

## THE ART OF FICTION NO. 51

# JOSEPH HELLER

This interview with Joe Heller took place during the week of the publication of *Something Happened*—a literary event of considerable significance, because the novel is only the second of the author's career. The first, of course, was *Catch-22*. The fact that it has taken more than a decade to produce a second work of fiction seems of small concern to Heller, because he has evolved a definite and unique pattern of work that is not at all determined by deadlines and other arbitrary demands. He says he always wanted to be a writer. His earliest story was pecked out on a neighborhood boy's typewriter and ultimately rejected by the *Daily News* short-short story editor. His career moved at its own pace. He did no writing during his war years in Italy. His first accepted story appeared in *The Atlantic* (along with a companion piece of fiction by James Jones) in 1948. *Catch-22* wasn't published until ten years later. Heller has no illusions about the difficulty of making a living as a novelist. He tells his creative-writing class at the start of every academic year that even if every word a writer writes is published, he will almost surely have to supplement his income, usually by teaching (as Heller does) or perhaps by marrying money. The exigencies of such a career do not seem to have marked Heller

himself. He sits very much at ease—an impressive figure (his considerable crop of hair seems to surround his face like a lion's ruff), trim (he keeps himself in firm shape by jogging and sticking to a strict diet)—and with the detachment of someone talking about a third person he begins describing in a voice strong with the inflections of his native Brooklyn the unique process through which his novels have come to him . . .

—George Plimpton, 1974

## JOSEPH HELLER

In 1962 I was sitting on the deck of a house on Fire Island. I was frightened. I was worried because I had lost interest in my job then—which was writing advertising and promotional copy. *Catch-22* was not making much money. It was selling steadily (eight hundred to two thousand copies a week)—mostly by word of mouth—but it had never come close to the *New York Times* best-seller list. I had a wife and two children. I had no idea for another book. I was waiting for something to happen(!), wishing I had a book to start. My novels begin in a strange way. I don't begin with a theme or even a character. I begin with a first sentence that is independent of any conscious preparation. Most often nothing comes out of it: a sentence will come to mind that doesn't lead to a second sentence. Sometimes it will lead to thirty sentences which then come to a dead end.

I was alone on the deck. As I sat there worrying and wondering what to do, one of those first lines suddenly came to mind: "In the office in which I work, there are four people of whom I am afraid. Each of these four people is afraid of five people." Immediately, the lines presented a whole explosion of possibilities and choices—characters (working in a corporation), a tone, a mood of anxiety, or insecurity. In that first hour (before someone came along and asked me to go to the beach), I knew the beginning, the ending,

most of the middle, the whole scene of that particular “something” that was going to happen; I knew about the brain-damaged child and, especially, of course, about Bob Slocum, my protagonist, and what frightened him, that he wanted to be liked, that his immediate hope was to be allowed to make a three-minute speech at the company convention. Many of the actual lines throughout the book came to me—the entire “something happened” scene with those solar plexus lines (beginning with the doctor’s statement and ending with “Don’t tell my wife” and the rest of them) all coming to me in that first hour on that Fire Island deck. Eventually I found a different opening chapter with a different first line (“I get the willies when I see closed doors”) but I kept the original, which had spurred everything, to start off the second section.

#### INTERVIEWER

Was it the same process of “receiving” a first line with *Catch-22*?

#### HELLER

Just about. I was lying in bed in my four-room apartment on the West Side when suddenly this line came to me: “It was love at first sight. The first time he saw the chaplain, Someone fell madly in love with him.” I didn’t have the name Yossarian. The chaplain wasn’t necessarily an army chaplain—he could have been a *prison* chaplain. But as soon as the opening sentence was available, the book began to evolve clearly in my mind—even most of the particulars . . . the tone, the form, many of the characters, including some I eventually couldn’t use. All of this took place within an hour and a half. It got me so excited that I did what the cliché says you’re supposed to do: I jumped out of bed and paced the floor. That morning I went to my job at the advertising agency and wrote out the first chapter in longhand. Before the end of the week I had typed it out and sent it to Candida Donadio, my agent. One year later, after much planning, I began chapter two.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any accounting for this unique procedure?

