

An Interview with Frederick Busch · *Donald J. Greiner*

BORN IN BROOKLYN in 1941, Frederick Busch now lives on more than one hundred acres of untamed countryside in Sherburne, New York. He was educated at Muhlenberg College and Columbia University, and since 1971 he has published thirteen books—eight novels, three collections of short stories, and two books of criticism—among them *The Mutual Friend* (1978), *Rounds* (1979), and *Invisible Mending* (1984). In 1986 the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters honored Busch with a five-thousand-dollar award in recognition of his contribution to American letters. In this interview, which took place on 6 June 1987 in Sherburne, Busch discusses first the problems with publishing fiction in the United States, the richness of contemporary American literature in general and the versatility of novels by living American writers in particular, and the effect of his education. He then offers commentary on his own work: how he wrote the novels, why he focuses on the family unit, and why, though Brooklyn born, he writes largely about the rural northeast. The interview will be included in Professor Greiner's *Domestic Particulars: The Novels of Frederick Busch* to be published by the University of South Carolina Press.

Greiner: What is your general opinion of contemporary American fiction?
Busch: Rich, various, exciting. Few or no major writers—lots of interesting minor writers. There are a lot of writers who get a lot of attention and a lot of writers who don't get a lot of attention and many of them are very good. And I think what's most interesting about American writing now is the sorry state of American criticism and reviewing which stands between a lot of writers and their audience. I don't mean myself—I get a sufficiency of attention—but I do mean the way American writing is being read publicly: it's being read essentially either for the classroom by the professionals or for book review journalism. And I don't think that I see too many useful ways in which writers can come to the attention of a public. It's a time of big money, big reviewing, big book clubs, and lots of small writers. The condition of the writers themselves seems to me to be in opposition to the condition of the review media by which writers normally

come to the attention of their readers. In other words, America is unlike England where, if you published a book this weekend, the chances are excellent that the *Observer*, *TLS*, *The Listener*, *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph* and a number of other papers would all review you within the same 48 or 72 hours and attention would be paid. So the condition of American letters is therefore in a state of misrepresentation and befuddlement because what we're dealing with is the careers of people who are trying to be "major" critics while the writers continue to do what they have always done—which is to write books, and wait for the dust to settle, and let history sort them out.

Greiner: Do you think the critics are still looking for a Faulkner, Fitzgerald, and Hemingway?

Busch: Sure. And if you ask they'd probably say, well, there's Bellow, there's Updike, there's Mailer, there's Thomas Pynchon; maybe someone would say Salinger; once they would have said Malamud although I'm afraid his work had fallen off before he died. How about Reynolds Price? People might say Roth; surely, people would say Eudora Welty. The point is these are essentially the same names that would have come up five years ago. And there's something untrue about it now as there was something untrue about it then—all these people are very good writers and there are 250 other very good writers who are either as well known for some things as those other writers, or are living in their shadow. In any case these are probably not the major writers of the century. I have a feeling that once the dust settles I don't know that we're going to have had a major writer since the 40's. I mean today is a time of really terrific work; it's wonderful if you like to read books; but if you like to make pronouncements, it's all very unclear.

Greiner: To what extent is the dispute about verisimilitude still an issue in contemporary American fiction?

Busch: I don't think it's an issue. I think verisimilitude has been dismissed as a useful, usable goal for fiction. I think that people who attempt to achieve it, in other words who are storytellers, are considered by critics who are carving out their careers to be not too useful. I'm looking at a novel by Ward Just. There's a first-rate writer who strives for verisimilitude, for tough, sinuous language, for telling stories, for writing about an interesting amalgam in politics and psychology that is perhaps more European than American but that I think is a fascinating goal in fiction; and he

would probably be dismissed by some of these critical hacks as just a guy who tries to write about people's lives. Who cares? Whereas to people like me that's the goal, to tell a story, to make a person come alive on the page. I think the debate is over; I think that the drift at least of contemporary academic criticism is far, far away from verisimilitude. The drift of the American *reader* is, as it always has been, toward it. The storyteller wants to tell the story and the reader wants to be told the story, and I am convinced that that is the goal of the novel, has been the goal of the novel, and will be the goal of the novel.

Greiner: Do you agree with the proposition that was especially popular about ten years ago that the Latin American novel has surpassed American fiction in terms of what is called "advancing the genre"?

Busch: No, not at all. Do you really think that Garcia Marquez, as brilliant as he is, took the novel beyond, say, where Dickens had been. I'm not at all convinced—he does, of course, write a wonderful novel. Puig is fascinating, Cortazar is fascinating, Carlos Fuentes is fascinating, but what they have done is combined their heritage of the folk tale—the peasant story—with education and imagination, and have made what we call magical realism. But is that so far beyond what Isaac B. Singer, or Bernard Malamud, or the American father of them all, William Faulkner, did? No, I think it's just another trend in criticism, not a trend in fiction writing.

Greiner: One of the witty observations about the contemporary American novel is that it suffers from "the *Moby-Dick* syndrome." That is, our writers seemed obsessed, either consciously or unconsciously, by the notion of the great American novel, and they often write huge, sprawling, dazzling books. One thinks immediately of *Gravity's Rainbow*, *LETTERS*, *Mickelsson's Ghosts*, *The Public Burning*, *Sophie's Choice*. Do you think the elusive goal of "the great American novel" is indeed an issue?

Busch: I don't know that it's an issue; I think it's a habit. Americans have always wanted to hit a home run. This is the country that invented the home run. And I suppose this is the country of expansion toward frontiers, beyond frontiers. This is the country of aggrandizement. This is the country of the psychological colonist, and I suppose to that degree the American writer wants to write the Great American Novel—perhaps. I think that Pynchon was not trying to write the Great American Novel in *Gravity's Rainbow*; I think he was trying to write *Gravity's Rainbow*. I think

