

PETER STRAUB: SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR MY BOOK

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Telephone conversation with Peter Straub about detective stories, collaborations with King, the film noir, Vietnam.

DARK TOWER MATERIAL IN *BLACK HOUSE*

I had been reading *Hearts in Atlantis* and was struck by the character of Ted Brautigan in the first story, “Low Men in Yellow Coats.” I already knew something about Steve’s “Dark Tower” ideas, but I didn’t know about what he called “Breakers.” He had not yet explained anything about that. I wanted to learn more about that on my own. Then I contacted him and suggested we work those materials into the end of *Black House*. It was my idea. Yes, I think you can find implications of that in *The Talisman*, too—but that’s more just because we find ourselves thinking along the same lines sometimes. Anyway, I remember Steve calling me on the phone, all excited about having just come up with the idea of the “Big Combination.” He was running with it. It’s how we have learned to work together. The amazing thing about Steve is that he can start from “zero” and reach “100” in a short time. Like a sprinter off the blocks, or a race car.

So he wrote the Dark Tower stuff and the Big Combination in the last part of *Black House*. You see his work in most of the end of the book, including Jack’s transformation. It was better than I could do. I credit him for that. I’m really happy about including the Dark Tower material. But I don’t think it’ll be developed further in the third book, *Hello, Jack*. (I’ve now changed the title, *What Went Down* to *Hello, Jack*, by the way.) It’s been about a year since I’ve been in contact with Steve; I will have to do that. He’s a very patient person, thank God.

I wrote the beginning of *Black House*, that long introduction to the area. It took me a long time. As you say, I did feel like a tour guide, a little like the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town*. I didn’t know at the time that Wilder had also written that dark picture of Hitchcock’s, *Shadow of a Doubt*. How about that?! Yes, that sequence does seem related to my story in *Houses Without Door*, “A Short Guide to the City.” You know, some people *hate* that long introduction; they say it slows down getting into the story. But Steve loved it, and so do I.

CHANDLER AND HAMMETT

I think my comparison of myself and Steve to Chandler and Hammett does apply, although I think Steve prefers to be more like Chandler! You know, I don’t really like Hammett much. Everything is too much on the surface. I made that comparison intentionally, since I feel that Steve and I are the two best writers in the field.

I really do love *The Long Goodbye*. In a way, it’s the model for *The Throat*. Both are about the betrayal of a friend—by Philip Marlowe’s friend Terry Lennox; and Tim Underhill’s Army buddy, John Ransom. Near the beginning, April Brookner asks her future husband, John

Ransom, about a book to read, something by Chandler or by William Burroughs. He recommends *The Long Goodbye*.

Yes, I've read a lot of Chandler and Ross Macdonald. *The Long Goodbye* and *The Galton Case* made a great impact on me. You know, whenever I have a character get into a car to go somewhere, or go ringing doorbells—that kind of detective investigation—I think of Macdonald. These days you don't get that kind of investigation, any more. But I am fascinated by Macdonald's background, his troubled childhood, the dysfunctional father, his psychoanalysis. Unfortunately, I haven't read anything by Macdonald's wife, Margaret Millar. You say I should check out *The Iron Gates*?

Yes, I think the whole point of my mystery stories is that people are *investigating themselves*. Detectives and criminals are alike in some basic, instinctive way. That's what I'm saying at the end of *Mystery*, when Tom is with Sarah Spence at the zoo. Tom has inherited from von Heilitz all his papers, his money, his house. He's a detective now. There's a panther there, looking at him—a big beautiful, but dangerous animal. It fixes its huge eyes on him. Sarah says, "*The panther's looking at you!*" And Tom realizes he *is* what he *does*; he is what he's supposed to be.

You know, I was tempted to do a series of stories with von Heilitz and Tom Pasmore, sort of a Sherlock Homes-Dr. Watson pairing. But I thought, no, the very idea is *nauseating!* It made my skin crawl! I can't imagine anything worse, taking both of them around the Midwest, solving crimes! So I killed off von Heilitz! But I admit I miss him, now and then.

FILM NOIR

My central viewing of movies as a child was when I was around seven years old. I was at the movie theater, watching whatever was showing. I particularly liked the Alan Ladd movies. He was a great hero of mine. Years later, while I was living in Westport writing the story, "The Juniper Tree," a movie called *Chicago Deadline* [1949] came on the television, with Alan Ladd and Donna Reed. I thought, this is terrific! And I decided to insert it into the story. It's the movie that young Tim watches in the theater. Yes, it's a real movie. All the other films noir that I talk about in my stories are pastiches.

LILY AND KALENDAR—BACKS TURNED

You asked me about the two scenes in *lost boy lost girl* and *In the Night Room* when both Kalendar and Lily keep their backs turned to you. Yes, I do make a point of that. Kalendar keeps his back turned. He turned to evil and isolation. Lily is only partly turned away. She has been able to survive in the world as a doctor who helps people. In *The Night Room* Tim and Willy find Lily in her home off in a cul-de-sac. They look through the window and see her, although she doesn't see them. She keeps her face averted. But she doesn't turn her back, like her father does. I want you to know she has coped with her demons, contracted with them, you could say. But it's important that she realizes she *still* has these awful impulses. She's *barely* able to

control them. But she can't let people get close. I think it's the most moving moment in the whole book.

I took the whole idea from a painting by Magritte I mention in *In the Night Room* ["Not to Be Reproduced," 1937]: A man faces a mirror, but the reflection is of *the back of his head*. That painting was very much on my mind.

VIETNAM

I agree with you that for me Vietnam was a *personal* tragedy; and yes, I agree with you that Steve King sees it more in terms of a *national* tragedy. I spent a lot of time traveling through the countries I wrote about in *Koko*. I wanted to get the right feel of the places. But not Vietnam. I got letters after the book was published from veterans. I remember there was one man, a returned veteran, who was angry at me for what he called "violating" the veterans. I wrote him back, saying that he should "*drop his pose; that it's not working. You don't own Vietnam. I have free access to it in my imagination.*" But I also got another letter from the wife of a veteran, who told me that my book had helped her and husband talk about his experience.