HELLER

I don't understand the process of imagination—though I know that I am very much at its mercy. I feel that these ideas are floating around in the air and they pick me to settle upon. The ideas come to me; I don't produce them at will. They come to me in the course of a sort of controlled daydream, a directed reverie. It may have something to do with the disciplines of writing advertising copy (which I did for a number of years), where the limitations involved provide a considerable spur to the imagination. There's an essay of T. S. Eliot's in which he praises the disciplines of writing, claiming that if one is forced to write within a certain framework, the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will produce its richest ideas. Given total freedom, however, the chances are good that the work will sprawl.

INTERVIEWER

Can you remember some other opening lines?

HELLER

Well, people have always asked what happened to Dunbar, a character who disappeared in *Catch-22*. So I was thinking of writing a novel about him. The opening line I came up with was obviously cultivated by an advertising slogan for Bigelow rugs that was widespread at the time: "A name on the door deserves a Bigelow on the floor." My variation of it was, "Dunbar woke up with his name on the door, and a Bigelow on the floor, and wondered how he had got there. . ." So it was a novel about amnesia, Dunbar finding himself in a plush office, not knowing the secretary's name, or how many people were working for him, or what his position was—and gradually finding out. It did not work. I couldn't take my mind past a certain point.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have last lines that come along with those first lines?

HELLER

I had a closing line for *Something Happened* before I began writing the book. It was “I am a cow.” For six years I thought that was good. I had it on one of my three-by-five notecards. Then I wasn’t all that happy with it, and finally I discarded it. But it seemed good at the time, and besides, I can’t start writing until I have a closing line.

INTERVIEWER

Once you have an opening (and closing) line in mind, what dictates whether you will continue?

HELLER

I think writers move unconsciously toward what they think they can do. The two novels I have written, *Catch-22* and *Something Happened*, I chose to write and write in the way I did because of an instinctive feeling that I could handle the subject matter and the method of dealing with each of them. I have certain gifts. I can be funny—for one half-page at a time, sometimes even more, though I wouldn’t want to push my luck and try to be funny for ten. I can be humorous in several ways—with irony, with dialogue, with farcical situations, and occasionally with a lucky epigram or an aphorism. My inclination, though, is to be serious. But on the other hand, I cannot write an effective, straightforward, separate narrative. I can’t write description. I’ve told my editor that I couldn’t write a good descriptive metaphor if my life depended on it. In *Catch-22* there is really very little physical description. There is very little in *Something Happened*. Bob Slocum tends to consider people in terms of one dimension; his tendency is to think of people, even those very close to him—his wife, daughter, and son and those he works for—as having a single aspect, a single use. When they present more than that dimension, he has difficulty in

coping with them. Slocum is not interested in how people look, or how rooms are decorated, or what flowers are around.

INTERVIEWER

Do you find it restricting to tell the novel through the limited persona of Bob Slocum?

HELLER

It's true that I myself could have been much funnier, much more intelligent, much cleverer with words than Slocum is. But I must limit him, because if he had all my attributes he wouldn't be working for that company; he'd be writing *Catch-22*. Still, even though I can't have him talk like Nietzsche or Marcuse, I have unlimited possibilities with him as long as I can establish the personality of someone who is only sure that he is sure of nothing. He is utterly unset, undefined, ambivalent. Thus, I can put him into any frame of mind, have him react from just about any emotional perspective. The opportunities were not too few but too many.

INTERVIEWER

Yes, but . . .

HELLER

Besides, your question suggests that Slocum's function is to inform. I don't think, even as an author, that I have knowledge to give to readers. Philosophers might and scientists can. It's possible for me to express something that you can agree or disagree with, but certainly you will have heard it before. So I don't think the "what" distinguishes a good novel from a bad one but rather the "how"—the aesthetic quality of the sensibility of the writer, his craft, his ability to create and communicate.

I don't have a philosophy of life, or a need to organize its progression. My books are not constructed to "say anything." When I was at college, in every literary discussion there was always such an emphasis on "What does he say? What's the message?"