that Melville was not trying to write the Great American Novel when he wrote *Moby-Dick*; he was trying to write the book broiled in hellfire that had haunted and driven him, that, when he finally read Shakespeare carefully and read Hawthorne and was sufficiently crazy and whacked out in his own life, and ready and muscular enough of mind, and obsessed enough, he could write. He finally wrote the book that he was meant to write. But the book that another writer was meant to write might be 150 pages long. I don't know that Styron's *Sophie's Choice* is his "big book." Styron tends to write long, thick, discursive novels. I think he's written novels better than *Sophie's Choice*, that are wonderful and good, but they are not the home run. Just as Mailer's big home run book, *Ancient Evenings*, was absolutely not the novel he should have written because in his researches about Egypt he found every convenient metaphor he had always wanted. He didn't have to really stretch his notions about the novel and reality. It was what he had been waiting to do and it fitted like a glove. It's wrong for a writer to wear gloves when he works. I suspect that when he wrote *Why Are We In Vietnam?* Norman Mailer wrote the novel he had been intended to write and that was in fact as fine a novel as one needs to write, and that was Mailer's terrific book. But maybe that book would be called a double or a scratch single because—and finally to come back to what I said at the beginning of this—it's not about (a) critical theory or (b) commercial success. Whenever you talk about a writer and his "success," you have to talk about how what he has written fits the critical theory of the moment and how what he has written fits the requirements of reviewing media and commercial houses. So that when John Barth published *Giles Goat-Boy* his reviewer could say, "at last a book that is worthy of our training in Joyce." Well . . . who cares about our training in Joyce? What's the book like? This book should not have been written for professors. It should have been written for people who read books, people without theories. And I think that the "home run" book, the "big book," the so-called "*Moby-Dick*" book, finally, alas, is nowadays about prevailing critical theories and commercial success. But I want to go further with that: *Moby-Dick* has lasted as the Great American Novel not only because of its size, and not only because it was the perfect capturing of that American moment, but because it told an ultimate truth about humankind. It's more like *Paradise Lost* than it is like a book of the moment. It's an eternal statement about the nature of man in his cosmos. And about the nature of

American man, secondly. And about the American man of the 19th century in a tertiary way. Just because a book is big and fat and about America doesn't mean it has anything to do with *Moby-Dick*, in my eyes. And also, has there been a writer since Melville—there have been one or two or three or four—but, really, has there been a writer since Melville who could write that thundering, biblical, poetic prose? I mean, finally, it's the language we keep coming back to. The vision of Ahab is nothing without the language, and that's what that book is about.

Greiner: You've mentioned Mailer a couple of times. Which writers among those well established do you particularly respect?

Busch: Dead or alive?

Greiner: Alive.

Busch: Well, I respect them all. I like an awful lot of Mailer's stuff. Updike, Roth. I like an awful lot of David Bradley, Richard Bausch, Rosellen Brown, Leslie Epstein, Reynolds Price, Ward Just. I've mentioned to you Richard Russo's book *Mohawk* and there's a guy named Pearson who writes sort of insane Faulknerian sagas about the modern South. I didn't mention Walker Percy when we talked about established writers, but surely he's terribly important to me and to writing and reading in general. I have a hard time coming up with useful lists. I like to just read and be moved and entertained as it happens.

Greiner: You've been teaching at Colgate for years. How does teaching affect your concentration as a writer?

Busch: Well, when you have to do your preparation for teaching, and I am a very conscientious preparer, you're not writing. So that answer is evident. On the other hand, I would not have read Dickens when I did and as I did if I hadn't been doing it to teach a Colgate group in London. And I would not have prepared so thoroughly as to read Edgar Johnson's two-volume biography on Dickens and would not have gotten hooked on his life and hooked on his work and have written a novel about him and a number of essays about him if not for Colgate and my work. So I guess some of the academic work feeds some of the writing, and surely what I do as a writer, if I'm worth anything at all to Colgate, makes me know more, presumably, about how writing is achieved and what goes on in the text I teach. In certain ways from certain angles different from the view of someone who doesn't write. So I can see the two as mutually beneficial, and, yet, you finally come down to the fact that you're tired and you have

only so much energy and that if you are doing what you should as a teacher, your first energies should go to teaching. You have to do what you keep telling your students to do which is to make a choice and live with the consequences. And I make that choice.

Greiner: You're a writer who happens to teach, then?

Busch: I think that has to be the case and I think that's how I'm best for Colgate, in a way. If I were more devoted and in the classroom most of the day and hanging around my office and going to more meetings, I might be a more likable fellow and I might receive more approval from my colleagues—and that would be fun, to get a lot of approval from my colleagues. But, I would not be a good writer, and if I were not a good writer I would not be able to bring whatever is special about my insights to the classroom, and to be of maximum use to my students. So in a way it works out for us all, though you don't win any popularity contests.

Greiner: You've taught at both the Iowa and the Bennington workshops.

Busch: And Columbia's.

Greiner: And Columbia's. What do you think about creative writing programs in general?

Busch: I never took a creative writing course in college, or in graduate school, and so it's hard for me to see what it is like as a student. Once in Iowa I subjected a long story of mine to a workshop experience at the end of the semester and had a bunch of extremely bright, tough young men and women take me apart for three hours. They were merciless and brilliant.

Greiner: Did they know it was your story?

Busch: Yes, I told them. And they were right, and they helped me fix it. I don't know if I ever got the story right but I got it better because of them. You learn a lot. It's harrowing. A number of my very good Colgate students have gone on, and I have suggested Iowa to them, and they have gone there and inevitably the reaction is that the first year is hell and I hate it and I want to go home. And the second year they're sort of on top of it, and they see the limitations of the workshop experience but they appreciate aspects of it. I would guess that the chance to hang around—if you can get to them—a number of really good senior writers is a priceless opportunity. I don't have that opportunity, and I envy those kids being able to walk down the hall and talk to Vance Bourjaily or to James Alan McPherson, or to be with John Leggett. I think that's wonderful. I think,

too, the opportunity to be in a community of writers—with all its attendant back-biting and all its politics—nevertheless, not to be alone as a writer is good, because ultimately writers do write alone, and when you can get some company it sort of helps to gird you for the long fight. I think if you have a good teacher in a creative writing class it can be a wonderful and useful experience. I think all too often writers at workshops are not conscientious teachers because they are doing their own work. And even if they're conscientious they're not perhaps sufficiently "present" because they're doing their own work. And that's one of the things that a young writing student has to contend with; I think it's part of your gamble. It's worth taking the gamble, I suspect. I think, too, that many workshops do not select teachers who are writers or writers who are teachers. They simply go for a name and who's available. I know whenever Leslie Epstein wants to hire somebody for Boston University, he calls me up if he doesn't know the person, and he asks, what kind of teacher is this man or woman? And that's the way to pick. So the kids who go to Boston University presumably are meeting not with someone who's only a good writer, but with a good writer who's got some kind of gift as a teacher, whether it's concern, or ability, or merely hours doggedly put in at the office. One way or another, in that situation, the students will get decent or effective teaching. I think a workshop can strive for some happy combination of those two things: good writing and good teaching.

Greiner: What are the limitations for the students in the workshops?

Busch: Well, you bring your own talent, so that's the first limitation: how far your talent goes. How deep your energy runs—energy is the key to writing. Talent you either have or don't, but energy is the ability to work hard hours, to work at the implacable page until it yields something. And to do it over a long enough haul so that you are not exhausted by the forces that stand in opposition to every writer, which is the carelessness of reviewers, the cruelty of publishers, the stupidity of readers and of yourself. I mean, it's a long, hard fight and you might as well start learning it in graduate school. And finally I mean there's the obvious piece of realism which is, if you have a graduate degree maybe you can get a job, because you're sure not going to make your money writing unless you're extremely lucky.

