



## A CONVERSATION WITH **TRACY KIDDER**

*Win McCormack*

Tracy Kidder was born in New York City and grew up in Oyster Bay, Long Island, the son of a New York City lawyer father and suburban schoolteacher mother. Following college at Harvard he served in the U.S. Army, including a year's stint in Vietnam as an intelligence officer, after which he returned home to attend the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Kidder's professional writing career began as an in-house freelancer for the *Atlantic Monthly*, working under the tutelage of Richard Todd, who remains his editor to this day. An assignment from the *Atlantic* to cover the trial of Juan Corona, accused of murdering migrant farm workers in northern California, led to his first book, *The Road to Yuba City*, published in 1974.

In 1981 Kidder made his name with the publication of *The Soul of a New Machine*. The book narrates the frenzied creation of a super minicomputer by an obsessively driven team of engineers at Data

General in western Massachusetts in the late 1970s. It won the Pulitzer Prize and put Kidder and his family on a sound financial footing for the first time. There followed *House* (1985), an often painful tale of the construction of a couple's residence that is also a subtle examination of social class in America; *Among Schoolchildren* (1989), an exhaustive account of the workaday performance of a harried schoolteacher over the course of an entire academic year; *Old Friends* (1993), a warmhearted depiction of friendship between men nearing the end of their lives in a nursing home; and *Home Town* (1999), a narrative exploration of the town of Northampton, Massachusetts. *Mountains Beyond Mountains* (2003) focuses on Paul Farmer, an American physician who has almost single-handedly pioneered effective health-care delivery to the poor in Haiti and throughout the world, and *My Detachment: A Memoir* (2005) recounts Kidder's posting in Vietnam.

Among his friends and colleagues, Kidder is legendary for his prodigious level of work on both the research and craftsmanship ends of nonfiction writing. "When I have put in a really hard day of work," he once memorably stated, "I feel my Puritan ancestors think well of me." One June, I made a two-and-a-half-hour drive north through New Hampshire and along a section of the sparkling Maine coast to my friend's summerhouse overlooking a saltwater cove. The following is the result of a conversation during a long evening, over more than one bottle of good red wine, in front of a fire kindled and stoked to warm the chill early summer Maine night.

**Win McCormack:** When did you first start thinking you wanted to be a writer?

**Tracy Kidder:** You know, when one is in college one tries to identify oneself as something and while I was at Harvard I took a creative writing course. Though I only took the course in the first place because I thought writing was going to be sort of a hobby. I was going to be a diplomat. Save the world from terrible things that one had read about in *The Ugly American*.

Some of the girls liked the stories I wrote, and it occurred to me that writing stories was a way to impress girls. Honestly. And actually, when I look back, I can't think of a much stronger motivation for becoming a writer. Also, at that time, it seemed like a very romantic thing to do. A writer. It was something to call myself.

**WM:** You studied with Robert Fitzgerald, the legendary Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory?

**TK:** Yes. He was a pretty good poet in his own right, and a really a wonderful translator of the classics. Also a wonderful teacher. He really paid attention to you. He cared enough to be mean, too. Well, not mean but stern. Demanding. It was a great compliment to a student. He made writing seem important. He would read stuff to us that friends of his had written, people like James Agee and Flannery O'Connor. The first time I took his course, I would stay up all night writing stories for him, then go to sleep about the time my other classes began. He made me think it was a high calling. I took his course three or four times. I performed best the first time. After that I got self-conscious. I started a novel at one point and I made all these notes and drawings in the margins, which were much more interesting and better written than anything in the actual novel. I left that stuff in, imagining my biographer's delight in finding them.

**WM:** You started out in the Government Department at Harvard and switched your field of concentration to English at almost the last possible minute, late in the spring term of sophomore year—because of Henry Kissinger.

**TK:** Yes.

**WM:** You and I have somewhat different recollections of how it happened. Mine is that we were both taking Kissinger's course in international relations—Government 180—that semester, the spring of 1965 . . .

**TK:** Right so far.

**WM:** And it was conducted in a lecture hall that had very bad acoustics. And Kissinger used to pace back and forth, projecting his voice.

