

Mary Rockcastle and David Oppegaard

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK BUSCH**

Frederick Busch was the author of more than twenty-seven books – novels, short story collections, and works of nonfiction. In his latest novel, *North: A Novel*, he returned to Jack, the protagonist and narrator of *Girls*. While *North*, like *Girls*, is a whodunit, it is also a multilayered exploration of the power of grief, of memory, and of the complicated ties that bind one human being to another.

The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* writes that Busch is “an artist who counts, a writer who matters to the cultural health of the nation.” His short story collection, *The Children in the Woods: New and Selected Stories*, was a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award, as was his acclaimed novel, *The Night Inspector*. He received the PEN/Malamud Award for achievement in short fiction, the National Jewish Book Award, an award in fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and fellowships from the NEA and Guggenheim Foundations. Busch was the Edgar Fairchild Professor of Literature at Colgate University, where he taught for many years before retiring in 2003. He died of a heart attack on February 23, 2006, at the age of sixty-four.

This public dialogue with Frederick Busch was held in front of a live audience on October 18, 2005, during his visit to the Graduate School of Liberal Studies at Hamline University. The two interviewers were Mary Rockcastle, Dean of the Graduate School of Liberal Studies, and David Oppegaard, a student in the M.F.A. program at Hamline. Questions at the end were from members of the audience.

**Oppegaard:** In *Girls*, Jack and Fanny lost their child when she was an infant, but the missing girl Jack is looking for is a teenager. Why did you choose Jack's and Fanny's particular loss, which seems to have nothing to do with child abduction, as a catalyst for Jack in his search for Janice Tanner?

**Busch:** At the time that I began to write *Girls*, which I would guess was around 1995 or 1996, there was a wave of abductions in the part of New York state where I live. I live about 200 miles north of New York City and about seventy miles south and east of Syracuse. One of the girls who was taken was walking by the side of the road on her way home from Sunday school. It was that all-American story when an all-American monster took her. Her family responded to the emergency by covering the area with posters showing the little girl with her cheerleader pom-poms. She had a sweet, sad, desperate face, and everywhere you looked there were pictures of this child. What you saw was an index of the family's grief, as well as an index of the innocence that had been violated, was being violated.

At one point, the friends of the family came onto the Colgate campus. They covered all the cars in the faculty and student parking lots with these posters, "Have you seen this girl?" Then somebody came into the classroom building where I worked and stuck the posters on the bulletin boards. I had to do something, but I couldn't get her back, could I? The next best thing I could do was to transform my perception of their pain and my sense of my own inability and pain. I thought of a man I had been thinking of off and on for several years – Jack, the protagonist of the story, "Ralph the Duck." When I wrote that story, I did not know the source of the sorrow shared by Jack and Fanny. I was coldly practical in that I realized I could use the quest for this stolen girl as

a way of answering my own question: what happened to the baby of Fanny and Jack?

The writing of the novel *Girls* was therefore an odd mixture of coldness and passion on my part – practicality and need simultaneously.

I was into the book a very short time before the nature of the story, the root of the problem of the fate of their child, came to me. When I fully understood Jack as a character who could not speak, I wanted to explore all kinds of inability of speaking in the novel told by the man who couldn't speak. I quite enjoyed the paradox, relished it in writing about a character who could not name his dog but who could tell you his story somehow and have those two contradictory impulses going on at once.

**Oppegaard:** Jack never tells Fanny about her role in her child's death, and this eventually leads to their breakup and the tragedy involving the family. Do you think if Jack had told Fanny they would have stayed together, or at least found some semblance of peace with their daughter's death?

**Busch:** No. I admire Jack because he was willing to do the greatest thing you can do for someone you love and want to keep. And that is to give them up. What greater sacrifice can a love require? I would be too selfish. I would have told my wife. I would have whined and whimpered and ruined our lives together in a different way, but I'm not the man Jack is. He kept his mouth shut because it would have killed her to know what she did. She was, after all, a nurse, a lifesaver. Being Jack, he could only do what he did, which was to keep his mouth shut and let her leave him.

