

**GOING PLACES**

**A Celebration of Leonard Michaels**

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**Berger Forum**

**The Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers**

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**BETSY BRADLEY:** Good evening. Thank you all for coming. My name is Betsy Bradley and on behalf of Jean Strouse, the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers, and our partner in this endeavor, the wonderful Makor, it's my pleasure to welcome you to this evening's program, *Going Places: A Celebration of Leonard Michaels*.

If you're already a fan of Leonard Michaels's breathtaking stories and novels, then I don't have to tell you why you're here tonight, but if you're new to his work, be prepared to be absolutely mesmerized. The stellar group to my right will do a much better job of showing you why, and I'll leave it to Wendy Lesser, the moderator, to introduce them, but I'm just going to say a few words about Wendy before I give you over. Wendy Lesser once described herself as "an eighteenth-century man of letters, though one who happens to be female and lives in twentieth-century Berkeley." I'm sure she's really tired of hearing that quote repeated over and over, and it may be an apt description, but it does not do justice to her twenty-first century talent for connecting to writers, composers, choreographers, filmmakers, visual artists, and every kind of intellectual, from the highly public intellectual to the intensely private, from those she finds in her New York and

Berkeley backyards to those she seeks out far from home. Perhaps it's a nineteenth-century talent, a devotion to—or an early twentieth-century talent—a devotion to E. M. Forster's mandate of “only connect.” But it makes her one of the most intriguing, exacting, and clear-thinking critics we have today.

Wendy is the founding editor of the *Threepenny Review* and the author of numerous acclaimed books of criticism, including *Pictures at an Execution*, *A Director Calls*, *The Amateur: An Independent Life of Letters*, and most recently *Room for Doubt*. She has also written a novel, *The Pagoda and the Garden*. She is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a former fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation, and, I am proud to say, she was a fellow of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers in 2005.

And before I turn this over to Wendy, I just want to add that we have e-mail signup sheets and announcements of our upcoming programs outside the doors of this room, and next week, a former fellow, David Blight, who's a Yale professor, is going to be here speaking with Brent Staples, from the *New York Times*, about his marvelous double biography of two escaped slaves. He's a fantastic speaker, and I encourage you all to attend. You'll also find volumes of Leonard Michaels's work for sale—this is one of them—outside. I'm not going to need to urge you twice to take a look at this once you've heard from the group, and I know you'll be as enamored as we are with his writing. And it's my pleasure now to turn the proceedings over to Wendy and her marvelous panel.

**WENDY LESSER:** Are we audible? Good. Good. So that was a lovely and very long introduction for what I hope will be a relatively minor role, since all of these writers and editors know Lenny—knew Lenny, and have a lot to say about his work and I'm just going to sort of push things forward every once in a while and not do too much. But the main thing I'm going to do is to introduce them to you at the beginning and explain what we'll be doing up here for the next hour or so. I think our part of the program will last about an hour, but it could be a little shorter, and then I hope that we'll have questions from the audience. And we would all love to answer questions from the audience, so be thinking about them, if you want, while we're talking.

The first person over here on my—I'm very bad at right and left—on my right, your left, is Deborah Triesman, the fiction editor at the *New Yorker*, who edited Lenny a number of times, but in—particularly for the Nachman stories, the last few stories. I can't remember whether you ever edited Lenny in your very very early incarnation as a *Threepenny Review* assistant editor. This was her baby job in editing before she came to New York and became much more famous, but I can't remember whether you did, you certainly would have met him. So Deborah knew Lenny for a long time and worked very closely with him.

Robert Pinsky is a three-time U.S. Poet Laureate and a very noted poet with many books out, including one just out, *Gulf Music*, this second practically, has just been published, and the inventor of the Favorite Poem Project, and he knew Lenny as a colleague at UC—Berkeley, they were both on the faculty at the same time. And Lenny was very sharp-

tongued about his more academic colleagues, but he liked the poets, and so Robert was one of his favorite colleagues.

To my left and the beginning of your right is David Bezmozgis, who is a Canadian writer from Latvian Jewish family background, some former Soviet Union place, grew up in Canada, and started writing short stories and I believe met Lenny when he was already starting to write, is that correct? And the book *Natasha and Other Stories* came out in 2004, the year after Lenny died, and I remember my first thought on reading this book was, “I wish Lenny were alive to read this,” because it so much took what Lenny had been doing and changed it into something new and inventive and entirely original, but you could see the direct inheritance of the Leonard Michaels way of looking at writing and sentences and the way people relate to each other in David’s short stories, so he’s a wonderful writer from whom we have only one book so far, but more coming.

And on my far left, your far right, is Wyatt Mason, who is many things—a translator, an essayist—I’ve heard that you’re working on fiction, too, is that right? Or is that not to be mentioned in public? And he has done wonderful translations, for instance, of Montaigne, a few of which he sent me for *Threepenny Review* saying, “I know Lenny loved this particular essay, wouldn’t you like to publish it?” So of course that won me over, besides the fact that it was a great translation of “Monsters,” wasn’t it that one? And he’s written essays in *Harper’s* and the *New Yorker* about works in translation and about works in English, and he knew Lenny for many years. How did you meet Lenny? By writing to him in the first place?

**WYATT MASON:** I came to his writing first, years before, but as a person I was introduced to him because the publishing house that was his interim publishing house in the '90s, Mercury House, out in San Francisco, published a volume of translations that I did in 1997 and Kirsten Janene-Nelson, who was that publishing house's publisher, years later, said, you know, "I think you would really like Lenny and he would like you, and he's coming through New York so would you like to have a drink with him? And he and I just had a drink one day and had the chance to begin to get to know each other. So it was professional initially.

**WENDY LESSER:** And so Wyatt, too, like David, is one of the younger writers who was influenced by Lenny and Lenny's style and Lenny's personality, which I hope will be present to us as we speak. We'll certainly talk about him as a person and how we knew him, and some of the audience members may, too, but we want to focus tonight on the writing. So I thought that a way to do this would be to get each of the panelists to choose one little piece from *The Collected Stories*, which is our real occasion for gathering here, and was edited by Katherine Ogden Michaels, sitting here in the front row. So, I think Deborah has picked the earliest piece. I'm going to call on them as we go along, and then we'll chat in between the readings, so you won't get a solid block of readings and you won't get a solid block of chat, you'll get an intermingling, but we'll start with Deborah's piece from *Going Places*, the first collection of stories.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** Sure. this is the opening passage of a story called “Sticks and Stones.” “It was a blind date. She met me at the door and smiled nicely. I could tell she was disappointed. Fortunately, I had brought a bottle of bourbon, an expensive brand, though not a penny too much for a positive Weltanschauung. I felt disappointed, too. We finished the bourbon and were sitting on the couch. She stuttered the tale of her life and named her favorite authors. I’d never met a girl who stuttered. Our hands became interlocked and hot, our knees touched. Both of us were crying. I cried for her. She, moved by my tears, cried for me. Beyond the room our sobs, and her breaking retrogressive voice, I heard church bells. I squeezed her hands, shook my head and staggered from the couch to a window.