Greiner: Well, that leads into the next question—today's university is yesterday's patron of the arts . . .

Busch: Absolutely.

Greiner: How mixed is that blessing?

Busch: It's always good to have money. It's very good not to die of hunger or in debtors' prison. In that sense the blessing is signal. It is nice not to have to live on the streets or in a garret. So that's good. And there are fringe benefits, and occasionally at some universities, even if you are a writer, you're respected.

Greiner: Like at South Carolina?

Busch: Like at South Carolina. And in the case of the universities which support so many writers, you have to contend with the location of the university—do you want to live in Missoula, Montana?—maybe you're a New Yorker and maybe it's good for you to get out to Missoula, Montana, but how good for how long? You have to go where the patron is. You don't get a shipment of money from the patron to go live in Venice and write books. You have to go where the action is. That's one drawback, though I'm very happy about where I ended up. You have to teach according to somebody else's schedule until you get to be a very senior professor when you can have a bit more success in naming your hours. That's important: writing is chemical; it depends on your physiology, when you can do your best work. And sometimes you're not allowed to write when you can do your best work. You have to teach Freshman English when you can do your best work and that's a drawback. On the other hand, compare the alternative. You might be writing advertising copy or pumping gas at the hour when you do your best work, or waiting on tables. So I guess teaching is preferable. The drawback is that you use up your brain cells if you teach hard and teach well and if you spend hours and hours preparing Faulkner with the respect and reverence and insight that you should and then in teaching him right and then in assigning papers and then in grading those papers. There's a lot less time left for writing than most people think.

Greiner: Did your experiences at Muhlenberg, Columbia, and NYU have much effect on your writing?—the experiences themselves?

Busch: Yeah. I got a great education at Muhlenberg. I took mostly required courses for the first couple of years. I worked extremely hard for very demanding professors whose curriculum was conservative in that there was no nonsense about "take what you please, lads and lasses, and see how it ends up." They said, we want you to know this—learn it. And I

had to learn how to study very hard and to read very well, and I did. I met some wonderful teachers. There was the chairman of my department who became the vice-president of the college and the Dean and who is now retired, Harold L. Stenger, Jr. He is the reason I thought to read literature seriously and teach it. “Doc” Kinter taught everything from Denise Levertov and Allen Ginsberg to Renaissance poetry, say; he was an important force in my becoming a writer. I remember I gave him some poems and he came to me in the student union one day and he sat down and he said, “you can write, Rabbi.”

Greiner: Rabbi?

Busch: Yeah. I used to do Stations of the Cross with him—he said, “It’ll do you some good, Rabbi.” He was a devout Anglican. He’s retired now—both men are. But both men were crucial influences on me as were a number of my other professors there. And it was a small enough college so that I got all the attention I needed. I thought of myself as a writer and that college let me think of myself as a writer. I was lost at Columbia. I was simply too young when I went up there; I was just twenty or twenty-one.

Greiner: And you went to Columbia to study 17th-century metaphysical poetry?

Busch: Yeah. Because, of course, I had studied it with Harold Stenger at Muhlenberg. I was so intimidated by Columbia and so useless at being there that I stayed in my New York apartment and I wrote. And my long poems turned into stories, and I wrote stories and read stories, and I continued my education there. So in a sense it was very good for me. I was at NYU for only six weeks on money that I had borrowed from my parents, which alas I never repaid. And I was there because I thought I should get a doctorate. And clearly I shouldn’t, so I quit, and Judy and I were married, and I began a succession of magazine writing jobs. Every experience a writer has is useful. The place where I was most educated was Muhlenberg College.

Greiner: You grew up in the Midwood section of Brooklyn.

Busch: Right.

Greiner: So Midtown Manhattan and Greenwich Village are old stomping grounds, yet most of your fiction is set in small towns and the rural Northeast. How do you account for that?

Busch: I don’t know. I have some ideas. As I think you and I have said,

some of the first novel published, *I Wanted a Year Without Fall*, begins in Greenwich Village, goes to Staten Island, which is the pattern incidentally—New York to Staten Island—of *Invisible Mending*. Which is also a city book . . .

Greiner: With the same Alligator Patrol.

Busch: Yeah, that's right. Good for you. I didn't realize that. That was a very important scout patrol for me. Some of the—you will call them chapters, but I will call them stories in *Domestic Particulars*—are set in the city. I consider that essentially an urban book. And I have written a lot of short stories about city life. But I find a rhythm in my fiction of writing about the city, and then writing about the country, then writing about the city, then writing about the country. But as my life has taken me farther from the city and as my affections have turned toward rural life, I mean my own version of it—I don't want to be out here up to my thighs in manure with hayseed in what's left of my hair; I'd like a good bottle of Chateau Clark and I'd like to contemplate the countryside—I guess I've written a good deal more about living in the country and on a lot of land. I notice from the beginning, though, my impulse was to move my characters from the urban setting I then knew and so wrote about. Of course, a lot of my early stories were about Brooklyn because I was writing about my childhood, and I still return to the Brooklyn of my childhood and still like to write about it. It was quite Edenlike and beautiful, which most people find hard to believe. And very green and lush.

Greiner: A tree grows in Brooklyn . . .

Busch: There were many, many trees. I find that in my work there is the pattern of moving the characters, at least early on, from the more complicated urban landscape to the more simplified rural area—or Staten Island, which is more bucolic or was—to the more simple landscape. John Hawkes has a phrase. He describes the set in one of his plays as the “pure, white space of psychic activity”—a lovely, lovely description. And I think of that in terms of what I used to try to do in getting characters out to the country and away from the more complex cityscape to achieve a simplicity for psychic activity. I would try to write the fable, or the myth, I think, on the simpler landscape. I was trying to pare away the more complex trappings of verisimilitude and achieve almost a two-dimensional, kind of silhouetted venture on the landscape. That's at least what I saw happening in *I Wanted a Year Without Fall*; hence the use of the *Beowulf*. Trying to

achieve some kind of mythic dimension, epic simplicity. I think that now since I live on and with the kind of land I used to have to run away to, I've adapted and have tried to make a verisimilitudinous fiction that takes place on a land that I no longer see as evasion or escape but that is part of the background of my characters.

Greiner: Do you feel a symbiotic relationship between your fiction and upstate New York the way that, say, Jim Dickey explains that he needs the South in his work?

