

Gene Edwards: Welcome. I'm glad to have you all here.

Jack Pendarvis: Us, too.

Gene Edwards: It occurs to me that this is the most varied group of writers that we've ever had at this table. You do all kinds of things. You do novels; you do short stories; you do essays. Some of you teach. You're beginning to teach again. So the idea here is to give us a chance to let us all in on your secrets, to find out, what was it David Mamet said, to give us a chance to hear the notes that aren't being played. And that's what we're going to do. Glad to have you all help us do it. When did you know that you wanted to write? Was it from the very beginning?

Pia Ehrhardt: As a child, no. But I was an avid reader and I loved entering worlds that were in books, disappearing from my own

Gene Edwards: Who was it that inspired you?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, when I was young, I used to spend a lot of time in the library. We were living in Calgary when I was going through my reading streak. I was in about the sixth, sixth seventh grade and I used to take the bus down there and just hole myself up. And "The Borrowers" had a huge influence on me. But I used to love reading. I was thinking I used to love reading books about women who did things well, like "Cherry Ames, Nurse," like women who had professions, "Nancy Drew, Detective," ballerina books, which is not the course that I took in my own life, learning how to do anything in particular

Gene Edwards: Some people would disagree with that

Pia Ehrhardt: I admired, I used to kind of live vicariously through those women in those books. And I used to keep a diary and then in school I just, I just took a short story writing class with Frederick Barthleme and just wrote some short pieces that kind of came out of my Italian family and my grandmother was a great story teller and so I was trying to kind of transcribe a lot of the stories that I had grown up with and to make them into fiction and they did well. I published when I was younger in "Mississippi Review." And then I well, someone else should answer. I took a big detour with a marriage that was not the best decision.

Gene Edwards: We're going to come back. Did you always know?

Jack Pendarvis: Yes. I read a lot of ballerina books about nurses. No, yes, but I...

Pia Ehrhardt: Nancy Drew

Jack Pendarvis: Nancy Drew, no but my grandmother gave me Trixie Belden one year and I, I was insulted because you know I was a Hardy Boys man and yes, I think I always did know. I mean I always wanted.

Gene Edwards: Were you hanging around the library? Were you?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh sure. A lot and “Pilgrim’s Progress” for some reason was a big one for me, because you know, Baptist and it was exciting. You don’t know what’s going to happen to Christian. He’s got that thing on his back, and there were pictures, I believe, but you know and also comic strips.

Gene Edwards: Thus your love for love for graphic novels later on.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh yes. I like comic books. I still do and I drew. I think I drew picture stories before I could even write. And I learned to write and read pretty early and started writing stories almost right away.

Gene Edwards: Who, who paid attention to you?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh my parents

Gene Edwards: Did they?

Jack Pendarvis : Sure

Gene Edwards: Did they encourage you?

Jack Pendarvis: Yes. Oh yeah I was always encouraged to write. I was so precious. No, I don’t know. No they were very...

Gene Edwards: Hold on to that thought, Precious One, hold on.

Gene Edwards: You had never had any idea, did, did you have an idea that you wanted to do this?

John Hart: Well, yes, and no, and it’s funny. Jack mentions comic books and maybe it’s just a guy thing, I mean that was probably my earliest exposure to storytelling. And I actually wrote a comic strip when I was nine with an artistic buddy of mine that drew really well. And I’m sure we all share the avid reader passion from an early age, but for me, the read desire to write came upon finishing college and having to get a real job. And I’m a very proactive, goal-oriented person and I wanted to be a writer. I wanted to live the lifestyle of a writer and um, I just loved books.

Gene Edwards: How did you know what the lifestyle of a writer was?

John Hart: I believed, and I’ve been proven correct so far, that if you do your job well and keep your readers happy, you really don’t have to answer to anyone else. If you’re successful, your publishers allow you to do what you want to do. If your fans like you, nobody tells you when to get out of bed, when to work, when to not work. I wanted that. I

mean, I had a lot of jobs that I didn't find very satisfying, from being a lawyer to being a stockbroker to being a banker. They're all button down, nine-to-five jobs that didn't suit me and I, I just loved reading so much that I honestly believed that I could write those kinds of books. And so one day, it was actually, I guess, I was twenty seven and studying for a master's in accounting. God, don't get me started on what I was thinking there, but I was studying for a master's in accounting and it was such a miserable time for me and so brutal and the thought of jobs that would follow prompted me to write my first novel. That was fifteen years ago.

Gene Edwards: And what happened to the first novel?

John Hart: Oh, it's, it resides to this day in the darkest drawer in the kingdom and will never be seen again.

Gene Edwards: And the second novel?

John Hart: Same place, slightly higher. My editor's convinced that they're lost masterpieces and he's asked on six occasions to see them. He says he will publish them under a pseudonym, but I, he thinks I can write, correctly or incorrectly, and I'm not going to blow that up by showing him these God-awful starting pieces. And the learning curve, I think we can all agree, is so steep in fiction. It's all trial and error. For me that's what I cut my teeth on, and it just took fifteen years to actually get to where I am now.

Gene Edwards: I want to come back to that story in a minute. But you took some time off to, to have a family, be a person. You and your second husband started a business.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yes.

Gene Edwards: Right? And then when did you get back to the writing?

Pia Ehrhardt: Around, I was publishing sporadically through the 80s. Maybe like, two, two stories which is really sporadic, but around 1998, I dusted off a short story that I hadn't looked at in a long time and I actually rewrote it into a screenplay. And I just, I was really unhappy with what I was doing in my career and I found a web community called Zoetrope, which Frances Ford Coppola—he has this wonderful site which he makes available to writers and screenwriters—and so I just stepped into that community. I posted this story, put it up on the internet and a lot of people and responded to it. And then I reviewed their stories in turn. And so I just fell into this community of writers, that treated me as a writer. I would never have called myself a writer even though I had published a couple of things. So, I just, they, they buoyed me, and then I had a reason to write new stories and post new stories and from there I went back into... I had not finished college, so in 2000, I was forty two, and in 2000 I went back and finished my undergraduate and graduated and then I stayed on for graduate school at the same school, Southern Miss. So, then I, then I took these stories that I started workshoping at Zoetrope and brought them into the workshop where I wrote new stories and just got my, you know, turned upside down on my head by Barthleme and Mary Robison who were

teaching there at the time and they were just like, you need to tell the truth, you know, all of this is just like dodging around what you really want to talk about.

Gene Edwards: And what did you really want to talk about

Pia Ehrhardt: The stuff that's really hard to talk about the stuff that is painful to see in characters and in myself and you know, the tender places that make us all human.

Gene Edwards: Family stuff?

Pia Ehrhardt: Sometimes family, sometimes things that you see out in the world, yeah. The secrets, the mysteries, the things you, you think about, you worry about, but the things that are interesting to you, you know.

Gene Edwards: Were you journaling the whole time? Were you...

Pia Ehrhardt: I started journaling when my son was three, and I'm almost a daily journaler. I have lots and lots of journals. No. I was gathering. I was a big listener. I grew up with—both my parents are musicians, and I wanted to be in their company so badly that I kept myself really small, and I just listened to everything that they did—so I just had, was storing up a lot of observations, questions, ideas, my own feelings about things.

Gene Edwards: There's an interesting character in your book Miriam, who keeps herself really small and listens and that turns the whole world upside down.

John Hart: Are we talking about Down River?

Gene Edwards: Yeah.

John Hart: My second book.

Gene Edwards: Yeah

John Hart: Yeah, you know, I think that good story telling needs tension and conflict, but it needs good honest emotion, too, that spills out from those things and pain is about as honest as it gets. I find myself drawn to writing about people in that kind of crisis and I'm often asked about how I do it so well. And for me, it doesn't make any sense, because I can think of maybe twice I've been in pain. Once I fell down when I was seven, and then there was one other time I've never written about. But I just seem to feel it the way that you probably do, that people no matter where they are, have an interest in the real emotions that characters can put forward on the page. And pain and love and all those things, but pain for me is just interesting. It's just very real.

Jack Pendarvis: I look forward to having some pain one day. You know I can.

Pia Ehrhardt: Maybe I can help you out with that.

Jack Pendarvis: Sure. Thanks.

Gene Edwards: Your characters are not in much pain, are they?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh no. Are you kidding me? They're a mess. They're just in a terrible amount of ...

Gene Edwards: Where did your characters come from? Or where do they come from. Where does the...

Jack Pendarvis: Sometimes it will be something external. I saw a guy—my novel that is coming out in the summer—I saw a guy walking around Little Five Points, Atlanta, a derby, a bowler hat, and I thought, his thought, his thoughts came into my head. “Man I look fantastic in this derby.” He just walked around in proudly wearing a derby. I also saw a guy on a, you know, one of those bicycles has a giant wheel in the back? Why, I don't know, but anyway, I went home and started writing just based on seeing these kind of anachronistic people walking around. So that was an external thing. But I don't know. I guess my characters come from the same place as everyone else's. You know, if I have a fleeting phobia or a stray thought that seems odd, rather than push it to the back of my mind as most of us have been trained to do in the normal human world, I try to take it out and let it fester and sort of push it and imagine the most extreme version of...

Gene Edwards: And is that where the “Sex Devil” came from?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, Sex Devil, sure that came from... Well, Sex Devil.

Gene Edwards: It's just the best story.

Jack Pendarvis: I'm not, I'm not going to read it or anything, but I'm trying to remember, you know part of it came from a kid I remembered or a couple of kids that I remembered, you know, when I was in high school or junior high or something like that. Kids that were picked on. Actually, once again, I had an external impulse. My wife and I went to see the Ben Affleck movie “Daredevil.” And I thought wow, I really understand where comic books come from. It's kids who feel picked on. I mean, the kid in the movie, he's blind and people push him down in the mud and you know.

Gene Edwards: Right, right.

Jack Pendarvis: And it's really masochistic, and I came home after seeing “Daredevil,” starring Ben Affleck, my muse as I call him. No, you know, he's actually inspired a couple of my short stories now that I think about it, anyway, and I just changed “Dare” to “Sex” and then it wrote itself, really pretty quickly. Very quickly.

John Hart: I've got to read this story.

Gene Edwards: It's a wonderful story.

Pia Ehrhardt: It's really good.

Jack Pendarvis: Here, read it right now.

Gene Edwards: It's a wonderful story.

Gene Edwards: Who inspired you?

John Hart: Oh, God.

Gene Edwards: We were talking earlier about the fact that somebody said that some of your writing reminds them of Ross MacDonal, but you've never read Ross MacDonal.

John Hart: I've never read Ross MacDonal. At the core, the people who inspired me initially were all of the people who managed to get published. I mean it was just that simple.