“Glass broke, I fainted, and minutes later I woke on a porch just below the window. She was kneeling beside my head, smoking a cigarette. I heard her voice repeating consonants, going on with the story of her life, a bad man, accident, disease. **(laughter)** Broken glass lay about me like stars. Church bells rang the hour, then the half-hour. I lay still, thinking nothing, full of mood.

“Cloth moved smoothly across her thighs as she breathed and rocked to the measures of her story. Desplicable as it may seem, that made me sexual. I lifted on an elbow. The sight of my face with the moon shining in it surprised her. She stopped telling her story and said, “N-n-no, I d-d-d-on’t w-w-w-ant t-t-to.” Our eyelids were thick with water. We shook like unhealthy feverish things.

“There was a reason for not having called her again. Shame, disgust, what have you.

When I saw her in the street, I would run. I saw her there often, and I ran hundreds of miles. **(laughter)** My legs became strong, my chest and lungs immense. Soon I could run like a nimble dog. I could wheel abruptly, scramble left or right, and go for half the day. I could leap fences and automobiles, run from roof to roof, spring deadly airshafts and snap in middle flight to gain the yard that saved my life. Once I caught a sparrow smack in my teeth and bit off his head. Spitting feathers and blood, I felt like an eagle. But I was not. And good things, however vigorous, come to an end, at least for me. I was neither Nietzsche, Don Juan, nor Chateaubriand. My name was Phillip.

“As I resolved to stand and started practicing postures, a friend who knew the girl came, and said she wasn’t reproachful, I ought to call her on the phone. It didn’t sound true, but he insisted. She wanted to see me again, at least as an acquaintance. She would be spared the implications of my flight; I could rest in body and mind.

“Next time I saw her in the street, I ran faster than before, my hair flying, my eyes big. I ran half the day and all that night. My friend came again. Running alongside, he shouted that he had had her, too. We stopped. “Do you mind,” he asked. It had bothered him so much he couldn’t sleep. Mind? I kissed him on the cheek and slapped his back. Was I happy? The answer is “yes.” I laughed until my sight was bleary. My ribs, spreading with pleasure, made a noise like wheezy old wood. My friend began laughing, too, and it was a conflation of waters, lapping and overlapping.”

**(applause)**

**WENDY LESSER:** And I know you looked all the way through the volume before picking that. Do you want to talk about why you settled on that passage?

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** Well, we didn't have anything else coming from the early years of his writing, this is from his first collection, *Going Places*. Which—there are arguments to be made for Lenny's writing at all the different phases—it actually changed quite a bit over the years. This first book has so much energy to it, so much sort of strangeness and vitality to the writing. Later he got more distance from it, but what I love in this book is just the immediacy and the sense of just *wonder* at the world, even when the world is not particularly wonderful, and that's what this passage had for me.

**WENDY LESSER:** I had forgotten that his early work was so fantastical until I reread that, you know. I think of him as sort of a realist all the way through, which he is, of course, on a psychological level, or a, you know, people in the world level.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** What is interesting to me is he has these two strains and one is this very gritty realism in which you get just the nasty details of bodily fluids, of people beating each other up, of just nastiness on the street and dirt everywhere, and then at the same time he has almost a magic realism in which, you know, birds appear and fantastical things happen, and it feels in the writing as though he doesn't make any distinction between these two things. Both are real to *him*, though one seems less real



perhaps to other people. But it's wonderful that he can go back and forth between these two strains and not show any surprise about it.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** Strains throughout that first book or throughout the writing?

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** I think throughout. I mean always, always things are happening in his writing that we don't normally think happen in the world, though perhaps they happened to Lenny, that's the sort of underlying sense that you get.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** I certainly saw him many times catch sparrows in his mouth and bite their heads off.

**WENDY LESSER:** As a party trick.

**DEBORAH TRIESMAN:** And he could leap in midair.

**WENDY LESSER:** But are you doubtful that he did it all the way through? Is it from your point of view only in the early stories?

**WYATT MASON:** Much more in the early stories. But always even when he did these fantastical things, you thought you moved into the realm of fantasy, and then he would ground you back. Like in that piece, he falls and things are like stars, but he's actually

fallen, it's not something that he's imagined, in fact he's fallen, and the story continues on as if this is—as if these are the rules of the world.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** And the story gets much crazier beyond what I read.

**WENDY LESSER:** And you don't know until you get to the end which parts are crazy real and which parts are crazy just in his head.

**WYATT MASON:** I would certainly say that as time went on there would be fewer instances of that explicit transit into a world which was more surreal, but the language always retained the capacity at any moment to rise into something or to lower into something which would illuminate a very believable realistic moment with a metaphor that would be animal or something very powerful that would instantly kind of pin it down. That was also present, I think, in the early stories, too, except it was somewhat less visible because there were story moments which actually seemed surreal.

There were a couple of things that I've pulled out of some of the early stories for an essay I wrote about him, just some language that kind of shows how he would do that sort of thing. He would say, "a woman has a voice that flew around like pots and pans." Or he described another woman's hair as "thick, red, bulging around her ears like meat." A man is eager to leave the hospital and so eager that he rushes into the dark "as if pursued by dogs." And a woman walking home finds "a group of children jammed together on the stoop, tiers of heads made one central head and the wings rested along the banisters, a

raggedy monster of boys studying her approach.” So there are always these moments where he’s not so much seeking out, I don’t think, something that would be flashy or, you know, out of the ordinary but it really resonates for readers as an image which does more than just create something briefly illuminating for you, but it also is sewn into the whole story. If he’s describing a “raggedy monster of boys on the stoop,” those boys as a monster are going to at some point bite that woman literally in the progress of the story.