Busch: Yes, yes! That's one of the reasons I think I shouldn't leave this country, this countryside. My last novel, *Sometimes I Live in the Country*, a title, by the way I had been trying for years and years to use for a book—this was the right book for it—was in a sense my coming to terms with *this* land, at last. I mean I have a city person moving on to the land and making it his and being at one with it—grappling with it, but finally coming to some kind of terms with it and his life on it. And I like to think of it now as my own fictive terrain.

Greiner: What leads you to focus most of your novels on domestic concerns, family trauma?

Busch: Well, I don't know what else there is to write about. The family is the basic unit of tragedy and of comedy. If you look at the end of every Shakespeare play that's a comedy, say, you have a clown talking bawdry or a wedding taking place, an allusion to the coming together of family. I believe that behind that wedding in mythic terms is the coming together of the Sky Father and the Earth Mother, the male and female element, the yin and yang, the totality of life. And I believe that the mythic stuff is really behind everything we write. It is certainly what drives the comedies and tragedies in fiction which are verisimilitudinous reenactments of those rituals about death and fertility and life—I mean life with a capital L—the generating force. The family is the basic unit of all of those interplays. Whether it is the male and female about to produce a child in imitation of the earth, about to manifest its fecundity, or whether it's someone like Oedipus bringing himself and his nation-state and his family into ruin. *Oedipus Rex* we think of as a drama, a ritual enactment, a tragedy of huge dramatic proportions. Sometimes we forget that *Oedipus Rex* is a political play in the most profound sense; it's about the politics within the family. And Oedipus before he was a king and a politician and then a blind seer—Oedipus was first a son and then a husband and then a father. I mean, what

else do you write about except the family? I've mentioned Ward Just, and I've mentioned Ward Just because he knows American politics and he knows the American political family and he is able to write, in effect, a contemporary *Julius Caesar*. And I am very much interested in stuff that deals with American politics in a way other than the basic New York '30s *Partisan Review* way, which is to talk about earnest Jewish intellectuals coming to grips with the realities of communism. Ward Just deals with the American Protestant animal prowling Washington, and he is fascinating in that respect. But even he, in his new book *The American Ambassador*, which sets out to deal with terrorism and world politics, comes down to the family. A writer in whom I'm very interested is Alberto Moravia, who has always written about the family in one way or another, has also always written about politics. He's combined the two in *A Time of Desecration*, a fascinating and sensational novel, where the drama of family politics—and sexual politics—reflects contemporary political events. Finally, what we are about is the family. Who we love begins with the family, what we need begins with the family, and where we go has to do with the family. The family becomes our metaphor one way or another, whether it's Jimmy Carter embracing us all and telling us we're his family, or Lyndon Johnson telling Harlem they're his family, or Ronald Reagan spanking Central America and telling them they've been his naughty children and telling them his world family's misbehaving. Family becomes our central metaphor. And I suppose that is why I have been writing what I have. The other thing probably has to do with my own relationship with my own family and my observation of middle-class American life. I don't know if what I'm saying now occurs to me because it is my way of defending what I have chosen to write or have been driven to write. I don't know and I can't tell you, to be honest with you.

Greiner: Reading your canon I was struck by the dead children in *Manual Labor*, the troubled sons in *Domestic Particulars*, *Take This Man* and *Sometimes I Live in the Country*, and Sam who slashes his stuffed animals in *Invisible Mending*. Do these hurt children have any special significance?

Busch: Children, next to puppy dogs and kittens, are the most vulnerable things in the world and I guess I'm writing about vulnerable people—what else is there to write about? We're all vulnerable, and one of the things fiction explores is our vulnerability, and the best manifestations of hurt adults is the hurt child that they were. I suppose that's one reason. I

love children, I like children, I think about children—I'm probably half child. Some of the writers I admire very much are writers who dwell upon childness. Dickens was, and probably still remains, the best at evoking the nightmare world of the child, the horror of being the victim. There, now: politics comes into it when you talk about children, the horror of being the victim, and all of a sudden are you talking about politics and the plays of power, or are you talking about the family? You see, they intersect. When I talk about Hemingway I end up, as you and I did yesterday, talking about how he is at once the adolescent crying that he's hurt and the slightly older adolescent saying, no, I didn't mean it, I'm really not hurt, but look at my wound anyway, just in case. Well, that's the child. And being a child is a matter of contentions of power, using your power, using your weakness as a lever so as not to be hurt more, to get what you want; and being an adult is using your power more responsibly, presumably, but acknowledging the fact that you are finally as an adult in a cruel reality, in a harsh world, nothing much more than a child in many ways. We're all very small.

Greiner: I occasionally hear the prose rhythms of John Hawkes in *Manual Labor*, especially the descriptions of the wind and the sea, the insects and the heat. How fair is that observation?

Busch: I'm trying to think of when I wrote *Manual Labor*.

Greiner: It came out in '74.

Busch: So I wrote it in '72, '73, and I read John Hawkes first in '65. I guess that's possible. I'm certainly moved and impressed—the first book that I read by Jack Hawkes was *Second Skin*, and nobody has written better prose rhythms than are in *Second Skin*, at least in my mind, for my money. So I would hope that they have affected me. It certainly was not conscious.

Greiner: Why do you think *Manual Labor* teaches so well—not just from the professor's point of view but from the student's point of view?

Busch: Well, I think it's a young book. I've always been immature and a late bloomer and I forget how old I was when I wrote that book, but I was probably younger than I should have been. I think Phil and Annie are an attractive couple, I think that their love is a *nice* love, that it's a *good* relationship, it's *interesting*. Their weakness and their strengths and the enduring centrality of their marriage are important—I'm a very married man and worship my state of marriage, not in any abstract way—and that attitude no doubt found its way into the book. Annie possessed me as a char-

acter, and she's one of the few characters I've written almost as though I were taking notes. I'd go up to my office everyday—for some reason I was writing that book at Colgate in my office in the month of January, I remember, when there are not as many students around—and I'd go up there every morning and I'd write her as if I were taking notes. Type it right out. And when I was finished with her section and I knew that it was done, I was shattered because it was like having an affair with someone; and then it was over. I mean I knew I would never be that way with *that* woman. I've been that way with *other* women in my books, but that woman was gone for me then. I was deep inside of her, or she was deep inside of me, or something and I felt the book coming together too. It stopped coming together after that, in many ways, I'm afraid. Maybe female students, I don't know if this is true . . .

Greiner: They respond to Annie.

Busch: . . . they respond to Annie because she's living on the inside in that second section of the book where her husband can't get to her, and the novel is about being who you are undercover, about being an alien presence in your own life, in the life of your own household. And I was able to get in there for a while.

Greiner: Do you consider *Manual Labor* more of a breakthrough for you than *I Wanted a Year Without Fall*?

