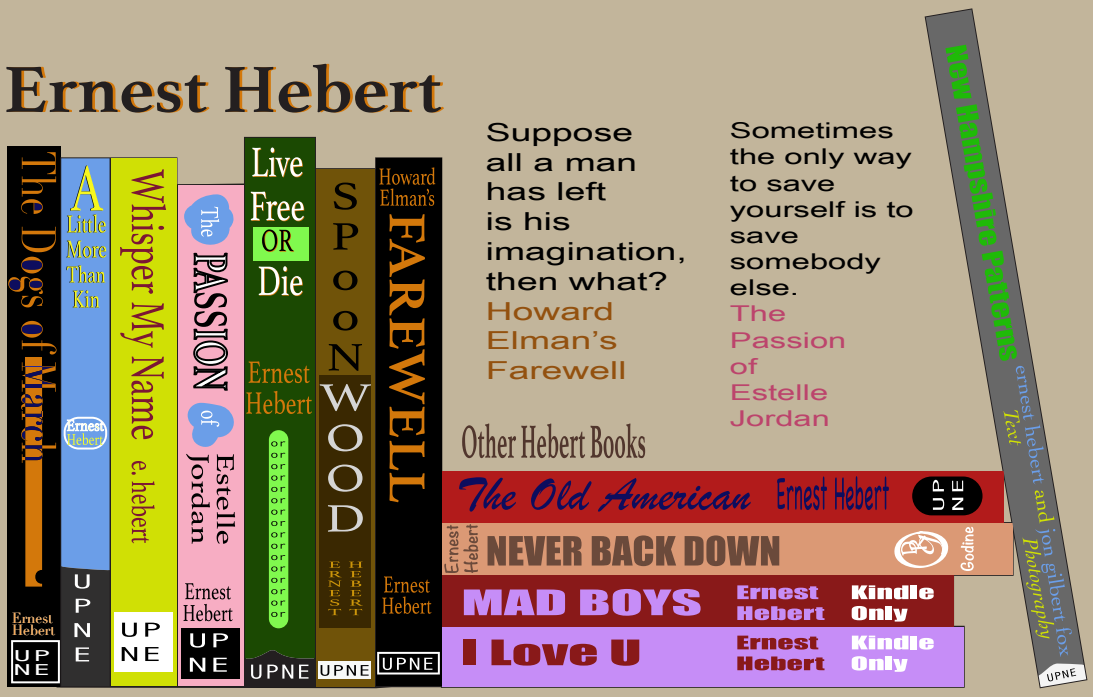
A Guide to the Darby Chronicles



life, death, and laughs in a small town

erniehebert.com

Also by Ernest Hebert

The Darby Chronicles

The Dogs of March
A Little More Than Kin
Whisper My Name
The Passion of Estelle Jordan
Live Free or Die
Spoonwood
Howard Elman's Farewell

Fiction

Mad Boys
The Old American
Never Back Down
I Love U

Nonfiction

New Hampshire Patterns
with Jon Gilbert Fox

Introduction

The essays in this book are compiled from my website <erniehebert.com>. The seven novels of the Darby Chronicles along with my historical novel, The Old American, are available from my publisher, the University Press of New England, from Amazon, or from your local bookstore. My award winning sci-fi book, Mad Boys, along with the sequel, I Love U (think dyslectic cyborg), are on the Amazon Kindle. You can buy my only consciously autobiographical novel, Never Back Down, from the publisher, David Godine, Inc. New Hampshires Patterns, a book of marvelous photographs by my friend Jon Gilbert Fox (I contributed the text of personal essays) can be found on the Internet and in bookstores.

A lot of people ask me where to start reading the Darby Chronicles. It's a question that sends a death shiver down my spine, because if I'm any judge of human nature I know that nobody wants to be faced with an assignment of seven books to read and that most people will just walk away.

The answer is it doesn't matter which book you read first, nor which order you read them in. All the books are designed to be read as standalone works. Some books do go together. Howard Elman, at fifty something the protagonist of The Dogs of March, is also the protagonist of Howard Elman's Farewell when he is in eighties. A Little More Than Kin and The Passion of Estelle Jordan cover related themes and characters of the Jordan clan. Spoonwood leaves off where Live Free or Die ends. In Whisper My Name I discovered the town of Darby as a character and foresaw the next two books in the series.

Ernest Hebert, 2015

Manifesto and Dedication

My goal in this endeavor is to provide everything I can think of that might complement the seven novels that make up the Darby Chronicles.

With these books I hoped to pay my respects to working people everywhere, but especially to my parents, Elphege Hebert and Jeannette Vaccarest Hebert. While I was writing the early part of the Darby Chronicles my parents supported me in every way. My father was a weaver in a textile mill. I remember my father's hands, clean and soft and his nails long to help him repair broken threads on his looms. My mother was a nurse. In my mind's eye, I see her in nurse whites and starched cap; I see her in a house dress in our neighborhood tending the wounds of boys who can't stay out trouble.

I admired them both, especially in their attitude toward work. They believed in work. They believed that working people are the backbone of any society. I believe as they did.

I've written one book with a woman protagonist, The Passion of Estelle Jordan, but most of my books have been about men, in particular working men, because I spent most of my working life in their world. I started my work life at age 16 as a clerk in a men's clothing store during the Christmas rush. From there my father got me a job as a "web boy" in the textile mill where he was a weaver, International Narrow Fabric Co. Inc. I worked for the telephone company. I was an enlisted man in the army where I was a cannoneer on an eight-inch howitzer. I worked all through college. Drove taxi. Washed and dried acres of bedding and gowns in a hospital laundry. Mowed lawns, trimmed hedges and dug holes for a landscaper. Pumped gas in the days before pump-your-own. Mopped floors and cleaned toilets as a part-time custodian at Commuter Shell on El Camino Real in Palo Alto, California. Night attendant in a psychiatric hospital in New Orleans, Louisiana.

I had a servile mentality, that is I wanted to please people with my labor, and was proud of this state of mind. In my family there was no such thing as "menial" labor; there was just labor, and the pride you took in doing it or the shame you experienced if you didn't do your best. I didn't get my first middle class job until I become a news reporter at age 31. So there you have it. I spent my fifteen formative years as a working man. I often think of some of the working people who inspired me: Harold Archer, Joan Cotton, Paul "Moose" Frangis, Helen Kershaw, John Todman, Rusty Wilson, Dick Tewksbury and many others. They have been as much mentors to me as my teachers and editors.

I started my career as a fiction writer by creating a working man, Howard Elman, and after many years of thinking over the matter, my intention was to close out my career with Howard Elman as the protagonist. The result is the seventh and probably the last of the Darby Chronicles, Howard Elman's Farewell (University Press of New England, 2014.) I wrote "probably" because I never know where my muse is going to take me.

When I created the town of Darby I realized that I needed to expand beyond the working class in order to report accurately the story of the town. I have written about what today we might call the rural underclass and about the old rich. I have not written too much about middle class people, because so many other fiction writers have covered the terrain the middle class inhabits in detail and with great skill. I have sought to write about people who have been slighted or left out altogether from books; I have written about the people I grew up with, the people I loved and admired, and who at times drove me crazy.

You who hauled the stone to build the pyramids, you who fell off the scaffolds in constructing the great cathedrals, you who fabricated my smart phone, you the collectors of swill, you who served my Buffalo wings, you the countless slave laborers down through the ages who did the shit work, you who died for our sins–Working People–the unsung heroes of human civilization, I dedicate the Darby Chronicles.

Darby Motto

For years–no, decades–I've wanted to recreate my fictional New Hampshire town of Darby visually, but I lacked the drawing and painting skills for such an undertaking. Then along came digital tools and slowly I've taught myself to draw on the computer. Sorta. What I had in mind at the start was the idea that the fiction I wrote, the text, would lead to the imagery I would create. What I didn't expect was that sometimes the imagery would lead to text. So it was with Darby's motto, "Town Meeting Spirit 1753 to Doomsday," which I did not come up with until after I had completed the final draft of Howard Elman's Farewell.

My book had been accepted by University Press of New England, and the Press had also agreed to publish new editions of the previous six novels. I'd been working hard to create this scenario for a decade, so I was ecstatic to get the news from Michael Burton, director of the press. Thanks, Mike. Now it struck me that I ought to create a map of Darby, which I did, drawing it in Adobe Illustrator. After a lot of fiddling to produce all the info in the format of a book page, I thought the map still lacked something. It needed a graphic to unify all seven books. It was that thought that led me to the idea of drawing a road sign, based on the familiar Welcome to New Hampshire/ Bienvenue signs that you see everywhere in my state. I loved putting the French word in because it echoed my French-Canadian heritage. But when I looked at my drawing I could see it was still missing something specific about Darby.

I decided I need to write a few words that would represent the town, a motto. The idea was on my mind the day I attended a talk about demographics of my own town, Westmoreland, NH. The speaker was Richard High, a neighbor, friend and very smart guy. Through his study, Richard showed that early settlements in Westmoreland and no doubt other towns on then frontier in our area were dominated by young adults and children–many children.

The talk left me with the possibility of future fictions. I began to muse over the notion of writing a faux history of Darby. I asked myself what's the one big theme that identifies a New England town distinct from towns elsewhere. The answer was obvious–town meeting. That led me to the phrase "Town meeting spirit". Then doodling on a handwriting app on my iPad I came up with "Town Meeting Spirit 1753 to 2013."

I didn't like the way the phrase looked on the page, nor the "2013" figure since that would change year by year. I thought some more until the plot line of my new book

popped into my head. One of the major subplots involved a video game that I called Darby Doomsday. In fact, one of the working titles for Howard Elman's Farewell was Darby Doomsday. From there the tumblers in my head fell into place and I had Darby's motto, Town Meeting Spirit 1753 to Doomsday.

Darby and the Magic Moment

Probably the character in Howard Elman's Farewell most in line with my own thinking is Birch Latour. Birch, 24 (in 2014), is Howard Elman's grandson. Below are a few lines in Howard Elman's Farewell that Birch says in addressing the Darby Planning Board.

"Communities are always changing, but when we look at the history of a place we identify two important time periods, the idealized time period, what I call the Magic Moment and the End Time when change has so degraded the place that its Magic Moment identity is lost forever. Think of those communities in the southeastern part of our state. Darby is on the verge of its End Time. If we don't do something in the next few years the Darby we know will cease to exist."

It wasn't until I wrote that paragraph that I grasped an idea that was important to me. Perhaps the concept of the Magic Moment was there all along, but not at the surface of my consciousness; perhaps it's the act of writing that brings ideas up from the depths. It's as if Birch is a real person, who I channel. I think better when I type. Maybe my cognitive apparatus is my hands. Certainly the contents in my head have been questioned.

The Magic Moment is the notion that there's particular time period when a community's identity becomes fixed in the minds of its inhabitants and visitors. Change can be for the better or for the worse, and sometimes a place has such little beneficial emotional value to its residents that it doesn't matter what happens to it. My concern is for the special places, places that somewhere along the line establish an identity of value that lingers over time and that enlivens, enriches, and sustains its inhabitants. When such a place reaches its End Time it's a tragedy not just for one person but for many. I remember driving through a neighborhood in Youngstown, Ohio, back in the 1980s. Abandoned steel mills gave the place a lonely, haunted feeling. (Which later I noted in my novel Mad Boys.) I went back a decade later–no change. For all I know the place has come back, but I'll bet it's not the same Youngstown as before.

A big theme in my Darby books is the identity of the town, which is constantly under threat of one kind or another. Identity is a big theme in the real world, too. Some communities–especially big cities–seem to be able to withstand huge cultural–even disastrous–changes and still retain their identities. Think of Paris, Rome, New York, Boston, New Orleans. But even big cities can lose themselves. Look at Detroit. Will it ever again be the Motor City? Probably not. I think a general rule is that the smaller the place the more vulnerable it is to change and loss.

Darby's Magic Moment parallels the Magic Moment of the real town of Westmoreland, NH, where I live as I write this today. Here's how Birch Latour expresses the idea while he's addressing his fellow townspeople at the planning board hearing.

"'Darby's Magic Moment occurred in the decades following the American Revolution. Farmers grew crops, raised cattle, sheep, pigs, chickens, and turkeys. Local industry thrived: blacksmiths, tinsmiths, candlemakers, glass blowers, sawyers, and timber framers. I'm thinking of two historical figures, well-known local cousins with the same name distinguished by their trades, Wooden Josh, a carpenter, and Iron Josh, a blacksmith. Every neighborhood had its own one-room school houses, twelve in all. Every child could walk to school, because school was right around the corner. There were three different churches. Citizens met at town meeting to govern themselves. Darby town [like Westmoreland] was pretty much self-sufficient.

By the Civil War Darby's Magic Moment had gone by, and the town has been in decline ever since. We've lost almost all of our farms. We no longer manufacture the goods we need, but buy them elsewhere in the global economy. In another generation River Darby, Center Darby, Upper Darby, and Darby Depot risk merging into one amorphous suburban blob, with its citizens commuting to jobs in Keene, Brattleboro or Bellows Falls, and infested by an outsider element of desperate working poor and criminals: druggies, burglars, bullies, poachers, and arsonists. Meanwhile, property taxes continue to rise, state and federal laws cut into our autonomy. Our children are schooled elsewhere in large, expensive unnecessary warehouses of education. This very building that serves as our town hall and meeting house is expected to be too dangerous for use within the next five years. The timbers that hold it up are too degraded to be repaired. Soon Darby will only be a name for another taxing station.'

"Birch paused to let his words sink in, and then he said, 'It doesn't have be this way. We can do more than postpone the End Time; we can recreate the Magic Moment of Darby in a new and creative way. We will bring back the Magic Moment.'"

Birch has a plan to save Darby, but it will be costly and who can know whether the plan will work. That's a book yet to be written. Through various devices outlined in Howard Elman's Farewell, Birch wants to recreate Darby as an 18th and 19th century village but with 21st Century technology. He wants to bypass most of the 20th Century. In his thinking, the 20th century was the destroyer century, not just for the wars in spawned, but for the cultural identities it smashed. Birch's plan is his own version of virtual reality, which plays out in Darby Doomsday, the video game that he and his friends are creating.

I've only sketched these ideas in Howard Elman's Farewell, because the book belongs to Howard and I didn't want to upstage him. Let's just say say that Darby Doomsday is an important plot element in the book.

I would like to expand upon this idea of moments, applying it to my own life. My moments were not particularly magical, but they certainly were transformative. The first moment:

I'm four years old. After my father is drafted into the Navy, my mother moves from Keene to Epping, NH, with my baby brother Antoine and me to be near her mother and brother, a Catholic priest that I am named after, Father Joseph Ernest Vaccarest (Father Vac, as he was known).

My mother reads me a story of the three little pigs, or maybe the story comes to me from another source–I can't remember. What I do remember is that I've been programmed by elders to believe that pigs are small, pink, clean and cuddly.

Cut now to visual memory. I am with my mom, my "memere", and Father Vac. We are visiting a farmhouse. I remember the strong smell, very unpleasant, and a feeling of unease. We walk on planks because the area between the driveway and house is muddy. Besides this make-shift walk is a wooden fence. Suddenly, pigs appear in the mud behind the fence. They are huge. In my four-year old mind they are like ambulatory freight cars, caked with filth. They stink and they are also extremely loud and aggressive. I fear for my life, trampled and eaten alive by pigs. The farmer comes out of the house and with some difficulty he succeeds in driving the pigs away from us. It crosses my mind that these real pigs are extraordinarily different from the three little pigs. The moment remains with me like this: Ernie, you have been betrayed by your elders. You

cannot trust what they say to be true. That notion, established when I was four years old, is still with me.

Now it is 1953. I am twelve years old and I have walked the mile from my family house on Oak Street to Main Street to witness the biggest event of my lifetime to date. President Eisenhower is coming to Keene to help us celebrate our Bicentennial. It looks to me as if the whole city has turned out for the parade. I can see the President in an open car, standing on the floor of the rear of the limousine waving to the crowd.

But it's not the President that grabs my attention: it's the people in the crowd, especially the adults. They are jubilant, waving and grinning. Perhaps if I had been among them as an adult I too would have been in a good mood in the presence of the President of the United States. But as a 12-year-old I'm getting those old feelings of ... well, it's not betrayal this time. It's something more subtle, pervasive and terrifying. The sight of the President had made grownups–these people who control my world–stupid.

Over the succeeding years I have expanded on the idea: Celebrity–that is, the concept of celebrity–makes people stupid. It clouds the judgment of usually cautious thinking people. There have been moments–not too many–when I was the celebrity and by gazing at my audience I could see what I had done: Lowered the collective IQ, impoverished their judgment. To this day I stay away any time a big shot comes to town; I never go to concerts–which are the worst. I remember a few friends who went to the Woodstock festival and who pitied me because I chose to stay home, where what I felt was vast relief.

And then there was a political moment, the year before Woodstock. I'm attending an anti-war rally. I've been trying to find a political belief. In high school, I tried "I Like Ike," and I did like Ike as a President. He was reassuring. But Republican thinking, especially in the person of Senator Joseph McCarthy, made me uneasy. The Civil Rights movement drove me to the liberal side. Later, as a telephone man and union member I joined the Democratic Party and voted for John Kennedy. So now it's 1968, and I'm a veteran but big time into the anti-war movement. My liberal tendencies are coalescing. Finally, I have something to believe in.

I attend an anti-war rally. A celebrity anti-war guy (can't remember who) is giving a speech. Suddenly, the crowd starts chanting, "Ho-ho Ho-Chi Minh." Something in me breaks. The idea that we would be rooting for a dictator who is killing our soldiers makes

me ashamed. Apparently, celebrity makes liberals stupid, too. I left the rally, and I left the idea of tying myself to a political ideology.

This kind of thinking–skeptical and stubborn, and maybe in the end wrong-headed–often leaves one isolated, an outsider who lacks the kind of core belief that is the mark both of a leader and of a loyal follower. It means I have to depend on myself to make judgments and on my loved ones and a few close friends for companionship. It's probably the turn of mind that made me a writer.

Darby, the Landscape

Fictional Darby is a rubix cube of farms, Colonial and Cape Cod-style houses and 19th century homesteads, contemporary suburbia, gilded age mansions, discrete villages within the town, a little lake, a land trust, a river, many brooks, rolling wooded hills, high up ledges, glacial erotics (er, excuse me; that's glacial erratics) and, as the local lingo has it, pucka brush. What is its future? Not just the future of the people, but the future of the places and landmarks. That's the question I pursue in the seven novels of the Darby Chronicles.

I based Darby on three southwestern New Hampshire towns where I have roots–Westmoreland, Sullivan, and Dublin. Anyone familiar with the southwestern New Hampshire landscape will look at my map and figure out that Darby is located about where Westmoreland is in the real world. Did I type "real world"? Let us call it the hypothetical world that we appear to inhabit during our hypothetical temporary earthly existence.

Westmoreland is located on the New Hampshire side of the Connecticut River, the little town between the bigger towns of Walpole and Chesterfield. East of us is the place where I was born and grew up, Keene, the hub and "big" city of our region. I called Keene "Tuckerman" in two of the Darby Chronicle novels, one of no doubt many interruptions of continuity in the series, since I never planned a series–it just happened, the way life just happens, and the way sentences, like this one, just don't want to end.

When Medora and I returned from California in 1970 (so she could continue her schooling at Keene State College) we rented a tiny house in the Park Hill Village of Westmoreland. I thought then that it was the most compatible place for me on this planet. I still think that, and today we live in Park Hill after building a house in 2009. We were gone from Westmoreland for more than 35 years, but I never got the town out of my system. When I started writing what would be my first published novel, The Dogs of March, I set the action in Darby, whose fictional geography was very much like Westmoreland's. Disclaimer: I've said before and I'll say it again, though Darby partakes of Westmoreland's terrain none of characters are consciously based on any past or present-day residents of Westmoreland or anywhere else in the material world.

My fictional characters are based on aspects of my own personality that I exaggerate.

The nearly geographical center of Westmoreland and the site of the town hall, the post office, church, and village store is called South Village. In Darby it's called Center Darby. The Elman place is located in Center Darby about where you would find my own house on Route 63. In fictional Darby there is no Park Hill, a cluster of dozen or so homes; there is only the Elman place and up slope the Cutter place.

Westmoreland is neither a rich, nor a poor town. It's a town of working class and middle class people. It has no mansions, no shacks and no trailers–at least none that you'd notice driving its roads. I wanted Darby to contain some social classes that are not very prominent in Westmoreland; in other words Darby is culturally different from Westmoreland and those differences are visible, represented by the dwellings of the inhabitants. From Sullivan I borrowed a neighborhood of run down shacks (long since gone) and plunked them down in Darby and called that section Darby Depot. In later books the shacks disappear, replaced by a shabby mobile home park. Such places appear in various towns in the Monadnock Region, though not in Westmoreland. I built a cabin on Valley Road in Sullivan many years ago. That cabin has reappeared as the domicile of the hermit Cooty Patterson, Howard Elman's best friend.

In the early Darby books Cooty's cabin is in the town of Donaldson. I can't for the life of me remember where Donaldson is supposed to be on the New Hampshire map. In my mind it's Sullivan, but in the fiction it's supposed to be closer to Darby than Sullivan is to Westmoreland, about where you would find Walpole. This is one of those problems in continuity that one runs into when writing a series of books based on a real region. Things change from book to book, and the changes are not always congruent. No doubt there are more miscombobulations in the books, because I never checked for continuity. I should have, but I hate to look into the entrails of a book after it's been published. I can crack open any volume, point my figure, and find something I want to fix. As a long as a book is in manuscript form and unpublished it's always in a state of becoming. I can improve it, screw up, even destroy it; I am its god. Once it's published I lose control over it. I can see its flaws but I am powerless to repair them. Perhaps there is a real God/ Creator and he/she/it/them let loose the universe we live in with Ã©lan and a component of chaos so even God didn't how it would develop and now, God–poor thing–is stuck with careening out-of-control sentient beings that he/she/it/them never envisioned and beyond his/her/its/their powers to alter.

After I wrote Howard Elman's Farewell, I created a map and put Cooty's cabin at the very west end of Darby, in the woods, off a back road, in the Darby Depot section of town. In the early part of the book Cooty's cabin is moved to the Salmon Estate in Upper

Darby so that Birch Latour (Howard's grandson) can take care of the centenarian. I make a big deal out of the idea that Cooty serves as a kind father confessor for three generations of Elman men–Howard, Howard's son Latour, and Birch. What they say to Cooty figures heavily into the plot of Howard Elman's Farewell.

Darby, unlike Westmoreland, includes a section where wealthy people have built gaudy and pricey houses. Picture great houses and estates in the highlands off Glebe Road in Westmoreland and you have Upper Darby. My model for Upper Darby is in Dublin, NH. My mother, Jeannette Vaccarest Hebert, was a nanny for a wealthy family that had a house in Hanover, NH, and a mansion in Dublin, a place so vast and with so many servants that one person's sole job was to polish things.

River Darby is based on the lovely landscape of farms and pleasant homes along River Road in Westmoreland and Walpole. In the Darby Chronicles River Road is the site of the Hillary Farm that plays a big role in Whisper My Name. The Hillary Farm is roughly based on a farm on River Road in Walpole, NH. River Darby is also the site of the proposed Riverboat Gambling casino and new town hall, the brainchild of Elenre and Howard Elman's youngest daughter Heather and her company, PLC (Paradise Lots Covenant). The location of the project is based on the former County jail and and county farm in Westmoreland on River Road.

It's a lot of fun, though a little creepy, when I walk by or drive by the real places that serve as models for my fictional town.

Center Darby

Center Darby gets its name from its location, roughly in the geographical center of town. Darby's three major local roads–Route 63, Parade Road, and Upper Darby Road–flow into the town's center, which features a grassed area in the middle, known as Lafayette Square, though its shape is more or less elliptical.

There's a story that appears in Darby Doomsday, the video game, that explains the connection between Parade Road and Lafayette Square. In 1824 and 1825, the Marquis De Lafayette, the last surviving general of the Revolutionary War, was invited by President James Monroe to tour the United States in anticipation of the country's celebration of its fiftieth anniversary as a nation.

Lafayette, a very wealthy French nobleman, was only 19 years old when he came to America to fight with the revolutionaries. Because of his great wealth and commitment to the American cause, Lafayette though he was just a boy received a commission as a major general. Originally, General George Washington and his officer corps planned to humor the young general. But as it turned out Lafayette, despite his youth, was a very capable officer. More important, perhaps, is that he and Washington hit it off right away. Washington, who had no children of his own, and Lafayette, whose father died in combat when he was two, formed a close some say father-son relationship that lasted until the death of Washington. Lafayette named his first son George Washington.

Lafayette went on to fight for democracy in France, Poland and the Caribbean where he freed slaves on his own plantation (he repeatedly urged Washington to free his slaves). When he returned to America more than forty years later the country was aware that Lafayette played an important role in recruiting the aid of France during the revolutionary war. Over the course of almost a year Lafayette visited all of the 24 states then in existence where he was wined, dined, and put on parade. It was probably the biggest celebration of any celebrity in American history. Which is why there are so many mountains, lakes, and roads named Lafayette in the eastern part of the country. There are no official records that Lafayette actually visited Darby, but somewhere along the line the story spread that Lafayette and his entourage passed through the town to cheering crowds. Result? Parade Road and Lafayette Square.

At the center of this center is a granite obelisk war memorial commemorating the dead in the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, World War I, World War 2, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Middle East

Wars. There was a big discussion at town on whether to name all the wars and or keep the numbers down for purposes of editorial elegance. In the end, the maximalists won, conceding only the lumping together of various on-going armed conflicts into "Middle East Wars."

Let us consider a future issue discussed at the town meeting that later will appear in the video game, Darby Doomsday. The first local resident has been killed in combat in one of the recent Middle East wars. Bez Woodward, a drone pilot for the CIA, was captured and decapitated somewhere in the border lands of Syria and Iraq. Bez's widow, state senator Missy Mendelson, petitions the town for a War-on-Terrorism memorial. Trouble is there's no room left on the monument for more plaques. However, PLC (Paradise Lots Covenant), a national development company, proposes to build a new and bigger monument in its proposal along River Road for its Riverboat Gambling Casino. The company's plan includes moving the town center to its property that will feature a shopping mall, restaurants, condominiums overlooking Connecticut River, and a new town offices complex to replace the Darby's condemned town hall. The improved war memorial, yet to be designed, will be placed prominently on the new town common.