And so something that I think happens in the stories that is notable and unusual for any good storywriter is how he makes sure his metaphors are in line with the nature of the story being told. So that it’s not just flashy writing, which is like, oh, a contemporary writer described a person’s smile as “a fat man moving through swing doors”—a British writer, so it’s revolving doors. So that’s an image which is very full of *stuff*, but I can’t *see* it, and also I didn’t quite in that context really understand how it illuminated the story. Whereas Lenny was always very, I think, attentive to that aspect of it, language attuned to use in a story so that the *story* would sing through language.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** What you say makes me realize that two strong qualities of Lenny’s writing—the economy and the wild exaggerated invention are really the same thing. He’s impatient. He’s impatient with taking the ordinary way of getting somewhere, and they both express this desire to get rid of the easy steps and to get on to the most effective steps so that the economy is almost violent, the way you move, just in the piece that Debbie read, you hear how quickly he moved through time and through space, and what happens between these two characters, and that violent economy is like the violence

of saying “I could jump over cars I ran away from her so hard.” They are the *same* gesture.

**WENDY LESSER:** I was going to say *before* you read your examples that the flight of fancy always came from within a character’s psychology. In fact there is no moment within any of the stories that is not within a character’s psychology but then I couldn’t figure out if that was true of all the things you were reading. They seemed in some cases to be external. But do you remember if you plucked them out of a character’s mind?

**WYATT MASON:** They’re all from different stories, and I think that the examples that I read are mostly instances from *Going Places*, where it was less in the characters’, you know, perspective than it was the authorial perspective at that moment.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** That image of “red hair like meat” is like the sexual feelings in the story where terrific attraction and terrific revulsion are almost simultaneous. So meat on the one hand is something you want but on the other head, coming out of somebody’s—

**WENDY LESSER:** Not on your head!

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** You also get the sense that he’s not actually trying to *surprise* us. He’s surprised, himself, he’s saying, “That hair looks like meat!” You know.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** It’s not showing off. It’s not showing off. It’s going somewhere.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** He's not saying, "what can I say this hair looks like?" he's actually observing it. And "she sounds like pots and pans!" you get that sense of surprise.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** What you say Robert about him not taking the ordinary route, of being impatient, my experience of reading him was that, well, that is the ordinary route. I mean, that's the way it should be done. Everything else is extraneous—that's what it should be. That for me, when I encountered his work, all of a sudden everything paled by comparison, and it was a tremendous revelation and I'd read other things. Some writers who I think are very good. But nothing quite like that. And then he for me said, "Well, if you like me, try Isaac Babel."

**WENDY LESSER:** Who you had not heard of before?

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** No, he opened me up to Isaac—and then I could see, "Oh, this is why you respect this guy so much."

**WENDY LESSER:** And can you say something about rhythmically what it was in Lenny's sentences that made you feel that that was the real thing, that was it for you, because that's what I hear in your sentences also, something about the rhythm.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** Rhythmically for him, it's really interesting—he had a phenomenal sense of rhythm. But he could—it was dynamics, as in music. I think you

find that in all good writing. He would have short words, a number of very short, sharp words, and then he'd have this word, a very long word, like "adumbrations" or something, and I have no idea what this—just words that I had never, I did not know what this word was, but reading it, it had the rhythmic quality that I could basically get it and then I would look it up in the dictionary and then I'd learned a new word, but it was the sensation that you could see how he—which is not to say that you could replicate it, but you could see why it worked musically and what it was that he was trying to do on the page.

**WENDY LESSER:** And what Robert said about the economy mixed with the violence and the fantasy reminded me of what one of Lenny's draft pages looked like. I don't know about later, I don't know if he worked on a computer first, or still wrote by hand first, but, early on, when he only wrote by hand he would cross out two-thirds of the words at least. I mean, the first sentence would be written, and it would have very few words in it and two-thirds of them would be crossed out, and other ones replaced so that the process of writing as a process of economy, of constantly subtracting.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** The word violence occurs to me again.

**WENDY LESSER:** Right, it was a very firm line.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Let's make it slightly nicer and say he was a very *athletic* writer.

**WENDY LESSER:** Right. It goes with the basketball playing. Do you want to read your section, Robert?

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Sure, sure. I Xeroxed mine, out of respect to my own age. I'll just read two sections of a, two section of a kind of a narrative sequence. What it's like like a sequence of poems, and I would have said to you if I could that he called them "Downers." Two things that are interesting about these passages to me, amongst many things is that though the thing is called "Downers," the narrator in both cases comes out very well. And in both cases it very much has to do with the *body* and I think that is a typical action in a Lenny Michaels story. These things are very unhappy, and then you get to the body and then things are *better*, it's a resolution. So I'll read two sections from "Downers." The first one is the first section in the story. It's called "Lefty/Righty."

"Lefty/Righty": "Running in a fast game, I was pushed, and went running off the court into a brick wall. My palm flattened against brick, driving shock into my wrist. The city wasn't big enough for that pain. Other players left the game to watch me. Buildings grumbled in their roots. In tiny grains of concrete, I saw recriminations. I rolled onto my back. The circle of faces looked down. I looked at the sky and didn't scream. I might have broken my nose, my cheek, my left wrist. Why had it been the right? Then someone replaced me in the game. It resumed before I left the playground. I was abolished by tenements.

“For six weeks, I wore a plaster cast. It itched in warm rooms. The left hand held forks and spoons, combed my hair, buttoned shirts. It could soon knot a tie, but it took passes like a wooden claw, it threw them like a catapult, not a hand. Broken this way, a wild animal would have been noticed, killed, got out of sight. I appeared daily, lingering on the sidelines, shuffling in among the healthy when they formed teams. Not saying a word, I begged, “Choose me.” Nobody looked in my direction, but being there gave me a right. Begrudged, but a right. Sooner or later, at least once a day, I’d be chosen. Any team I played on lost.

“Before and after games, alone, I practiced running to my left, dribbling lefty, shooting lefty. I became less bad. The left hand became a hand. In a tough, fast game a few days after the cast was removed, my opponent said, ‘Hey, man, you a lefty or a righty?’ I mumbled, ‘Lefty/Righty.’ My team won easily. He came up to me and whispered. ‘How do you wipe your ass?’ **(laughter)** Out of noblesse oblige, I laughed. **(laughter)** He grinned like a grateful ape, then offered me a cigarette, which I declined.” **(laughter)**

And in a way, almost the same story, in a way, but here it’s a man and a woman, but it’s not basketball, it’s sex or something. “The Snake.” “The road, crowded by woods on either side turned whimsically as a line of smoke, taking its own peculiar way, unpredictable, inevitable as fate, but I continued driving hard, pressing it, until I’d go too fast and have to slow suddenly, holding the turn until I could press again, fast, faster. It was like that for hours, me against it. I was tired. She was bored, nervous, giddy. Whenever I said anything, she’d say, “Awfully Jewish of you.” **(laughter)**



“She giggled, tried to read a magazine, brushed her hair. I smoked cigarettes, attacked the road, and stopped talking to her. She played with the radio knobs, pulled up her skirt, stroked her legs. Then I noticed a brown snake. I stopped the car. ‘Drive over it,’ she said, ‘don’t you leave this car!’ I left the car. She moaned. ‘Please.’