Gene Edwards: Which would be Grisham and Turow and

John Hart: Any, anybody that could break into publishing and get their words mass produced and disseminated across the country. I just marveled at that feat. So I really just admired everybody that was published. I mean, that's the base level. Growing up, the obvious things like Tolkien when I was a kid. But Pat Conroy is my, my literary hero, and he always has been. In fact, he was really kind to blurb my first book.

Gene Edwards: He wrote about your first book.

John Hart: And that was just wow!

Gene Edwards: Great.

John Hart: It was just fabulous for me to go down and meet him and have his name on my book. And to this day I can say that *Prince of Tides* was probably just the book that blew me away. I guess I was twenty when I read it and I was just like man this is great. And that's probably why I like writing about dysfunctional families because Pat does it so well. And I just think it brings a real texture to, you know, an otherwise normal story, whether it's a whodoneit or howdoneit or whatever. You put a good family dysfunction in there and ramp it up a little bit and it gets suddenly much more interesting. So, I write thrillers and mysteries and so in terms of just the mainstream people that I read. Sure Grisham, I mean, I'm a lawyer. It's hard to be a lawyer/writer, especially in the south, and not be in awe and admiration of his accomplishments. And Turow, Patricia Cornwell. We were both Davidson grads, so it was kind of nice too. In fact when *King of Lies* hit *The New York Times* best seller list, she was on the list at the same time. And that was kind of neat for me because I'd always looked at her accomplishments and said, "You

know, she came through Davidson, I guess about ten years ahead of me, and said if she can do it, you know, then I can do it.” So I always, I won’t say I patterned myself after her, but she was like a magnet, pulled me into the business with the belief that I could do it. But, but again, anybody that has the courage to put the words on paper, hold themselves out to be judged by the world at large and get the notice of a publishing house because that’s so difficult to do.

Gene Edwards: So how did you get the notice of a publishing house?

John Hart: Well.

Gene Edwards: Did you have an agent? These are the questions that everyone wants to know.

John Hart: Trial and error. Yeah I mean brutal trial and error and wrapped up in a lot of that good old pain we were talking about. *King of Lies*, which is my first published book, is actually my third novel, and it was my fourteen year overnight success story. I wrote two that never went anywhere. I couldn’t get an agent. I couldn’t sell it. I wrote *King of Lies*. In fact, I came to a crossroads where I was in practice in Salisbury, my hometown. I was a criminal defense attorney, had a young child, another on the way, and I really wanted to try for that third book and see if I could break it out with number three. Third time’s the charm, but law practice is demanding. Kids are demanding. And I just knew that once the second child got there, it wouldn’t work. So I rolled the dice with my wife’s blessing, and I thank her forever for this. And I quit my job and my wife was at home with the kid. And it was a stressful year. But I knew I could write a better book. So I literally said, “John, my gift to you, my once in a lifetime gift, is a year to try to break this out.” And so that’s what I did. I spent eleven months in the public library in my hometown writing *The King of Lies*, and for me, that’s what I needed to take it to the next level. I never was willing to say I am a writer because I still hesitate to say that although I am starting to feel more comfortable. But everyday, I went to work thinking that, and for me dropping the switch to say this is what I’m doing without distraction. I am writing this book. That’s what allowed me I think to really bring the focus that got me published but, but the agenting stuff is brutal.

Gene Edwards: The interesting idea is to say “Every day I’m going to work.”

Pia Ehrhardt: Right. Treat it like a job, like a job.

Jack Pendarvis: That true. That’s very true

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

Jack Pendarvis: I think that’s one thing that separates people who get it done—is really treating it like a serious job.

Gene Edwards: So how many pages do you, when you go to work?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, usually, I don't...

Gene Edwards: Do you set page goals or...

Jack Pendarvis: I do, I did with the thing I just finished. At some point I thought well, I really need to get this thing finished and I set myself a five page a day goal, and I did it. It was, it turned out that I could do that. I've never really done it that way before.

Gene Edwards: Have, did you set a goal?

John Hart: This is funny. This just started for me two weeks ago. We were laughing earlier about deadlines and the pain of missing a deadline.

Gene Edwards: Where, where are you on the deadline?

John Hart: And I'm overdue for my deadline and I've never set goals. I've set hour goals and every day I'm at my desk job like. I rent an office and I go in and I put on my worker face.

Gene Edwards: So you don't do it at home?

John Hart: No, God no. But just this past two weeks I decided I really need to set word goals because I know more or less where I want the book to land and I can't sit here and waste a day making a perfect paragraph, you know. Normally, I will make sure each page is perfect before I move on to the next. And so what I'm doing now is trying to bring the last third of the book home so that I can then go back and make it perfect. But I need to drive the bus, so I've given myself word count goals.

Gene Edwards: So you edit as you go?

John Hart: Oh, absolutely. I like to be able to just set down the last page, step back and know that it's the best I can make it. And I may go back a few weeks later and change some small things.

Gene Edwards: Do you know what the last page is going to be when you start?

John Hart: That's about the only thing I know. I have a strong sense of where I want the book to end but I have very little idea of what is going to happen in between. I have a sense of who my main character is and a couple of emotional issues. With *Work* and *The King of Lies* it was guilt and shame. That's what drove him and he was going to spin around those emotional tags as the plot unfolded. With Adam in *Down River*, this young man is all about loss and rage and so he's a very angry man who's lost a lot. That's what gives him big buttons to be pushed. Characters for me that have great big buttons do unexpected things and make for interesting storytelling. I had no idea what the story was going to be, kind of where he was going to be emotionally at the end, if that makes sense.

Gene Edwards: Do you know?

Pia Ehrhardt: Never.

Gene Edwards: You, really?

Pia Ehrhardt: Never. I don't know what the hell I'm doing. No never. I'll have my first sentence or I'll have some gesture. I mean my stories start with very slight things or things that are like in my peripheral vision and then I just, I just go in and normally, I write and then the areas that I'm starting to dodge around. Or if I get up to go get Cheez-Its or like Cokes or like Diet Coke or something, I know that's normally like an area is making me uncomfortable. I'm probably going to have to go back.

Jakc Pendarvis: Corn nuts.

Pia Ehrhardt: and spend some, corn nuts

Jack Pendarvis: Sometimes you get that.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yes Check MSG.

Gene Edwards: So those are the, those are the personal signs that say I'm dodging something here. I've got to go back.

Pia Ehrhardt: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Gene Edwards: Otherwise you're locked in.

Pia Ehrhardt: Otherwise, I'm just kind of spinning wheels, and the reader. I think the reader knows that. They, they know when you're moving away from the part that's making me squirm and the part that's making me uncomfortable for the character.

Jack Pendarvis: But that never ends up in your final draft, does it?

Pia Ehrhardt: The squirms?

Jack Pendarvis: The part, I mean, the reader can't tell because you've gone back and taken away those.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: You've cleaned it up.

Pia Ehrhardt: The coasting kind of stuff?

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah.

John Hart: I think you've hit on something remarkable, that I just now figured out going into my third book, and that's the ability to recognize your own cues that you're giving yourself subconsciously about when you're wasting time of off on the wrong tangent. I mean, it took me a long time to start to pay attention to what was happening with my body language and my work habits and everything else to recognize that maybe deep down I knew something that maybe consciously I didn't

Pia Ehrhardt: Right, right. And if you can just keep your butt in, Ron Carlson had said this in one of his interviews, if you can just keep your butt in the chair when you have this incredible urge to go get a snack, because you just really are needing a snack because you just don't want to be there.

Gene Edwards: You don't want to deal with that moment.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, yeah um it's, you really can write through that and use that, use that discomfort and keep, keep, you know, keep inside the story. That's what I'm trying to do.

Gene Edwards: So how much is it like therapy and how much is it like fun or work or an exercise?

Pia Ehrhardt: How much is it like therapy?

Gene Edwards: Yeah...

Pia Ehrhardt: How much is it like fun or work. I think when I start, when I went back and started working on the stories in 2000, I was writing about emotional um things that had happened and feelings that I didn't, I got myself into choppy waters pretty quickly in terms of how deep I was going inside these stories and inside these characters. And I did go and talk to someone, actually, and that did help a lot. I don't think that you can do the writing as therapy. I think you can. I don't know, I don't know. I mean, I don't think anyone wants to read a story and feel like they're in a therapy section, session, but I think what you're looking for is to drill down and to understand a character as deeply as you as you can and have compassion and, I don't know. That's a hard, that's a hard question.

Gene Edwards: Well, yeah, that's why we're here. So how much is it like therapy?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, I hope not at all.

Gene Edwards: Not at all. It's fun.

Jack Pendarvis: Or I've got really got big problems according to these books.

Pia Ehrhardt: But don't you understand, do you understand more about yourself and about your when you get to the end of a story?

Jack Pendarvis: More about my characters?

Pia Ehrhardt: Your characters.

Jack Pendarvis: I don't understand anything about myself.

Pia Ehrhardt: You don't?

Jack Pendarvis: No. Do you? Can you help me?

Gene Edwards: Where did the cartoon come from?

Jack Pendarvis: The cartoon?

Gene Edwards: Yeah. You wrote a cartoon.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, no, no. I made a kids' show at TNT. That was just a job, you know, what I did before I quit. Much like John, I quit my job to...

Gene Edwards: What was your job before?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I was a producer at TBS and TNT

Gene Edwards: And you did?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, one thing we did. I made a kids' show with a friend of mine. That was the most fun I had there. We just had a goat, a live goat and some marionettes and they introduced cartoons. And we just, we did the voices and we did everything. You know, it really was a tiny, little operation and it was a lot of fun. That was the most fun I had at Turner and if that had kept going I might never have quit my job. But just like, just like John was saying, and I think you'll agree, it's so important, it's so important to have a spouse who'll say okay, quit your job and write.

John Hart: Absolutely.

Jack Pendarvis: And then turns around and goes uuuunnnnhhh or whatever.

Gene Edwards: What are we going to do now?

Pia Ehrhardt: Or how much did you write today?

Jack Pendarvis: No, no, she...

Pia Ehrhardt: No, I know

Jack Pendarvis: No. Don't you agree though? That's such an important part of it

Pia Ehrhardt: Yes. Same thing. Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

Gene Edwards: When did you first sell something?

Pia Ehrhardt: Sell like for money or place something in a literary magazine?

Gene Edwards: Later on, later on. When did you begin to make a living at it? Or have you?

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh, oh, oh, I don't know about a living, but to get money for a story is really great, to be treated like a professional and to be paid for a story is wonderful.

Gene Edwards: Do you remember the first?

Pia Ehrhardt: The first story that I got paid for?