Even then I felt that very few authors had anything to say. What was important to me was “What does it do?” This refutes, of course, the idea that the message is the objective of a novel. In fact, any “message” becomes part of the texture, stirred so much that it’s as negligible as a teaspoon of salt in a large stew. Think of the number of artists who have done still lifes—a view of a river or a vase of flowers . . . there is nothing about the choice of subject that is going to startle anybody. What will distinguish one still life from another is what the artist brings to it. To a certain extent that is true of the novelist.

INTERVIEWER

What is your own feeling about Slocum?

HELLER

I told several people while I was writing the book that Slocum was possibly the most contemptible character in literature. Before I was finished, I began feeling sorry for him. That has happened to me before. That’s why there are two generals in *Catch-22*. General Dreedle certainly had bad qualities, but then there were certain characteristics I liked (he was straightforward, honest, not a conniver), and I found I didn’t want to attribute certain unsympathetic qualities to him. So I invented General Peckem as a sort of substitute scapegoat. Very hard to like *him*. But as for Slocum, many of my friends to whom I showed the book found not only compassion for him but strong identification. That surprised me, but I suppose it shouldn’t have. He *is* very human.

INTERVIEWER

Does the reaction to your work often surprise you?

HELLER

Constantly. And I rely on it. I really don’t know what I’m doing until people read what I’ve written and give me their reactions. I didn’t know what *Catch-22* was all about until three months after

it came out, when people, often total strangers who had no interest in saying the right (or wrong) things to me, began coming up and talking about the book. It meant different things to them. I thought the chaplain was the second most impressive character in the book (after Yossarian). But it turned out to be Milo. Then, it surprised me that things in *Catch-22* turned out to be very funny. I thought I was being humorous, but I didn't know I would make people laugh. In my apartment one day I heard this friend of mine in another room laughing out loud, and that was when I realized I could be comic. I began using that ability consciously—not to turn *Catch-22* into a comic work, but for contrast, for ironic effect. I really don't think authors know too much about the effect of what they're doing.

INTERVIEWER

Doesn't that bother you that the author (you) has such a tentative grip?

HELLER

No. It's one of the things that makes it interesting. I would only be nervous if I were told that what I'd done was no good and no one would want to read it. I protect myself from that by submitting the first chapter to my agent, and to my editor, and, after about a third of the book is done, to other friends. They can be tough on me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have an audience you keep in mind when you write?

HELLER

Since writing is really performing for people, unconsciously I must have an audience I'm writing for—someone who is really me, I suppose, with my degree of sensibility, my level of education, my interest in literature. . .



+ WEIRD OBSERVATIONS

ACCIDENT

Tom Hunt

"something happened" says Pat

Finds Tom in pain, screaming on floor.  
Thinks he is dying + can't stand to  
see him suffer, so he turns to go  
to the chest and smother him

COLORECTAL SURGERY

"Death due to asphyxiation"  
The policeman at my side and  
wait until I finish weeping and  
say "Don't tell my wife"

Bob

I want him back. I  
don't want to live him.

HOME-OFFICE

How I wish to ask  
you this question: which  
is worse, my home  
or my office? Or  
are they really the  
same?

Bob

It's odd how I picture  
him close. I picture him  
exactly the way he is now.  
I can think of a julm  
for him.  
But I can't see  
or

INTERVIEWER

What sort of a discussion do you have with your friends about your work when it's in progress?

HELLER

It's never a discussion. They simply tell me what they think is good or bad. I do not always believe them. I try not to talk about it to anyone for years. I think of writing as private enterprise . . . since so much comes from rumination. Nothing is more personal than one's thoughts; I think I'd prefer to keep it that way.

INTERVIEWER

What are the best circumstances for this sort of ruminating?

HELLER

I have to be alone. A bus is good. Or walking the dog. Brushing my teeth is marvelous—it was especially so for *Catch-22*. Often when I am very tired, just before going to bed, while washing my face and brushing my teeth, my mind gets very clear . . . and produces a line for the next day's work, or some idea way ahead. I don't get my best ideas while actually writing . . . which is the agony of putting down what I think are good ideas and finding the words for them and the paragraph forms for them . . . a laborious process. I don't think of myself as a naturally gifted writer when it comes to using language. I distrust myself. Consequently, I try every which way with a sentence, then a paragraph, and finally a page, choosing words, selecting pace (I'm obsessed with that, even the pace of a sentence). I say to myself what I hope to put down on paper, but I hope not aloud. I think sometimes I move my lips, not only when I'm writing, but when I'm thinking of what I'm going to be having for dinner.

