

LOWELL B. KOMIE: AN INTERVIEW

with Norbert Blei*

Life is God's novel. Let him write it.

—Isaac Bashevis Singer

Lawyer, Scott Turow, may be Chicago's best known writer of legal thrillers, a string of best-sellers, block-buster advances, his novels turned into major motion pictures, but that gentleman over there in the shadows of Chicago's skyscrapers, schlepping his way every day from the Northwestern train station to his office on Michigan Avenue, is one of Chicago's best writers too, a lawyer as well, who probably couldn't write a legal thriller if he tried. And few have ever heard of him.

His name is Lowell Komie, the author of three collections of short stories, and two novels; winner of the Carl Sandburg Award for Fiction for his collection—*The Lawyer's Chambers and Other Stories* in 1995 and the Small Press Award for Fiction for his novel, *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America* in 1998.

Far from a formula writer, Komie's work is rich in the traditional storytelling of Isaac Singer; sometimes rollicking in the humor and passion of Philip Roth, with prose running as clear as Hemingway, and background voices tangled at times in Kafkaesque conundrums. But he is pure Komie. Read an opening sentence or two from any of his stories, and he is impossible to put down:

— “Mr. Julian Grossman seems to have a fetish for No. 3 Ticonderoga pencils.”

— “There was a little tavern that I remember on California near the Criminal Court where they served blood red Polish sausages from a huge communal jar while you played ‘bumper pool’ and people passing on the streets would pause by the tavern window and watch your game.”

— “She sat back on the reception room couch, and, as she settled herself, her hands automatically felt for the edges of her slip along the fullness of her inner thighs where the fat lapped over the tops of her stockings.”

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— “He had gone underground the day after he failed the bar exam. He hadn’t thought about it for 30 years, but now . . . ”

At times, he reminds me of one of Singer’s besieged characters, the weight of the world upon him . . . resigned to the plight of the writer’s life: “Shoulders are from God, and burdens too.” “Experience has shown me that there are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work. It’s impossible to write a good story by carrying a rabbit’s foot in your pocket.” And “whatever doesn’t really happen is dreamed at night. It happens to one if it doesn’t happen to another, tomorrow if not today, or a century hence if not next year. What difference does it make?”

Seated across from him in his writing quarters far north of the city, I watch him lean forward from his comfortable old chair and thumb through the book on his footstool containing a manuscript in progress, *The Humpback of Lodz*, looking for a particular area of the story he wishes to call to my attention.¹

On the table beside him are hand written chapters in ten, 10"X8" spiral notebooks, a copy of Shimon Peres’s memoir, *Battling for Peace*, a half-dozen Post-It note pads of various sizes and color, assorted pens and pencils, a digital clock/calendar, his reading lamp, and two tape recorders—one which he reads his work into as part of his process—the other containing a tape of Isaac Singer reading “A Friend of Kafka” from 1968, when he appeared at the Cultural Center in Chicago.

At his feet are large binders with various versions of *The Humpback of Lodz* and more books within his immediate attention: *My German Question: Growing Up In Nazi Berlin*, *Polish Jews: A Pictorial Record* and a copy of *Chronicles of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising*.

There is a wall of bookshelves behind him with his own books faced-out, easy to see, as if in confirmation (I am a writer, too!): *The Judge’s Chambers*, *The Lawyer’s Chambers*, *The Night Swimmer*, *Conversations with a Golden Ballerina*, and a plaque: 1998 Small Press Book Award Winner for *the Last Jewish Shortstop in America*.

He is a marvelous storyteller in print and in person. With a brightness in his eyes, a voice sometimes bubbling in both delight and despair, he spins his latest mad tale of the writing life, telling me of a friend who took a copy of *The Humpback of Lodz* to Poland recently in an attempt to interest a Polish publisher. A publisher (as it turns out) so small, he is the whole company, publishes only sparingly—and only in Yiddish.

¹ *The Humpback of Lodz* was published by Swordfish/Chicago in 2004.

And there the book rests on the Polish publisher's desk for now. End of story.

That's when the laughter begins. The irony sets in. How more Kafkaesque and Singerish can it get? To have one's ms. under review in a foreign country, by a one-man press, in a language that has almost disappeared. A Komie conundrum for sure. His name written all over it.

