INTERVIEWED FOR THE BROOKLYN REVIEW

DARIN STRAUSS

BY ELLEN ADAMS

Bestselling author Darin Strauss' work has won numerous awards, including the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Library Association Alex Award. His first novel, Chang and Eng *(2000), is a fictionalized account of world-famous conjoined twins, following them from Siam to North Carolina, from marriage to civil war.* The Real McCoy *(2002) re-imagines the life of Virgil Selby, turn-of-the-century boxer, bigamist and scam artist. Set in the present day, his third novel,* More Than It Hurts You *(2008), explores the aftershocks on both family and doctor in the wake of a troubling diagnosis: Munchausen syndrome, whereby a parent intentionally injures a child as a means for attention. His most recent work, the memoir* Half a Life *(2010), examines the aftermath of a car accident that left a classmate dead when her bicycle swerved into his car. Darin Strauss is a recipient of the Guggenheim Fellowship. He teaches at NYU's creative writing Program.*

In early March, I met Darin Strauss at a coffee shop in Windsor Terrace, Brooklyn to discuss his most recent book, Half a Life. *The following is our abridged conversation about craft, Lucille Ball, and the fine line and overlap between truth and storytelling.*

Ellen Adams : Have you found the writing community in Brooklyn different than that in Manhattan?

Darin Strauss : Most of my friends who are writers go back and forth. I do think that the writing community in New York overall gets a bad rap. A lot of people outside New York expect that the writing world in New York is filled with backstabbing and obnoxious competition, and in fact it's been really friendly and helpful. [Author and friend] David Lipsky and I try to approximate an office over the phone because we both work from home. So rather than go to the water cooler, we give each other a call. I also made a poker game with a bunch of writers. It's a solitary job. Any time you can make a community out of —

His phone lights up—it's David Lipsky.

EA : Water cooler time!

DS : Ha, exactly. Anytime you can make it less isolated, the better. It's important for people in MFAs to keep in touch with the people you like and the people you respect—those aren't always the same—because you're going to need readers.

EA : How long do you wait before you show your work to a trusted reader?

DS : I want it to be really good. One of my weaknesses is that I over-revise and buff away what was good about it. There's something to be said for having a first draft because it's easier to revise than to start from scratch. After a hundred pages I see what I have, then I plot out the rest of the book so it's not inorganically constricted or too aimlessly wandering around.

EA : In terms of constraints in subject matter, in *Half a Life* you write, "My accident was the deepest part of my life and the second deepest was hiding it." When you look back on your trajectory as a writer, are there times when you started to write about the accident in a fictional context, or did you make a conscious decision not to?

DS : The only time I made a conscious decision was in graduate school when a woman I was dating said, "You should write about that." I said, "No, I can't do that." You have to make changes when you turn a non-fiction story into a fictional story so that it fits more perfectly into dramatic precision. I wouldn't have felt comfortable doing that with this material. It would have seemed disrespectful. I wanted to tell the story exactly how it happened and not invent too much and not worry about artistry. I had short bursts of recollection and I wanted the book to reflect that. That's why there are bursts of incident and then whitespace, then more incident, then more white space. If there's any intricacy to the structure, it's that I wanted the book to mimic the experience of memory.

EA : From the other side of the page, I certainly experienced those rhythms of recollection. At another point, you write that "tragedy turns a life into an endless publicity tour." Is there an element of this tour that you wish you could banish?

DS : On the book tour, I got an understanding of why Alcoholics Anonymous is so effective: getting up in front of a room full of strangers and talking about something you wouldn't necessarily want to talk about is not easy in the moment, but each time you do it you feel a little more healthy. It's not fun while it's happening, but the book, the writing of the book, the talking about it, the putting the book away, all of that has been therapeutic in a way that was surprising. There's a line from William Gass where he says that if you're writing well, it can't be therapeutic because

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writing is so hard. You can't let yourself stop enough to feel catharsis. Either I didn't write it well enough, or he's wrong. I felt a lot of catharsis, but now I do want to move on. I don't want to be the "accident guy." But I chose to write it, so I can't bitch about it too much.

EA : Are you working on fiction now?

DS : I wanted to do something light after this book. David Lipsky and I collaborated on a young adult adventure book. He teaches at NYU with me, and we just said, "Yeah, let's write it together." It's actually a trilogy. We just finished the first draft for the first book. It's called *The Unaccounted*. Hopefully it'll be out next year. Aside from that project, I'm working on a book that's a weird hybrid. I wanted to incorporate all I've learned in my last four books. It's part contemporary fiction, part historical fiction and part memoir. It's about Lucille Ball and how she built Hollywood, and my grandfather who was part of this real estate empire in New York and then lost all his money. It's totally fictionalized. It's about a passionate love affair, and they never met.

EA : Aw, Grandpa!