Center Darby as it is portrayed in the seven Darby novels includes the Elman Place, the Cutter Place, the McCurtin Place, the town hall, and the village store. Other buildings that don't appear in the Darby books but that I had in mind when I created the town include the library, the Congregational Church, the Grange Hall, the Fire Station, the Post Office, the town library, the elementary school and of course private homes, most built in the Colonial and Cape Cod styles with clapboard siding. There are a few red brick houses and even a couple houses built from the local granite.

Across from Center Darby Elementary School is the site of the town's biggest (though not its oldest) cemetery. The four cemeteries of Darby, one in each village, feature stone walls, mossy grave stones, artfully planted trees, and rolling lawns; for many of Darby residents the cemeteries are visitation sites that are as much places of rest for the living as they are for the dead.

Darby Depot

I wouldn't call the region in New Hampshire that I live in poor, but it does have pockets of poverty. In fact, I grew up in the presence of that poverty. My parents were what sometimes have been called working poor, though I can't say we ever felt poor and they would have resented being lumped in with poor people. We got by and after my uncle died and left my mother his small cottage on Granite Lake we thought ourselves quite well off. The poverty I am talking about, the poverty that I've felt if not experienced, started with my boyhood observations of some of our neighbors. I'm thinking now as I write this poverty of spirit, poverty of love, poverty of initiative, poverty of knowledge, as well as poverty of possessions and prospects.

One particular house was as as rundown as one can imagine and still be habitable. It was covered with drab brown asphalt shingles. There were perpetually broken windows, crumbling front steps, sagging roof rafters. Any wood showing had rot and peeling paint, or the paint had gone away completely. The inhabitants dressed in rags and to my eye as a boy seemed brain-damaged or perhaps a different species of human being that was not taught in the books. The half dozen or so children in the family (I never did learn the number) seemed to wander in a daze unconcerned with the machinations of the planet. In my school was a similar family. For all I know they were related. I never knew details about these pitiful people, because they were not discussed within my family or by my peer group. They might as well have been visiting Martians invisible to all but me.

In the house next to the Hebert residence were a mother and a daughter about twenty years old, who were also very poor, but they were friendly and kind and I considered them friends. It was their house that left me with a love of wood heat. There was no furnace in the house, or if there was it was never turned on because when you entered it was cold in the hallway and I could feel the cold from other rooms, but the kitchen, the only warm room in the house, was very warm and had a nice smell that I cannot define to this day. It's the smell of a wood stove. My only memory of the kitchen was that black kitchen stove and plain wide boards walls that I don't think ever saw a coat of paint or wallpaper. Every once in a while a son, who was older than the daughter, showed up. Even as a child I could read the anger on his face. One day he got mad at his car and spent a hour destroying it as best he could with a sledge hammer. Very entertaining for the children in the neighborhood.

Decades later after my mother's death and after my dad moved in with my family I put my parents' house up for sale. It languished on the market for six months. We kept lowering the price. Connie Joyce, a friend and my real estate agent told me, "Ernie, this is the cheapest house in Keene. Nobody wants to live in this neighborhood, especially women."

These two families in my boyhood in my crummy neighborhood, which never felt crummy to me at the time, gave rise to the Jordan clan, which appears throughout the Darby Chronicles. I asked myself where the Jordans would live, and with that question I invented a part of Darby that I call Darby Depot. It's where the poor people live, and it's a decision that makes me vaguely uneasy because it suggests that poor people are the criminal class. In some ways that's true, but the crimes of the poor tend to be the result of poverty and do not greatly impact middle class and rich people (unless of course the poor people rebel). It's the crimes of the rich (which are often legal because of the way the rich manipulate laws) that impoverish everybody else.

Every section of Darby has a signature structure. In Center Darby it's the town hall; in Upper Darby it's the Salmon mansion; in River Darby it's the Hillary Farm; in Darby Depot it's Ike's Auction Barn.

River Darby

The phrase "River Darby" does not appear in the Darby novels. I made it up for this guide to designate a part of Darby that pops up over and over again in the Darby Chronicles but does not have a name in the books. Often a village in a New England town is named for a specific location, but not always. For example in my town of Westmoreland, NH, I live in the village known as Park Hill after the Park Hill Meeting House, which I see through the trees from my front door. However, the area in Westmoreland that people call The Depot is less obvious. Westmoreland once had a train depot, but the tracks have long since been abandoned and there is no trace remaining of the actual depot building.

Center Darby is easy enough to find. You're in the geographic middle of the town with the town common, town hall, library and village store. Darby Depot and Upper Darby are just chucks of territory that got labeled, but not named after any particular place, so I figured that somewhere in the history of Darby, perhaps shortly after the pioneers laid out lots along River Road, which runs more or less parallel to the Connecticut River, they started calling that section River Darby.

River Road in Darby (like River Road in Westmoreland) runs along the high bluffs above the river valley, but here and there where runoff from melting glaciers thousands of years ago cut ravines through bluffs the road winds down along the river briefly before twisting up to the top of the bluff again. It all makes for a pretty ride. Unlike the rocky land of the hills, the soil on the bluffs and below is alluvial and the farmers like it. The road today is still narrow and windy, and sometimes it floods in the spring, but it's paved, a nice ride for bicyclists such as Garvin Prell, who had an unfortunate accident on the bicycle in Live Free or Die. The distance from the Prell house in the highland of Upper Darby to the proposed PLC development on River Road is about six miles.

Used to be if you drove your horse and buggy along River Road in Darby you'd pass farm after farm, the landscape in the summer looking almost midwestern from the sight of cornfields. But the farms have been losing over the course of a century, and now there are only a few. The farmers have been selling off lots and retiring to warmer climes, their sons and daughters no longer interested in tilling soil. In those newer lots are single-family homes in the ranch style, which to my eye do not look right in this environment. You might find a few camps for getaway along the river, but no trailers. Seems as if after a big company from down country bought a couple of local farms and built a trailer park, the town banned any further construction of mobile homes. How then did a trailer

park spring up in Darby Depot? Answer: Politics in an (as yet) untold story in the Darby Chronicles.

One of the features in River Darby is what was once an oddly shaped hill; that is, oddly shaped for the terrain. Most of the hills in Darby are rugged, cut by ravines, with outcroppings of granite, the soil littered with stones. This particular hill was modest in height and smooth, no stones, no ledge. After the original pine trees had been logged off it in the 19th century, the soil was found to be sandy. The pioneers had discovered what later would be called a glacial moraine. In the 20th century the Hillary farm family used the hill to mine sand, a "sandbank" in the local parlance. Imagine that: a bank where God made a deposit of sand and the earthly proprietor made withdrawals.

The Avalon Hillary Farm is the main set in the third Darby novel, Whisper My Name, and the sandbank plays a role in the seventh novel, Howard Elman's Farewell. There's a sandbank on River Road in Westmoreland, but that's pure coincidence. When I was writing about my sandbank on River Road in Darby I didn't know about the one in Westmoreland very close to the location that it appears in Darby.

Upper Darby

My town of Westmoreland, NH, has no visible evidence of extreme wealth. But my fictional Darby does. I call it Upper Darby, a place of grand houses, even mansions, inhabited by wealthy and prominent families. It's based on a section of Dublin, NH, that has great views of Mount Monadnock and/or Dublin Lake. I used to think that Dublin itself was far richer than Westmoreland, but when I looked at recent statistics I discovered that the median income in Dublin is actually slightly lower than it is in Westmoreland. What Dublin has is a pocket or two of great wealth. Just what is the influence on a small, New England town: that's the question I posed for myself when I created Upper Darby. Some but not all of the answers play out in the novels of the Darby Chronicles.

Upper Darby is colder in the winter and cooler in the summer than the other Darbys. Upper Darby includes a small section of primeval forest, large chunks of rugged wood lands, high-country beaver dams, ledges, and outlooks with views of Abare's Folly Mountain, Grace Pond and on a clear day the Green Mountains of Vermont. Upper Darby road which winds through the hills is the only paved road. You really can't see much on the drive, because the trees are in the way. The real scenery, some of it quite spectacular, is available only the narrow dirt roads off Upper Darby Road. On such roads you'll find the Salmon Estate and other grand houses built by rich families back in the Gilded Age.

Upper Darby is dominated by three families–the Salmons (pronounced sal-mohn), the Prells, and the Butterfields. So many grand houses in New Hampshire towns are built often in locations of wild habitat–swamps or steep grades, on ledges, the soil strewn with glacial erratics, and serviced by poor roads. It's ironic that the people who settled in such areas in New England tended to be the very poor and the very rich, the poor because it was the only place they could afford and the rich because of the views and the beauty of the landscape. In Darby, one of those progeny of the very rich, Raphael "Reggie" Salmon, creates a land trust and buys up as much of the Darby wild lands as he can get his hands in part to drive out the poor (because he believes they deface the landscape) and in part because they happen to be in the way of his desires for a natural landscape with a minimum of human habitation. (For more information click on The Trust.)

The Dogs of March

His life had come to this: save a few deer from the jaws of dogs. He was a small man sent to perform a small task.

The Dogs of March is the first of the Darby novels. It was published in 1979, and the action takes place around the same time period. I had no idea when I was writing the manuscript that it would lead to a series. In fact, the advice I had from my first agent, Mavis McIntosh, was not to write a series. "All they'll remember is the first book," she said. She was right, but I went ahead anyway, guided by an angel or maybe a demon. I dunno.

From the University Press of New England promotional copy:

"The Dogs of March is about a dyslexic, barely literate working man–a man tough and tender–who begins to lose things in middle-age. He loses his job, the affections of his son, and temporarily the companionship of his wife. He takes action when he stands to lose his homestead in the little town of Darby, New Hampshire.

"Howard Elman is a man whose internal landscape is as disordered as his front yard, where native New Hampshire birches and maples mingle with a bullet-riddled washing machine, abandoned bathroom fixtures, and several junk cars. Howard, anti-hero of this first novel in Ernest Hebert's highly acclaimed Darby Chronicles, is a man who is tough and tender."

One of the forces driving me to write this book was a threat I saw to small town rural life after the Interstate highways opened up New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine to the influences of the money culture from down country.

The Dogs of March was cited for excellence in 1980 by the Hemingway Foundation (now the Pen Faulkner award for fiction).

Below is the story of how I happened to write that book.

When I married Medora Lavoie March 22, 1969, I was a twenty-seven year-old senior at Keene State College in my hometown of Keene, New Hampshire, and she was a nineteen year-old sophomore from Dover, New Hampshire. We honeymooned in Quebec City near our ancestral roots.

In the fall of that year we set out in my 1963 Chevrolet for Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, where I'd been accepted by poet Donald Davie in the poetry section of the master's program in creative writing. Medora and I were an hour and a half out of Keene in Bennington, Vermont, when Medora said, "Ern, this is the furthest west I've ever been."

I loved driving across the country. It made me feel patriotic in a time when there were good reasons to question the decisions by our leaders and even our values. Among my peers patriotism was suspect, but I grew up with the idea that the United States was special, even favored by the divinity. Seeing the country and its people help me reclaim a little bit of that earlier feeling for country, if not for God, with whom I have never been able to reconcile.

I didn't like the Bay area from the get-go–too many seemingly good-natured people and a climate that raised my suspicions because it was so redundantly nice. I wasn't in a mood for "nice" in those days. I wanted rigor.

My adventures in creative writing workshop at Stanford soured me on poetry writing as a career. It was the first time I'd met people who were more self-absorbed than I was and–more shockingly–unashamed, did not try to hide their ego mania, but traded on it in their writing. I gave this turn of mind: The Morass of Moi. It was all too much for a young man who had been raised in a culture where St. Joseph was the ideal figure of manhood, guy who raised a son not his own and, near as I can figure, never got laid.

I wrote a crazy story about a young woman who seduces her bishop, literally killing him with love. Wallace Stegner read it and let me into his fiction writing class. The class did its job, which was to tell me I was a fiction writer all right but not one cut out for grad school. Let me add that I valued both Donald Davie and Wallace Stegner as mentors. I just didn't have the right stuff for grad school. I quit Stanford.

Medora and I returned to our roots so she could finish her education at Keene State College. Eventually, I landed a job as a reporter with The Keene Sentinel newspaper, but for a couple years I managed a small, one-man gas station; those were the days before you pumped your own. Nights I labored at the craft of fiction writing, days I wore a baggy light blue jump suit that said Top Gas over the left breast pocket. Many years later, after I'd published several books, I met a guy on street who stopped me and said, "Where do I know you from?" I named one of my books. He said, "No that's not it. I

named another book. "No," he said, "I remember now–Top Gas. You washed my window. They don't do that any more."

One summer day around 1971 an old dented pickup truck pulled into the station. The driver was a big, balding man about fifty with little squinty eyes and a mouth set in the start of a snarl. He wore heavy cotton forest-green work duds, and the left sleeve of the shirt had been cut below the shoulder revealing an arm that ended at the elbow. On the passenger side of the bench seat was a small boy.

The man bored into me with his eyes. "Fill it," he said, and pointed with his one index finger to the regular pump. While I dispensed the gas, the man grabbed an oil rag on top of a pump with his one hand, tucked it in the crook under the half arm, raised the hood of the pickup, pulled out the dip stick, swiped it on the oil rag, inspected the dip stick, put it away, slammed down the hood and returned the oil rag to its place. I was impressed by the man's competence and something else, a "don't tread on me" attitude.

The man remained at the outer limits of my peripheral vision while I washed the windshield. I imagined that he was eyeing me critically; I went out of my way to do a good but not great job to signal him (and convince myself) that I was not intimidated.

I took note of the boy. He was seven or eight, watching the motion of the squeegee with interest and delight.

Probably I never would have remembered the episode if something seemingly insignificant hadn't happened. Just as the pick-up was pulling out of the station I glimpsed the man as he looked at the boy with a sudden softness in his hard eyes. I thought: this is a man who is both tough and tender.

That night I went home and started writing a fiction about that man who was tough and tender. The working title was The New Englander. I wrote in longhand in a school notebook. Since I had no idea what the story was, I wrote a day in his life, using number two pencils, sharpened with the short blade of my Swiss Army Knife. Over the next few months I wrote, I don't know, maybe a hundred or so single-space pages. I had all this data about a character, but no story. I didn't know what to do, so I set it aside.

Couple years went by. I wrote a sci-fi novel that wasn't very satisfying, but the work did help me learn the craft of novel writing. I got a job working for The Keene Sentinel, first as a sports writer, then as a general assignment reporter. I was only an average reporter,

but I did have a flair for journalistic writing. I wrote fast and easily. In fact, my first year on the job I won two New England United Press writing awards.

Like my journalism writing, my fiction writing was coming fast and easily, but it was no good. I wasn't getting anywhere. Eventually, Medora talked me into attending the Breadloaf Writer's Conference. From that experience, I found my way. I realized that all the good writing I'd done came after I'd written it over and over again. And again. And again. I was, by necessity, a first-draft newspaper reporter; I was not a first-draft fiction writer.

I hauled out the New Englander manuscript that I'd written in longhand; I discovered that most of it was not only illegible, it was ugly. I couldn't bear looking at my handwriting. As for content, I had no story, no plot, just a day in a man's life. However, I did have something: I knew where my character lived, who his loved ones were, the nature of his personality. Perhaps most important I had given him a name–Howard Elman. Howard was derived from a book that meant a lot to me in college, Howard's End by E.M. Forster. The Elman name comes from my hometown of Keene, which used to be known as the Elm City, until the elms were all destroyed by a disease brought in by insects from overseas.

One reading The Dogs of March might conclude that I based the name Elman on the theme of loss, that as the elm trees of Keene and other American communities were threatened by an invasive species so was Howard Elman. Actually, it was the other way around. I picked the name Elman merely because it sounded like a New England Yankee name. Two years had to go by before it occurred to me that Howard Elman's name suggested plot points for a novel. In Forster's novel we see an uneasy mingling of social classes; we see population changes to a small town brought on by the expansion of the city of London. I saw the same situation in the towns in my part of the world, changes brought on by the coming of the Interstate highways, which closed the distances between rural and urban centers.

The Elman part of Howard's name suggested that this would be a story of loss. I still didn't have a main plot, but I had some vague ideas where this book might go.

This much I knew from my day-in-the-life writing exercise. Howard Elman was a shop foreman in a textile mill, and he lived in the small town of Darby, NH, in an old house with purple asphalt shingles and a yard littered with junked cars that offended the sensibilities of his new neighbor, Zoe Cutter.

The house with purple asphalt shingles and junk cars came from a house I admired, kinda, on a back road in the town of Sullivan, NH. I figured the owner must have gotten a bargain on purple roof shingles and used them as house siding. Junked cars in the front yard? Well, they're more common than you might think, not only in New Hampshire but across the country. Next time you drive coast to coast take back roads. The whole of the USA is a junk yard. Junked cars are all part of nature to me, beautiful in their own way as mountain peaks and cascading waterfalls.

I neither plotted nor planned a book about Howard Elman. All I had was a character that I didn't know well, and a vague story revolving around the idea of native versus newcomer. By the way, native versus newcomer is one of the great themes of North America and perhaps of human habitation everywhere. By means sometimes benign but more often disruptive and destructive, one group replaces another.

Just what is plot? Plot is not the journey, not the destination. Plot is a layout of adventures along the way, in particular the order in which those adventures occur. Good books sometimes don't have good plots, and bad books sometimes do have good plots, so a writer should not overvalue plot. Even so, most of the time, plot helps a book and it certainly helps the reader, and often it helps the writer find his way. Plotting is the hardest job a fiction writer does (I am echoing a line from novelist John Gardner). I have to admire modernist and post-modernist fiction writers; through some kind of alchemy they have persuaded critics and many readers that fucked up plotting is cool. I wish I was so smart. In those days I had never heard of post-modernism and I had rejected modernism, kinda, so I was stuck with having to devise a plot that casual readers could follow and that would give structure and flow to the story. I was thinking, though not consciously, like a 19th century novelist. I had not formed an aesthetic, as such, I was just writing for my life: that's what it felt like.

Devising plot is like mapping a route. It's appropriate that I use a travel metaphor to make my point since I actually devised my plot for The Dogs of March on the road. I continued writing the "day in the life" that I had started maybe year or so earlier. I had written scenes, plot notes, but had no idea what to do with all this data.

At the time I owned a Datsun mini-pickup truck. One day I announced to Medora that I would be gone for a while. I wish I could remember a dramatic moment when I made this decision, or what her reaction was, but it's gone from memory. What I remember is taking off with no idea where I would end up. All I knew was that I wanted to stay on

two-lane roads. I carried a tape-recorder. As I drove I would speak into the thing, plotting my book. First night I stayed at a state park in Delaware. By the time I reached New Mexico I had a half-way decent plot. I turned around and came home and started writing.

I proceeded very slowly, but I was happy because I was making progress. With each typed page, I became more knowledgable about Howard Elman, my protagonist, and Zoe Cutter, my antagonist. The more I wrote the more empathy I felt for my characters; the more I wrote the more information I accumulated about the fictional world of Darby, though at the time I had no idea I would go on to write more books about a fictional New Hampshire town. There was just a feeling of … how to say it? Of an intimacy with landscape and the people who inhabit that landscape. I worked six days a week, two hours a day, for four years; then, done. At the completion of the book, I experienced a thrill, the warmth of accomplishment. But this feeling only lasted a couple days, replaced with an empty feeling, a feeling of loss. I felt like a hitchhiker on a lonely road under threatening skies. The message from the muse was clear: start another book.

My emotional, imaginary, and intellectual adventures in writing The Dogs of March was the beginning of a writing method that has served me well over the years. I always begin by writing a character profile with lots of random notes, much experimenting with style and point of view. I deliberately avoid thinking about plot or even story. Nonetheless, plot ideas emerge organically from the writing. I write these notions down as side notes.

When I can't bear the mess, I hit the road and plot the effing book. Sometimes on long cross-country trips, sometimes on short hops. Depends on my life situation. Since Medora and I moved to Westmoreland, NH, (in 2009) I've faced an hour plus commute to my job at Dartmouth College in Hanover. No big deal. I use the time in the car to plot whatever book, story, or essay I happen to be working on. In fact, I plotted the entire story of Howard Elman's Farewell, the seventh Darby book driving back and from Westmoreland to Hanover. NOTE: I also wrote that book on laptop computer, a Google Chromebook Pixel, reclining on the couch.

So, then, the Darby Chronicles, go back to that moment at Top Gas. I see him to this day in my mind's eye, a working man, tough and tender. I named him Howard Elman, the protagonist of the first and last books of the Darby Chronicles. At the start of the series in The Dogs of March he's about 51. In Howard Elman's Farewell he's 86, or maybe 85 or 87. Howard is not quite sure how old he is, and neither is his creator.

A Little More Than Kin

Ollie Jordan: "Everybody's got an idiot chained to him, only difference is, mine's here to see."

Ollie Jordan and his clan appear in my first novel, The Dogs of March. The events in A Little More Than Kin (published in 1982) occur a year or so later than those in The Dogs of March. The Jordans live in shacks behind a huge billboard that advertises a Vermont business, Basketville. Ollie is a brooding character with an inquiring philosophical turn of mind, but he grew up with no education, no mentors, and a serious Freudian hangup. A family history of poverty, stubborn pride, and a culture that runs contrary to mainstream society have robbed Ollie and his people of opportunity, even hope. They live by a culture of "succor and ascendancy".

When Ollie is evicted from his shacks he breaks his drinking rules and heads out into the wilderness with his mentally deficient son, Willow, literally chained to him. Father and son are doomed. How that doom plays itself out, through the disturbed but insightful mind of Ollie Jordan, is what makes A Little More Than Kin tick. My goal in this book was to make a rural underclass man a tragic hero. I probably failed in that endeavor, but I gave it my best shot and I do believe that Ollie is a strong and believable fictional character. In Ollie I wanted to create an underclass character who was not stupid, not shallow, not silly.

The book was in part a rebellion against the novel and movie Deliverance, where rural people are portrayed as bestial. My aim wasn't to glorify or romanticize rural people; it was simply to show them as complex human beings. Though A Little More Than Kin is action-packed the book is at heart an exploration into a brilliant mind that has laid waste to itself.

Back in the 1970s anybody driving on I–91, the new interstate highway in Vermont that ran roughly parallel to the Connecticut river boundary with New Hampshire, would notice how beautiful the landscape was, in part because Vermont did not allow billboards. But look at that: a huge sign, tall and very wide, a single word on it, BASKETVILLE, advertising a store in Putney, Vermont. The proprietors got away with the billboard by placing their sign across the river in New Hampshire, which had no legal prejudice against billboards.

Every time I drove the highway, especially at night, I would look for the sign. There was something about it, perhaps the incongruity of a lit-up billboard seeming to come out of the forest, that gave me a little thrill, folloowed by an twinge of shame for feeling so giddy about a blight on the landscape. One afternoon I was driving south on the highway to New York. Somewhere in Massachusetts–in Easthamption, I think–something caught my attention. High above on the edge of a cliff stood a naked man in all his male splendor facing the traffic. I projected the mental picture of that guy to the top of the Basketville sign.

Probably Willow Jordan, Ollie's eldest son, standing on the ridge board of the Basketville sign naked facing the traffic on 91 is the most vivid image in A Little More Than Kin, maybe in all the Darby books. To that naked guy going solo on a cliff top, I say, "Thanks for the image, friend."

In A Little More Than Kin, behind the Basketville sign, unseen from the highway, are the Jordan shacks. My inspiration for the Jordan shacks came about as a result of a newspaper ad I answered advertising a 10-foot aluminum johnboat with oars for $75. The time period was the 1970s. I called the number in the ad, and a man with a weak voice gave me directions to his place, ten or so miles from Keene. It turned out be a two-room shack in a compound of half a dozen or more shacks on a country road. There was a lot of junk laying around amid briers, rocks, random vegetable plants but no discernible garden, plenty of weeds and weed trees, though; patches of tall grass and a wild flower or two, but no lawn, nor evidence there had ever been one. To me this layout was beautiful.

It was obvious from the look of the owner why he wanted to sell. The man was a walking scarecrow. He told me he had cancer and was too weak to fish; indeed, he could barely get around and converse. I knew I could talk him down on the price, but I paid the $75 anyway. Out of pity? Well, a little, but mainly I just don't like to haggle.

Later when I was writing the first two books of the Darby Chronicles–"dogs" and "kin"–I put those shacks and "landscaping" in back of my version of the Basketville sign. I also put something of the former boat owner into the physique of Ollie Jordan when Ollie is deteriorating from alcoholism and growing madness.

Ollie and his clan are squatting on the property of an absentee landlord. Eventually, the sign is torn down, the shacks demolished, until there is nothing left but bare ground. In later Darby novels, a trailer park springs up in the vicinity. By the end of the Darby

Chronicles, the trailer park too has vanished from the earth as if it had never existed. That's how it goes with the dwellings of the poor. We remember the rich and the privileged, their castles, their walled cities, their pyramids, their great cathedrals, their sarcophagi, the documentation of the structures left by architects, artists, and historians for us to study and admire. By contrast the poor live in fragile and short-lived structures. The poor are not interred in vaults that last over the millennia; they do not live in stone castles, mansions, or penthouses in the big city. They leave very few paper trails. They are like the creatures of the wilds that build nests to raise young and to seek shelter, only to be dispossessed by fickle weather, a landlord with a different idea, or the demands of their own wandering spirit.

When I published The Dogs of March, I sold the johnboat; with part of the $4,000 advance for the book I bought a canoe. As it turned out that purchase was a mistake. For my purposes, fishing on small ponds with a fly rod, the johnboat was superior, easier to toss into the bed of my pickup, and it handled better in wind than the canoe. Plus too much time in the canoe using, no doubt, poor paddle-technique gave me tendinitis in my right elbow. I never had elbow problems pulling oars. Only thing I didn't like about rowing was having to look over my shoulder to see where I was going.

Whisper My Name

The stakes are high when a big company proposes a regional shopping mall in Darby.

The New England town has the power through its institution of town meeting, the beauty of its landscape, and the enduring qualities of its architecture to shape in a good way the identity of its inhabitants. These values are put on trial at town meeting for a vote. That's the premise behind Whisper My Name.

The plot plays out through the eyes of Reporter Roland LaChance, Farmer Avalon Hillary, and the Trust land conservancy founder Raphael "Reggie" Salmon.