Gene Edwards: Isn't that a great line, do you remember the first?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, you know, this is the thing in a lot of the publishing that I've done. I was just so grateful to be published in a literary magazine. Mississippi Review, for example, is a great literary magazine but they don't pay. They do publish you. And they give you copies. And a lot of literary magazines give you copies and they don't give you any money. And they're really hard to get into. They're hard to get published in. And there's a lot of people who are trying to get their work published in there. So the first literary magazine I think that published my work, I think, was McSweeney's.

Jack Pendarvis: Mmm. I remember that story. That's a great story.

Pia Ehrhardt: It's a good story. It's one of the first stories that...

Gene Edwards: Which story was that?

Pia Ehrhardt: *How It Floods*

Gene Edwards: *How It Floods*.

Pia Ehrhardt: Which is actually about a hurricane but an earlier hurricane that missed the city.

Gene Edwards: And it's about a relationship with a father, too, that's really uncomfortable.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah. Yeah. It's an uncomfortable story. Yeah. And McSweeney's bought that which felt really great.

Gene Edwards: Remember how much they paid for it?

Pia Ehrhardt: I think they, Jack, what do they pay?

Jack Pendarvis: I think five, four thirty, five

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, four fifty, five hundred dollars. So when you said make a living, they, you know, you sell the story and then it doesn't run for like another six months and I mean if you sell a story in The New Yorker, you can make a living because they pay thousands of dollars for stories but. And then I won the narrative prize which was really amazing and it happened right after Katrina and that was four thousand dollars and that was like a lot of money for a story.

Gene Edwards: Do you remember the first sale?

Jack Pendarvis: My first story that got published was called "Our Spring Catalog" and that was this magazine called Chelsea. It's a tiny literary magazine, but at the time, and I don't think they pay anymore, but at the time I think they paid some, you know, something like seventy five dollars or something like that.

Gene Edwards: Wow!

Jack Pendarvis: I put that right in the bank. I'm not kidding.

Pia Ehrhardt: Absolutely. I know. I agree

Jack Pendarvis: You know that's great, I thought. Because I'd never had anything published before and it came at a time when the tone of a lot of the stories in that first book including that one are sort of sour, I suppose at the publishing world because I'd been trying to get published for twenty years and no luck so I started writing these...

Gene Edwards: Sort of satirical, bold

Jack Pendarvis: Stories that went against, you know, everything they told me, like I said, I'm going to put...

Gene Edwards: It's kind of the anti-publishing book.

Jack Pendarvis: Yes, yes I'm going to put. I'm going to put an adverb in every sentence. You know, things like that. They tell you to put an adverb

Gene Edwards: I want you to read, would you read that?

Jack Pendarvis: Oh sure.

Gene Edwards: Would you read page, page 140, I think. I don't have my glasses.

Jack Pendarvis: That's my favorite page.

Gene Edwards: I love that.

Jack Pendarvis: It's really the only good page in the book.

Pia Ehrhardt: No, it's not.

Gene Edwards: Oh, it's one of great pages. Set it up a little bit.

Jack Pendarvis: Many people consider this one of the finest pages. My main narrator of the title novella is the worst writer in the world, and it's written in his voice. And at one point he takes an adult education class to try to improve his writing. I'm not sure whether I should read this or the instruction that the instructor says at the beginning at the beginning of the class.

Gene Edwards: That's also good, too. Read, you may read whatever you'd like, but I love page 140, but the instructor I love, too.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, the instructor...

Gene Edwards: I think we've all had that instructor, haven't we?

Jack Pendarvis: I'll, I'll do a little of the instructor.

Gene Edwards: Okay, fine.

Jack Pendarvis: The instructor says, "As I am sure you are all aware life is about having epiphanies the impressively mustachioed writing instructor explained." And he goes on, "That is why it is so important to have a couple of epiphanies in your short stories he continued. Conflict is also important. I want a sandwich. Oh no! There is a bear standing between me and the sandwich. Either I defeat the bear or the bear defeats me. Perhaps as I take a bite of the sandwich the bear rips out my intestines and I have an epiphany. There in a nutshell is the essence of great writing. And that is just off the top of my head. To make it realistic we give the bear a detail, such as, I don't know. A glass eye. Suddenly he springs to life! The smell of his wet fur. Like a, like a soiled carpet that has been left in the sun. Now I am going to pass out an example of great writing for us to look at more concretely. It is a story I wrote about a man who drinks too much at a party and astonishes everyone with his epiphanies. But I don't want to give away the ending! It's a doozy." And he goes on like that for several pages.

Gene Edwards: I love epiphanies

Jack Pendarvis: So is that okay?

Gene Edwards: Read, read a little bit of 140 because...

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, sure. I know you're going to edit that part out and just go straight to page 140.

Gene Edwards: Maybe not. Maybe not.

Jack Pendarvis: Okay. He's talking one on one with his uh with his writing instructor my, my narrator. "He motioned with two fingers, indicating that he wished for me to approach his desk. I came forward, clutching my manuscript, and then stood by feeling quite exposed and nauseated as he flipped through the pages with impatient rapidity. At last he looked at me. This is composed in the florid tones of the autodidact he proclaimed unsympathetically. A mantle I wear with pride I responded expansively. Ha ha ha he laughed ruefully. What's so funny I internalized silently. You use a lot of adverbs he stated querulously. How many is a lot I challenged calmly. A lot is too many he returned cryptically. I guess that's your opinion I deferred cannily. And what have you got against the word "said" he sputtered abruptly. I use whatever words my brain things are appropriate I explained patiently. What does your brain tell you about quotation marks he lisped tentatively. From what I have seen of history it does not use quotation marks. And from my understanding of writing James Joyce didn't use quotation marks either I trumpeted handily. Have you read much Joyce he reproached slyly. All of it I expounded firmly. *Finnegans Wake* he pressed condescendingly. They gave us that one in 6th grade I insisted unwaveringly. I have nothing to teach you he admitted finally." There's that.

Pia Ehrhardt: That's pretty great.

Gene Edwards: That's pretty great.

Jack Pendarvis: Okay. I'll be seeing you next week. Goodbye everybody

Gene Edwards: No, you're here for the duration. You've got to stay.

Jack Pendarvis: Okay.

Gene Edwards: How do you edit? How do you edit?

Pia Ehrhardt: I step away. Go back to the places that I seem to be dodging and dig in deeper. Go back to the story and see if I've left anything stranded at the beginning of the story, any kind of imagery, any, a character. I kind of take a head count at the end of the stories and make sure I've got everyone back...

Gene Edwards: Everybody in?

Pia Ehrhardt: Everyone is you know is at the end of the story, too, or at least has been not forgotten, and objects, any kind of thematic material, I just... That to me is the fun part, is getting the story down and then doing the crafting, the crafting of the story.

Gene Edwards: And making sure you've got it right. How?

Pia Ehrhardt: And seeing what you've done and making sure that your mining what you, you know what you, what you put in there that may be very subtle and underneath the surface and then also getting out the clunkers, you know the stuff that you're so proud of and that you know the darlings. What do they call them, kill the darlings? And you look at it and you think, "Oh God, what did I do that for? Love this line. This is such a great line." And then you go, "Oh no. I think I love that way too much. And this probably needs to come out."

Gene Edwards: How do you edit and how many... What's your world record for editing pages?

John Hart: Oh, I don't have a record uh one way or another, but the first thing that I'm very leery of is something that feels like inspired writing. I mean if I feel like I'm inspired then alarm bells...

Gene Edwards: If it's an epiphany, then you...

John Hart: Alarm bells are either going off or they should be going off, but I always look at those darlings fairly –what's the adverb I'm looking for?

Jack Pendarvis: Uh, let's see. (picks up book)

Pia Ehrhardt: Ruthlessly.

Jack Pendarvis & John Hart: Ruthlessly.

John Hart: I'm always, I look at those very ruthlessly.

Pia Ehrhardt: Suspiciously.

John Hart: Suspiciously. Ruthlessly. Determinedly. That, that's the first thing. I read over things over and over again. Um my first line of defense is actually my wife. She's a very smart woman, and she's very, very keen-eyed when it comes to bad writing. I tend to over write. That's my weakness and I'm aware of it. And my wife is aware of it.

Gene Edwards: So when you end up with this many pages, how many pages did you start out?

John Hart: Well, this book, actually, in it's original draft that I sent to New York was um 88,000 words, and by the time I finished the edit it was 104,000 which is the opposite of the way I normally go

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, interesting.

Gene Edwards: That's what happened with you with *Your Body is Changing*. Isn't this supposed to be a...

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, it sort of the opposite happened to me. I had one story that was seventy, seven-zero pages long and it ended up being a page and a half in this, in this book.

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh wow!

Gene Edwards: And who did that?

Jack Pendarvis: I like to chop.

Gene Edwards: You did that.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh I did it before I showed any. I like to chop things out. I'm amazed I can even finish a book, what people generously call a book.

John Hart: Chopping is so, is so important.

Pia Ehrhardt: That's a lot of pages.

Jack Pendarvis: It's the best, it's the most fun, and you were talking about what part is fun earlier and that I think is the most fun. And I often, I often find taking the beginning and the ending off of every chapter or every section seems to work really well. You're, at least for myself, I always seem to be gearing up to something, and then I do the thing I want to do, and then I'm kind of tapering off. And I just chop those things chop those parts out.

Gene Edwards: Because it takes a while to get going so if you just get rid of that.

Jack Pendarvis: Just get rid of it. A lot of times you find you're telling yourself something more that you're really telling a reader

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

John Hart: Well, see, I really write with what I like to think of as two muscles, really, and they seem to come out at different times of the day. The morning for me is the unfettered, purely creative muscle. I don't know what side of the brain that would be, but it drives the story and I try not to put any restraints on it. And I just sit down and I let it

go, and I may come up with ideas or directions that I didn't plan. Suddenly the book is just off in that direction. The second muscle comes out in the afternoon, usually after a nice nap, and that's the analytical sort of task master.

Gene Edwards: That's the lawyer part.

John Hart: Well, yeah, that looks over those pages. And I might have a, you know, a fifteen line paragraph and then the analytical part looks at it and says, "You know if you cut out twelve of those, it will be perfect." And I knock out twelve. And then I just move on to the next part. And so when I say that I edit as I go along, is what I'm really trying to do is keep the two separate parts of my writing regimen alive. I don't want anything to interfere with the pure drive because that's all it is—pure drive, and it's what I count on to get the story done. When this muscle comes out, it needs to be able to do its job. So I literally, break my process up into these two parts as opposed to trying to write the whole book in one draft and then come back and edit it five, six, ten times. I exercise and flex both muscles as I go and it works for me really well. My, my editorial process with my editor in New York is generally relative, well, relatively painless because the stuff that I know is going to be problematic I find before I get there so the darlings that have to be killed, I usually kill on my own uh initiative. That doesn't mean I don't have painful discussions with my editor because he's very good and he sees things that I miss. But if he saw what it looked like before I sent it up, I'd probably be at a different house.

