated that so many people say they are pro-abortion and anti-capital punishment, or people who call themselves pro-life might be pro-capital punishment. To me it’s quite interesting.

So, I guess what I’m wondering is—you don’t necessarily have outspoken views on certain things, you have views that you hold strongly on certain things. Do you feel comfortable criticizing the moral calculus of an administration when you could argue that they have a cultural difference?

Well, certainly, the moral calculus of the administration that acts in our name is not exempt from our criticism, for all the good that it might do. But I think it’s one of the last rights that a citizen still has, to be able to say bad things about the government. If anything, I think that there was a moral calculus implicit and explicit in the Constitution and the administration violated that.

The other question I wanted to ask about this is: people are very impressed in general by your desire to write very large books on topics people don’t like to write books about, like violence and poor people. How would you characterize your approach in *Poor People*? Because you take sort of a Marxist approach, which is a more universalist way of looking at things, not as relative.

Right, well, although that’s a somewhat relative approach also, because I feel that it’s wrong to speak for others unless it’s absolutely necessary. Because, clearly you’re desperate and need my help, clearly you’re evil, my intervention is required. Most of the time I think it’s better to respect the consciousness of others, and to be very wary of attributing false consciousness, which I think is something that Marxists have done, rightly and wrongly, but if I ask somebody why are you poor, the answer might even be, no, I’m not poor. And the United Nations defines poverty in terms of a certain minimum amount of daily income because that’s one of the few ways that poverty could be defined, but that certainly leaves out subsistence hunter-gatherers that have no money at all. Are we to say that all of them are poor? Or, for that matter, are we to say that someone who has a much lower income than I do but doesn’t have the worries that I have is worse off than I am or maybe better off? So it’s really, really tricky, and the worst thing would be to say “I know what your problem is,” because of course I don’t.

Did you feel as satisfied with the conclusions you drew from *Poor People*, which were maybe less far-reaching? It was a much shorter book, it wasn’t seven volumes. Yes, I think so, because the thing about violence is that it invades and transgresses. So, it’s something that affects you and me as potential victims, or even as secondary or tertiary victims. Let’s say you and I are tertiary victims of Sept. 11. So you and I have the right to talk about

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what those Sept. 11 hijackers did. And what our government did in response and so on and so forth. Whereas, to the extent that poverty is a state of experience, we can, if we are feeling generous, try to reach out to those people as we would reach out to anybody, but we don't necessarily have the right to make rules about who's poor and who isn't and how we define that because the people who are living in my parking lot are not invading me, are not transgressing me, I'm not their victim, and why should I make them mine and say this is who you are and this is what you have to do, and maybe you think you're fine, but I can see that you're not fine, and my demand is that you go to the homeless shelter, or do this or do that.

How do you feel about governmental intervention in the service of alleviating poverty?

I think it's vital, and I don't think it's vital that you or I intervene, but I think it's recommended that we try to be as helpful and generous and openhearted as we can be. But the thing is that there are a lot of people who will say that yeah, of course I'm poor. I'm hungry, I'm desperate. And those people deserve to be helped and it's the obligation of governments and NGOs to help them. It's not their obligation to say we're going to make you do what's best for you.

You have what seems like a real interest in real-world issues—very gritty issues, often, to the point that people have called you a dirty realist. That's sort of a term that has almost been invented to apply to you.

Is that what they said?

Yes, and I'm not sure what sense of the word "dirty" they mean, but I was wondering how you felt about that, because it seems like you refer to a lot of your influences as being surrealists.

Well, I guess I would accept it. I guess that characterizes a significant part of what I do.

Even the novels. You would call them realistic?

Some of them. That's not entirely what they are. *Whores for Gloria* is definitely that, but it also is indebted to the Russian formalists. So, yes, you could say that *Rising Up and Rising Down* is half dirty realism and the other half is thinking about history as it reveals itself or not, textually.

Are there other writers working today or in the past that are essentially doing what you are trying to do, or that you look to?