Magnus Mall, a national corporation, wants to buy the Avalon Hillary farm and transform the property into a mall to serve Western New Hampshire and Eastern Vermont. The aging Hillary is torn between the traditions of his family and "the thought of the money." LaChance is not only chasing down leads in his reportage of the mall he's chasing down the story behind his own origins. Along the way he falls in love with Sheila "Soapy" Rayno, an aphasic girl, and a daughter of Darby with her own mysterious origins.

Whisper My Name is the novel that I am least satisfied with, and yet in the end it was the book that for better or for worse sent me on a career course.

The inspiration for Whisper My Name came from a radio news reporter I was somewhat friendly with. She was very young, maybe 21 or so, plump but curvy and very pretty, but her face was perpetually dirty and it appear that she never put a comb through her blond hair. And makeup or lipstick? Perish the thought. She seemed to be too young and inexperienced–and no doubt underpaid–to do her job well. I was vaguely attracted to her in the way that men are attracted to vulnerable women. You want to protect them at the same time that you believe (in your secret heart) that you can dominate them.

Around this same time period I had two other issues on my mind, one relating to my job as a newspaper reporter and a personal matter. The news item centered around a big company that wanted to build a pulp mill on farmland in the small town of Walpole, New Hampshire. Local people divided along class lines in their support or condemnation of the project. In my personal life, my heritage from French Canada seemed to come out of a fog like a specter simultaneously to enrich and haunt me.

In the mysterious and sometimes wacky way of creativity, the pulp mill drama, the dirty girl, my retro ideas of male-female attraction, and my own search for identity appeared in my head as a plot line for a book. The radio reporter morphed into an aphasic and troubled teenager that I named Sheila "Soapy" Rayno.

The center for the plot of the book would be a dispute over whether a small town should vote to accept a regional shopping mall. The protagonist would be the newspaper reporter who covers the story and the future lover of Soapy Rayno. I named him Roland LaChance. I broke my writing rule and did not create a profile for Roland because I thought I knew him. It was my first attempt at writing a book with a protagonist based somewhat upon myself. The work did not go well. I was not ready to confront a story relating to identity with a version of myself as the focus, perhaps because even though I had turned age 40 I was still wasn't sure who I was. It would be another decade before I settled comfortably into a slowly evolving self.

Evolving? Yes. If I may digress, just as the human body is constantly changing, so is the mind and, it follows, the self. Know thy self? Can't be done. By the time you figure out who you are, you have evolved into a new self and from that perspective you are evaluating the ghost image of that old self. Corollary to the Uncertainty Principle?

I'd already published two novels. Nobody was asking me to publish a third. I put that pressure on myself. I usually write an elaborate day in the life of my protagonist before embarking on the actual composition of the novel and even before I have a plot; I didn't do that with Whisper My Name. Somehow I staggered through and published the book. In retrospect, I think it's pretty good (though, LaChance, the protagonist, remains the weakest part of the story). However, the experience of writing the book remains as a bad memory. It's the only book I've written that wasn't fun to make.

Despite all the anguish I had writing Whisper My Name something happened toward the end of composing it that led me to a fateful decision. It's a rather long story.

The story begins with an idea I came up with when I was a news reporter for The Keene Sentinel. New Hampshire is a great place to break in as a reporter, because you get to cover presidential candidates. I was a Sentinel reporter from 1972 to 1981. I did a lot of reporting of candidates and their positions during the campaigns leading up to the election of Jimmy Carter in November 1976. I didn't do any original reporting during that time. I was just learning election politics. When the next presidential campaign season arrived, I was a little more savvy.

The problem for a local reporter is that your knowledge-base is so small. You can never know as much as the national reporters because you don't have the time to devote the hours that they do, nor access to their sources. The result is that you only write what the candidates tell you in interviews and by reading their position papers. The only news you can provide your readership with that is unique is the local reaction.

There were a huge number of candidates on the Republican side: Former Governor Ronald Reagan of California; former CIA director and United States Representative George H. W. Bush of Texas; Representative John B. Anderson of Illinois; Senate Minority Leader Howard Baker of Tennessee; Representative Phil Crane of Illinois; Former Governor John Connally of Texas; Senator Bob Dole of Kansas; Former Special Ambassador to Paraguay Ben Fernandez of California; Former Minnesota Governor Harold Stassen; Senator Larry Pressler of South Dakota; Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut.

Democrats included Jimmy Carter, President of the United States; Ted Kennedy, U.S. senator from Massachusetts; Cliff Finch, former governor of Mississippi; Jerry Brown, governor of California.

Among the Republicans my personal favorite was John Anderson. Among the Democrats it was Jerry Brown. Still is. I think Brown would have made a great President.

The big question: who would be nominated and who would be elected?

My goal was to scoop the big media outlets in picking winners for the nomination and then election. Reporters get criticized for spending to much time writing about who's ahead and who's behind. My feeling is that covering "the horse race," as it is known, is a good idea because it is another way to read the mood of the country. The mood of the country: That's what I was really after.

Local was the only edge I had over my competitors–New York Times, Boston Globe, Washington Post, Time and Newsweek, and of course the TV networks.

With the experience of covering the previous campaign I came up with an idea. I had noticed candidates tended to attract local people who shared their ideas. I concluded that you could tell a potential winner or loser by the people who followed his or her

campaign. So, early on, though I thought he was the smartest and wisest politician in the group, I wrote off Jerry Brown, because his local followers were ex-hippies, lefties, and academics. Their candidates never won.

I remembered that Carter, though he was a liberal Democrat, had distanced himself from the left. His slogan, "I will never lie to you," resonated. I saw people at his political rallies that I had never seen before. So the cue I was looking for as the 1980 campaign was gearing up in the late spring of 1979 was strangers at a political rally. I knew by sight all the regulars of all the factions. Kennedy had the look of a man who had a hangover; the local political people picked up on that as well as myself. It was soon clear to me that Kennedy was not going replace Carter on the ticket.

Then Reagan arrived in Keene for a campaign stop at Keene High School. One thing that clicked with me is that he came across in an interview as a lot smarter and more knowledgeable than he'd been portrayed in the national media. This was a shrewd operator who knew what he was doing. He packed the gym at Keene High School for a speech that drew a standing ovation. Of course one could argue that Reagan because he had been an actor drew crowds because of his celebrity status. Well, Paul Newman, who was a much bigger deal as a celebrity than Reagan ever was, arrived in Keene to support Democrats and did not draw anywhere near the size crowd that Reagan did. Furthermore, in follow-up political gatherings I saw people at Reagan functions where Reagan was not present that I had never seen before. Based on the local reaction, I wrote a piece predicting that the two nominees would be Reagan and Carter, and that Reagan would win in a landslide.

Flash ahead to 1983. I was just finishing up Whisper My Name with a knowledge that it didn't have anywhere near the power of a breakout novel. For the first time since I'd published The Dogs of March in 1979 and a Little More Than Kin in 1982, I tried to predict what the future held for me. Was I going to be a loser or a winner?

I took the technique I devised as a reporter (studying the local reaction to candidates) and applied it to my own career. By now I'd received a lot of mail, communicated with many people about my books, and had given talks in schools, libraries, and in private homes to book groups. I knew my readership. Actually, I knew the answer to my question all along but I had deliberately kept the information out of my mind for fear it would pollute me somehow. Deep down I was scared.

I'd already compiled the data in my head so the exercise in thinking about it and coming to a conclusion lasted only a minute. Maybe even less. My readers consisted of a few professional admirers–writers, editors, academics, high school teachers; a few educated readers of New England fiction; and probably the biggest group, new people moving into rural New England who wanted a heads-up on the locals. Near as I could tell my books had zilch appeal in suburbia, big cities, and small towns outside of New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine. The people I wrote about–working class people and rural underclass people–did not read my books. I avoided hot-button issues of the day: war, race, gender, nouveau riche money, soft core porn, celebrity, religion. (Note that these are the same hot button issues today.) Generalizations: My protagonists were men, their themes were male, the readers of literary fiction were women.

Upon realizing my position in the marketplace, my first thought was that my publishers were pretty stupid: how could they be smart if they were publishing my books? My first novel, The Dogs of March, had received a citation from the Hemingway Foundation (now the PEN/Faulkner award), gotten rave reviews in the top newspapers and magazines in the country, and I still did not sell all that many books outside of my own very small region. Viking Press nominated my second novel A Little More Than Kin for a Pulitzer Prize and other big time awards, but the judges didn't notice the book, reviews were good but not great (they have to be great to be worth anything at all); sales were flat. What would make anybody think that somehow another Hebert book about Darby, NH, was going to break out? Once the publishing companies figured me out I'd be gone. And yet what I had in mind were more Darby books.

I can't remember when I got the idea for two more Darby books, but probably it was when I was on my daily run. Like most of my good ideas it seemed to arrive via some celestial messenger. The same angel that impregnated Mary with the son of God impregnated me with the story lines for both the fourth and fifth Darby books, The Passion of Estelle Jordan and Live Free or Die.

I mulled over my choices: continue writing Darby books; try to write books that would sell; quit fiction writing and go back to writing newspaper columns. I couldn't think of any other options that I could stand. I certainly did not want to give up writing book-length manuscripts of fiction. I was hooked on the excitement of the creative process and, really, in my vanity I thought had I something to give to the world through my words and imagination.

In the end I made the only decision that at the time was available to me. I would plunge ahead with Darby books four and five. It was fun dreaming up scenarios for best-seller novels, but when it came down to doing the actual writing I couldn't do it. I could only write my kind of book.

The Passion of Estelle Jordan

Maybe the way to save yourself is to save someone else.

One of my many part-time jobs when I was a student at Keene State College back in the middle 1960s was laundry man at Elliot Community Hospital. Since the hospital was next door to the school, it was a short walk from classroom to work space. However, the environments were startlingly different.

The hospital laundry was in the basement. I remember dark stone walls, a rough unpainted concrete floor, washers and dryers the size of compact cars, a network of steam pipes wrapped in what must have been asbestos insulation. I don't remember any color. The phrase "fifty shades of grey" had whole different meaning for me in those days. It meant work in a dreary, cheerless place.

In the middle of the room was a chute that ran to the top floors. One of the rules of the place was don't stand under the chute. Twenty or so pounds of dirty laundry wrapped in a sheet could build quite a lot of attitude in its descent from the third floor to the basement. It was my job to throw the dirty bedding and gowns into a washer. Another rule was look before you reach into the pile. You never knew what kind of bodily mush was in there.

Once a load was washed and dried I would wheel it in a cart to a long table behind which stood three women, the folders. At the time I was young and they were, in my mind, ancient, perhaps late fifties and early sixties. They were dour, a turn of mind they'd earned. I surmised that they'd had the wrong parents, the wrong the spouses, and the wrong breaks in life. They rarely spoke to me, but one them touched my heart.

She dressed plainly, wore no makeup nor ornamentation. But her hair–ah, her hair–it was black and white, long and flowing and always freshly shampooed. I imagined that her pride in her womanhood was in that hair.

During this same time period I would sometimes visit the local bars in Keene–The Crystal Restaurant, The Bon Ton, the Star Cafe, the Coney Island Grill. One night an attractive bleached blond in maybe her late forties came into the Crystal with a man around seventy. The woman was brash, sassy, self-empowered–a turn-on for a young man like myself. I imagined that this woman was a femme fatale of the most fatal kind.

She would hook up with older men, give them one last thrill before ushering them into the next world.

Years later when I was writing The Passion of Estelle Jordan I concluded that Estelle, the Jordan "witch", had two personalities in conflict with one another. One self was assertive, practical-minded, slutty, shrewd–in charge; the other self was tender, chaste, and vulnerable. For my models I turned to the lady of the night in the Star Cafe and the laundry woman. The theme of the story would be Estelle's attempt to reconcile her warring selves.

Estelle is a major character in A Little More Than Kin and Whisper My Name, the second and third novels of the Darby Chronicles. The Passion of Estelle Jordan is her story. Estelle is sliding into late middle age, drawn to two lovers who could not be more different, Avalon Hillary, widowed farmer, and a mysterious young punk that Estelle knows by the car he drives, Trans Am. And there's a threat, not to Estelle–she can take of herself–but to Noreen Cook, a younger woman that Estelle sees as a version of the secret vulnerable self that she carries. It's not a coincidence that the title of the book echoes the passion of Christ. This is a story of sin, suffering, sacrifice and perhaps redemption.

I may be a lapsed Catholic, but the church's teachings and influences keep finding their way into my fictional world.

Live Free or Die

Long drop, no net when the trash man's son and the squire's daughter fall in love.

I'm proud of Live Free or Die. It has some good scenes, and I think I got across the idea that was in my head of a tragic love story. That said, I was never satisfied with the two main characters, Frederick Elman and his lover, Lilith Salmon, and some of the magical realism had neither magic, nor realism.

For reasons mysterious to me, I seemed to be better at writing about characters a decade or more older than myself. Writing about Howard Elman, Ollie Jordan, Estelle Jordan and the hermit, Cooty Patterson, came easily to me and sometimes, even, without any conscious artifice. By contrast, I had to force myself to write about Roland LaChance (in Whisper My Name), and Freddie and Lilith. Even now I don't quite believe in them as fictional characters. I mean I think they are true to life, a little too true. Great fictional characters have an element of the strange, the fabulous, the outrageous. Freddie and Lilith don't have any of those qualities. They are believable, but not very interesting. It wasn't until I wrote Spoonwood, the followup novel to Live Free or Die, that Freddie came alive for me. I never did do justice to Lilith, and never will, because I killed her off at the end of Live Free or Die.

Live Free or Die was billed (by myself in cahoots with the publisher) as the last of the Darby books. It wasn't that I didn't want to write more Darby books. It was just that the sales were so discouraging that my desire was to move on to something else. Even so, in the back of my mind a question nagged at me. Birch, the baby of Lilith and Freddie, is born at of the end of Live Free or Die. What happens to that child? I also knew that since my books were written in real time, that is the action takes place during the time period I am writing them, I would have to wait quite a few years before I could attempt a sixth book with Birch as the center.

Meanwhile, in 1993 I published Mad Boys, which has been described as a cyber punk novel, though at time I didn't know what a cyber punk novel was. I still don't, but I like the sound of the words. Mad Boys was great fun to write, and I had a superb editor to help me improve it, Michael Lowenthal, who just happened to be a former student of mine. He later went on to a career as a novelist. I'm so proud of him.

Too bad, but Mad Boys was another bust at the box offices.

I had better luck with the next novel, The Old American. It got stellar reviews, won a prize, and even sold well, at least by my standards. Up until then my only successful novel had been The Dogs of March. Like a lot of writers with a first-book success I felt under its shadow, the work having been done by a younger man that I was only barely in touch with. After The Old American everything changed. I was no longer jealous of my younger self. I fell into a decade of, as my students would say, chill.

Spoonwood

How a boy saved his dad and brought together warring families.

All the time I was writing Mad Boys and The Old American I was thinking about the novel that would be Spoonwood. I even had that title in my head. My inspiration for the story and the title grew from a visit I made to the Sunapee Crafts Fair held every year in the lake town of Sunapee, New Hampshire. I happened to come across a booth by Dan Dustin, who made his living carving wooden spoons. In Dan Dustin I saw all that I admired in a craftsman; in his spoons I saw what I pursued in my own creative life–beauty of expression, history, utility, and expertise. In the material for the spoons, local woods, I saw my boyhood in the forests of Beech Hill in Keene, New Hampshire, where I grew up.

I started carving spoons. They were nowhere as elegant as Dan Dustin's, but I enjoyed the work and even now years later my spoons are still in use in our kitchen. Wooden spoons behave differently from metal spoons. Wooden spoons do not clink. Wooden spoons grow more beautiful with age. If you make the spoon yourself, you get a little mental youtube of its origins every time you pick it up. I made most of my spoons from firewood that I cut myself–maple, oak, birch, cherry–so that when I carved a spoon I could enjoy a memory of how I acquired it. My favorite spoon wood came from a piece of lilac wood I got from a friend, David Corriveau.

The lilac trunk was about five feet long and perhaps five inches in diameter. I cut it to make a one-foot long stick, which I split down the middle. I was shocked with delight to see that the heart wood was the color the flower–purple. But it was a fugitive color that began to disappear within seconds. Or maybe the purple was all a hallucination. Doesn't matter. The feeling–a thrill–remains in memory. In the end the heartwood color stabilized to a dark reddish brown, very beautiful, especially the way it played off with the blond sap wood. It was hard work carving that spoon because lilac is very dense and resists the blade. However, the wood does not splinter easily so in the end I was able to fashion a passable spoon. I followed the grain so that the spoon has curve in it.

Historically, mountain laurel was called spoon wood because it was hard and lovely, but also easy on the carver. Mountain laurel was Dan Dustin's favorite wood for spoon carving. After Spoonwood was published Dan and I formed talk duo for library groups, book stores, anybody who would listen to us.

Fiction writing for me is like what I imagine method acting must be like. I have to use part of myself in the role I play on the page. When I wrote The Dogs of March, I started a gun collection like my protagonist Howard Elman. After the book was finished I lost interest in guns and got rid of them. Same thing happened with Spoonwood. In the book Frederick Elman (who changes his name to F. Latour) earns his living and finds salvation in carving wooden spoons. All the time I was writing the book I carved wooden spoons. I haven't carved a spoon since I finished writing the novel. I suppose I would be a danger to society if I wrote from the perspective of a serial killer.

In Spoonwood, to get away from booze and people Latour raises his infant son, Birch, in the woods; they reside in an abandoned hippie school bus with no electricity, no plumbing, and a mile from the nearest road. In that environment Latour heals himself over time and raises his child. Spoonwood comes as close to the fulfillment of a personal fantasy than anything I've written. From the time I was a boy I've soothed my emotional hurts, staved off boredom, and contemplated a pleasant future by imagining myself living in the woods in a tiny cabin. It's never happened in real life, but if you count the down time of thinking about it that imaginary cabin has been a second home for me for many decades.

Spoonwood won an IPPY (Independent Publisher book award) for best regional novel in the Northeast in 2006.

After I finished Spoonwood, I did a lot of writing, but not for publication. I wrote a book on fiction writing for my students. That project was spawned by the price of text books. I thought the quality of the text books on writing were okay, but way over-priced. Writing my own book and giving it away was my little rebellion against the publishers. I also wrote a not-for-publication memoir for my children. That project got me thinking about the past, and the next thing I knew I was writing a faux memoir. I asked myself, "Self, what would my life been like if I had never gone to college." The answer to that question was my somewhat autobiographical novel, Never Back Down, published in 2012 by David Godine, Publisher.

The acquiring editor for Never Back Down was the founding editor of the company, David R. Godine, but the actually editing of the book was done by Susan Barba. I mention her because, like Michael Lowenthal, the editor of Mad Boys, she was one of my former students. Makes me proud.

These adventures in prose writing–Spoonwood, Recycling Reality (which is what I called my writing handbook), my memoir for my children, and my semi-autobiographical novel, Never Back Down–all began with a Dan Dustin carved spoon at the Sunapee Crafts Fair. Imagine that.

Howard Elman's Farewell

Suppose all a man has left is his imagination, then what?

I had no thought that I would be writing another Darby novel. Then something happened. I was pushing 70 years old, already planning a retirement, and all of a sudden I began thinking about my mortality. My muse, which until now had been advising me about what to do with imaginary people, was now talking directly to me: "Ernie, eventually, your body is going to wither way, your brain is going to turn to mush, and you are going to pass toothless and slack-jawed into oblivion, unless of course a stroke or a heart attack or a falling tree that you cut for firewood, you idiot, doesn't kill you first."

Which led me to thinking about my legacy as a writer. It was obvious that my reputation, such as it was, no doubt would rest primarily on the six books I'd already published around the imaginary town of Darby, New Hampshire The books were scattered all over the place. One of the books, Whisper My Name, had gone out of print. Two of the books, A Little More Than Kin and The Passion of Estelle Jordan, were in one volume and were about to go out of print. How to bring all the Darby books together? I certainly could not boast a track record in sales to persuade a publisher to invest the resources for reprints of my books.

Around this same time period Amazon came along with the Kindle. Suddenly, I saw a way to bring the Darby Six-Pack (my name for the Darby novels in those days) under one banner. I envisioned a digital set. How to go about doing this? I had a lot of ideas, but they were the ideas of a spacey fiction writer. I wanted advice from a smarter, more practical-minded person. I immediately thought of Chip Fleischer, founder of Steerforth Press, and a former student of mine who as a graduate student was in the first advanced creative writing class that I taught at Dartmouth College back in 1987 or maybe it was '88.

We met for lunch at the Canoe Club Restaurant in Hanover, New Hampshire. I told Chip my desire to bring the Darby novels together and to call attention to the series. He offered one bit of advice. "Ernie," he said, "you'll have to write another Darby book." By the time we'd left the restaurant I had the story that would become Howard Elman's Farewell in my mind. Apparently, the idea had been there all along. It just needed Chip Fleischer to dislodge out of the unconscious.

I knew immediately that I had to write a keystone novel for the Darby books and that the protagonist had to be Howard Elman, since he was the protagonist of the first Darby novel and the only major character who appears in all the Darby novels. I did some quick math. If I was going to stick to my process of setting the Darby books in the same general time period that I was writing them Howard would be in his middle to late 80s. I envisioned a geriatric coming of (old) age novel.

I thrilled to the idea of writing from Howard's perspective. For reasons mysterious to me, when I inhabit Howard Elman's persona my muse loosens all her restrictions and I write with great freedom and joy. I was just born to write about this irascible, dyslexic working man. Howard Elman is my King Lear and Ralph Kramden rolled into one.

One of my first thoughts was that if I was writing about Howard Elman I had to include Cooty Patterson, another of my favorite characters. But Cooty was even older than Howard. He'd likely be dead or pushing a hundred. Chapter One would be Cooty's funeral procession. "No way," my muse said. "How about starting with Cooty's hundredth birthday party?" In this way, Howard Elman's Farewell got written–and surprisingly fast. It usually takes me three years or more, writing multiple drafts, to write a novel. Howard Elman's Farewell came together in less than a year. In fact the publication process took longer than the writing.

Though I submitted the book for publication, with the insistence that it be published in companionable editions of the other six Darby novels, I was resigned to self-publishing the series as ebooks on the Kindle, because I couldn't see how my financial publication track record would justify a real publisher taking chance on me. But the University Press of New England did just that. To my editor Michael Burton and the other good people at UPNE, I have two words: Thank you.

My first working title for the book was Howard's End, which was the same working title I had for The Dogs of March. Howard's End is taken from a novel of the same name by E.M. Forster, one of my literary heroes. Calling the book Howard's End seemed like a hokey idea so I abandoned it. The next working title was Darby Doomsday after a video game devised by Howard's grandson, Birch Latour. I liked the way that phrase resonated, and the video game along with Birch and his computer start-up company, Geek Chorus Software, do play a big role in the novel. However, it's Howard Elman's book and I wanted his name in the title.

I tried Howard Elman's Goodbye, a nod toward what I thought was the title of a book I admired by James Crumley, The Last Goodbye. However, thanks to the Internet, I've since learned that The Last Goodbye (which I have not read) was written by Raymond Chandler. The Crumley book that I had in mind and that I enjoyed immensely was The Last Good Kiss, which some people have compared to The Last Goodbye. No doubt I read that fact someplace and, as Howard Elman would say, miscombobulated the info. Perhaps I should have called my book Howard Elman's Last Good Kiss. Anyway I was more or less satisfied (partly, as I have tried to demonstrate, for the wrong reasons) with Howard Elman's Goodbye as a title for the seventh Darby volume. In the end it was my acquisitions editor at the University Press of New England, Michael Burton, who suggested Howard Elman's Farewell for a title. I liked it. It fit the story, and I liked the way the words sounded together. Thanks, Mike.

Since you can't copyright a title, I've never felt proprietary toward my book titles. For example, one of the Darby books is called Whisper My Name, which is also the title of a romance novel by Fern Michaels and Emily Durante. I was in a huff when I ran across this paperback with my title until I saw that the copyright was before my own book with the same name. Mike also came up with a name for the series, The Darby Chronicles. I liked my own title, The Darby Six-Pack, but the Darby Seven-Pack didn't make any sense, so The Darby Chronicles it is.

So what is this novel written by a newbie Septuagenarian about? Here's what I wrote for my publisher. "Howard Elman was a fifty-something workingman when he burst onto the literary scene in The Dogs of March, in what would become the first novel of the Darby Chronicles. Now in this, the seventh, Darby Constable Howard Elman is an eighty-something widower who wants to do "a great thing" before he motors off into his sunset. Maybe he does do a great thing, but he gets there in strange, wonderful and dangerous ways, aided, abetted, hindered, and befuddled by his hermit friend Cooty Patterson, age 100, by his living middle-aged children, by a voice in his head, and by the person he loves most, his grandson, Birch Latour, 24. Birch has returned to Darby with his friends to take over the stewardship of the Salmon Trust and to launch a video game, Darby Doomsday. At stake is the fate of Darby. And the world? Maybe."

My Name and Darby Names

My full names is Joseph Ernest Vaccarest Hebert. I was named after my mother's uncle, a Catholic priest, Joseph Ernest Vaccarest.

The first French settler in North America was Louis Hebert, an apothecary who with his wife Marie Rollet established a homestead in Quebec in 1617. The male line of the Louis Hebert Heberts died out. I read somewhere that all the Heberts in North America today are the descendants of two brothers who migrated from France to Acadia (present day Nova Scotia) in 1632. I like to think they were related to Louis Hebert, but who knows. It does please me that a Hebert beat those Mayflower people to the New World. When the English, in one of their more disgraceful Colonial adventures, deported the Acadians from their homeland in 1755, many of the inhabitants wound up in what is now Cajun country in Louisiana, which is why so many Heberts hail from that part of the world; for example, former NFL quarterback Bobby Hebert.

I grew up a Hee-bert, though some New England Heberts spell the name A-b-a-r-e to approximate the ancient French pronunciation. Many a rural Yankee has called me Heebit, as in Ehnie Heebit, he's a writah. In Nova Scotia, it's Heh-bert. In my last visit to Montreal a few years ago, my name was pronounced Ee-bare by a hotel clerk. So there you have it: at least five different ways to say Hebert, and two different ways to spell it.