Busch: A breakthrough as a work of fiction or in public terms?

Greiner: In public terms. The first book is always so important.

Busch: Well, I couldn't get *I Wanted a Year Without Fall* published in America, nor could my British publisher, Marian Boyars, so maybe in the public sense it was a break. For James Laughlin was wonderful about publishing *Manual Labor*—over the objection, by the way, of the man who was then his editor-in-chief, although with the approval of the man who is *now* his editor-in-chief, Peter Glassgold. Mr. Laughlin was terribly encouraging, and that was important to me—the support of one of the greatest men in publishing and in letters of our time as far as I'm concerned. That man's approval meant everything. Some of *Manual Labor* is pretty good writing too. It's a book I believed in far more than *I Wanted a Year Without Fall*, I suppose. I wrote the first third of *Manual Labor* as a long story, as a novella. And I tried to publish it and could not publish it anywhere in America for money. I finally gave it to Joe David Bellamy, at, I think it was called the *Falcon* . . .

Greiner: It's called the *Falcon*. What college was that?

Busch: Mansfield State College in Pennsylvania. Joe David Bellamy founded *Fiction International* and he was then editing this magazine and I saw an issue, I guess, and sent it to him. He published it and I was so happy to see it in print. It had been turned down by the good periodicals that paid.

Greiner: Was that the first movement of the novel—this story?

Busch: Yeah. And I loved it, and it was terribly important to me.

Greiner: It included the thumb, the lost thumb?

Busch: Sure did. That, by the way, was my hymn to *Moby-Dick*. I thought of the *Rachel* looking for her lost child when I thought of Phil looking for his lost thumb—outrageous, isn't it? And I put the story away and I mean I had nothing else to do with it. And about six months later I looked up and I said to Judy, "I wonder how Phil and Annie are?" And she said, "Who in hell are Phil and Annie?" And I realized that I had better get back to work because those people had become living presences for me. Then I wrote Annie's section. And then I was faced with the need to make a story out of it, to make a novel out of it, and that is for me where the novel fails. I resolved it with Abe, a *deus ex machina*, a Jew in the attic of an old Maine church, sort of an interesting possibility in that character, but he would have worked only if he had somehow been present in the book from the start. And I had him present in the book from the start only as a noise, or a light—a ghost in the church. And I failed to pull those elements together. Two thirds of it is pretty good, though.

Greiner: I discuss *Domestic Particulars* as a novel instead of a cycle of stories. How do you define it?

Busch: I used to think of it as a seamless chronicle. I thought then that it would be more honest to call it a book of stories. They are finally neither. They are episodes in the life of a family. I continue to list it under the rubric, *stories*. I had some stories from my second book, published only in England, and called *Breathing Trouble*, and I took some of those and adapted them for this book. I then wrote a number of stories to pick up the chronology and the circumstances of the characters in this book. So in effect I was writing chapters. So let's compromise and call it episodes in a chronicle. It's a book about the same people told in chronological order, broken into sequences, and it sure sounds like chapters in a novel now that you mention it.

Greiner: Did you have any special models for Claire and Mac Miller?

Busch: Special models—you mean physical people I patterned the book . . .

Greiner: Don't name any names, but are they an amalgam of people you knew in the Midwood section, or people you knew at Columbia? Mac ends up teaching at Columbia.

Busch: I think I had him up there because I remembered Columbia well and wanted to write about it. I had some models in mind for aspects of their lives, but they grew independently once the book began to move and I began to add sections to it. I began to invent rather wildly. None of my uncles and aunts, or Judy's, and neither of our parents taught at Columbia or anything like that.

Greiner: Their experiences seem in many ways typical of the intellectual who came up through the political and moral fervor of the '30s . . .

Busch: It's very much a New York book in that way.

Greiner: And then suddenly they got scared in the '50s under McCarthy, especially Mac. In the scene of burning the books on a birthday . . .

Busch: Kind of nice, isn't it?

Greiner: Yeah.

Busch: I owe that title, by the way, "The Three-Legged Race," to my friend, Terrence DesPres. We were talking at some point about some episode in my youth, and he said, well, that sounds like a three-legged race. And I thought, what a brilliant metaphor for a marriage that couldn't quite make it and yet there were these people tied together for life. They could succeed if they cooperated wonderfully, but if they faltered for an instant they were on their faces. Yeah, I like that scene, and that experience is one of the things that makes me very eager to do the work that I have now embarked on in writing this script for Home Box Office.

Greiner: About Roy Cohn?

Busch: About Roy Cohn, who was Joe McCarthy's lawyer. It's an opportunity to go back to that time and see it from the side of the guys who were scaring the people.

Greiner: Is the scene in *Domestic Particulars*—that sad moment when Mac and Claire drive all those miles to Harry's graduation and he's embarrassed—

Busch: Is that "Twenty-one Thousand and Change"?

Greiner: Yeah. And he leaves to go to a party and Mac tracks him down around the lake—is that the Muhlenberg campus?

Busch: No. There is a lake near Colgate. And a lot of students lived out there and at one time my brother Eric rented a house near the lake. He's a painter and was out there painting after he graduated, I think. And, again here's my taking a city person out into the more mythic landscape, having him and his son do this sort of insane, competitive baptism together — and farewell — at the same time. I wrote that story because once upon a time Judy and I were driving past the Colgate Inn, looking at parents who'd either come up for their children's graduation or had come up to drop off freshmen. And Judy burst into tears, she was so moved. And this was long before our children were anywhere near college age. I mean, then it was twenty-one thousand and change for four years. Now it's sixteen thousand for one. I wrote that story really for Judy, to commemorate how moved she was by the dreadful and beautiful and happy moment that was going on. It was a birth moment, in effect, for the parents, you see, that separation.

Greiner: *The Mutual Friend* is the most unexpected book in your canon. Anyone who's read all your work would not have bet on *The Mutual Friend*. You mentioned a moment ago taking a group of students to England. Is that the genesis of the novel, the fact that you had to teach Dickens and that led to reading Edgar Johnson? Dickens had not been a favorite of yours particularly — I mean we all love *Great Expectations*, but . . .

