

Things You Can Only Do in Fiction

an interview with Glen David Gold
interview conducted by Michelle Chihara

On the morning of the day that I interviewed Glen David Gold, he spoke by phone to a high school class in Radnor, PA. An earnest student asked for his view of the writer's role in society, and Gold told me that his response went something like this: OK, imagine that society is the dance in the school gym. Near the center are the popular people and the jocks. And then at the edge are the band kids and the nerds. And then behind the bleachers, there are the cool kids and the rebels. And then outside the gym, all the way outside, with his nose pressed up against the glass . . . That's the writer.

Gold, now planted firmly outside the center of the action near Santa Barbara, California, published his novel *Carter Beats the Devil* in 2001. In the novel, Charles Carter, a famous magician, brings the beleaguered President Harding onstage for a gory trick just before the President dies mysteriously. Carter becomes a murder suspect, trailed by a hapless Secret Service agent. The ensuing web of interconnected plots and illusions maps Charles Carter's rise to fame, his romances and his pirate encounters, just to name a few elements. Written with keen grace and impeccable timing, the book is an adventure story driven by its characters' inner lives — their quirks, their losses and their weirdly S&M childhood traumas. Glen David Gold and I met in a café and talked about the UC Irvine fiction MFA program, publishing, Hollywood and the power of the macchiato.

You were writing novels before you came into the UCI workshop, right?

Yes. I wrote four bad novels, and a bad book of short stories. They weren't getting any better, so I applied to the fiction program at UCI because I thought it would give me a couple years to write and improve. By the time I left the workshop we all wanted to kill each other, but while we were in class the comments on the page were outstanding. John Cleese always says Monty Python was the best fighting comedy unit in the world, and at a certain point we were the best fighting fiction unit, the best at improving each other's stories. I really managed to internalize those critical voices in workshop, the people who really got what I was trying to do. I kept hearing them as I finished the book.

I was thirty-one when I got into the program, and I had spent a good deal of my twenties self-mythologizing and mythologizing my friends. *Oh my god, they're so fucking awesome. We're all going to be the best sculptors-actors-painters-dancers in the world. It's amazing to be at the center of this thriving heart of creativity!* Then suddenly, I looked around, and people were going into . . . advertising. People would get emotionally killed by trying to do this. By the time I got to UCI, I had stopped trying to write professionally.

Tell me about your experience writing for Hollywood — you did that for a while.

I had the experience of ninety percent of people in Hollywood who really work hard and diligently, which is that you get screwed and you're cast aside. It took me about seven years to figure that out. I had this one screenplay particularly that kept getting optioned and re-optioned. I wrote about that for the *Bay Area Express*. They actually let me write a great article.

I think I saw something about this. The lesbian biker chic movie?

Yeah, it was largely autobiographical. Romantic comedy. It was a pretty good piece, but we couldn't get it funded. The irony, which

is now a big, huge, hilarious irony, is that at one point we had half the money, 500K, but we couldn't get the other half because no one had ever heard of the woman who was going to be the lead. It was like, "well, we've heard of Chad Lowe, but who's this Hilary Swank?" So they turned us down and she did *Boys Don't Cry* almost immediately after. That's why I like publishing. It's so much easier. All you need to get published is to have five people say yes.

Did you learn about writing novels from writing screenplays?

Well, I was humiliated when I realized my novel was going to have three acts . . . or no, that's not true, but I didn't want it to. It so made sense, though, that there was no way to get around it.

There are plenty of great screenplays in three acts.

It's not that, it's that I really wanted to celebrate all the things you can do in fiction that you can't do in a screenplay. There's a writer named Trevanian. When you're a teenager he's great to read, spy novels — his stuff is ridiculous. His first books got turned into movies, and he hated them. He wrote a fourth book, *Shibumi*, that is incredibly suspenseful, great action, and literally none of the action scenes are filmable. It's friggin hilarious when you realize what's going on. He does some things where the only way it makes sense if it's backwards. He does something that takes place in a white-out on a mountainside. Something takes place behind a curtain on an airplane. The most important action happens in massive flashbacks. I thought that was a nice revenge. But in movies I did learn to think about how things move.

I wanted to ask you about the way you write action. Few people write extended scenes of action like the scene on the dock where Charles is abducted, crated, bagged and dropped underwater. It was so gripping and clear. Did it come naturally, after the movies?

No. Hard. The clearer something is the harder it is. Margot Livesey once drew a racetrack on the board for us in workshop. Every scene is a race, and you have your horses: plot, environment, character exterior, character interior, two other things. At every point, you have to know where all these horses are in relation to each other, up to the end. So you write a draft and then, oh! I forgot that he's wet. I forgot he's confined. He should have an interior — oh! he might have emotions. After a few weeks of thinking about nothing else, maybe you can get it straight.

I know you're working on another novel. Also historical fiction, but not magic?

I don't really have anything I want to say about magic right now, though I might again at some point. The new book is more about entertainment. It's in a similar vein as *Carter* but — let me think about this for a second. The same era basically, but if *Carter* is about the intersection of technology, magic, and faith, then this is the intersection of entertainment and war.

So World War I? That sounds very different.