In the Darby Chronicles, the highest point within sight is a mountain which I named Abare's Folly. The explanation of how Abare's folly got its name appears in Howard Elman's Farewell, the seventh and concluding novel of the Darby Chronicles. In that book, there's a minor character named Josephine Abare. She's a native American writer, a nod to the female side of my own character and to the small amount of native blood in my heritage. In the book the explanation of the folly of Abare's Folly was trying farm above the 2,000 foot mark. But for me the folly was going against the advice of my first agent, Mavis McIntosh, who advised me against writing a book series. "They'll only read the first one," she said. She was right.

Vaccarest, my mother's maiden name and my middle name, is unusual to say the least. My great Grandfather, Giovanni Vaccaressi, was from the port town of LaSpezia, Italy, or maybe he only departed from there. Who can say? Not me. He migrated to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and moved to Quebec where his name was changed to Vaccarest, silent at the end, which I supposed sounded better to the people of Quebec. When Giovanni's son, Jean Baptiste–my grandfather–came to the states the spelling of his name

remained intact, though the pronunciation was Americanized to give it a hard e-s-t sound, as in Crest toothpaste. My family history is full of unusual names– Alcide (great-grandfather), Elphege (dad), Elodie (mom's middle name) and Omer (brother), my middle name (vaccarest).

I believed that my name was Ernest Vaccarest Hebert until I had occasion to look at my birth certificate when I was age 18. It said Joseph Ernest Vaccarest Hebert. I asked my mother where the "Joseph" came from. She told me that in her day Catholics from French Canada traditionally named the oldest boy in a family Joseph, after Jesus's earthly father. However, since that practice led to too many Josephs, one was given a second name to use day-to-day. I've flirted with the idea of writing under the pen name of Joe Vac.

I find it hard to speak my authorial name, Ernest Hebert. In speech, it comes out Erness Teebert. When I worked at The Keene Sentinel newspaper, my first boss was Sports Editor Bert Rafford; we were Bert and Ernie. Later, I transferred into the news department, where the managing editor was Frank Barndollar; we were Frank and E[a]rnest.

My wife Medora and some close friends call me Ern, and a handful of friends call me Ernesto because to them I look vaguely Hispanic. Indeed, the several times I've visited South Texas I've been stopped and checked by the border patrol. Maybe the sight of someone of my skin tone and aspect driving a car with New Hampshire plates sends up a warning flag. Once they check my driver's license and hear my New Hamsha accent they let me go.

I used to sign my books Ernest Hebert, but in the last decade or so I've written Ernie Hebert, which is what most people call me and which is how I think of myself.

My good friend, fellow writer and wise critic Terry Pindell, used to get on my case for making up silly names back when I was learning my craft as a fiction writer. My worst offense against Terry's sensibilities and other persons of refinement came in a book length sci-fi work I wrote that was never published. I named a character after a baseball term, Professor Juan Up Juan Down. I love collisions of language. I think the main wrap on puns is that they draw attention away from the content and to the author. So be it. Even today, when I should know better, I have a weakness for word plays that sometimes sabotages the emotion I'm trying to get across, though I try to be more artful about it, if artful is a sneaky way to say sneaky.

I do try hard to name characters to create congruence with the story and to fit the characters in some subtle way, but word play is never far from the more important content.

Howard Elman is the protagonist of my first novel, The Dogs of March. His first name is in honor of E.M. Forester's novel, Howard's End. In fact, the working title for The Dogs of March was Howard's End. In Forster's book, the English village of Howard's End is in danger of losing its identity in the spreading London megalopolis in the early decades of the twentieth century. The state of New Hampshire went through a similar structural change in the 1970s when the new interstate highways closed the distances between New Hampshire and Boston and New Hampshire and New York.

When I was growing up in Keene in the 1950s, the place was known as The Elm City. I remember two huge elm trees on my family's property on 19 Oak Street. I watched while the city took them down after they were infected. The Keene elms were all destroyed by a disease, which came from overseas. My protagonist is also threatened by outside forces–so, Howard Elman. He's the elm man.

In The Dogs of March, Howard Elman's antagonist is Zoe Cutter. She tries to cut him down. I got the name "Zoe" from the Horowitz family in Westmoreland oh so many years ago. Carla and Milton Horowitz had a baby that they named Zoe. I loved that name and thought it fit Howard's antagonist quite well. Let me add that the real Zoe was a lot cuter than the fictional Zoe.

For Howard's son I wanted a name that could be both formal (Frederick) and slight (Freddie) to show his ambivalent nature. I named Howard's wife after another neighbor in Westmoreland. Her name was Eleanor Hood, a grand lady. However, I'm a poor speller, so Eleanor ended up as Elenore. Elenore continues on as a character in Howard Elman's Farewell, the seventh novel in the Darby Chronicles, even though she's dead. I tried to deepen the readers' knowledge of her character through Howard's recollections about her.

In Spoonwood, the sixth Darby book, Frederick Elman all grown up is the protagonist. Elenore Elman, in genealogy research, fails to discover anything about her own roots, but she does discover that Howard Elman's real name is Claude de Repentigny Latour. Howard, secure in his identity as an Elman, does not act on the new information. But Frederick changes his name to F. Latour, thus reclaiming a minuscule part of his

French-Canadian heritage. In the history of old Acadia, and indeed in the history of the shaping of North America, no name stands out more vividly than Latour. The story of Claude Latour and his son Charles is too deep and convoluted to get into here. It's enough to say that it makes fascinating reading. In my fictional world, Howard Elman is descended from the famous Latours of old Acadia, but also from Robert de Repentigny, a voyageur I created in my historical novel The Old American. In my imagination, the Elmans are distantly related to Grace Metalious, the author of Peyton Place. Grace's maiden name was de Repentigny, and according to my good friend, the writer Robert Perreault, Grace's parents likely were married by the Rev. Joseph Ernest Vaccarest, my uncle on my mother's side, my first mentor, and the man I am named after.

In The Old American Robert de Repentigny takes an Indian wife, who happens to be of mixed race. Her father is a refugee of the King Philip war of the late sixteen hundreds; her mother is a Seneca Iroquois whose father was an escaped black slave from the states who was adopted into the native American tribe. (For insight into what happened to all those runaway slaves who found their way to Canada I suggest The Internal Enemy by Alan Taylor.) Though he doesn't know it, Howard Elman has a little bit of Native American and Black African blood in his DNA. In Howard Elman's Farewell the reader learns that Elenore's ancestry, like Howard's, includes a smidgen of native American blood. I believe that anyone whose people have been in North America for a long period of time is likely to be a mutt of one kind or another.

I come by the idea of mixed blood honestly–I think (I say "I think" because I'm not absolutely sure). My mother, who was a nurse, did not believe in mixed marriages; that is, she didn't believe that a Catholic should marry someone from another faith. However, she had no racial prejudices. In fact, one of her frequent lines was, "It's good to mix the blood." In her later years she told me that her grandmother on her father's side was a Native, probably from Canada. "It's why you're so dark," she said. I wish now I had questioned her to acquire more information, but at the time she was very ill and weak and I was more interested in her health than in matters of our ancestry.

A minor character in my historical novel The Old American, Father Esubee Goulet is named after an ancestor of mine on my father's side. I don't know anything about the real Father Esubee Goulet. I just liked the name. Another priest who appears briefly in The Old American, Father Sanibel "Spike" Morrissette, is named after Jack Kerouac's priest in Lowell, Massachusetts. Though I don't think that Jack and I have much in common as writers, we do have a remarkably similar family story. We were both born in New Hampshire of parents with roots in French Canada; we both spoke French as our

firsts language until age 5. I had a memorable lunch with Father Spike Morrissette relating to a news column I was writing about Kerouac. Father Spike told me Kerouac stories while knocking down three Manhattans. He was great company; I wish I had known him better. The last time I was in Lowell I noticed a street named Father Morrissette Boulevard.

Another minor character is Lawrence Dracut, Howard's nemesis in Howard Elman's Farewell. I got the idea for the Lawrence Dracut exit sign on I–93 in Massachusetts. Lawrence and Dracut, are cities. If you're on the look out for them road signs can give a writer a lot of ideas for fictional but plausible names. Perhaps in the future I'll name a character Chester Ludlow from a sign on I–91 in Vermont.

Mistakes? I've made a few. The tragic heroine of Live Free or Die, the fifth Darby novel, is Lilith Salmon. One of the supposed origins of Lilith is "woman of the rocks" and since Lilith dies on a ledge, I thought the name fit nicely. My brain must have been scrambled. I don't think there's a more unpleasant word on the tongue than Lilith. It's not only hard to say, it creeps me out to voice it. In the sixth Darby novel, Spoonwood, I changed her name to Laura, after the mountain laurel on the ledges where she perished giving birth. However, my editor, John Landrigan, argued that to change the name would be to confuse, yea even to betray, readers of the Darby novels. In our discussions he used the word "consistency" more than once. He won me over with his argument and I changed Laura back to Lilith. But every time I see Lilith in print I want to puke.

About consistency: There are bound to be some, probably many, inconsistencies in the Darby Chronicles, because I've never actually read one of my books after it has been published. Every time I sneak a peek at a published book, I find something wrong and become upset because I can't change it. The most flagrant inconsistency was deliberate and probably one of my bigger errors in judgement. After book two, I changed the name of Keene to Tuckerman. Keene is a real place, and I thought by changing the name I could fictionalize it more honestly. But, really, that is not a very good reason. I changed the name back to Keene in book six, Spoonwood, but the damage was done.

A salmon is of course an elite fish, so I thought Salmon would make a good name for the elite family of Upper Darby. Professor Chauncey Loomis, a colleague in the English Department and a man I consider one of my mentors, gave me the idea to pronounce the name Sal-mohn. Raphael Salmon is the founder of the Salmon Trust, a handsome, imperious and ultimately doomed man. Some people–though not my editors–at Viking Press, which published the first five books of the Darby series, encouraged me to make

Raphael (more often called Reggie or the Squire) the protagonist of a Darby novel. The idea was that featuring the elite guy and his family would sell more books. I'm sure they were right, but I wanted the series to focus on ordinary working people. I knew from the start that that was not exactly a great career move, but I stuck with my original plan anyway.

One of my favorite newer characters is Tahoka Texas McCloud, the daughter of Heather Elman, Howard and Elenore's youngest daughter, who was raised by Zoe Cutter (see The Dogs of March). In my many road trips I almost always stopped in Plains and later San Angelo, Texas, to visit with my wife's cousin Maryjane McCord and her family. Over the years I watched her children grow up. The eldest was Marla, who matured into a beautiful young woman with a dynamic personality. She died too young of a fast-moving cancer. Marla had a way of talking that I really liked. Her accent was pure Texas-Southern, but it certainly wasn't a drawl. She talked real fast. Let me add that Tahoka, Texas, is in the same West Texas region that my wife's cousin, Maryjane, is from. I loved the sound of Tahoka, Texas, so I named my character Tahoka Texas McCloud. Tahoka has Marla's looks and speed-talking lingo, but a back story that is not based on real people but is purely fictional.

Another of my favorite characters in the Darby Chronicles is the hermit, Cooty Patterson. Cooty is a kind of a bridge to the Elman men–Howard, Howard's son F. Latour, and Latour's son, Birch Latour. They unburden themselves to Cooty. Cooty offers no advice, but even so his presence inspires the Elmen men to think and act. Cooty is known far and wide for his stew pot. He gets his protein from road kill and veggies from dumpsters. The stew pot, according to legend, has never been emptied. Cooty just keeps adding to it down through the decades. At this writing, he's still at it, though he's older than one hundred. Some characters you don't want to kill off.

Corey "Cooty" Patterson is based upon two people. One is Perley Swett of Stoddard, NH, who was a real hermit. Perley was a small man, with wild long white hair and a mustache. He was also quite handsome; he looked like a photoshopped-air-brushed version of Albert Einstein in old age. I met him once and took his picture back 1969. I really didn't know much about Perely when ten years later I, in effect, cast his physique for the role of Cooty Patterson in my first novel. Three more decades passed and I read PERLEY, a biography of the old hermit by his granddaughter, Sheila Swett. It's a magnificent portrait of a complex human being. It was Sheila's work that inspired me to make Cooty more complex in Howard Elman's Farewell.

Cooty's personality, not exactly crazy but kind of spaced out, was based on Jimmy Dow, a custodian in a factory where I worked a summer in high school. However, as it turned out, Jimmy Dow, the real person was nothing like my fictional creation. Jimmy got married and moved south. Cooty? Never. The fact is Cooty's core identity, like almost all my characters, is based on a particular quirk of my own personality. Part of me would love to cut himself off from all humanity and live out his days in a cabin in the woods. Since I was ambitious and a family man, I could only live as a country hermit in my imagination.

One more thing about Cooty. Though I was thinking of Perley Swett when I created Cooty, in my mind he had a different look than Perley, though I could not picture what it was. Then during the time period I was writing Howard Elman's Farewell I happened to be looking at paintings on the Internet when I came across a self-portrait of one of my favorite painters, Pieter Bruegel the Elder. I thought, that's him, that's Cooty Patterson.

Darby Families: Elmans, Jordans, Salmons

Fictional Darby, like real New England towns, is dominated by extended families, almost like clans, though not quite. The characters in these families move among themselves and among their neighbors, sometimes as allies and sometimes as adversaries. The three featured families in the Darby Chronicles–Elmans, Jordans, and Salmons–have conflicting values, histories, educational and financial circumstance. The result is politics. They are constantly jockeying for position in community.

What the families have in common is a love for the town of Darby, and for the most part they'll settle their differences with civility through the institution of the town meeting form of government. They live by the town's motto: Town Meeting Spirit 1753 to Doomsday. Another thing they have in common is that their feeling for community is constantly at odds with their passion for individuality. In other words, Darby is very much American town.

In the world I created, I see the Elmans as representing the aspiring class. They are constantly trying both to survive but also to prosper, to improve themselves and by doing so improve their world. They are, at heart, believers in the American way, even if they aren't sure just what that way is; indeed, they are constantly tinkering with their own psyches in hopes of improvement; of justifying themselves; of seeking out, finding, and reestablishing the old values of hard work, faith (in something), honesty and progress; they are the keepers of the flame.

The Jordans represent the contrarian class. They live almost instinctively, that is, without much conscious thought, in a manner that opposes current social norms and laws. If thisaway is the trend, they'll go thataway. They will either ignore or go against the fashions and beliefs of the times. They have no qualms about breaking rules set up by governments, but among themselves their code of "succor and ascendancy" is rigid, enduring, and specific. Every family member may seek "succor" (shelter and protection) from another family member, but must submit to the "ascendancy" of the granter of succor.

The Salmons represent the secure class. By virtue of their bank accounts, real estate holdings, family traditions, education and, perhaps most important, contacts with power brokers of the world outside of Darby, the Salmons are at the top of the local social and political structure. The Salmons and the other families of Upper Darby are secure in ways the Elmans and Jordans cannot fathom. They have high social standing,

means to get their way (at least to some degree: no group has absolute power in America), but above all they have financial security. It's ironic of course that people who are the most secure often feel the least secure, since so much of their energy is expended in remaining secure.

Everybody else in town watches the machinations of these dominant families with mixtures of amusement, envy, and once in a while, even, gratitude.

Mrs. McCurtin: In Defense of the Town Gossip

The local gossip, usually portrayed as a woman in popular mythology, does not have a good reputation: intrusive, mean-spirited, malicious, sexless, physically ugly and vindictive. Gossip itself is seen as destructive and hurtful, and to be avoided. And never mind that we all do it.

Dorothy McCurtin, the town gossip I created in imaginary Darby, NH, is nothing like the stereotype. She's attractive, well-groomed, generous-hearted, and optimistic with a cheerful disposition.

For Dot McCurtin, gossip is news. She thinks of herself as a reporter, and she follows standard reporter protocol. Strives to remain objective. Develops sources. Seeks facts. Neither starts nor spreads rumors. She'll investigate rumors, to either debunk or confirm them according to her findings. She will seek out and disseminate strong opinions on issues of the day, but will not take a stand herself. She will tell your secrets, but that is your fault. You knew who you were dealing with, so why didn't you keep your mouth shut? And, really, now that the secret is in the public domain, don't you feel relieved?

Her goal is to spread her knowledge of local events, human dramas, silliness, politics, illnesses, deaths, secrets of the populace, and the current mood of the masses. She believes that if everybody knew everything about everybody else, mass empathy would prevail and world peace would follow since the core of conflict between people is misinformation leading to misunderstanding.

In my mind the town gossip is the modern representation of the Town Crier, which used to be an official position of the court. The Crier, often dressed to attract attention to himself (red and gold cloak, white pants, black boots, tricorn hat) would stand on a street corner, ring a bell, and make announcements of court proceedings.

The town crier had his voice and his bell. He was a low-tech conveyor of information. Dot McCurtin is high tech all the way; she has telephones, landline and mobile, police scanner, computers, and accounts with social media. She keeps a data base of names and events, and a journal. Who knows what's in it? Not her creator. I always try to treat my characters like real people. In the same way that I can never know everything about my friends and loved ones, I can never know everything about my fictional characters.

They surprise me just as the people closest to me surprise me. Mrs. McCurtin will tell you that "Surprises keep me bopping." Me, too.

Dot McCurtin provides information to curious townspeople in return for information surrendered by them. You want to know something, ask her, and then wait while she pries some news out of you. It's okay–she's a skilled and sympathetic listener. Her motto is "Local Know Is the Best Know."

Birch Latour and Tess Jordan

Birch Latour had an auspicious entry into the Darby Chronicles, born on the ledges of the Salmon Trust while his mother bled to death. In that scene in Live Free or Die I was thinking of a line from (I believe) Sigmund Freud that total recall is a sign of hysteria. In fictional Darby, Birch has the gift (or perhaps it's a curse) of near total recall. He remembers everything, including (he claims) his own birth.

The idea of a character who remembers too much sprang from my own inadequacies. At St. Joseph's Elementary School in Keene, New Hampshire, I flunked altar boys because I could not memorize the prayers in Latin. Later in Keene Children's theatre I discovered I could not memorize the few lines in the part I played. Birch's father, Frederick Elman (he later changed his name to F. Latour) also possesses an ability I lack. Freddy is unafraid of heights, whereas I am so seriously acrophobic that when I took my daughter and her cousin to the Grand Canyon, I cowered in our tent in the campground while they saw the sights. As a fiction writer, I found it very satisfying to create characters who had abilities I lacked.

As a pre-adolescent Birch plays a huge role in Spoonwood and again at age 24 in Howard Elman's Farewell. Following a series of timely deaths (an idea I derived from the biography of the Marquis de Lafayette), Birch inherits the Salmon estate where he's the Steward to the Salmon land conservancy and co-founder, with his childhood friend Missy Mendelson, of Geek Chorus Software, producers of the video game, Darby Doomsday.

Birch has big ambitions and he has the brain and temperament to pursue his dreams, but he's also burdened by a feeling that he does not understand, which is that he must be successful or the whole world will collapse. Birch, while a fairly complex character, is unformed. Maybe someday I'll write a novel to find out just what happens to Birch, or maybe I won't write a book, but let Birch's dreams play out in the video game, Darby Doomsday, or maybe ... maybe. Well, I dunno.

In his looks and personality, Birch is a composite of some of my favorite male students over many years at Dartmouth College. He might be mistaken for the actor Montgomery Clift, who was a big star when I was coming of age.

Birch's secret lover in Howard Elman's Farewell is Tess Jordan, daughter of Turtle Jordan. She's a visual artist. Like Birch, Tess is not a completely rounded character. Perhaps in some future work I will discover her.

At the end of Howard Elman's Farewell the readers learn that Birch and Tess are parents of a boy. Tess has roots in French-Canada through her mother, and from the notorious Jordan clan, through her father. Among the grand ambitions of Birch and Tess is the idea of unifying the values and bloodlines of the competing classes in Darby. They live by the motto of Geek Chorus Software, "All can be saved," the words supplied by one of their mentors, the mysterious Origen. I wonder if they'll find out if Origen is not what he seems.

One-Liners by Darby Characters

In Howard Elman's Farewell the reader learns that the protagonist Howard Elman is often guided in his actions and in his personal philosophy by what Howard's calls "sayings," that is, one-line ideas expressed by his friends–Ollie Jordan and Cooty Patterson–and sometimes ideas he comes up with himself. Howard is also influenced in his actions by Dorothy McCurtin, Darby's high-tech gossip.

OLLIE JORDAN:

- The Devil enjoys his torments, which most naturally pisses off his creator, which is why the Devil enjoys his torments.
- That fella who dropped over the cliff when you cut the rope was your better half.
- If books could kill.
- A man doesn't hunt the deer and the partridge; he hunts the awe.
- The right thing for thee is the wrong thing for me.
- Ones you love most hurt you hardest.
- No doubt God, if there is one, did not mean for elm wood to be split. (This line actually comes from Heman Chase of East Alstead, New Hampshire, who was one of my mentors back in the 1970s when I was coming of age.)
- Family is all about same old same old.
- Howie, you sound like a firecracker going off in a toilet.
- How come they crucify the men and burn the women?
-

HOWARD ELMAN and the VOICE in his head:

- Once a child learns to pump on a swing, the child no longer needs the male parent.
- Maybe there is no sin, maybe sin, like time, is just another word to give meaning to change. Maybe the sin doesn't matter after all these years? No, Howie, the stain of sin lingers on after the passing of the sinner.
- Howie, after the loved one expires any sensible widow or widower will move south.
- Howard figured the Voice [in his head] that questioned so much of his judgment and behavior had birthed from his pains.
- He liked to think that its discovery [of his pistol in a drawer] after he had sold the place would leave some fear of him in the hearts of the new owners.
- Suppose all a man has left is his imagination, then what? Then, die, fool!
- The universe is no more no less than your own expelled breath. Who had said that? Was it Ollie Jordan? No, Howie, it was Professor Hadly Blue.

- [Sentient] It means you know smaht from faht.
- Howard put on his boots and left the mobile home and tried to hut-horp soldier-walk to his car. Leg said, no, I want to limp.
- The trouble with getting old is you know too many things that don't mean anything anymore. It's like your mind is an overfilled dumpster and the trash collector is on strike.
- One of the benefits of old age was that you didn't have to put in a day's work to feel as if you'd put in a day's work.
- Howard Elman, you are your hands. Who had said that? Was it Ollie Jordan? No, it was Elenore when she was young and beautiful and full of passion for you.
- A coward knows himself before everybody else by the way he over plans.
- Old age softens the intestines among other body parts.
- If you can't trust your gut, try your brain. Oh-oh. Now we're in for trouble.
- If the gut instinct proves unreliable then a strong will is a liability.
- On the drive from Keene all the way back to Darby he ran the blue light and siren. It was exhilarating, which was why they called the gas pedal the exhilarator.
- Partial truths make St. Peter scratch his head at the pearly gates, wondering: If "x" has sinned but believes he has not sinned has he sinned?
- First day on the road is an up day. You are excited and optimistic. Day two is a down day. You question yourself. All the worries of the regular life hang over you. On day three the old life fades into memory. All you know is the road. The trip begins.
- I'm slipping. You slipped a long time ago. You're in free fall.
- Loved ones accumulated over the years until there were too many of them. About when you really really needed them, in your old age, they went away or died off or grew feeble and stupid and useless. If you lived long enough the loved ones, the ones that really mattered, remained only in memory. In the end loved ones by the fact of their remove reminded you that you were alone. Eventually, even memory leaves, if you're lucky.
- Howard was surprised to find himself sort of loving Port Mansfield, Texas, a small fishing village cut off from other towns by range land. What do you mean by "sort of love"? A person can't "sort of love." Either you love or you don't love. There are no meaningful "sorts of love". I don't know, I don't care, leave me alone.
- I won't report your information unless it's absolutely mandatory." Mandatory? Why did you say that? Cow patties enrich the soil.
- Why did women own so many pairs of shoes?
- Why is most thinking mostly useless?

- After removing more blankets Howard uncovered the [frozen solid] body of Billy Jordan. The face and hands were white. Howard thought: so this is what a real white person looks like.
- Trip, fall, break a hip, the old man's death warrant. No, that's just inconvenient. The death warrant is when they take away your driver's license.
- Endless stew nourishes endlessly. Who said that, Ollie Jordan? No, it was you, Howie.
- You could make songs from the names of trees. Who had said that? It was Heather.
- Everything is a thrill for you, don't lose that part of yourself. Those were the first words Corey Patterson–while he was still whole–had uttered to Howard.
-

BIRCH LATOUR:

- My father used to tell me that a bowl of Cooty's stew could change your luck, but only if your heart, like Cooty's, was empty of desire.
- As a boy, Birch often received information from his grandfather that he'd heard before, and Birch would reply, "I already know that."
- A line I cut: Birch had remodeled the mansion in a style he called "totally American postmodern ironic Bauhaus eclectic."
- When Howard asked Birch what it was about the Trust lands that perked him up, Birch said, "I melt the snow. It's my energy drink."
- What was it Elenore had said? A man grows old he gets more like a woman.
- If you belonged to the Jordan Kinship you were a member of an a cappella choir crying in the wilderness. Who had said that? Was it Ollie? No, it was your son, Latour.
-

COOTY PATTERSON:

- Cooty installed a crooked window in his cabin "to remind me I see better when I cock my head."
- Finding out is never as good as wondering.
- "You need a bigger place," Howard said. Cooty pointed to the great beyond behind the glass, and said, "Not really, my cabin goes on into the forever."
- Deep end, end deep. How deep is deep, how far the end, and where do we go from there?
- Cooty on advising Howard ruminating over building one's own casket. "You could nap in it, die in your sleep, and save everybody the trouble."

- "Because Birch figured you'd figure and he told me and I told Luci and she told the writers and and pretty soon everybody will know and when everybody knows, why then ...” Cooty abruptly stopped speaking. He'd lost his thought. Maybe one of the bots in his head had collided with a misplaced punctuation mark. "Why then, what?” Howard asked. "Why then we go on to the next figure."

DORTHY MCcURTIN:

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- Local know is the best know.
- A touch of amnesia stolen from memory is good for the soul. Call it harmony.
- Mrs. McCurtin's theory of watering plants is "wait for the wilt."

Darby Doomsday, the Game

The time period is the near future in the small town of Darby, New Hampshire.

Two major political parties–the Biophilians and the Transfers–have replaced Democrats and Republicans, which have been rejected by the voters. A third group, The Edge, is a terrorist organization that has grown in power in recent years.