**TK:** It was a little stage.

**WM:** Yes. He would pace back and forth on that stage, projecting his voice into the wings. On top of this, he had that extreme German accent. You often couldn't understand at all what he was saying. On this one particular day, as I remember it, we were sitting in the very back row. He was lecturing about some obscure diplomatic event from another century, perhaps the Schleswig-Holstein controversy, whatever that was. All of a sudden, you jumped up and said, "I've had enough of this! I'm switching to English!" And you went right to the English Department and changed your major.

**TK:** The way I remember it is that it had gotten to the point where I wasn't often going to that class, and my recollection is you had said, "You should come this time because Kissinger is going to defend the Vietnam War. He's going to have a debate about it with his teaching assistants. You should come because it is going to be an interesting argument." And it was in the middle of that argument when I decided to walk out. Actually, this is how I've written about it in the memoir about Vietnam. I didn't stay to hear the argument get finished. And I've written something like, "One should always stay at least that long."

**WM:** Norman Mailer has said that by the time he graduated from Harvard, because of the excellent writing courses he took there and the feedback he got, he already had the conviction that he could be a successful writer. Did you?

**TK:** No, I didn't know that. I wasn't that sure of myself, to tell you the truth. One of the things that happened to me was that I had gotten so self-conscious that not a lot of ideas and stories were coming to me. I felt desperate about it because I had been walking around telling myself, and everybody who would listen, that I was a writer, but I didn't know what I was going to write about.

**WM:** Then you went to Vietnam.

**TK:** Yes, but I wasn't in combat, so I came back without those stories to tell. I wrote a novel anyway, about the experiences that I didn't have in Vietnam, which I thought I had destroyed, but then a copy surfaced a few years ago and I have kept it carefully hidden since then. In fact, I've begun my memoir with it. For me, it's an interesting record of self-deceit.

**WM:** But Vietnam has remained a subject for you.

**TK:** I wrote a couple of short stories about Vietnam. One was called "The Death of Major Great," and the other was originally called "The Island of Flatdicks," but when the *Atlantic* agreed to publish it, they felt they had to change the title. I'm still surprised they published it. It was later called "In Quarantine." The story was based on one of those myths that apparently is common to almost every war: that if you contract an incurable venereal disease they'll send you to an island and you'll never get to go home. You know, these are stories that you half believe because you know that "they," the great amorphous "they," are capable of almost anything. I invented a venereal disease called "longitudinal herpes." It was characterized by a miniaturization and shortening of the reproductive organ in the male. Later I did a nonfiction story about Vietnam combat veterans in 1978, about ten years after I had gotten back. I went around and found people who'd had the experiences I had not had. It was published as a cover story in the *Atlantic*. It was just such a shame what had been done to these guys. This was a very small group of veterans. There was lots of money going to veterans, but these were the ones who needed it the most. They were by far the most screwed up and screwed over and they weren't getting what they deserved. Guys with missing limbs and paraplegics being put in rat-infested VA hospitals in the Bronx. Stuff like that. It was awful.

**WM:** You are now addressing Vietnam in a memoir?

**TK:** I'm writing this memoir, but I actually don't much like memoirs. There was a memoir craze and I suppose it's dying now a little bit. But you can see why it's so attractive to people—they don't really have to go and do any work. I thought for a while that people ought to have licenses, you know, to have to be issued licenses to write memoirs. And one of the preconditions for getting a license would be to have done something in your life besides having written this stupid memoir.

**WM:** How and why did you switch from writing fiction to journalism and what is sometimes called "creative nonfiction"?

**TK:** After Vietnam, I went to the Iowa Writers' Workshop to write fiction. Robert Fitzgerald got me in. I went there on the strength of that dreadful novel I wrote. And I got really intimidated. There were some really high-powered, wonderful writers there. They ranged from Stuart Dybek to Ron Hansen, Allan Gurganus, Michael Ryan, Thom Jones. Jane Smiley was there too.

