

INTERVIEW

ROBERT HELLENGA

ROBERT HELLENGA spoke to *Night Train* just days before an extended trip to Italy to celebrate his retirement from teaching—but not from writing. The author of the acclaimed novels *The Sixteen Pleasures*, *The Fall of the Sparrow* and *Blues Lessons*, Hellinga began teaching at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, in 1968. At the end of the 2003-04 school year he stepped down as the George A. Lawrence Professor of English in order to write full time.

He told us he “didn’t start out to be a writer at all, but the program at Knox is really active. Everyone writes, and they make such a fuss over it. I figured I could do that.”

Hellinga just sold his fourth book *Philosophy Made Simple* to Little Brown. A quasi-sequel to both *The Sixteen Pleasures* and *The Fall of a Sparrow*, the new novel reprises the protagonists from each.

Night Train: Talk to us about rewriting. So many young writers seem to feel it is rather boring compared to the thrill of getting that first draft down.

Hellinga: For me inspiration comes on the third or fourth or fifth draft. It takes such an effort to get stuff down—it’s a victory—then you find stuff in that. Students think it starts with a flash of inspiration that then you fix up. But revising is where the real action is.

Tell us a little about your writing practices. Do you binge or are you regular in your habits?

You've got to work every day. It's always hanging over my head. I like to get up in the morning and get going before I get irritated with things. I lose things, all the time, and it upsets me. My wife is good at finding things. The whole routine is a stereotype.

Kind of like Blondie and Dagwood?

Something like that.

Who have you been reading lately?

Jane Smiley's *Horse Heaven*. It's everything I don't like in a novel: no central story line; no central theme; the point of view is all over the place. But moment-by-moment it's really wonderful. I keep going back to it and asking, "How did she do that?"

In teaching undergraduates, what do you feel are the greatest challenges they need to overcome to improve their writing?

One: I see too many characters with no agenda. No one seems to want anything. The characters are just hanging around. They should either want something, or they should have something significant to respond to. In the second chapter of *Horse Heaven*, for example, Farley Jones is watching his horses being exercised at the track. Nothing much is going on. But as soon as we learn that Farley's got an agenda—something he knows he has to say to another trainer though he doesn't want to say it—we've got a story.

Two: In class, I often give students short assignments like this one: Imagine a character looking into a store window at a fancy guitar. Write about that. It always works—they come up with wonderful stuff. A particular time and place with someone wanting something or responding to something.

Three: If you get a bunch of stuff down you can usually find something in it, provided you don't shy away from what's painful and embarrassing.

Four: And some advice to myself—it's easier to plan in outline than to plan in writing. Although you needn't feel wedded to the outline, because that might inhibit the process of discovery. But it's nice to have a sense of the whole story and the ending instead of trying to write the thing straight

through. The computer has given us more options, although I do like the idea of trying to write a novel by hand—I'm a big fountain pen fan.

Some beginning writers have a hard time with rejection. Something tells us that you, like every other seasoned writer, have had some experience with rejection of the "writerly" variety. Any advice on that?

You have to believe in the value of just doing. My first novel never got published, and I got thirty-nine rejections for the second, *The Sixteen*



Tom Foley

Robert Hellenga, playing "Mr. Jelly Roll Baker" at the Night Train Railroad Days reading in Galesburg, Illinois.

Pleasures. The hardest thing was a senior editor who said it, "just wasn't commercial enough." But I had grants from the NEA and Illinois Arts Council and the second chapter was published in the Tribune. You have to keep going. With a novel, by the time you've exhausted the possibilities it's time for the next novel. Short stories come back much faster. The worst thing you can do is worry about how people are going to respond. Reviews can be just as inconsistent as rejections, so it's not over once it gets published, either.

The Fall of a Sparrow is a favorite of the Night Train staff—it was so wonderful, all about compassion and forgiveness in all their varieties. And the amount of research was incredible. How did that come about?

The genesis of *The Fall of a Sparrow* was seeing the monument in the Bologna train station with the names of all the eighty-five victims of a terrorist bombing in 1980, when two of my daughters had been in that very station. I knew so little of Italian politics. I thought the bombing had been the work of the Red Brigade, but it was Black or right-wing terrorism, not Red or left-wing terrorism. I sort of had my heart set on the Red, so it was a little disorienting for me. When I went to Bologna to do research everyone was very helpful. The president of the association of the families of the victims gave me one of the last copies of the book he'd written about his son's death in the bombing and about the subsequent trial of the terrorists, six years later. The vice president of the Association took me to the morgue where the bodies had been taken, and I talked to the woman who was head of the hospital. The reporter who covered the trial was amazed at how accurate my account was—but I'd read his articles. On two occasions I've marched with the families of the victims, which was a great honor. In my next book I'm linking up the characters from *The Sixteen Pleasures* with those from *The Fall of a Sparrow*. They overlap in time and setting, so I figured why not?

Who are your official "readers"—with whom do you share your work before it's published?

I had a lot of interaction—feedback and criticism—from the editor of my first novel, and I liked that a lot, but the editor of my last novel disappeared before the book was done. Now my agent, Henry Dunow, is really the only one I show my stuff to, and that's usually when I'm just about done.

You don't even share it with your wife?

No. I think it's too hard for her to be objective about the work, and too hard for me to be objective about her responses.

What about those in the Knox community recognizing "real people" in your work?

As a writer you take certain, external things and change them for your work. Certain parts may remain recognizable to others, but for them to believe it's entirely based on reality is misleading. Obviously, some of the things from *The Fall of a Sparrow* are based on one of the deans at Knox, whom I liked a lot, though some at Knox were not pleased by it.

In Blues Lessons, Martin's crusade to bring "down home" blues to the masses in the 1960s is reminiscent of the efforts by some real-life promoters who "rediscovered" blues artists from the 1930s and '40s—like Dick Waterman and Stefan Grossman. Were they an inspiration?

I read everything I could get my hands on when researching *Blues Lessons*. I might have read Waterman's book. But Grossman, the guy who started the Kicking Mule label, is the model I had in mind. He was a Jewish kid from New York who moved in with the Reverend Gary Davis and learned the techniques of (legendary blues performers Son House and Mississippi John Hurt. He dug out old newspaper clippings and blues recordings, and he put together tapes of blues songs with transcriptions of how to play. He made a real impact, brought the music to the masses. He even lived in Italy for a while, played blues guitar there. So, Grossman was the model for Martin in *Blues Lessons*. I also received a lot of help from Happy Traum, who founded Homespun Tapes.

Blues music is obviously a passion for you, and it's in more than just Blues Lessons.

I can't seem to get away from it, can I? And the tune "Mr. Jelly Roll Baker" always gets into all my novels. It's such a life-affirming song.

Will your retirement from Knox College create a void for you, or will it grant you more time to put all the accumulated inspiration to paper?

Actually, I plan to be on the Knox campus a lot. I need that as a base for support. A large segment of my life has been lived there. I'm not sure in what capacity I'll be around there quite yet. I have tentative plans to take a drawing course.