Interview with Lawrence Block

Lawrence Block spent the Fall 2019 semester as the Gerding Writer-in-Residence at Newberry College. On November 7, 2019, Block sat for a public interview at the Newberry Opera House with Warren Moore, a professor at the college.

WARREN MOORE: Your professional career started in the late ’50s, but I think most writers get a sense that this is the stuff that they need to be doing or want to be doing earlier on. What were some of the things even pre-career or early in your career that let you know that this is what you maybe ought to be doing?

LAWRENCE BLOCK: Well, I’ve known a lot of writers who knew very, very early on, who did lots of writing, made up their own stories starting when they were seven years old, things like that. That was not my experience. But in my third year in high school—I guess eleventh grade it was—the teacher was assigning a lot of compositions, and I was having a certain amount of fun with them. And there was one that she assigned, I remember, it was on what career you thought you might want to do. So I talked about the first job that I’d wanted, which was being a garbage collector because I saw them doing that, you know—kids have things like that. I let go of that when my mother told me that they generally wound up with chapped hands, and that struck me as something worth avoiding. [Audience laughter.] So I went on to mention other pursuits I’d occasionally considered, and so on, and I wound up with the last line, “On reviewing this composition, the one thing that’s clear to me is that I can never be a writer.” And my English teacher wrote in the margin, “I’m not so sure about that.” Before that moment, I had never entertained the notion of being a writer. After that moment, I never seriously considered anything else, so it was a watershed of one sort or another.

MOORE: You hear about authors having to struggle with family disapproval. From reading your work, I’ve always gotten the impression that your folks were very supportive of what you chose.

BLOCK: They were fine with it. Absolutely. They were very encouraging, and I’m grateful for that. They were both college graduates. There were lots of books in the house. While they didn’t know any writers, I don’t believe, the notion that this might be an acceptable way for a person to spend his life was not foreign to them.
MOORE: You went on to college for a while. While you were there, you found yourself doing a co-op at what you’ve described as sort of the pirate ship of American literature, the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. But you said that it was an extremely valuable experience for you. How come?

BLOCK: Oh, it was a wonderful experience, and the way I got there, Antioch [College] had a co-op job program where you spent about half the year in jobs, generally which were available through the co-op program. But you could go own plans and find your own gig, and I wound up out in New York, not for the first time, but I was in New York City, and I answered a blind ad and took a test and was accepted, hired, as an editorial assistant at the Scott Meredith Literary Agency. And the schedule, which I didn’t advise them of when I took the job, was that come October I would depart and go back for a semester at Antioch to return to school. And, oh, a month or so into the job, I realized that I was not going back, that this was the most instructive experience for someone who wanted to be a writer that there could be.

I’d been writing a lot of short stories. I had actually sold one at about the same time as I was hired by the agency, and that’s a story that’s too long to go into, but it was an interesting coincidence. And what the job consisted of, the agency represented a batch of professional writers, but they also would read manuscripts for a fee, and presumably this was just to cover expenses while they found new terrific professional clients. It wasn’t—it was to get rich on. People were paying essentially five dollars for the first five thousand words and a dollar per thousand words after that to have their stories read and evaluated and considered for market, for representation by Scott Meredith, the head of the firm. He never saw these stories. All he saw was the checks.

There was a batch of us. At the time there were only about two or three of us in the office who would read these manuscripts in great profusion and write lengthy letters explaining why the stories didn’t really make the grade and were not salvageable, “but you’re a terrific writer, and please, we really look forward to receiving your next story and your next check.” [Audience laughter.] And either I had a sufficient moral failing so that this just didn’t bother me, or I was swept up in the glamour of it all, but I did well at this. And what I learned was considerable. For one thing, just being in that office I learned a tremendous amount about how the publishing business worked and all the rest of it and how writing worked. But by reading inferior work day in and day out, I learned a great deal about what worked and what didn’t on the page. You can read the work of a master, and you may be awed and moved and delighted by the experience, but you won’t learn too much. But to read something that’s profoundly flawed, you see what’s wrong. So it was a wonderful, wonderful experience.