Not exactly, but I think what Zola did was kind of interesting, his whole idea of describing lots and lots of different levels of social hierarchy through the novels. Tolstoy was very good at doing that, and there have been some photographers, like August Sander, who tried to create what he called "Citizens of the Twentieth Century," this gallery of photos that would show a whole bunch of bakers who looked like a bakers, and a whole bunch of peasants and he would capture what he thought was the definitive peasant look, and you see these things and they're very convincing, his typologies, and, of course, they don't apply anymore. But that's OK. It gets back to this whole thing of what it means to not be vague in your descriptions, and as soon as you try to nail something down, unless you say, "This is how it seems to me, today, with these particular distortions and accidents and so on and so forth," then it's not going to be true in the long run.

How do you think you've done that in fiction?

I hope that, for instance, in that prostitute trilogy, that I have accurately and lovingly described some members of the prostitute class, and some of them have been based entirely on real

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people, and then after a while I was able to invent my own characters, and I feel like those characters have their own life, and that they respect the reality that I believe I know. And, in some of the *Seven Dreams*, I feel that way about certain of the Indian characters. Amantacha the Huron in *Fathers and Crowns*. I think that I was able to work backward from the Jesuit relations because he was one of the few individual Indians who was described in some detail by Europeans. And, of course, it's only through the Europeans that we know these people at all. And so, I could sort of start with these known facts and a few occasional quotations from the guy and from his father and try and imagine what he might have been like. And then, using some of the anthropological stuff I had learned, and the history to try to project myself into his mind, and so, in the end, probably I didn't create Amantacha, but I created someone who was a plausible Amantacha, who may be some 17th century Iroquois and who may have recognized himself and said, "that's not too far off."

First off, the prostitute trilogy, is that *Whores for Gloria*, *The Royal Family*, and—*Butterfly Stories*.

That's interesting. It was probably intentional, but it seems like a big part of those books is attempting to project this ideal. The protagonists are all looking for a specific woman that they cannot find, and that they keep finding substitutes for. Is this a commentary on the difficulty of finding definitions, or something else entirely? That's part of it, and I think it's also part of the essential human tragedy that we come into this world and leave it, alone, and so most of us yearn for some kind of bond with another person and if we're as lucky and skilled and successful as we can possibly be, it's still not going to be perfect. And no matter how happy we feel, it's certainly not going to be eternal. So the search for love, for friendship, for community, it's a necessary, and at times, desperate thing we do, it may be the most worthwhile thing we can do, but it's never going to give us anything we can hold onto. We just have to keep trying and trying.

It seems like prostitutes come up in every one of your interviews, which I think is just because kids like reading about them—but there are a lot of people who feel that the topic of prostitutes, or writing about them, implies a sort of dominance over women in a lot of the main characters. But when I read them, it seemed like most of the characters like to put themselves in subordinate positions. And I was wondering whether this is a commentary on dominant/submissive cultures.

I think that all the love and sexual relationships we're capable of are on a continuum. People often think that love and sex with a prostitute has got to be inherently different, and it's not. It may be farther along the continuum in some ways, but if you have a sweetheart, a wife, there are going to be material things that you do for her, and there might be sexual or emotional things that she does for you or that you do for her while not really feeling in the mood. Or, maybe you do feel in the mood, but what's the difference between taking someone out for dinner and then going to bed with her, or buying her a wedding ring and going to bed with her, or giving her \$20 and then going to bed with her. A lot of people think that, because the cash nexus is such a naked entity in that prostitute kind of relationship, there is something inherently brutal about it. But I've seen so many customers who love the prostitutes that they frequent, and I've seen that love reciprocated. There's a bar I used to spend a lot of time at that had some stockings with the names of the two prostitutes who used to work there a lot, stockings that would go on the Christmas tree. And if some stranger came to pick up the girl in his car, one of the guys would just look out and check the license plate, if she were going to nod off at the bar because she'd had too much heroin or whatever, one of the guys might run

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her home eventually. So a lot of these guys love them, and they love them, too. And that didn't mean the relationships weren't often kind of sad, but, then again, that's often true of other relationships.