**WM:** And Raymond Carver?

**TK:** Ray Carver was teaching there, as was John Cheever. I remember both of them pretty fondly. Carver was still in his wild-man phase. He had a blue Ford Falcon and it had an aneurysm in one of its tires. I remember great big Ray Carver and little John Cheever sitting outside the Iowa State liquor store in that car, each with his bottle in a brown paper bag, sitting in the front seat drinking away.

Anyway, the other students were high-powered and it was sort of intimidating. There was a man there named Seymour Krim who was an interesting man; he was sort of a beatnik, in the 1970s, a beatnik. He really knew and had lived through a whole period of wonderful jazz in New York City. He was proselytizing something that was then called the "New Journalism," which of course wasn't particularly new. But he was proselytizing that and I sort of thought, Well, this is something I ought to try my hand at.

**WM:** There is a lot of discussion these days about the overlap of fiction and nonfiction.

**TK:** If what you're really interested in is telling stories it doesn't much matter whether they're factually true or not. I mean, the techniques of storytelling don't belong exclusively to fiction any more than they do to nonfiction. There are different imperatives. Different rules. Mostly you lay them down for yourself. If I had to make a list of really interesting books I've read, Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* would be on it for sure. It's a mix of fiction and nonfiction. He carefully labels the parts that he invented. I don't mind that at all, if you ticket it, label it.

**WM:** At that time did you buy into Tom Wolfe's thesis that the New Journalism was going to supercede the novel as an art form?

**TK:** I couldn't buy into that. I love novels. Tom Wolfe is to me a very entertaining writer, sometimes really good, but like all the pronouncements of writers, that's just utterly stupid. Wolfe in his worst nonfiction believes that there's only one thing that motivates human beings and that's the quest for status. And anybody who's done any thinking about what drives people knows that there's never just one motivation.

**WM:** Well, that's the motivation that drives him. He's confusing himself with the rest of the world.

**TK:** That's a problem that writers have, I think. But I don't know why one has to talk about one form replacing another form. I think we ought to be glad we have them all.

**WM:** I have in front of me here a *New York Times* review of your second book, the book that made you famous, *The Soul of a New Machine*. The reviewer compares contemporary fiction very unfavorably to what you accomplished in that book. He says the contrast with the narcissism of most contemporary fiction is striking.

**TK:** Well, look, when people are saying things like that in order to praise you, of course it sounds much more intelligent than when

they're criticizing you. There's a lot of really bad fiction, some of which gets praised. And there's some really bad nonfiction that gets praised. It all gets sorted out in the end. I do think that one of the problems for people who are writing fiction sometimes is a lack of experience in the world. I didn't have all that interesting a life, you know, compared to a writer like my dear friend Stuart Dybek who could mine his childhood endlessly because it was so bizarre. One of the most important things somebody ever said to me, I mean, in just directing my little life, putting it on a certain course, was a wonderful writer who isn't all that well known named Sam Topperoff, who, when I was young and just back from Vietnam, was really encouraging me and was extremely kind. He said in an offhand way, "You know the world, particularly this country right now, is so strange and interesting." He said, "If I was a young man, I'd go off and get a job at *Time* or *Newsweek*."

**WM:** To give him his due, that's exactly what Wolfe accused the contemporary novel of doing in the sixties, of abandoning the strangeness of America for abstract modernism. He said there's so much interesting stuff going on and the only people covering it creatively are us New Journalists.

**TK:** I think there's some truth in that. Although, there's no reason to dismiss all of the novels and stories from that period that have appeared. I don't think Raymond Carver, for instance, ever abandoned the strangeness of America. He got right into a whole piece of it and he provided extraordinary immediacy. Any person who aspires to be a good writer could learn an enormous amount from Raymond Carver. However, if you do choose to go down the road of narrative nonfiction, one of the cool things about it is you get to satisfy your idle curiosity about things. You get to go out and see and meet really strange and interesting people. If what you're interested in is story, then of course you're interested in people because, at least in my view, character is the engine of plot. I think there are people who automatically assume that if it's not fiction then it can't have any-

thing artistic about. But the craft of writing narrative is not confined simply to fiction.

