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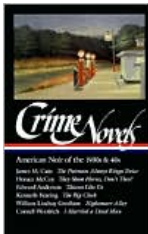
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Next Stop: Hollywood & God; Conversing about Form with Robert Polito

by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 06-18-2009 11:49 AM - last edited on 06-22-2009 01:16 PM by [ADMINI PaulH](#)

I first became acquainted with Robert Polito's work in 1997 when I received the gift of his beautifully bound two book American Library set, Crime Novels.



I'd never heard of Patricia Highsmith before, but after reading *The Talented Mr. Ripley* on a long post-Christmas Amtrak ride, I was hooked enough to imbibe the rest of her works. Highsmith soon went through a posthumous popular resurgence after Anthony Minghella's film of the first Ripley book, *Talented Mr. Ripley*.

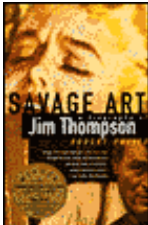
This week, two writer friends sent me the link to another look at this great author in *The New York Review of Books* <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22797?email>. The obsession with her continues.



Polito's work summons up the dark, nervous, mysterious vibe of the noir authors he has championed including wildcat author Jim Thompson, whom Polito wrote the ultimate biography of, *Savage Art*. His new book, *Hollywood & God*, a slim, tasty compendium of poetry and prose embodies the exciting and unpredictable feel of a jazz improv session, much like a conversation about writing with the author himself.

JD: Your book is refreshingly eclectic in form. As published, the order of pieces seems inevitable, but how did you go about trying to arrange your material?

RP: Thank you. From the outset I thought of *Hollywood & God* as a book, rather than a miscellany, or even a collection. One of the ways I saw the title is as the intersection of two streets - Hollywood & Vine, Hollywood & Gower, Hollywood & God. So the book mixes poetry and prose, mixes as well different sorts of poems, each piece tracking various claims on the author's life and a reader's attention, and there's a lot of collage, some obvious, some (I hope) seamless. But ultimately I wanted a total effect that might emerge out of the intersections and sudden turns of the prose and poetry, perhaps like the ghost of a novel, though without any manifest storyline. The ordering was, as you suggest, everything, or almost everything, and stayed in play right up until I was finished, when I reversed the order of two of the prose pieces, and the book felt done.



JD: Like many writers, you also teach (RP is Director of the New School's MFA in Creative Writing Program). When writing *Hollywood & God* how did you arrange your time to actually get your writing done?

RP: For poems, and even for the prose pieces in this book, I tend to take a ridiculously long time accumulating notes, lines, and stanzas - months, years - but finally then write them all up very quickly. Some of those notes are done at a desk, though many arrive under preposterous circumstances, such as on the bus to New Paltz, or during a New School meeting, or a poetry reading I'm introducing, or while researching some essay. Cause and effect are hard to distinguish here - do I work this way because of the fragmented life I have as a writer, teacher, and administrator, or do I have that life because of the way I work? Much of the New School fortunately happens in the afternoon and evening, so many mornings and, of course, weekends are pretty free.



JD: Your book summons up the music and the voices of many recordings and films. Do you read your work aloud while you are writing it? It feels as if you are channeling different voices. Not to ask the magician to reveal his secrets, but how do YOU do what you do?

RP: Often in *Hollywood & God* I was after a composite or collective voice. I spend a lot of time watching movies, and maybe more time listening to music. Way back, in a review of an Elvis Costello show I wrote in the 80s, I glibly called the singing I like "method acting singing," meaning, I guess, those spooky singers who dwell down deep in a lyric, and appear to inhabit from the inside any song they're singing, irrespective of whether they wrote it or not. Maybe *Hollywood & God* is in that sense a medley of voices - a medley of America singers who, at least over the expanse of a dissonant phrase or line, believe deeply whatever they're singing.

JD: What are you working on now?

RP: I'm going over the galleys for a monumental book (900 pages!) I'm so happy to be involved with - *Farber On Film: The Complete Film Writings Of Manny Farber*, which I've just edited and will be out in the early fall from the Library of America. Manny was a friend, and the most amazing film critic and painter. He died last summer, at the age of 91,

About Unabashedly Bookish

Unabashedly Bookish features new articles every day from the Book Clubs staff, guest authors, and friends on hot topics in the world of books, language, writing, and publishing. From trends in the publishing business to updates on genre fiction fan communities, from fun lessons on grammar to reflections on literature in our personal lives, this blog is the best source for your daily dose of all things bookish.

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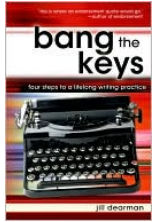
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Who introduced you to reading? RIZZO'S WAR author Lou Manfredi thanks his dad. <http://bit.ly/1RZHRM> about 6 hours ago

A fantasy world where people's souls go down a spirit stream and end up on Earth when they

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only a few months after his last gallery show of new work. Plus I'm on sabbatical from the New School, and trying to finish a nonfiction book, *Detours: Seven Noir Lives*.