“The snake was thicker than my foot, blinkless eyes, **(inaudible)** of mud against its sides, tiny sticks of grass embedded in the mud. Ants crawled across the scales. She said, ‘Please.’ Her voice was bright, meaningless, far away. I crouched and reached slowly, toward the neck, a necessity. It would fill my fist, whip, hiss. She yelled, ‘My mother was bitten by a brown snake like that, you New York asshole.’ **(laughter)**

“I grabbed it. I screamed. She tumbled out of the car. I lifted the snake. It hung. It was a dead snake. We got back into the car and sat there quietly. Then I asked her to marry me. She said, ‘Okay.’ We laughed and fucked until dark.

**(applause)**

**WENDY LESSER:** And how you read it partly answered my question, but how did you choose to pick this particular section?

**(laughter)**

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Well, I was thinking a lot about Lenny. I think I liked—I've always loved those short, you know—Now, these kids have flash fiction—Lenny was all *flash*. And at some point, deciding which of these real short things to choose, I noticed there were a lot of them where he comes out triumphant, and you do think of Lenny as, frankly, a kvetch. He complained quite a lot. **(laughter)** It went with the impatience, and there was this other side that had immense confidence. Lenny was in many ways a winner, and his outrageousness often was what was winning. So the stories reflected—they're autobiography; they're both capsule autobiographies. Something goes wrong or something *is* wrong, you have to work extra hard against it, you have to make up for it, and it's *better* because you did that. It's better. It's a word I can hear Lenny say, "*Better*, it's *better*." It's a very Lenny Michaels word, that word "*better*."

**WENDY LESSER:** Never best.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** That's right.

**WENDY LESSER:** You raised the question of autobiography, and it seems to me that between *Going Places* and *I Would Have Saved Him* if I could, we've lost the fictional Phillip, there is no longer a disguise that these sentences are being put inside.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** I certainly didn't mean autobiographical in that sense, I meant they're metaphorical or symbolic, they might have happened or might not.

**WENDY LESSER:** But is there a fictional character and *I Would Have Saved Him If I Could*, or is it all just—

**WYATT MASON:** Well, he goes back to Phillip Leibowitz in there's some, the story of—and there's another one also, the one where he really needs to pee. What's the title of that one?

**WENDY LESSER:** We could look.

**WYATT MASON:** We could look. “Reflections of A Wild Kid.” Right. That's Phillip Leibowitz also. But I mean, yeah. That's a Lenny concept. Like he could take a story where a guy really needs to pee and he's locked in his former lover's bedroom while her husband is in the other room trying to woo her. And he opens up a—like an entire world.

**WENDY LESSER:** That's fascinating because the same exact image reappears in a late Nachman story, the last one, I think, that you published in the *New Yorker*. So it was clearly a primal movement for him.

**(laughter)**

**WYATT MASON:** Lenny wrote an essay called “The Personal and the Individual” in the *Partisan Review* in 2001 and it discusses his difficulty, he says, of writing about himself. And there are a number of—Lenny was a very learned, he was in conversation

very playful and would always tell great jokes, but he was a deeply read person, and in his essays, which have yet to be collected, you really see that. And he quotes many ancient authors and contemporaries to make a point about how difficult it is to write about the self. He says, he quotes Freud and says that Freud said, “Writing is a record of an absent person.” And he is leading in this essay to the idea of how difficult it is for him to present himself. And he says, “I think we name ourselves, more or less. Whenever we write, we always tend to write about ourselves.” So in the idea of autobiography with Lenny, but the question of, you know, where these things come from is always going to be there, if anybody writes a biography they can dutifully match up event to story.

But what’s interesting in what Robert read is, you know, you notice the style of that passage if you read Lenny, in the way you’d notice the style of a Hokusai painting or a Renoir, or it’s a deliberate series of choices which marks him on the page. Those sections, you know. “Guy breaks hand, talks about difficulty playing basketball.” I’m sure that that has been written many times before but certainly not that way. It’s not to denigrate the nature of that material, but *all* material can be made rich if looked at very particularly. And Lenny looked with great particularity at *anything* to find something which spoke of the self in a way that was not the same and yet would be understood by other people.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** In that same essay he says, “when writing about myself or anything else, my presence and absence are always—There’s always a tension between my presence and absence,” which this idea of how you need to find the form, an

appropriate form, to write anything personal. And you find that throughout all of his work.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** Often the autobiographical elements in the stories are the things that you *least* thought would be autobiographical. I mean, you read these early stories and you think, “well, this is a metaphor about relationships and no woman actually behaves this way or would say this.” And then you read *Sylvia*, which is a novel that’s really a memoir of his first marriage and including journal entries from the time, and his wife says *exactly* these things and suddenly those early stories just take on a completely different light. What you thought was fantasy was in fact really very directly taken from speech and relationships.

**WYATT MASON:** Well, to collate those things together, I mean, Lenny wrote this book *Sylvia*, which he said was material he didn’t want to touch initially. He was married to Sylvia Bloch in the early sixties and for twenty-five years he didn’t write about the marriage, and he writes about not writing about it. And the—what’s interesting is that so much violence, to use your word, much more so than athleticism, I think, was sublimated into the language of the early stories and into the nature of the engagement with prose. He was trying to find a way of capturing feelings, very intense feelings, feelings of dislocation and frustration and anger and a lack of an ability to communicate, in a very communicable form, and he was constantly fighting to find a form to communicate those really difficult emotions and later became much more explicit about his engagement with

feeling, I think, in his stories, whereas initially it was through metaphor that I think he sought feeling.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** The narrative had to be pure. Everything was narrative, it was pure. It was never *just* expressive, it always had to have a presentational quality.

**WENDY LESSER:** But I think he also—this makes him sound a little more desiccated than in fact he actually *is* on the page, that is, he had a deep engagement not only with the material but with the potential reader. So that's where the *humor* comes from. I mean, you can hear him trying out the gags, in a way, in his own mind, and knowing exactly where the laughs would come, and he was a wonderful reader of his own work, so he *knew* how to do it.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** But also the cultural part—at some point we have to talk about the New York, the Jewish, this is somebody whose first language was Yiddish. He never was interested in a kind of easy ethnic humor, Yiddishist. There's a certain kind of vulgarity of just creating a certain kind of speech that he didn't want to do. And I had very interesting conversations with him about his misgivings about not being able to write a certain kind of, you know, like, purely English prose because of who he was. He would never be able to write that. And I don't know why he would want to. But he would take and argue a position that there's a certain kind of English sentence he couldn't write because of who he was.