INTERVIEWER

How long can you keep at it?

HELLER

I ordinarily write three or four handwritten pages and then rework them for two hours. I can work for four hours, or forty-five minutes. It's not a matter of time. I set a realistic objective: How can I inch along to the next paragraph? Inching is what it is. It's not: How can I handle the next chapter? How can I get to the next stage in a way that I like? I think about that as I walk the dog or walk the twenty minutes from my apartment to the studio where I work.

INTERVIEWER

Do you put these ideas down as they occur to you?

HELLER

I keep a small sheath of three-by-five cards in my billfold. If I think of a good sentence, I'll write it down. It won't be an idea ("have him visit a brothel in New Orleans"). What I put down is an actual line of intended text ("In the brothel in New Orleans was like the time in San Francisco"). Of course, when I come back to it, the line may change considerably. Occasionally there's one that sings so perfectly the first time that it stays, like "My boy has stopped speaking to me and I don't think I can bear it." I wrote that down on a three-by-five card, perhaps on a bus, or after walking the dog. I store them in filing cabinets. The file on *Something Happened* is about four inches deep, the one on *Catch-22* about the length of a shoe box.

INTERVIEWER

Are there card files for unfinished work—like the Dunbar book you mentioned?

HELLER

No. I don't unfinish anything I start, and I don't start—as I've said—until I see the whole thing in my head.

INTERVIEWER

What are some of the other sources for material?

HELLER

I pick up a lot from friends. Mel Brooks. George Mandel. Especially Mandel. He talked about his experiences in the war. Once, he told me about talking to an army psychiatrist who asked him about his dreams, and George made one up about holding a fish in his hand. That's a bit in *Catch-22*. I've picked up a lot from him. He had the oddest medical ailment at one time—a stone in his salivary gland. It's very rare. And we can conclude that it was a very *small* stone. Well, it turns up in the hospital scene about the mixed-up records in *Catch-22*. Just a year ago Mandel suddenly became aware that Schrafft's no longer existed in New York, and that the *World-Telegram* wasn't being published anymore—somehow he hadn't noticed—and he said, "My God, soon there'll be nothing left." That went down on one of those three-by-five cards and was used in one of Bob Slocum's digressions in *Something Happened*. He's been very helpful.

INTERVIEWER

What about the influences from your reading?

HELLER

Every once in a while I can identify an influence. There's a page and a half in *Something Happened* that I wrote during my Jamesian period . . . the use of the word "Ah?" When Slocum tells the psychiatrist he doesn't have auditory hallucinations but thinks he smells excrement, the psychiatrist says "Ah?" a number of times. It's out of *The Ambassadors*. The influence is not especially pronounced.

INTERVIEWER

What about personal contact with contemporary writers? Is that of use?

HELLER

I don't think writers are comfortable in each other's presence. We can talk, of course, for five minutes or so, but I don't think we want to socialize. There's always an acute status consciousness relating to how high or low a writer exists in the opinion of the person he's talking to. I've noticed that the opening gambit in conversation between two writers—and I'm always very uncomfortable hearing it—is "I like your work." I've heard it so often. It's so condescending. What if the person had not done any work? He would not be spoken to at all. This sort of relationship is peculiar to writers—after all, our status is never challenged by anyone else, one's jeweler or a dress manufacturer. No, I don't think two novelists who have enjoyed a high measure of success can exist into their middle years living close to each other if both continue writing—I don't believe human nature can accept such a situation. The fact is there are few people with whom I would want to spend even a full weekend . . . to be in the same house or on a fishing trip with, unless I knew them well enough to go off by myself if I wanted to. I don't want to have to entertain them. In a novel you can't spend sixty pages writing about that sort of relationship.

INTERVIEWER

You wouldn't go on a fishing trip with Bob Slocum?

HELLER

No.