**WM:** That same reviewer called *The Soul of a New Machine* "a journalistic report that is also a work of the imagination." Are your books works of the imagination?

**TK:** Yeah, yeah. It's just that I don't invent dialogue, I don't invent the characters, I don't invent the settings. But yeah, they are. Of course, they have to be. Look, any kind of writer, anybody who has ever tried to write a story, a historian or anyone, who has tried to do it well with economy and to bring people to life on a page, making voices palpable, putting them in a scene, all those things, and has gone a little bit beyond the banal or at least has imagined his way beyond it, knows that of course all narrative writing is an act of imagination.

**WM:** You mentioned before that writers set themselves rules. Do you have rules you set for yourself?

**TK:** There are rules that I set for myself—I know I make mistakes and I'm sure I'm committing them all the time—but I try not to tell a story in which people say anything that they didn't in fact say. I try to catch that reflection of a real live human being on the page. I know that to the people I've written about it's often like looking in a fun-house mirror. If you're writing nonfiction you're always dealing with more information than you can present. For most of the projects I've done, I've filled more than a hundred notebooks, gathered tons and tons of stuff, and I've had to make some order out of that chaos. I try to make it the story that I think I saw. I try to. John McPhee has a good line. I can't quote it exactly. He says you shouldn't abridge the accuracy of what you're reporting, because that accuracy is what allows you to tell stories that would be banal in fiction. What you really don't ever want to do to your reader—and I'm afraid it's almost impossible to prevent this—you never want to break the deal you have with readers. That's when they stop believing you. That's where I stop reading, generally—when I don't believe it.

**WM:** Does that injunction hold true for fiction as well, to not let the reader down?

**TK:** That injunction of course extends to fiction and poetry, to Coleridge's famous line: "that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith." In fiction it has nothing to do with factuality, it has nothing even to do with plausibility, necessarily. But there's some kind of deal that one strikes with the reader. Dybek does this marvelously well in some of his more bizarre stories. He sets out the terms of the deal right at the start and he doesn't break them. He doesn't violate them along the way. I think an enormous amount of care goes into that. When Mary McCarthy said that everything Lillian Hellman wrote was a lie, even "and" and "the," I knew exactly what she meant. I rather like Lillian Hellman, but I know exactly what Mary McCarthy meant. Of course some books of narrative nonfiction attempt at least to be works of the imagination. Not in the same sense as a novel, but then I wonder how many really good novels have ever been invented out of whole cloth.

**WM:** How big an influence was McPhee on you?

**TK:** I was forbidden to read him for a long time by my editor, Richard Todd. I think he said it was time for me to stop trying to imitate him. So he was a big influence on me. When I first read him, a friend handed me *Encounters with the Archdruid*. I had never heard of McPhee. I stole it from my friend. I was really smitten with the prose.

**WM:** Richard Todd has been your editor for a long time. Almost since the inception of your career. If I recall correctly, he gave you the idea for *The Soul of a New Machine*.

**TK:** Yes. What happened is, I had written a really bad work of nonfiction called *The Road to Yuba City*. Really bad work. I've gotten the rights back and have kept it out of print. I'm not sorry I wrote it. It's not that. I did my best. It's naïve. It's stupid in many ways. I'm glad it's out of print. But Todd helped me after that. Todd really taught me how to write, to the extent that I know how to write. It's not that

I came to him without an ability to write a sentence, but I just glommed on to him. It's interesting, his wife once said of him that he's willing to work as hard as the writer is. And he is. It's amazing. I had so much to learn about writing magazine articles, which I did with the *Atlantic*. I didn't dare attempt another book after that one for about five years anyway. Five or six years. Then I had come to the end of another article. I think it was the article about Vietnam combat veterans. I was starting to feel like I knew what I was doing. I started to feel like I had a voice writing nonfiction. It wasn't the voice necessarily of the person I thought that I was, but the voice of a person I thought I wanted to be. So I felt much more confident. And I said to Todd, "What should I do next?" He said, "Why don't you look into computers?" This was 1978 and I just laughed. He said there were things called minicomputers. That made me really laugh. He knew this fellow Tom West, who became the main character in the book, and I went to see him. I trust Todd completely. He has a really good eye for cant. He's writing a book of his own now. I told him he should let me edit it, and he just stared at me.