**Oppegaard:** Did you believe when you finished *Girls* that you were done with Jack's and Fanny's story? What drew you to come back to it in *North*?

**Busch:** I had the feeling at that point that I could stop writing novels that broke my heart to write and have a new career as a writer who produced only novels about Jack. They would be less serious and I would respect them less, I would make more money, and I could ride off into the sunset on them. In fact, I was asked by a publisher to create such a series.

**Rockcastle:** About Jack?

**Busch:** Yeah. And my answer was fairly snooty, I'm afraid. I said, "I don't know how good a writer I am and I guess history will be the judge, but I would like it to be known that I was a serious writer who tried to be an artist, and I think if I stop being an artist I won't be able to live with myself. So, no thank you. Take your million." I then wrote a couple of novels that were rather difficult to write: *The Night Inspector* and *A Memory of War*. *A Memory of War* was very, very complicated. I hated writing it. I didn't have much fun when I got myself into dark, Freudian territory. I thought the ghost of my mother was coming down to smite me. It made me want to write a really simple book.

I yearned to ventriloquize again, to speak again through the consciousness of Jack because Jack broke things down pretty basically as I can't—good or bad, honest, dishonest. I don't mean he's simple-minded, but Jack knows when he gets up in the morning that you are supposed to try to be a good man. If you can't do that, you should not feel good when you lie down again at night. I'm rather more kind to myself than that, I fear, in my own life, but I wanted to live Jack's for awhile and so I went back.

I also felt that there was unfinished business with Jack. I had, beginning with *Girls*, embarked upon what I now rather grandly call a project—I don't know if it was

that full of intention or not—of writing about the impact of the past on the present and finding ways of talking about one’s personal history, talking about my characters’ personal histories, in ways useful to the reader. How did I connect the past with the present in this character? I was pitched into thinking of it by my friend, David Bradley, who’s a smarter man than I am, and who saw that that’s what I had done with *Girls*. And I thought “Oh, maybe that’s what I ought to be doing,” and I did it until I couldn’t do it anymore. I finished it with *North*. From now on, everything is going to be hazy and fun.

**Oppegaard:** Jack’s dog is a wonderful source of comic relief in *Girls* but exits *North* as a character early on. Did you feel the dog’s absence as keenly as Jack did as you worked on the remainder of *North*?

**Busch:** Yes. We have often had three labradors at a time, and we’re down to two, and the dog on whom the dog in *Girls* and *North* is based is, was, a dog named Jake who was our dearest heart. I had to have Jake put down. I had to go there and have my hands on him when he stopped breathing. One way I tried to deal with missing him was to write about his absence. You can allow yourself that – it doesn’t hurt the reader too much, I thought. A lot of people, when they heard that I was writing about Jack, asked me about the dog, and when I made it clear that he had made an exit, acted as though I had unforgivably taken something from them.

**Oppegaard:** In your book, *A Dangerous Profession: A Book about the Writing Life*, you write,

Fiction that matters, of course, cannot be about living happily ever after. Serious writers don’t, I think, believe in it – although they might keep wanting to. Serious writing is about the trail of lifesaving breadcrumbs that are eaten by the forest birds. It is about being disposable. It is about what you say to yourself even if you have defeated the terrible darkness of nighttime in the forest, or the witch and her oven, or the dangerous,

unmapped distance that separates you from home. It is about living a truth you've discerned but don't want to know. It is about hunger, how hunger comes first.

Is this the same as saying a piece of fiction that matters cannot be about a progression towards a happy conclusion? Do any realistic characters get to live happily ever after anymore?

**Busch:** I don't know if people get to live happily ever after. I won't know until I die. At that moment I will know the secret, and if you care to get in touch, I will tell you. Certainly happiness is one of our subject matters, and the desire for it and the quest for it are what serious writers consider and write about, I think. Is that what you're asking me? I don't think it is. I think you want me to say that what I said isn't true. I think what I said *is* true, that that is what we write about. We write about nightmares. We write about sorrows. We write about not wanting to have the sorrows. We write about wanting to wake up next to someone we love and have the nightmares obliterated, and some of us are lucky and sometimes that happens. Obviously. And we write about that sometimes when it happens, but we know when it happens, it happens sometimes, and the reason the word *sometimes* is in my sentences now is because that means there are times when that happiness is not in my sentences.