Gene Edwards: You're, you're having this, both of you are having this experience right now because you're working on your very first novel.

Pia Ehrhardt: I am.

Gene Edwards: And your first novel is about to be published.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, that's right.

Gene Edwards: So what's, how is the experience of working on the novels different from the experience of working on the short stories?

Pia Ehrhardt: Novels are hard.

Gene Edwards: Yeah?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah Yeah. They're hard to write, I'm finding. And especially when a hurricane comes in and just completely levels your city. The flood, levee breakage. My novel was coming along pretty well, and it was set before Katrina and it was set in New Orleans before Katrina, and I just, I was having trouble going back to it after coming back to the city. And I just realized that I don't want to write a romanticized book about, what would feel like a romanticized book, about New Orleans now because that city doesn't really exist. So I've reset the whole thing, post-Katrina, in this new landscape that

we have but in so doing I've introduced all different characters and all different kinds of conflicts because people have a whole different set of issues.

Gene Edwards: And there's a whole different cast of characters out there.

Pia Ehrhardt: Different cast of characters. Right, right. And what's true is that I think everybody was affected by this storm. I mean, everybody, whether you had water or you didn't have water.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, it's a similar thing in my, well, nothing that serious, but it's very similar in one aspect, I thought. And you thought maybe. Did you sort of think, "Oh I'll just put it after Katrina?"

Pia Ehrhardt: We talked about that.

Jack Pendarvis: Right, right, I remember.

Pia Ehrhardt: "From Here to Eternity" and you know that the storm's coming and uh

Jack Pendarvis: But in my case, I thought I'd finished a novel and then Tom Franklin, who's who's been on here...

Gene Edwards: Who's been on this program...

Jack Pendarvis: Sure. He read it. And it's about a giant. I have a thirty foot tall giant as my protagonist, my narrator.

Gene Edwards: Do you have any giants in your...

John Hart & Pia Ehrhardt: No.

John Hart: Metaphorical perhaps.

Jack Pendarvis: Maybe then... But yeah, right, metaphorical. This guy's a real giant and he...

John Hart: I've got to read this man's books.

Pia Ehrhardt: They're great. They're wonderful.

Jack Pendarvis: Well the thing I'd done, I'd sort of made him kind of, I made his size vary. I'd have him go in a bar. I didn't bother... And then Tom Franklin read it and he said, "Oh, you know, your giant changes sizes a lot." And I said, "Well yeah." And Tom said, "Well, then he's not a giant." And I thought, "Tom's right! He's right. He's not a giant. And so I'm going to go back and I'll very easily make him thirty feet tall in every

scene.” And then, well you know, it’s nothing as serious as what you’re talking about but, but it was a similar. It was tough.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right. You had to change the buildings.

Jack Pendarvis: It was a lot harder than I thought because every... It was almost sentence by sentence.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: But how do you tell your publisher, I, I’ve got a book about a giant here?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I just sent it to them and they said, you know, they said, “What’s the lowest amount of money we can possibly give him and keep him on the hook?” And they came up with a good figure and I said, “Okay. I’m just desperate enough to accept that amount.” And so we were both happy. They knew that nobody wants to read a novel about a giant.

Pia Ehrhardt: Aawww

Jack Pendarvis: And I knew that they were right.

Gene Edwards: But what happens if people do want to read a book about a giant?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, that would be amazing. I’d faint. So we’ll see.

Gene Edwards: Wouldn’t that be something? Talk with me about Tom Franklin.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I’ve know Tom for...

Gene Edwards: What a wonderful guy.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, he’s a great person. He’s so sweet, wouldn’t you say?

Gene Edwards: Yeah.

Jack Pendarvis: To use that word sweet to describe him?

Gene Edwards: Well, I don’t know if I’d use sweet.

Jack Pendarvis: I would and...

Gene Edwards: I think he’s funny.

Jack Pendarvis: You read his books you know, and they’re violent.

Gene Edwards: They are.

Jack Pendarvis: I mean extremely violent and I imagine. I can't imagine because I knew him, you know, before he had anything published and our...

Pia Ehrhardt: Weren't you all in writing, writing class, school?

Jack Pendarvis: No, no. We had the same, we had some of the same teachers, but we were not there at the same time. But I can't really imagine what someone who knows him only through some of the stories might think. Oh no, he's going to be a rough guy. I might be intimidated by him or something, but he's really the opposite of that. He's very, quiet and kind and...

Gene Edwards: Students love him.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh yeah. Everybody loves him.

Gene Edwards: I guess where I'm going with this is that he is nothing at all like the characters in his book.

Jack Pendarvis: No, no.

Gene Edwards: You and your background are nothing like the characters. Where did these people come from?

John Hart: I think that I, I envisioned...

Gene Edwards: Where did Barbara come from?

John Hart: Okay, I'll answer that specifically.

Gene Edwards: What a character she is!

John Hart: Barbara is the protagonist's wife from *The King of Lies* and she is everything that is to be despised in a truly bad woman.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh goodness!

John Hart: She is shallow, money-grubbing, back-stabbing, social-climbing, a just horrible, horrible person. She's married to my protagonist, poor guy. And I get that question a lot, especially in my home town where the book is set. How, how did you write this woman so convincingly? She must be somebody real, you know, in the town. Of course, you know, I would never admit to that, and she's fictional, based on different pieces that I pulled from different people, but the reason that I write her so well is that I'm scared to death of her. And I think that some of my best writing comes from things

that I fear. You know, family for me is the core. It's my life. My family is my life and I write about dysfunctional families because I'm really scared of what it would be like to be trapped, and I think trapped is the right word...

Gene Edwards: But you're from a family of doctors and all and prominent people...

John Hart: Well, you know, I, I just... Nobody wants to read a book about a delightful day of shopping with your wonderful mother, you know. They want to read about people who are coming apart at the seams.

Gene Edwards: They want to read about going to cooking class in New Orleans.

Pia Ehrhardt: With your cheating mother.

John Hart: Yeah, yeah. So you know, I think that, I think that we all probably take little bits and pieces from what we see around us. I mean the inspiration is everywhere. I try not to lift people whole hog and put them on the page, but I do think that I know what scares me and I sort of like to pick at that scab. The book I'm working on right now is about a thirteen year old boy whose twin sister was abducted a year earlier and that terrifies me. I have young children. It's a constant fear in this, in this modern age, and so I'm having a difficult time but a kind of soulful time in exploring this issue in this book. And I never set out to write thematic works. I don't set out to answer questions or resolve anything, but I just find as I write that I get intrigued and I start going down those paths and so hopefully, at the end of the day, the books have a little bit of a resonance beyond just the plot elements, but it's not intentional. I just find my interest piqued and that's where I go. I mean with *Down River*, I had a scene early on, where the protagonist was out in the woods on the old family farm and he sees a white deer and he remembers a white deer that he had seen as a boy the day that his mother killed herself. And so I just started thinking that's kind of interesting so I did some research into the mythology of the white deer.

Gene Edwards: You did research? You told me earlier...

John Hart: I hate research

Gene Edwards: You didn't do any research.

John Hart: I know. I said I hate research but I did it. And there's a lot of mythology about white deer. Christians believe that it's a sign of impending salvation. The Celts believe that white deer led people into the strange parts of the forest and showed them new understanding. There's all kinds of this symbology around the white deer and I started thinking, "God, that's really fascinating. How can I fit that into the book?" And before I finished, I decided that the white deer was the symbol of purity in a lot of ways for my character. There needs to be a contrast so I started writing about this pack of wild dogs, and they're kind of these black, surly dogs that are killing cattle and they're now sort of at play in this kid's soul. Actually it's not the kid, it's the young man in *Down*

River, but they became very symbolic for what's going on in this character's mind. I put a whole bunch of stuff into that book and into that element of the book that I never planned to do, but it's just fun. And fiction should be fun. Above and beyond, I mean forget the pain and all that stuff. At the end of the day if you're not having fun doing it, it's not worth it. It's too hard.

Gene Edwards: I don't know. You're frowning, Pia.

Pia Ehrhardt: Fiction? I don't know. Fiction to read should be fun? Or fun to write?

Jack Pendarvis: To write

Gene Edwards: Fiction to write.

John Hart: Oh I think it should be fun to write. I mean, it's brutally hard and it's, it's discouraging and it's very lonesome at times, but at the end of the day, if you're not enjoying the process, then it's probably not something you should be doing. That, that's just my opinion...

Gene Edwards: So is it fun for you?

Pia Ehrhardt: Fun no, but definitely gratifying and interesting and exactly where I want to be. I don't know that it's always fun because my, you know, when your characters are in trouble, they're probably going to stay in trouble off the page. I tend to worry about them off the page, too.

Jack Pendarvis: Hum, interesting.

Pia Ehrhardt: Kind of take them with me, but yeah, definitely exactly where I want to be. Those are the messes that I want to be writing about.

John Hart: But I think it goes to what you were mentioning earlier about therapy, I mean, I agree with Jack. I would never set out to practice therapy on myself in the pages of the book but because these sort of thematic elements become attractive to me. At the end of the day or the end of the year, when I finish the book, I have to ask myself you know why am I attracted to this.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

John Hart: Or you know or to that. And so I look back on the books and I can honestly say this is fiction, and that bad part, that's not really coming from deep inside me, but then I have to stop and think, "God, maybe it is. Am I exploring something that I'm not aware of?" And then I think, "Well, I just need to drink less."

Jack Pendarvis: Right. Well, I drink while I'm writing.

Gene Edwards: Which makes it interesting.

Jack Pendarvis: Which makes it really fun. And no, the thing is though. I have no idea what I was going to say. No, okay, we'll edit this awkward moment out. But the therapy thing. What you have to do is trust. You have to trust. The white deer comes up or the pack of dogs. You sort of trust that thing without over thinking it at the time because, I think, that could get you into a lot of trouble if you really analyzed it while you were writing it. But you kind of have to trust.

Pia Ehrhardt: You actually said a really interesting thing when you were talking about that deer. You said when his mother killed *himself*. When the boy, when the boy...

Jack Pendarvis: A weirder...

John Hart: Oooooo

Gene Edwards: When the boy's, yeah...

Pia Ehrhardt: But I would take that as a little gift from the muse and say, "Okay this is about the mother killing herself but something died inside the boy in the white deer..."

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, that's interesting. Well, you said...

John Hart: Well, and that's, and that's, well, it's just

Pia Ehrhardt: It's just, the little Freudian slips that we make when we speak are interesting. I mean if you just don't believe that there's such a thing as accidents. I mean a lot of this stuff comes in as a kind of a gift.

Jack Pendarvis: You said something, what...And I'm not kidding. Earlier, you were saying that...I can't remember if it was the word session, but you said sex-ion or something

Pia Ehrhardt: I said something, too? I probably did.