And then in that passage I read when I heard the cadences of it, I realized you couldn't even say it was New York Jewish exactly, but it's New York, something about "Nobody looked in my direction, but being there gave me a right." And the way you stop after the word right. "Being there gave me a right." And then "Begrudged, but a right." That's what, four words? "Begrudged, but a right." The snap, and I'll use the word again, impatience of that, is very characteristic. And it calls up, one reason it's not dry is that it has the—it feels like a whole culture. You get a whole pun in place. Just that "Nobody looked in my direction, but being there gave me a right. Begrudged, but a right." And that cadence is—

**WENDY LESSER:** You get a whole culture—

**ROBERT PINSKY:** It's a whole human community, it's not just a character.

**WENDY LESSER:** Yes, but sort of streamlined and made into *literature* by the fact that it's not any *real* language that anyone ever spoke. Where just as you said, where he didn't want to go for vulgar Yiddishisms, it's not just straight translation from, you know—

**ROBERT PINSKY:** It's art.

**WENDY LESSER:** Borscht Belt comedian. It's turned into some language, some idiom that nobody ever quite spoke. I was thinking you should read your section now because it touches—it touches on the first-class English idea.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** What you were talking about, I was thinking that's a very good introduction to what I'm about to read. If I could borrow it. You've come superprepared with like, things are highlighted and cut out. I was the last one to show up. I almost didn't make it. All right.

**WENDY LESSER:** Look how tiny that print is.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** I've got it. It's okay. This is also from *I Would Have Saved Him If I Could*. You read from a sequence called "Downers," I'm reading from a sequence called "Eating Out." Why any one of the stories was in "Downers" or "Eating Out," I've read these books like more than I don't know many many times. I still don't know why he put what where, but, if maybe somebody has an idea, I'd love to hear it. But this I thought, in large part because of what you were talking about, you get a sense of where Lenny came from, which was this Lower East Side Jewish neighborhood, this immigrant background, but you also get—as you say, he was never shtick, and this was one of the things that really appealed to me, because, you know, I'm also from an immigrant background and growing up in similar circumstances, I'd never really seen it done quite like this, and the brevity had a lot to do with it, so he went for the essential, and this little short section that I'm going to read, it's perfect. I mean he—everything that he introduces pays off. Even things that you wouldn't even imagine. It's so much of a piece. It's called "Pleasure":



“My mother was taking me to the movies. We were walking fast. I didn’t know what movie it would be. Neither did my mother. She couldn’t read. We were defenseless people. I was ten years old, my mother was five foot nothing. **(laughter)** We walked with fast little steps, hands in our pockets, faces down. The school week had ended. I was five days closer to the MD. **(laughter)** My reward for good grades was a movie. Black, brilliant pleasure. Encouragement to persist. We walked in a filthy, freezing, blazing wind for half a mile. The pleasure I’ll never forget.”

That’s not English, you know.

“A girl is struck by a speeding car. A beautiful girl who speaks first-class English, but she is struck down, blinded, broken, paralyzed. The driver of the car is a handsome doctor. My mother whispers, ‘Na.’ The Polish word that stimulates free-associational capacities in children. **(laughter)** Mindspring, this to that. The doctor operates on the girl in a theater of lights, masks, and knives. She has no choice in this matter, blind and broken, paralyzed. Lucky for her, she recovers. **(laughter)**

“Her feeling of recovery is thrilling love for the doctor. He has this feeling, too. It spreads from them to everywhere, like the hot, vibrant, glowing moo of a tremendous cow, liquefying distinctions. The world is feeling. Feeling is the deadly car, the broken girl, and blinding doctor. The masks, knives, and kisses. Finally, there’s a sunset. It returns me with smeared and glistening cheeks to the blazing wind. I glance at my mother. She whispers, ‘Na?’ Intelligence springs through my mind like a monkey, **(laughter)** seizing

the bars, shaking them. We walk fast with little steps, our hands in our pockets, but my face is lifted to the wind. It shrieks ‘MD.’ My call.”

**(applause)**

**WENDY LESSER:** Great.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** So all of those things, that Jewish, you know, Eastern European, Yiddishized influence is there, but it’s—everything is just intimated.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** There’s nothing condescending about it.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** Nothing. And it’s pure feeling, and on one, you know, on the one level, it’s very funny in the way he chooses to show it, but it’s also incredibly touching, and I think he was a master at balancing these two things.

**WENDY LESSER:** That notion of “first-class English” comes up a lot. It comes up in his essay about Yiddish that he wrote for an anthology I put together. It comes up in the end of the story that you’re going to read the beginning of, “The Penultimate Conjecture,” where the other mathematician who is standing in front of him and comes from Stockholm, speaks perfect English, a mixture of Oxford and Stockholm, and you could sort of tell that there was admiration mixed with hatred (**laughter**) in that idea.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** I argued with him about it quite a lot, because I thought he was extremely—there was something very bizarre about it. As though there was this ideal somewhere. And all really great writing is very idiosyncratic, among other things. You don't want only idiosyncrasy, but who cares about purity of English? You want to write like the catalog of great English things? It was very odd.

**WENDY LESSER:** He was very staunch about the idea that he *couldn't* and that defined him.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** He couldn't, and he was doomed to that. And he always implied that I couldn't.

**WENDY LESSER:** And that was the source of the fight.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** That was part of the fight.

**WENDY LESSER:** I'm Sir Walter Raleigh.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** I can remember talking about citing as an example, for example, I remember citing Faulkner, who I admire very much. Often I read Faulkner's *The Hamlet*. And Lenny, impatiently, "I don't like his writing." He did not like William Faulkner. And I almost think he didn't like William Faulkner because he didn't match this "as Latinity is to Latin." Because my example was Faulkner is not a pure English writer, either, he

invents some other bizarre thing. And Lenny said, “Yes, that’s one of the reasons I don’t like him.”

**WENDY LESSER:** I think another reason why Lenny wouldn’t like him is all the words.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Yeah, it was the opposite of economy.

