

Sunday's Speech

Hello everyone. Thank you all so much for coming, I'm glad to see so many of you here today. Thank you also to Arthur Jackson for organizing this event, and for inviting me to come and present for all of you today. Thanks, Arthur.

I'm very pleased to be here. I have to admit, I'm not a frequent public speaker, so please bear with me. In fact, when Art first asked me if I'd be interested in doing this, although I knew I would say yes to such a great opportunity, I knew equally well that it would be a challenge for me. I told myself at first that I'd avoid the issue altogether by just reading from my novel for a solid hour and then opening up for questions, but eventually, upon reflection, I thought that might not work. But fortunately, upon even further reflection – I may not be the fastest dart in the gun, but I get there eventually – I realized there are actually quite a few points relating to humanism in my novel, and that maybe reviewing and leading a discussion of some of those points might be a slightly better use of our time together.

So I thought I'd try that. And in that spirit, I chose to focus on a couple of specific thoughts that I had while considering my novel's – and thus my own – relationship to humanism. I will also discuss the issues I originally planned on talking to you about today, the novel's place in modern society and particularly its relationship to movies, but these other topics, which relate directly to humanism, seemed more relevant and interesting, so I thought I'd like to discuss them first. The first point is

read your Bible. And that may sound a bit strange, as a first step in humanism, or in novel-writing for that matter, but I will attempt to explain. The second thought I had regarding my relationship to humanism, is that we as humanists must always strive to understand the reasons why people reach out for God, and then also, we must always be conscious of whether, and how, humanism fills that need that they are reaching out to satisfy. And I'll probably be a bit out of my depth in that area, but I'll try to formulate a few thoughts on that subject, as well. And then third, just to lighten things up a bit, I'll discuss a little bit about the novel's place today's busy society.

First, a bit about me and how I came to write my novel, *The Glasshouse*. I was born in upstate New York, in Albany. I moved quite a few times as a child, including multi-year stints in Puerto Rico and Germany. I loved creative writing as a student, but the idea of making a living at it hardly seemed possible. Actually, it still seems impossible. In high school I used to write short stories and the occasional poem, I was in a creative writing program and I enjoyed that very much. I took a creative writing class as a freshman in college at NYU and enjoyed that, too. Then I finished my business degree, got a job in New York, and forgot all about writing. I always intended to write the great American novel one day, among my many other grandiose long-term goals, but my precious evenings and weekends always seemed to get donated to other pursuits... (glug glug).

It was probably for the best that I didn't write much during that period in my life, however, mainly because I didn't really know very much. About life, or philosophy, or about what's important and meaningful. I had transferred to the University of Pennsylvania, where I graduated with an undergraduate business degree, and then I spent the next decade working in public relations. And then a very fortunate thing happened. I inherited a bit of money following the sale of my grandfather's business and was able to stop working and go traveling. And that's what I did. For two years. I backpacked through forty-five countries in about twenty months. And during that trip, about six or seven months in, sitting in a very small, very humble little hotel room in Ouzoud, Morocco, I had a kind of revelation. In essence, it was this: you only live once, and you only get one life's worth of time on this Earth, so it is incumbent upon you to make the most of it, to find a way to do what you really want to do with that time. Life is too short, too precious, to be spent at a desk in a cubicle somewhere, doing what someone else wants you to do. In my case, this used to be writing press releases about cell phones and other new technologies. Not a bad way of making a living certainly, better than ditch-digging or latrine-cleaning, let's say, but ultimately less than spiritually fulfilling. And definitely not worthy of the precious time I'd been given on this planet. I wanted to make a difference, to say the things I thought of as being the most important, to reach people, and maybe even for my name to outlive me, a weak stab at one small form of immortality. And writing seemed to me to be the way to accomplish all these things at once.