**Oppegaard:** During your prolific career as a writer, what truths about writing fiction have you discerned that you never wanted to know?

**Busch:** That it's impossible. *That* I never wanted to know.

**Oppegaard:** Yesterday you talked about how you don't like doing book tours that much.

**Busch:** I don't like publishing.

**Oppegaard:** And you don't like publishing.

**Busch:** I hate all of that.

**Oppegaard:** I'm sure most of the people in the room join me in salivating over that.

**Busch:** Sure. It is no critique of anyone who wishes to be published if I say that it's a humbling—extraordinarily humbling, and often, almost always, demeaning—experience. When I was in my early thirties, thirty-two I think, my first novel was published. I had written three novels before that that were not published. I sent my manuscript to a friend of mine who was a poet in Scotland at the time, and I asked him what he thought. I had never taken a creative writing class, and I didn't have anyone to commiserate with except my poor wife. I just thought maybe I had finally written a novel. I probably took milk money away from the baby to get the postage to send this bulky thing overseas. I remember we went to New York City, and when we came back there was a telegram under the door. In those days they actually would send somebody with a telegram and slide it under your door. It referred to an English publisher named Calder and Boyars, a London house that published Samuel Beckett and other good writers. The telegram said Calder and Boyars want to buy world rights to your novel for 200 pounds. That was 480 dollars then. And they still own those rights. I looked at the telegram and said, "My luck has changed." Judy looked, too, and said, "It's beginning."

I thought it was going to be all gravy and no potatoes from then on. My life didn't change. All that happened was that I was more disappointed in the novel I had written than I thought I would be when I re-read it. As a rule when you publish, whether it's a poem in a magazine or a book of poems, or a novel or collection of stories, your life

does not change substantially because your life is as a writer, and that means your job is to suffer the unrequited love of your characters. There are such impediments to pleasure in the act of publishing and the experience of publishing, which you're not going to care about when you publish your first book. And if you're lucky enough, the second book.

**Oppegaard:** By the end of *North*, do you think Jack has found a measure of peace that he lacked before the novel started?

**Busch:** Yes. It depends if we can use tablespoons and teaspoons for the measures. I think he thinks at the beginning of that book that it does not matter whether he lives or not. I think he wouldn't mind if somebody killed him, or if he died. By the end of the book, he does care, so that's, in existential terms, several tablespoons. That's half a cup. But real peace, I don't know. He should have gone off with Merle. Don't you think?

**Rockcastle:** One of the things I love about *The Night Inspector* is that you're interweaving two plot lines: Billy's experience as a sniper in the Civil War up until his accident, and his life in New York City in the present, including his relationship with M (Herman Melville). Sometimes you use memory or reverie as a transition into the past, but often you just make the leap. For example, Sam Mordecai and Billy will be in a conversation, and in the next paragraph Billy's in bed with Jessie. Then, in the paragraph after that, he's back in the conversation with Sam. How did you finesse it on the page so the reader doesn't get lost or the movement feel disjointed?

**Busch:** I have no idea. I wrote the novel in a state of panic. I was frightened every day when I went from the house to the barn and upstairs to my workroom because I was writing about Herman Melville. He is to me the great hero of American letters and



the author of the great American novel. He's also a brilliant exemplar to us of how to mismanage the literary career, how to set fire to the cash and how to die for art. I was afraid to confront him.

Melville was so big a character to me that I was actually too intimidated to write his name, so in the novel he's called M. I thought that was really stupid, but I couldn't help it. I couldn't write the rest of his name. It was a very passive/aggressive thing. I wanted to take advantage of his life and career for my own artistic purposes, and yet I was also at the same time afraid to do it. Of course, I used a nineteenth century device which you often find in fiction today: I created the character of Billy, William Bartholomew, who narrates the book, who is the protagonist of the book, to be a kind of intercessionary force to get me to Melville. I was trying to sidle up to the great man instead of trying to deal with him directly. William Bartholomew was not only a machine in the plot the way I first wrote him, but he was a machine that enabled me to approach this man for whom I have so much reverence. And William Bartholomew took over my book; he *became* the book.