INTERVIEWER

How close is *Something Happened* to your own experience?

HELLER

Neither of my books was intended to be autobiographical. Both were based to a certain extent on experience—*Something Happened* is about someone who works in a company (which

I have done) and who has a family (which I have), but it's also based to a great extent on my experience as an observer of other people and a reader of other writers. It's an imaginative work, after all—the most important ingredient in writing fiction is that *choice* is always available: *Who* will? *What* will? I told my wife and children years ago when they knew what *Something Happened* was about that they might think it was an exposé of their family life, and I told them—truthfully—that it was not about them. I did not feel (I said this half-facetiously to my wife) that she was interesting enough, or for that matter, that I myself was, to write a novel about.

I have had no experience with a brain-damaged child. But it turns out that the insecurity Bob Slocum feels not knowing how to deal with it is typical of parents who *do* have that experience . . . what's called “denial”—the refusal to accept the condition. Every time Slocum starts talking about the child, he starts digressing—and it's an accurate reaction.

#### INTERVIEWER

How do you compare the two novels?

#### HELLER

I think one difference between the two books is that *Catch-22* is concerned with physical survival against exterior forces or institutions that want to destroy life or moral self. *Something Happened* is concerned very much with interior, psychological survival in which the areas of combat are things like the wishes a person has, whether they are fulfilled or not, the close, intimate situations we have with our children when they're small and as they grow older, the memories we have of our relationship with parents as *they* grow older—these are some of the areas of disturbance in *Something Happened*. Of course, these areas are much more difficult to deal with than those in *Catch-22*. Given an Adolf Hitler, or inefficient or corrupt people, or people without sensibilities, we know what the dangers are, and we know what we

must try to do. There's a line in *Something Happened*: "It was after the war that the struggle began."

INTERVIEWER

How long did it take you to write the climactic passage about the "something" which happens at the end of *Something Happened*?

HELLER

Two minutes. It had all been done years before sitting on that deck in Fire Island.

INTERVIEWER

Do titles come to you easily?

HELLER

There have only been a few. "Something Happened" turned up in the fall of '63 when I was walking with George Mandel past Korvette's or Brentano's and a kid came running past and yelled over his shoulder to another, "Hey come on, *something's happened*"—some sort of traffic accident I guess it must have been.

INTERVIEWER

You've spoken about music being important while you are working?

HELLER

It overcomes those noises that might distract me—a leaking faucet, my daughter's rock music in the other part of the apartment, or someone else's radio across the courtyard. I have tapes. I mostly listen to Bach, his choral music. Beethoven is OK; he's great, but Bach, for me, is the best.

INTERVIEWER

What about the necessary disciplines of writing?

HELLER

Well, I don't have social luncheons with people. By not having lunch with people it means that I do not have two martinis, which usually means the afternoon is not shot, since all I can do after two martinis is read the newspaper.

INTERVIEWER

Still, a considerable amount of time . . .

HELLER

I am a mysteriously slow writer. I say "mysteriously" because there is no accounting for it. I didn't start working on *Something Happened* until two years after that day on the Fire Island deck. In the meantime I started a musical comedy, wrote the final screenplay for *Sex and the Single Girl*, and then a television thing that turned out to be a sort of pilot of *McHale's Navy*—none of this especially serious stuff. Then the play *We Bombed in New Haven* took me away—not the writing of it (that only took six weeks) but the time spent working on the two productions. All this delay turned out to be for the better. When I went back to the two hundred and fifty pages I'd managed to get down on paper over those two years, I was able to write the book the way I wanted. I had learned more, and read more. The original forty pages became a hundred and twenty pages; the thirty pages of the second section became eighty; the seventy pages on the wife became a hundred—all of it much different in texture and mood from what I originally had in mind. It has happened with each novel. Originally, I didn't think *Catch-22* could be long enough to be more than a novelette. The addition became not padding but substance with a meaning and quality of its own. I missed my deadline for *Catch-22* by four or five years. I felt that it was the only book I was going to write, so I wanted to do it as well as I could. Actually, I wasn't ever sure I was going to be a writer. When I started *Catch-22*, I thought writing novels might be a useful way to kill time. I remember thinking that when I had the book one-third done and my agent was showing it to



editors, that if they all had said, “No,” I would not have finished the book. I don’t have that narcissistic drive, the megalomania involved in spending years working on a book that no one is really interested in publishing. As it happened, there was no difficulty in finding a publisher. *Catch-22*, by the way, was the first novel I’d ever started.