**WM:** What makes him a good editor?

**TK:** One of the most important things is, particularly for constitutionally insecure people, he never makes you feel like you personally, deep down, are guilty of these crimes against the language. I think there's a kind of objectivity that he cultivates. You can sit and laugh about stuff that didn't work. He doesn't make you feel like you are necessarily a bad writer because you just wrote some really bad prose. Unfortunately, I've overused him. Poor guy. I've given him drafts of things and he'll always say, "It's fine, keep going." Then you get to the end and you wonder what it could have been that he thought was fine. He's very even, and part of it is simply trusting that he will know when the thing is finished. You could go on writing something or reporting something forever.

**WM:** How do you know when to stop researching? How do you know when to stop writing? Hemingway was accused of having made fac-



tual errors in *Death in the Afternoon*, his book about bullfighting. His response was something like, “I probably did but if I’d kept on researching till I knew every single thing there is to know about bullfighting I never would’ve gotten around to writing the book.”

**TK:** I think that’s true. Part of it is exhaustion. But I have leaned on Richard Todd for that. Saying, Does this matter? Does that matter? There is all kinds of research you can do on a person’s life and that could also be endless.

**WM:** In many reviews, you’re credited with being able to distill complex technical information in such a way that the reader can understand it. You can make a computer’s workings or the intricacies of building a house comprehensible.

**TK:** But this isn’t really a compliment to me. I had wonderful people helping me. That’s also one of the reasons why this vein of writing is so much fun to do: With *House* I got to go and see architectural historians, people who are historians of the nail, for instance, and it was really fun. I really got into it. With *The Soul of a New Machine* I had very good instructors. I had these engineers who were willing, and I think actually eager, to explain their jobs to me. It wasn’t all that hard. I was never any good at math and I avoided science in college, and I always felt that as a consequence a huge part of what makes up the modern world was simply closed to me. What a stupid way to be. So it was fun to be around people who did speak that language, the language of mathematics, and have them interpret it for me. I began to think, and this is no doubt a kind of special pleading, that the ones who could explain it to the likes of me were usually the ones who really understood it. And I’m glad to do that, to make those translations. I’m glad that people feel that I’ve done that well. It’s nowhere near as hard as trying to find that mysterious combination of things that makes a human being seem alive on the pages of a book. One is just work. Just trying to find a way to explain something. It’s complicated, but a human being is something else. I’ve been reading a lot of Graham Greene. One of the things that astonishes me about him is

that he can depict people, sometimes, without describing them at all, and yet make them completely vivid. I don’t know quite how he does it. It’s alchemy, you know? I think that’s an important thing. When I wrote *The Soul of a New Machine*, I really thought of that computer that they were making—which is, by the way, an infantile computer now, an outmoded sort of thing—I thought of that computer as the intellectual setting, the real setting of that book.

**WM:** If you look at the body of your work as a whole, what jumps out for me is that you’ve almost always chosen to write about work, about people in their jobs, which is a subject largely missing from modern fiction and even nonfiction.

**TK:** There was a guy at Harvard who taught a creative writing course, named Morrison, who kept telling undergraduate writers, “Try and write about a job you’ve had. Something you’ve done.” I think that may have stuck with me. Work is where people spend so much of their lives.

**WM:** So did you do that consciously? Choose work as the subject of all or almost all your books?

**TK:** To some degree. When I began what became *House*, I wanted to write about carpenters. I had gotten really interested in carpentry personally. I had bought an old house and was trying to fix it up. I cut my thumb half off, literally. Took a few awful falls off ladders. I decided I really wanted to write about the craft of building houses. I wanted to write about craftsmanship. I thought that I was writing about craftsmanship when I wrote *The Soul of a New Machine*, what opportunities were left in an advanced industrial country like the United States for people to practice meaningful work, the kind of work that allows them to use their minds, in basically an industrial setting. That preoccupation carried over into the next book, *House*. Then in *Among Schoolchildren* I wrote about a schoolteacher, and then in *Old Friends* about a group of men going into a nursing home. Try-

ing to make some kind of life in such a place, that's another kind of work, you know?