Jack Pendarvis: You know, and I thought...

John Hart: But, Pia, I give you, your, your intelligence just went up in my estimation by by dramatic leaps.

Pia Ehrhardt: Thank you.

Jack Pendarvis: Because before it was just way down.

John Hart: Because it's interesting. Because on that one thing you really cut to, went to the core of this book, and that's very clear on the page that that's what this guy is dealing

with. Loss and rage that I spoke of earlier. It all ties into his mother's suicide and the fact that he saw it and where he is years later and what it has done to his life. And so I mean, that was a very, very astute step from a very small, small mispronunciation

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, but it's what you hope for when you're writing.

John Hart: That was sharp. Yeah, that's right.

Jack Pendarvis: That's right.

Pia Ehrhardt: That's what you wait for. And when I, as far as, I think part of the therapy is in, if you're going to write about things that are kind of close to things that might have happened to you or to people in your family, what really is important to me is to not judge the things that happen but to try to understand it from kind of everybody's point of view.

Jack Pendarvis: Well earlier you were talking about teaching high school students and they like to write about how they don't like their father or mothers.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right. I get stories that you know, the girl's lashing out against her mother because the mother's passive and you know a little blah and then the boy's just enraged with his father. They can't speak to each other and he wants so badly for it. I said, "Okay, no one wants to read this. Write these stories now from the father's point of view, having a kid who's something like you or from the mother's point of view." And that's, that's what I decided.

Gene Edwards: Were they able to do that? It's a struggle, isn't it?

Pia Ehrhardt: It's hard. and they don't really want to. I mean they really want to just vent sometimes in stories and I don't think stories are good vehicles for venting.

Gene Edwards: Why do you write in the present tense?

Pia Ehrhardt: I didn't really mean to, but the stories just kept getting started in the present tense because it just felt like it was immediate and like it was kind of ongoing. And I, there was a feeling of the reading being very complicit with me. Like, I'm going to tell you a story about this and then this is happening and then this is happening.

Jack Pendarvis: Is there anything cinematic about it?

Pia Ehrhardt: It just felt real present. I mean, everything just felt real present. The screen felt kind of flattened to me. But now, my novel I'm writing in the, in the past tense

Gene Edwards: Are you?

Pia Ehrhardt: And I also love that distance and the time. That there's time that's happening between the narration and the event. But I didn't mean for them to all be present tense but it just felt good.

Gene Edwards: It's like you woke up and there was...

Pia Ehrhardt: Urgent. They were real urgent stories.

Gene Edwards: Could these characters in your books, could these happenings in your books, happen anywhere but in the south? The south is so much a part of it, of all of your stories, I thought, of all of your characters...

Jack Pendarvis: I don't, I'm not a, yeah, I think mine could happen anywhere.

Gene Edwards: You're not going to call yourself a southern writer.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I mean I know I'm from Alabama

Gene Edwards: You've got these...

Jack Pendarvis: And all of these stories take place in Alabama. It was going to be a novel called the "Alabamiad" but it didn't hang together at all. But that's why they all sort of ended up being in Alabama. But most of the ones in the first book don't really take place in a specific place. And the giant, he goes to California and, you know, he's a giant. He can't, every time he takes a step, he's in another state so he's not really a southern giant.

Gene Edwards: He's not a southern giant.

Jack Pendarvis: No not at all.

Gene Edwards: He's just a giant giant? But how much does the south drive what you do and how much do southerners drive what you do. I don't think, for example, *The Pipe* could happen, well it might happen somewhere else.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah. It could happen in the Midwest.

Jack Pendarvis: No, but it could happen in Ireland, you know. I mean, I'm really just stealing from Beckett. Hand over fist and you know, he did it pretty well.

Gene Edwards: We have to catch up on the story of *The Pipe*. The story of *The Pipe* is a radio station promotion, right? Where a guy is buried underground. And who's watching?

Jack Pendarvis: A paramedic and a security guard are sort of guarding his air pipe. He's buried underground.

Gene Edwards: And how long is he down there?

Jack Pendarvis: Forty six days.

Gene Edwards: Why?

Jack Pendarvis: For, you know, for publicity, like that guy that hung himself over the Brooklyn Bridge or...

John Hart: David Blaine

Jack Pendarvis: David Blaine. What, where was that, London?

John Hart: London.

Jack Pendarvis: So, see, it could happen in London. So yeah, I'm going to refute, although the dialogue's kind of got a southern...

Gene Edwards: Could, could these stories, could these people exist anywhere but in the south? Are you all driven by, by being in the south? Jack, are you...

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I don't think...

Gene Edwards: Could *The Pipe*, could that happen anywhere but in the south?

Jack Pendarvis: It could happen anywhere but the south. No, it could happen anywhere.

Gene Edwards: What's the story of *The Pipe*?

Jack Pendarvis: The story of *The Pipe* is a radio DJ's buried himself underground for forty six days as a way to raise, you know, as a promotional stunt, and there are two guys who have to guard his air pipe. You can't see him. All you can see is his air pipe sticking out of the ground. In other words, it's a ripoff of "Waiting for Godot." It's Beckett. So yeah, that could happen anywhere, I mean nowhere.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right

Gene Edwards: But the two guys are just the perfect, penultimate rednecks, aren't they?

Jack Pendarvis: Where do you get that? I mean, I guess there's some dialect, maybe a little dialect, but that may be just a natural thing on my par, you know just a natural impulse on my part that their voices sound sort of southern. Yeah, I guess I think of them as southern but they don't have to be.

Gene Edwards: They don't?

Jack Pendarvis: They didn't have... Yeah that just happened.

Gene Edwards: So being in the south doesn't... Does being in the south drive what you write?

Jack Pendarvis: I, well, a lot of the stories in the second book take place in the south. I originally thought they would be all part of the same novel which took place in Alabama. So really, we were talking about research earlier and our distaste for it and a lot of that just comes from okay, I'm from Alabama. I know a lot about Alabama. I know city names in Alabama. I know what's frowned upon in Alabama, whatever, so I don't have to do any research. So that's why it was in Alabama. But the novel about the giant, it's, he's an American. He calls himself an American, but other than that, he's not particularly southern. He's not southern at all.

Pia ehrhardt: Does he have an accent? The giant?

Jack Pendarvis: No, no. He's very, kind of very... He's a very educated giant. He's very polished. He probably talks like Tom Brokaw. I don't know. I'm going to get Tom Brokaw to play him in the movie.

Gene Edwards: A large Tom Brokaw.

Jack Pendarvis: Now, your stories are in the south, but they're...

Gene Edwards: But yours, yours is definitely in the south, isn't it? Or would it work anywhere else?

John Hart: You know, I think, at the fundamental level, I think it would work anywhere. They're universal stories in terms of what are driving the characters. I think what comes across as very southern in the setting.

Gene Edwards: To me the geography of what you're doing is so important. The places...

John Hart: Well, it's so funny when your book gets out there and suddenly people you don't know are chiming in with learned opinions about your work. And some of them you agree with and some of them you disagree with. One of the almost universal things that I've heard about my books is that the south, North Carolina in particular, is almost a character in the books. That it's just very vividly drawn to the point where it feels like a character. I think that is similar to what Jack was just describing. I write and set my stories in the place where I grew up, which is Rowan County, North Carolina. It's a real place. And I know it intimately and I feel it in every fiber of my being, the good, the bad and the ugly, and there's plenty of all of those things. So it comes across very, very southern. But I think the story itself could take place in Michigan.

Jack Pendarvis: It could be a Russian novel in a way, right?

John Hart: Yeah, it could. I mean, anyplace where people live deeply and feel strongly and passionately and do bad things, you can have the kind of stories that I write. I think that mine will always feel like mine because they're set in the south and because I am a creature of the south. But I think the stories could be anywhere.

Jack Pendarvis: I should add one other I'm sorry to interrupt,

Gene Edwards: That's okay,

Jack Pendarvis: But really this Alabama's not much like any real Alabama. There's a guy driving goats down the middle of the interstate, believe it or not, you know.

Gene Edwards: It's your Alabama. It's your Alabama.

Jack Pendarvis: Although some, some people think that is what Alabama's like. And part of the book is trying to, you know, play off the ideas that people have about the south, too. So, what about yours, Pia?

Pia Ehrhardt: I love setting mine in New Orleans. I'm trying to think of how many. I have to look and see how many are set... I mean I love putting people in cars and getting them to drive around look out the windows, get away from the conflict that's happening inside the room and just kind of understanding what's going on outside. So the city, kind of pressing on the stories. I really enjoy. One of them, "The Longest Part of the Day" was set in Mandeville, which worked well for it. But I really wanted to move to New Orleans and the next story I set in New Orleans. I started setting the stories in New Orleans and then we ended up moving into the city. So it was like I just started, I moved the stories there before I moved my family there. So, but you know, the vegetation in New Orleans the you know the way it's...

Gene Edwards: The way it's, just everything about it. The way it feels. The way it smells and all that stuff.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Where do you write? Do you have a... What, what is your, what is your system. Do you have a place?

Pia Ehrhardt: I have a room that's filled with books and CDs and overlooks the park, City Park, which is really nice. But I have a laptop now so I tend to kind of cart it around. I write on the on the computer most of the time, so I'll go sit in other rooms. But I'm starting to think that I need to go and pick up and leave and go to a place as if I had a job, like I used to when I worked in the corporate life. Because I just think I would get a lot more done. I'm very distracted by my own house.

John Hart: I think it's imperative. I have an office downtown. I treat it like a job. And for me, it's very much about turning the switch on. I don't ever want to turn the switch off

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

John Hart: Which is problematic if I leave my laptop at the office and then at ten at night I have a great idea, I'm, kind of out of luck.

Pia Ehrhardt: You write everything on the laptop?

John Hart: Oh, absolutely.

Pia Ehrhardt: Do you do any longhand?

John Hart: God, I can't, I can't read my own notes, and so I stopped taking them. I mean, really, I'm horrible when it comes to handwriting. If there were not computers, I would not be a writer. And that's probably a really sad statement, but there it is. But yeah, the office for me is imperative, especially with young children.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

John Hart: They don't understand boundaries and I don't want them to.

Pia Ehrhardt: No.

John Hart: I don't want to be that guy. "Don't bother me now. I'm busy." So I leave and it's understood and then I come back and hopefully, I put it down. It, novels, we were talking earlier about the difference between novels and short stories, and I can't speak to short stories so this may be pure speculation. For me, writing novels, it never stops. I mean, the best ideas come at the dinner table, and they come when I'm walking the kids into school, and so I almost stop and just let the wheels turn and it drives my wife crazy because every other job, I would come home at the end of the day, and that was it.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

John Hart: Whether I was practicing law or a stockbroker, you know, I could leave those jobs behind. I could never leave this job behind and so it makes my time with the family, which is actually more plentiful now, because I'm on my own schedule now, but at times it's not as quality. And I think that's just a trade-off from being in the business.