Well, of course, novel-writing is not as simple as all that. I had a feeling, when I started out, that writing a novel would feel something akin to writing an extended, extra-length short story. Well, it turns out it's a bit more complicated than that. I was about halfway through my first novel when I realized I didn't know what I was doing. My book had become the novel about everything that has ever happened to anyone, anywhere. Apparently this is a common trap for first-time novel-writers, I'm told. I was in a bind. The half-finished novel seemed like an untamable monster, and I wanted nothing to do with it. I was still looking at it every day, even adding more words, but it felt like bailing out a sinking ship with a little plastic bucket or a teaspoon, maybe: the water was rushing in a lot faster than I could ever hope to empty it, and the entire enterprise seemed doomed to miserable failure.

As I was doing research one day, I somehow found myself on the web page of the German-American Historical Society of Maryland and Washington, DC. I should note, I really like doing research. Doing research is one of my favorite aspects of the novel-writing process, in fact I think I may like it too much. It has certainly made novel-writing a very lengthy endeavor for me, but I think it's also contributed a lot to the quality of my work. So, on this site, on this web page dedicated to German-American history, was a transcript of a presentation given at the group's most recent meeting, by its president, concerning three little-known German carpenters who had traveled to Virginia with some of the earliest English colonists, twelve years even before the Mayflower. The three Germans are cast as spies in the somewhat dubious narrative of events provided by John Smith, the colony's leader

for a little over a year and, unfortunately, virtually the only source for the events which took place at Jamestown during the colony's early years. The speech by the historical society's president was a rebuttal to Smith's version of events, pointing out the self-glorifying aspects of his tale, the inconsistencies, the obvious fabrications, and making the case that the Germans were not, could not have been, and never were spies.

There was something appealing about this historical fact-checking, something about setting the story straight, and the righting of wrongs, that spoke to me. I liked the idea of showing everyone how incredibly wrong Disney and everyone else had gotten the story of John Smith, Pocahontas and the poor, much-maligned Germans. So, as the days went by, I began to work on both projects at once. At first I was just writing the story of the Germans in Virginia as an exercise, as a break from my real writing, but the story grew and developed rapidly, even as my half-finished novel languished, mocking me. After a few weeks, I finally had to admit to myself that the novel I was working on was not going anywhere. Suddenly, the story of the Germans was now my novel. The other novel still sits, half-completed, somewhere on my hard drive, waiting for the day when I will return to it and try to rescue it from the dread disease afflicting it, if possible. And that day will come. At some point. I still love setting grandiose, long-term goals for myself. ☺

So I'd like to continue, at this point, by telling you all the story of my novel. The novel, as you know by now, is called *The Glasshouse*. Its narrator is a retired history

professor from Tidewater Virginia who recounts his life story, which begins when as a 10-year-old he finds a buried treasure chest in the ruined foundations of an early 17th-century glasshouse at the back of his family farm. Inside the chest, among a few other random objects whose meaning he will discover as the story progresses, is a manuscript written by two German brothers who crossed the Atlantic with the English on one of their first voyages to Virginia. As it turns out, the three carpenters I had first read about were accompanied by two other Germans, glassmakers hired by the English, who had no native glassmaking industry at that time because they lacked the forests necessary to feed the constant fires that melt sand into glass. The narrator begins to tell the story of the two brothers contained in the manuscript, of their beginnings and their journey through Europe and on to the New World in 1608, interspersed with the further elaboration of his own life story and its various secrets, lies and regrets.

So that's a very brief outline of the basic story, and I will read a bit from the book later, as well. A few other notes about the book: I've been working on it, on and off, for a little over five years so far, so, thank God it's not my day job he-he. It's been a labor of love, writing it, and I haven't always been willing to punch that clock and roll up my sleeves, but I believe that that's actually given me time to become more sophisticated about my subject and its themes, and to do more research, which after all can only be done profitably beforehand, not after! So I merely thank my lucky stars that I have as much time as I need and keep plowing forward, or sideways, or... I don't know, whatever direction it may be that I'm going in. Point being, I think it's a

blessing to think things through slowly, to ruminate and cogitate and let one's mind go where it will. And it's a blessing a lot of folks have forgotten how to enjoy. We do still have time for that if we make time.

