

OUTLINE FOR TV SHOW ON "MY LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES"

1. Explain who Delmore Schwartz was, and how you came to write a biography of him.
- 2(a). How and why did you come to write a biography of Saul Bellow. How many years did it take? Did you speak extensively with him? With which people who knew him?
 - (b). Do you have a particular take (or takes) on Bellow?
 - (c). Explain who Isaac Rosenfeld was, and its relevance to your points.
3. Describe the publishing ventures you've started, including your current one.
4. You say that you grew up in a Chicago suburb and, after decades in the east, are still not comfortable with what you called the sophisticated eastern style. Explain this.
- 5(a). Explain how you came to write "My Life In The Middle Ages," especially the "generational memoir" aspect of the work. Include the story of the piece on failure you wrote for the New Yorker and the (somewhat dam bursting) reaction to it.
 - (b). To what extent is the book a chronicle about the lives of privileged middle and upper middle class New Yorkers? To what extent does it pertain to other people as well?
- 6(a). It seems to me that one conceivable "lesson" of the book is that one never quits, as when your father was trying to learn how to use the Internet in his mid or late 80's, or your grandmother kept trying to improve herself by taking courses and trying to get a pharmacy license, or you taking tennis lessons from one coach after another in your late 40' or 50s. As Churchill said in a speech at Harrow as an old man. "Never, never, never give up." (That was his complete speech -- amazing.) Do you agree, and why or why not?
 - (b). Is this idea that one never quits a product of the last 60 years or so of the 20th Century? Of "Chicagoland" or the midwest? Is it extensively an immigrant phenomenon? Is it a general, permanent human idea? Where does it come from?
 - A. You know, although he was already at the top of his profession, Tiger Woods spent a year and a half or so -- with much "failure" accordingly -- revamping his swing to try to become even better. This is a remarkable example of never

quitting in the quest for improvement.

- 7(a). Describe the bookish character of your father.
 - (b). Describe the effect of growing up in a home filled with books, with a father who was a reader.
 - (c). Explain what makes you a reader, and what books have meant to you -- the private escape into a different world, etc.
 - (d). Explain how you want to read everything in sight, so to speak (a characteristic I share), how you are constantly buying books that you wish to but do not read, and ultimately have to sell them to a second-hand book shop, how sometimes you buy second copies of books because you cannot find the copy you have on your shelves (due to "overload").
 - A. Where do you think this mania for books comes from? Is it just genetic? Is it from your background? Is it a case of "who knows?"
 - (e). Explain how the host of distractions today interfere with reading: cell phones, email, even airplane magazines. (Alexander Gerschenkron, the famous Harvard economist of the mid century, stopped reading newspapers because he wanted time to read books).
 - (f). Explain that you find yourself speed reading things these days because of lack of time, and/or jumping right to the bottom line.
 - (g). What is your view on the question of whether Americans are or are not reading books these days?
8. Describe the kinds of kids you hung around with in high school, and how this caused your parents to worry about whether you were maladjusted. Explain the prevailing idea in the '50s and '60s that, if one is an artist, one must have a screw loose. Is this an idea that prevailed all over America? In the midwest or in Chicago particularly? Did it prevail in New York? Does it prevail as much now as it did 40 and 50 years ago?
 9. Briefly describe the life of your paternal grandfather. Discuss the effect (a crippling one, I gather) that his parents had on your father. Tell the story of his mother lying down in front of the door so that he wouldn't leave, and the notation you found in which she asked where did she go wrong with her son. These stories seem to me the

quintessence of the experience that a lot of sons of immigrant Russian Jewish mothers went through. Do you agree or disagree? Do you think it is comparable (yet even more stifling perhaps) than the experience of sons of immigrant Italian Catholic mothers? Of daughters of immigrant Chinese mothers?

