

## An Interview With Deborah Eisenberg

WE HAD THE PLEASURE of interviewing Deborah Eisenberg during the fall of 1992, when she spent a second semester as Visiting Lecturer at The University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. She is the author of the play *Pastorale* (produced in 1983 in New York and Los Angeles and again this year in Chicago), and of two collections of short stories, *Transactions in a Foreign Currency* and *Under the 82nd Airborne*. Her story "The Custodian" was chosen by Alice Adams for the 1991 edition of *The Best American Short Stories*. She has taught at Utah University and Washington University in St. Louis, and will return to Iowa for the fall semester of 1993. She lives in New York City.

The interview took place on a dark, rainy afternoon in late October, at the home of a University of Iowa professor teaching abroad. After making a pot of tea, Deborah led the way to the only lighted area in the house, a comfortable room with a couch, a coffee table, and a cross-country ski machine. On the couch lay a copy of Kleist's *The Marquise of O and Other Stories*. She set the book aside and the tea onto the table, then with a dramatic gesture she asked, "Shall we repair to the couch in front of the NordicTrack?"

TIR: You've said you never envisioned yourself teaching. . . .

DE: Oh, no. In fact, I always had an absolute horror of schools, and I never wanted to be around one at *all*, and in a way I find it absolutely absurd to be here. It wouldn't have occurred to me to look for a job at a school. I was waitressing, that's what I was doing to make a living. And when Frank [Conroy] called—he was the first person who ever suggested I teach—I said, Oh, that's completely out of the question, I can't do that. And I remember the day I first got here, there were these words—like syllabus, and mailbox—and I thought, I just can't do it. My boyfriend always wanted to be around schools, and I always said, Go right ahead, but leave me out of it. But now, of course, I'm thrilled that it's turned up, because it is something I enjoy.

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*Eileen Bartos was the interviewer.*

TIR: Do you enjoy it enough that you see yourself continuing?

DE: Well, I wouldn't do it on a volunteer basis, because I do find it disruptive. Most people can work very easily and teach at the same time, but I find it takes all of my brains and all of my energy. But I do like being here, because I like the students so much. And that feeling of a common endeavor is so strong here—that feeling that we're all engaged in the same undertaking. That itself is quite exciting.

TIR: And before, you were waitressing and writing.

DE: I waitressed for about a decade, until 1982. Or maybe '83—I remember my play was on while I was waiting on tables, and I couldn't go. I did get there occasionally, but I would have gone to previews every night—except I had this job. Then I published everything that I'd written all at once, though it had been many, many years in the writing. That sort of floated me for a bit.

TIR: Now your play—that was another instance when someone suggested you do something, and again you said, I can't do it.

DE: That's exactly what happened. There's a story in my first collection, a story called "Days." That was the first story I ever wrote, and it took me, oh, God, that story took me three years to write. Partly because I didn't think I was writing a story. I thought I was doing something else entirely. But I did write it eventually, and a friend of mine, an actress and director, said, "You know, I'd really like to direct it as a reading at the Public Theatre." And I said, Please don't, it's not something to be done aloud, it's something for the page. And she said, "Well, what kind of friend are you?" So I said, All right, you do it, and I'll leave town. And that's what happened. She directed this reading, and I left. Looking back on it, it was just a reading, I can't imagine why it seemed so cataclysmic. But it was the first time I sort of admitted I was trying . . . to put words together on a piece of paper. Yeah, you know exactly what that's like, it's really scary.

But anyhow, about six months after that, I received a call from Joe Papp, who was running the Public Theatre, and has subsequently died, alas. And he said, "I was just going through this stuff on my desk and remembered your story, and I think you should write a play." I said, Oh, I can't do that, Joe. And he said, "Well, I'll give you money." So I said, Let me think this through again, rethink it, as we say.

So then I told him, Well, I'd love to, but I've got this very good waitressing job. And he said, "Well, why don't you arrange it with the

restaurant to drop two nights a week, and I'll put you on salary for five months for those two nights, and then you give me a play."