Philosophies of the Competing Political Parties:

Biophilians are existentialists, environmentalists, and just plain folks of conventional political persuasion. They believe in human beings as biological creatures who are basically good. They believe that, in working through science and traditional culture models, human beings have a fifty-fifty chance to save the world's forests, oceans, grasslands, and deserts, and to carry on the human epoch here on earth. Some Biophilians believe in God, some don't. The religious people among the Biophilians believe that human beings are evolving to a plateau where they will find God. The Biophilian motto is "All Can Be Saved".

Transfers, the minority party, believe that changes in the earth's climate will make the planet uninhabitable to human beings, because human evolution is too slow to keep up. Their solution is that human beings have to change themselves in order to adapt. They must abandon biologically-based bodies. Transfers are working toward a technology to "transfer" human identity into computer chips. People will still enjoy the pleasures of food, drink, sex, exercise and work; they will see, they will hear, they will experience touch, they will smell the roses; but their sensations will be virtual. Some individuals will choose to inhabit fabricated bodies, replacing parts as they wear out; others will exist only in cyberspace as "spirits." Since parts are replaceable a "transferred" human being for all practical purposes will be immortal.

Members of one branch of the Transfer party see themselves as colonists of other worlds in artificial bodies designed to thrive in unearthlike environments. That group plans a rocket to a neighboring planet in our solar system as a starting point. Most Transfers are atheists or casual agnostics. They are heavily funded by wealthy old people who don't want to die. The motto of the Transfers is: "Live On."

A third group, outside of the mainstream, call themselves The Edge. They are on a mission to prepare the way where only a chosen few will remain to restore the earth.

They believe that the idea of human-caused global climate change is a hoax perpetuated by the major parties, Biophilians and Transfers. The Edge want to destabilize the world through any means, gain power, and restart the human epoch at ground zero. The Edge are often at a war with each others. Besides fanatics of different religious groups, The Edge includes opportunists who only want power, technophobes, thrill seekers, racists, ethnic cleansers, and disestablismentarianists.

Factions within all the parties bring complexity and variety to the game to accommodate gamers who think out of the box.

Premise:

Changes in earth's environment and climate threaten the future of the human species. In particular, the world's forests are rapidly degrading. However, scientists think they have found a cure to the blight in properties found in an ancient forest in the Salmon Trust Lands of Darby, New Hampshire.

How the Game is Played:

The game revolves around a town-meeting style presidential debate in Darby, New Hampshire's new town hall. The winner–or perhaps one should say, survivor–of that debate is sure to be elected president and will lead the nation and the world toward its destiny.

Game players can be "Townies," (residents of Darby); "Flatlanders" (residents with roots outside of Darby), or "Aboriginals," members of the Connisadawaga native American tribe. Players can join a political party, a terrorist group, or sign on as lobbyists, journalists, mercenaries, or independents (Indies). Players can join with other players of the same party to nominate their candidates and impede the opposing party.

Players belonging to the major parties gain maximum points when their candidate ends up being the party's nominee, wins the debate and discredits his/her opponents. Terrorist players gain points when they disrupt the debate, destabilize the country, seize control, and establish a reform government, the politics and policies of which is determined by the player.

Darby Doomsday is a game with great flexibility. Gamers can play alone or create alliances to gain more control and influence. Players can even choose not to compete but

merely to watch the machinations of other players, living and loving as ordinary citizens in the town of Darby. They can purchase building lots in Darby and nearby towns, make bank deposits, go to the dump, join clubs, take jobs, landscape their homes, and attend church services. Players can change their party affiliation at any time, or they can attempt to change their own party to implement their ideas.

In living their virtual lives players are encouraged to post their own fictionalize–or NOT–stories in text, pics, videos, and/or artwork.

The highest scores go to players actively engaged in politics, those who gain their party's nomination and win the debate or to the terrorist players who successfully disrupt the debate either through bombast or bombs.

Players advance in the game by scoring argumentative points on a range of issues. Game judges (actually a computer algorithm) awards points along with the players themselves who can rate each other's arguments. Each player is allowed one vote per issue, though more votes can be acquired through through bribery.

The creators of Darby Doomsday, the minions of Geek Chorus Software, believe their game is more than just entertainment. It's a tool to provide information to researchers about human behavior and to help world leaders make decisions. All the data from the game are fed into main frame computers, analyzed, and sold to corporations, government entities, or individuals willing to pay the fees.

Quirks of the Game:

Play is continuous, with neither final winners and nor final losers. There is only change. It's the same basic story over and over again, but with multiple endings that all lead to restarts. The writers, artists, and coders of Darby Doomsday along with the players are constantly adding new scenarios. The developers include tools so that players can construct their own characters and plots. Players understand that their contributions to the game are permanent, that is, that their scenarios go into a data base that can be used by other players and by the developers.

Original Site of Cooty's Cabin

Cooty Patterson is Darby's hermit. In Howard Elman's Farewell, the seventh novel of the Darby Chronicles, local people move Cooty's 12-by–16 foot cabin to the Salmon Estate where Birch Latour with the help of two nurses can take care of Cooty who has just turned age 100, but for the first six books the cabin is not even in imaginary Darby, but in a nearby town that I called Donaldson. I never did develop Donaldson so I can't relate anything about the town. Cooty's cabin and surrounding landscape is based on a cabin I built in the town of Sullivan, New Hampshire.

I bought two acres of slanted land, later added two more, from my good friends Terry Pindell and Nancy Ancharsky back in 1976 or 1977. These were the days of the counter-culture, the post-hippie, post Vietnam era. I was not really a back-to-the-lander, or a protester, though I hung out with the anti-Vietnam War crowd; I was a romantic fool. As a boy my hero was Tarzan (before he fell for Jane), because I liked his cabin and solitary existence. I wasn't part of an ape tribe, but like Tarzan I was very suspicious of human beings, who in my reasoning were an endearing but pathetic species you could not depend on, a view shared by Tarzan of the apes. I was a faithful reader of Sports Afield, Field and Stream, Outdoor Life, and my favorite, Fur, Fish and Game. My goal as a boy was to get out of my parents' house, move to a cabin in the woods, and live off the land as a fisherman, hunter, and trapper. There were no hvegetables in my boyhood musing.

I eventually gave up these silly dreams, but decades later in the early 1970s I happened upon Living the Good Life by Helen and Scott Nearing, The Craftsman Builder, and Handmade Houses by Art Boericke and Barry Shapiro, and of course The Mother Earth News. In 1968 I met Perley Swett, a real hermit. Suddenly, I was a boy again, in my mind living a "good life" in a counter culture handmade house in the New Hampshire pucka brush, no electricity, dug well, clivus multrum composting toilet, heat from a wood-burning stove. I wanted everything to look a certain way, the rudiments of actual living not part of the deal. After I brought those steep wooded acres I had vague plans to build some kind of homestead along the lines of my esthetic principles.

In this pleasant, if not practical, state of mind I built what would become Cooty's cabin. I had never built anything before, so I read Your Engineered House by Rex Roberts. I followed the principles laid out by Boericke and Shapiro, using recycled materials. Somehow, with the help from my dad and a friend, Glen Davis (a real carpenter) I muddled through and got the place built. By then I had it in my head that the cabin was

only the beginning; I intended to create a homestead. Except … except …"Jane" got in the way.

I had met my Jane, a.k.a. Medora Lavoie, late in the previous decade and we had married in 1969. Turned out that when we decided to start a family "Jane" had her own ideas on how to live, and it was not in a house built by an amateur in the woods with no amenities. It was in a neighborhood with streets, near schools, house with electricity and a flush toilet. We bought our "starter house" in a crowded neighborhood and made two babies. The cabin became a get-away place for me. A lot of people think I must have used the cabin as a writing shack, but actually I did no writing in the cabin. I would just build a fire in the wood stove, have a beer, or a cup of coffee, and just sit and think as I looked out the window.

It's those views from the windows that remain with me: chickadees fly almost to my hand in a backdrop of dark, almost gloomy, hemlock trees. I watch the way hemlocks grow around rocks, how their branches weighed by snow, rain, or ice signify the weather. Quite a few red squirrels, too. I take walks in the woods, where I marvel at the beauty and variety of trees–white birch, gray birch, red birch, beech, red maple, sugar maple, poplar, red oak, Eastern hemlock, white pine, red spruce, and Balsam fir.

Sometimes I walk down by Spaulding Brook just to look at the water flow around rocks. Once I follow tracks in the snow of a rabbit until I reach a bloody spot in the snow and few feathers and some fur. Apparently, an owl or maybe a hawk had dropped from a perch in a tree and dined on rabbit.

It wasn't the cabin that got in the way of my marriage, it was my back-to-the-lander dream. Every time I went to the cabin I would return home quietly resentful of my domesticated life. Something had to change: I had to choose between my childhood dreams and my adult love. In the end, I sold the cabin and the land. Problem solved–sorta. The boyhood dream evolved once again, this time in the guise of Cooty Patterson and his cabin. I tell people that Cooty Patterson was based on a real hermit, Perley Swett, but really he's a version of a self inside of me that never developed.

I do not think about myself and my experiences while I am writing fiction: I'm just telling a story. It's only later, sometimes years later, that I realize that my best writing is really a metaphor of some aspect of my own life.

And now for a torpedo into my essay. After checking with Terry Pindell, my friend who sold me the lot, it's possible that I may actually have built the cabin after the first Darby novel, The Dogs of March, which was completed in 1978. Maybe the fictional cabin I placed in the novel inspired me to build a real cabin and not visa versa. I don't know which scenario is accurate; to me they're both true. I'm comfortable with the phoney-baloney of memory and desire. Without ambiguity there is no reason to write literary fiction.

The hardest part of building the cabin was digging six holes through stony hardpan to hold tubes to pour concrete into for the footings. My builder friend Glenn Davis helped me with that part of the project. I acquired the building materials by putting an ad in The Keene Sentinel offering to take down small structures in return for stuff I could salvage. My dad helped me tear down a garage in Keene. I found this labor very satisfying; it was the only time that Dad and I ever worked together. From the garage we salvaged joists, rafters, and studs.

For floor boards I worked with another friend, David Sayre, taking down a barn. David took most of the boards for the house he was building, but there were plenty left over for floor and roof boards in my cabin. The exterior and interior walls were rough-cut pine boards that I bought new from Cote & Reney Lumber Company in Grantham, NH. I can't remember where I got the door and the windows. I do remember that the cabin was crude, partly by design and but mainly because I lacked carpenter skills. I put in a second-hand wood-burning stove and an insulated metal chimney. Oddly enough, the cabin had electricity, from a "temporary" line set up by the power company. Total cost was around $500.

I transferred the cabin to my imaginary world of Darby, New Hampshire, and gave it to my character, Cooty Patterson. The walls inside and out are rough-cut pine boards. Windows come from Ike's Auction Barn. My cabin had a deck, but I don't think I ever mentioned that Cooty's cabin had a deck. My cabin set on posts on a steep hillside; Cooty's cabin is on relatively flat land–lucky him. A small wood stove supplies heat to Cooty's cabin.

The most distinctive object at Cooty's place is his stew pot, filled with rain water, veggies from dumpsters, and road meat found on the highway. I got the idea for the stew pot in the days when I used to jog. Frequently, I would see car-killed animals on the roadside. Cooty's stew pot has never been emptied and simmers over an open fire in the warm seasons outside, and on Cooty's wood stove during the cold months. There's a tiny table

where Cooty sits on a homemade stool to whittle the bark off sticks that he hangs on the walls, because the sight of them pleases him. There's a GI footlocker in the cabin with his real name on it, Corey Patterson, but it's locked and Cooty has lost the key and cannot remember what is inside. The contents are revealed as part of the conclusion of Howard Elman's Farewell.

There is no bathroom in the cabin. Cooty does his business in the woods. He keeps track of his night soil deposits on a map on a wall in the cabin. "Ordinary men fertilize from the front, I do it from the back," Cooty says.

I never did fasten in my mind just where Cooty's cabin should appear on the map of Darby and environs. In my mind's eye, I see the cabin in great detail along trees and rocks that I remember from the locale of the real cabin that I built, but I don't see a road. The cabin exists in the twilight zone between imagination and materiality. The Spaulding Brook valley in Sullivan could be beautiful, but often it was gloomy and cold, because the hill blocked sunlight. My friend Terry Pindell dubbed the place the Valley of Broken Dreams. The eventual end of my cabin demonstrates Terry's point.

I rented it for a while to a young woman who was trying to live the counter culture life. I never saw a woman dress so down–baggy blue jeans, work boots, flannel shirt, hair chopped short, no make up, no evidence that her hair was ever brushed or combed. She seemed determined to tough it out alone in the woods. As far as I could figure she had no friends and no nearby relatives. When I would come by to pick up the rent money she seemed withdrawn and terribly unhappy. I tried to strike up conversations, but I sensed she was afraid of me, so I backed off. I never got to know her. One day she was gone. I don't know what happened to her. She needed somebody or something in her life, I don't know what; the problem for her, I think, was she didn't know either. I hope somewhere along the line she found it, whatever "it" was.

I sold the cabin and property to a crazy man. It was said he had "a plate in his head," that he was a traumatized Vietnam War veteran. That part I'm sure was true from the conversations I had with him. I used to visit him now and then where I determined that he wasn't crazy, just wrought from anxiety and panic attacks. He'd installed a privy, which he said "kicked" when the wind was in the wrong direction. If it got too bad he told me he'd treat the waste the way GI's did in Vietnam. Dump gasoline on it and set it on fire. Not only did we napalm the local people of Vietnam we napalmed our own piles of shit.

One day I went to visit the vet and to gaze at my former cabin and land. The vet had left a lot of junk outside and I was vaguely annoyed that he had defaced the landscape. Still, everything looked normal enough, except the door was open, blowing in the wind. I called his name. No answer. I walked up the steps to the deck of the cabin where the vet had placed a refrigerator. Inside the cabin on the tiny table was a dirty plate, half a cup of coffee, fork and spoon; unmade futon, stack of Mother Earth News magazines, weary scatter rugs on the floor, ripped curtain over a window. I shut the door, went outside on the deck, and yelled his name again. No response, not even a bird call. I opened the fridge. The light went on so the electricity was still on. It was crammed full, including ground meat wrapped in butcher paper. The sticker said 1.2 pounds, and the date, a week earlier. I hung around for half an hour. When the vet didn't show I left and decided to put him and cabin out of my mind.

I came back a few days later. The electricity was shut off. Everything else looked the same.

Flash ahead about five years. I returned to the cabin on a winter day. My goal was to photograph the cabin for the cover of a book that the University Press of New England was printing, The Kinship, which included two of my out-of-print Darby Chronicles novels, A Little More Than Kin and The Passion of Estelle Jordan. (Both of which are back in print, by the way under separate covers.) The Kinship included an essay I'd written about the idea of "kinship" in the Jordan clan. I was shocked by the sight of the cabin. It was abandoned, but everything looked more or less the way it had five years ago, including the contents of the fridge. I was curious to unwrap the butcher paper and see what a pound of hamburg looked like after five years, but I felt squeamish and I shut the door of the fridge.

Medora, at that time a professional photographer working for a newspaper, had loaned me one of her cameras, but I didn't bother to learn how to operate it. Result: lousy pictures. The people at the press fudged it and came up with a passable cover for The Kinship, though the cabin is obscured. Besides my incompetence, there was another reason I didn't take good pictures. I was trespassing on property I no longer owned. The scene of the abandoned cabin made me very uneasy, so I snapped off a few shots and left. I made some inquiries, and discovered that the vet had moved to Florida. Later, I learned he'd died.

Four or five more years passed. I returned to the cabin with my childhood friend Dennis Patnode. The door to the cabin was now padlocked. I peeked through the windows

everything looked the same except there was evidence of mice invasion. I opened the door to the fridge. I expected a bad smell, but there was none. Anything organic must have dried out long ago. I should have taken a picture, but all I have left in memory is the sight of a jar of Hellman's Real mayonnaise. The oil had separated and floated to the top. It was kind of brown. Below was a gray sludge. The meat package still retained its shape after ten or so years. What does hamburg look like after a decade in a non-functioning refrigerator? I don't know. I never mustered the courage to look under the butcher paper.

It was a tough time for me. My New York publisher had just dumped me because of low book sales.

There was a brief moment when I and my books were trendy. It was the time of the New England counter-culture in the 1970s. Those guys I mentioned earlier–Terry Pindell, Glen Davis, David Sayre–they were all builders, but they were also college graduates. This was a time period when college-educated men and women were giving up the middle-class life of upward mobility and turning to working class occupations. As a writer of working class and rural underclass people, I benefited from this trend. The readers of hardback literary fiction in those days–and also today–were mainly college-educated, liberal-minded middle class women. They had money, time, and curiosity. They were curious about working people because their sons and daughters were turning to the working class. The links between working and upper middle class vanished in the 1980s.

When I thought about my ruined cabin I associated it with my career as a novelist.

Another decade went by before I traveled to the valley of broken dreams. The cabin was gone, the site cleaned up; the natural landscape showed no sign of human presence. I was swept by a grief and some other unpleasant emotion I cannot pin down. Guilt maybe. I never should have built the cabin. It ended up being an eyesore to the people of Sullivan and a disappointment to its inhabitants. All that's left is the fiction, Cooty Patterson's cabin.

My main regret now is not the loss of the cabin, but my inability to form some kind bond between myself and that young woman who rented the cabin and the veteran who bought the property. I can't get over the feeling that I owe something to somebody.

Let me add that Perley Swett was a much more complex person than the hermit I imagined. The average Joe or Josephine living an ordinary life give you more contrarian moments than Shakespeare's Hamlet. Perley Swett's story would be revealed in PERLEY: The True Story of a New Hampshire Hermit, a book published in 2009 by his granddaughter, Sheila Swett Thompson.

Basketville Sign and Shacks

Domain of Shacks with Sign is a part of Darby that gets destroyed in A Little More Than and destroyed again in its reincarnated version as a trailer park in Howard Elman's Farewell. The idea to use a sign in a novel came first. Back in the 1970s anybody driving on I–91, the new interstate highway in Vermont that ran roughly parallel to the Connecticut river boundary with New Hampshire, would notice how beautiful the landscape was, in part because Vermont did not allow anybody billboards. An exception was a huge sign that had a single word on it, Basketville, advertising a store in Putney, Vermont. The proprietors got away with the billboard by placing their sign across the river in New Hampshire which had no billboard ban.

Every time I drove the highway, especially at night, I would look for the sign. There was something, perhaps the incongruity of a lit-up billboard seeming to come out of the forest, that gave me a little thrill, followed by a twinge of shame for enjoying the moment.

One afternoon I was driving south on the highway to New York. In East Hampton, Massachusetts, something caught my attention. High above on the edge of a cliff stood a naked man facing the traffic and in all his male pride. I projected the mental picture of that guy to the top of the Basketville sign. Probably the image of Willow Jordan, Ollie's mentally deficient son, standing on top of the basketville sign naked facing the traffic on 91 is the most vivid image in A Little More Than Kin, maybe in all the Darby books. To that naked guy going solo, I say, thanks for the image, friend.

In A Little More Than Kin behind the Basketville sign, unseen from the highway, are shacks, my version of a Hooverville. The shacks are derived from my memory of a place and an idea. The idea is that the difference between a cabin and a shack is not in the structure, but in its locale and in the attitude toward aesthetics that its inhabitants hold. A small wood-frame dwelling all alone on a stream is quaint and lovely. It's a cabin. Same dwelling with a junky yard in a nice neighborhood is a shack. Inhabitant who clutters his tiny dwelling to suit his tastes and needs lives in a cabin. Inhabitant who clutters his tiny dwelling without reflection upon his acts lives in a shack.

My image of Ollie's shacks was the result of a newspaper ad I answered advertising a 10-foot aluminum johnboat with oars for $75. I can't remember the year, but it had to be before I published my first novel; I'm sure of that because I spent part of $4,000 advance for my first novel to buy a canoe to replace the johnboat. As it turned out the

canoe was a mistake. For my purposes, fishing on small ponds with a fly rod, the johnboat was superior, easier to pack on the my truck, and it handled in wind better than the canoe. Plus too much time in a canoe using, no doubt poor paddle-technique, resulted in my ending up with a case of tendinitis in my right elbow.

My first thought when I bought the johnboat was that I could throw it in the back of my Datsun mini-pickup truck and be on a trout pond in minutes; my second thought was: I can afford this. I called the number in the ad, and a man with a weak voice gave me directions to his place, eight or so miles from Keene. His home turned out be a two-room shack in a compound of half a dozen or more shacks on a country road. There was a lot of junk laying around amid briers, rocks, random bushes, weeds, and weed trees; patches of tall grass, but no lawn, nor evidence there had ever been one.

It was obvious from the look of the owner why he wanted to sell. The man was a walking scarecrow; he had cancer and was too weak to fish; indeed, he could barely get around and converse. I knew I could talk him down on the price, but I paid the $75 anyway.

Later when I was writing A Little More Than Kin, I put those shacks in back of my version of the Basketville sign, hidden from the road. I also put something of the former boat owner into the physique of Ollie Jordan when Ollie is deteriorating from alcoholism and growing madness.

Ollie and his clan are squatting on the property of an absent landlord. Eventually, the sign is torn down, the shacks demolished, until there is nothing left but bare ground. In later Darby novels, a trailer park springs up. By the end of the Darby Chronicles, the trailer park too has vanished from the earth as if it had never existed. That's how it goes with the dwellings of the poor. We remember the rich and the privileged, their castles, walled cities, pyramids, great cathedrals, their sarcophagi. By contrast the poor live in fragile structures as well as fragile circumstances. The poor are not interred in vaults that last over the millennia; they do not live in stone castles, mansions, or penthouses in the big city. They leave very few paper trails. Like the creatures of the wilds, they build nests to raise young, seek shelter, only to be dispossessed by fickle weather, a landlord with a different idea, or their own wandering spirit.

Great Meadow Village

I've mentioned elsewhere that fictional Darby is a composite of many New Hampshire towns, but in particular of Westmoreland, Dublin and Sullivan. I envisioned the nice cape cod and colonial style houses you find in New England towns (the Dot McCurtin house); newer places, less quaint but functional (the Dorne house); rundown, funky places like the Elman spread; and shacks and cabins and a tree house; also mansions, like the one found on the Salmon estate. Trailers, mobile homes, manufactured homes, whatever you want to call them also figure into the landscape.

Some towns, such as the one I live at this writing, zone out mobile homes. By contrast, in fictional Darby, like many New England towns, almost anything goes. "It's my property, and by gosh I'll do what I want with it." That idea is always in conflict with its counter measure to preserve and protect property interests through legal means, the purview of the well off. In rural areas in New England people who can only afford to live mobile homes are often driven to unlikely places, like in a woodland with no nearby services, or in low areas that often flood.

In fictional Darby, the first mobile home that appears is at the end The Dogs of March when Howard Elman replaces his burned-out home with a trailer. Decades later, in Howard's Elman's Farewell, we find that a for-profit corporation has built an entire mobile home community, Great Meadow Village, a common occurrence throughout the country. What happens to Great Meadow Village in Howard Elman's Farewell I believe is typical of the fate of many of those communities.

"Great meadow" is a term that comes up frequently among English place names in Colonial America. Take a nice long look at a "great meadow", then take a similar look at a trailer park; now consider how corporations often name their entities without regard to the way language resonates over time and perhaps you'll see a little sarcasm in my name for the trailer park. Note also that the site of Great Meadow Village is in the same location of the Jordan shacks of A Little More Than Kin, an earlier Darby novel.

In the New England countryside, and indeed throughout the United States, yea, the world, from New Hampshire to New Mexico, from both sides of the Great Divide, from the Cajuns of the Louisiana bayous to the boat people of China ("drifting twigs," as they are sometimes called), you will find in the dwellings of ordinary working people a certain dishevelment that mirrors the natural landscape. Example: Recently I drove through the beautiful hill country of central Texas when I came upon a yard of junk cars,

horse corral, trailer home, ramshackle wood deck; outside the family sat around an open fire and a grill. It was a scene right out of one of my books, though a couple thousand miles away. To my eye the scene fit perfectly into the surrounding cacti and mesquite bushes, no lawn.

That's difference between people with ordinary and extra-ordinary income. Regular people find ways to fit themselves into their landscape. Their more financially successful brethren show of their wealth by imposing themselves upon the landscape.

For me the real offense of a trailer park like Great Meadow Village is not the close-order living in flimsy structures (the poor have always lived in such circumstance), it's that the materials used, sheet metal and plastic, and how the structures are placed, in a grid, just appear out of place in and an insult to the natural landscape. I can't help think that such environments are not good for human happiness.

Abare's Folly

In the Darby Chronicles, Abare's Folly is a mountain that looms over the town. As I've mentioned in other notes, the geography of fictional Darby is based on Westmoreland, New Hampshire. There is no looming mountain in Westmoreland, though there is one thirty or so miles north across the Connecticut River in Vermont–Mount Ascutney. To create Abare's Folly I merged Mount Monadnock in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, with Mount Ascutney, and parked it about where you would find Walpole, New Hamsphire.

I never produced any fiction where Abare's Folly plays an significant role. Nonetheless, the mountain is important merely because it's there, a presence, an influence on the behavior and group psyche of the local inhabitants. The influence is subtle, hardly felt, but real enough. I believe that landscape affects people, molds the thinking of people.

I came to this idea after many road trips. If you will pardon some generalizations: People who live in relatively flat orderly farm country, for example, the midwest, come across as open, friendly, neat, but not too deep; people who live in hilly forested areas (say, rural New England, or even rural New Mexico) are more reticent and suspicious, messy in their habits (like their forests), but such areas produce contrarian thinkers, too (think of Joseph Smith, who grew up in Vermont); people who live near large water bodies, whether it's Los Angeles, New York, or Miami, tend to feel superior to their landlocked brethren.

The French pronunciation of my name, Hebert, is something close to A-b-a-r-e. In the Darby Chronicles, the folly is in farmers trying to make a living raising crops above the 2,000-foot level on rocky soil. But in my mind the folly was something else. My first agent was Mavis McIntosh, a legend in New York publishing. She was quite old when she discovered me and about ready to retire, and she passed me on to her protege, Rita Scott (a former Miss Pennsylvania, by the way), but not before giving me some advice: "Don't write a series, they'll only read the first one." She was right. Of the seven Darby novels, Live Free or Die was a New York Times notable pick and Spoonwood won an Ippy, for best regional novel in the Northeast, but only The Dogs of March, the first of the novels, sold well. Abare's Folly is my folly, failing to follow my agent's advice.