- A. Describe how, every Sunday, you had to go to your grandmother's house for the same boiled chicken dinner with gefilte fish, etc., with the plastic covers on the furniture and so forth. This is quintessence although it usually was Friday night dinners. (Elaine May has a hysterical skit on this.)
 - B. Explain that, because your grandparents suffocated your father, he gave his children a loose run. (How did you raise your own kids in view of the loose run on you?)
10. Describe your father's friendship with Jerry. What your father did for Jerry with regard to the Schurz High yearbook. How they went to Northwestern together -- how did they get into Northwestern, which was very antisemitic at the time? Why Jerry left school and your father didn't and instead went on to medical school. Why your father didn't invest in Jerry's company. (Did the fact that Jerry was his friend mean that he lacked confidence in the family's business acumen, that one simply didn't invest with friends, or what?) How the company grew to behemoth proportions. (I'm curious -- though you spoke of a paper and container business, was this fictionalized? The story sounds like that of the Crown family or the Pritzker family.) The times that Jerry and your father got together as very old men, and the devastating (ruined face) aspect of the meeting that they knew would be their last.
- A. Tell the story of the two Silver Clouds. This is symptomatic of something which appears in many places in the book, isn't it?: inanimate objects (cars, houses, etc.) remain, but the people are no more. (Ars longa, vita brevis) Isn't this a horrible, saddening human tragedy?
 - i. There is, relatedly, a strong sense in this book of one generation leading to another, as the generations come onto the stage and then pass away, right? (It is evocative though not logical to say "Nothing beside remains.")
 - ii. Tell the story about only the cart still remains.
- 11(a). Describe your father's personality, including the fact that he was a presence and his distaste for the banal, for platitudes, for bushwa, for most TV. Where did the latter traits come from?: Was it in the genes? Was it from reading?

- (b). Why do you think your father changed his first name after 38 years?
- (c). Though your parents had enough money to lead a good life (describe the life), and your father was a real presence in people's lives, he considered himself something of a failure because he was not wealthy, when so many around him had become rich. Similarly, in New York during the '90s, a lot of intellectuals began to be sorely disappointed, and to wonder whether something was wrong with them (though they were leading comfortable lives), because they were not wealthy but were living in a place where there was so much wealth, such enormous fortunes, and it was all thrust in front of one on a daily basis. Explain all this and what you think about it. Haven't we carried the emphasis on wealth to the point of serious disproportionality, and even a form of sickness, in America?
- A. How was it that, in your father's generation in Chicago, the wealthy all knew how much each other had though they didn't explicitly discuss this?
- i. Explain that money allowed one to move up in class as a Jew, but not as an American.
- B. Doesn't the emphasis on wealth in this country really get in the way of an idea, that you ultimately learned and that appears in several places in your book? I'm speaking of the idea of being who you are and doing what you can do, which is what, I gather, causes you not to write novels even though you once wanted to be a novelist because fiction writers are regarded as the great writers. In sports, which Americans tend to understand, the idea of being who you are and doing what you can do is called "playing within yourself" -- don't try to hit home runs if you lack the power and are basically a angles hitter. The lesson is true everywhere in life, isn't it? (That you turned away from writing novels is something of a contrast, isn't it, to the aforementioned idea that one never quits -- an idea that can lead to permanent frustration when something, for one reason or another, is not in the cards, but that, on the other hand, can sometimes lead to amazing results.)
12. Describe your sense that people seek permanence and connectedness, and seek to escape the daily struggle to create their own identity. Explain how this causes you to have a second home in a country village, to slowly restore it from a broken down state, to revel in being known there. Contrast this with the isolatedness of life in large urban areas, especially New York, with the dog eat dog nature of life in such areas, and with the fact that so many people move from place to place in the course of pushing forward their careers.