That's a lot of what *The Royal Family* in particular was about. Henry is wondering why it is his sister-in-law seems to be fascinated by all kinds of crystal and china at her wedding, and his brother always seems to talk about moneymoneymoneymoney all the time, and he's this aggressive businessman. Actually, in a way, he's the nicer character. He tries to take care of Henry, and is more successful in taking care of the mother, and, because Henry is the sensitive one, and because we see things through Henry's eyes, we think, well, John is just a jerk, but he isn't. And Henry isn't either. Most of the men who go to prostitutes, or don't go to prostitutes, aren't either. And any time anyone says that this kind of relationship in general displays dominance or displays any particular quality, it's just as likely to be wrong as me saying that any specific relationship is characterized by a certain thing. You can't say that. I mean, you can, but the wider one's experience is, the more one tends to say, "Well, I have to qualify." And after a while, the most you might say is, "In my experience, prostitutes are exploited. But that's because my experience is working in a shelter for abused, runaway prostitutes, helping them get away from their pimps—And in my experience, prostitutes are all nymphomaniacs and they love what they do. But that's because in my experience I don't look into their lives, and I seek out high-priced call girls who are educated enough to show me exactly what I want to see, and no more and no less." So, if someone says the prostitute-customer relationship is this and exactly this, probably they're seeing prostitutes and customers as flat characters, and that may be appropriate for an NGO that is trying to alleviate certain conditions, but it might not even be appropriate for them if they pick the wrong qualities.

Do you ever use flat characters yourself?

Sure. If you look at, say, an Ansel Adams photograph, there will be maybe some trees far in the background that are a little bit out of focus because he has stopped the lens in such a way that he's controlling his own focus. And he wants some things out of focus, because that will draw the eye more to things that are in focus. So, you can't say that's dishonest or incompetent, all the trees should be in focus, or that he should have erased those out-of-focus trees from the picture. They served their purpose. And the way consciousness works, we can't take in everything all the time, only a god, if there were a god, could do that. What we can do is guide our perception, or if we're creating art, guide the perception of others, by creating a focused zone with a zone that's out of focus behind it, to increase, if you like, the reflectance and acutance and everything else of the background.

Are you a photographer as well?

Yes.

I remember seeing a lot of the photography in your books. Do you use it more as a journalistic method, or has it become an artistic thing for you?

I do both.

Has it had any effect on your writing, do you think?

My writing is very visual, I like to describe the colors of things, how things look. It's actually very helpful as a journalist in a war zone if, maybe I'm nervous about my own safety, concerned about establishing some kind of rapport between myself and the person I'm interviewing, and also interested in getting down that person's story, and describing the things that I first see as I look around, and those three things are usually enough to fill up my weak intelligence. But if

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I have a camera I can take some photographs. Later on I can look at the photographs and see things I couldn't see at the time.

If you don't mind me asking, when are you going to sell out?

Either never or else maybe I already have and we inevitably do. One of the compromises I've made is writing for the magazines, because it's only by getting the press credential that I get the access, and the magazines have the money, too, to send me to places like Iraq, but in return, the magazines will take the piece and cut it to fit based on how many ads they have that week, not based on any absolute or coherent vision of what the thing should be, so my defense has always been, if it's something I care about, I will make sure it comes out in a book later the way I want it. But it's not ideal.

To have your stuff truncated in that way?

Not just truncated, but dumbed down and often made shrill or edited in such a way that it becomes more sensationalist. But I like to think that as long as I keep controlling what I write and making sure the things come out in the books, that I'm doing the best that I can. That's how it was with *Rising Up and Rising Down*. Many of those pieces appeared in magazines in forms that I wasn't especially proud of. But I like to think that I wouldn't let something run if the basic message was completely distorted or destroyed. I remember fighting with a magazine about a Yugoslavia article because at that time what you'd hear was the Bosnians were good and the Serbs were bad and I never thought it was that simple.

How did you come to the decision to release an abridged version of *Rising Up and Rising Down*.