WM: That book would seem to be the departure from the pattern.

TK: No, not really. Because they weren't at their place of work, but they were at a place of wishing to work. Sometimes I think that the whole business of choosing what to write about has to do with that stupid joke about the bum who searches for the lost quarter not where he lost it but under the streetlight because that's where the light's better. I also think that a little bit of self-doubt, not the crippling doubt, but a little bit of self-doubt is extremely good for a writer or anybody who's trying to do anything. You should have some. Because not everything you write is really worth publishing.

WM: Do you ever reread your work?

TK: At a certain point the Modern Library decided to publish *The Soul of a New Machine* and they offered me the chance to change anything I wanted. I started through the book and I got about twenty pages in and there wasn't a single page that wasn't completely marked up. I talked to Todd about it and he said, "Well, it's kind of like taking down an entire brick wall to get at one brick." He advised me to leave it alone. It's a book I wrote when I was thirty-six years old. Fine. I hope that I've written better books since then.

Actually, I've liked every book I've written. I've liked them each at the time and I always thought when I finished them that each was the best thing I had done. Robert Fitzgerald used to talk about "the luck of the conception," mostly talking about poems and stories and novels. But it also works in nonfiction. He used to say that writers had to depend on the luck of the conception. Some stories are better than others, or better for an individual writer. He was right.

WM: How has this worked out in your case?

TK: With *House*, things just sort of fell into place. I thought I was going to write about a bunch of carpenters in the building season,

and suddenly there was this couple who needed a house built and there was a six-foot-six-inch tall architect who needed to design a house, his first house—he's a pretty famous architect now. And there I was in the middle of it. Suddenly I had this ménage à trois, without sexual connotations. I've always found writing books difficult, particularly the first draft. In retrospect, that book seems like the easiest, the most fun both to research and to write. One of the things I like is you can write a book that appears to be about one thing and it's also about another thing and another thing. Basically, *House* is a book about social class. I didn't want to have to say that. I think the message or theme or whatever is stronger if it's implicit.

WM: Haiti has become a subject for you.

TK: I've been trying to write recently about American foreign policy toward Haiti, an evil tale, and it's the first time, I think, in thirty years I've had a piece turned down. It's been turned down by the *New Yorker*. I think I let myself try to hedge too much. Tried to make myself seem . . .

WM: Objective.

TK: Yes, objective. The point is, there's no need to be objective about this. This is a situation with people dying, starving. Dying of dirty water and things like that. Then we, the United States, are blocking assistance that would at least begin to try to remedy some of those problems. And there is an enormous history going behind all of this. Maybe I wasn't able to cultivate that state of mind that Wordsworth talks about: "emotion recollected in tranquility." But I'm going to keep writing that piece until someone publishes it.

WM: Can we talk about *Mountains Beyond Mountains*?

TK: The main character, Dr. Paul Farmer, is the most important person I've ever followed around. This guy is a very special kind of idealist, an idealist who demonstrates that what he says is true. That is, that what he says is possible really is possible. Or, as he once put it, he's an action kind of guy. He's a person who is, in the broadest



sense, tremendously upset about the distribution of medical technology in the world—or, probably better to say, the distribution of public health in the world. The maldistribution is so acute. I hadn't realized that, really, until I started traveling with him. The disparity is just so enormous, it really almost takes the top of your head off. My God, I had no idea the world is in such bad shape. Farmer set to work as a young man, even before he was a medical student, trying to address some of the suffering he'd found in the worst part of Haiti. I don't know if he had calculated in this way, but he had chosen a very good spot to begin working, because it stands to reason that if you can do a good thing in the worst part of the poorest country in the western hemisphere, you can pretty much do it anywhere. If you can show that you can treat AIDS effectively in a place like that, if you can show that you can treat the whole range of human illnesses there, then you've wiped away the arguments that I think have been developed in the Western world in order to make people like you and me feel better. Arguments like, you really can't do AIDS treatments in Africa because people don't have wristwatches there. There are these enormous epidemics, terrifying epidemics, of AIDS and TB and malaria, and here's a person who has basically shown us that there is no excuse for not taking them on and trying to stop them. This really caught me in a way nothing else has. To see someone actually make such a profound difference in the world.