- A. Explain the relationship to this idea of venerable English homes. Of the Italian Catholic practice of a family living in the same house for two or more generations.
 - B. Explain your aching for the raspberries.
 - C. Describe the continuous presence in the old days of a large extended family. (My family had a cousins club.)
 - D. I suppose the downside of all this is that it can be very stifling, like living in a small town.
13. Describe your visit to your old home in Evanston, and the reaction of you and of the people who live there now.
14. You talk of the desire for speed -- to get places in record time -- and doing dangerous things to accomplish this, even though a few minutes are meaningless. This strikes me as a prevalent American phenomenon. What is your opinion of its prevalence and of the reasons for it.
- 15(a). Describe the daily struggle with bills.
- (b). Describe your bad investment experiences. Isn't this *very* relevant to the idea of privatizing social security so that people will make their own investments?
 - (c). Describe the incredible homes in the Hamptons, and how this caused you to realize that there is a different world out there that 99.9 percent of us will never know (but which is daily thrust in our faces by the media and causes people to be dissatisfied with their own lives. (This relates to your father and to New Yorkers of your class.)
- 16(a). Describe the utterly horrendous experience of being fired, especially when one is in his 40s or 50s, with a family to support, and doesn't know where the next dollar is coming from. ("I thought I'd fall down in the street.")
- (b). Yet people often say, years later, that getting fired, or other failures (as with your novel) was one of the best things that ever happened to them. Explain why this can happen. Of course, for other people it's simply a life-destroying experience. Explain this too. How much does the philosophy of never quit have to do with the ultimate result? How much do flexibility, and luck have to do with it? (Some people would never dream of leaving New York or Washington, when this would be the best action

to take.)

- (c). Explain the effect on people of “Death of a Salesman” and the effect on you of “Mr. Holland’s Opus.”
- A. Your Dad, I note, was somewhat formal not because he didn’t feel, but because he felt too much. Formalism, gruffness, surface hardness are often reactions to feeling too much, aren’t they?
- 17(a). Explain your view that the key to happiness, or at least acceptance, is to feel you are successful without the confirmation of others, i.e., regardless of what others think.
- (b). Explain that we always fail to live up to our own hopes. It is the human condition. Tell who is in your list of self assessed failures -- Cyril Connolly, Norman Mailer, etc.
- (c). Explain that we always make mistakes that we can’t take back -- and that for years, we may, feel ended on our chances. Describe your own decision not to write the authorized biography and to leave your job at *The Times*. Explain that when we’re young we don’t understand our own limits and incapacities, so that when we are older, and know them, we would make different decisions if we had it to do over again.
- (d). With regard to the views of one that are held by others, discuss Gore Vidal’s description of schadenfreude: It’s not enough to succeed. Your friends must fail. Where does this characteristic come from? From measuring ourselves against those we know? From jealousy?
- (e). Explain your views about the American myth of self creation, and that it ignores things like were you born smart or born rich, were you lucky, etc.
- (f). What are your views of book reviewers, who can turn one into a “failure” and regularly do? What would be your view of the position that they are generally jerks who consider it their bounden duty to savage books (lest they be thought unsophisticated), who often write unbalanced and uncomprehending reviews, who often are far more interested in presenting their own views than in describing the author’s, and who, it is now known, often do not read, or at most only lightly skim, the books they are reviewing?
- A. How can reviewers -- e.g., for *The Times* -- thoroughly read the books they are reviewing when they write two (or sometimes even three?) reviews a week?
18. Describe your feelings when your son began to regularly beat you at tennis.

19(a). Describe the reasons which you think may account for the increase in divorces. Include:

- A. Men hit a wall around age 50. They are not going to rise to the top, become head of the company, etc. Their possibilities are closing down. So they find a new woman. (Explain that Europe is *much* less puritanical, so that, if a man gets a mistress or a woman a lover, nobody thinks badly about it and the marriage continues.
- B. Or maybe the wife becomes more successful than the husband, and this causes problems.
- C. Women need a husband far less than vice versa.
- D. People are living a lot longer, and were not built to stay married for 50 or 60 years (as your parents did). In the old days marriages may have been unhappy but that was not grounds for divorce, so people stayed married (and sometimes got along best in their old age).
- E. Monogamy, you say, is a recent invention.

(b). Describe the downside to divorce. Include:

- A. It's "cold out there."
- B. Married people confide in each other, know each other's thoughts, can follow each other's stories, grew up together.
- C. There is a loss of trust and connectedness.