So, you know, there comes a time in your life when if somebody says, I'll give you money to write a play, you have to decide whether you're going to do it or not. And if you're not going to do it, what are you going to do? So I said, Fine, I'll do it. Well, the first two months I spent on the floor with the grappa bottle. I was so terrified, I was nonfunctional for about two months. And then I sat down and began writing the play. In the meantime Joe kept calling. "How are you doing? Do you want to show me anything?" And I said, Oh, I'm fine, Joe, everything is absolutely fine. Because I can't stand the idea of showing somebody something that I'm working on. With me, there *is* nothing until I'm finished, it's nonsense, it's garbage, it's nothing. So I kept saying, Sure, Joe, I'll bring it in one of these days. Finally the five months were up, and I had finished. I've never written anything else so quickly, by the way—it takes me a year, more or less, to write a story. But I was really proud of that play, I have to tell you. And I still am. I can't believe I could write anything so good. So I brought Joe the play, and he called me to come in and talk, and he said, "I hate this play, this play is terrible." And I don't understand how I could've had the reaction I had, but my reaction was, Well, you're wrong. It's a good play. And we got into this enormous argument about it, and he said, "I will never think it's a good play. Even if it's done on Broadway, I won't think it's a good play." Because he was the kind of person—it hurt his feelings if he didn't like something. It was so painful to him not to like my play that he was really angry at me. But I was completely sanguine about the whole thing, I really have no idea why. And by the time I had finished writing that play, I sort of had thrown my lot in with writing. I loved it so much that even though I didn't see any way I could continue, I also couldn't stop.

TIR: So why didn't you continue to write plays?

DE: Well, I love watching actors—it's my favorite thing, watching actors work—and I've never had more fun than watching actors work on *my play*. That was really divine. But I don't have any interest in theatre as such. Some people really do, some people are born with what I consider an affliction. But I don't really like American theatre. I think it's pretty wretched. And I don't really have a gift for writing plays. For instance, even that play, which I'm obviously an egomaniac about, is in a way not suitable for theatre because it's so light, so easily damaged. Theatre is at its best

when it's very very hardy. Think of really successful playwrights—Strindberg, Ibsen, Mamet, O'Neill, Shakespeare, Webster—well, that's an odd list. But all of the really good ones, except Chekhov, I think, write in this very hardy way that's indestructible. Even Caryl Churchill, whose work is so finely wrought and complex.

TIR: And there's a subtlety to your work that—

DE: It's very, very easily lost in the execution, just as it is in the reading, I think. Theatre is terribly literal and engaging, it has to go out to engage the audience in a certain way. And I don't do that. And another thing is that I find it so distressing that there is no such thing as a *play*. There's a script, and then there's the production—one production or another, at that—and when a production doesn't exist, there's only the script, which is not a play. There's something thrilling about a production that there isn't about anything else. Live actors working with the words—it's like some coalescence of natural forces, and it's just electrifying. But I like having the physical thing. I like being able to say, Here is this thing that's complete, I finished it, I'm in charge of it, now I've given it to you. And then there's a third thing, too: I don't know how to put it exactly, but with a play you have to come down on it just right, whereas with a story you can sort of slither around into the right place.

TIR: So are you going to stick with the short story?

DE: I don't know what I'm going to do, including, Will I write another word in my whole life. I have no idea. I love short stories, as you know, I just love them, but if it turned out that I wrote anything longer, that would be fine, too. I just don't want—you know, there's always pressure on everybody to write a novel, and I don't want to write a novel just to fill up pages.

TIR: A couple of times now you've mentioned the terror of writing, particularly when you were just starting out. Do you still experience it?

DE: More than ever, I think. Although there are certain ways in which I don't. Because now I do assume that if I sit down and go through the incredible agony, eventually, sometime, in some way, something will end up on a piece of paper, which is not something I always assumed. It may be that I'll never again get something that I think is any good, or that anybody else would think is any good, but I'll probably be able to put down one word, and then another word, and then another word. Which is not at all something I always relied on. In that way the terror is much alleviated by

these years. But—one of the things that’s still terrifying is that you don’t know if your courage is going to hold, if you’re going to be able to really do the thing that’s making you sit down and try in the first place. And it’s very frightening to think that you’re going to have to go and slosh around in the chaos of your brain, and then you might not even be brave enough to put the chaos down on the paper. That’s scary.

TIR: You said that when you first started—when you were writing “Days”—you didn’t think you were writing a story, or didn’t think you were *writing*. What did you think you were doing?