Site of PLC Project

I don't believe there is any such thing as time. I believe that time is a human construct to measure change. A clock–from a grandfather clock to an atomic clock–uses a rate of change as a measurement that we call time. If I'm right it's silly to think that you can go back and forward in time. You can't. Once you change something, you can change it again, but you can't unchange it. Until entropy sets in in some far distance future change is our one constant; it is relentless. Even an apparent constant, the rotation of the earth, is subject to minute changes with every spin, which clocks must account for by their creators fiddling with their mechanism.

So one of my main concerns in my fiction is the relentlessness of change, in particular how change affects a small New England town that I call Darby and its people. I first came to this idea of change in the early 1970s. My state of New Hampshire and neighboring Vermont were undergoing tumultuous changes bought on by the coming of the interstate highway, which gave our states the urban benefits and urban problems of Boston and New York. No place ever stays the same: a place changes for the better or for the worse. However, the change can be so leisurely that the inhabitants of a place can readily adapt. It's this idea of change that I have been testing over and over again in my Darby novels.

PLC (Paradise Lots Covenant) is the brain child of H.C. Wentworth, whose identity, by the way, supplies a big plot point in Howard Elman's Farewell. The vision behind the company can be summed up in its motto, "connecting tradition to technology." PLC views Darby as an experiment. To save the town from melding into a dull suburb of nearby Keene the company is planning a huge development that includes a new structure to replace the Darby's condemned town hall, a shopping mall, condos, and the big attraction, a gambling casino on the shores of the Connecticut River. The site for this project is the former county farm property on River Road. The locale is easy to picture in my mind, because I see it often; the fictional site is based on the former Cheshire County Farm and jail in my hometown of Westmoreland, New Hampshire. By the way, the former jail in Westmoreland, abandoned at this writing in 2015, is a wonderful example of Brutalist architecture that shames even the drearier buildings of Soviet era Russia.

The company's name, Paradise Lots Covenant, is of course a play on Milton's poem Paradise Lost. I thought Paradise Lots was an appropriate name for a 21st century real estate development company whose motto is "connecting tradition to technology."

Will PLC follow through with its plan? Will town voters oppose and crush the idea or embrace it with the company promise of lowered property taxes and jobs? With the conclusion (maybe) of the Darby Chronicles with book seven, Howard Elman's Farewell, the question remains open.

Elman Place

It's 1945. Private First Class Howard Elman returns from the war, and with the help of the GI Bill, modest savings, and a bank loan at reasonable rates, he buys a worn out farm in the town of Darby, New Hampshire. He's very young but already a father. His wife Elenore, like Howard, is uneducated and without a family. She and Howard met as foundlings in a foster home. While Howard was away in the Army, Elenore worked in a laundry and cleaned houses. She was able to save a little money. Howard was surprised that while he was gone, Elenore discovered religion and converted to the Catholic faith.

The main reason they could afford this place and its 50 or so acres was that the rocky soil was played, any valuable lumber had been cut down and sold off, and the house and barn were in a sorry state. Howard took a job in textile mill. He was handy with tools and on weekends he worked on the house to make it livable. Howard liked bargains, so instead of painting over the distressed clapboards he covered them with purple asphalt roofing shingles. Concrete building blocks served as front steps.

Howard almost killed himself climbing the big maple tree beside the barn to fasten a hemp rope to a limb for a swing for the kids. With a hatchet he hacked out a seat from a red oak firewood billet. As soon as one of the kids was old for the swing, he carved the child's name on the seat. Years later, it occurred to him that the father is no longer necessary once a child learns to pump for herself.

Elenore? Well, she didn't like the house, she didn't like being in the country, she didn't like the way Howard went about repairs, like he was color blind–purple shingles on a house? But she never said much. He was a domineering man but not a slapper and a good provider. She offered up her minor suffering to the blessed Virgin Mary, the way Sister Felicitous had taught her when she had counseled her at St. Bernard's parish in Keene when Elenore was converting).

Elenore painted over the faded wallpaper in all the rooms. Above the TV set she installed a crucifix. She nailed up prints of holy people she admired: Pope Pious XII, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, and Sister Felicitous. Above the couch in the parlor she put up a framed picture of Jesus exposing his "sacred heart". Other pictures on the walls included the blessed Virgin Mary with the baby Jesus, Mary standing bare feet on a snake in obvious discomfort; the Holy Family of Jesus, Joseph, and Mary with a desert background; and St. Sebastian full of arrows, funny look on his face like .. like ... like

when you pull a man's rutabaga. And then there was a statuette of her favorite saint, which she bought at Ike's Auction Barn for six dollars. Overpriced, but it was worth it.

Howard built her a little wooden shrine to hold the 18-inch high plaster likeness of the saint, who stood in a brown robe, sandals, girly face with rosy cheeks, bald head but with a gold halo.

Howard watched while she placed the saint in the cubby.

"Who is that guy," Howard asked.

"My patron saint, St. Anthony, patron saint of stuff you lost."

"What did you lose, honey."

"My origins."

"Your what?"

"You know, my mother, my father, and all my relations down through the ages. Doesn't it weigh on you that we don't know where we come from?"

"Naw, I don't care about any of that."

"Never give it a thought?"

"Maybe half a thought."

"Just what does it take to produce a full thought in your head?"

Howard paused for a moment. "The thought of dinnah."

These were the kinds of conversations the Elmans had in those early years.

Driving by the Elman Place, taking it in at a glance–the junked cars, the lurid color on the house, the ramshackled barn, the upturned wheelbarrow on the edge of the driveway–you might think: the inhabitants of this place have no taste. You'd be right if you meant that the Elmans tastes do not correlate to conventional tastes. But you'd be

wrong if you thought that the Elmans do not have an esthetic sense. They do, but it's in their own non-conformist package. Because of the way the Elmans grew up, shuttled from orphanages to foster homes, no adult mentors of any consequence, they formed their sense of beauty and order helter skelter. As they matured into adults, they–in the local parlance–made do. For Elenore it was in the quilts she made, the way patches of color and texture in fabric can create meaning; for Howard it was in the way the natural world–flowers, tall grass, snow, sunlight, and weather–combobulated with his collection of junked cars.

Cutter Place

The antagonist in The Dogs of March, Zoe Cutter, like Howard Elman, bought a rundown farm in Darby, New Hampshire. That's about all that they had in common. Howard was a working man, just squeezing by in the world, loud, barely civil in his dealing with his fellow human beings, direct, not quite literate, honest, and brash. Zoe was a wealthy widow, college educated, used to getting her way, confident in her tastes and beliefs, polite, unafraid.

For Howard, his property was all about "the land," as he put it, in fact, not even "the land," for "the land" was an expression of a mysterious feeling for which he had no accurate words. The only structure he loved was the barn; the house was mere shelter. This feeling, which came over him every day when he stepped out of the front door into the outside air, was so strong that it prevented him from understanding that for Elenore, his wife, the house had great meaning. Indeed, her house was a sacred place.

For Zoe the property was, as she would say, a challenge. Her goal was to completely renovate the house but keep its character. But for her own personal pleasure it was not the property that thrilled her. It was the view. From the prospect on this hill, looking over the field below, she could see the Connecticut River valley and the Vermont hills in the distance. Indeed, she bought the house on impulse after catching the view on a perfect October day when the trees were full of color. It wasn't until she moved in that she realized that she'd overlooked an eyesore, the junk cars on the property directly below her. Perhaps part of her subsequent behavior–the anger, the stubbornness–was an attempt to distract herself from self-blame.

In the first book of the Darby Chronicles, The Dogs of March, the Elman place and the Cutter place began as worn out farms with owners who wished to improve their properties according to their own lights. By the seventh novel of the Darby Chronicles both properties had been irretrievably transformed in ways that the original owners could have not have imagined. It's this theme of change, the form that changes take, that interests me as a novelist.

Ike's Auction Barn

For me Ike's Auction Barn is not so much a representation of rural architecture as it is one of those mysterious places of mind that keeps shape shifting. Memories you can't quite recall. Ideas that come and go and never quite make sense. Perhaps the true source in my mind of Ike's Auction Barn is a random fragment of dna inherited from a disturbed ancestor. I dunno.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. It's 1983 and I'm writing Whisper My Name, the third novel in the Darby Chronicles. Picture a ramshackle wood-frame building of two stories with a shed roof. On the bottom story is a good-sized apartment where Ike Jordan and his family live. On the second story is a smaller apartment, which is accessed from a side stairway that leads to a deck with rotted floor boards and a rickety wood railing. Various kin of Ike live in that apartment over the years. Beside the apartment there's another smaller apartment, the door padlocked.

This space is used for storage of burglarized objects that are dear to Ike. Only he has the key. He'll enter, always alone, and admire the objects he has stolen. Most of the stuff he steals he'll sell to another flea market operator in Connecticut, but some items are precious and Ike keeps them in this room. They are not objects of great value; they are items one might find in a bedroom where a woman sleeps: various articles of women's clothing, a bottle of perfume, several vibrators and vanity mirrors, even a manikin of a tall female model with out her wig. The idea of woman completely hairless, not even eyebrows, is a turn-on for Ike. I don't believe I have to go into detail to explain the use that Ike Jordan makes of these objects.

Flash ahead now to the next book, the Passion of Estelle Jordan. Upon Ike's death his special room was discovered by his eldest son, Carleton "Critter" Jordan. For Critter the room becomes a memorial to his father who he thought he hated until the father was murdered and he, Critter, in his shock visited scenarios in his head where he for a brief believed that he had killed his father and somehow repressed the act. When he got over these weird feelings he realized that he did not hate his father, but had hated himself. By book seven, Howard Elman's Farewell, Critter's his hatred of his father had turned to something else, not quite love but close.

In the rear of the building is the brainchild of Critter, a commercial business which faces the parking lot. A bright neon sign says, "LOOK UP!". Inside are peep show booths, popular along lonely roads before the coming of the Internet. This environment is very

important to the plot of The Passion of Estelle Jordan. Beside the wood building is an almost square one-story concrete block building with no windows. It has a front entrance, an emergency back door and a concrete floor. No windows. This area serves as a flea market and auction barn.

Ike's Auction Barn, which I first described in Whisper My Name, persists but with changes throughout the Darby Chronicles and, if I keep writing, say, scripts for the video game, Darby Doomsday, no doubt it will undergo more changes.

My descriptions of Ike's Auction Barn vary somewhat from book to book, but the imagery I present is clear enough for the readers; however, in my mind Ike's Auction Barn consists of a huge collection of images, some realistic, some cubist, some abstract, from the real world and later distorted through my faulty memory and loonytoons imagination.

There's the flea market in what was once the cow barn of the Page Homestead farm in Swanzey, New Hampshire. There's a plain concrete structure with an attached house that was Stan's grocery on Route 12 in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. (Stan was Stanley Castor, who was a friend of mine when were students at St. Joseph's Elementary School.) There's the set of crazy houses built for the Robert Altman Popeye movie on the island of Malta; the set is still there, a tourist site.) There's a porn shop I visited in White River Junction Vermont in the basement of a strip club, later destroyed by fire that I reference in my novel Never Back Down. There's a second-story deck of a distressed motel I stayed at during one of my many road trips ($14 a night, best bargain I ever got for a motel room). There's an auction barn in an actual renovated barn of an auctioneer I wrote a news story about when I was freelance writer.

I could spend a career writing about and drawing pictures of various representations of Ike's Auction Barn. Maybe in some future life I will.

Connecticut River

The Connecticut River divides New Hampshire from Vermont, flows through Massachusetts and Connecticut and empties into the Atlantic on Long Island Sound. It doesn't play much of a role in the Darby Chronicles. It's just there. Which for me is role enough.

Though I'm native to the region I never really got to know the river until I became a fly fisherman. I would launch my ten-foot aluminum Johnboat from the public access point in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. I'd see big fish taken out of river–Northern Pike, rainbow trout–but I never caught any big fish. Mainly, I caught six-to-eight-inch smallmouth bass. They were a lot of fun on the fly road because they jumped out of the water. Eventually, I did catch bigger bass at the bottom of the rapids in North Walpole, NH, casting from shore in the spring to spawning beds.

Except for that fast water of what is known today as Bellows Falls, where native Americans of old used to catch shad and salmon swimming upstream from the ocean to spawn, most of the river was slow and, in the summer, even torpid, because of dams built all along it's length. I enjoyed imagining the Connecticut as a wild river instead of a series of brown-water lakes behind human-built impoundments. But imagination has its limits, and the river frustrated me in a way I did understand.

Until I read a particular book, and then I knew what I was missing: it was Life Force. So often the real thing just didn't quite do the job. So many experiences are like that. Reality is sometimes disappointing. Maybe that's why we need the human imagination, and that imagination put to work as art. The book was Tall Trees, Tough Men by Robert E. Pike, which has been described as an anecdotal history of the logging and log drives in the New Hampshire woods in the North Country. "Anecdotal history": that means the bullshit is less disguised than in regular history. Doesn't matter to me. The stories of the loggers, their way of life, their skills, but mainly of the log drives set me on fire.

At one time the Connecticut River featured the longest log drive in the world, or so some people claim. But, really, how would anybody making the claim know that fact? Doesn't matter. It was a long log drive, more than 350 miles to the ocean.

A 19th century log drive in New England, before dams made the practice impossible, is the equivalent of a cattle drive in the old west. Aiming and riding those logs down a wild river was dangerous, requiring strong but nimble men. When they came to a town, the

men would cut loose in local drinking establishments. When town officials tried to curtail their escapades the loggers would retaliate by booming the logs against the town's covered bridges. Or so the stories go. Somebody, not me, ought to write a screenplay about a 350-mile logging drive on the Connecticut River, Sergio Leone back from the grave to direct it.

Oh, well, maybe I'll write a novel, fit it into the Darby Chronicles somehow. It's dreams like this that keep the fiction writer hopeful during his years of decline.

Grace Pond

When I was coming of age as a fiction writer in the early 1970s I somehow found the time to go fishing. I was a mad fly fisherman, specializing in ponds. I had a little aluminum johnboat that I would toss in the back of a pick up truck. I fished in the more than a dozen ponds within ten or fifteen miles of my then home in Swanzey, New Hampshire. My favorite pond was Bolster Pond in Sullivan. I liked it because it was NOT a trout pond, which meant that I always had the place to myself. There was only one camp cottage on its shores, and I never saw its inhabitants.

I would fly fish, occasionally catch a decent-size smallmouth bass, and once in a while a pickerel, but lots of perch. With pliers I would break the barbs off the hooks, so it was easy to catch a fish, bring it in, flip it off the hook and back into the deep. In those days I rarely kept the fish I caught, not because of culinary or philosophical reasons; I was just too lazy to clean and cook them. I will say, though, that no fish tastes better than perch.

I'd like to take a moment here to explain the difference between a lake and a pond, a strictly local definition that I grew up with in the Keene, New Hampshire, area. It wasn't until I was an adult that I realized my definition was not universal. In the definition I picked up as a boy, a lake is deep with clear water that in its depths stays cold enough to support cold water fish such as trout and salmon. A pond is shallow with tea-colored water, and maybe lily pads and reeds. The water is warmer, no place for a trout, but just fine for bass and hornpout (which is our name for the local catfish). Lakes tend to be larger than ponds, but not always. The word "pond" can also be used to define a water body behind a dam. Since almost all local lakes were dammed (for water power), you can often find a phrase in a local history defining, say, the pond behind the dam in Dublin Lake.

In writing the Darby books, I created Grace Pond, a composite of all the ponds that I fished, though it my mind it looks most like Bolster Pond, but with lots of new development around it. Grace Pond straddles an imaginary line between Center and Upper Darby. It's a crowded environment by Darby standards, but surrounded by the deep woods of the Salmon conservancy trust lands. A narrow dirt road rings the pond, where one will find small, quaint cottages, rustic camps, but also newer houses and even a few condos that resemble structures built in Anywhere, USA. This mixture of structures that reflects the tastes, experiences, and roots of their inhabitants is a breeding ground for conflict, though I have yet to exploit those possibilities in my fiction.

I had a wonderful experience on Bolster Pond one day back around 1973. I watched a great blue heron catch a fish, struggle to get airborne with the fish crossways in its mouth, finally gaining altitude, circling the pond, and settling into its nest high up in a dead pine tree in the shallows of a cove where it fed the fish to a chick. Decades later I translated the experience into a poem in, which appears in Howard Elman's Farewell in the voice of F. Latour (a.k.a. Frederick Elman). Note that Latour navigates in an aluminum johnboat like the one I owned back in the day. Also, I spelled johnboat differently in the poem than here. Different dictionaries show the word spelled in different ways.

Interstices Between Dark Matter and Us
I put my son in the front pack baby carrier
for a walk in the woods headed for Grace Pond
What do you see, boy?
I read his answer in the thought he sends me.
Spider webs in ferns, in trees, in the interstices
between the comet dust that makes up
the rings of Saturn
and the loved one who left us too early.
Give me water, father, give me water.
I tip a moose wood leaf toward my son's mouth,
and droplets of dew quench his thirst.
When we reach Grace Pond I place the baby carrier
on the stern seat of the John boat and tie it down.
I row out into the pond to the cove
full of lily pads and the grey skeletons
of dead pine trees rising out of the shallows
like big ideas that just don't work.
We've come to see the heron.
She walks on her stilt legs
until she finds a station.
She stands motionless waiting for the judgement.
I hold the oars so they don't part the waters.
My son sends me a thought.
I answer with my own thought:
I'm thinking of your mother, too.
The heron darts her beak into the water

and comes up with a yellow perch.
Fish crossways in her mouth she begins
a laborious takeoff,
tucking her stilt legs behind her,
huge wings slapping water as she strains for a height,
finally rising on an air current,
circling back into the nest at the top of a dead pine.
I look through the binoculars
and see a chick's open mouth.
I let out a celebratory whoop.
My son throws up his hands and imitates my whoop,
his first word.

McCurtin Place

I didn't consciously devise my books this way, but the living places I've created in the Darby Chronicles reflect mainly male thinking, while in my real world women determine the look and feel of living spaces. Is this misapprehension a result of my culture, my upbringing, my gender, or just a flaw in my own makeup? I don't have answers. Everything in a book is up to the reader to decide. Once a book is finished and the author abandons it to prospective readers the book no longer belongs to him. All I can say for sure is that writers reveal themselves by the subjects they take on and how they handle those subjects. But only if they're honest. Dishonest writers have the advantage; they can hide behind persons; they can sometimes fool their readers and almost always themselves.

Let's look at some of the women in the Darby series and their relationship to house and home. Elenore Elman married too young. She identified as best she could with the house her husband foisted upon her. But, really, she expressed herself through her garden and the quilts she made. Persephone Salmon lived in the grandest house in Darby, but it was built and its spirit sustained by her husband's people. Perhaps it was the realization that the house was never really hers that fueled her anger. The Jordan women–Helen and Delphina by marriage, Estelle by blood–lived in circumstances dominated by poverty, the culture of the Jordan clan, and limited formal education; they were never able to develop an idea of home that integrated with their own personalities. I wonder about the future of The Manse with Birch Latour and Tess Jordan. Whose vision will determine its next incarnation? Maybe Birch and Tess need Darby Doomsday, the game they invented, to work out the real difficulties that lie ahead for them.

Arelene Flagg lived with her brother Harold in the back of the Village Store. Eventually, she left, just disappeared; she woke up one day with a personal truth: Darby was never home for her.

The women of Great Meadow Mobile Home Park invest themselves in a potted plant, an appliance, pictures on a bureau. But that's it. The contemporary mobile home with its conveniences, its inorganic materials, its cramped building lots doesn't allow much room for an individual identity to express itself fully.

The idea of home in Darby, as I am trying to portray it, is best realized in the house and lifestyle of Darby's high-tech gossip, Dorothy McCurtin, who appears in all the Darby novels. Or maybe not–I can't remember. Let us review her situation in the most recent

(and final?) Darby novel, Howard Elman's Farewell. Dot, like Howard Elman is widowed.

Her husband (I never did give him a name) had set up a little shop in the garage. After he died Mrs. McCurtin gave his stuff away to their children and his brother and now uses the garage for its intended purpose to shelter her new Jetta. She has always done as she pleases with the house. Mrs. McCurtin chose furnishings for the house without consulting with her husband; she managed repairs and (frequent) redecorations, constantly was on the look out at the "give and get" at the town dump–excuse me, transfer station–for items to enhance the appearance of the house. The paintings on the wall of covered bridges and flowers, many flowers, reflect her taste. No trace remains in the house of her husband or their children.

Somewhere between spare and cluttered is the right decor for the public rooms downstairs. The kitchen, dining room and parlor have the eclectic and tasteful look of one who prefers bargains from auctions, flea markets, and yard sales to new furnishings. Mrs. McCurtin shops where there's an opportunity to mix with her fellow Darby citizens. Her interests and attention are always divided between the products and the people. Mrs. McCurtin tastes extend over all architectural periods, but she is fussy about sizes, colors, and placement of objects in the home. She doesn't want any one item to dominate a room. She wants a visitor to feel comfortable and–how shall I put this?–somewhat at a lost to remember any particular aspect of her home; in her own words, "A touch of amnesia stolen from memory is good for the soul. Call it harmony."

Her bedroom/office is more revealing. After the kids left, after the husband passed on, Mrs. McCurtin brought in a crew to tear down a couple walls and combine the master bedroom with a kid's room. Everything is painted white and the hardwood floors have been sanded and urethaned so they gleam. Color is provided by red clay pots (no other color but red is allow) from which sprout greenery and flowers.

The furnishings in the bedroom/workroom are all new–desks, tables, office chairs. This is Mrs. McCurtin's communication center. Two computers, one a Mac, one a Windows machine, monitor all the news outlets. In addition there's a scanner tied to a voice recorder. When the phone rings and Mrs. Mccurtin picks up, the caller's voice comes across over a speaker so that Mrs. McCurtin can type while she converses with her sources and never mind that now she is in her middle ... sorry, I mustn't divulge age. The bed is rigged up with hospital style serving table, because Mrs. McCurtin likes to sit in bed to talk on the phone, read, munch on scones with tea, and to write in her diary in

longhand. Although she is surrounded by the latest computer equipment her most prized possession is a fountain pen she bought from the Levenger catalog.

Mrs. McCurtin has brought high-tech into the world of the town gossip.

Mrs. McCurtin does not deal in gossip for malicious or frivolous reasons. She thinks of herself as a journalist. She believes if everyone knew everything about everybody mass empathy would prevail. War would be unnecessary; domestic strife would be limited to disagreements over cribbage. Mrs. McCurtin is the most idealistic and perhaps the happiest person in Darby, New Hampshire.

Dorne Place

The Buzz Dorne ranch house, circa 1970, with oversized lawn, basketball hoop on the garage, paved driveway, on River Road in Darby is my nod to modern middle class housing. I guess I'm a romantic fool, but it always makes me a little sad to see a suburban-style house and yard in rural parts of New Hampshire. In my view, the landscape dies a little.

I'm not the only one who feels this way. In conferences with my students I alway ask them where they grew up. Those from small towns, farms, big cities, and exotic places always have something to say and write about their environment. Not the students from suburbia. They leave the impression that something was left out of their childhood, and they almost never write about the suburban environment. When I ask them about this empty space in their creativity, they can never give me a good explanation, except that their memories of home are boring, that there's nothing distinctive about their communities. And, really, they don't care.

I associate my creativity with my sense of place. It puzzles me that many of my talented students, some of whom have gone on to publish books, do not need a sense of place to be creative. And some students with a feeling for place don't necessarily have a feeling for language. Maybe "place" is a gismo in dna; some have it, some don't, and while those writers who have it invariably use in their work, those who don't have it can get along just fine without it.

Town Hall

Because I was a newspaper reporter for a decade in Keene, New Hampshire, attending scores of different kinds of meetings all over the Monadnock Region, but especially annual town meetings, I became very familiar with town halls in New Hampshire and their affect on the people and culture of the communities. Over time I came to believe in the beauty and practicality of the town meeting form of government. It's a belief that underlies much of the fiction in the Darby Chronicles.

Those qualities that I admire in town meeting are personified in the buildings themselves, the town halls. People build structures to signify their identities, but the structures, often after the demise of their creators, impact future generations in ways that shape who they are. Architecture matters.

This idea that would go on to be a theme in my work presented itself to me when I was a graduate student at Stanford University living in the San Francisco bay area. The first apartment my bride and I rented was in Palo Alto. It was a long white building, two stories high, with a very nice pool at the front entry. It looked a little bit like a motel, both inside and outside–but a nice motel.

Our place was on the second floor. You walked down a narrow carpeted hallway. You felt confined by the walls. If someone was coming toward you the tendency was not to make eye-contact and to be wary. There was no escape in that hallway. In those days I was young, big Frank Zappa style mustache, swarthy complexion. No problem when I was with my wife, but when I was alone I sensed the fear I evoked in some women who had to walk by me in that hallway. It was that feeling toward me that rang a bell in my head: bad architecture.

We had a nice little balcony in our apartment, but it looked out at the next apartment building. The sides were sealed off so you couldn't see your neighbors. Bad architecture.

I went down by the pool a couple times to swim, but I never saw anyone else in the area. It was lonely swimming in a pool alone. After a few months we had not met anyone. The place, like a motel, was designed for people who wanted privacy, who were fearful, who wanted to hide. We wanted community. We got another apartment in the next town over, Menlo Park, and everything changed.

The place was a lot smaller. You reached your apartment on a large open deck. I think there were eight doors leading off that wide board landing. People decorated their doors, painted them different colors, left potted plants on the deck. Sat in lounge chairs to sun themselves. Day we moved in we met two of our neighbors. By the end of the week, we had a nodding acquaintance with half a dozen people. We found that the apartment dwellers could often on the deck, which was open on three sides and to the sky to commune, for conversation. If you didn't want to commune you went inside and closed your door. It all worked. Good architecture.

So what is good about the architecture of a New England town hall? Most town halls look like churches. They were built in a time when church, government, and what we call today "social media" were integrated. The building doubled as a house of worship. The United States constitution split off government from religion, but many communities continued to use their church buildings for town meeting.

Today people of all kinds of religions and of no religion gather in town halls to discuss town matters and to vote. Even an atheist or an agnostic, such as myself, can't help but feel a certain formality and, even, spirituality when one enters the "hall" part of the town hall. If I may resort to my seventies counter-culture lingo: town halls throw off good vibes. The town hall as gathering place is good on a practical level, supplying a meeting place for townspeople, but also good in the morality sense of the word.

