Introduction to The Further Adventures of Langdon St. Ives

My Life (in part) as a Reader and Writer

A writer who starts writing early in life and keeps at it discovers that things change, particularly the writer. P. G. Wodehouse was apparently the same writer at ninety years old that he had been at thirty-five, as if he had been dislodged from time. But he was a rarity, perhaps an enviable rarity. When I wrote my first steampunk story, "The Ape-box Affair," back in my mid-twenties, I was still occasionally asked to haul out identification when I ordered a drink in a restaurant. A couple of months ago the same thing happened, except that there was no drink involved: I was hoping to get the senior discount at the local movie theater. It occurred only once, and the phenomenon was instantly amusing. But it came into my mind, as it had forty years earlier, that youth isn't the only thing that is fleeting; everything is fleeting, and that there's an absolute family resemblance between a mirror and the clock on the wall, both of which are reminders of our own mortality. I'm writing this as an introduction, but one can't introduce something until one knows what it is, and so every introduction is an afterword after all.

One of the distinctions between the new writer and the old writer is that the world of books and stories is the new writer's oyster. He or she might become any sort of writer at all, or so he or she supposes, perhaps a literary genius, and Shakespeare might as well start shifting chairs in order to make room in the

panoply of literary greats. The writer who has been at it most of his life looks back and very clearly sees what he (in my case) has become. He's perhaps closer to Shakespeare than he was when he started, but there'll be no rush to shift any chairs. That being said, if he's generally happy with what he sees when his books and stories are lined up in temporal order, he's very fortunate indeed, and is even more fortunate if he still sits down at the desk in the morning and adds a few hundred or a few thousand words to the living thing that his writing has become to him.

Not long ago, when I was in a looking-back mood, I realized that the books I read when I was a child and teenager had an outsized part in shaping who and what I would become as a writer. The course of my literary life was being mapped before I knew that I would have such a life. I learned to read, literally, in the last three months of the second grade, after my teacher, Mrs. Rice, who had a haircut like Moe from the Three Stooges, sent a fortuitous note home to my mother saying that I was reading so far beneath grade level that I was in danger of failing. My mother got hold of a book titled *Why Johnny Can't Read*, popular among mothers in those days, and which she tortured me with for those three months insufferable months. Instead of getting into trouble with my friends after school, I sat at the kitchen table and sounded out words, read paragraphs aloud, and took spelling tests. It turned out that the book worked. I was meant to be a reader all along, but simply didn't know it, and when I went into the third grade, I was a sort of reading whizbang.

Christmas of that year my aunt and uncle gave me a copy of *The Complete Short Stories of Mark Twain*. (Or perhaps it was the following Christmas. In "A Child's Christmas in Wales," Dylan Thomas wrote, "I can never remember whether it snowed for six days and six nights when I was twelve or for twelve days and twelve nights when I was six.") It was years later that I figured out the gift must have been suggested by my mother as part of her grand scheme to turn me into a reader; my aunt and uncle weren't readers of any sort and were far more likely to give me a bow and arrow. *Why Johnny Can't Read* had disappeared into the drawer by then, thank God, and I was free to run around in orange groves again and spend long afternoons wandering along the railroad tracks searching out ant lions. And yet, due to my mother's insidious scheme, I was inclined to spend more and more time reading, which is to say occupying other worlds.

I opened my Christmas gift (I have a clear memory of it) and started out with Twain's "The Notorious Jumping Frog," happy to discover that Calaveras County, which apparently had a surplus of prodigious frogs and comical people, was in California, within driving distance. I tackled "Cannibalism in the Cars," and was disappointed that there was no cannibalism to be found in it, and then "An Invalid's Story," in which a man's deterioration and death is brought about by a disguised Limburger cheese. I had no idea what Limburger cheese was and had to ask my mother, who told me that it stank very badly but that Europeans were fond of it. Much of what I found in books was deeply mysterious, but I can still recall

the strange change that came over me when my world was no longer limited to the comparatively small town of Anaheim of the 1950s.

Twain's language was like no language I'd ever heard, and I wished it was my own. My mother brought home an illustrated edition of Tom Sawyer, which in time I read literally to pieces. I took to saying "what in tarnation…?" a lot, and memorized the spunk water chant that cured warts, and badly wanted a "sure-enough" Barlow knife, as Tom Sawyer put it. My father cheerfully gave me a Barlow when I asked him about them, he having collected knives over the years, and it being okay in those days for a kid to carry one around, a notion that strikes terror into people today. I carried mine around religiously, just in case I had the urge to whittle on a stick. I wanted a corncob pipe, too, since Huckleberry Finn smoked one, but I was informed by my mother that I wasn't of pipe-smoking age.

(Here's a sad business: all these years later I believed I still owned that Barlow knife, so I searched around in my study today and found what I thought was it. I discovered after blowing off the dust, however, that it had a suspiciously plastic-looking handle rather than a bone handle. The name "Barlow" was etched into the stainless steel bolster at the top just as it should be, but on the base of the blade were etched the words "Made in China." That "sure-enough" Barlow that my father gave me had vanished some time in the past fifty-five years. Maybe goblins had stolen it and left the cut-rate Barlow.)