**WENDY LESSER:** I mean, Lenny liked short, dense things and Faulkner was sprawling.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Yeah, it was an opposite.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** But short, dense things, I mean, with language, but even there, you have these short words and then he would go off on, you know, “liquefying distinctions.” Just this flourish.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** That’s right, it’s the cow, and we’re laughing at the cow, with this tremendous cow with this moo and then it’s “liquefying distinctions,” it’s a great example of that.

**WENDY LESSER:** When Lenny uses words like that, and when he talks about first-class English that is inaccessible to him, he’s playing a very double game. I was thinking

“Mask, Knives, and Kisses” would be a good subtitle for this panel. But I mean, the way in which he is wrapping us all around with the English language and at the same time saying I can’t do it, it reminds me of the James Baldwin essay “Stranger in a Village,” which is all about no black person ever has the grasp of Western civilization that every peasant in this little village does. And James Baldwin is delivering these ideas to us in these rolling, wonderful sentences, and there is the same kind of duplicity in Lenny’s saying, you know, “I’m not part of the club.”

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** You can feel very empowered by not being part of the club, you know. You have no sense of entitlement, right, and you’re going to barge your way through.

**WENDY LESSER:** And you’re making up yourself step by step.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** You’re making it up, and the worst thing that can happen is you’re included, like you’re invited into the club, embraced by the club, which is on the one hand what you want and on the other hand what you fear.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** I can remember when *I Would Have Saved Him If I Could* came out, I avoided it. I thought the title was a sentimental statement about concentration camp victims. And then you read the book, and it’s from Byron. It’s Byron talking about watching an execution, and I believe having a sexual experience *while* watching the execution.

**WENDY LESSER:** that's not actually in the quote.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Yeah, but it's in the narrative. It's in the narrative and the sentences from Byron. And one of the things that knocked me out about that book when I read it was the way that it took kind of English Lit knowledge and indeed quotations and made it absolutely part of this fiction.

**WENDY LESSER:** Because Lenny wrote his PhD dissertation on Byron, and God forbid it should just fester away in some library somewhere. So Wyatt do you want to read your section?

**WYATT MASON:** Sure, I'm going to read from some, a late story called "The Penultimate Conjecture." It is written through the consciousness of a mathematician called Raphael Nachman. He is the central character in the seven last published stories of Lenny. And Lenny's style seems to have changed or evolved through time and it's exhibited in these stories and in her note to the beginning of this volume, Katherine Michaels said that the first of the Nachman stories, called Nachman, was something that Lenny wrote in seven hours. And I remember he said to me at a certain point that the ideal for him would be to be able to write a story in a day, to retain that kind of energy. But as Wendy has said, most of his drafts that she's seen had all kinds of editorial violence of his own hand, and I think that whatever state in which the other Nachman stories were composed in, he had reached a very different approach to mixing this very

compact style with a different kind of lyricism, so this is from the middle of the seven. It's the fourth story, "The Penultimate Conjecture," it's a story that Deborah edited at the *New Yorker*, where it first appeared. And I'm just going to read the introduction of it, and all sides of kind of writing and the particulars of style aside, Lenny was just a really great and very entertaining, very cunning, storyteller. And you can think about language not at all and just want to know what happens in a way that he always earns out. So "The Penultimate Conjecture":

"From the beach in Santa Monica, Nachman could look across the water towards LAX and watch airplanes take off and land. The sight reminded him that he hated to travel. Nevertheless, he'd decided to make the short flight to San Francisco, where he would attend this year's meeting of the Pythagoras Society, an international organization dedicated to pure mathematics. Nachman wanted to hear the featured talk on the Penultimate Conjecture. It would be given by the Swedish mathematician Bjorn Lindquist.

"Nachman packed a clean shirt, a razor, a toothbrush, and a change of underwear and socks, though he planned to return the same day. He didn't expect to become involved in a discussion, and could think of no friends he might meet in San Francisco who would cause him to prolong his stay, but any trip held unpredictable elements. 'Every time you walk out of your house,' thought Nachman, and then let it go. He was aware of a compulsive strain in his thinking.

“Razor, toothbrush, underwear, socks, and shirt went into his briefcase, along with a writing pad and some ballpoint pens. He added a bottle of aspirin, too, as if he expected to have a headache. At the airport, he bought a package of chewing gum, to help alleviate the anticipated pain in his ears. He particularly disliked flying, with its discomforts and terrors. Also, having to breath unhealthy gases.

“The flight was uneventful except for ten minutes of turbulence. However, shortly before landing, an argument erupted a few rows behind Nachman. A passenger and a flight attendant were yelling. It was about something serious. When the plane landed, police rushed into the cabin. Nachman heard shouts amid the commotion of the struggle as he shoved past the passengers in the aisle who were gaping towards the rear. “What the hell happened?” asked a man at the front of the plane, his eyes wild and prurient, crazed with desire for information. “How would I know?” said Nachman, pulling his arm free of the man’s grip and pushing by him. He didn’t know because he’d been thinking about the Penultimate Conjecture and scribbling notes throughout the commotion. He continued thinking about it as he walked through the airport to the taxi stand. Television reporters lugging a camera went by, rushing in the direction Nachman had come from.”

I want to read more, but I won’t.

**WENDY LESSER:** You can read a little more.

**WYATT MASON:** Then I’ll read a little more.



**(laughter)**

**WENDY LESSER:** I'm the taskmaster here.

**WYATT MASON:** You were so stern.

**WENDY LESSER:** I was.

**WYATT MASON:** All right. Fair enough. There's a little break and then it continues.

“The problem of the Penultimate Conjecture was formulated during the Second World War by brilliant English cryptographers who broke the German code Enigma. Germans, also brilliant, broke English codes. Obscure men and some women who had a knack for solving puzzle analyzed the coded messages of the enemy so that nameless soldiers, sailors, and airmen could be blown to bits, drowned, burned alive. A proof of the Penultimate Conjecture would have no such practical consequences, at least none yet known. But for mathematicians, it was a glamorous problem indirectly associated with horrendous violence.

“As a graduate student, Nachman had brooded over it. The problem was exceedingly difficult. He was afraid he might spend years on it and fail to prove anything. A mathematician had only so much time. Nachman then turned to other problems and built

a reputation for solid, indispensable work. Bjorn Lindquist would know the name Nachman.

“As for Lindquist’s reputation, it rested on a number of dazzling publications, all coauthored. Mathematicians worked together more than they had in previous years. Lindquist’s name appeared first on the publications he coauthored. He was considered a genius for his ability to see the implications of the work of others, and also for his devastating questions. In San Francisco, Lindquist would be the one who was questioned. The sole author of his lecture on the Penultimate Conjecture, Lindquist had taken the risk Nachman cautiously declined, making a bid for greatness, something beyond mere reputation.