DE: Well, I was in such desperate personal disarray at that time that it’s hard for me to recall what I thought I was doing. I was about thirty, and my life seemed absolutely to have ended. I seemed to be on the earth for no reason whatsoever. There was nothing at all that I wanted to do—I never had wanted to do anything at all—and I was very, very desperate. And I’d also stopped smoking. And fallen into a million pieces. “Days” is my only autobiographical story, and although the story is kind of funny, what was really going on in my life was not funny at all. And what I thought was that I was—I thought I was trying to write a piece of expository prose about the YMCA, and what a really great thing it was.

TIR: “The Y is this whole thing,” as I recall.

DE: Yes. And I was in such a state of rage for this whole period—real rage—that I kept getting furious at the idea that I was trying to do anything, and I would just pitch the whole thing into a fire. Then a few weeks or months later, I’d start all over again. I’d have a good day and think, Well, I really can try to do this. And when I was finished, I gave it to my boyfriend, and he said, “Well, you know, you actually haven’t written a piece about the Y, but you have written a story.” Then he said, “Now write it again. Think of it that way, and sit down, and start it all over.” Well, you can imagine. I thought I was going to die. It had been a year and a half or something, and I thought, How can I do that? But since my life was about absolutely nothing else, I had to do it. Either you say, Okay, this is where I stop, or you have to go ahead. So I did it, and when I finished, however many months later, I gave it to him again. But I had turned it into a third-person narration, and he said, “Well, now it really is a story, but it’s lost its life. Do it again.” So I did it again. And then it basically turned into what it was. Many sub-drafts in between, but that, I think, is one reason why I don’t really mind spending a year on something. I’m always

surprised in workshop by how quickly people expect to be able to do things that are finished, that are polished, that are good. Of course there are always a couple of people who can, in workshop or not in workshop. Ann Beattie, for instance, just sits down and it's perfect and that's just the way she does it. Most of us don't do it that way at all. I happen to have a very, very high threshold for the long period of time it takes because of the way I started out. And I think that's good—if I expected to be able to work as quickly as many people in workshop expect to be able to work, I would've quit as soon as I started. That's a problem with the workshop, and I think there has to be some kind of countervailing to it. One good thing about knowing other writers is that you learn it's not supposed to be easy, you find out that actually it's very painstaking for most people. A slow, painstaking process. It's supposed to *look* easy, of course, but that's something else entirely.

TIR: Were you always a reader?

DE: I was in my childhood, and I would say I stopped being an anything when I was in my mid-teens, and just didn't start being an anything again until I was thirty. But particularly since I started writing, I don't read much fiction. I read a little, but not much.

TIR: Do you read new things, or—

DE: Mostly I don't read much contemporary fiction. Some people say they don't read their contemporaries because they're afraid of being influenced, but I don't find that at all. It's just that I find the activity of writing so present in my mind that I can't read very well, because I'm always thinking, Well, why is she writing it like this, why didn't she—? It's like when you learn to drive, and you're sitting next to the driver, and you think, Well, I put my foot where the brake is supposed to be, why didn't the car stop?

The things I do read—and teach—I read because they're thrilling. I don't choose things because they're teachable. And I have no interest in technique at all. Or in teaching technique. I don't even know what it is. But I'd rather read things that are electrifying than things that you can theoretically learn something from.

TIR: So when you're working on something, and you have a problem, do you work it out yourself, or do you go to Chekhov to see how—

DE: I've never gone to anything. I can't learn anything from anything that anybody else has ever done. Because it's all so unified, you know, it all comes in a piece, it's not like a little Lego set that you're putting together.

TIR: Maybe all you get out of reading something is that it *can* be done.

DE: It can be done, somebody else could do it, somebody else did it this way. Now David Leavitt told me once—I've known him for about six years, and during that time we've both shared this huge enthusiasm for Alice Munro—and he told me that he really examines her stories. He, for example, is very analytical, he's a wonderful reader, and really tries to figure out how people did things. I never do, because I just assume it doesn't apply to me. I do feel that it's your own obstacles that teach you how to write. It's not what somebody else has managed to do.

TIR: So do you have any feelings about the process of workshop, or studying writing formally, since you didn't do that?