It was a pretty easy decision because the full version had already come out more or less the way I wanted. I'm not completely happy with it because it has many typographical errors and all my horizontal photographs were truncated to it. So there might be maybe some graffiti on the wall that goes from left to right, and the first and last word of that graffiti might not be there. Some significant loss of information. Still, I'm profoundly grateful to McSweeney's. They're wonderful people. Dave Eggers is a generous, really noble guy, and he was doing it out of the goodness of his heart because he believed in it. And it basically is out there the way I want it. So when HarperCollins offered me some money to abridge it, I thought why not, take the money. I tried not to pick the chapters that people would think necessarily to be the most, again, sensationalistic or salacious, so, hopefully, the feeling that some people might have had after reading the abridgement is, gosh, I'd like to read the whole thing. But if they don't, that's OK. I'm sure some people would have been happy if I'd put in the chapter about the deaths of my friends in Bosnia, but it doesn't need to be there. So I just tried to maintain the moral calculus in full, and then to pick whole chapters or selections to show how the argument would work.

Have you been able to maintain this—what seems like a pretty good level of creative control over your work—since the very beginning, since you published *You Bright and Risen Angels*?

Yes I have, and it's very easy to do that. All you have to do is say, as Gandhi did, "One must scrupulously avoid the desire for results." It's much better to say, "Well, alright then, it's not going to get published, I'm not going to get any money." That's not the point. It's much better to let that stuff go, because if you're really concerned with money or recognition as goods in and of themselves, you can get them in other ways—by going into public relations or being a politician or being a celebrity for the sake of being a celebrity, but as far as I'm concerned, that

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stuff is just a means to an end. So, I had a few offers to publish *Rising Up and Rising Down* before Dave came along, but they always insisted that the book be cut. And I was kind of sad—I was sure the book wasn't going to be published in my lifetime, because of course I always had to say no. But I felt good about the fact I said no. I think that's the most important thing.

I haven't spoken to many famous and/or brilliant authors, but you went to Deep Springs, which instills that sort of spirit in people. Do you feel like this is a Telluride/Deep Springs idea?

Deep Springs helped me out a lot.

I wouldn't say that your writing is monastic in any way.

When I was there, I thought that the single-sex policy was very foolish and harmful and everything else, and now I think it's kind of irrelevant. It's only two years out of your life. If they go co-ed, it's going to be fantastic, and if they don't, I think that's fine, too. So that aspect, being monastic, I don't know whether that applies. But I do think that one of the things that Deep Springs offers is isolation. I think the way that people keep in touch with each other now, with cell phones and email and everything else, I think it's awful. And that's why I don't have a cell phone and I don't have email, because I don't want my concentration interrupted, and if you have a ton of phones plus email, a blackberry and this and that, all that means is you have to check all these different devices all the time, see who's trying to call you. For me, it's really really wonderful not being in touch. My studio does have a phone, but my phone's in the closet, so I can't hear it ring. I check it every few days. I don't know, what do you think?

I have this seeming inability to interact with technology in a mutually beneficial way. Things tend to fry when I get around them. I feel like you've declared yourself against technology in a number of ways—I think you also have a thing against cars. Right, and I think, suddenly, in the last few months, some other Americans are beginning to get what I mean.

Do you find yourself taking advantage of the Sierras' isolation?

My best friend does that. Every year he walks a hundred miles or so into the Sierras. He goes way up there, and in fact that's the way he wants to die when his time comes, is just to have an accident in the Sierras, which sounds pretty good to me. But my studio gives me all the isolation I need. The blinds are down, there's razor wire around it, and people can bang on the fence as much as they want, I don't pay any attention.

There's razor wire?

There didn't used to be. I added it a couple years ago because people were turning on my water tap and leaving it on, and I started having fears of getting a ten thousand dollar water bill if I went away for a month. But yeah, as soon as I could, I put it up, and I love it. Maybe I'll put more razor wire around that some day.

It's picturesque.

It gleams nicely, and especially now, it's getting a nice patina of rust on it.

Regarding this isolation: you travel an astounding amount, and, for a major author you go to a lot of exotic places and write a lot of journalistic stuff. But, as far as I can tell, you don't go a lot of places that would be termed isolated in terms of the

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number of people that live there. You did go to Alaska and Canada and spent a fair amount of time there, as you mentioned in *The Atlas*, but a lot of other places in that book are almost metropolises, very bustling and people-filled.