Anyway, the basic approach I decided to take with this story, when I discovered it, was to write it as fiction, but to portray everything as accurately as I possibly could. I prefer not to pigeonhole my book as historical fiction, but I realize most will probably label it as such anyway. In a lot of historical fiction, however, the writer finds a story, or an interesting character, brushes up on the basic outlines of the story and a bit of the fashion and lingo of the times, and sets to work inventing the rest. I chose a different approach – to research as though I were writing a history, a nonfiction account of the story, and to only fill in the personal aspects of the story where the historical record leaves off. Sort of the antithesis of *A Million Little Pieces* if you will, on the edge of being true although it's a novel rather than being over the edge of truth and purporting to be fact. This approach, although fortunate for my proclivities, has been unfortunate for my timeliness, as it has led to a lot of research. And still more research. And yet more research. I continue to do more research than writing, even after five years, and I truly believe that it's only making the final product better and better. By expanding my research concentrically outward, I've discovered links to my story with Shakespeare, King James and his Bible, astronomy and the invention of the telescope, all happening simultaneously with the story of my Germans traversing the globe, all waiting to get involved somehow in my little fiction. So any writers out there, don't be afraid to take your time. ☺

One of the most humanistic of the themes in my novel is represented by a character named Samuel. In keeping with the factual approach I had decided to take, this character is a real person from history, one of the three carpenters, whose real name was indeed Samuel. Taking this factual basis and running with it, I decided to infuse a parable of the Biblical story of Samuel into my story, with the intention of using his personal story arc to demonstrate the idea that all prophets are, by definition, false prophets, in the sense that no man can truly claim to know the face of God. This is part of my personally-held beliefs, and something I want to put out there and demonstrate in the story, but I have to use the Bible to do it, even though the point I want to make is anything but Christian doctrine.

Which brings me to my first point. By the way, if anyone has any questions at any point, feel free to raise your hands. And, if anyone knows any publishers or literary agents, please come see me after the talk! But back to my first point, which is read your Bible.

Some of you here today probably come from a religious background and are steeped in that knowledge, and have come to humanism by a theological path. But many others among us probably are not like that. Many of us probably came from different backgrounds that may not have stressed the learning of religious knowledge as important, and many of us have probably been quite happy about that, happy to

know only as much about the subject as we've been forced to learn by the non-humanists around us.

And this can suffice. Indeed I'm not sure how much one really loses by not believing the fairy tale, if I may put it so lightly. Until I became a novelist, that is. Once I began writing novels, I quickly realized how necessary a knowledge of these stories is, regardless of your faith or beliefs. Whether we like it or not, the Bible is so fundamental to our history, to our way of thinking and looking at the world, that it simply can't be ignored. And it pays to know more than the Bible. It pays to know as much as you can about the Koran, about the original Torah, about the teachings of Buddha, about the various versions and translations of the Bible that have appeared throughout history. These things help prove to us that religion is mutable, that nothing is written in stone, even if it is written on stone. Where are the Ten Commandments today? They survive only on paper. These ideas that we get from religion, they can change, and they do change.

But they also form a core belief set for a large segment of the population, and they represent, for better or worse, the mainstream perception of what it means to be alive, to exist, to be human. And that perception must be accounted for, and spoken to, by anyone hoping to write a meaningful novel. Whether you embrace divinity or reject it, you must address it, and to address it, you must know it. While it may not be a necessity in some of your lives to have this knowledge or to understand this perception, as it has become in mine, as a humanist it should still number among

one's goals to understand the Bible, the Church, the history, all the good as well as the bad wrought in the name of religion throughout time. I have an innumerable number of books I refer to during the course of my writing, but none more frequently or for purposes more fundamental to my work than the King James Bible.