MOORE: So you knew you wanted to be a writer, and then you had the experience of reading various slush-pile stories. When do you realize that crime and suspense is the direction that might work for you?

BLOCK: Well, the first story I sold was to Manhunt magazine, and it was certainly a crime story, and that gave me a direction right there. But I was doing other things as well and trying other things as well. I just found over time empirically that the work that I was most pleased with myself and that seemed to be most successful aesthetically was work in the field of crime fiction.
MOORE: Were there writers on the scene that you looked at and thought, “Yeah, okay, I could do that”?

BLOCK: Well, there were a lot. I read a lot very early on. One of the first experiences I had a year or two before I got to the Meredith Agency was reading a book of Evan Hunter’s short stories and realizing that that kind of story was (a) worth doing and (b) probably something within my range. So that was an influence of sorts, and it was very gratifying years later when Evan and I became friends.

MOORE: The main character in the first story you sold, “You Can’t Lose,” is a con artist. The main character in “Autumn at the Automat,” the story our students read this term, is also a con artist. You’ve got Bernie Rhodenbarr, who’s a burglar, and you have Keller, who is a hitman, sort of a professional serial killer in his own way. The critic Tony Hilfer talked about crime fiction as being a kind of deviant, subversive genre in that, in the works of people like Jim Thompson or a work like Thieves Like Us by Edward Anderson, it puts the audience in the position of cheering for or perhaps even identifying with people that polite society tells them, “You shouldn’t be cheering for these people.” What is it that makes your outsider, outlaw characters so endearing?

BLOCK: Oh, it’s probably my own warmth coming through. [Audience laughter.] I don’t know. I am aware that some people have mixed feelings about this. There’s a fellow I knew, a private detective named Anthony Spiesman in New York, very nice fellow, he actually got into private detecting through crime fiction.

MOORE: Really?

BLOCK: He was a big fan of crime fiction. But he was very, very much a fan of Nero Wolfe and other books as well, all of the field. And he said, in fact, that when he was on a case, he would sometimes say to himself, “What would Nero Wolfe do in this situation?” Well, probably what Nero Wolfe would do in that situation was have something to eat or go play with the orchids. But anyway, it was an approach he used, and Tony was a fan of mine, specifically of the Matthew Scudder novels. He was not interested in reading the Bernie Rhodenbarr books, though, at all. He said he didn’t even look at them because he wasn’t going to read anything that glorified a criminal. So that was an interesting line to draw.

I was on a book tour, oh, sometime in the late ’90s, I think it was. The second book about Keller had come out, and Keller is a sort of urban lonely guy who, as a profession, travels somewhere and kills somebody every once in a while, and the second book was called Hit List, and it came out and I was touring for it. And I remember I was in a bookstore in Marin County in California, and during the Q&A, a woman raised her hand, and she said, “I don’t know if you realize this, but I think you’re doing something very subversive.” I waited. She said, “I was reading Hit List. I was in my living room. I was reading Hit List and at one point I opened the book on my lap, spread it on my lap, and I looked off into the middle distance, and I said out loud, ‘Well, so, he kills people. What’s so bad about that?’” [Audience laughter.] And I hadn’t, you know, hoped for that effect when I wrote the book, but I found it an interesting one. So I know it does put a spin on the moral compass for some people.
MOORE: We’ve mentioned “Autumn at the Automat,” and lately you’ve edited several anthologies based on various artists and artwork. What gave you the idea to start putting together these ekphrastic anthologies?

BLOCK: This is all so Warren can get to say the word “ekphrastic” in front of people. [Audience laughter.] I hadn’t even been thinking about doing an anthology at the time, but I was sitting and thinking and it struck me. I’ve long admired the paintings of Edward Hopper, and it struck me they were very evocative, that each one didn’t necessarily tell a story, but suggested that there was a story there waiting to be told. And I thought of that for a few minutes. And, the next thing I knew, I had decided to invite fellow writers to contribute to an anthology to be entitled In Sunlight or in Shadow: Stories Inspired by the Paintings of Edward Hopper. And I don’t know exactly how “inspired” is supposed to work in that context. It’s just that someone looks at a painting and writes a story, and there’s some kind of relationship. It made for a beautiful book, you know, with a painting reproduced there to introduce each story. Anyway, that pleased people well enough, and because I sometimes have trouble leaving well enough alone, I went on and did a second volume, Alive in Shape and Color, with paintings from different artists, and a third book in the series, From Sea to Stormy Sea, will be coming out in a couple of weeks also from Pegasus, and that’s all stories inspired by paintings of various American artists. And I think that’ll probably be as many trips to the well as I’m going to make with ekphrasticism. [Audience laughter.]