DS : Right, Grandpa! So we'll see. It's either going to be terrible or really good. I guess like everything, right?

EA : Do you find yourself watching a lot of *I Love Lucy*?

DS : I probably will as I get into that part of the book.

EA : Ricky!

DS : That should be the title of the book. Ricky, exclamation point.

EA : Not *My Grandpa*. Has the autobiographical exploration that went into *Half a Life* changed your writing process at all?

DS : I tried to approach *Half a Life* as a novel. Not that I would make anything up. You have to approach the truth with a kind of reverence. You can't just make shit up. But I was in more trouble after the first draft than any in any of my other books. The difficult decisions of fiction are

gone, but there are other difficult decisions: taking this blob of experience and make it into story. In *The War Against Cliché*, Martin Amis says the reason that he doesn't think *In Cold Blood* is as great as everyone says is because it lacks a moral point. There's no guiding principle of the novelist to say, "Here's what all this means. Here's why this happened." Capote is brilliantly transcribing fact, but it's still unshapely fact.

EA : In terms of the idea of shaping the story, it's not until late in *Half a Life* that you refer it to as an essay. Was it a conscious decision not to name the form until then?

DS : I didn't want too much attempt at cleverness. I wrote it as it came out. When I got to parts in the writing where I was struggling with the writing or remembering, I thought I should mention that. If there was something from the present day that didn't seem to fit into the flow of the narrative, I would stick a footnote in. I had to fight to keep those footnotes in. I had more fights with this book than I ever had. I put my foot down.

EA : What is your research like? Having spent some time working in Thailand, I'm particularly interested in the research process for *Chang and Eng*.

DS : I got a lot of stuff wrong. I was in grad school and I didn't have enough money to go to Thailand so I bought some books. I realized I was writing for an American audience, so I didn't concern myself too much with the truth. There's a famous story about E.L. Doctorow getting a letter from a reader, and she says, "I'm from Arizona and there are no *X* cacti in Arizona, and you say there are," and he wrote back, "Well, Madame, in mine there are." That was really freeing. I can't go to Thailand, so I'll just imagine Thailand. Having said all that, when the book came out—there aren't many American books about Thailand—I got a call. It was going to be translated into Thai, I was going to be flown over, I was going to be the keynote speaker at the first Thai book festival, I was going to meet the Princess of Thailand.

EA : Wow. An invitation to meet a member of the royal family is a tremendous distinction in Thai culture.

DS : I was psyched. And then I got a call saying, "Hey, we're having a little trouble with the translation. You can't come to the Thai book fair." I assumed that I'd made so many mistakes that they just said, "Ah, fuck

it," or that they censored it or edited it. Nowadays, I'd be more careful. But fiction has different rules. Your requirement is not to be history-book-grade accurate. It's for the reader to buy it enough to follow the magic trick of fiction. As long as the reader doesn't say, "This smells like fakery," who cares?

EA : What rules have you found yourself having to break or advice you've had to discard from your early writing life?

DS : *Write what you know*, which is bullshit. The way you get better is challenging yourself to write beyond your current powers or experiences. If you only write what you know, it's a pretty narrow field of land. Another one to ignore is *Show, don't tell*. TV is a show. What books do is tell you what the *show* means. I had a teacher tell me once that there is no such thing as writer's block, and I believed that but now I think sometimes it's not true. You want to keep writing, but do something else for a while and then come back. Norman Mailer said that the professional writing can't afford to wait until he or she is inspired. Amateurs can wait, but if that's how you're making your living, you've got to sit down and do it. As a writing teacher, having to articulate your aesthetic is helpful.

EA : In *Half a Life*, you mention, "My moral and aesthetic codes argued against my writing an accident memoir." How would you describe your aesthetic codes prior to writing the book, and have they changed since?

DS : The struggle was to write what I call "hard-luck lit." No one writes a memoir unless something crappy happened to them. I didn't love those kinds of books, the usual self-help idiocy or whiney memoir voice. The book diverges from my aesthetic because I've always been attracted to big stories. My first book was about conjoined twins from Thailand who come to America, get caught up in the civil war, become famous and marry sisters. You want to tell a story that's as interesting as possible and engages with big themes. Most autobiographical fiction doesn't do that.

EA : Is there an element of writing fiction that you particularly enjoy?

DS : I find it all hard. A favorite quote of mine is from Philip Roth. He says that the difference between being a professional writer and an Olympic swimmer is the Olympic swimmer doesn't feel like she's drowning every time she jumps in the pool. If Philip Roth feels like he's drowning with every manuscript, then that should comfort me a little bit. But there are parts of being a writer that I do enjoy. I like engaging with literature. I like being my own boss. I like the way it makes you look at the world. There's a thrill in writing if you surprise yourself.

For more of the interview with Darin Strauss, please visit our website: brooklynreview.org