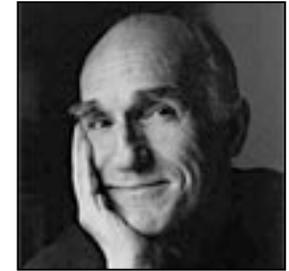


INTERVIEW WITH SCOTT RUSSELL SANDERS

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SHAYNE CLARKE: You began your education studying physics, and then switched to English. If you were starting over, would you take the same path?

SRS: I would still study science. That is, given the passions that I had as a boy, and also given my abilities. All the standardized tests said that I should go into science and math, and that's really what I loved as a boy and young man. So I think that I would study it all over again. I continue to be fascinated by science and inspired by the vision of the universe that science is gradually unfolding.

At the same time, I don't regret giving up the formal study of science in order to pursue literature, because I really have much more aptitude, finally, for reading and writing than I do for abstract theoretical analysis, which is what the physics required of me. I think I gained a vision, a way of seeing the universe, a way of appreciating human ingenuity from the study of science that I would be very reluctant to give up.



ANGIE SMITH: What do you see as the goals of creative nonfiction?

SRS: The goals depend, of course, very much on the writer. For some writers, creative nonfiction may be a way of making sense of life. It may be a way of recording a memorable person, or event, or passage of history. It may be a way of thinking on paper that is often a way of clarifying something that's confusing. That's certainly often the case for me. So I don't think there's any one single purpose for the writer.

I think creative nonfiction for the reader should provide the same kinds of pleasures and satisfactions that other literature does. I think it should be entertaining; I think it should be inspiring; I think it should be well made. But also, I think the essay, or the memoir, or autobiography, or other kinds of personal nonfiction, can help readers think about their own lives, give them insight into important matters such as war, or the environment, or relations between the sexes, or race relations, and so forth. So I think that creative nonfiction can serve many different purposes, both for the writer and for the reader.



ERIN BARKER: In your interview with Robert Root [*Fouth Genre* 1.1 (Spring 1999)], you said that you feel an obligation to be honest and represent scenes as accurately as you remember them, but your writing, especially in *Hunting for Hope*, is so detailed. You even talk about the fly that landed on your son's back. Did you record these details as they happened, or did you go back and reconstruct them later?

SRS: It depends on how far back in the past the event occurred. For example, that detail about the fly landing on my son's back was something I wrote into my journal a few minutes after I observed it. As I mention in *Hunting for Hope*, I was taking notes during my hiking trip with Jesse as a way of pondering the challenge that he posed to me when he said he felt he had been denied hope. Since I felt hopeful about the future of humankind, in spite of my many worries, I wanted to figure out where my hope comes from, so I began taking notes to provide Jesse with answers. I usually write in my journal or a pocket notebook when I travel, because I'm stimulated by new places. Thus, many of the details you find in my work were recorded on the spot.

On the other hand, some of the details about events and people and places encountered long ago, as in my coming-of-age memoir, *A Private History of Awe*, are drawn from memory. And we know that memory is creative and transformative: it moves things around, provides atmosphere, fills in blanks. We don't recall the past unerringly. But I take seriously the prefix "non-" in nonfiction. When I'm writing nonfiction, my implicit contract with the reader is that I'm not making anything up. The reader can trust me to give an honest account of what I actually remember. At the same time, I realize that memory will fill in

details. And you can't be sure whether the details that memory provides would have been recorded had a film crew, let's say, been on site at the time the event occurred. I happen to possess a powerful memory for sensory details; that's one of the reasons I became a writer, because I've always been haunted by vivid scenes from the past.



LINDA WALTON: How do your children respond to what you write about them?

SRS: Whenever I write about my children or my wife, I show them what I've written before I show it to anyone else. For instance, the first portion of *Hunting for Hope* I composed was about the fierce quarrel that Jesse and I had during a backpacking trip in the Rockies. In the midst of that quarrel, he accused me of having denied him hope, and that challenge inspired me to write the book. I showed the narrative first to Jesse, and I asked him how he felt about it, whether it represented him fairly, whether it coincided with his own memories. And I asked him whether he would mind other people reading this account, or some revised version of it. When Jesse returned the draft to me, he laughed, saying my description seemed fair, even if he remembered things a little differently. By then, a year had passed since the quarrel, and so he was seventeen when the events occurred and eighteen when he read my narrative. He said, sure, it made him seem kind of young and immature, but it also made me seem immature, and at age fifty I had a lot less excuse for bullheadedness than he had at age seventeen. So he could accept this account because it did not portray me as the all-wise, all-knowing father and him as the brash teenager. It showed that I had listened to him and had sought to learn from him.