MOORE: Can you tell us a little bit about your writing process? Do you start with a high concept or a voice? I’m sure it varies from story to story and from work to work, but is there some sort of general case that you can talk about?

BLOCK: Well, at this point, I generally just try to avoid doing any writing that I don’t have to, but it’s not as easy to disengage as one might think. And periodically I’ll get some idea and I’ll start and I’ll pursue it, and if it doesn’t have the decency to die and wither away, I’ll finish it. But, as for the process itself, the whole thing gets more inscrutable as the years go by. I don’t know why some ideas engage anyone and some don’t, but sometimes all I have is a few opening lines, and I see where they go. Sometimes I have a certain amount of vision of the book. There was one notable case—well, notable for me, no reason why anyone else would notice—and that was one of the Scudder books, I think the ninth book in the series. I believe it was A Dance at the Slaughterhouse.

And for that book—see, I’m content if I have an opening scene in mind. I can write that and see where it goes. And sometimes it develops and sometimes it doesn’t, and you abandon a certain number of things that way, but some of them work out. Well, here what I had was an ending. I had a closing scene. And that started to play out in my mind, and I thought, “Gee, I really like this. Let me think about it and see where it goes.” Well, thinking about it just made that scene more detailed for me, and when you’ve got an ending, you can’t just sit down and write it and see where it came from, that doesn’t quite work. So I sat on it for a while, and then I tried, I went off to a writer’s colony, I went to the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. I booked myself a couple of weeks there, and I started writing, and I kept writing, and I wrote about 200 pages, I think, something like that, hoping to lead up toward that ending, and it didn’t work. And I thought, “Well, I don’t know where
this is going, but where it’s going right now is in a drawer.” And I spent the rest of that stay actually writing short fiction, and it was very productive. But, when I ultimately went back to *A Dance at the Slaughterhouse*, which is what the book became, I thought, “Well, I’ll be able to salvage some of this opening.” I salvaged about, oh, maybe two paragraphs. Everything else was scrapped, and I just started over and came into a different kind of story that way. The book worked out very well for me, but that’s not how I advise anybody to go about doing this.

**MOORE:** I remember in your blog post last November [2018], about a year ago, you talked about maybe being interested in a gig like this [teaching at Newberry College]. How did that come up for you?

**BLOCK:** Well, I should say that after that interval at Scott Meredith—and I think I must have been there for about eight, nine months—I realized that I didn’t need to do that anymore, and I probably ought to go back to school and maintain my student deferment and do things like that. I did go back for a third year at Antioch, and that didn’t work. It wasn’t the school’s fault—it was mine. I just wasn’t terribly academically inclined at the time. I was writing books for market, and I was more interested in that than in the classes. And, at the end of that year, I was in New York working on some books, and I got a letter from the Student Personnel Committee saying, “On reflection, we think you might be happier somewhere else.” And I thought that was remarkably perspicacious of them because indeed I would have been happier somewhere else. So it was the kind of letter where I might’ve been able to grovel a little and talk my way back in, but I regarded it as someone taking the handcuffs off, and I never did return to college, never graduated, and, you know, when you never have a college degree, the idea of actually being able to function as a college instructor has enormous fantasy appeal. *[Audience laughter]* So I thought that would be something I would really like to do, maybe on some small, ivy-covered campus. And so I had that fantasy for years as something I would like to do sometime. I figured that probably the lack of even a bachelor’s degree would make it impossible, and then, as luck would have it, I wound up here.