DE: I came here very skeptical, thinking that a workshop probably was not a great thing. But I now think it can be a fabulous thing, and usually it is. But there are tremendous pitfalls, and I think that the onus is on the student in a writing workshop, much more than it is in other disciplines, to figure out how to use it. Each person has to be very, very cagey about figuring out in what way it can benefit them, and in what way they really must not pay any attention. The process really requires a very vigorous and active engagement. But I'm amazed at how rapidly and dramatically people's writing improves, for example their understanding of when they're expressing something and when they're not, or a feeling for flow in a story, what information is useful and what is not. And again, I do think it's good to be with other writers. When I started writing, I was very, very fortunate, because I knew other writers. So I learned that it's not supposed to be easy, I learned that you don't do it well at first. And I learned that you might be any sort of person. Before I started writing, I thought I couldn't possibly be a writer, because if I were a writer, I'd already be a writer. Then I learned that wasn't true, and I think that's something you learn in a workshop. Of course, most people who come to a workshop probably already know that. But in case you came with any doubts, those doubts would be erased.

TIR: Can you talk about your work habits, or process? Do you spend one solid year at one thing?

DE: I tend to work on one thing at a time, and I like to work steadily, although most of the time is spent just putting gibberish into the wastebasket. And it might not necessarily be a year, maybe eight months, usually not much longer than a year. I think I once wrote a story in five months.

TIR: Is it in longhand, then?

DE: I recently started using a typewriter as well—mixed media.

TIR: I suppose process is one of those things that, well, once it's working for you, it may not be interesting to talk about, but people who are still struggling are really interested in it.

DE: I'm always interested, actually, in how other people do it, because nobody does do it quite the same way. I think I heard somewhere that E. B. White used to wake up and have a martini before he started to work. I don't know if that's true. Just one, though.

TIR: Do you keep a journal?

DE: Occasionally I make a couple of notes, failing to make any progress on a story, because I'd like to remember the horrible times. And occasionally I jot down a phrase or something, but generally I don't. I always wanted to, but I don't seem to be capable of it. I don't have the patience. And I don't have talent, exactly. I can't sit down and describe something well. Some people can; I can't. So if I want something to be in the kind of shape that I want to remember it in, I'm better off leaving it alone and . . .

TIR: . . . storing it in your chaotic brain?

DE: Right.

TIR: When you described in the *Best American* collection how you came to write "The Custodian," you talked about an element in your brain coming into the light and dragging other things into the light with it. Can you remember with any particular stories what those elements were?

DE: It's funny. I sort of go into fugue, I think, when I'm writing, because usually what I remember afterwards is what color of notebook I was using, and that sort of thing. Nothing else. But I have a very clear memory with the story called "Rafe's Coat" that I started with a melancholy picture of a woman with a bowl of flowers. Of course it turned into a very artificial and jokey story, there's not much melancholy about it. With "What It Was Like, Seeing Chris" I remember I had a picture of a young girl in the hallway of an apartment building. Now that completely disappeared, but that was the image that generated the story. Usually there are a few that sort of accrue, or accrete.

TIR: Like the description in "Flotsam" of how meaningless things come together.

DE: That's right. That's exactly what it's like.

TIR: In "The Custodian," though it's about two young girls, Lynn and Isobel, you started out with a conversation between them as adults, a very short puzzling scene. Was that where the story actually started?

DE: No, I was going through a very bad writing period that whole time before I started it. I felt like a stone, or like an old piece of newspaper or something, utterly without the appetite or energy for writing. So I thought I would do something very, very simple. And I thought, Well, if I can't write a story about a teenage girl who's tortured with jealousy, or a teenage girl who has a crush on an older man, I might as well just hang up my pencil. So that's where it started. I was also sort of enjoying playing around with tenses, particularly in this book—tense madness, some people might think. I know also that I'm sometimes merciless with the beginnings of my stories. Sometimes they're just so difficult to read, and obviously if they went through workshop, I'd never be allowed to do that.

TIR: Another thing you said about "The Custodian" is that with every story you throw yourself off a different cliff. Can you think of what you saw as those cliffs in any particular story?

DE: I guess that's also what I started out with each time. With "Presents," for example, I wanted to put those four people in a room together. So I had the four people, I put them in a room, and that was my mandate for that one. I'm not sure if that's even what I meant, but I think that either consciously or not, usually not, I present myself with a little challenge.

TIR: How about with "A Cautionary Tale"?