Busch: No, we don't. I mean, I worship it now. But I guess I had never read Dickens in college. I just never took British novel courses. I changed my major from political science to English in college and was therefore always a year behind my mates, trying to catch up with my required courses. Never studied the British novel at Columbia, and maybe read something by Dickens in high school. So I came to Dickens as a total novice, as a total idiot, as a total ignorant man; and reading Edgar Johnson after having read a number of Dickens novels, I remember I said to myself, "How is it possible to have lived with this man?" And I thought, "Well, here's the model of the kind of man I must be and the kind of man and woman many of my colleagues must be. People so immersed in their writing that they may be absolute bastards and destructive in the home without knowing how much harm they do." And that seemed to me interesting to explore. Dickens was a man who did so many public readings, and I was thinking of this at a time when there was still a lot of money in the culture for public readings, and writers were criss-crossing campuses,

myself included. It seemed to me an interesting analogue. And then when I read in Johnson's book that Dickens had been stranded at Utica, and I was feeling stranded in Utica myself, or near Utica, which is only fifty or sixty miles from here, it was just an interesting convergence of elements. I was in-between books, I was interested in doing something new, and I thought, "Right, I'll do a play. I'll write a play—I've always wanted to write a play—I'll do a play about Dickens, what an interesting idea." And I sat down and I wrote the first set of stage directions and I said, "The stage is his mind." And I looked up and I said, "This ain't going to be a play; it's going to be a novel," and I started to write the novel. But, as I have said to you, in a certain way *The Mutual Friend* does speak to certain of my books because it is divided into the voices mostly of his family, whether professional or domestic. And it is as much about his home life as his literary life.

Greiner: What led you to create the character Moon?

Busch: Well, Moon—I've noticed a curious pattern in my books. I hope it's not seen as patronizing. I hope that people who know me and respect me don't think of it that way. I've got a lot of Black characters and Hispanic characters in my work because I'm an American and formerly an urban man and a man who loves the variousness of his country. I love my country, I suppose, and one of the things I love about it is the fact that we're not all pink and Semitic like me. That we're all different kinds of people. And I guess I've been writing fiction I consider to be reflective of the world I live in in a small way. And so there are Black and Hispanic men and women in books of mine that are essentially about white, middle-class people. And I suppose that was my impulse in putting Moon, who was Indian, who received his name from the English. That's something I noticed in Dickens: people are always being renamed by the controlling element; people's names are taken away. Moon is the product of a colonial empire. He is a victim, and what I love about him in that book is that he spends his life up to the ankles and wrists in other people's pus and bowel movements, but at the end gets hold of George Dolby's book in which George Dolby has remade the great maker, Charles Dickens, and Moon's last words are, "I will make changes." Am I talking about the emerging third world? Perhaps. But I am surely talking about the underdog through imagination changing the nature of reality. In many ways that was my most—I suppose you would say experimental—novel; or I sup-

pose some running dog of critical jargon would call it “post-modern.”

Greiner: What’s the background of Lizzie Bean in *Rounds*? You once told me you were writing and you had the L. L. Bean catalogue on the desk, but that doesn’t necessarily lead to this tough lady.

Busch: There is a woman whom I taught named Elizabeth Bien. She was here many years ago at Colgate as a student of mine in a seminar on the ’20s. She was beautiful and talented, and everybody who read the book at Colgate assumed that I had been in love with Elizabeth Bien in my class. Well, she was a sweet person, but, no, that is not the origin of Lizzie Bean. The L. L. Bean catalogue is the source of her name. A lot of people tell me her character reflects that of my wife Judy, but then again a lot of people tell me that all the women in my books are aspects of the character of my wife Judy, and there is no doubt that is in a large sense true.

Greiner: Resilient.

Busch: Resilient, feisty, bright, attractive. Lizzie Bean—where does she come from?—that’s all I know about Lizzie Bean. Lizzie Bean comes out of no place into *Rounds*, and she stayed with me. I had to write about her again in *Sometimes I Live in the Country* because I had not—I felt I had used her and abused her, like the guys in the book.

Greiner: You had to rescue her from the local store?

Busch: That’s right. From the Price Chopper in Bennington, Vermont.

Greiner: You told me in October of 1980 that *Take This Man* was part of a story you had tried to tell for years. Can you elaborate on that?

Busch: Yes; it’s a very simple story and it’s a tribute to the heroism of Judy’s mother, Helen Burroughs. Judy was a little girl, about two or three years old. Helen was living in Philadelphia with her extended family, sort of taking care of them all. Helen is a nurse, and Al Burroughs, Judy’s father, was a Marine. He had been serving with the Sea Bees in the Pacific—and then—he was in San Diego or somewhere on the west coast. And word came, rumors came, suspicion came, maybe even from Al himself, that a huge massing of men and materials was going on for an invasion of Japan. What’s interesting is that my father was on the east coast while all these rumors were floating, and it had been thought that his 10th Mountain Division was going to be part of that first strike.

Greiner: Your father fought in Italy?

Busch: Yes. And Helen Burroughs, hearing that her husband, whom she loved dearly, might be sent to die in the invasion of Japan, grabbed all the

ration coupons she could, and little Judy Burroughs, plonked her in the front of their '37 Dodge or whatever it was, and set off for the West Coast through a snowstorm, through hail . . .

Greiner: And no interstate highways.

Busch: No interstate highways, and with lousy tires, guys making eyes at her in hotel restaurants, polio scares, all of that. And she got through. And he didn't go, and it had always been to me a beautiful story about love and the tremendous, heroic adventure of a brave woman. And I had always wanted to write it. And Judy's father, before he died, had talked about it, those times, and Judy's mother had talked about it. I began to do some research. I love to do research for my novels, and I set out to write, and as usual I couldn't keep my yap shut, so the story became more complicated and more complicated, and what you see is what I did to that simple, lovely story. I baroqued it to death.

Greiner: Well, you also told me that *Take This Man* was your most difficult novel to write.

Busch: It certainly was.

Greiner: Do you still feel that way?

Busch: Yeah, it was hard as hell. I don't know why. I guess because I simply wanted to write a seventy-page story and be done with it, and yet at the same time wanted to make a long novel out of it. The book had originally been wrapped in a sixty-page frame which, with the advice of my editor at Farrar Straus, over my kicking and screaming, we took out.

Busch: But you told me later that the editor was right.

Busch: She was right. Her name was Pat Strachan and she's a wonderful editor and she was absolutely right. I gave her a really cruel time over it, but she was right.

Greiner: What was your reaction to the charge against *Invisible Mending* of— your phrase—“Semitic insufficiency?”

Busch: Well, of course, I was warned not to read the review in the *Times Book Review* and so I didn't.

Greiner: The one by Norma Rosen?

Busch: Yeah, I didn't read it. I heard it was disappointing and I didn't want to get involved in feeling any worse than I did.

Greiner: It's actually not as bad as you've been led . . .