Well, I haven't met very many people I don't like. I love meeting people, it's fantastic. The amount of variation in our human family is astounding. The difference in beliefs, in action between a Talib in Afghanistan and a Thai prostitute is mind-boggling. And they're both great. So yes, I love that aspect of my career. I feel very lucky that I could do it. It's also nice that I can come back and slam the gate and go behind the razor wire.

Do you find yourself reading other travel writers?

Right now I'm reading some Henry James—he writes about traveling in Europe in his day, it's kind of interesting. I used to love reading Arctic narratives, and Antarctic ones, too. I was really into biographies of Shackleton and books about the Hall expedition, the Franklin expedition.

You've been to the North Pole, right?

Just the magnetic pole.

I'm sorry, just the magnetic pole.

Not too far south.

You've done a very large number of things that most other people would call either astounding or crazy.

Or stupid.

Is the appeal of danger at all related to it, or is that just incidental?

The unknown is an appeal, and sometimes exploring the unknown can be dangerous. And then curiosity is an appeal. Especially when I was writing *Rising*, I really wanted to understand violence as best as I could, and in order to do that I had to go to places where violence was being committed. Usually, being in a dangerous situation is just a sickening feeling. It's a feeling of fear, of trying to keep the fear under control so that you can function and get what you need to get out of the situation and get out of there. And sometimes a feeling of shame for having been so stupid as to be in this situation because unless I were setting out to do so, really being killed in those situations would be a failure. Possibly an act of stupidity, maybe accompanied by bad luck. If I've decided that's the way I'm going to end my life, then of course it would be a success. So when I've been in places where people wanted to kill me, I've thought, why am I doing this again? It's really not a nice feeling.

So now that you are in a more settled situation, with a wife and a daughter, is this something you're still doing—going to places where danger is a possibility?

Yes—I went to Iraq for *GQ* last spring. There's another example of the craziness and arbitrariness of the marketplace dictating things: so far they haven't published it because advertising revenues are down and so if they were to run the story they would have to run it very, very short. So they're waiting. It was quite dangerous, and my fixer, a very interesting guy, very brave, got rather tired of me. I kept saying, "Let's go back to Kirkuk," which, as you know, is a very dangerous place. I rolled the dice, and I was fine, and then *GQ* decided to send a photographer there. And this time, there was a bomb that went off, and the crowd turned against my fixer and beat him quite badly. It's a dirty business, and the story might never run. So that's the game.

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Do you find yourself following the news a fair amount for these sorts of articles, or do magazines contact you when they have a dangerous place where no one else will go?

I would say both. I read *The New York Times*, and I really enjoy that. My favorite part of it is the editorial section. It's always interesting to see what's happening. I don't necessarily agree with everything they say, but they're probably the best American paper now. *The LA Times* used to be a really really good paper and now it isn't.

I don't mean to suggest that you have two distinct writing styles, but you do have published works that are very prominently journalistic and that are very novelistic. Is there a lot of cross-pollination for you or do you have two mentalities when you write a book?

There's some cross-pollination for sure, and it's really great to say, "I think that what I'm writing is this, but even though I think that's what it is, maybe I'll let it be a little more that," and every time you cross those boundaries and let them blur a little bit, you're likely to catch something real. When astronomers are trying to figure out where something is, they use parallax. They look at a star say when the earth is in a certain position, and when the earth has moved a certain amount, they look at it again and it helps them to figure out exactly where this thing is. And if you're trying to orient yourself in the woods you triangulate. You have a point on the left and a point up ahead, and that way you're sure that you're going where you want to go. And I think that that's how it is to with something that you like. You start over here and you think about it over there, and if you do that, you might find it aiming over here, and we'll be able to keep on the course that you wouldn't have known that you should have been on.

Do you like to experience something before you write about it, as a rule?

Well, it's nice to write about it before you know what it is, then forget what you wrote, and then go out and experience it, and then write about what you experienced, and look back at what you wrote before and find out what your prejudices were. But it's not essential. When I do the journalistic stuff, I like to know not too much before I go. I want some understanding of what the situation superficially is, and what people I should try to meet, but aside from that, the less I know the better, because I don't want to live this life under preconceptions.