As a humanist, each of us probably has strong beliefs and opinions about religion. Indeed, some of us may have beliefs and opinions every bit as strong as any fundamentalist preacher or desert-wandering mystic. We all see religion as an important issue, whatever our personal feelings about faith may be. And it is in this spirit, understanding that religion is a huge force in our lives that affects us in more ways than we even realize, that I say we all need to know our Bibles, and our Torahs and Korans. Whether we want to embrace its teachings or refute them, write a book about what it means to believe in God or only read one once in a while, become a preacher or just argue with one, if we want to be good novelists, or even just good humanists, it's important for us to know our Bible.

The second point I want to make today is that if we, as humanists, wish to see humanism replace religion, which it seems to me is the ultimate wish, to convert all others to your belief system, if we wish to see humanism triumph in the competition of ideas, it must provide all the same caring, solace, comfort and support that traditional religions provide. Without the ability to invent narratives and superhuman characters that die for our sins, this may not be an easy task, but it's one that humanism must accomplish if it is to become the world's dominant concept

of, I'll call it, suprahuman existence, that is, existence outside of human and animal life as we know it, or if you prefer, the divine. Basically, the idea here is that people turn to God, and to their church, for answers to the questions that are not answered elsewhere. In ancient times, when people's understanding of the world around them was limited compared to now, the need for God, or gods more accurately, and their role in society were far greater than today. Thus, in an age lacking understanding of phenomena like meteorology or the female mind, there were gods of war, and gods of weather and of the harvest, and gods and goddesses of love. Everything thought to be based in chance, or fate, everything shaped by unseen forces, was placed in the portfolios of the gods and became part of their purview. The more we understand about the world around us, the less need we have for God. Thus, of course, the age-old struggle between science and religion, between faith and knowledge. As far as I'm concerned, science and learning must always come first, and nothing should be allowed to block access to our further understanding of the world, of the universe. Many of you probably feel the same way. And for a lot of us, there it ends. Human understanding surpasses the false comforts of religion, religion is shown by thousands of years of evidence to be backward, reactionary, ostrich-like in its denial or lack of awareness of simple, everyday facts. In another three or four hundred years, perhaps the church will admit the possibility of evolution, for example. Darwin is lucky he wasn't born a century or two earlier, he probably would've been burned at the stake like Giordano Bruno, like they threatened to do to Socrates and Galileo and Copernicus. But here is the problem: there will always be things we don't understand, and therein will always lie a home for God. And a further problem:

many people still believe in God, still respect the Church, regardless of your and my enlightened opinions. And those folks will never embrace humanism, indeed the staunchest church supporters will continue to harass and persecute humanists, until humanism can offer something beyond a cold, rational way of looking at divinity. It must somehow offer a warm, compassionate comfort to those in need, a shoulder to lean on, to cry on. I don't know how it does that, but do it it must. While a cold, rational view of the universe may be enough to get us by on most days, it is on those few other days, those days of grief, or terror, or simply depression, that one's belief system steps in to offer support and comfort. And while believing in yourself, and in your fellow man, in his capacity for greatness, or even just kindness, suffices for most days, on those few other days a lot of folks need something more, even if it's just a fairy tale, even if they know that in their heart of hearts. And how humanism can be there for those folks at those moments, is a question too big for me to address here, even if I had the foggiest clue as to how to go about it. So I will simply say, humanism must find a way to replace all that religion does, all that religion means to people, if it is to win converts from among the religious. Being smarter is not always enough, and generally does not make you the most popular, either.

So, third: what is the place of the novel in today's society? A question of grave importance to writers, bibliophiles, publishers, and various other hand-wringers. We have all noticed that things are picking up speed. Everything moves faster, everyone is busier than ever before, and fewer and fewer people have time for novels. Simultaneously, film and television, the Internet, the Playstation and X-Box,