This was not my intention. I had proposed a very short novel to my publisher that would be about Melville dealing with the death of his son Malcolm, a suicide. My editor talked herself into thinking I wanted to write a book that would be a mystery in which Melville would solve the crime of who killed his son. She had her checkbook out and I thought "Sure, why not? Sure, we can do that, yeah." And so I got a rather hefty advance based on the commercial success of *Girls*. There I was, in their eyes apparently, committed to writing a book about the mystery of Melville's boy's death, and in fact I was writing about the mystery of Melville. I was writing about the mystery of art. And

William Bartholomew was going to get me there. I didn't know who William Bartholomew was; I just knew I would have a character who had been a veteran and who was involved in financial schemes at the beginning of what became known as the Gilded Age. A man who had been badly wounded in the Civil War, who would be seeking his revenge on the culture at large by making money. You know, I think of people like Trump and others like him. I have the feeling there's a lot of violence in these people, and pleasure in becoming moguls. It has to do with plundering, bullying – it's all kind of bellicose. The Gilded Age was a great time for that, and New York was my town, so I was ready to go.

Judy and I went to a show at the Metropolitan Museum of the paintings of Winslow Homer. As we walked into the first hall, there on the right was a picture called "A Sharp-Shooter on Picket Duty." It was a Union soldier up in a tree holding a rifle with a telescopic sight. Picket duty would be guarding the perimeter lines, the Picket lines. And that spoke to me. The last picture in the show is called "Right and Left." In the painting two ducks are being shot in mid-air. We view the scene from the ducks' point of view as they fall or try to escape from the man who is shooting at them. I took those two pictures as the polarities of William Bartholomew's experiences. He is a man who both kills and is almost killed; he's maimed by a Confederate horseman. I knew that the book would be about seeing how we see each other – how this man saw the world, and how he saw Melville for us. That's much too long an answer.

**Rockcastle:** No, it's a fine answer, even though you don't know how you do your structure, but I'm going to forgive you for that.

**Busch:** You want me to talk about that, too? (Laughter.)

**Rockcastle:** No, let's move on. The mask is an important symbol in *The Night Inspector*. It's a predominant symbol throughout literature, of course, but particularly so in the work of Melville and Hawthorne, the most obvious being the black veil the protagonist wears in "The Minister's Black Veil." Talk about the importance of this symbol for you.

**Busch:** It was very, very practical. I knew that Billy was going to have to seduce Melville, who was an inspector of customs. The story required that Melville help him to cheat the customs laws at the port of New York, for reasons of the plot, and I knew that Melville could not resist a mask. When Ahab hurls his spear at the whale and cries "Strike through the mask," he saw a kind of platonic vision of a society—of a world—behind which an evil God lurked, in front of which there were masks. So I had to put a mask on a person to get Melville interested. Why would this man be wearing a mask? Well, because he was maimed, as so many Civil War veterans were. How had he been maimed? He had been shooting at somebody when a bullet struck the breach of his gun and blew it up in his face. That was the practical reasoning. The sense of the literature of the day might well have been a factor. I love that period, and Hawthorne as a writer is pretty important to me, and was crucially important to Melville. But the first impulse was practicality.

**Rockcastle:** You wrote, "The culture is with some rapidity fearing its imagination. I don't know why. Imagination is not of interest." Could you explain what you mean by this?

**Busch:** There are various ways in which culture expresses itself, but the most important way – it's a lesson taught to us by writers like Melville and F. Scott Fitzgerald

– is through its money. Publishers will pay you a hefty amount if you can propose a book of nonfiction. If it is about being the victim, so much the better, because it feeds into a kind of a sleezy, gossip-hungry aspect of us. Publishers will not encourage you if you come to them and say, “I have got a book of forty poems, each of which is about the metamorphosis of one member of my family into a nightmare creature.” They won’t. Believe it or not. They won’t even buy you lunch. If you say, “I’ve got a novel about this poet who writes a book about her family, and each member of the family is transmogrified.” “By all means do send it to us sometime, won’t you?” Fiction is not of much interest. Just look at the *New York Times Book Review*. On a so-called “good day,” there are five works of fiction and maybe a book of poems reviewed. All the rest is nonfiction.