If Jesse had said, “Oh, Dad, this seems wrong to me,” I would have tried to address his criticisms. And if he had said, “This is embarrassing, please don’t publish this,” I wouldn’t have published it. He is far more important to me than my writing. I would never knowingly hurt my son, my daughter, my wife—or anybody else, for that matter—for the sake of a good story. I love my family dearly, as I trust is evident in my books, and I write out of that love.



PATRICK MADDEN: Have there been times where you have decided not to publish something, or delete it, or edit it?

SRS: Yes, a few times. For example, I first wrote about my father’s alcoholism seven years after his death, in an essay that was eventually published as “Under the Influence.” I showed the draft first to my mother, who had never been willing to talk about my father’s drinking, and she was appalled. For this was the family’s deep, dark secret—that my father drank. She was upset to discover that I remembered so many painful episodes, and even more upset that other people might learn about them long after my father’s death. She begged me not to publish it, so I put the essay in a drawer. Eventually, my sister and brother caught wind of it from her and asked to read it. They found the essay so helpful in dealing with their own troubled memories that they prevailed on my mother to let me publish it, so that other readers might be helped. At last my mother gave her blessing, and the essay appeared in *Harper’s* and was later collected in *Secrets of the Universe*. It has since been reprinted in anthologies perhaps thirty or forty times. But if my mother had not changed her mind, I would have left the essay in my drawer, at least so long as she was alive.



AUTUMN VETTER: Going back to the part in *Hunting for Hope* where you describe this argument with your son, before you give the conversation, you give a sort of disclaimer. And you say, “I do not pretend to recall the exact words we yelled at one another after my

challenge, but I remember the tone and thrust of them.” How important is such a disclaimer when you’re going to reconstruct, not exactly verbatim, what happened?

SRS: I didn’t make notes on the argument in my journal until that night. Even a few hours later, I couldn’t remember the exact words we had flung at one another in the heat of argument. And the final version of that scene was not written until a year after the events. So I used that disclaimer because I didn’t want the reader to imagine that I was pretending to offer a verbatim transcript. Instead, I was dramatizing the scene as it stayed with me, trying to be true to the situation, the emotions, the setting, to my son’s character and to my own, and to our relationship.

Your question raises the larger issue of how dialogue functions in creative nonfiction. Unless the nonfiction writer is using a tape recorder or taking detailed notes, the dialogue is always derived from memory. It’s not a transcript, but a more-or-less faithful account of how the persons involved actually speak, how they relate to one another, and what’s at stake in their exchange. My own practice is to use dialogue sparingly. When a nonfiction writer presents page after page of dialogue, I grow suspicious; I sense the fictional impulse taking over. For example, Frank McCourt’s justly celebrated book, *Angela’s Ashes*, seems to me not a memoir but an autobiographical novel. I would say the same of Tobias Wolff’s *This Boy’s Life*. Used carefully and sparingly, dialogue can play an important role in

nonfiction, because it can bring voices onto the page other than the narrator's, it can enliven a scene, and it can reveal subtleties of feeling.

You'll find brief exchanges of dialogue scattered throughout my books, usually without disclaimers. But that particular scene from *Hunting for Hope* is so crucial to the shaping of the entire book that I wanted the reader to know I was reconstructing the nature of that conversation, capturing the feel and rhythm and import of it, as accurately as I could.



MEAGAN LAWRENCE: Do your meditative and narrative movements in essays weave together on their own—do they come out of your head that way—or do you have to assemble the pieces as you go?

SRS: Needless to say, the language was revised a great deal, draft after draft. But the chapters were generally written with the sequence of materials as you find them, alternating between narrative and reflection. In other words, I didn't first compose the narrative and then go back and insert the commentary. In the "Beauty" chapter of *Hunting for Hope*, for example, I weave together the story of my daughter's wedding with a series of reflections on astronomy, owls, mathematics, and other analogous materials, and that's the way the composition actually flowed.

My mind works that way, shuttling back and forth between storytelling and analogizing. I knew, when I wrote the book, that I wanted to thread a narrative through it, and not simply offer a series of reflections. I wanted a story line not merely to make the book more accessible to readers, but also to reveal that my ideas, values, and commitments arise out of my

life experience. The chief narrative thread is provided by the four "Mountain Music" chapters, which tell about hiking with my son, first in the Rocky Mountains and then in the Great Smoky Mountains. There are, in addition, many smaller stories throughout the book, such as the account of my daughter's wedding, all designed to connect thinking with living.