It turned out that by learning to read I hadn't lost my taste for railroad tracks and orange groves at all. To the contrary, they meant more to me than they

had before. The world glowed more brightly now that Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn were living in it and always would be living in it (unlike a Barlow knife, which can disappear out of it). I was curious by now about other writers' books, and I went searching through the volumes in my mother's library (a built-in room divider of four shelves with a copper planter in the top filled with philodendron). I found a set of books by Steinbeck and pulled out something called *The Long Valley*. I didn't understand half of what I was reading, although even then I was particularly fond of "Breakfast" and still am (both the story and actual breakfast). I undertook to write opening scenes in the manner of Steinbeck: the sun coming up over the hills above Salinas or Monterey, a man ambling along a country road, the smell of a river and the sound of the wind. After a couple of paragraphs of literary mimicry I would inevitably run out of steam, and of course I had no idea that I was practicing what would one day come to be my craft. I found a copy of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* around this same time and was infected with the image of gaslamps glowing along foggy London streets and the rattle of hansom cabs. That particular book impressed upon me the notion that the best books very often had a black cloth cover with red or gold embossed print, a black-and-white frontispiece illustration, and the wonderful smell of dusty old paper. In short, I began to develop a love of books as objects, which is often looked upon as a variety of insanity and should be kept secret.

My mother, seeing that I had begun to browse avidly through her books, began to take my sister and me to the Stanton Free Library on Tuesday afternoons.

On one of those trips, very early on, my mother handed me copies of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* and *A Journey to the Center of the Earth* (or was it *The Mysterious Island* or Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*? Did I check out two books on the third Tuesday or three books on the second Tuesday?) I remember absolutely that both of the books passed the binding and frontispiece test. The language was slightly archaic, which was another requirement. They had the right effect. My brain (perhaps literally) began to take on the finny, fishy submarine shape of Captain Nemo's Nautilus, and I began to think a lot about the possibility of worlds in the center of the Earth.

My sister Lynn and I started swapping books, and I borrowed her Black Stallion books and the Howard Pease merchant marine mysteries (copies of which books are now in my own library.) Around then she discovered a book called *High Times* beneath the philodendrons in the room divider – a story about three retired women who cut comical capers while out seeing the world. There was a picture of a martini glass on the dust jacket, and so we read the book secretly, thinking that it was fairly scandalous stuff. I remember lots of solitary reading and secret reading in those days: under the covers with a flashlight at night, of course, and up in an orange tree in the middle of a ten-acre grove on a spring afternoon, one eye on the lookout for the unpleasant owner of the grove, who carried a shotgun loaded with rock-salt. These crimes would lead to further wickedness, a *Mad* magazine hidden inside a Pee Chee folder at school, for example. Reading had become a vice.

I look back and see my life in those days as a succession of books, alternate universes without end. Alexander Smith, the English essayist, wrote that "The world is everywhere whispering essays," and it seemed to me then (and still does) that the world was everywhere whispering stories. I wasn't competent to whisper any stories myself yet, but that had clearly become my destiny.

I finally wrote my first story in the 5th grade, which means I was eleven years old at the time. I had a book-loving teacher named Mr. Borden, who read out loud to us every day. I remember that he asked us to choose between *Tom Sawyer* and *The Yearling*, and how disappointed I was when the class chose *The Yearling*, even though I had already read *Tom Sawyer* two or three times by then. Mr. Borden asked us to write a story of our own as homework, due in a week. It happened that a couple of days later my friend Johnny Hatley and I were walking along the railroad tracks killing time – throwing rocks, stealing oranges out of adjacent groves, and searching for horned toads (writerly research, it would turn out) when he told me about a terrifying film he'd just seen, a film titled *Macabre*. He was having nightmares about it. Not having the foggiest idea that the word "macabre" existed, I immediately (and I'll insist sensibly) thought of a corncob pipe. I went home and wrote a story about a walking skeleton named McCob, who smoked a pipe and terrorized a family in a farmhouse. I remember thinking that it was particularly brilliant, so it's a good thing that the story doesn't survive: I can go on thinking that way. I also remember that I didn't care much about motivation. The skeleton had no particular grudge against the family in the

farmhouse. Peering into windows was evidently the sort of thing that walking skeletons were put into the world to do. And I'll admit that several months earlier I'd been immensely impressed by *The Seventh Voyage of Sinbad*, which had primed me for a lifelong passion for animate skeletons. A couple of years later I would watch *Jason and the Argonauts*, which featured an entire regiment of skeletons. I was certain that nothing more glorious had ever been seen on Earth, and (although I can't swear that this is true) I was no doubt happy that my story "McCob" had tied into the Universal. I'll cheerfully give that to literary critics who in some dim future will want to write learned articles about the walking skeleton theme in Blaylock's work, although I suppose it's even-money that none will step forward – critics, that is to say, not skeletons.

I've written a great deal elsewhere about how I came to write early Steampunk stories along with K.W. Jeter and Tim Powers back in the 1970s and 80s. I wrote it on and off for 15 years and then not at all for a period of time. And then by a happy chance my brother-in-law gave me a copy of James Norman Hall's collection of historical seafaring stories titled *Doctor Dogbody's Leg* (which you should read) and it came to me that I missed the cast of characters who figured into my steampunk stories and novels. The result is the collection of novellas in this book. It's a cliché to say that characters "take on a life of their own," but sometimes they do, at least in the writer's mind. And the more we write about them, the more likely that is to happen. Mine seem to have taken up permanent residence. In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner wrote that the world of

the novel can become more real to the writer than the actual world, and that's also true, and is another thing that sounds like lunacy. Writing is a dangerous profession.

Reality comes highly recommended, but it's not a bad thing to take leave of it now and then, especially into the pages of a book. And with that I believe that I've said what I wanted to say. It's my great good fortune once again to be able to sit down at my desk in morning in order to find my way into another story – an afternoon's stroll down a railroad track heading for nowhere in particular, but ideally a place worth discovering. Thanks for reading this introduction (which is an afterword nonetheless) and the book that goes along with it.

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