Blei: In the long-standing tradition of many of our best American writers, you are part of both an early ethnic (neighborhood) experience as well as a great city (cities), first, Milwaukee, then Chicago, where the major portion of your work is set in some stunning short stories and novels. Could you speak first about those early years in Milwaukee—childhood, family, friends, education, dreams. As a great admirer of your work for more than twenty years, I am both keenly aware and somewhat mystified that you have so far not mined the rich experience of those childhood years for the inevitable, inimitable Lowell Komie stories that surely lie there.

Komie: I've never thought about why I haven't written much about my childhood. I have been writing fiction for over fifty years, and there are only a few stories from childhood. The most important, I believe, is "Lederhosen Boys" which was published in *The Milwaukee Journal Magazine*, "Insight" in 1978. It was a story about my childhood in Milwaukee and two little boys that I met in front of my house one morning. The boys were dressed in Lederhosen outfits and had just come from Germany and moved next door. I never really knew who those boys were and why they had suddenly appeared at the front curb poking stones with sticks down the sewer grating. Later I traded my skeleton ring with ruby eyes to them for a pale, blue booklet they had, about the size of a literary quarterly. It was stories in German about the rape of Sudetenland German women by the Czechs.

The German American Bund was very active in Milwaukee. This was around 1936. My parents and I presumed that the two Lederhosen Boys' parents had come to Milwaukee to make contact with the Bund. I remember one Sunday afternoon out for a drive with my parents, we passed a Bund outing. There were, in my boy's eye, a thousand brown-shirted men out in that field playing soccer and picnicking. The German swastika flag was flying from the flagpole. We drove under a bridge and saw a sign whitewashed on the bridge that read: "Kill the Jews."

After the story was published, I received a call from one of the Lederhosen Boys. This was now over forty years later. He worked in New York for the UN. They weren't Bund members, he told me. They

were Jewish, and the father had come to Milwaukee to Marquette University as a professor.

In a way, that story was a detailed chronology of my Milwaukee childhood, and I was satisfied with it and really had nothing more to tell. In 1938, we moved to a Chicago suburb, Highland Park, and I have written a few stories stemming from my high school days. “Queen of the Voyage” in *The Night Swimmer: A Man in London and Other Stories* is probably closest to my high school days. Also, “Peter Freund” in the same collection comes out of my high school and early college experience. The North Shore of Chicago, of course, was a completely different experience.

Blei: Every writer who has ever touched base with Sandburg’s, “city of the big shoulders,” for whatever length of time, has his own piece of Chicago turf, his own love affair, fantasy, private sense of place about this great city. Something, perhaps, he calls home. What is yours? Where was the excitement in the beginning? Is it still there today? And how have you tried to incorporate it in your work?

Komie: I could say . . . the commuter train. After all, I’ve ridden the train to Chicago twice daily, five days a week for almost fifty years. That would be over 20,000 rides. I’ve written a novella that I call “A Commuter’s Notes,” but I’ve never published it. But all that time on the train doesn’t really seem connected to my vision of Chicago. I suppose that vision would be intimately connected to my law office, but also to my friends and my wanderings. The great cultural institutions, the scenes on the street, the courts, all the corruption I’ve seen as a lawyer, the beggars on the walks, the sounds, the sirens, the trains, the great diversity of races and faces. I often sit at my office window on the fifth floor of a Michigan Avenue office building and just watch the people passing by. I see beautiful, young women, their hair streaming in the sunlight. Beggars sprawled on the sidewalk soliciting them with amputated limbs and paper cups. Beauty and always such great poverty. Sometimes, I count the number of people that pass the man with the cup before someone drops a coin, usually another poor person, mostly poor blacks dropping the coins. I’ve put some of this in my fiction, the juxtaposition of great wealth and power against extreme poverty and hopelessness. I’m a watcher and observer.

Blei: While my Chicago writing experience, beginning in the ’60’s (before you and I had met) was largely identified with a sense of camaraderie with other Chicago writers . . . poets, short story writers, novelists, editors, newspapermen from J. Robert Nash, to Curt Johnson,

Brian Boyer, Ron Offen, Roger Ebert, Herman Kogan, Christine Newman, Mike Royko, etc. not to mention literary publications, city magazines, and all the famous watering holes from Old Town pubs like O'Rourke's to downtown joints like the Billy Goat . . . your entrance on the scene always seemed to me very quiet, private, isolated. In a way, unnoticed. No doubt your line of work had something to do with it. Do you think you may have missed anything because of this? Or was this scene (a Chicago version of 'the bohemian life') something you really didn't need because you were after something else in your own development as a writer?