I'm hoping for that miraculous thing of completely different but exactly the same.

Did you write historical fiction before *Carter*?

No. I hate historical fiction. Ian Frazier wrote an essay called "The Stuttgart Folders." He talks about how all bad historical fiction begins with a famous person sitting in a chair worrying about his itchy tweeds, looking out the window and musing about his accomplishments. That kind of thing I hate. I can't tell you how many books I've started where the moment they mention the character's itchy crinolines or itchy tweeds I throw it down and I'm done. There's no reason to keep reading. I don't know why that

specific detail is the one, but it's always that kind of thing that makes you notice the author striving to live in the character's skin. I came to *Carter* completely differently. If you think of fiction as limited to this time and this place, you have a really small playing field. But then you realize you can make up events and treat history as your play-pen. Then it's really vast, the potential for stuff you can do.

The first time I had to turn something in at UCI, I went to Geoffrey Wolff's office and said, what can I actually make up? Geoffrey pointed out that it says "fiction" on it. I said, people are going to disagree if I say something happened and it didn't. He thought about it and then brought up *The Public Burning* by Robert Coover, where Richard Nixon has sex with Uncle Sam while the Rosenbergs are electrocuted in Times Square. I think you can probably use that as your model.

How do you know when you have found the idea for your next novel?

Writers understand that no *idea* ever really leads anywhere—they all kind of die on the vine. It's more like there's something you saw ten years ago that keeps bothering you. Finally you sit down and pour your heart out into a short story, and the short story is bad. You did the best you could, and it just wasn't good enough. But you never know. It nags at you, the moths in your closet that you can't get rid of — eventually, you have to try to do something with it. I have too many ideas, and, if you think about it, everybody does. The real question is where do you get the insane courage to follow up on it, to stick with it for a while, so questions about ideas are always funny to me. But you know about this, you're in a room full of people who have ideas all the time.

True, but I am always interested in how each writer answers questions like this. Some people really do say –

A man walks up with a briefcase, every six months?

Right, and I give him the password. But really, some people do say that ideas take them over, that characters start talking to them.

All that stuff is true, and no way to write is any better or any worse than any other one. But I generally find that thoughts of revenge play out the best.

Really? So revenge is a good motivator for you?

Oh, yeah.

So we should expect a book about Hollywood at some point?

No, no, no. I will never do that. You always hear about new novels that are real insider-y, real punches in the face of Hollywood, but they never are. They're always written by embittered screenwriters trying to settle scores with a system that you cannot settle scores with. It's like writing a scathing novel about the Bush administration. Who cares? Whatever is actually happening is much more interesting.

You were going to tell me about working with Robert Towne on the movie adaptation of *Carter Beats the Devil*.

He made me a macchiato. I felt from the moment he made me a macchiato that even if nothing else ever happened . . . I got a *macchiato*. It was really good, too. He also talked to me for four or five hours about the book, the structure —

Those three acts?

The acts, yeah. He was funny about that — he kept telling me how good my structure was. We got along really well, and he’s incredibly smart. He’s now filming a novel called *Ask the Dust*, a John Fante novel set in LA in the thirties. I talked to him a couple weeks ago, and he answered the phone with a detail about how things would work in the screenplay: “Robert here. Listen . . .” And he gave me a sentence. But you know how it is: when you know the movie is actually going to happen is when you’re in the theater and your name goes by and you politely applaud.

Are you worried about anything?

Like they screw it up, you mean?

I think it would be strange to have something you put so much creative energy into in someone else’s hands.

Yeah, but I’m done. The book’s out there. I would actually be more worried about it if I were involved in the writing of the script, but I have confidence in him, in Robert Towne. When you actually get through to good people . . . and they make you a macchiato . . . I guess they could still make Carter have web shooters, or demand that it be more like *The Passion of the Christ*, but I don’t see that. I see committed people who got what the book was about.

I read the article that you wrote for the *New York Times* about David Blaine, the magician/performer who recently suspended himself in a glass box above the Thames in London for forty-four days. It struck me that, unlike Carter, Blaine really seemed to use magic to keep people away. It seems to me that writing can be used the same way, as an art you use either to connect or to hide.

I just published a short story in *Playboy* about a video store owner who wins a contest where he gets to spend Christmas with his favorite porn star. He knows her oeuvre in a way you don’t

normally know your favorite star. He knows *everything* about her. And it's Christmas! So she gives him a lovely present of a cassette tape she's made, of herself singing standards. She wants to get out of the business and sing. What could be more intimate than that encounter, in a way? But her porn career, which meant so much to him, was definitely a way to keep people away. So something that's allegedly the most intimate thing we can do - people having sex - is all theater. It's all a way of keeping people on the outside. People consume porn in the same way, as if it were intimate, in a way that's allegedly very close, but at the same time there's a gap.

With magic, there are people who use it to keep the audience on the outside. David is definitely one of those guys. I didn't even know when I wrote the article that his next trick was going to be being sealed in a box dangling above London. Wow . . . I could have guessed. I really liked the guy. You could sense that really desperate search for companionship and at the same time his real terror of intimacy.

I guess you could say the same about most writers.