Architecture matters.

Darby's town hall is based on the Park Hill Meeting House in my neighborhood in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, but with many differences. From the outside you could mistake the Darby town hall for a Christian Church, though not a Catholic Church. At the top of the steeple is a weather vane, not a cross, and the windows while tall and wide and kind of grand are plain glass. No stained glass, no stations of the cross, no graven images in this building, thank you very much. Of course at one time the town hall was a church. Church and state if not one and the same were pretty close. Some people would like a return to those days.

You enter through tall doors into a small hallway, very spare. The entry into the main meeting room is wide and inviting. The walls are bare wood, very beautiful the way pine boards age if you don't paint them. There's a big open space with folding chairs stacked along the side. The floor is wide pine boards, not flat, but with undulations. Along our roads in the spring you'll see signs warning of "frost heaves." There are no signs in the

town hall warning of "heaves" in the floor boards, but they are there. You can feel the history of earth on the soles of your feet. At one end is a stage erected later, you can tell, because everything looks cheaper than the original wood work, which has a warmth and complexity to it. The windows are grand and tall.

The town hall has a furnace but it only heats rooms on the first floor where town offices, kitchen, and conferences rooms have been carved out of what was once a worship area. Upstairs is the main meeting room, which is only used for special occasions–wedding receptions, voting and the like–and of course for town meeting. In the hall you will find four wood burning stoves, which are fired up when necessary, which is often in this climate. The state fire marshall has repeatedly warned the town that wood heat in such an old building is inherently dangerous, and every year the selectman put in warrant article asking the town to raise funds to remove the wood stoves and expand the central heating, and every year the warrant article is turned down by acclamation. It's a tradition.

You're alone in the town hall in that meeting space. Close your eyes, concentrate; you can hear a hush, the sound of the distant echo of Creation day. Actually, it's the sound of carpenter ants methodically dismantling the Darby Town Hall. A few years and the building will be too dangerous for human habitation. A problem for the town. And for the writer, a plot point to develop? Maybe.

Architecture matters.

Village Store

In the fall of 2012 I drove from my home in New Hampshire to a Trimble Sketchup conference in Boulder, Colorado. (Sketchup is a 3d app, one of several I use to create digital drawings of Darby.) I gave myself an extra two days and meandered on back roads. I wanted to check out the heartland. Saw lots of sad sights. Signs of drought were everywhere: dried out river beds, corn stalks that reached no higher than three feet. But droughts come and go. A worse blight on the landscape was cultural, the recombobulation and in some cases discombobulation of the small town.

It was unusual to drive down a main street without seeing boarded up businesses. Few people on the sidewalks. Used to be I could always find a little cafe for coffee and homemade apple pie. Gone. All the vitality, where there was vitality, had moved to the highway, which is the recombobulation part of my tale. Everything used to be on Main Street; today it's on that highway that bypasses Main Street and all the little streets that give a town its character and identity.

That's the report for the big town. News of the little town, or the villages within the big town, is even more dire. The general store is gone. It's either been zoned out of existence or forced to close because people don't shop in local markets any more. I think a town loses something when a small local market closes down or, not quite as bad, gives way to chain convenience stores on the highway.

It's not news to most people that the small town–not just in the United States, but in the world–is in decline; everybody knows it or senses it. I'm guessing that most people don't care. I care. I'm a townie and proud of it. Even neighborhoods in cities lose cohesiveness when the local mom and pop grocery closes. By contrast when the box stores and restaurants come in, so do the people. Trouble is more often than not the owners of the new places live out of town and they take the town's disposable income with them.

In my New England some towns have melded into cities, others have just outgrown themselves. Derry, New Hampshire, used to be a nice little town. Robert Frost lived there, among other places. At this writing it remains technically a town, but it has 34,000 plus inhabitants. It's still a nice place to live, but the Derry of Robert Frost is gone forever. Still, many towns in New England have maintained their identity. It's that issue of town identity that interested me as a fiction writer when I started to write.

Some places, usually big cities, retain their identity over time no matter what–New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, come to mind–but small towns are more vulnerable. Even when the population of a town remains more or less stable, even if the building booms and busts are modest, a town's identity can take a severe hit when the village store closes.

The village store in Darby is located in Center Darby where you can also find the town hall, the post office, the library, a protestant church, and a village green or common. The grange hall has closed and stands idle, a sign that perhaps not all is right in Darby. All these structures are grander than the village store, but the heart and soul of the town is in that store that in olden days was a tavern. It's the main place where people congregate. They sit in straight back chairs around the wood stove sipping coffee and homemade muffins and breakfast sandwiches. And they talk. And talk.

Some of my readers have told me that they think Ancharsky's Store in Darby is based on the Westmoreland Village Store. It is and it isn't. It is in that in my imagination Center Darby with its town green and town hall and village store is a copy of South Village in Westmoreland, but everything else is fiction. The interior of the store I picture in my mind for the Darby store is a composite of village stores in many towns of the Monadnock Region. I went out of my way NOT to base any characters on the good people who have operated the Westmoreland store over the decades. However, the first proprietor of the Darby general store, Harold "Fatty" Flagg, is based on a real storekeeper, but from a town other than Westmoreland.

His is a sad story–or maybe not; maybe I only know a sad part of an otherwise fulfilling life. Back in my college years at Keene State I drove taxi part time. An occasional customer was a storekeeper from a neighboring town. He called one Friday night while I was at the taxi stand; it was my turn to go out, but Helen Kershaw, the dispatcher, told me to remain seated and she sent one of the older drivers. The dispatcher read the puzzled look on my face.

"You're too young–he likes the young stuff," the dispatcher said, and that was the end of the conversation, which I in my naÃ¯vetÃ© did not understand. Over time the storekeeper's story unfolded. He was a married man, but gay. Every once in a while he would hire a taxi to bring him to the city. I would see him on the streets, a fat man with a small pinched face, glasses, and a bald head. He would get very drunk, loud, and finally morose by the time he called for a cab from the pay phone of one of the local beer joints. On the drive home he was known to have made passes at younger drivers.

I felt sorry for the man and then one day when I happened to be on the highway I stopped at his store, presumably to buy some m and m's but actually so I could see what the storekeeper was like when he was sober. I happened to catch him and his wife while they were in the middle of a conversation. Or maybe she was his sister–they looked alike. I sensed an intimacy between them, but the nature of that intimacy was not revealed to me. They appeared to be a formal, even solemn couple, but also detached, as if they spent most of their lives attending a funeral that never ended.

Somehow my mental image of that couple wound up in The Dogs of March as Harold and Arlene Flagg, brother and sister. Arlene was the town gossip (later replaced by Dorothy McCurtin) and Harold was a selectman and storekeeper, who had a crush on Howard Elman's nemesis, Zoe Cutter. I loved writing about the Flaggs. I used them as comic relief. Later after I'd published the book, a storekeeper in a small town told me that Harold was not a realistic character. Fatty Flagg is politically involved in Darby. He has opinions that he expresses; he takes positions on issues. My storekeeper-critic pointed out that in the real world of town affairs a storekeeper would risk losing business by involving himself in any deep way in local politics. A good storekeeper knows when to keep his/her mouth shut.

To name minor characters I often grabbed the names of Keene people I knew as casual acquaintances. A man named Flagg worked in the finishing room of International Narrow Fabric cotton mill where I worked for a summer in high school. He was kind to me, and I was grateful. Harold Savage was a county commissioner in the Keene area, another man I admired. And yet I stole his name, too, and gave both names to an unlikeable character–Harold Flag. I knew a family named Pratt in Stoddard, New Hampshire, respectable people. I gave their name to the woman Howard has a one-stand with in The Dogs of March. Her son Porky is based on a guy I went to school with, who eventually went to jail for murder.

My apologies to the Flagg and Pratt families. We writers often make decisions during the madness of our creativity. That feeling, that expansive giddiness when we dream up, is not necessarily kind or sensitive to the feelings of others. Writing unlike, say, medicine and law, is a practice based on selfishness.

Trust Lands

The land conservancy that I invented for the town of Darby–the Salmon Trust–represents an idea that I believe in. I am a strong supporter of the Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests (SPNHF), a group that does very good conservancy work while at the same time advises land owners on how to profit financially from their property. It's a core New England value, mixing idealism with practicality, a union of environmentalism and the capitalism.

So if I'm a tree hugger, why did I portray Raphael "Reggie" Salmon, the driving force of the land trust in the Darby Chronicles, as one pretty close to being a mad man? I did something similar in my semi-autobiographical novel Never Back Down. In that book I invented a priest, Father Sebastian Gonzaga, who was a little crazy, even an object of ridicule, and yet the great man in my own life, my uncle and the man I named for, Joseph Ernest Vaccarest, was a priest. Why do I mock what I love the most?

I pose the question, but I do not have an answer. For me, fiction writing starts as an adventure into the out-there, but always ends up being an inquiry into in-here, my own state of mind, memory and history interwound. However, the insights and revelations come in code that is not easily decipherable and is always full of contradictions. I like the messiness of it all. Keeps me curious and eneregized.

For the moment, let me stick with what I know. Raphael "Reggie" Salmon (pronounced Sal-mohn) is based somewhat on Newt Tolman, a writer, philosopher, and musician in Nelson, New Hampshire, who was also one of my mentors. I based Reggie Salmon more on Newt's looks, not his personality. Newt was a big, handsome man, who managed to look bookish, sophisticated, rugged, rueful, athletic, and just a little bit dangerous (hard to tell whether to himself or to others) all at the same time. Newt was also creative and, in his writing and behavior toward others, very funny. My kind of contrarian. Fictional Reggie is humorless, driven, and when he senses a threat to his land trust, without conscience. About the only real thing they both had in common was ownership of large tracks of New Hampshire woodland.

Salmon–the Squire, as he is sometimes referred to–believes that the land is always more valid and more important than the claimant of the land. People, through their legal systems, devise property lines for the land; people use (and abuse) the land for their own purposes. But people die, legal systems collapse or simply change, and therefore human habitation and claims on the land are temporary. In the end, the land can have

no ownership. Reggie Salmon knows all this. His solution to use money and human law to achieve his goal to keep land as much possible in a natural state. He is quite reptilian in the means he uses to achieve his goal.

Reggie passes on his beliefs to his grandson Birch Latour, who carries on, somewhat modified, Reggie's devotion to and management of the Salmon land trust. Birch is moral and, unlike his grandfather Salmon, empathetic to the human species, and yet in his own way Birch is as driven as Reggie to preserve the land trust. Birch, like myself, asks: Should one do bad things to achieve commendable goals? I have no answer to this old question. I pose it in my fiction, and leave it to my readers to come to their own conclusions. Perhaps in some future work we'll see how Birch deals with the question.

My model for the Salmon Land Trust is the Warwick Preserve in Westmoreland, New Hampshire. It's a forest of mixed hardwoods and softwoods in rugged terrain that includes granite ledges and mysterious stone structures. Built by early Colonists? Or maybe Native Americans? Who knows? Pardon me for repeating myself but I do not seek an answer; I like the mystery. I prefer questions to the (usually disappointing) answers.

I believe that the best reason for a land trust, or any such legal mechanism designed to preserve an environment, is that landscape plays a big role in determining human identity. Alter the landscape and you alter who you are, who your children will be, and in the end maybe the entire course of human history.

In the New England countryside, and indeed throughout the United States, yea, the world, from New Hampshire to New Mexico, from both sides of the Great Divide, from the Cajuns of the Louisiana bayous to the boat people of China ("drifting twigs," as they are sometimes called), you will find in the dwellings of ordinary working people a certain dishevelment that mirrors the natural landscape. Recently I drove through the beautiful hill country of central Texas when I came upon a yard of junk cars, trailer home; outside, the family sat around an open fire with skewers over a grill. To my eye the scene fit perfectly into the surrounding of cacti and mesquite bushes, no lawn. It was also familiar. I'd noted its equivalent in my road trips across the country, not to mention descriptions in my own writings derived from my own region.

A difference between people with ordinary and extra-ordinary income is that those with limited income often find ways to fit themselves into their landscape. Their more financially successful brethren show of their wealth by imposing themselves upon the

landscape. Is this true? Well, not quite. Almost all of us humans reflexively attempt to impose ourselves on the landscape. It's just that the greater our resources the greater our success.

Perhaps the most pleasing landscapes (to the human eye) are a compromise between wild nature and the imposed humanscape. A garden would be such a compromise, or maybe even a well-architected golf course. A perfectly imposed humanscape without compromise would be a parking garage designed by a Brutalist architect. Even the surface of mars is less alien to my sensibilities than the terrain of a parking garage, but maybe you have different aesthetic. Which is the point I want to make. In the end nature doesn't matter. Nature is. Even if human intervention causes, say, global climate change, the result will still be nature. Nature is. What matters is human aesthetics bought to bear on nature. And aesthetics is just a kinder word for "imposed humanscape."

Architecture matters.

How close can we come to the best "garden," as it were, the best compromise between the natural world and our human desires for dominion. The Salmon Trust is my answer.

Elm Stump

Howard Elman, the protagonist of The Dogs of March and Howard Elman's Farewell, is a foundling. He doesn't know his family origins. Eventually, he does find out (in Spoonwood), but by then he's already formed an identity and is not about to abandon it and start over. Howard claims that he named himself after a particular elm tree. He half-believes his manufactured story, and when the tree is mysteriously cut down Howard's reaction sets the plot in motion for Howard Elman's Farewell.

Elm trees have played a big role in my life. I remember when my father came back from World War II and my family moved into a house on 19 Oak Street in Keene, New Hampshire. I had just turned age 5. It was a small lot on the side of a hill, but it included two very large elm trees. They were not unique. Keene was known as the elm city. (For a fascinating story, search the Internet for Cooke Elm Keene NH.)

I loved our elm trees and so did everyone else in our house, though the following spring my dad noticed that the trees didn't seem to have as many leaves as they should. Over the next two or three years, big trucks would come by and spray some kind of white foamy stuff into the canopy of the leaves. The stuff didn't work. The trees continued to die in slow motion. One day men came in trucks and over the course of a couple days cut down both trees, leaving only the stumps. By the time I graduated from high school all the elm trees in the elm city were dead and gone, victims of a disease brought in afar.

So when it came time for me to name my protagonist for what would be my first published novel, the name Elman (Elm Man) sprang to mind. I can't remember whether coming up with the name helped set the theme of the book, or whether I had the theme and found the name to fit the theme: local working man's life threatened by invasive species. In my mind the name and idea came at the same time. Anyway, it's a theme I've sounded in all my books.

Primeval Forest

Old forest, old growth, primeval forest: these terms all refer to a forest that has not been logged by human beings. One presumes that such places in North American look pretty much the way they did before the Europeans showed up. There are very few places left like that in North America, fewer still in New England, which of course was one of the first places on the continent settled by Europeans who brought with them metal saws and axes, tools well-suited for dismantling trees, and an attitude to use those tools.

I grew up on a crowded street, but two streets up slope were the woods of Beech Hill–my church. I used to go there alone to think and just enjoy. My fantasies in those wonderful years between ages 10 and 13 centered around the forest. I imagined myself in a log cabin in the woods, living off the land as a hunter, fisherman, and trapper. As a grown-up I eventually tried hunting (failed, too squeamish), fished madly for a couple years but outgrew it, never did trap anything. What stuck was a love of the New England forest.

When I learned that there was a small slice of primeval forest in the nearby town of Stoddard, New Hampshire, and a state expert was going to give a tour, I jumped at the chance. I wanted to see what real estate looked like before it became real estate, in other words before the Europeans showed up with their their of concepts of "property." I wanted to imagine myself in some ancient time; I wanted to see what the woods looked like in those days. Yes, I know, I know, I was (still am) a romantic fool.

I was not disappointed. The trees really were grander–taller, wider, more luscious in the crowns–than the second, third and fourth growth forest that makes up almost all of our tree cover in New England. Just the look of an ancient oak that has fallen from old age and maybe a random wind, the moss covering it after a few years, the lost-world feeling when you get close to it, well, that experience doesn't exist in second growth forests. I can't remember a word of what the guide said, but I do remember the feeling of those woods. I'll rank the memory, visual and emotional, not verbal, as one of my best.

I transferred the memory of that feeling to creating a small section of primeval forest in the Salmon Trust. In fact, I wrote a novel, a thriller I called Firewhirl, about a threat to that forest. It's a volume that would fit in the Darby Chronicles but you won't find it online or in a bookstore. Alas, the story was turned down by all the publishers that my agent submitted it too. One of these days I'm going to self-publish it as an ebook.

My fantasy of the primeval forest has a rather dismal postscript. At the time I was writing the early books of the Darby Chronicles and that day I took the tour of the primeval forest I did not know that the idea that it was untouched by human beings other than native Americans was no doubt wrong. Hitching rides on those European ships were creatures not native to the region–earthworms, honey bees, and a zillion other critters.

Without those creatures, the forest duff likely would have been as much as a foot deep in the deep woods. Plant life would not be the same as it is today. Chestnut trees, the dominant and grandest trees of the New England forest, would have pleased the eye. Today's "primeval" forests have a very shallow forest duff, having been chewed down by earth worms. Alas, the Chestnut trees pretty much vanished from a blight and cannot be found in today's "old growth." In other words, there are no true primeval forests remaining in New England. Alas alas.

Tree House

One book carried me through my childhood. It sustained my spirit, fed my growing need to inhabit a world of make-believe, and on a practical level gave me material to write book reports over several years. Book reports are more fun to write second, third and fourth time around. They give you an excuse to read the book again; they get easier to write as you become more and more familiar with the material. Then, too, there's the excitement one feels in apparently putting one over on the teachers. The book was Swiss Family Robinson by Johann David Wyss.

I discovered it around age 11 browsing the shelves in the Keene Public Library. The books I enjoy most seem to be ones I find myself. Even at an early age I never read the book everybody was talking about; still don't. My policy is never a read a book when it's hot. Wait a few years. The first thing I liked about Swiss Family Robinson was that one of the characters had my name, Ernest. Second thing, dogs that acted as protectors. In my real world, I was constantly being chased by dogs as I biked down streets. Third thing, tree house.

After reading Swiss Family Robinson I decided I would build a tree house and live in it forever, but of course I never did. I teased myself with the idea, though. Decades later as a man in his thirties I built a tree house on property I owned in Sullivan, New Hampshire. It was very crude, just a platform with floor joists nailed to five trees and a slanted roof but no sides, and it was only eight feet or so off the ground because I had (and still have) a fear of heights.

I used to go to the tree house to read, but the experience was never quite right. Sometimes it was too cold, and in the summer I would be attacked by mosquitos or the evil ones, black flies. I never gave up the idea of building a more elaborate tree house and living in it. I just built them in my imaginary world. The first virtual tree house appears in Mad Boys, published in 1993.

A tree house pops up in I Love u, which is a sort of sequel to Mad Boys but has never found a book publisher. (Mad Boys and I Love U are available as ebooks through Amazon Kindle.) I have an idea in my head of a future novel where almost all the action takes place in a tree house that is a thousand years old. Such a structure would have to be located in a very old tree indeed, perhaps a Sequoia in a remote California grove. Or maybe a freak White Oak tree in the Salmon Trust lands in Darby, New Hampshire. I dunno.

In Spoonwood, the sixth novel of the Darby Chronicles, Birch Latour and his friends Missy Mendelson and Bez Woodward build a tree house. Most trees houses built by kids are eventually abandoned when the kids mature. Not Birch's tree house. In the next book, Howard Elman's Farewell, Birch converts the early version into an elaborate, expensive high-tech structure for grownups. In my mind it represents my own dream come true. Birch Latour is me at 25 but greatly improved over the original model. I've projected my childhood dreams and desires upon him. I do something like that with all my characters, but Birch is a special character. Now that I am past seventy it's comforting to inhabit, if virtually, the persona of a youthful character.

The appeal of a tree house is universal and obvious. It's visually exciting; it's a get away; it gives the illusion of privacy and safety. And, hey, humans once lived in trees (supposedly), so the tree house is a virtual resort representing our primal past. For Birch and his lover, Tess Jordan, the tree house is a honeymoon cottage. It's also a beta project tied in with the couple's business, Geek Chorus Software, creators of the video game Darby Doomsday.

Birch and his friends are attempting to invent a workable way of life for their century, by ignoring the 20th century, embracing previous centuries, especially the 19th, but at the same time staying on the edge of technology and new discoveries of their own time period. This time-convergence idea gets played out in the tree house. Its design and location cups an ear to the whispered echoes of the past, but it has been built to take advantage of the 21st century version of the Spike Jones band. Birch will take what he learns from this experiment in the woods and use the knowledge to remodel the Salmon Estate. Which for me, the creator, is a future project. Wonder if it'll ever get done.

Hillary Farm

The Avalon Hillary Farm plays a big role in Whisper My Name, the third novel in the Darby Chronicles. One of the true life dramas that inspired that book was a proposal by an outside firm to build a pulp mill on farmland in Walpole, New Hampshire, back in the 1970s. The controversy showed the great divide between the people of North Walpole, who welcomed a company that would bring jobs to the area, and the more upscale people of Walpole who opposed the project for esthetic reasons. In the end the plan was defeated.

Farms of course have been disappearing from the New England landscape since the end of the Civil War. Romantic fools, such as myself, lament the loss. We believe that every New England town ought have a few farms anyway. Why? Because they enhance the views, because it's comforting to know that somebody nearby is raising food, because ... because ... well, it's hard to come up with reasons that don't contain at least some romantic foolery. The idea I was trying to get across in Whisper My Name is that once the farms go, the town, too, will vanish as an entity–an irretrievable loss.

In Whisper My Name, the Avalon Hillary dairy farm is located on River Road in Darby. Black and white Holstein cows look just right to my eye on green, rolling pasture land, with deep woods as a backdrop. In that book I even devised a battle between farmer Hillary operating a back hoe and a bull moose trying to gather Hillary's cows into a harem. When I picture the Hillary farm I see in my mind's eye a hip-roofed barn and the surrounding fields on South Village Road in my town of Westmoreland, New Hampshire.

In my role as a newspaper reporter covering town issues in the 1970s, I came to admire farmers for their wide-ranging knowledge, flexibility, and sometimes subtle sense of humor. Farmers have to be mechanics as well as herders; they have to know local, state and federal laws, not to mention accounting and business practices; they have to be physically strong and possess stamina. And to survive the emotional upheavals that come with market changes and weather events a farmer has to have a philosophical bent of mind to mediate the offenses to his practicality. I think the big loss to a community when the farmer sells off his land and retires to a warmer climate is not only the loss of the farm, it's the loss of the farm family and the smarts and savvy they bring to town government and local traditions.

Sandbank

I was in grade school when I first heard the phrase "glacial moraine"; it made me smile. I was thinking of my mother's superb lemon meringue pie. I wanted to raise my hand and say, "So, a glacial moraine is pie filling left by a glacier?" Perhaps that moment was the beginning of what would be a literary career. That is, it was the moment I discovered my love of the playfulness inherent in language. Put it another way, it was the moment I discovered that it was fun to be a smart ass.

Perhaps now I should turn to a definition. In the lingo I learned as a boy in the 1950s, growing up in Keene, New Hampshire, a "sandbank" is a glacial moraine that is being mined for its contents: sand. A truck back up to it and a steam shovel (more fifties lingo) grabs sand from the banking and dumps the contents in the bed of the truck. Imagine that, a truck has a bed: there is no end to word play, because precise meanings in language are so few.

In my part of the world–the "granite" state–there is something miraculous about a sandbank. Everywhere else the soil is rocky or non-existent (ledges, hardpan, river clay) or black and fecund. Somewhere along the line God, or whatever force you want to call Nature, dropped a handful of fine sand, as if from a distant ocean beach to create a grand dune. As a kid every time I happened into a sandbank I felt religious. Later, when I got my first car I would take girls to various sandbanks to neck. My idea or romance at the beach, since there was no nearby ocean. In my novel, Never Back Down, there's a love scene that takes place at a sandbank.

Sandbank memories:

Age 11 or 12. In those days of yore the sight of a boy on a bicycle carrying a .22 rifle would not have elicited a 911 call. In fact, there was no such thing as a 911 call. Indeed, there were no numbers on the telephone receiver at my house on 19 Oak Street in Keene, New Hampshire. You lifted the phone and brought it to your ear. The operator said, "Number Please." If you didn't have the number you said, "Information, please." Sometimes you recognized the operator's voice and she recognized your voice and you hellos.

So there I am on my balloon-tire Schwin, my .22 in a sling on my shoulder, pockets stuffed with bullets, .22 Longs. I'm bicycling to meet a friend on the other side of town. He's going introduce me to a secret game that he and his pals play. "Bring your 22 and plenty of ammo," he had said.

I get to his house, and from there we walk a fairly long ways through a path in the woods, each of us carrying our respective rifles. Eventually, we reached a sandbank. We're at a ridge. Below, the sand of the bank opens up, a gulf. On the other side is another ridge above the sand. My friend waves. I see two or three boys waving back.

My friend has no need to explain the game. I figure it out. We lay prone on the ground like soldiers, and the boys on the other side of the banking do the same. The idea is to shoot at the sandbank, aiming just below the "opposing team" on the opposite side of the banking. There is no scoring, no winners and no losers. It's a thrill game. One thrill is watching your bullets kick up sand just below your adversaries. Another thrill, even more stimulating, is watching your opponents' bullets kicking up sand on your side of the banking.

I enjoy the game immensely. It's only later, thinking about it, that I realize how dangerous it is. I never played that game again.

Age 15. I'm at a construction site of the Otter Brook flood control dam in Roxbury, New Hampshire, playing in the mounds of sand with a friend. Showing off, I leap from the top of a sand bank into the sand below. It's a little further than I figured, and I stumble forward throwing down my right hand to break my fall. Result: Badly dislocated wrist and the end of my career as a baseball pitcher and football quarterback. I could still throw hard, but the extra hard you need to excel was lost forever.

We did a lot of crazy things as boys growing up in the 1950s; it's a wonder that I and my playmates survived to adulthood. Well, actually we didn't. Two of my friends, including a distant cousin, David Lamoth and Dick Trombly, were killed in a car crash when they were sixteen. Which leads me to another sandbank story.