Gene Edwards: Where do you write?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, they, this Oxford...

Gene Edwards: You are blessed right now.

Jack Pendarvis: Right.

Gene Edwards: You are writing in a very special place.

Jack Pendarvis: Yes, I'm the John and Renee Grisham Visiting Writer in Residence at Ole Miss. So they give us a house, a big house with an attic and there's the writing space. That's where you go to write. So it's almost, you know, there it was, and I just walked into it

Pia Ehrhardt: You used it.

Jack Pendarvis: And started writing

Gene Edwards: So you feel like you're a, you need to get up there and write. Is that what you?

Jack Pendarvis: Yes, it really—or you know, check my MySpace page to see if I have any new friends, and then I write a little bit.

Gene Edwards: Yeah. And do you have a particular time of the day or does it make any difference?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, lately have been writing in the morning. We've been getting up earlier since we've been in Oxford, maybe because it's central time and we used to live in eastern time, so I feel like "Oh, I'm getting up early and I'm doing things." I've been writing in the morning.

Gene Edwards: What does it mean to be the Writer in Residence up there and tell me about getting the phone call.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, it's just the greatest.

Gene Edwards: Did Barry Hannah call you?

Jack Pendarvis: No, Beth Ann Fennelly.

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh, wow!

Jack Pendarvis: Even better in a way. In a way. I would have loved to get a phone call from Barry Hannah. I did get a phone call from Barry Hannah after we moved in and uh he said, "I'm going to come by there on my motorcycle." That's what he said. You know, I don't know him that well and I love his work and him and he, you know, intimidates me with his power, not personally. He's never personally intimidated me but just, you know, how much I respect him.

Pia Ehrhardt: He's so good.

Jack Pendarvis: And so I said—I ran down the stairs, “Oh, Theresa, Barry Hannah's coming over here on his motorcycle!” And it was quite an exciting day that he did that, but that phone call from Beth Ann was great. I didn't know it was coming at all and she just asked if we could move to Oxford and I said, “Okay, let's go.” And we packed up and went. Because it's just such a...

Gene Edwards: And you're there for a year?

Jack Pendarvis: There for a year...

Gene Edwards: And what are the other responsibilities?

Jack Pendarvis: I mean, it's so pleasant. I have to teach one class per semester, so that's, and I don't really try very hard. I'm just kidding. I really do. I try to, I try very hard with the class because I've never, you know, never actually taught a class like that before. So that's been very interesting and ...

Gene Edwards: You talked a little earlier about your students in your classes. This is likely to air after you finish with those students so tell us about the state of writing and...

Jack Pendarvis: Yes, I don't try at all. No, the students are great.

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh. yeah.

Jack Pendarvis: I mean, okay. I have to tell you, I've only taught the undergraduates so far. I've just had my first class with the graduate students um last night. But the undergraduates were just fantastic. I had some really interesting I even liked the ones whose writing I didn't quite respond to as much as some of the others. There's just some, I still really liked them, and I liked what they were trying to do.

Gene Edwards: What were they trying to do?

Jack Pendarvis: You tell me. There was one about a crazy demon and I, you know, I told them no supernatural stories, no dreams.

John Hart: No “Sex Devils.”

Gene Edwards: No “Sex Devils.”

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, don't write anything like this. No, I had a list of rules and one student...

Pia Ehrhardt: A list?

Gene Edwards: A list of rules!

Jack Pendarvis: Yes, like don't write about your grandmother. I think that's fair.

Pia Ehrhardt: That's fair. I think that's fair.

Jack Pendarvis: No stories about where we don't know if it's a dream.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

Jack Pendarvis: I didn't want anything like that. I want to trust whatever's in the story. I don't want to have to wonder is this a dream or is it real and he woke up and you know, he didn't really kill his wife. You know, those kinds of stories. I didn't want a trick ending, things like that. So one student really went out of her way to break, I think, every rule, and some other rules I would have set, if I would have thought of them. But I kind of respected that story. I thought, "Wow, this is, the exact opposite of what wanted."

Pia Ehrhardt: What I asked.

Gene Edwards: That's okay.

Jack Pendarvis: In a way, I love it, you know.

John Hart: She killed her grandmother and then woke up?

Jack Pendarvis: Well, you know, that's just for starters, and I...

Gene Edwards: And it was Bobby in Dallas?

Jack Pendarvis: And I really liked, I really liked it. It was, it was everything, and I just had to respect that, and I really got a kick out of it, to tell you the truth. But I liked all the students. We had some good stories coming out of there.

Gene Edwards: Did you feel like you needed to study writing? Did you take a writing class? You talked about your law degree and your accounting degree. Did you have an English degree in there, too?

John Hart: No, no. I was a French major, which I don't think really qualified me to write stories in any way shape or form. But no, I've never taken a writing class. I've taken a couple basic books that just told me what not to do, you know, don't use the passive voice, basic stuff that every writer needs to know. And I found those helpful because it saved me some, you know, ridiculously silly mistakes. But for me it was really just, it was a learning curve and it was completely self taught. As I said earlier, *The King of Lies*, which was my first book published was my third book written. The first two, prior to that, were three hundred fifty, four hundred pages apiece, and every page got better than the one before it. And I can look at beginning of the first one I wrote and compare it to the

end of the second one that I wrote and see a curve that is like this. So when I sat down to write *The King of Lies*, it was just hard knocks and you know, I'm still learning and still making mistakes.

Gene Edwards: Tell me, tell me about the phone call that said you'd sold it.

John Hart: Ah, ha, ha. The phone call that said I'd sold it. Well, bear in mind that I'd quit my law practice to write this book, okay? I had alienated half the town. Half my family thought I was insane. The other half just was being really nice, I suspect. But it, I knew that I could write a better book and I knew that I had to quit my job to write full time to do it. Before I found an agent or sold it, I went back to work in another capacity, after I finished the book. Took a year to find an agent and we tried to sell it for about a year, so we'd been rejected by a number of the big houses, and St. Martin's, who is my current house and a great house, a great publisher, are the ones that eventually picked it up. And the call came like this. I was at work. I was working as a stockbroker, and my agent—and I'd been waiting for this call for my entire life, I swear my entire life. "Good news, John, we have an offer." Which, I'm telling you, that sounds like a very simple statement, but it's not when you've spent fifteen years trying to make this happen. It's not. So I pushed the phone more tightly to my ear, and I'm literally looking around my office thinking, "Oh, I'll miss this place, you know. So I'm imagining myself leaving yet another profession and he tells me about the offer. And he says, "St. Martin's has made an offer for \$7500." And all of a sudden my illusion vanishes, the walls come rushing back at me and I realize I don't think I can quit my job on a \$7500 advance. And so I asked him to go into more detail about this good news and he tells me, "Look, you know, it's not about the advance. You're a first timer. It's about getting on the playing field. That's what Patricia Cornwell got for her first book. It's more than Grisham got. It's more than Clancy got. Just get in the game and see what happens. It's a major house and they want to publish you." And I thought about it and I realized, "God, he's absolutely right. That is absolutely what it's all about." And the book was acquired quietly and it was acquired for \$7500, which was not a tremendous amount, obviously, but it spent three weeks on *The New York Times*' best seller list and is going to be published in twenty two languages, and it's being adapted as a movie and he was right. Get on the playing field and see what happens. And that is probably the most important lesson I learned about the publishing side of things, not necessarily the writing side of things, but get in the game and see what happens. Put your best foot out there.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah yeah.

Jack Pendarvis: That's good.

John Hart: So in retrospect, it was probably the second best call I've ever had. The best one was the one saying that it was on *The New York Times*' best seller list because I never expected that. I never, ever dared to dream that that would happen.

Gene Edwards: Do you ever expect that?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, I would love it and I get a lot of really wonderful notes from people who have read the book. I just, it just has to be read. It just has to get into people's hands.

Jack Pendarvis: That's what you want, right?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah. Yeah.

Gene Edwards: And isn't that the challenge?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah

Gene Edwards: That's the tough part these days? Not, not... It's harder to get short stories read than it is to get a novel read?

Pia Ehrhardt: By readers?

Gene Edwards: Yeah

Pia Ehrhardt: Short story collections are much harder I think to sell.

Gene Edwards: Why?

Pia Ehrhardt: I don't think people buy them as quickly as they buy novels. And I was able to publish a short story collection because I did a two book deal, and I have a novel coming after it. And I think, well no, you were actually were not...

Jack Pendarvis: No?

Pia Ehrhardt: You were different. You're an exception to that. But most of the time they want, they'll publish your short story collection if you have a novel coming quickly thereafter. People want to read novels and not short stories and I just, I don't really understand that. Short stories are so satisfying.

Jack Pendarvis: And they're short.

Pia Ehrhardt: And they're short.

Jack Pendarvis: Which is much more convenient.

Pia Ehrhardt: They have a lot of impact. Yeah, and it doesn't take you two days or three days. You're, you're not up all night reading.

Jack Pendarvis: Right, right.

Pia Ehrhardt: But you know, if you can get librarians behind your book, if you can get book clubs behind your book, it really comes down to needing warm bodies to read your book and buy your book.

Gene Edwards: To get bookstores behind it. To get independent bookstores...

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh that's great and important and...

John Hart: It's still the last great word of mouth business.

Jack Pendarvis: Right.

John Hart: I mean, a slick trailer will sell a Hollywood dud but the best marketing campaign in the world is not going to give legs to a bad book,

Pia Ehrhardt: Plus independent bookstores, the employees get behind the book, too and they...

Jack Pendarvis: Right, right.

Pia Ehrhardt: They make a little stand of your book and a poster and it's just really wonderful what they do for writers, where I could go into the bigger chains and I, I my book will be just like wedged in, you know.

Gene Edwards: So you remember going out for your first signings and your

Pia Ehrhardt: It was great. Just so great, so great.

Gene Edwards: You, you went on the road together.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, Pia's first book and my second book, they came out at the same time and we had the same publisher. So we drove around in Pia's very nice car all around the, all around the southeast together. And we were in New York together, too.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, we did. We started out at Happy Ending and

Gene Edwards: Well, what is it like?

Pia Ehrhardt: It's just tremendous to have a book that has your name on it that people can actually buy.

Gene Edwards: John may have a completely different feeling about that.

John Hart: About what?

Gene Edwards: About what it's like to be out there on those book tours and in those places.

John Hart: Well, you know, for me it's just an endurance issue. I love the first couple weeks, but the tour for *Down River* was thirty five cities, coast to coast.