JULIE JOHNSON: On a related note, as you write an essay, do you find structure revealing itself, or do you set out with a formal structure in mind?

SRS: I usually discover the structure as I go. I may have preliminary hunches about the shape of the piece. So for example, I might imagine a certain interweaving of storytelling and reflection. But the working out of such a scheme is highly improvisatory, rather like the way jazz musicians elaborate on a skein of chords. In the case of *Hunting for Hope*, I began with a series of chapter titles, each one pointing to a thematic focus. For most of a year, I made extensive notes for each of those prospective chapters, sometimes renaming or revising the topics, and I kept compiling ideas, images, memories, and episodes until a given chapter began to feel ripe. When I have a critical mass of material, I look for a beginning point—a scene, moment, or image that excites me, that carries energy. Once I discover the beginning, I see where it leads, finding my way forward sentence by sentence. I keep going back to the notes, but they impose no structure; they simply provide an array of potential materials. I'm willing to go wherever imagination, memory, knowledge, and the texture of language lead me, so long as the sentences ring true, so long as the path of words convinces me of its relevance and power. I realize it may be frustrating for young writers to be told that I have no step-by-

step method, that I can offer no firm guidelines for writing. But for me the making of essays is a highly intuitive process, as mysterious as dreaming.



PIPER ARMSTRONG: When and how did you begin discovering your deepest concerns that would serve as themes for a lot of your work?

SRS: I wrote fiction for a dozen years before I started writing essays. And in my stories and novels I explored some of the same concerns that I have since explored in my nonfiction. But when I began writing essays, some twenty-five years ago, the medium of nonfiction seemed to me more hospitable to reflection—about family, marriage, religion, science, race, war, the future of the planet, and my other preoccupations. Some of these concerns have been with me since childhood—questions about the origins and meaning of the universe, for example, and questions about how we should treat one another. Other concerns have come to me gradually as I became a husband, a teacher, a father and, most recently, a grandfather—questions about our place in nature, for example, or about the meaning of wildness, the sources of beauty, the promise of community, and our responsibility to future generations. *Hunting for Hope* gathered up the most pressing concerns I had felt up to the time of that writing. My more recent book, *A Private History of Awe*, chronicles how these concerns arose from the circumstances and events of my life.



JANEL MACY: You've mentioned before that you desire for your readers to gain insights and to find beauty or meaning in your work. How do you test your words to see that they're

fulfilling your desire to connect with others?

SRS: Well, one test is to hear what people say when they've read the book. While I'm interested in the reactions of professional readers such as reviewers and critics, I learn more from the notes and letters people send me about what they've found in my books, what pleasure or insight they've gained, and occasionally what bones they want to pick with me. So that's one measure. I also gauge the reactions to my books by giving public readings—which I do twenty or thirty times a year. Every time I read from my work, I sense reactions from the audience as I speak; I entertain questions afterwards, if the hosts allow for that; and I always talk individually with members of the audience who seek me out. They tell me what they have taken from the book, if only from the portion they've heard me read. Sometimes, again, they'll challenge an idea or opinion, and that's fine. More often they tell me how the work has spoken to them, how it has clarified or ratified something for them. I want readers to come away from my books thinking harder about their lives and about the life we share. So, responses from readers, whether written or spoken, are the most important measures for me of how well or poorly I have succeeded in doing what I set out to do. It's also the case that the more experienced I've become as a writer, the better I've been able to judge the quality of my own work.

JM: And before you publish, what's the process you go through before you get that feedback from the readers?

SRS: I started writing when I was a graduate student in England, in isolation. I didn't know any established writers, or even any apprentice writers. The only person whom I could ask for a response was my wife. So I began by giving my work to

Ruth, whom readers can meet in *Hunting for Hope* and *A Private History of Awe*. She's a scientist, and a skillful writer of scientific papers as well as lively personal letters. Her comments on my manuscripts tend to be factual or technical, noting when a passage is confusing or inconsistent, when a word has been misused, when more evidence is needed to justify a claim. To this day, she is the one person who reads everything I write before I send it out. Now that I know quite a few writers, I occasionally exchange work with a friend. And yet I'm reluctant to impose my writing on others, figuring they already have more than enough to read. So I don't often circulate my work before I submit it for publication. And so, apart from Ruth, the first person who reads one of my pieces is usually an editor.