Age 16. Back in those days there was one straight road of length in Keene. We called it the summit road because the straight stretch eventually went into a steep curve up a hill. I heard rumors of drag races, though I never engaged in one myself. However, I did have a friend with a car and one day he took it out on the summit road to see how fast it would go. I was the passenger. These were the days before OSHA, before seat belts and other safety features we take for granted today. The car hit a hundred miles and hour and began to shake, rattle, but thank God it didn't roll.

I thought for a second there that the car would disintegrate. The scariest part was when we hit the curve and car was on two wheels for a moment before the grade slowed us down. We turned at the top of the hill at a sandbank. It may have been the same sandbank where I played the bullet game. That's when I got the idea that the sandbank would be a good place to go parking with a girl. At the time I had just gotten my driver's license, and had never been parking with a girl. But I had aspirations. That sandbank has since disappeared, replaced by the Keene city dump–excuse me, landfill.

All these sandbanks merged into one and made its way into my novel Howard Elman's Farewell where it trips into one of the main plots.

Turner Jordan Place

The Turner Jordan place, which appears in Howard Elman's Farewell, is based on one of the nicest properties in my town of Westmoreland, NH–house, workshop, and a garden where the wonders of nature integrate with the tastes and desires of the gardener.

However, the scene between Howard and Turner Jordan is one of my regrets. Turner Jordan is too much like Jim Merritt, a skilled wood worker who specializes in turned wooden bowls. I never meant to equate the fictional character with a very real person. It just happened in the writing.

My apologies to Jim Merritt, who is a good guy, the kind of guy you would want by your side if you had to go to war.

Latour's Spoonwood Cabin

In Spoonwood, Frederick Elman a.k.a. F. Latour moves into the woods at the site a former hippie commune from the 1960s to get away from booze to raise Birch, his infant son. I loved creating this little home in the woods along with its back story of hippie idealism and eroticism and, in the end, failed dreams.

I got the idea from a real place in my town of Westmoreland, New Hampshire, that I discovered forty something years ago. I'd walked a mile or so on a path up a steep wooded hillside, came to a relatively flat spot along the ridge of the hill. Though the area was heavily wooded there were some clearings here and there to let in plenty of sunlight.

The place gave me a pleasant feeling of having wandered into another era. There were stone walls, ledges, and a rock foundation that in some previous century might have supported a farmhouse and barn, all grown over with trees and brush. I found a big flat rock that capped a dug well.

I was pondering all this when I could see a flash of yellow through the trees. I walked over to investigate and came upon a schoolbus that had been converted into a home. Over the windows were faded tie-dyed curtains. The bus door had been removed and the entry had filled with wind-blown pine needles.

The inside was disappointing. It had been gutted, nothing remaining of furnishings or personal articles from the inhabitants. I filled in all the details with my imagination and loaded them into my novel, Spoonwood.

Salmon Estate and Cooty's Cabin

I have roots in the Monadnock Region, that part of New Hampshire in the southwestern corner whose landmark is Mount Monadnock, a place of forests, glacial erotics–excuse me, glacial erratics–and of course the mountain. My connection with this area begins with my uncle, my first mentor, and the man I am named after, the Rev. Joseph Ernest Vaccarest. His first parish as a young pastor was St. Dennis Church in Harrisville in the late 1930s and early 1940s. I don't know for sure, but I believe he helped his kid sister and my future mother–Jeannette Elodie Vaccarest–get a job as a nanny for the Cabot family that resided in a house in Hanover and a mansion in Dublin, next town over from Harrisville.

For a long time Dublin was just another hill town of farmers, but it also had great beauty that included Dublin Lake and spectacular views of Mount Monadnock with the result that from around 1870 and onward it became less a farm town and more a get-away for rich people and artists from down country. During my mother's time in Dublin, her employers, the Cabot family, lived with another family, the Pierces, in a huge Italian-style villa built by the prominent architect Raphael Pumpelly.

One of the continuing characters in the Darby series is Raphael Salmon, known as the Squire of Darby and who resides in the fanciest house in town. I patterned the Salmon estate and house on the Pumpelly estate in Dublin, so it would be logical to conclude that I also named my character Raphael after Raphael Pumpelly, who built the mansion. However, it's a coincidence. It wasn't until after I'd created Raphael Salmon (nickname "Reggie") that I learned Pumpelly's first name. In fact for a long time I incorrectly assumed that Pumpelly was the name of the estate (some kind of corruption of an Italian place name) not the name of the owner who contracted to build the place who just happened to be an architect. The name "Reggie" came from Reginald Van Gleason III, a character created by comedian/actor Jackie Gleason back in the days of black and white TV. Put it all together and it makes no sense. That's the way it goes in novel writing, for me anyway.

That Pumpelly mansion featured grand museum-sized rooms on the first floor, bedroom suites for the Cabot and Pierce families on the second floor, along with guest rooms, and a warren of little rooms on the third floor for the help. There were so many servants that one man's only job was to polish things. My mother, who was a registered nurse, cared for two or maybe three children. Today she would have been called a nanny. I don't

think she would have liked that word. She was very proud of being an RN, registered nurse.

One afternoon at the mansion on her day off she was conversing with a friend, an upstairs maid, when the maid's boyfriend showed up on a motorcycle. Astride another motorcycle (Indian was the brand name) was another young man, Elphege Hebert, a factory worker from Keene. Jeannette, nicked named JenJen by the Cabot family, agreed to double-date with the other man. Jeannette and Elphege discovered they had a lot in common. Neither was a drinker and their families had both come to the states from French Canada. They were married in July of 1940. I was born ten months later.

So then, the Salmon house (called The Manse in Howard Elman's Farewell) is based on the Cabot/Pierce Pumpelly Hill mansion. I know what the mansion looked like in the late 1960s, because I'd been in it. In college, I met a guy who was a house-sitter at the mansion and he gave me a tour. By then servants were hard to find, and the mansion must have cost a fortune to heat and maintain, so the current owners gave up on it as a home. The house-sitter was the only occupant. Another decade or so passed and I read in the newspaper that some burglars had stripped the house of its valuables, then burned it down. So sad an end for so grand a manse.

The Manse is not a copy of the Pumpelly Hill structure. In fact, I never quite made up my mind about what the Salmon place looks like. In one book I envisioned it resembling the Pumpelly Hill mansion, based on an Italian villa. In another book it was shingled like a Newport, RI, "cottage." The inspiration for that was another big house in Dublin. I never gave the Salmon mansion a name until the seventh novel of the Darby Chronicles, Howard Elman's Farewell. I want to do more with Birch Latour's "Manse"–redecorate it, redesign it, under the persona of Birch, the heir to the Salmon Estate. When The Manse is ready for an open house I will post pictures.

Birch's tastes parallel my own, and yet he's not yet a fully drawn character. Maybe I'll develop him in some future work. Birch was brought up in the New Hampshire woods in a hippie schoolbus renovated into a cabin. He's inherited a little bit of his father's 1970s counter-culture aesthetic. But he's also a man of his own time, cool, confident, conflicted; his idea of a better society is a 19th century life-style combined with 21st century technology; he would like to skip over the 20th century.

Brich and his values in any deep way are yet to be formed and tested. Stay tuned. And let's remember that Birch's new wife, Tess Jordan, will have more than a little say how

her house should look and what shape her family should take. I have not thought through her aesthetic concerns. How this all comes out as an architectural plan remains to be seen.

Howard Elman's Farewell begins with Cooty Patterson's hundredth birthday party. During that event, the old hermit's cabin is moved to the Salmon estate so that Birch, now 24 and the heir to the property, can watch over him.

I like simple living. It's the way I grew up. It's the way I live today. I have no desire to live any other way. But I do like to imagine what complex living is like, which is one reason I created the Salmon Estate, the grandest property in Darby. Imagine putting all your belief system into your house and yard: that's how I picture the world of the Salmons. I wonder if this vision is accurate, since I haven't lived it.

Ledges Where Birch Was Born

High places scare me. This fear is probably built into my dna, but an experience that almost killed me surely made the phobia worse and, alas, permanent. I was about age 12 visiting my priest uncle with my family in the Pinardville section of Manchester, NH. We often went to Manchester and sometimes stayed a week or more at the rectory of St. Edmund's Parish where my uncle was pastor; while I was there I made a friend, Omer Beaudoin.

Omer was a daring high-spirited kid, whose company I greatly enjoyed.

One day he showed me a new game. He walked along the back railing of the sidewalk of the Piscataqua Bridge. The drop to a shallow river or on land was more than enough to get anybody killed. I was in a jolly double-dare mood at the time, and since my friend had risked his life, I had to, too. I went out on the back of the railing in a giddy moos. Somewhere out there, I looked down. In that moment, my world changed forever. Suddenly, I understood that one false move and I would die; suddenly, I understood human mortality. For few seconds I froze, the feeling of panic so intense and unpleasant that death itself seemed preferable. I had urge to just drop. Then I realized that no, I wanted to live. But I was frozen–could not move. Then a blank space in memory. Somehow I was able to inch my way to safety.

Since that day I have been not just afraid of heights, but terrified. I've made a few attempts to face this fear and failed every time. Today I'm more or less resigned to it. My phobia worked its way into my novel Live Free or Die. When I was writing that book I remembered the seven months I lived in New Orleans back in 1967. I got around on a tiny 100 cc Yamaha motorcycle. Couple time I had to cross the Huey P. Long bridge that spans the Mississippi, an experience I loathed for the terror it brought out in me. The worse job I could dream was painting the upper spans of that bridge. That's the job I gave to Frederick Elman, and the book opens with a scene on the bridge.

The culminating scenes in Whisper My Name and in Live Free or Die occur at high ledges on the Salmon Trust. For me, the fear of falling from high ledges and bridges is ever present. Since I can't deal with the real thing, I purge it through my writing. Did I write "purge it"? Well, not really. I have a moment of mastery while I'm creating the scene, but the good feeling goes away very quickly. I've found that writing about bad experiences only momentarily eases the trauma. In fact, writing can make it worse. Conclusion: Writing is not good therapy.

The Zombie Metaphor and a Future for the Human Species

by Origen

NOTE TO THE READER: What follows is fiction, a draft of some future work? Maybe.

Hello, Birch, here is the piece I told you about. If you think it appropriate put it in the Darby Doomsday data base. I know it's pretty esoteric stuff, but hey you did hire me to conceptualize for Geek Chorus Software, so maybe we can find a place for this idea in our game.

What does it mean to be human? I don't mean in the larger sense, something anybody can all agree on–for example, that humans are sentient beings; I mean what does it mean to you as an individual? Answers vary. Here's what it means to me.

We philosophers have to concentrate on being self-aware more than most people. It's part of the job. Whether one is a hybrid Buddhist/Existentialist, such as myself, or a novelist like that bonehead Hebert, or even a news reporter, in the end one is always ruminating about one's self. We are not doers; we are mere thinkers. The only thing philosophers have to give to the world is our observations, our experiences, our insights, our very thoughts and feelings. To do that task at the highest level requires some examination of one's own thoughts, feelings, and personal history. There are different ways of going about this task. Let us count a few of the ways.

Now, Birch, I know that you were influenced by your grandmother Elenore Elman–you grew up with streak of her hybrid Catholicism; accordingly, you might examine your conscience before confessing your sins to your priest. Funny that we are asked to contemplate our vices and not our virtues. I suppose virtues are less interesting to heaven than the vices.

For the non-believer in you, and in most of our colleagues in Geek Chorus Software, there are the pleasures and pitfalls of telling your troubles to a therapist to discover how your family background has affected your behavior and feelings. Yet another way is to read the huge amount of literature these days about the mechanics of the brain. Fascinating stuff. Map your genome and pass it on, improved of course, to your progeny. Mix and match genes with our partners to create super babies. What the world doesn't

know is that we in Geek Chorus Software are already halfway there with Wiqi Durocher and Luci Sanz.

As a philosopher, I have interests in all of these ways of self-discovery along with my own little quirky notions which lead to that question: what is it that makes us human and, more specifically, makes us ourselves? I don't think it's our commonality; it's our differences. Each human brain is a little different from other brains, and sometimes only we who possess the brain can locate, understand, and use these differences in our work and personal lives. I've given up on trying to be a better person, but I am constantly looking into myself in hopes of becoming a better thinker. I'll begin with general observations. Thinkers by nature tend to be outsiders, which leads to a kind of loneliness-in-a-crowd feeling. At the same time this state of mind gives us an ability to look at our world and ourselves from an outside perspective, like looking at the stars through a telescope or at bugs through a microscope. What is the human equivalent to the telescope or the microscope? It's your thinking apparatus. I ask myself the question? Just how do I think?

For Origen there are three ways to think: through imagery, through language, and through pure abstraction. And of course memory helps with thinking, though it is not thinking per se. I can picture a dog. Now I'm thinking of my family's beagle/basset hound (before the divorce, before my madness, before my crimes) that I take cross-country skiing. If I close my eyes I can picture myself on the skis after a fresh snow. I'm breaking trail in the woods. BeaBass runs with me. He goes up, then dives into the snow, and with his short legs almost disappears, until he suddenly shoots up. And now I am thinking metaphorically of a porpoise. BeaBass plunges in and out of the snow like a porpoise. Dog, porpoise. Two images. Am I really seeing a dog turn into a porpoise, the snow now an ocean? Not really. I am creating metaphors.

I used to believe that I thought mainly visually: Dog, porpoise, snow, cross-country skis. I see them in my mind's eye. Mind's eye? Now there's another metaphor. Just what do I see in this "mind's eye?" I'm trying but I don't visualize anything. Now I am analyzing myself after my incarceration, and the psychiatrist is asking me to draw a face with an emotional expression. I draw an ellipse with funny ears, round eyes, and my version of a frown. I have many limitations as an artist. One is that I can draw only crudely out of my ability to visualize; I can draw better what I see. This is the pattern of most people, even most professional artists. We draw from models or from photographs or from memory, but what is the nature of that memory?

Even when we draw from our so-called imagination we are actually putting together bits and pieces from structures produced by our memory. We are not really visualizing anything with this mind's eye; what's in our minds is a script; that is, the mind's eye does not see; it reports, describes, and fools us into thinking we are visualizing. Dog, beagle/basset, white with brown and black irregular shaped spots, floppy ears, short legs that resemble turkey drumsticks, and droopy eyes. The human ability to visualize is extremely primitive. We depend on language–or call it code–for just about everything that requires judgement and intelligence, even pictures in the so-called mind's eye.

What about abstract thinking? BeaBas is tangled in his leash. His doggie intelligence has certain olfactory advantages over mine, but when it comes to abstracting I have him beat. I can tell in an instant how to untangle him. Such is abstract thinking. It comes more or less automatically, like breathing. I don't actually think in abstractions. To summarize: my thinking, your thinking, all human thinking, is mainly verbal. Which makes me wonder: just how much thinking could I do if I didn't have language? Would I be no better off intellectually than my dog?

I'm at an age where a person's name, or even a common word, often does not come immediately to mind. It's in there some place, but I have to fish it out. Maybe there will come a day when the name itself has departed. Maybe there will come a day when I cannot remember your face. Cannot remember our times together. Cannot remember BeaBas. In this tragic decline, am I still me? Is there a point when I disappear? Maybe my body is still with you, but my soul has left. Or maybe the essence of Origen is just dead. I no longer exist. My apparently living body remains as a reminder to others that I once existed. But I am no longer there.

Sometimes the results of our thinking gets stored up in muscle memory, way way on the edge of our thinking processes. Indeed, thinking sometimes interferes with action. Think about how to hit a curve ball (which by the way I could never do with any facility) and the ball will go right by before you swing the bat. How about typing? Where is the "a" on the keyboard. The pinkie finger of my left hand knows before my brain does. Even every day conversation pours out without thought. When you stop to think out what you are going to say the language is almost always stilted. The best stuff comes unsummoned, also the worst stuff, the stuff you wish you could take back. Action from muscle memory is creative but messy. In this way, we are like the beasts who react under threat. Thinking is just a small part of the mind, but really it is the part that makes us who we are. How we think is what makes us human.

How are we different from animals? What makes us different from our cats and dogs, or the wild creatures? After all even a rat thinks to get itself out of a maze. Chimpanzees, like us, are self-aware and share most of our dna. What makes our thinking unique? Perhaps it is a disposition toward metaphor; furthermore, it's this disposition toward metaphor that led to complex human languages. As children grow into adults and become more sophisticated in their thinking they learn to quote unquote "read between the lines." What is not there is often more important than what is: this is metaphorical thinking at its most sophisticated–and perverse. Religion is a metaphor. Jokes are metaphors. Horse walks into a bar, bartender says, "Why the long face?" You can teach a dog a few nouns, and you can teach a chimp verbs, and you can teach a horse to react to your voice, but you cannot teach any of these creatures to respond to a simple joke that any ordinary human being will get: why the long face?

Let's take the word boring. You may be thinking, Origen bores me. You're probably not thinking that "boring" likely comes from the tedious activity of boring a hole with an old-style wood auger. What do we call a word whose metaphorical roots have been forgotten? A dead metaphor. Boring is a dead metaphor, because it's original meaning has passed away (another metaphor). The phrase "dead metaphor" is itself a dead metaphor, since a metaphor cannot literally die because it was never actually alive. Most of our nouns and many of our verbs are made up of dead metaphors.

I get a kick (another dead metaphor) when I see dead metaphors rise up out of the grave. Here's the lead paragraph from the sports page of a local newspaper. "Harisamowitz lit the spark that turned the tide." The literal meaning of words often sails right by our thinking apparatus, because our language, like ourselves, inhabits a world of figurative speech. And indeed figurative life. We read novels, go to the movies, watch TV, attend stage plays, indulge in video games, enjoy sporting events, listen to Wait Wait Don't Tell Me on the radio. So much of our lives occurs in a world of language-based make-believe.

In the Catholic world of your grandmother Elenore (who from reports baptized you in the cradle) baptized people had three possible places to go after death. If they were very very good, they would go to heaven; very very bad, hell; most people of course are neither very very good nor very very bad, and are headed for purgatory, like Hamlet's dad:

"Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,

And for the day confined to fast in fires,

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purged away."

But what about the souls of unbaptized babies and other special cases? They went to limbo until God decided what to do with them at the final judgment. In our day limbo has taken on a new meaning. Limbo as a dead metaphor is a condition of waiting, often in a political context. The proposal is in limbo until the committee puts it on their agenda. You could actually use two dead metaphors to make a point that a casual reader would grasp without even thinking about the literal meaning, which would make no sense. The committee "tabled" the plan, which effectively put it "limbo."

So back in June of 2013 I'm listing to NPR's Morning Edition. Remember when one of the guys who detonated a bomb at the Boston Marathon was killed? Seems like no cemetery would accept his body for burial. Then one did. The newscaster said a Virginia cemetery had agreed to bury the body after the remains had been in limbo for a week.

When dead metaphors rise up out of their graves they lurch around but they are not really live metaphors. I call these zombie metaphors. For me, what it means to be human, what makes us unique, is our disposition toward metaphor. Once that's gone, the very idea of humanity is gone.

Let us now look at the future of the human species and how metaphor can save it.

With climate change, we are at the very beginning of what may well be a doomsday scenario. Even if our politicians smarten up and pass the laws necessary to make us a less polluting nation, will the rest of the world follow? I don't think so. Even if, magically, the entire world decided to go Green, it's probably too late. The earth has made its course change, and we really don't know where it's taking us in the next two or three or more centuries.

In fact, climate change is inevitable whether we humans act or not. Earth has made many climate corrections in its past and its climate will continue to change in ways that will be disruptive to civilization at best, ruinous at worst. Even if the impending climate change of our epoch ends up being relatively benign we–and by "we" I mean we humans–face so many other problems in the future that we could wreak havoc simply by

being ourselves. Our institutions of order are so at odds with each other, so outmoded that they cannot keep up with technological change. Overpopulation alone could bring down civilization without a shot being fired.

And then there is pollution of various kinds. Remember that movie version of War of the Worlds? Invaders from outer space want to take over the earth, because they've ruined their own planet. Well, those invaders are us: we are ruining our own planet. In the movie the invaders suffer a massive die-off because of a pandemic. Who's to say we won't suffer the same fate? Even if humans do the right thing, clean up our act, it's likely that one of these days disaster will come from a crashing comet or asteroid or some other source outside of our ability to control or even to predict.

What we think of as civilization–which seems to come with the codification of spoken language into the written word–is only about 10,000 years old, if that. A blink in planetary time. We can imagine our world in ten years, in a hundred years, maybe even in another two or three hundred, but what about a thousand years? What about 10,000 years? What about one hundred thousand years? What about a million years? If cockroaches can survive millions of years, why can't we? Maybe we can and maybe we will, but because of these natural disasters that the planet itself is subject to I don't see how civilization as we know it can survive over a long period of time. The best we can hope for is a series of die-offs of our species with a few survivors each time. What we call civilization will have to be constantly rebuilt. A process of constant start-ups and failures. In the long run, very little progress. We're like that Greek guy that pushes the rock up the hill, only to have it roll back down over him, so he has to start over. And over. And over again.

In the end, changes in the sun will remove our oxygen and vaporize our oceans. The earth itself will fall into our now red sun. The sun will burn out.

Perhaps human civilization will be carried on in other worlds. But there are problems with that scenario, too. There's a lot of radiation once we leave the air cushion of mother earth. Biological life requires access to air, water and frequent food, and without this access it perishes. Trips to the stars seem unlikely given our present circumstance as short-lived, biological specimens.

If we are looking to maintain the human species and to advance civilization I don't think we can get there by conservation or technology or religious faith. Seems to me the gods of all our religions are as unreliable as our leaders. We can't depend on God; we can't

depend on Nature. I think we have to depend upon ourselves. I believe our strongest asset is our ability to adapt and our disposition to embark. Human beings have a knack for road trips, boat trips, foot trips, mountain bike trips, space trips, and acid trips. We are at heart explorers looking for … something … what? God? Home? Gold? Our neighbor's spouse? Lands and peoples to conquer? Or just along for the ride? All those rides, what are they about? I think they are built into our dna. What would be–or perhaps I should say, what will be–the ultimate trip?

I think the answer to that question is our only hope for a journey toward a vibrant civilization in the near as well as the far distant future. And the answer is? To maintain our species we have to change ourselves. We have to take charge of our own evolution. Those of us with a religious bent of mind have to believe we are evolving toward God. Evolving toward–and now the heretic in me is speaking–immortality. What is the one part of ourselves that we share with all biological creatures–it's death. It's the one part of our humanity that we can all do without. I believe that evolution toward immortality has already begun. And the direction is away from our biological make-up.

Birch, remember when Luci and Wiqi outfitted you with a new artificial foot and ankle? It is a very well made prosthesis. You manipulate it with your nerve endings as if you have a real foot. You can even feel touch, cold and warmth. You and thousands of other people are making do with metaphors of body parts.

How about doing away with messy biological bodies and create designer bodies so that the entire physical self, like the artificial hand, is a prosthesis? The human body as a metaphor? Suppose you can transfer who you are: your self-awareness, your identity, your memories, everything that is you into a little package of parts that looks like you at your best; or, more likely, a better you. Better looking, more fit, smarter. For someone who is young, attractive, and athletic, and whose identity is still in the process of being formed a new unit is not a particularly enticing idea. But for someone over forty or who is on the decline because of disease or accident, or someone older in a nursing home, well, they'll take that full body replacement in a New Hampshire minute.

Let's look at some of the benefits. Something goes wrong, you just replace the part. There's no aging. You become, for all practical purposes, immortal. We can adapt a lot faster to a changing earth than biological creatures. We can adapt ourselves to space travel easier. If we were to land on another planet and the natives of this place breached our spaceship they would not find a crew. We the explores would exist virtually in the computer of the spaceship. Our crew to the stars in effect would be the space craft. Once

out of the ship and onto the surface we can adapt our bodies to its atmosphere and gravity and climate.

Our lives would not be dull. We would be able to experience everything that our biological ancestors experienced, from licking a popsicle, to the smell of pop corn popping, to going to the bath room, and even great sex; perhaps a little bit of managed pain now and then, not too much, just enough to remind us of our biological ancestry. As we replace our parts we can experience realms not available to biological humans. Seeing x-rays, hearing whales the way whales hear whales; maybe, I don't know, experiencing cosmic ray orgasms; shedding light on dark matter. On this journey to the stars, a dangerous mission for advanced humanity, you could back up your identity on the equivalent of what we call today a server. You would be–what?–beside yourself?

I like to think once we dispense with biological bodies that the idea of human competition–conquest and war and torture–will be ameliorated or maybe even fade into history. Take away the curse of mortality and bring on an enhanced pleasure principle and there is little reason to want to control and dominate others.

The human epoch as a metaphor of its biological days: well, I find it exciting and disconcerting to think about. Such change is far enough away in the future that it's not scary, like worrying about your children having to deal with climate change or atomic bomb warfare. Certainly, mind-transfer will never happen for me, nor for you, Birch. What about your children, your grandchildren, our progeny down the line? How long–fifty years, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand? Who knows, but at the rate technology is expanding it might not be all that long.

The obvious problem, man against machine, has been done over and over again in Hollywood movies and sci-fi novels. The machines take over and we're fighting the robots. In the movies we always squeeze out a win. In the real world if the robots really to do get smarter than we are and want to take over they will. We won't stand a chance. I think Hollywood and the sci-fi folks have it all wrong, though. I think Luci Sanz and Wiqi Durocher are on the right track for an inevitable future. We won't be fighting the machine. We will be the machine.

The real problem is making the transition from biological to metaphorical humanity. A promise of immortality, a promise of a body that is always efficient, a body that will constantly improve itself, a body that feels no pain, a body that can experience what it means to be human without worry of illness or aging, who won't want it? Who will get

it? I think the answer is obvious. The rich and powerful, their families, their connections will grab for the technology: a few national political leaders, corporate CEOs, rogue billionaires, generalismos. There will be wars to see who controls this medium. In the end, whoever wins will have total command. Will they be the caretakers for the rest of us? Will they enslave us? My guess is they will simply sterilize the remaining humans, and biological humanity will die out. Maybe not; maybe a few people will be kept in zoos as curiosities.

The final product of human beings, say one million years from now, will be a mathematical construct. We will experience all that is human but it will be virtual. Sounds horrifying to us bio humans, but really with the way we live today we're already half way there. We are highly adaptable to a life of metaphor.

For us at Geek Chorus Software I say we must always keep in mind our motto: All Can Be Saved.