Pia Ehrhardt: We didn't have that.

John Hart: I mean I...

Pia Ehrhardt: Five day road trip

Gene Edwards: Five day...

Pia Ehrhardt: Four day...

John Hart: Well, it was, it was six weeks.

Jack Pendarvis: We had thirty five people total.

John Hart: Well, the last three weeks, I didn't see my own home or my children for three weeks.

Pia Ehrhardt: That would make me miserable. That would be hard.

John Hart: And that was brutal. Though, the first week of it was sexy and slick and everything you want it to be. You know, you're in San Francisco and New York and Denver and all this stuff and you've got guides who are driving you around. And you think it's just great. I mean this is exactly what I've been working for. And then you realize, "These hotel rooms, they all feel the same. The food's the same. It's not as sexy as people think it is."

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, I just love hotel rooms.

Pia Ehrhardt: Lobby food.

Gene Edwards: And you're on television shows at six o'clock and they haven't read the books.

John Hart: Well, during the three weeks that I was traveling coast to coast, there were four days that I had to get up at three in the morning to meet a cab or a car at 3:45 to get to the airport to travel all day and then do two or three events that next, that same day in the next city.

Gene Edwards: Right.

John Hart: I'm not complaining. I'll take it all day long.

Jack Pendarvis: Right, right.

John Hart: I'm thrilled to have the opportunity but it is a, it's not all roses and sunshine.

Jack Pendarvis: I was staying in a hotel in Los Angeles that didn't have coffee, I noticed. I had to get up very early to go to the airport so I went to Starbucks the night before and got two iced, gigantic iced coffees with no ice and stuck them in the freezer in the hotel. That was the worst tasting thing you've ever had. That's my sad story from the road. But you're right, though, it's impossible to complain. It's great.

John Hart: Oh, it's impossible to complain. What, what's frustrating about it is you don't know what to expect. One night you show up and there are a couple hundred people there and the next night there are three at a different venue. And you can't predict it and you have to put on the same face and give the same talk and realize that those people are there to meet you and to have their book signed, and you can't get discouraged.

Gene Edwards: Did, did you read when you were on the... Did you read out loud from your...?

John Hart: No, no.

Gene Edwards: Why not?

John Hart: I've generally, to this point, it's my policy that I don't read in public. I write...

Gene Edwards: You know what's coming here.

John Hart: Yeah

Jack Pendarvis: Well, I don't know.

John Hart: Well, I don't know either. I can't imagine, but I feel personally that the written word for me is done so that people can read it and hear the words in the stillness of their own mind. I don't like the way I sound reading my own words. I wrote them so I don't have to say them.

Jack Pendarvis: Well, you know, I think you're on to something because you've been to readings. I'm sure we've all been to readings where our minds start to wander after... And I always try to bear that in mind, and you know, Pia's stories are just like punches in the, I mean I, we did a reading together at Square Books in Oxford, and after, at the end

of her story there was an aw... At the climax of that story *A Man*, there was a collective gasp from every body in the room. Remember that? That was powerful, wasn't it?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah

Jack Pendarvis: That was amazing.

John Hart: See, that's the difference between doing readings with short stories and with novels.

Jack Pendarvis: True. True.

John Hart: You get a start and a middle and a finish.

Pia Ehrhardt: And you have to set up the novel.

Jack Pendarvis: Right.

Pia Ehrhardt: And then you have to, yeah

Jack Pendarvis: And look, okay, you might not remember this guy. He was this guy's uncle and then it gets...

Gene Edwards: So we're not going to make you read but I do, I do want to know, so what do you do?

John Hart: I'm an attorney by training. I describe myself as a recovering attorney which means by default I have a great love of the sound of my own voice. It was a required course in law school and I excelled in it. I love speaking extemporaneously to crowds. I've done seventy or eighty public speaking events over the past two years, and I love them. And I just talk about the process. I talk about what the path has been, how I got published, how I came to write, what in my life led to the desire to write. And I have to tailor it, obviously, for the venue. If I'm speaking to five hundred people, which I've done a number of times, I give a nice hour and fifteen minute talk and then I take questions. If three people show up, then I give the twenty or thirty minute version because, you know, it's very difficult to speak for an hour and fifteen minutes to three people. I know they deserve it, but I just can't do it. If people, and people have asked me to read, and I feel like they should just buy the book if they really want to see what I wrote or get it from the library.

Gene Edwards: And, Pia, the thought of speaking before a crowd like that, does that terrify you?

Pia Ehrhardt: Five hundred people?

Gene Edwards: Yeah, yeah.

John Hart: I'll tell you what's funny is the thing...

Gene Edwards: Which would be easier? I'm sorry.

John Hart: Well, the things that happen when you set on this road to write. You have no idea what's going to be around the next corner, and here's a perfect example of a kind of twisted irony, in my opinion. I left the law joyously to pursue a career in writing. I mean, I was thrilled to leave the law to try to become a writer. When I was in New York to promote *Down River*, my publicist, who is a very enterprising young man, took it upon himself to get in touch with Court TV and said, "Hey, you know John Hart, he's a best selling author and he's an attorney and would you like to have him on Court TV?" They said, "That's a great idea." So six years after I left my law practice, I'm in New York on Court TV hanging out, discussing some case with the talking heads. I mean, that, to me is just hilarious. I called the producer after it was set up and said I didn't know that much about this kind of law when I was in practice, when I was doing it, and it's been six years. And they said, "Are you camera shy?" and I said, "No." "Well, come on." And it was great. So I had, had that wonderful exposure on national television but I still haven't watched the copy of it. I bear to.

Gene Edwards: Can't...

John Hart: It's kind of like the sound of your own voice. I don't want to see it, either.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah. None of us are going to watch this, are we?

Pia Ehrhardt: No

Gene Edwards: What, but, but would you feel more comfortable talking to the crowd or would you feel more comfortable reading to the crowd?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, I love reading.

Gene Edwards: Yeah?

Pia Ehrhardt: I love reading my work out loud and I'm always um, it makes you write really good sentences, I think

Gene Edwards: Do you read it out loud as you write it?

Pia Ehrhardt: I do.

Gene Edwards: Do you?

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh yeah, and dialogue, yeah, yeah, definitely. And I'll read it sometimes to my husband. I mean, I'll read it to another person which, which gives me another kind

of objectivity. But I do. I love to read the work out loud and then I also... I'm fine with speaking to people and I love answering questions. People just have really great, I mean that's always the nice part of

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, reading is the Q & A

Gene Edwards: What's the best question anybody ever asked you at a reading?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, they normally, well, they want to know are the stories true to my own life, which is, you know. Then they want to know how, then they want to know how did you get to be a writer? When did you start writing? I mean, it's like they have their own dreams of doing it. They've thought about doing it. I mean, how did you find an agent? They want to know some of the practical, the practical things.

John Hart: One of the best things about becoming a writer or, or holding oneself out as a writer is that you get to meet so many aspiring writers because they really will seek you out.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right.

John Hart: And whether it's for good, solid advice or because they believe you have some magic writer dust that you can sprinkle that will bring the luck down upon them.

Jack Pendarvis: And I do.

John Hart: And you do.

Jack Pendarvis: I have some right here.

Gene Edwards: It came from a giant. It came from a giant

Jack Pendarvis: Would anybody like some?

John Hart: But the Q & A is always great.

Pia Ehrhardt: It is.

John Hart: And I find that about eight out of ten questions are absolutely expected because you've heard them a hundred times, but there are always one or two that just surprise me.

Gene Edwards: So what are the one or two that surprised you?

John Hart: Well, it sometimes takes the form of a lecture in the guise of a question. I write about some pretty bad stuff that's happened to these people, and my language is not impeccable by any stretch. And I often will have people that want to um soapbox me.

Gene Edwards: Want to straighten you out.

John Hart: You know, get up in front of a hundred people or whatever the crowd is and lecture me and then ask me to justify what I've done and I...

Pia Ehrhardt: Really?

John Hart: Yeah.

Pia Ehrhardt: About using bad language? Wow!

John Hart: Bad language and you know, some of the bad things that happen in the books, and I always tell them, "Look when people stop speaking this way, I'll stop writing this way." And secondly, these are basically books of crime fiction and they're mysteries and they're murder mysteries and they're about people doing bad things. Nobody's going to find their dead mother and say, "Gee whiz, that's really unfortunate," You know, that's just not how people react. But it always interests me. In fact, one woman came through a, a signing. I saw her about ten places back. She was nice and well dressed and very attractive uh, about sixty years old, smile on her face, so pleasant and she had the book clutched to her chest and she came up to me. "I really liked your book," she said, and this is where I knew it was coming because it was going to be followed by the "but." And she opened the jacket, and she had written down the page number. Every time that the "F" bomb appeared in my book. And she had tallied it up, and apparently there were forty seven of them in *The King of Lies*. I didn't know that until she showed me.

Jack Pendarvis: Wow!

Gene Edwards: Now you do...

John Hart: The count

Jack Pendarvis: I got forty seven, I got forty seven on this.

Pia Ehrhardt: On one page!

Jack Pendarvis: I want to say something about that, though, cause it's not, I don't... I'm not comfortable, you know, I would never say that in a reading that, that word. In fact, the way it's used in this one story in my book is kind of a parody of the way it's used sometimes, I guess. It's sort of a parody of, of, of the "F" word, if you will. And so McSweeney's just called me to do an audio book and they wanted me to read that story, so I had to say it. And I've never said it any a reading or anything. I had to say it about a hundred times for this audio book

Pia Ehrhardt: And now you're using it all the time.

Jack Pendarvis: So if any of, so, you know. God forgive me

Gene Edwards: Do you, do you feel comfortable putting it in a story?

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh yeah.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh yeah, and she'll, man, she'll, you know, and there's little kids there, Pia doesn't care. I'm just kidding. I'm exaggerating, but yeah, you'll say it. You'll lay it right on 'em in the story

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah I mean, if it, if it makes sense, I'm fine with it.

Gene Edwards: You're okay with it.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, yeah.

Gene Edwards: Tell me about twenty minute stories.

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, McSweeney's ran a contest asking people to sit down, start the clock, write a story. Write for twenty minutes or write a story in twenty minutes. And I did three of them.

Gene Edwards: I love that one.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Will you read that one?

Pia Ehrhardt: Sure, sure

Gene Edwards: Will you tell us about... How did it happen and come to be?

Pia Ehrhardt: It was interesting. It was a great process for me because I tend to write, just feel my way through stories. I have no idea where they're going. How they're going to end, what, even what the conflict is, sometimes. I think I know what the conflict is but this forced me to get up over the arc and come back down again in twenty minutes.

Gene Edwards: It's interesting that you say that. You know Alistair MacLeod was on this program once and I asked him if characters ever surprised him and he said that he would kill a character that ever surprised him.