Some editors at magazines and publishing houses still take time with a manuscript and make useful suggestions for improving it. Nowadays, however, they often don't have the time to truly edit the work, and so they publish it more or less as I submitted it. While I had an excellent relationship with my editor at Beacon Press when *Hunting for Hope* was published, she did very little actual editing of the book. On the other hand, *A Private History of Awe* benefited significantly from revisions that I made in response to questions and suggestions from my editor at Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, which is my new publishing house. My work has also been thoughtfully edited at certain magazines, such as the *Georgia Review*, *Missouri Review*, and *Orion*. Any sensible writer is grateful for keen-eyed editors; I certainly am.



JOHANNA SORENSEN: What advice would you give for writing candidly and intimately without being confessional?

SRS: My writing is personal, but it's not

confessional. I don't present myself as the focus of interest. Rather, I am a witness who glimpses things, has hunches about things, and wants to convey those glimpses and hunches to the reader. To switch metaphors: I use my personal experience as a lens through which the reader can see things that are far bigger and more significant than I am. The stories I tell are not about me, even if I participate in them; they are about us, about being human, about other people, other creatures, the wild world, and the universe, all refracted through one person's consciousness.

When you write personal nonfiction, you must be clear in your own mind about what you are willing to make public, about yourself or about other people, and what should be kept private. Not everything should be told, especially if the telling would invade the privacy of someone else, or if it would play to the voyeuristic strain in our culture. You should consider your own experience as significant not merely because it is yours, but because it gives insight into something larger than yourself. Depending on your interests, that larger thing could be religion, or wilderness, or science, or race, or gender, or anything else under the sun. The point is not to admire the lens, but to see through it to what is beyond.



OWEN YOUNG: Do you ever find yourself "dumbing down" an essay linguistically to appeal to a wider audience? Do you ever decide not to use a word or a phrase because it might be too obscure, maybe something that would confuse your readers?

SRS: I write for literate, curious readers. Still, even for such readers, my books may pose difficulties, if not of vocabulary, then of structure. Sometimes I tell continuous stories, which are

easy to follow. But other times the sentences make leaps and connections that readers may have trouble following. I've had students in high school, and even in college, tell me that they found *Hunting for Hope* to be challenging. Well, it's meant to be challenging. If I aspired to write a best-seller, I would make fewer demands on the reader's attention or memory or understanding. But such an easy-reader book wouldn't have allowed me to fully explore the ideas I wished to explore. I want to reach people who are willing to examine their own lives, who appreciate rich language and complex thought, who enjoy using their minds. Judging by the letters I receive, those people come from all walks of life, all social classes and professions, and from all over the map. To go back to your question: I'm never aware of censoring myself, of avoiding an idea or a word because I think it's too sophisticated for readers. What I do avoid is jargon, the specialized language that may be appropriate to a given domain, such as medicine or astrophysics or literary theory, but which is incomprehensible to outsiders.



LOGAN MOLYNEAUX: It has been said that one of the most important traits a writer can have is the ability to take criticism. Do you agree, and how much weight do you give to criticism and feedback you receive?

SRS: If you're going to survive and improve as a writer, you must maintain a balance between accepting and resisting criticism. On the one hand, you must be open to those voices that challenge your work, that identify its weaknesses or suggest how it might be made stronger. You must learn to discern what's valuable, what's well-meant, what's useful in the comments that other people voice about your work. On the other hand, you must have enough confidence in yourself, in your command of

language, and in your vision of things, to keep going in the face of discouragement. Every writer faces discouragement. You're going to send work to magazines and publishing houses and have it rejected; you're going to publish work and have it misread, or have it ignored. So if you don't possess a certain belief in yourself, and a certain ambition, you'll quit. And a lot of aspiring writers give up for just this reason. However, if your confidence borders on arrogance, if you believe you're a genius with nothing to learn, then you won't benefit from criticism. Cocky writers also tend to quit, because they don't get any better. So you need to maintain a balance between self-confidence and humility. I've been writing seriously for thirty-five years, and I am proud of what I've accomplished, but I also know I have a lot to learn. I hope to continue gaining skills and extending my range as long as I keep my wits about me.

It's also vital to develop one's own critical judgment. You must learn to see when your work is succeeding and when it's not, where the weaknesses are. You have to develop the ability to hear your work as though you were a stranger—to read your work as though you hadn't written it. Ultimately, you must become an astute, hard-nosed, and honest critic of your own work.



EMILY McARTHUR: What does your revision process look like?

CHASE McMILLAN: How do you know when your essay's finished, when



SRS: I revise constantly, line by line, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, as I work on a piece. When

I'm writing an essay, for example, I might work back through the opening paragraph a hundred times; the second paragraph, ninety-five times; the third paragraph, ninety times, and so forth, all the way through to the final paragraph, which might be revisited a dozen times. I revise as I go; I have to feel good about what I have put down before I can move forward. This isn't the method of writing I recommend to my students; it's just what works for me.