Komie: It's true. I was never part of the bohemian literary life of the city. Also I think that I never required the tavern scene and the camaraderie of other writers. I wrote very privately, often at night after the children were in bed. Of the writers you mentioned, I knew Roger Ebert and Christine Newman. She was my editor at *Chicago Magazine*. I don't think she gets enough credit for her work as a Fiction Editor. She published a lot of Chicago writers and gave them a voice in a major publication. She also stuck with Nelson Algren in his late years when no one would buy his stories. Also Stanley Elkin. I think she also published your great story about the gypsy fortune teller "Skarda." She used to take me to Riccardo's, but I never really fit in with the writers that hung out there. John Fink, who was my dear friend, introduced me to Chris Newman. He was the editor of *Chicago Magazine* and had a story of mine ready to be published, pencil edited by him. She was about 25 years old and fresh out of the University of Chicago. Almost her first act as fiction editor was to cut my story. She rejected it. It took me perhaps four years to get her to publish one of my stories which was "The Kisses of Fabricant," which is the opening chapter of my novel, *Conversations with a Golden Ballerina*. Chris Newman is an important literary editor who helped many writers in this city along with John Fink, who's deceased. I will always remember him as a very gracious man who recognized me as a writer and not just as a lawyer. He was the one who sent me to Poland in 1984 to cover the rise of Solidarnosc, and Chris was the editor of that piece.

Blei: If we could catch a short glimpse of your early days as a writer . . . the first short stories that you wrote and published, leading up to your first publication of a collection, *The Judge's Chambers* published by the American Bar Association in 1983 (re-issued in both paper and hardback by Academy Chicago Publishers in 1987). What was your first published story, and what possessed you to put that particular story down on paper? How long had you been writing up to that point? And did

publication change anything, perhaps give you some kind of authentication in your own mind that, yes, you were a lawyer in the real world . . . which was how you lived your daily life and fed your family. But now, with the first publication of a piece of fiction, you are something more. I recall you saying, "My profession is law, but my passion is fiction." And you have been at law for . . . 50 years? And at writing for . . . how many years?

Komie: I have always been a writer. I was the editor of the newspaper at Great Lakes when I was in the Navy in 1946. I wrote my first story in 1948 when I got out of the Navy and returned to the University of Michigan. I took creative writing courses from Allan Seager who was a wonderful short story writer and a Rhodes Scholar, a graduate of Michigan and Oxford. He had the most important early influence on me as a writer. In those days, there were no graduate programs in creative writing. I didn't know how to go about being a writer. Michigan had very few, Arthur Miller was the most prominent. So I began law school and began trying to write a novel in Ann Arbor. I never really understood law school at Michigan. I dropped out before they considered asking me to leave because I wasn't going to class. I started over the next year at Northwestern law school and I forgot about writing and didn't begin again until the early 1960s when I was a young, married man with a family. So, there was about a six or seven years hiatus from law school to writing fiction again in 1962 or 1963. I have been writing now for over fifty years. My first published story was "The Name Kozonis" in the Eastern Illinois University literary magazine, *Karamu*. It took me four years to get a story published. Publication of that story did make me feel authenticated, because although I had been a journalist, I had no confidence in my ability as a fiction writer. Soon, I published in several other literary quarterlies and then finally in *Harper's*. So I knew I could do it, and then I stopped sending out stories to the slush piles. I found a market at the American Bar Association and published many stories in their *Student Lawyer* magazine.

Blei: You have truly become a master at the short story form, and I'm not blowing smoke at you because we happen to be good friends. What is it about the art of short story writing that has always engaged you? Is it simply because its brevity of form did not encroach too much upon all the demands of law? Those of us aware of your past, admire the fact that for years the only time you could write was on your daily commute from Deerfield to Chicago and back.

Komie: I think you're right. I simply did not have time for the novel. I had a very active law practice, and I had to have the income to support my family. Writing paid very little, and the only way I could keep at it was to write short stories. I can hardly remember writing on the train. I guess it must have been true. In my memory, I did most of my writing in restaurants in the morning after my daily court call or if I didn't go to court, I'd take a long coffee break. I wrote by hand in composition booklets. I still work that way.