QUESTION OF THE WEEK for Key-bangers: That's all for now with RP. I'm curious, but I'm dear writers, how has music and film (or other art forms) influenced your work? Let us all know, and keep banging the keys <http://www.bangthekeys.com>.

Check out my writer's workshop in a book, *Bang the Keys!*

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Posting comments on the blog is simply a matter of signing into the *Book Clubs* and then clicking on the "Post A Comment" link that appears on the bottom of each blog entry. In order to sign into the *Book Clubs* you have to have a BN.com account. You can create that by using the Sign In link at the top of any page on BN.com. Once you have a BN.com account and are signed into that, you'll need to click the Sign In link on the *Book Clubs* (it's below the image of a bookshelf). Again, this club is called *Unabashedly Bookish*. Any problem - try the Help board.

And if YOU or a writer you know are interested in being INTERVIEWED for this weekly column on writing, write to me at Jill@JillDearman.com. Put "B&N Blog Interview" in the subject line. Be patient; I shall respond. Show's over. Cut! Print!

Message Edited by PaulH on 06-22-2009 01:16 PM

All Users' Tags: Anthony_Minghella Jill_Dearman Jim_Thompson Manny_Farber Patricia_Highsmith View All (6)

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by [jynyc](#) on 06-18-2009 12:19 PM

Options

Thanks for a great interview Jill. I have not read Polito but am curious to check him out! Also I like hearing about his fragmented work process... it's reassuring!

Permalink

1

by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 06-18-2009 12:25 PM

Options

Isn't it, though? Polito is king of fab little pieces adding up to a puzzling and powerful whole. I write in fragments too, and it's reassuring to hear that YOU do too! How about other folks?

Permalink

0

by [SDFicklin](#) on 06-18-2009 02:36 PM

Options

Wow, great interview! I've tried writing in fragments and while it's liberating to be able to write scenes that way I found it hard to weave back together into a cohesive piece. I guess that's why I don't write Noir!

Permalink

1

by [BLOGGER Jill_Dearman](#) on 06-18-2009 04:35 PM

Options

Ha! Yes, I suppose those threads can get lost in a dark alley, on a rainy night ...

Permalink

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by [BurtShulman](#) on 06-18-2009 06:04 PM

Options

My most productive writing seems to come in what I'd call fragmentary bursts which can be pretty intense, but may only happen every other year or so (sometimes, sadly, even less frequently). I just seem to hit periods in my life during which for various reasons I find an opening -- kind of like a football running back who breaks that one tackle and hits the open field. It feels great, and for a little while I'll write at a good clip -- I'm talking maybe three or four months. Then my inner defensive line closes up again and I start getting stuffed on every play (ok, enough with the football metaphors). Often, that's when I start feeling exhausted and depressed because to continue the writing burst would mean going on very little sleep while still needing to fulfill all those Life Obligations (plus craving some mandatory goof-off time). My ongoing effort is to somehow lock in a schedule where I write at least a little every day -- forever -- and still have room for those periodic bursts. But -- for me, much of the time writing for a half hour a day ends up feeling more frustrating than gratifying. So often between bursts I kind of stop, though never completely. And that's when I get really fragmented and end up just tinkering with my stuff every few weeks at best. Right now I'm in or just coming off one of those bursts, so I'm really musing about this, trying to locate the mechanisms that raise my anxiety to the point at which it becomes less painful to just avoid writing than keep at it. I have similar issues when it comes to the work I do for a living so this isn't surprising. I comfort myself by recognizing that even this odd pattern

die. Sound familiar? <http://bit.ly/4FuJdG> about 23 hours ago

Stop by and chat with Debbie Macomber. <http://bit.ly/sgTVQ> 1 day ago

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does result in a gradual accumulation of what I pray are readable pages. But I also cling to the fantasy that one day -- "soon" -- my latent writerly discipline will trump my blatant writerly avoidance and I'll somehow start getting in at least 2 hours a day no matter what. I suspect this is all tied up with the fear that even after a sustained effort I'll come up empty or close to it. But I'm on it; I'm a committed mindfulness meditator and I now work with a gifted writing coach. It may be possible that some of these old energies are shifting enough so that even when I'm in the teeth of my intense non-writing life demands, and in the grip of the perfectionism I can never satisfy, some of my resistance may be morphing into acceptance. If I can channel all this baloney into a sustainable, nourishing writer's habit, which I was able to do for several years a number of years ago -- before I took on a lot of blessed but absorbing responsibilities -- I'll be well satisfied. We'll see. But I'll never give up trying.

Permalink

2

by **KathyS** on 06-19-2009 08:55 PM

Options

Music...