“Nachman, who was unusually slow, was never asked to collaborate. It didn’t much matter. He preferred to work alone. He had sometimes wondered about returning to the Penultimate Conjecture, but he assumed that even if many mathematicians engaged it seriously, none would be successful. When he was ready, Nachman imagined, the problem would be waiting for him like Penelope watching for Odysseus. Suddenly it was too late.

“According to gossip, Lindquist had an amazing proof. As if the problem had been stolen from him, Nachman was somewhat hurt and suffered a touch of jealousy, but he felt no ill will towards Lindquist. He wanted only to see Lindquist demonstrate his proof. Nachman was extremely curious. He didn’t want to wait for Lindquist to publish his proof on the

computer or in a paper, but he wanted to see him do it in person, in public. Nothing else would have made Nachman buy his own ticket to go to San Francisco in a terrifying airplane, breathing plague.”

**(laughter/applause)**

**WENDY LESSER:** So, Deborah, I want to ask you a little about that story, which you edited, I believe. And maybe Katherine will remember, too. My memory is there was an earlier draft where Nachman just tears off home and doesn't return to the conference, is that right? And I either said to Lenny or to Katherine, and now I can't remember which, “No mathematician would do that, you know, no mathematician would know that there was something wrong with the proof and leave the field to go astray in its own way and just go home in a rage.” And this thought leads me to the idea that in fact Nachman, though an incredibly believable character—I believe in him completely as a character, and I love the Nachman stories—Lenny didn't know from mathematics. And, you know, there would be no penultimate conjecture—that suggests an ultimate conjecture—that suggests an endpoint, which mathematicians don't have, and then there's a conversation in this story about how many friends you have among the numbers; “I have only five, because I'm a poor mathematician with not very much. You have ninety-five or a hundred friends among the numbers.” You know, again, this is not the way a mathematician would talk. But somehow the character lives, anyway. But tell me what you did to get the mathematician back from the airport.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** Well, the funny thing about editing Lenny is that endings were always the—always the subject of discussion, and when I was looking back through our files today, I saw and, you know, I confirmed for myself that this story and two of the other Nachman stories, “Of Mystery There is No End,” and “Cryptology,” I had the first drafts where he had sent them and they stopped at some point which did not feel like an ending, and the endings, which are some of the most beautiful passages in the Nachman stories, were added at sort of—after some prodding. And he was wonderful to work with, because really you could read a story and you could respond and you could say, “This is leaving me unsatisfied,” and unlike many writers, who would say, “That’s tough, that’s how I want it,” he would think about this, and he would come back with something that maybe took the story in a completely different direction, maybe summed it up, but that was entirely its own passage, and, in some cases, the most beautiful passage in the story, particularly in “Cryptology,” and put this on, and it seemed seamless, and to anyone reading that version of the story, it seemed inevitable, as though this was how it had always ended, so even I am surprised, going back, to see these early drafts that just sort of to me end because they’re missing what’s become so familiar to me. But it seemed he would sort of write and he would hit a point where he had to stop. And I think even he—and maybe Katherine can attest to this—but even he I think knew that the story just wasn’t over yet, but he just wasn’t ready to do it until you went back and said, “Lenny, you *have* to do it now.” It was almost like homework.

**WENDY LESSER:** Exactly. As if he would hand it over to you to be *told* that it needed more. He did the same with his essay on Yiddish for me. He handed me a little seven-

page shred that was totally tantalizing, and I said, “Well, okay, where are the rest of the two-thirds of this?” So I think now we should put it open to the public for questions, answers, whatever anybody wants to say out there that contributes to the general vein that we’ve been talking about.

**Q: (inaudible)**

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** I’ll only say one thing. Because, going back to Babel, it’s just a guess, but I know he admired Babel tremendously, and you could say the same thing about Babel, which is the early stories were very much—you know, either you have the gangster stories, which were early, and obviously the Red Calvary stories. But his later stories were much more realistic and much more, you know, conventionally lyrical. I don’t know if this is a model that Lenny followed or—I agree that that seems to be the trend. Maybe it had something to do with getting older. You know, his life changed. That’s my guess as well.

**WENDY LESSER:** I think it might have had something to do with moving to Italy, because the earlier work was all written in opposition to an English that was around him, and so he was battling to make *his* English different and resistant, and then when he was surrounded by another language, maybe English seemed more like his home and he could settle into it, in a way. The Nachman stories are more relaxed, linguistically, they are more normal idiomatic English to a certain extent than the earlier stuff, I think.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** For those of you who knew him longer, did he change as a person? I mean, he seems in knowing him.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** A lot happier.

**DAVID BEZMOZGIS:** Happier, no doubt. Because in the—the Lenny that I knew, which was really the last three years of his life, seemed very similar to me to Nachman in the way, sort of in the rhythms of we had an e-mail correspondence, and just the rhythms of his mind and how he worked and his approach to work.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** If you think about either the story that Deborah read, or the passages I read, the passages I read, the real reason I chose them in part is because the character is pugnacious. He likes getting to be Righty/Lefty so he can put down the guy, you know, in lordly noblesse oblige. He's scary in that whole—one thing that made these stories different from "Eating Out"—that these stories are, the character is a little scary, he's a very pugnacious character, and I think Lenny did become happier, by a lot, he mellowed.

**WENDY LESSER:** He didn't entirely lose his pugnaciousness.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** No, I know that. But he could write about a character who was a bit of a loser, vulnerable, often defeated, often not as successful as someone else, and the characters in the earlier stories weren't ready to be that way. They were more still

standing up and knocking everybody else down. I'm not psychologizing, exactly, but to me, when I read the Nachman stories, I thought they were a word that came to me was just *gentler*—he was just gentler to the character and the *character* was gentler than the ordinary character, particularly the first-person characters, whereas Nachman is mostly a third-person character, as I remember.

**WENDY LESSER:** Although we're inside him all the time. And Nachman has much less to prove than the earlier characters. He's a good mathematician, he's made his reputation. The name would be known to Bjorn whatever-his-name-is, and he knows that about himself. And that's certainly not true of the earlier characters, who haven't become something yet and they're desperate to become something.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Proving. They're at a certain kind of young-man proving.