Busch: I'm not going to read it, though. There had been a lot of talk that that book was going to go a long way, and that review effectively stopped

it, I think. I suppose in one way I was trying to engage the *idea* of Jewish self-consciousness. That is to say, the consciousness of oneself as a Jew in a post-Holocaust world. It interested me a little bit but not totally. And I certainly did not grapple with that philosophical dilemma. I am not a philosophical writer. I haven't the brains and I haven't the interest to be. But I thought I had written about some people that I had thought about and felt about and made up pretty convincingly. I thought I had dealt with some notions of bigotry from both sides of the Semitic fence. And finally I dismissed those charges. I think it's a pretty good novel. I meant it to be a funny book, but not enough people talked about the humor. I think it is kind of funny at some points. I think Rhona is a pretty good character. I think there were some great moments in there. One tends to fail more than he succeeds as a novelist, almost as a matter of course.

Greiner: One of the fascinating scenes for me is when Zimmer and Rhona visit Rhona's parents in the parents' apartment in Queens. Could you comment on that? That's a *painful* scene where they're sitting around the table.

Busch: I think it's some of my best writing.

Greiner: Yeah, with the mother.

Busch: Well, I can tell you that the deepest experience I have with Queens, with the borough of Queens—aside from the fact that a man named Ed Owre, a wonderful artist, had a studio in Long Island City where Judy and I went once—I was dating a girl named Bobbie who lived with her very lovely, thin, widowed mother in Queens. I think I had more of a crush on the mother than on Bobbie now that I think of it. I don't know anything about Queens, and I don't know any children of Holocaust survivors, I don't think. I've never known these people and I've never had any experience like that. It was purely invented and I'm pleased about that. I plucked them out of my own sympathies and affinities and meditations on the event and its effects. And they were part of my effort in the book to keep myself honest, to be true to the horror of the Holocaust while trying to write something funny and moving about people who were wrong, from every direction, in their responses to the Holocaust. And this couple was the manifestation, I think, of my conscience, of the real effect of the real event on actual seeming people. The other thing I did, all the time that I wrote the book, was to keep a poem—the poem is called “Death Fugue” and it's by Paul Celan, which is about the killing of

the Jews in the camps. I simply kept it on the wall in front of me as I wrote the book because it is for me one of the most powerful rhythmic incantations about the Holocaust. And I made myself read it and think about it as I read. I've certainly read a lot about the Holocaust, and thought about it, of course, as any civilized human being has. But I kept it there because there was the bleakest, most horrible music to it, and I wanted to remember that behind what I thought might be funny and pithy and interesting and a good story ought to be this blood black music about the real horror itself.

Greiner: What interested me in the scene was the husband, that is, Rhona's father, the combination of frustration with and love of his wife who was a victim of the camps.

Busch: I loved that man's patience. And that was—I'm glad you liked that—I had forgotten about that. I like those people too.

Greiner: I take it, then, that not much in *Invisible Mending* is based on personal experience at all?

Busch: Well, every book you write is based on personal experience.

Greiner: Well, yes. But the fact that you said you didn't know any children of Holocaust survivors.

Busch: Ah, no, no. I grew up with a lot of Jewish kids, and grew up as a Jewish kid, and I grew up as the kid whose Semitic insufficiency did get him alienated from his Jewish mates. I did go to Muhlenberg College, which was a Lutheran college, and I did get beaten as a Jew.

Greiner: That's phenomenal!

Busch: And so, being ostracized by Jewish kids for not being Jewish and beaten up by Lutheran kids for being Jewish, I learned sort of that everybody's capable of being a shit.

Greiner: Fascism is an undercurrent in *Invisible Mending*. Was that the transition to *Sometimes I Live in the Country*? I'm thinking of from Nazis to the Ku Klux Klan. At the end of *Invisible Mending* Lillian mentions the Klan to Zimmer.

Busch: I don't know. I've always been sort of politically minded in that sense, and I've always thought about the bullies of the world. And like most writers I range from mildly to very paranoid, depending on the wind currents. And I simply think about those things, I always have. I used to get hate calls from the Klan in college in response to some of my newspaper columns. One was from South Carolina. I wrote something about

Eichman and his kidnapping and mentioned that while we're worrying about him we might think about what the Klan was doing in the South, and they called to let me know what they thought. I did not think of that as an intentional connective at all. I just care about those things. I hate bullies.

Greiner: But the Klan is a presence near where you live now?

Busch: Yes. Upstate New York is hospitable to that kind of sad, undernourished, deprived hatred because a lot of upstate New York is tough living. And a lot of the people are sad, undernourished, and full of hate because their lives aren't going well. I think that this stony soil supports that crop.

Greiner: What's Petey's problem in *Sometimes I Live in the Country*? Is it a combination of psychological and geographical displacement?

Busch: Yeah.

Greiner: I mean the opening scene in that novel . . .

Busch: I stole that from Graham Greene, from Greene's essay on how he tried to commit suicide—it stayed with me and I wanted to write about it. And I've never appreciated Greene's existential explanation for why he, his rewriting of his life, for why he tried to do that. And I saw a very sad boy, and I wanted to write about him and that seemed to me a good image. Petey's geographically, physically, displaced of course, and kids hate that. And I wrote about that at a time that we yanked our kids out of the small town that we had lived in for twelve years and moved up here into the middle of no place.

Greiner: From Poolville?

Busch: Yeah. But more important to me was how the physical displacement became a metaphor for the interior displacement in Petey's soul. His father has taken him away from his mother without telling Petey that his mother doesn't know. Petey thinks that she agreed to give him up. And so he feels abandoned, and I guess I was trying to deal with that sense in children, that fear of abandonment, which I think children never lose and express still when they're adults.

Greiner: Hansel and Gretel.

Busch: Exactly. Which is maybe the basic myth. I've written a story about that. Petey can't figure out why his mother would throw him out like that. And I think a lot of kids in divorces must feel that way, one way or another. I'm not a child of divorce, but I've certainly known enough of

them. He feels bereft. He's in a nightmare world, and, as I've said, that is one of the aspects of Dickens that has always interested me: the small child's terror. And here's a kid who's just the right age to be both a small child in terror and a victim of it and almost a grown-up.

Greiner: He's thirteen?

Busch: Yeah, right on the edge—is there a more difficult time in life? And it's compounded for him. And I was very interested in the relationship between him and his father which strikes me as a very lovely one. One in which there are very few words.

Greiner: Is it fair to say that Petey becomes the child that Lizzie Bean gave up?

Busch: He sure tries to. I love the scene where she gives him the gift of knowledge about her life.

Greiner: She gives up the child in *Rounds*?

Busch: Right.

Greiner: And she finds Petey . . .

Busch: And she tells him, "I once did this, I have to live with this, I want you to have this knowledge, this power over my life, it's a loving gift to you. The truth." It's like perhaps an American Indian confessing his actual spiritual name to someone, if he would; I guess he wouldn't, though. It's analogous to that, though—giving up the name of one's soul as a loving favor. And Petey's immediate response is, Am I that kid? Could I possibly be that kid? And he says rather wistfully, Could we check it out? And I just love that.