I think it’s a very difficult world to contend with now, and has been for awhile. I think our cultural legislators, the people who control our money, have this very solid, peasant-like belief that if we can arm ourselves with lots of facts, we will be able to contend with the world. They don’t understand that the most practical way of contending with the difficult world is to immerse yourself in it, in the nightmares of that family, or in the fictions of fantasists. The legislators of our culture are encouraging facticity—fact-orientedness—in what we print, in our installations – the technical installations, which are sort of like facts, instead of in exhibitions of paintings. So yeah, I do believe that, but what do I know, I’m just a novelist.

**Rockcastle:** You’ve written about the difference between the short story and the novel, and last night you said that as a writer you love the short story even more than the novel.

**Busch:** To write, yeah.

**Rockcastle:** Why?

**Busch:** You can finish a short story. You can never, ever finish a novel. It is like an itch you can't ever scratch without making yourself bleed, and then you're not supposed to touch it. That's maybe a more superficial take on the artistic question. To write a good novel, I believe you have to try to be a poet, which is to say, to write with precision, pin-point accuracy, with no language wasting, and yet, as I hectored some of the students earlier today in our class, I also believe that every word you write as a fiction writer has to, in some way, create a metaphor with the central concern of the novel in which the language occurs. And that means you have to produce a lot of language, but it has to be language deathly and economically used with precision. Well, what is that? It's like having a ten-year migraine headache. Who the hell wants to do that for a living? Whereas a short story can be quiet, deft.

What's a long story? About twenty-five, thirty-five, forty pages. Piffle. What's that compared to a novel? In a story, you're aiming to fix a moment in time, to preserve an animal. And so you know what to work for. But if you're like me, when you start a story, you have no idea why you're writing it and what it's moving toward, and you keep writing the story to learn what the story's about and where it's going and why you are inventing these people. It's like a mother saying, on the operating table, "I wonder why I'm giving birth to this child?" Through revision and luck and intuition, you begin to find out what that story is about, and then you can go back and have this incredible experience of making everything in the story work towards reaching that moment when the amber is solid and the fly is trapped inside. You can walk around and strut your ass a

little bit and say, “See that fly caught in the amber? I invented it.” It’s harder to do with a novel.

I guess I have this resentment against publishers insisting that young writers produce novels. You go to a publisher with your book of stories. You’re thirty-six years old, you’ve spent most of your adult life writing that book of stories, and you give it to a publisher. If you’re lucky enough to get them to read it, they say, “Beautiful, I really admire your talent. Now bring me a novel and we’ll do a contract.” Because publishers are afraid of trying to sell books of short stories. And with good reason: they won’t sell. So they try to make up for it. Their conventional wisdom is to make up for it by getting you to write a novel. But you may not have a novel at thirty-six. You may have to write three bad ones and give us your first novel at forty-four, when you’re not a kid anymore and you know something, and you’ve got more to talk about than you talked about in your book of stories. The publishing culture is not very courteous to that. I think it may be responsible for a number of novels that certain writers may wish they hadn’t published.

**Rockcastle:** You said earlier that you couldn’t wait to have Jack’s voice back in your head. You used the word ventriloquist, which is a great image for the issue of voice. Last night, when I asked you how the language in *The Night Inspector* got that wonderfully authentic, you said it just wrote itself because you were inside Billy’s head. You had his voice in your head. So, talk about these are two characters, two voices – Jack’s and Billy’s – that got in your head. How does that happen?