DE: "A Cautionary Tale," it's strange, was very, very hard to write. Not the prose, which came easily to me. That very ornate, mannered prose was the only fun I had through the whole thing. But I wanted to write about New York, and though it looks kind of fun when I look at it now, I know that when I wrote it, it was absolute drudgery. But I did enjoy writing this very prosaic story in this absolutely ultra-elegant lapidary prose. And I do remember what that one started out with. I wanted to have a character reading—What is that story about the dog with the eyes as big as millstones? "The Tinder Box." I don't know why, but I wanted to have a character reading "The Tinder Box" to some other character. And of course, that's gone from the story.

TIR: How did you come to write that amazing paragraph-long sentence at the beginning about friendship?

DE: Oh, I really had fun with that, and I was absolutely horrified that when *The New Yorker* published it, they put a period in. Of course it had taken me about a month to get the period *out*. I found it just excruciating and painful. But it was sort of an error. I'm not sure it even ended up in it—I may have

gotten it out in the final editing process, I can't remember. But I had been brooding on the subject of friendship. I like things about friendship, though there aren't that many, I think.

TIR: When you're writing, who do you find yourself writing for?

DE: That I find an absolutely fascinating issue. Not particularly in regard to me, but in general: who is a writer writing for. I always think about it when I'm involved in a workshop as I am here. I would say that for me, I am writing for a creature of intelligence that's much greater than mine. Using all of my mental resources, I am trying to reach the most intelligent creature that can possibly make itself felt in my brain. But a creature from a different species, or a different planet, so that I have to lucidly explain what I mean—a creature who is sort of floating there, hovering there, empathetically, ready to grasp and receive my little communications. I never think to explain for people not in sympathy with me. I'm assuming the sympathy. And I'm assuming tremendous mental refinement and intelligence.

TIR: In certain of your stories I get to the end and I feel as disoriented as the character must be. "Flotsam" would be a good example, where at the end Cinder makes her accusation, and you have to go back and rethink the whole story, what happened, and was Charlotte an awful friend. But in stories like "What It Was Like, Seeing Chris" and "The Custodian," there's a very young, very naive character who isn't even equipped yet to understand. Is that difficult for you to do?

DE: Strangely, it's a little easier for me to do, because so much of my personal experience of the world is that I don't have the faintest idea of what's going on. So it's very easy for me to identify with a character who finds things puzzling.

TIR: You've mentioned "Rafe's Coat," but there are a number of other stories where—would it be fair to say that they depend on a character being self-deluded?

DE: I think it probably is fair to say. I never think about what my stories have in common thematically, because it's just too frightening. I don't want to know. But I'm sure that that is true. In fact, the discovery of something or other does tend to be the common technique. They're all, I suppose, about self-discovery.

TIR: Even in a story like "Holy Week" that's true.

DE: Definitely. There it's a sort of dual discovery of not just the information, but what you yourself do with the information. A lot of my

recent stories have concerned—or have used strategies of—repression of information, particularly repression of knowledge about oneself. “The Robbery” is a good example of that.

TIR: Have you gotten any reactions to that?

DE: Oh sure. A lot of people have said, This is not interesting, this is political, you shouldn't be doing this, too bad you're doing this, I don't understand this, the concerns are extraneous. Of course. And then there are other people who have been very encouraging about it.

TIR: A lot of those things sort of appeared under the surface in your first book—

DE: Definitely.

TIR: —so it was great to see how you could magnify those questions, and really deal with them in the second book, not just let them remain under the surface. I'm thinking of a story in your first collection called “Broken Glass.” That's another one with a double discovery, a discovery of how the narrator has remained distant from her neighbors, how snobbish she has been in her own way, and a discovery of how snobbish the neighbors themselves are. They say “those people” about the poor people they're living among, and off of.

DE: That's one of my favorite stories. I'm very pleased with that story, though it was very hard to write. “Under the 82nd Airborne” is another one I just didn't think . . . it was a mortal struggle, I thought it was going to kill me before I did it.

TIR: So what happens when you're in that situation? Do you always trust that something good will come out?

DE: No, it's just that I don't have any choice. What can you do? You can stop, but then you've stopped. So if you're ever going to do anything again in your life, you'll just be starting with it again.

