

Herbert Gold

Man of Letters

*Novelist Herbert Gold is the kind of man people fail to notice at parties until they bump into him at the shrimp bowl to find out what they've missed all evening. Thin and bespectacled, Gold looks like your Uncle Charles who spends his afternoons in front of his macaw's cage. Gold's books and conversations, however, mark him as a man to be studied and admired. Droll and witty, Gold has attracted a sophisticated readership since his first book appeared in 1951. His best-known novels are *Salt and Therefore Be Bold*. He was born in Cleveland in 1924 but moved to the West Coast to teach. This interview was conducted at the Squaw Valley Writers Conference.*

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NUWER: In your book, *The Magic Will*, you have a quotation that I really like. You write: "I used to say, in answer to the question, 'Why do you write?' that I write to master my own experience and to make the real world vivid. Now it seems more complex, to make the real world unreal and magical, to make the unreal and magical world real and practical, and all to make the expanse of human life in the twentieth century seem worthwhile at least for a span, at least for someone. The work of a writer is a way out and a way in, and both at the same time, and that is why this book faces two ways." Do you still hold with this description of the role of a writer?

GOLD: Yeah, I think I'd still say that. I try not to think abstractly; I still think of myself as a storyteller. So I associate that quotation with stories I was telling then.

NUWER: You are a popular success as a novelist and yet function also as a teacher of writing and literature. Does the critic in you ever interfere with the writer?

GOLD: I'm essentially not a critic, but writers are people like other people, and when I write a review or react to something else that's written, it's with admiration or disapproval. That's what criticism is—it's just another reaction. I don't separate the functions that way.

NUWER: How do you react toward reviews of your own work?

GOLD: I hate it when my books are hated by reviewers, and I like it when my books are liked by reviewers. I like it even better when my books are liked by a reviewer in a place that's influential, but I can only remember a couple of reviews where I learned anything. . . about myself, about my work. One was a review by Robert Martin Adams a long time ago of a collection of my short stories called *Love and Like*, and I know I learned something from it.

NUWER: Do you find yourself looking for reviews when a new book of yours comes out?

GOLD: It's a natural reaction which I try to suppress. What I find happens is that my enemies send me the bad reviews, so I always see them; my friends send me the good reviews sometimes.

NUWER: Your novels are filled with literary allusions and occasionally literary puns and tricks. How much reading do you do, and has a novel-in-progress been changed by your reading at the time?

GOLD: A novel is a very general and improvisational look at the world—so that something I happen to see may fit into the collage. I mean I felt almost relieved when I read a study of why an image of a streetcar appeared in one of the late Henry James' novels. His secretary reports that it was because James was dictating the book, and as he was talking he walked by a window and there was a streetcar going by. But you hope that your own vision is strong enough so that it will digest the accidents of reading that come along while you are working on a book; sort of the way handmade paper will digest the buttons and cloth and whatever else has gone into the vat.

NUWER: Who are the contemporary writers you regularly read?

GOLD: There are a number of contemporary writers I admire. Nabokov is one; I admire some of Bellow very much. *Humbolt's Gift*, I like a great deal. I like pieces of different works because somehow I've gone past the age of discipleship, and it's hard for me to approve totally—that's one of the signs of advancing age. I kind of like Nabokov's phrase when I asked him in an interview what books he liked and he said, "Many," but declined to name them "because anonymous praise hurts nobody." praise hurts nobody."

NUWER: How do you feel about Gold's early works?

GOLD: I don't like my first book [*Birth of a Hero*] at all. Some of my early books I can read with interest, but I still think of myself as "early Gold." I'm still going there so I don't divide myself into periods. (*Pauses*) Beginning, middle, end, obscene, and pornographic.

NUWER: Do you read criticism of your work—say for example, the dissertation someone did on you at the University of Oregon?

GOLD: Another person doing a dissertation on me elsewhere sent it to me, and I looked at it with interest. There was a lot of computer analysis of relationships of adverbs and so on. It didn't have much to do with me, but I think even the man who wrote it would agree that he was on his own little trip of which I was the occasion. I was interested, but I couldn't read it in any long doses. I kind of browsed through it the way I get into a bath.



NUWER: How much importance do you attach to popular reception of your books? Is it important that your books sell well?

GOLD: When I started writing what I really wanted was the approval of the great critics of the time. Now I believe in the jury system in that I would rather have a number of good readers like my work than to be praised by critics of whatever journals are influential at the moment. There are a few friends and readers that I want to please. Let's say I'd rather have ten thousand good readers than three esteemed critics liking me.

NUWER: Do you delight in redirecting quotations from Shakespeare and other authors? This seems to be a device frequently used in your novels, *Salt* especially.

GOLD: To some extent when you are writing about the texture of our times, parody is natural because we devour information at such a tremendous rate. Therefore much of our conversation is allusion to other conversations, so that the parodies, allusions and half quotations that you notice are part of the texture of the minds of characters in the book. In *Salt*, for example, they are highly sophisticated, urban New York people. It's natural that they find their own thoughts by reflection from other thoughts. I don't think of those allusions as my jokes on the reader, but the comic way the minds of those characters work. I like to think those parodies rise out of the situation, not that I put them there because I'm so smart, that because I have an I.Q., I want to play jokes on the reader.

NUWER: I see. Where do you draw your plots from? Life experiences? Reading? Current events?

GOLD: A plot comes out of me the way toothpaste comes out of a tube, and it doesn't always lie flat on a brush. What usually happens is that I start writing a story—say I have an idea for a story—which means either a character or an incident, and then I get to where the end should be but the story won't stop. My novels are usually stories that wouldn't stop; so I don't draw them, they draw me. I say "The End" but it's not the end. In *Salt* that's exactly what happened. The first section was published as a story first but it didn't stop.

NUWER: In the third person as I recall.

GOLD: Yeah, I had a view of New York life that I was trying to get through by taking three separate points of view. When I finished the story of Peter, which is the first third of the book, I had a sense of standing on one foot, a sense that I was unbalanced and needed to drop the other foot. And so that became the next story, and then I realized I had a novel because it needed to be completed with the story of Barbara.

NUWER: Do you feel a novel suffers when it's divided into three parts like that? In *Salt*, to take the last example, we see Peter first from his own internal view, and then from the external views of his best friends next and, third his lover. I guess what I'm saying basically is that I wonder if the novel is flawed when these various views of the same character are given; certainly Peter is a different man when viewed three ways.

GOLD: Well, Peter is consistent within himself, but he degenerates. He loses the element of distinction—of honesty—that he has at the book's opening, and gains instead a kind of viciousness. But I think that's consistent with the job choice he made to be a stockbroker, with his vanity, with his notching of his penis and continual dandyish play with sex—so we know that's the way he had to go.

NUWER: I noticed that you even altered his physical appearance to suggest his internal decay. While a dime-sized bald spot graces his head at the book's opening, it eventually grows to the size of a half dollar. His eyes become grotesque, as do his facial contours—

GOLD: —He's growing older, wearing out. To be a young man on the make in New York is a very tiring occupation.

NUWER: You teach down the highway a bit at U.C. Davis. Do you prefer an Academe life to the isolation of a Salinger or a Jeffers?

GOLD: Well, I made a choice which, for me, is very comfortable. I only teach one quarter a year. Nine months a year I am alone or as alone as I can possibly be, and if I need company I have to find it in sociability. I don't