**MOORE:** A writing problem: taking a series character and aging them in real time vs. aging them in book time. One of the classic examples I think of is Richard Prather’s Shell Scott, who actually says in one of the books, “I’m thirty. I’ve been thirty for quite a while now, and I expect to be thirty for quite some time to come.” Whereas in the Travis McGee novels by John D. MacDonald, you get the sense that Travis gets a little older, but it’s not real time, but then on the other hand, you’ve got your Matt Scudder character, who does seem to be operating in real time.

**BLOCK:** I didn’t even think about aging and all that when I started writing about Matthew Scudder, which was in the mid ’70s. That’s a long time ago, isn’t it? And I was never specific about Scudder’s age, and then in, oh, I think the early ’90s, I wrote the twelfth book in the series, *A Long Line of Dead Men*, and the book itself was very much about aging and mortality and the passage of time. And it seemed a requirement, really, to be specific about Matt Scudder’s age in that book. So I thought about it, and I looked back over time, and I decided that he and I were the same age. That was easy—that way I could always keep track of his age by considering mine, or the other way around.
But either way, that seemed to work, and even before the question of aging the character came in, somewhere around the fourth book in the series, I realized that the level of essential realism I was trying for in the book required a character who was affected in one book by what he’d experienced in earlier ones, that this had to be an ongoing story, not something purely episodic where essentially the same James Bond turns up even though he may be played by a different actor and is still the same person throughout. And so Scudder did age in real time, and that was 25 years ago, and he has continued to age in real time.

I realized at one point that he was clearly past it for being an action hero, that he was a little long in the tooth to be leaping tall buildings in a single bound, and I thought it was probably time to let him enjoy a well-earned retirement. But he’s had almost as much trouble retiring as I have, and, in fact, there was what I assume will be the last book in the series, which is a novella called *A Time to Scatter Stones*, that came out very early this year, and in it I think he either is or is about to become 80, and the voice of the character and his perceptions and everything else are those of a man his age, as they might well be. I think the series is better for his having aged in real time. However, the downside is that I, too, have aged in real time over these years, you know, and that’s a mistake.

Now, it was appropriate for Matt Scudder to age, as I said. The Bernie Rhodenbarr character is essentially the same age as he was when I started writing about him in the mid ’70s. He was somewhere in his mid to late 30s then, I assume, and he still is essentially. And that’s the way it should be. His perceptions, I’m sure, have somewhat ripened over time, but he’s essentially the same.

**MOORE:** Well, you managed to find a neat loophole of that sort when you were dealing with Evan Tanner. You stashed him in suspended animation for what, a couple of decades, was it?

**BLOCK:** I wrote seven books about a character named Evan Tanner back in the ’60s. I think the last one came out in 1970, and he was an adventurer. And the premise is that he was injured in the Korean War, and a bit of shrapnel had taken out his sleep center, and thus he was awake 24 hours a day. It was a nice enough premise, and it worked well, and I had fun with the character, and enough books was enough, and at one point I stopped. And then when a publisher made a deal to reissue the long-dormant Tanner books—he may not have been able to sleep, but the books certainly had slept for some years—I was thinking about Tanner, as I hadn’t for a long time, and I thought, “You know what? It’d be fun to write in that voice again. I might enjoy that. But can I? How can I explain his absence for the past 28 years? And how can I bring him back at a reasonable physical age and everything else?” And then I hit on the idea of his spending 28 years in a frozen foods locker in a basement in Union City, New Jersey. *Audience laughter.* And they thawed him out, and he was still somewhere in his early 40s in virtually every respect, you know, so, let him go.

**MOORE:** Ernest Hemingway said that “Good writers are only competing against the dead,” and that seems kind of unfair, but that’s the way it is. So, just limiting this topic to authors who are no longer with us, if one of our students or anybody else in the audience
thought, “You know, this writing thing might be pretty interesting,” who are some writers that you would point them to? If you want to be a writer, who should you read?

**BLOCK:** I’m not sure I have any kind of an answer for that. My perspective is that of someone who was born and did most of his reading a long, long time ago. And while I might remember certain writers rather fondly and might even occasionally still enjoy their work, there’s no reason for me to think that a young person today would relate to it. What I would say is that anyone with an interest in writing should have a strong inclination toward reading to begin with, and you’d be surprised that this is not universally the case. But I have known a couple of writers who weren’t heavy-duty readers. A couple of them were quite successful at it, but were not stylists, let’s say. [Audience laughter.] But almost everybody who gets into this gets into it with or from a love of reading. In fact, there are lots of people who are intense fans of fiction who think this is something they ought to do simply because they enjoy reading it so much, and that doesn’t always work out. There has to be more of an inner pull than that, I think.