TIR: It sometimes seems that in writing classes, people are encouraged to abandon something before they actually work with it. It's encouraging to know that you can sort of pull something up out of—

DE: Oh, God, almost everything I've done has reached a stage of almost brain-damaging disorganization. Complete chaos. Not knowing what on earth was happening, and not knowing how I could wrestle the thing into shape, or even what shape it was going to be. If something dies on me, I let it go, but that almost never happens. Sometimes the boredom is just killing me, but it still hasn't died. It's just this horrible mess, nothing is right, but

then there's usually one good day. I remember with "Under the 82nd Airborne" I was in Guatemala, staying at this beautiful convent—the convent from which the American nun was later abducted and tortured, not too much later, by the way. It's since become a sort of hotel, but at the time it was just a convent I'd managed to sneak into somehow. I guess the nuns saw my spiritual need or something. So I was sitting on my balcony, overlooking their beautiful courtyard, and I wrote a scene which sort of stayed intact through the subsequent months I was working on it, about how Caitlin felt being pregnant. That was the first good day I'd had with it, and it gave me the character, so that once I had her, I was able to get the story. But until then, it was chaos. And that story, I can tell you what that started with. I've never gone anywhere *to* write about it, and I've never gone any place and thought, Oh, now I'm going to write about this place. Except Honduras. I got off the plane in Honduras, and I thought, Oh boy, I can't wait. I'd had no intention of it, but when we got to our hotel, there was a table of people next to us, and I thought, I'm going to immortalize these people. I *knew* I was going to write about Honduras. The table of people included the daughter in the story, Holly, and her boyfriend. I can't even remember what the real people looked like, but I remember thinking, Oh, this is for me. I must have been working on something else at the time—I have a feeling I had just finished some other story and was starting on "The Robbery." So I wrote "The Robbery," and then I thought, Okay, back to that table of people.

TIR: Another thing that appears in some of the stories is the idea of class in America. It seems to me that's another piece of information that people don't want to look at. Can you talk about that?

DE: I certainly addressed it directly in "The Custodian," and also in "The Robbery" of course—though that's a class portrait of people who don't even know they're in a class, to whom the idea has never even occurred. But it's very much to my mind the portrait of a class. With "The Custodian" it was a very primary piece of the story that Linnie be from a working class family. Of course, I've never *met* a working class family. In America. It's very strange to me, and absolutely horrifying, that if I want to meet people who aren't exactly like me, I almost have to leave the country. Now there are plenty of people who now live on my street in New York—and I don't mean on my block, I mean on my street, living *on the* street—but I don't really have a way of talking to them. In the way that I

can go to Guatemala, and through being fantastically aggressive, can actually go hang out with human rights people who are taking testimony from Indian families. It's easier for me to go to another country and talk to people from a broad social or economic spectrum than it is for me to do that here. So I feel that at some point I'm going to have to figure out how — I'm not saying it's impossible. I have plenty of friends who are deeply engaged with life as it's actually lived in America. Not me, and it must be because I don't want to, I don't have the nerve, I don't have the drive, I can't handle it. But I think I really am going to have to figure out what's going on six flights below my apartment.

TIR: Besides affecting the scope of your stories, what effect has all your traveling had on you?

DE: Oh, I was raving on the other day in class about a trip to Eastern Europe—how it had changed my idea about what fiction was and what it meant to write fiction, and how it had really raised my respect for fiction no end. And traveling in Latin America further altered my ideas about what it means to write fiction, or to be an American writing fiction, or to be an American, or to be a human being. I'd been to Latin America several times when I was young, and I'd traveled other places, too. So there were a lot of things, obviously, that weren't a shock to me. But my recent few trips—when I was better informed and aggressively trying to figure out how things were happening—changed my sense of what it means to be a person in the world. We tend to think of ourselves as individuals who have exactly the same weight in the whole of humanity as all other individuals. In a sense it's true, but actually, the military and economic power of this country means that very casual behavior of ours has huge repercussions and ramifications for other people we aren't thinking about at all. For instance, I spent a little time in Central America during the eighties. Now, from this country it's all very confusing: what do I have to do with El Salvador, what do I *personally* have to do with El Salvador? Well, you go to El Salvador, and it's not confusing at all. Every six-year-old child knows exactly what you—as someone from the U.S.—have to do with El Salvador. Which is that you are paying for the murder of their family. Very simple. So I think you have to step outside of yourself to know what you are in every way, and I think you have to do it repeatedly, constantly. I haven't done it for a long time now, and you lose the sense, you go back to a certain false feeling based on your own experience of yourself. But your own experience of

yourself is very partial in regard to the meaning of what you are in the world. So that was a crystalizing moment in my life—when I saw in Latin America how very profoundly I had misunderstood the effect of my actions, or inactions, in the world, simply because of the huge strength of this country.