all compete to replace the book as the center of people's entertainment universe. In a time when everything comes in snippets, in short bursts, and everyone's attention spans have been revised downward accordingly, can something as lengthy as the novel still command attention? This is the fundamental question facing today's authors, publishers and cultural analysts. And my answer is: Absolutely. While the publishing industry may continue its downward spiral, while sales may continue to dwindle and authors, like musicians, newspaper reporters and many others, may have to continue searching for new ways to keep their profession lucrative, or if not lucrative, at least paying, there will always be a place for the book. No other medium contains the depth of thought, the precision and vast scope, of the novel. No film can capture all of the depth and wisdom contained in a good novel. If art is a search for the truth about ourselves, as I believe it is, no other artistic medium offers the artist or his audience the riches of the novel, the ability to explain what we think we understand about ourselves so completely, so precisely and thoroughly. For that alone, the novel will survive as an artistic form, whatever its fate in the marketplace as a profit-generating form of content may be. If photography couldn't kill painting, why should film think it can kill the novel? It can't. A film is only the surface of a novel, a two-dimensional picture of a three-dimensional object, if you will. It only represents those aspects of the novel that can be seen or heard first-hand.

Everything else that goes on in a novel, the inner life of its characters, the thoughts and feelings they experience, the details and background that inform the situations they encounter and deal with, is left on the cutting room floor, or rather, never appears in the film-making process at all, nor in the film that results from it. So

while I fear for the commercial outlook of the novel, I have no fear for its disappearance as an art form. The book, the novel, will survive.

I'd like to close now by reading a bit from *The Glasshouse*, which I hope you'll thoroughly enjoy, after which I'd love to answer any questions you may have about anything I've said here today, or anything else, for that matter.

From the end of Chapter One, pages 26-32, as the narrator pries open the iron lock of the treasure chest he has unearthed from the muddy Virginia soil of his backyard:

“When I think back now, eight decades onward into the future from that momentous moment, I have difficulty remembering what I expected to find. I remember everything else about that first glimpse of my future in the distant past, except that.

I believe I can tell you the weight, to within a quarter-ounce, of the crowbar I used to pry the lock. I can still feel it in my hand, slightly cold from its rest in the dark shed.

The sound when the lock finally gave: an indignant, violated screech my mind's ear heard reverberating off the trees and shaking loose birds before bouncing to all corners of the Chesapeake Bay 30 miles downriver. A once-fine lady of old filigreed metal long left undisturbed, settled into her dusty stays and ways, bony and frail, comfortably reclined in her favorite chair for three centuries, blanket spread across her lap, dozing restfully, suddenly yanked bodily upward and thrown across the room: the hoarse, high-pitched screech of rage, amplified by shock, that would trail her as she hurtled toward the wall.

The smell: a secret and mysterious combination of plants and earth and insects and brackish river water and a million other things. I can call it only by what I personally know as its rightful name: Summer. In your mind that word probably conjures a different smell entirely, but for me the smell of that forest during the warm months was the quintessence of the smell of summer. Yet I would know the smell of that one day, of that one moment, among the thousands of similar days and billions of indistinguishable breaths I have sampled of that same air, in that same forest, the very air and essence of my own childhood -- and most of the rest of my life, as well. Even now, as I write, I can look out the low attic window, past the small fields where my father spent his fortune of life's energy, to the fence where the farm ends and the forest begins. It's all park service land now, since the gatehouse was built in the late 1950s and the tourists began to come. I would know that one inhalation, that one instant among the long olfactory history which my nostrils could recount, from among all the billions. I could pinpoint it exactly, because it contained, in addition to its own complex natural *mélange*, if you leaned down close enough to it, the dry wood and mushroomy mud smell of the ancient box itself. The chest carried everywhere with it, like dogs and all living creatures do, its own earthen musk, a smell of piratical adventure, of the sea yet not quite of the sea, beach-strewn and mud-buried, a smell of age beyond years. To me, that was the smell of time itself. It has been said that every secret possesses its own unique aroma, a scent known only to the secret's keeper. Secrets kept as long as these, secrets that outlive all their keepers, waiting to be discovered so they may tell themselves to their rediscoverer, evolve a different type of smell altogether, a fragrant redolence so strong, so powerful, that they can change lives; indeed, whole worlds.