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh really? That surprised him?

Gene Edwards: He wouldn't allow that. Would not tolerate it. He didn't want... He knew from the moment the story started where it was going, how it was going to get there.

John Hart: I don't understand that.

Jack Pendarvis: I kind of do.

John Hart: I don't understand how people can write like that.

Jack Pendarvis: I sort of understand it, but anyway, I mean, in a way, sometimes I wonder, really? It surprised, it surprised you? Because you made it up in your head.

Pia Ehrhardt: Well maybe he feels like he knows. Maybe Alistair felt like he knew his characters so well.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah. I'm on his side, sort of, in a way.

Gene Edwards: Okay, I'm sorry. I digress

Jack Pendarvis: Oh, I'm sorry, too.

Pia Ehrhardt: Want me to read this?

Gene Edwards: Tell us again about this. Tell us again about this.

Pia Ehrhardt: Well this, I just started writing with the words "I thought" and then I realized that it needed to have a kind of an arc in it since it was a story. It couldn't just be a bunch of unconnected I thoughts. And then I was thinking this would make a kind of a nice overture to the novel that I was working on so at one point, it was a kind of an overture, an outline to what was going to be the novel, but then that's, that's changed because the novel's changed but... This one's called "I Thought."

"I thought my job in life was to be in the service of quasi-famous people. Keep their house calm, quiet, keep my room clean, clear the way for my mother so she could walk through the house practicing her violin, too many scales and repeating of passages and not enough music for me. I wanted to be entertained, this small audience of one.

"I thought affairs were a necessary extension of marriage, an extra wing in the boxy house. Why would you want everything from one person? That seemed a lot to expect and I did want everything.

"I thought dreams were things that, if they happened, left you empty-handed. A car at its destination, but out of gas.

“I thought orgasms lasted for two days, because my father, when he explained sex to me in his study, said sex was subliminal, religious, and so I thought there was a halo effect that you carried in your pants and in your heart that lasted for the man, too.

“I thought if I prayed I could keep an umbrella over my family, and if I didn't that's when my father would hit a boy on his bike at an intersection and break the boy's legs, and twist the front wheel of the red bike so that it looked like a surrealist warped O.

“I thought my mother played the violin like an angel, but this was not music to be shared, and it wasn't hers either. She didn't play, she practiced, and the music was for some other reason, not me. I never heard the end of any piece, only the beginnings and the hard passages that were always in the middle.

“I thought I could have any man I wanted if I put myself in front of him and then acted the opposite of desperate, and this worked for a long time until I got pregnant by accident and had a child and he made me into a family that lived in a boxy house with no wing for cheating, but there's a yard with trees that hold hundreds of birds singing for other birds.”

Pia Ehrhardt: So I started at 6:55 AM and ended at 7:15 AM. I just wrote all the way through and it's kind of terrifying to do that and not be able to walk away and not be able to go back to something but it came out nice

John Hart: So that's, that's unedited?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, oh yeah, you can't edit.

Jack Pendarvis: That's pretty, that's pretty amazing.

Gene Edwards: Yeah

John Hart: That's great. That's nice.

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh, thanks.

Jack Pendarvis: You know, I like that phrase. I like that phrase, “Only the beginnings and the hard passages that were always in the middle.”

Pia Ehrhardt: In the middle, which is like writing.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, yeah that's great. Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Music's always been important in your life, hasn't it?

Pia Ehrhardt: Both my parents are musicians, yeah. And I, one of the things that this story forced me to do, in each of these “I thoughts” was get to the point really quickly

which meant I had to like kind of put things out there that were not easy necessarily to say or admit you know, quickly to hold the reader's attention. I'm always afraid I'm going to lose the reader's attention. I just, I just think readers have a million other things to be doing than reading my work, so I just try to, every sentence, I try to make, you know, kind of...

Gene Edwards: Well, I think it's such a great.

Jack Pendarvis: Worth their time...

Pia Ehrhardt: And work. Worth their time.

Jack Pendarvis: Worth their time, right.

Pia Ehrhardt: And just lead to the next one and stuff like that, so...

Jack Pendarvis: Sure. That's great

Gene Edwards: I think it's such a great exercise, such a great, interesting experience.

Pia Ehrhardt: It was great for me. Now if I could just do this with the novel and do like a forty day story...

Jack Pendarvis: Well, why maybe you could do like twenty minutes every day.

Gene Edwards: Twenty minutes a day.

Pia Ehrhardt: Twenty minutes, yeah.

Gene Edwards: To get uh how many paragraphs out of it?

Pia Ehrhardt: Well, this was like seven?

Gene Edwards: What music do you listen to when you... What music do you ? What music is your muse, I guess?

Pia Ehrhardt: Oh I love music. When, when I can't listen when I write because I listen to music. If it's in the background, it has to be like two rooms over, you know. It really can't be in the room with me and in the background because I really will just stop what I'm doing and listen to what it is.

Gene Edwards: Do you listen to music when you...?

Jack Pendarvis: Yes.

Gene Edwards: Or is it quiet?

Jack Pendarvis: No, no, I listen to music, but Pia's right. And Pia and I share a lot of similar tastes in music and thoughts about music. But I do have it on when I write. I've had Fletcher Henderson on a lot while I've been writing lately, 1930s big band thing. But then I will stop and listen to something. I'll find myself doing, and one of the songs ended up in the piece I'm working on.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah. I just, you know, it just seeped in there.

Gene Edwards: It just kind of worked it's way in.

Jack Pendarvis: Yeah, it really did.

Gene Edwards: You weren't allowed to listen to the music there in the library when you were...

John Hart: No, I had to, I had some crazy homeless people there that gave me some good motivation.

Jack Pendarvis: Did they sing?

John Hart: No, they argued with invisible people.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh

John Hart: Quite vocally.

Gene Edwards: Is there music, though, while you're writing or is it?

John Hart: No No. Well, you know, I would love to be able to listen to music but I can't. I'm kind of like Pia. I would just get tracked, tracked off direction. I have very thin walls where my office is, and I just left one of the most productive places more, even more thin in terms of the walls, but I had on one side of me a very angry attorney that would just yell on the phone all day long. On the other side of me was a Nigerian tailor who was a very nice guy but he played the strangest music. So I guess I kind of had that. The third wall I swear to you had to have been a phone sex line because I heard things through that wall, and believe me, I listened. I left that office a month ago to go to a new place and it's much quieter and I find I'm having a bit of an adjustment dealing with the silence. I mean, you learn to operate in the environment that surrounds you and then when you move to a different environment you have to learn all over again um how to get into your happy place.

Jack Pendarvis: You should just call the phone sex line and put it on speaker phone while you write.

Gene Edwards: I think the silence is important to you because of your Italian family, isn't it?

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, yeah. Needing the space to think, for one thing.

Jack Pendarvis: And your parents being musicians...

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah, yeah but they really did. I mean, this is actually very true with the violin and my mother. I mean she did not play to be heard. She really played to play well, you know, for herself and she never thought she played well enough. And I thought she just played like an angel.

John Hart: Pia, could I ask a question?

Pia Ehrhardt: Uh huh.

John Hart: I think you said earlier that you don't really know where your story is going when you're... Is that the same with your novel because I'm a groper and hopper. I don't outline. I just feel my way along.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah.

John Hart: So I'm curious if that's what you do and if that's what Jack does.

Pia Ehrhardt: Right now I'm groping, but I'm really starting to think that I'm going to, I need to do more of an outline. I can change anything I want, right? I mean just because you do an outline doesn't mean you...

Jack Pendarvis: That's right.

Pia Ehrhardt: ...have to stick to it. And no one's going to be watching over my shoulder. And then I'm having trouble keeping up with the characters from the old version and the characters from the new, so I'm really starting to think of doing the kind of bulletin board with the cards and the characters and just understanding where people are going and drawing like arrows and I don't know. I'm feeling like I need a visual aid to help me stay on track with what I'm doing because I'm having trouble and I don't want to be going back and rereading what I've written all the time because then I start going in and futzing and I don't really want to spend my time doing that.

Gene Edwards: Start rearranging things and messing with it.

Pia Ehrhardt: Yeah. I don't rearrange. I just need to keep it moving this way.

Gene Edwards: What about you, Jack?

Jack Pendarvis: But that's one great thing about the computer though is that ability just to take a whole passage, You know, you were talking about writing on a computer. Isn't that a great thing?

John Hart: I love it.

Jack Pendarvis: Cut and paste is the most fantastic thing I've ever...

Gene Edwards: If you've ever been to Miss Welty's house, you know that you can go upstairs to her typewriter and there are the stories that she wrote and she would cut out the paragraphs and pin them.

Jack Pendarvis: Oh literally cut...

Pia Ehrhardt: And pin them, right.

Gene Edwards: ...Paste them.

Pia Ehrhardt: I'm really starting to think I need something like that, like something more. Yeah. Because I want to finish, I want to finish this book. One of the problems is that it's in, I think you had mentioned this before having young children, is that I'm writing about teenagers and about teenage drinking and about a lot of the reckless things that teenagers do. And when I'm being... There's a teenage boy in it. I have a teenage son. I'm being very protective of this character even though he's doing worse things than my son has done, and I'd... Something worse I think is going to need to happen to him and I just...

Jack Pendarvis: Well, it must be tough.

Pia Ehrhardt: It is tough and I, you know, and I'm thinking that I'm superstitious and if you talk to some writers about it, they're like don't be ridiculous. There's no such thing as writing your own destiny. Writing your own life, but go ahead, no, no, no.

Jack Pendarvis: No, Mark Childress, I think he had a house burn, he burned a house down in his first book and then somebody's house burned down...

Pia Ehrhardt: It happened

Jack Pendarvis: I mean, I would, thing after thing happened to Mark Childress to the point where I think he really got pretty superstitious about it

Gene Edwards: He got spooky about the destiny of all it

Jack Pendarvis: So, but I'm not saying that's anything to it but I know the impulse

Pia Ehrhardt: But it is, it is causing me, yeah, it's causing me a delay and then I'm thinking well, I just need to change him much, much more, but I definitely can't protect him because then the reader knows, you know. Oh well, come on, you're protecting this kid and I mean, something. The reader knows something needs to happen. You set up all this tension in the beginning, so I don't know.

Gene Edwards: This has been a very special time. Thank you all for coming to sit at this table with us and sharing your stories and sharing your imagination and your creativity and your enthusiasm. Thank you.

Jack Pendarvis: And our good looks.

John Hart: Thank you.

Pia Ehrhardt: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: And your, and your charm and all that stuff

Jack Pendarvis: Right. It was fun.

Pia Ehrhardt: I forgot we were being taped.

Gene Edwards: We were and we were taped for more than an hour and a half.