**DEBORAH TREISMAN:** There's also much more of a sense of bewilderment in the early stories. You know, it's as though to a child everything is strange. And you're seeing these early stories through the eyes of someone to whom the world *is*, actually, quite strange, and it's an attempt to respond to that. There's a great moment in—I guess it's in *Sylvia*, where, you know, the hero in this completely disorienting marriage talks to someone else who says, "Yeah, my marriage isn't great, either. I have troubles in my marriage." He says, "Oh my God, marriage is like this. It's okay, mine is normal." And looks, sort of seeking confirmation, whereas by the time of the Nachman stories, probably, you know, he knows what's going on out there and he's actually putting back

into the world someone who's quite familiar with the world, instead of so *confused* by it. But I don't actually see Nachman as being very similar—I see Nachman as being less like Lenny than the early—than Phillip.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** From my limited perspective, and leaving personal things like married life or something out of it, for me a watershed, and this is a very small. I knew Lenny rather well, but for rather, you know, a short time of seeing him very often because I was only at Berkeley for about nine years.

**WENDY LESSER:** A short time?

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Well, compared to what it could have been. It wasn't *twenty* years. To me a watershed was Lenny was first falling in love with Hollywood in the *Men's Club* years, Lenny having—and it was a kind of sweet innocence, he said, “But they tell me they love everything I do.” And Hollywood broke his heart, and it was though he had never read or heard that whole mythology at all.

**WENDY LESSER:** Hadn't even been to the movie he said he went to.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** Completely!

**WYATT MASON:** Really believed it.



**ROBERT PINSKY:** Lenny, the oldest joke in LA is how do you say “Fuck you,” in LA? “Trust me.” **(laughter)** And he was *completely* oblivious to that, and in the most, as though he were a farm boy, just completely went through it, and he was very disappointed and then he wrote that great essay about it, “Kishkes,” and to me writing that essay called “Kishkes,” he kind of exorcised the whole fantasy of talking to movie stars, starlets, Hollywood, that, you know, everything *better*. When I was thinking about that word, it was a very memorable conversation, because Lenny had a sort of a cocktail party. I got very tired of his anecdotes about LA, and I said, “Lenny, if you’d rather talk to pimps in Hollywood, why are you talking to me at all? What’s so great about it there? What is so fantastic about LA?” And he said, “Look around you.” So I look around, we’re at an English department cocktail party, **(laughter)** and you look at what people are wearing, what they’re talking about, what they’re drinking, and **(inaudible)**,” and he says, “Look it, there everything needs to be better, bigger explosions, more girls, fancier, it’s better, everything is better!” and I remember, I said, “You win.”

**(laughter)**

**WENDY LESSER:** Let’s go to Hollywood.

**ROBERT PINSKY:** That infatuation with that idea, and then getting over the infatuation, that to me, let him then make this other kind of character and this other kind of fiction.

**WYATT MASON:** Well, Nachman's much more contemplative, or allowed to be much more contemplative, at greater length and leisure than many of the characters that have preceded him. And he's also a mathematician not just to make funny stories about, you know, math conferences, but also to create a character who has such intelligence that the reader is not privy to the intelligence of a mathematician in the *Good Will Hunting* way, where we watch him you know, supposedly solve proofs, but we are inhabiting his mind and with incredible lucidity, he thinks through the same things that were bedeviling the early characters. Which is the feelings that would drive these people crazy to, you know, bite the heads off of sparrows and run forever. Now Nachman sits and doesn't really stew, he thinks and feels.

**WENDY LESSER:** He thinks a lot, that's his biggest thing.

**WYATT MASON:** These are stories about a man thinking through a difficult emotion, and they are as emotional as the early stories, but the execution of that emotion is different. At the end of most of the Nachman stories, Nachman, after going through something, is alone, and he's okay with it. There's a line at the end of "Nachman at the Races," "it wasn't such a bad feeling, the feeling of being lost." He's standing in the middle of a parking lot after going to the racetrack and he's alone. It could be a sentimental ending in almost any other writer's work, but because there's such a very rigorous way of thinking through it and because of Lenny taking his essayistic brilliance to a character who was allowed to be brilliant in fiction, we get to see this hidden

brilliance, a man thinking through stuff that is just normal prosaic life events that are hard, but with, you know, *real* specificity that becomes very moving.

**WENDY LESSER:** So now you see how much answer you get if you ask one question.

**(laughter)** So, anyone ready to ask another one?

**Q: (inaudible)**

**ROBERT PINSKY:** The question's about Lenny as a teacher, as an English professor. He wasn't your straight-ahead beloved Mr. Chips **(laughter)** and I think he was I think he was very hard on writing students because he was—you know, there was a sort of sacred quality to writing, so he wasn't patient with dilettantes. As Wendy has indicated, he found literary critical jargon and conventional academic life repulsive, but the students I knew who had studied with Lenny were very devoted to him, extremely devoted to him. And as, I guess it was Wyatt who said, he was a very learned man. And he knew how to convey it. And he wrote very comically about academics he didn't like, but he had a lot of respect for people with knowledge, particularly people like Julian Boyd, who knew a lot about linguistics or something. He liked real knowledge, and he was impatient with graduate students who wanted to parrot literary theory or something—he didn't hold with it.

**WENDY LESSER:** I can answer the question because I was Lenny's student. That's how I met him, actually. I was a first-year graduate student at Berkeley and I took his

Methods of Research course, if you can imagine. **(laughter)** I mean, there was nobody in the world less appropriate to teach this course than Lenny. Luckily, there was nobody in the world less appropriate to learn it than me. We both had a real thing against going to the library and doing research, so he basically said that we could research any modern twentieth-century American poet and make up a bibliography of that person and *that* would be our research project for the semester and then the rest of it was all just chat about poetry, which he managed to switch from a daytime session to a nighttime at somebody's apartment—it was a moving thing, it went around to different people's apartments. It was all very relaxed and informal, and I believe I did generate a bibliography about Randall Jarrell, but much more I had a sense of the poetry, because he made me think about that.

And then I took a creative writing course with him in which he was even worse. He would end the class *always* before the end—he couldn't stand to hold on to those students until the end of the hour and a half or two hours or whatever it had to be. And he clearly was bored with most of the writing and he had a principle, which was, "If I am bored, it's bad writing. Just like if the psychiatrist is bored when you're telling your story it's a lie. If I am bored when I'm hearing it read aloud, it's not good." But he then would entertain us with renditions from Wallace Stevens or some other poet who he loved and it would break up the class and make it all worthwhile, because Lenny reading a piece of literature was the best education you could ever have in that author and how either a poem or a sentence was constructed. Just the way he made his voice go up and down and mark the periods and the commas. That was an education.

**Q: (inaudible)**

**WENDY LESSER:** Well, I think that then nicely brings this to a close. And thank you all for coming.