**WM:** It seems that the combination of your experiences in Haiti and what's going on now in the world with America's new foreign policy has reawakened some of your old political passion. How do you view the current American government and the way things are going at home and abroad?

**TK:** How many administrations have I lived through? Eisenhower's is the first I remember. And this one [George W. Bush's] is without any question the most radical that we've ever had in my lifetime. It's astonishing to me how far right this country has gone. If you look at Nixon, and you subtract the Vietnam War from his record, he looks like a liberal Democrat or even a left-wing Democrat now. These

people I think want to take America back to a time before the New Deal—I'm not the only one to say that. In foreign policy, it's just been no-holds-barred. The notion that the United States can pretty much do whatever it chooses at enormous expense to other countries—and I'm not talking about some businessman in Paris not doing as well as he might have, I'm talking about people dying because of American policy. Dying of a kind of low-level warfare that doesn't have anything to do with soldiers or guns. And the level of hypocrisy—hypocrisy is part of government, after all, but the level of hypocrisy now is staggering in its proportions. To talk about democracy and trying to instill democracy . . . In Haiti they have a constitutionally elected government. A popular democracy, if there ever was one. Granted, it's all screwed up. Yet I think it's pretty clear we're systematically opposed to popular democracy throughout Latin America. What we really want is oligarchy, and I'm not entirely sure that that isn't what we have going on right here in the United States, with a few curbs on it. And those curbs are growing weaker. I'm speaking in sort of an alarmist mode. I'm living a very nice life now and I can say this to you clearly and not be worried that Ashcroft's people will come knocking at my door tomorrow . . . I guess.

**WM:** Not yet, anyway.

**TK:** Not yet. But I don't like it and I think these guys are really bad news. I think they have an agenda that's really unfamiliar to most Americans. I'm not a left-winger. I don't think of myself as particularly ideological. Still, I don't like what's happening to our country and I don't like what our country's doing in some of the places that I know about. These preposterous attacks on France, which may be one of the few civilized places left on this earth, that kind of thing really offends me. What function does a writer have if not to write about his times? I'm not happy about this stuff and I think I should try to learn more about what's really going on, especially in our foreign policy. The most powerful country on earth has a policy toward one of the least powerful countries on earth that is doing nothing to help that least powerful country and is in fact hurting it greatly.

I think that's a good story. I don't care what the various editors of magazines might think. I think that it's a tremendously important story. If nothing else, it's certainly emblematic of what is going on generally. I think it's important to write about these things, even if you don't have a great deal of faith that it will do any good or change much of anything. To lodge a protest on behalf of human beings.

**WM:** What about going back to fiction? Will you ever do that?

**TK:** I'd like to, but I don't want to do it until I really have some fiction that I want to write. I don't want to do it just because I want to write fiction. There should be some reason to want to write fiction. Some a priori reason. I have some stories in my mind but I have to let them percolate awhile and maybe some people have to die before I write those stories. Because I suppose any piece of fiction that I write will be thought of as a roman à clef—isn't that always the danger?—and it would be even worse in that case because you'd be making up things that people would imagine are true. The desire to write a novel is nowhere near as important as having a novel you really want to write. And I don't currently have one I really want to write.

**WM:** So might you address the political situation next?

**TK:** I'll write this little memoir and then I'll see what's cooking in the world. I think it's important to say that I've been very lucky. Anyone who makes a living in the United States by writing and doesn't admit to having been lucky is deluded. And we may be in the twilight of the written word, but there are always going to be people who will need to be told what to think and what to say. So there are always going to be writers.

**WM:** Personally, I'm not a big believer in the twilight of the written word.

**TK:** Neither am I. I agree with you. Sometimes it feels that way, that's all. Sometimes one confuses one's own impending twilight with the twilight of the written word.