.....is my life; I grew up with my hands on white and black keys. As with words, I wanted to connect them, to hear music, to say something real....formed into something other than inanimate objects. I find no other way around it. It's beauty, it's pain, it's all about life. I hear music in my head, constantly. I want to deny it, but it's there; I want to repulse it...but it sits in my lap...staring me in the face until I accept it.. Its form is who and what I am. I know no other way to express this. I write to music...I see it all around me...my sentences are formed with so many commas, they break because of the beat I hear in my head. My poems become lyrics to music no one else can hear. Though beautiful at times, this place, it can be lonely.

Permalink

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by **KathyS** on 06-20-2009 06:28 PM

Options

Jill, you asked how music, film, or other art forms influence our works.

Over the last couple of years, on these boards, I've taken this time to think about these art forms....and what just exactly is their influence on me; how I have to work through them all.

I started writing a serious...I mean really serious, story. A novel in the works....in between writing poems that are now coming out my ears! This story intertwines both poems and prose...very complicated to write, let alone explain... so many voices to keep track of. I've left it alone for six months now, and going back to it, I know, will be painful, because I've tried. I've now given myself time away, without guilt, knowing this Fall I will have the "full" time to write. Taking a step back for any length of time causes problems. I'm just a novice writer...who jumped into it with both feet!

I grew up in a movie theater, literally. My father managed one in our local town. I'd read a lot of novels as a kid.... I did get to see these novels come to life, making characters bigger than the average bear! Everything from drama, to comedy; mystery to musicals; fantasy to westerns! Movie actors, at that time, were all bigger than life.

I grew up studying the piano. I went to school and studied art. I've thrown pots for over twenty years. I sculpt and manipulate clay. I "work" with my mind, as well as my hands. I use and incorporate a number of different mediums in the process. Creating is what I do. I've painted scenery for plays, and other large projects, and all is purely from my imagination, but the one thing I've never actually studied, has been writing. But I have, these last couple of years, started reading a lot about writing, and writers.

How does my art influence why I'm now writing?

I believe, the senses that we all have, the ones we trained over the years and fine tune, these [I think], change the way we see things around us. I've told artists who have struggled with this process, the creative flow will come and be seen, but it's a process that requires the letting go of the mind, before it can be realized, and visualized. I knew what it felt like, but to explain it was difficult.

I can see words on a page, and I get visuals. I hear music, and words come to mind. I read or write a scene, and I can place other scenes around it. I connect these dots to past experiences. Daydreaming, I believe, is a necessity for any artist. It's ongoing....Finding the tools, the words to use, I fumble around. Every day I practice writing something, whether privately, or publicly on these boards, trying to keep my senses in tune. My fingers are never disconnected from my mind... The dots of all art forms are there, we just have to connect them. You call it banging on the keys...I call it playing a tune...I feel for all artists who struggle.

Kathy

Permalink

1

by **rp15** on 06-22-2009 12:06 AM

Options

People have been asking me about the singers I had in mind when I responded to Jill's good question about the film and music behind "Hollywood & God."

I've always gravitated towards singers -- hundreds of them, so here goes: Bob Dylan, Al Green, Howlin' Wolf, Geeshie Wiley, Sam Cooke, Hank Williams, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, Sister O. M. Terrell, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Chet Baker, Om Kalthoum, Paul Hillier, Otis Redding, Caetano Veloso, David Bowie, Tom Waits, Skip James, Blind Willie Johnson, Elvis Costello, Jackie Wilson, P.J. Harvey, Maria Callas, Morrissey, Syd Straw, Amalia Rodrigues, Connie Boswell, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, Ray Davies, Mary Lee Kortez, Conchita Supervia, Jo Stafford, Emmett Miller, Frank Hutchison, Ralph Stanley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Bryan Ferry, Cecilia Bartoli, Arthur Alexander, Bert Williams, Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Peggy Lee, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Sanford Sylvan, George Jones, Charles Brown, Hoagy Carmichael, Little Richard, the Louvin Brothers, Hector Zazou, Sally Timms, Amy Winehouse, Jimmie

LizFenton on: My Own Mr. Right

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I'll conclude there, for now. I'm transcribing lists I made in the car (we've been traveling), so forgive any misspellings or repetitions. If my ipod was handy, we'd be stopped here all day!

Permalink 1

by [BLOGGER: Jill_Dearman](#) on 06-22-2009 05:47 PM Options

Amazing how so much of what we hear and see infuses our work. Such richness from all these influences, and so great how what we write can turn other people on to old and delicious material. Curious if anyone listens to music while writing...

Permalink 0

by [KathyS](#) on 06-24-2009 10:24 PM Options

Jill wrote: *Curious if anyone listens to music while writing...*

Good topic for discussion. If you want to.

Permalink 0

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