**Busch:** I don’t know.

**Rockcastle:** It’s just magic then?

**Busch:** I hate answers like that – they’re a cop-out. I really love my characters. I love my wife, I love my kids, I love my dog – I don’t love my cat – and I love my characters. I believe in them. I don’t mean I have psychotic fits in which I think I’m living with them – I know that they’re characters – but I have great emotion for them, and I’m interested in emotion. I’m interested in generating emotion with my books. I want you moved if you read them. I mean, it’s one of our glories and one of the ways we get punished by life, that we are that mammal which gives itself to others of our species sometimes with great generosity, unremittingly. We love each other sometimes, once in awhile, and aren’t we lucky? And when you do – you’ve all been there, *are* there – if you’re lucky, you know the other person. You don’t know everything about the other one, but you know him or her in ways that others don’t. I don’t mean only physical intimacy, although surely that’s part of it. I mean other ways, too. Psychic intimacies. In that same way, I feel for my characters and believe in them to the point where I can speak for them. That’s as close as I can get without sounding like a real nutcase.

**Rockcastle:** But then in the novel, *A Memory of War*, you chose a third-person narrator for Alex. You said you wanted a different, broader view; you needed to do things that a first-person voice did not allow you to do. Surely you were as close to Alex as a character. Was there anything about the voice of that novel that was different for you because of the third person versus the first?

**Busch:** Yeah. It was more formal. The reader was distanced more from him because I distanced the narrative voice from him. Even though I could know more about him than a first-person narrator might tell, I was able to write about him in the context of the other

people in the book. I was the god of the book; I knew what was in the brains of several people in the novel and was able to write about all of them in terms of Alex's life

When you write first-person narrative, you are severely limited in what you can know. You only know what you can apprehend physically or what you are told or what you experience. I wanted Alex more distant. I wanted to be able to be more analytic about him. He's a psychologist, a therapist. And he's misbehaving, doing bad things. He sleeps with a patient. He does what therapists call "losing minutes." You know, you're paying a fortune to talk to him and he fugues out – he begins to think about his own past, not about yours. He permits his wife sorrows that she should not endure, I think, and he trespasses, as I saw it, upon his parents' history and his imaginings of them. To keep all of that under control, I needed a more formal voice and more distance between what I think of as the narrative persona and the characters in the book.

**Rockcastle:** Let's take a break, and when we come back, we'll take questions from the audience.

**Question:** I was wondering, if, when you're working with a character like William Bartholomew, who's a killer, and you're researching killing and things like that . . .

**Busch:** I just went out and shot a lot.

**Question:** How do you live with that for the few years that you're working on this novel?

**Busch:** It gets unpleasant. I wrote a novel called *Closing Arguments* in which I had a really unpleasant character, even though there are certain attractive things about a small-town lawyer who was a much-decorated Vietnam Marine Phantom pilot. Summer



came and with summer, where we live, it's very beautiful. That's when the friends start to announce that they're going to stop by, because Judy's a great cook and it's very beautiful, and I said, if I stop writing this book, I'm never going to write it. I have to go to work every day and finish it because if I give myself a weekend off, I disliked the man so much, I would tear away from the book. He's a guy who's really tough on his kids, and I found that very creepy, and he's living a lie, which is hard to sustain, hard for him to sustain. I didn't like the lie he was living, so I knew that I must not stop writing the book for a minute or I would not write this man. And so Judy very kindly wrote letters to all of our friends, saying, "We love you, don't come." I spent the summer with the drawbridge up just to push myself to write a book so I could complete it. So that's just a long way of saying, yeah, it gets really miserable sometimes. But that's why we make the huge money and live the kind of lives we do. They recompense us for that.

**Question:** In *The Night Inspector* there was a scene in which the characters were moving through lower Manhattan seeing all of those ghastly images, including wild pigs. As I was reading that, I was thinking about all of these other scenes in literature where pigs are associated with brothel scenes . . .

**Busch:** James Joyce's *Ulysses*.

**Question:** Yeah, exactly. To what extent are you aware that you're doing that, or do the pigs just appear?

**Busch:** As I was working on this book, I looked at a lot of pictures in New York in the 1860s, and one picture was of feral pigs roaming the streets eating people and garbage. New York at that point was a really tough place, and I just loved the idea of

wild pigs and wrote it into the book. I hadn't a literary thought in my head. But that's terrific – what a nice idea, that's worth following up. Note to self . . .