Blei: I would like to follow-up with at least one more direct question concerning the short story. Or I should say, The Lowell Komie short story. Because for me, especially, it has become that. I suspect I could identify one of your stories in any book or magazine, without knowledge of the author. Granted, many, if not most of your stories, concern law, in every human dimension imaginable. *But*, they are beyond law. They are both simple, complicated, and beautiful tales of life, love, and death. All the great and universal themes. Explain what *you* feel makes the Lowell Komie story something unique. What all goes into it? So many of them are such pure "Chicago stories," a street guide to Chicago: the Art Institute on Michigan Avenue, the Criminal Court building at 26th and California, the Civic Center, Traffic Court, 11th and State, Loomis Street, the Water Tower, Northwestern Law School, LaSalle Street, the Aragon Ball Room, Hyde Park, etc. Not to mention how suffused many of your stories are with references to art, from famous paintings and art objects, to great painters: Chagall, Rembrandt, Picasso, and others. There is something almost 'precious' in the content and flow of your prose, a sophistication that breathes both European and American culture. I mean this in the most positive sense.

Komie: This is really a hard one. What goes into a short story? It's a very personal thing. I think it has a lot to do with how you "see" people and everyday life. The writer's eye is indeed a camera ("I Am a Camera" —Christopher Isherwood), so it's a question of refining all these images that flash across your screen into something that's manageable and can be understood. The writer's job is to write with clarity. You are very kind to me. I do infuse my stories with not only the city of Chicago, but also art, travel, and most of all the psychology of relationships between human beings. How I do it? It's almost impossible to say. The important thing is to do it. As Allan Seager used to say to me, "Mr. Komie, don't tell me the story, just sit down and write it."

Blei: After having written and published two collections and one anthology of "law stories," you published your first, and very funny, novel: *The*

Last Jewish Shortstop in America (1997). The novel is “set in a Chicago North Shore suburb where David Epstein, a forty-ish, divorced father of two, behind on his alimony and child support, has built a gigantic Hall of Fame for Jewish sports heroes” in an attempt to put Epstein’s life back in order, both financially and spiritually. The book represents a dramatic break from your interest in law as the fixed-center of your stories, as well as a challenge in handling another form of storytelling entirely. Why did you move from the short story to the novel? And what, in particular, did this novel teach you about the long narrative form?

Komie: I was tired of writing about lawyers. I had written several stories that weren’t law oriented, and I didn’t want to be just known as a writer of legal fiction. I also knew that I could write humor, but I never really had an opportunity to write for a long period. So, I sold half of my practice to my law partner and used the proceeds to rent an apartment on the fifty-second floor of a high rise, where I could look out over the city and write a novel. That novel turned out to be *The Last Jewish Shortstop in America*. I would leave my law office at ten in the morning after answering my phone calls and return at two. I think I must have eaten three hundred filet of fish burgers in the McDonalds in the apartment building. Some of the people I saw there were put in the novel. Scenes at the grocery store, the laundry tubs, where the people would stop and stare at their laundry revolving as if they were watching television. I latched on to the anonymity and loneliness of urban life, almost as a voyeur. Each night, I would take the train back to our suburban home. The novel that came out of all this was, I thought, really humorous. It won the 1998 Small Press Book Award for Fiction. It is also now being taught at the University of Michigan as part of its course on Jewish literature.

Blei: *Conversations with a Golden Ballerina* (2001) is also a novel. A comic novel, of the first rank. I recall you both reading and telling me parts of this book in progress and your breaking into laughter as you described your womanizing character, the architect, Arthur Fabricant, in one hilarious scene after another as he attempts to design an invisible wall (a symbolic Jewish ‘Eruv’) around all of Chicago. Whatever possessed you to write this novel? And what did you discover about humor that caused you to give it such prominence in your novels?

Komie: I love this book. It really was easy for me. Maybe Arthur Fabricant, the main character, is the closest to me of all my characters. I think a writer lives much of his life in fantasy and this book is an attempt by me to write something that is both humorous and crazy. I

think it's a wonderfully funny story; I'm very proud of it. The beautiful ballerina on the cover was painted by my wife, Mary Lou Schwall-Komie, and people just love the ballerina. They give the book to sick friends in the hospital. It has a core of mystery, after all an attempt to build a Jewish *eruv* (this one is invisible and made of monofilament fishing line) is both mysterious and marvelously crazy. There's also a major love story interwoven in the book and multiple near-miss relationships with women. There's even a Jewish human cannonball, Jimmy Landsman, whose favorite line is, "everybody's gotta be somewhere."