I would just advise people to read omnivorously and find out what you like, and that’s valuable if you’re going to write. I know when I started writing crime fiction and was starting to sell to the crime fiction magazines, one thing I did is I made regular pilgrimages to a backdate magazine store—there really were such things—right off Times Square on 8th Avenue and about 43rd Street, and they would sell back-issue magazines for half of the cover price. They were the digest-size magazines that were in profusion, *Manhunt* and *Ellery Queen* and *Alfred Hitchcock* and a batch of others. And I would just buy every one I didn’t have, you know, because it was very inexpensive, the cover price was 25 or 35 cents, so half of that was what I was spending on a magazine. And I would read them cover to cover. And some of the stories were good, and some of the stories were so-so, and some of the stories were lousy. And it didn’t too much matter because what I managed by doing that was to internalize the sense of what made a story.

**MOORE:** It seems like more fun than a lot of market research.

**BLOCK:** Gee, I hope so.

**Question and Answer**

**AUDIENCE #1:** Of all the characters you write about, which one are you most like? The voice, the way they talk. Like Bernie or Scudder. If you were to have a conversation, which one would you sound the most like?

**BLOCK:** I don’t really know. I think any valid character and certainly any effective viewpoint character represents a kind of projection of the author’s self—you know, where else does it come from? And I know that Peter Straub, the writer, is a friend of mine, and I remember his saying that, of all of the characters, he thought that Keller and his musings and internal monologues reminded him more of me than any of the other characters. So, I don’t know. We have vastly different occupations. [Audience laughter.]
AUDIENCE #2: I was wondering if there were one or two of your books that you were most proud of as you look back on your career. Which ones would those be if you could narrow it down?

BLOCK: Rather than name any of the series books, there are some that are rather different that I kind of like. There’s a novel called Small Town, which is a big, multiple-viewpoint novel of New York, set essentially in the ashes of 9/11. And I had for years wanted to do a big New York novel, and that seems to be it. So I’m pleased with that. There’s a book of mine that most people have managed to avoid called Random Walk, which is rather anomalous, and there are two things that I sometimes would hear at signings when I would be on a book tour. A person might come up and say, “You know, I’ve read all of your stuff and I liked everything, except there was one book that I just couldn’t make heads or tails out of, and I can’t figure out why you wrote it.” And another reaction I’ll get occasionally, someone will come up and say, “You know, I’ve liked all of your work, but there was one book that absolutely knocked my socks off and changed my life, and I’ve read it 17 times, and I’ll go on reading it.” And I always know what book it is, and it’s always Random Walk. So, it’s a strange one, and I like that.

AUDIENCE #3: When you’re in South Carolina, what is it that you miss about New York, and what is it about South Carolina that you find endearing?

BLOCK: I think what I most miss about New York is that there are people there who are a regular part of my life. There’s a whole life that I’m used to there that I’ve been away from for several months now, and I miss that. It would be nice to say that I miss the museums and the art galleries and the concert halls and all the intellectual and aesthetic life of the city, but that’s not really it. I don’t know what it is, it’s some sort of the energy of the place that I got hooked on early on. What do I like about Newberry? I find it very charming. I find the people remarkably nice. I think the campus is beautiful. I like the pace of life here. So I like it. I hope to be a frequent visitor.

AUDIENCE #4: Are there any animal companions in any of your books that die? I want to know what books to avoid.

BLOCK: Oh, I don’t think so, and if there aren’t, that’s clearly a fault that I’ll have to address in the next book. [Audience laughter.] I’ll make sure I warn people. I think a good title would be Yes, I Killed the Goddamn Cat. [Audience laughter.]

MOORE: And since there’s really no way to follow up on that, let’s give it up for Lawrence Block, ladies and gentleman.

Audience applause.

BLOCK: You’re very kind. Thank you very, very much. Thank you.