The method I recommend to my students is to write a quick first draft so as to get a sense of the overall shape, and then to go back in subsequent drafts to patiently refine the language and tighten the form. I suspect this is the method that works best for most writers. For me, however, the only way is to work slowly, line by line. I'll cast and recast a sentence in my head, until one version satisfies me, and then I'll type it out; then I'll compose a second sentence, which often leads me to reconsider the first sentence, and so I inch forward. This sounds cumbersome and tedious, and it is. The only reason I've been able to produce so many books is because I've been working steadily for so many years.

Now, how do I know when a piece is finished? As I keep reworking the story or essay, eventually I reach a point where to change anything more requires me to undo too many other things. Eventually, the removing of a sentence or the replacement of a word would lead to a cascade of other, undesirable changes. To keep on tugging at threads is to risk weakening the fabric. So at that point I declare it finished. I don't declare it perfect—nothing I've written has been perfect—I simply admit that I have carried the piece as far as I am able to carry it. Of course I remain open to insights from editors and other readers who can suggest ways of improving the work.



NATALIE CLARKSON: Speaking about publication, you have said “If a writer learns well enough and has the necessary talent, then publications will come in due time.” How much of the creative writing process can be learned, and how much needs to be raw talent, something you can't buy or learn?

SRS: Success in writing depends as much on character as it does on training and talent. And by “success,” I don't mean fame or fortune, I mean a lifetime of work good enough to merit publication. The training comes not primarily from formal classes, such as workshops, but from reading high-quality books. Such reading tunes our ears to hear the power and music in language; it gives us an intuitive sense of storytelling; it supplies us with a repertoire of literary forms and moves; it teaches us ways of revealing emotion and recording thought. We internalize the standards of quality we encounter in books, so when we sit down to do our own writing, often unconsciously, we will draw on that whole lifetime of reading. Of course we also learn about writing from talking with others who are struggling to master this demanding craft.

Talent is important, but it's not sufficient. The verbal gifts a person might have, the degree of inventiveness, or the freshness of perspective, do not necessarily predict how likely that person is to succeed as a writer. Without certain qualities of character, talent alone will not make a writer. I've already spoken about one necessary trait—the balance between self-confidence and humility. But a writer also needs patience, curiosity, a lively sense of humor, a degree of stubbornness, and a willingness to work hard. I recently turned 60, and I've published twenty-odd books, and I still get up at 6:00 a.m. to write. Students often ask,

“Well, Mr. Sanders, is writing easy for you?” and I have to tell them the truth is, no, it’s hard. It grows harder every year. Because I’ve already written so much, I must take care not to repeat myself. Because I keep reading the best of what others have written, my standards keep rising. So whatever one’s training, whatever one’s talent, in order to succeed as a writer you must keep striving. You must sit down, hour after hour, day after day, year after year, and search for words to say the most elusive things.



DAVID GROVER: To send us off on a light note: Do you like James Taylor, and if so what’s your favorite song of his? And have you ever been confused for James Taylor in person?

SRS: [laughs] Clearly, you’ve seen a photograph of me. Yes, people have told me I look a lot like James Taylor. When my children were teenagers, they introduced me to his music, and his song “Carolina in My Mind” became my favorite. If I remember correctly, James Taylor is the son of a professor at the University of North Carolina, so there’s a little more of a connection between us than you might imagine. But he sells more records than I do books, I’m sure.

[laughter]

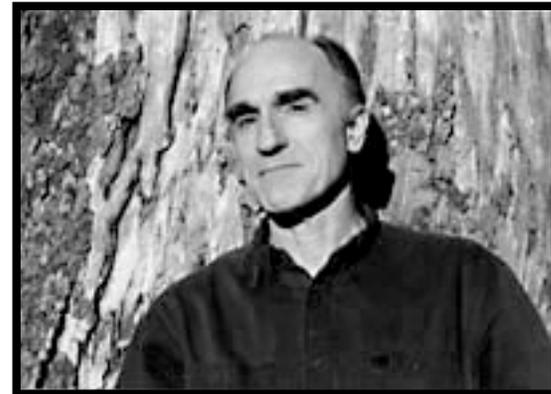
PM: Well that’s our time today. Thank you very much.

[applause]

SRS: Best wishes to all of you for your writing; you’re in good hands with Patrick Madden, and I hope you all flourish.



JT



SRS