Blei: Having reached such a peak with this latest book leads me inevitably to questions of success, persistence, and just how you see yourself as a writer at this point in time. You are 75 years old. You have practiced law for over fifty years. You have been a writer for at least as long as that. Your short stories rank with the very best. Professor James R. Elkins, a professor at the College of Law, at West Virginia University and editor of the *Legal Studies Forum* teaches a course entitled, "Lawyers and Literature" and states at one point in an issue of the *Forum* devoted entirely to you ("The Legal Fiction of Lowell B. Komie"): "Komie had not only produced some notable teaching tales, but that he was a formidable writer and that his portrayal of Chicago lawyers was of far more interest to me and my students than the lawyers we find in most contemporary fiction. Indeed, I could not think of a single writer of legal fiction who had created a collection of short stories that would equal Komie's work." To that I would add that *Conversations with a Golden Ballerina* is pure comic genius. I can't believe Hollywood isn't calling for film rights. It's as good as anything Philip Roth has ever written, yet . . . almost nobody knows your name. How do you deal with this? Speak to the issue of self-publication as well and your publishing venture, Swordfish/Chicago.

Komie: What can I say? It's true I've been a lawyer for almost fifty years, and I think I've been writing for just as long. I don't know how one gets recognized as a writer. In the long run I guess its word of mouth. For years I sent my manuscripts to New York agents. I think I've had five agents, and they've never sold anything. My greatest validation came in 1995 when I won the Carl Sandburg Award for Fiction. This year's winner was Joyce Carol Oates. The year before, the Sandburg Award was won by Kurt Vonnegut. Do I deserve to be in their company? I say no, but I am. After a while, I got tired of all the rejection and terminated my relationship with Academy Chicago (who was then my publisher). I decided that the only way my voice would be heard as a writer would be to publish my own work. My son, David Komie, and I

formed our own publishing house, Swordfish Chicago, which is named after a password of the Marx Brothers. My father was a friend of the Marx Brothers and grew up with them on the South Side. In their movie *Horse Feathers*, Groucho tries to come into a speakeasy. He has a blousy blond on his arm. Chico is behind the eyeglass and says through the door, "Whatsa the password?" Groucho replies, "It's a fish." "What kinda fish?" "Ah . . . it's a haddock." "You gotta a headache . . . go home and take two aspirin . . . that's a not the password." So the password was "Swordfish," and that was good enough for David and me and our publishing company.

Blei: You are not what one would call "a practicing Jew" whatever that entails. You were not, as I recall, educated in a traditional Jewish manner. Your children were raised 'non-Jewish.' Your late wife, Helen, was non-Jewish. In our long association, the subject rarely enters our conversation except for literature, where we both share a deep appreciation for Jewish writers (Kafka, Bruno Schulz, Singer, Roth, Bellow, etc) and what Jewish culture has contributed to the world culture as a whole. In the past few years, however, I see you beginning to address Jewish history in your stories such as "A Woman in Warsaw," "A Woman in Prague" and your novel-in-progress with the working title, *The Humpback of Lodz*. How important is the past as you continue to explore your art?

Komie: Well this is a serious question. I think the shadow of the Holocaust hangs over every writer who is Jewish and haunts them. There were six million Jews killed by the Germans and their cohorts. All those voices have been erased forever. Many of the people killed were marvelous writers, poets, and artists. As I grow older, I feel compelled to keep their memory alive and give voice to their lives. Even though I was not formally educated as a Jew, my family comes from a long Jewish tradition. They came to this country from Lithuania in the 1870s, and my great-grandfather founded one of the first Eastern European Orthodox synagogues in Chicago. I have put their photograph on the cover of *The Humpback of Lodz*. It's a photo of the men in derbies and beards, the women in great plumed hats, and the boys in sailor suits, one of whom is my father. The two little boys look like the sons of Tsar Nicholas. It was taken in Chicago in 1905. I hope the book will proudly serve their memory.