**Question:** How did you write the stories in *Don't Tell Anyone*?

**Busch:** Over the years I wrote a bunch of stories, and many of them struck me as I looked at them with an eye towards making a collection, as being about people not wanting to say their feelings but needing to say them, or even trying to say them and being unable to say them. I didn't write them as a group. I wrote them, you know, as individual stories. I give myself a chance, when I'm not writing a novel, or anything else, to play. To me, playing is to try to write stories, and I just sensed that there was a linkage to them.

On the other hand, all of the stories in a book I'll publish next year, *Rescue Missions*, were written with the idea in mind of family or lovers or friends going to rescue their beloveds. I wrote *The Rescue Mission* in response to the story I read last night, "The Rescue Mission." Judy and I were talking about that story and we began to add up all the times late at night that we'd go screaming off to rescue one kid or another or one semi-suicidal friend or another, and it seemed like half of our adult lives had been composed of trying to rescue people, which is what adults do. You're either cooking for somebody or you're rescuing them. Or you're doing the dishes because they're exhausted and they need their sleep. I did not write *Don't Tell Anyone* that way. I liked it because it included some stories I enjoyed re-reading, which is not always the case, and because the cover photograph is by the husband of a good friend of mine.

**Question:** I'm wondering, looking back at your work, do you see the conversations happening across all of your work in the same way? Can you see conversations happening between books over a decade?

**Busch:** That's a terrific question. When I put together a book called *The Children in the Woods*, which came out in the early 90s, it was a new and selected stories so I had to read through lots of books of stories. I published my first book of stories in 1974 in England. I remember being miserably unhappy as I put that book together, and I remember thinking that I was a really lousy writer and that I hated all of my short stories, whereas now, looking back, I think I could have taken another twelve or fifteen of my stories, a different twelve or fifteen, and called them *Don't Tell Anyone*, and I think I could have taken half of the stories in *Don't Tell Anyone* and called them *Rescue Missions*, because I think what is happening is that unlike the incumbent applicant for the Supreme Court, I *have* left a paper trail. And I can see certain concerns. I think I have a fairly small vocabulary of concerns. I think I have a very limited psychological subject matter. I think I'm a creature of small brain. I think I write about the same stuff all the time.

**Question:** I read a poem of yours on *Poetry Daily*. Are you writing poetry?

**Busch:** They told me they were going to put a poem of mine on there. Thank you for reading my poem. The month I quit teaching at Colgate in 2003, I started writing poems again for the first time in forty years. I wrote a cycle of poems about my grandparents and my parents and my brother, and a few of them were published. So I had the arrogance to send them out, didn't I? Then I stopped writing poems again. I assume that this is something that happens to me every few decades, and I am content to

wait for the next one. But I know I'm not a good poet. I'm a better fiction writer, a better prose writer, than I am a poet. I worship poetry and poets, and as a writer I go to poems to fill my well and stimulate me, so up in my work room in the barn I have all of our poetry books, which I have arrogated to myself from all over the house. They're all up there, along with reference stuff. The poets are the ones who know how to write.

**Question:** Maybe you'd get better if you did it more than once every forty years.

**Busch:** That's an awfully practical view. I will try.

**Question:** You mentioned Melville as a writer that you admire. Are there any other writers you admire, whom you go to when you're stuck on a scene, or when a character isn't agreeing with you?

**Busch:** No, they can't help you with that. Chekhov can make sacred the ordinary because he was a genius, but his genius doesn't help me any more than Melville's magnificent orneriness can help me be like him. And I don't want to be like him. I want to be better at being me, so that's when I go to poems. Or I write ten thousand letters to my friends until I make a good sentence and that's a signal to me that I can go back to work. I do use Robert Stone as an indicator. When I re-read a piece of my own prose, and I find that I am sounding like Robert Stone, who is a man whose work I revere, I know that I have to stop, wash my face in cold water, smack myself a few times, and address the page again because only Bob Stone sounds like Bob Stone. When I try to be more than I am, when I overreach, it sounds like Robert Stone with a water chaser.

**Rockcastle:** Thank you.

**Busch:** Thank you all.