Greiner: In the last twenty years you've created many, many characters. And you told me once that some of your novels are difficult to write *because* you create so many characters for them. Can you tell me your favorites among your characters? Annie, surely?

Busch: Annie . . . Lizzie Bean; maybe the mother in *Take This Man*, Ellen, the red-headed woman who becomes the mother of the boy. I like them a lot.

Greiner: Three women.

Busch: Well, I like women a lot. I like Petey. At the very beginning of my work I was writing stories about a boy named Hooty who wore glasses and blinked a lot and was troubled. And I think maybe Hooty became Petey. I ought to say that a lot of the characters I like were born in my stories, were and are in my stories, and that I consider my stories integral

to my novels. And one reason I like to write stories is that you can finish them more easily than novels, sometimes. Because when I'm not writing novels I can still be writing. It's a beautiful form, and I hope that they are not totally lost sight of as a very important source of psychic nutrition to me as a writer. They feed into the novels. There is a crucial and indivisible relationship to the novels, I feel. Let's see, other characters I love. I liked the father, by the way.

Greiner: Which father?

Busch: In *Sometimes I Live in the Country*. I think his clumsiness and violence and all of his mistakes as a father are mine. And I think I was sort of, when I wrote that book, I think maybe I was saying to my sons Ben and Nick, I know how I've screwed up, guys, but I still love you. They've both been very decent about forgiving me.

Greiner: What's the background of Rhona?

Busch: I grew up with a girl named Rhona Richmen. She was beautiful, European in ancestry. One of her parents seemed foreign to me, her mother—maybe her mother was Swiss or German. And she was this very lithe, strong, sweet, funny girl who I guess I had a crush on, off and on, and she was my friend when we were eight or nine or so. Then she moved away. Rhona was a great ball player. She was a better ball player than I was—a better athlete. I always liked her and I've always liked the name Rhona and I guess that was sort of my tribute to her—and the beautiful Savarese girls and all the girls of my block in Brooklyn—to have a character whose name was hers. And as I have told you, Rhona in the novel is physically modeled after a woman I knew in college who was just sexy and

...

Greiner: And just always moving forward?

Busch: Always moving forward—just a masterfully handsome woman who was a year or two ahead of me at Muhlenberg. In addition, Rhona is of course that kind of psychology about Jewishness in America that I was trying to deal with. So she's an amalgam of all those things.

Greiner: Which one novel do you have special affection for? I'm not asking you to name your best novel or your worst novel.

Busch: Well, I guess *Take This Man* is the runt of the litter. It sold about four copies. It was cruelly reviewed, by someone who doesn't write fiction, who was carelessly commissioned to review it in *The Times*. It was the hardest to write, I think. And it is one way or another about Judy's

parents, who are very special to me. It enabled me to go back in my research and in my thinking to the period of World War II, which is a time I'm very sentimental about because I'm a product of it. And maybe that novel—whose ending, by the way, I think awfully good: I like the prose at the end, I must confess—and the scattering of the ashes, and the final obscene comedy of the kid getting the ashes in his mouth; I think that somehow that and the prose of it have a lot to do with what my work is about, one way or another.

Greiner: Almost every commentator, almost every reviewer, applauds the ending.

Busch: Is that true? Well, I haven't read all the reviews. So I guess, *Take This Man* is up there.

Greiner: "Special affection." John Updike talks about writing for a boy somewhere in Kansas. Do you have an ideal audience in mind when you write?

Busch: I was once asked that, and I said, yes, and I hadn't known that I did. And I said something like this: She's sitting, drinking good coffee near a good wood stove or a fireplace in a nice house someplace, or an apartment. And she's reading my book, whatever book it is, and she puts it down and she cocks her head and there are tears in her eyes.

Greiner: Specifically, what can you tell us about the work you're completing now?

Busch: My hands are still dripping with blood from a book that I will probably call *Absent Friends* that will be a collection of stories, maybe eight or ten short stories and one novella, one very long story about the Korean War. It's work that goes back to maybe 1984. I don't think anything earlier than that. And it's the stories I like that I've written since *Too Late American Boyhood Blues*. I'm very engaged, as I've said, in writing stories and story collections. I am thinking very seriously, and have been making notes on, and have written a chapter of, a new novel. I don't want to say too much about it.

Greiner: What about the Roy Cohn project?

Busch: I've been doing, as you know, some writing on filmscripts—both as a way to make a little money and because I've always wanted to write drama. I've always wanted to write a play. I'm learning. I've been working on these two projects with a producer named Stuart Millar. Stuart is an independent producer who commissioned me to write a film, or try to

write a film, of my novel *Rounds*. We have just finished the first draft of a filmscript called *Closing Arguments: The Life and Death of Roy Cohn*. And that is commissioned by Home Box Office. It's about the last days of Roy Cohn, who is a very complex character, who seemed to be destroyed when McCarthy was destroyed. He retreated to New York like Satan falling out of Heaven, and he popped up again at Club 21 dining with the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, and making a fortune, and owing the IRS seven million dollars in back taxes, and dating Barbara Walters, and being a friend of Andy Warhol, and getting Christmas cards from the Reagans, and dying of AIDS. The man is a very complex American phenomenon, and he's a darker side of *The Great Gatsby*: an American crook who gave birth to himself in the great tradition of American self-inventing characters. And of course, that takes me back to the story "The Three-Legged Race." I'm very interested in that period. In addition, I'm going to be writing another script for consideration by CBS. They have commissioned me to do a very interesting and sweet thriller that Stuart and I are co-writing, and I probably shouldn't divulge too much about it, but it has a lot to do with kids, little babies. And I can be found daily at this desk doing business, nevertheless, as usual, and trying to make fiction.

Greiner: Do you have anything you can tell us generally about the direction you see your work going in the next four or five years?

Busch: My children are grown and growing. Ben is as of 1987, this summer, 18½, and is going to enter Vassar as a freshman next year. Nick is, as of this moment, 14½, and is going to be a freshman in high school next year. So both of my babies are very, very large people all of a sudden, and I should not be surprised if I did not end up writing stuff about . . . Well, let me put it this way. The first novel I wrote, the first full novel I wrote, was called *Coldly By the Hand*. It was about my experience in college and about these two professors I loved. It was not a very good book at all, and fortunately it was never published. And all of a sudden it seems to me I might be back at the point where I'm writing stories about little boys growing up and away and going to college again. It seems to me the cycle's swinging full 'round. I suppose that might be in the offing. I hope not, for my sons' sake, but you never know. In a way I'm going to be writing the same stuff I've always been writing. I just hope to be writing it better. I want to tell stories and I think and I hope that I'm getting better at doing that.