But enough of Hear, and Taste and Feel, and even incomparably unique and private Smell. We know that Sight is the true non pareil of our sensory organs, the first among five, crowned King of the Organic Input Mechanisms billions of years ago by our unthinking but instinctive forebears. So what did I see, you say?

I saw a new world born and an old one burn. I saw Utopia, and Atlantis. Prospero's enchanted nameless isle and Shakespeare's inspiration, just to name a few. I saw the way in which a man becomes immortal. And I saw that immortality mocked by something even bigger, even grander. I saw lives end, others begin, and still others, being carefully lived amidst these two extremes.

Let me explain in another way. Drawn by a strange, implacable power to the exact spot where I'd first found the treasure chest, alone in the forest, sunk to my knees within the mysterious rectangle of stones, which in another month the museum man from Richmond would declare to be the remnants of the Jamestown glasshouse, on a brown carpet of twigs and pine needles, it was there, within that magic box, that I first saw the mysteries that would shape my life, the objects that would direct the course of my earthly existence.

To paraphrase myself once more, to simplify things down to the physical, the tangible, the three-dimensional, to reduce it all to the here-and-now (or, rather, the there-and-then), this is what I saw: the etched-edge stone triangle of a mottled arrowhead, a small wooden box with a faded checkerboard pattern on one face, a lock of hair pressed between pieces of glass, and a thick sheaf of dry and brittle parchment, some sort of ancient manuscript, the edges of the pages twisted into one another and hardened, crystallized, petrified. Tied thrice with twine twisted through twice-gouged holes, coarsely leatherbound, sunken into

the wood it had rested upon for three centuries, of a single color and texture with that wood until I gently, carefully lifted the sodden weight of it, feeling the damp, pulpy leather of the back cover on my fingertips. The pages, the little wooden box, everything inside had survived only by virtue of the virtuous efforts of the chestmaker, his work sealed watertight but his name unknown to posterity, as his humility seemingly forbade the signing of his own work. The privilege of posterity is seldom vouchsafed to the humble; as with all prizes, it is usually won by those possessing great strength, unrivalled powers of self-promotion or some other indicator of excessive pride.

One more way of explaining what was in that treasure chest: a question strange enough, a riddle subtle enough, a mystery convoluted and time-obscured enough to occupy my endless curiosity until the end of days.

I don't recall ever being disappointed about what I found in the box. Not for one minute did I wish for diamonds or rubies, or exotic gold coins, the quotidian stuff bursting out of every treasure chest anyone has ever come across. I suppose that may seem strange, may make me seem strange even, but there it is all the same. Diamonds and emeralds may be worth a lot of money, but none of that holds the attention of an eight-year-old very well. But this array of artifacts, these bizarre, seemingly misplaced objects and this thick, moldy book, were of infinitely more value to me, then as now.

Over the years, I have examined each object in turn, over and over again, considering each minute aspect of each object from every one of the infinite possible angles of view, hundreds of hours spent in mute wonder and contemplation. I know, for example, that there are exactly seven small bubbles baked into the glass containing the lock of hair, and

that one of the half-inch high chess pieces inside the little wooden box, a black knight, is slightly cracked, a hair's-width split down the length of its muzzle. I know them intimately, each detail recognizable, like his lover's face to the touch of a blind man.

But there is yet one last way, one ultimate, conclusive way, of explaining exactly what was in that chest. Peer in there with me for just a moment, into the deepest darkest corner, where boxes and men always hide their greatest truths, and their greatest lies, beneath those three curious curios, under the curled and yellowed, salt- and cobweb-dusted, age- and barnacle-encrusted pages of that magical, mystical book, beyond the clarity of the present, deeper, into the murky black bottom of that box, squinting into the cloudy past, through the fog of war and the smoke of history, backward through the mists of time..."

And there, mid-sentence, ends Chapter One, and with it, my little speech today. I'd like now to open the floor to questions and comments, and to thank you once again for your presence here and your attention to my various ramblings. Thank you. Any questions, thoughts, comments?