I remember when I was in high school, all my friends wanted to be writers. I thought, God, that's amazing. But they all complained that it was so hard, because Americans had nothing to write about. Looking back on it, that seems like adolescence, and it also seems like a certain moment of history—the 1950s. On the other hand, I think we still have that feeling of being a vicarious nation, and that we choose to have it, to think of ourselves in that way. And I think Americans are encouraged—American writers are encouraged—to not look at the world, to not engage in it in some way. That's considered to be debasing the form, just as—to certain formalists, I gather—content is considered to debase the pure concerns of paintings. It's so ingrained in the way we think about writing that we don't stop to examine it. But really it's nonsense. I don't think that Chekhov's literary merits—or Tolstoy's, or Joseph Roth's, or Dostoyevsky's, or any other really marvelous writer—that any of their literary merit is in any way debased by the degree to which they turn their attention to the world. It's just nonsense. I think it's just one of the things writers *can* do. Should do. So I have a very strong desire, or drive, to understand *what we are*, what our day to day experience is, in the light of being encouraged not to know what it is, not to know what its meaning is.

TIR: How do you feel that idea about political writing is communicated to writers? Do you think it's coming through the literary establishment, or is it something bigger?

DE: I think it's bigger, I think it's coming right from our entire culture and society. Just as this is the only country in the world, I think, where the people who live in it, all of us, believe our own propaganda. That was another revelation from visiting Eastern Europe: that nobody believed anything they were told. If they were told something, they would automatically believe the opposite. It was a terrible thing, because even if they were told things that were true, they didn't believe them. At all. So it was sort of a shock to think about our own country, where we believe anything we're told. Because why wouldn't we, when it suits us to believe anything we're told. It's very flattering to be told you're the defender of

freedom, when actually what you're doing is manipulating financial markets so that other people starve and you get all their money. Of course it's nice to be able to get all their money and be told that actually you're doing them a big favor.

We are the army, in a way. As voters in the U.S. we are the army that's keeping everything in place. And the spoils of war that we get are inestimable, really. When you think how we're living and how other people are living, it's unbelievable. *And we get to not know about it.* So we're like these soldiers out on the front, but the way we fight is to not know the information that everybody else in the world knows about us. That's our job: to not know things.

TIR: So you came away feeling you had a responsibility to change your work?

DE: Well, let me go back to Eastern Europe. My boyfriend and I went to Eastern Europe before *glasnost*. I'm thinking particularly of Poland, where we had introductions to many wonderful, fascinating people through some friends of ours who were living in exile in this country. So we asked, What should we bring to your friends in Poland—because at that time there was nothing. And they said, Books. We were a little too ignorant at the time to realize that what was really meant was books about Poland, or books by Poles. Any books, really, were welcome, since it was hard for anybody to get any serious literature, but the books that were mostly not available in Poland were those by Polish writers and about Polish history, many of which were printed in England. There was a huge illicit business in serious writing. Things were typed in churches, but were hard to get ahold of—this terribly valuable commodity, the most valuable commodity, information about themselves.

Before this I'd always thought, Well, okay, I've found this thing that I just love doing. It makes me incredibly happy. I said to my class the other day that it was like some weird perversion that I liked to do. I'd always thought, Well, I'm such an odd person, I have an odd mind, and everything about me is odd, so I'll just sit on the floor and play with paper and that'll be okay. Then we went to Poland, and I realized that it's actually in the interests of anybody in the world who has any power to keep everybody else from knowing about the world—and that is as true in this country as it was in Poland, although here the execution of that goal is very, very different. It was very exciting in Poland at that time, because there was a

great effort of will to understand everything, to know and to understand. Everyone was putting his or her mind to work on the problem of garnering information, putting it into place, disseminating it, and making sense of it; and what each person had to offer was his or her own peculiar experience, perspective, mental properties. And I thought, Here I've been going around for decades feeling incredibly isolated by my oddness, but it's actually exactly what I've got to bear on the question of what is human life and what is the world. It's not very interesting to be so egocentrically involved with myself, to be sitting around thinking about how odd I am; now it's time to get to work. Just *be* odd and do what I can do. Keep track of the world. Put it together. Just look at it, write it down, try and get it down accurately. Just try and do it.