INTERVIEWER

Has success changed your attitude about living or writing?

HELLER

I don’t think so. And one reason is that it came to me so late. I don’t think it’s good to achieve too much at too early an age. What else can the future give you if you’ve already got all that your imagination has dreamed up for you? A writer is only discovered once in a lifetime, and if it happens very early the impossibility of matching that moment again can have a somewhat corrosive effect on his personality and indeed on the work itself.

INTERVIEWER

It seems to be a peculiarly American dilemma.

HELLER

It stems from a fundamental insecurity that afflicts successful Americans, particularly those who are self-made and have succeeded in a field in which there is a high element of risk. They never feel that they deserve their success, or that it is permanent; in fact, they seem to fear that their next book is going to cost them everything that they’ve gained . . . sort of like doubling up at roulette . . . betting on the black five times in a row. Actors suffer the same way. They can’t believe it when they are successful. They’re positive that an angel looking like Claude Rains is going to appear and say that a mistake has been made and “We’re taking it all away from you.” I’m not immune to it myself. It bothers me tremendously. But I like to think I’m over the hurdle. If I had finished my two books by the

age of twenty-eight, well, I'd have a lot to worry about. That's not enough. But two books at age fifty-one means that the next one won't be due until I'm nearly seventy. I can coast for quite a while.

INTERVIEWER

Could you imagine not starting up again?

HELLER

If I thought I might never get an idea for another novel—one of those lines dropping in that provides a whole book—I don't think it would distress me. I've got two books under my belt now. I would be content to consider that a lifetime's work, and I could just putter around and find other things to do. I've been very lucky. I've written two books that were unusual and unusually successful.

INTERVIEWER

When did you begin writing?

HELLER

I wanted to be a writer when I was in the sixth grade—of course I wanted to be one without working at it. I wanted to be published in the New York *Daily News*, which published one short story a day in those days, or in *The New Yorker*. I remember writing a story about the Russian invasion of Finland and sending it to the *Daily News*, which, of course, rejected it. I was eleven years old. All my writing was imitative of what I was reading: the magazines that my older brother or sister would bring home; what the circulating libraries carried out in Coney Island, where we lived—why, I think I can remember Jerome Weidman's work in the 1930s better than he does. In 1948, when my first story came out in *The Atlantic* and nearly won the "Atlantic First," I thought I was pretty hot stuff. About that same time, Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* was published, and he was on the cover of *Saturday Review*. We were about the same age—twenty-six or twenty-seven—and it put me in my place.

INTERVIEWER

What about other fields of writing? Have you considered nonfiction?

HELLER

I don't do nonfiction well, and since I work so hard at writing, I might as well concentrate on what I know I can do. I'm too conscious of myself as a writer to be a journalist. I'm a show-off. When I write, I want people to notice me and that I'm doing something different from other people. A journalist—at least the ones I admire—is a writer who can make me forget his involvement so that I can concentrate on the subject of the piece, not the personality of the author. The journalist and the novelist have completely different intelligences. Journalists almost always compose on typewriters. They rarely do more than one draft. Somehow they think in terms of openings, development, conclusion—all in almost automatic sequences. I envy that gift. But if I had it, I'd be a journalist. You can't have it both ways.

INTERVIEWER

Have you had any of those first lines come to mind since finishing *Something Happened*?

HELLER

Dozens! I think when a book is finished and the editor likes it, and it's been handed in, an author goes through a period of nervous craziness. Some writers invest in Canadian uranium stocks; others change agents or wives or commit suicide. Some writers hear voices. It's not a good time in which to trust one's own judgment. The author has been too busy and intent. I remember one first line that came to me during this time was, "The kid, they say, was born in a manger, but frankly I have my doubts." It's not a bad line, but I wouldn't think a book would come out of it. . . I did go further for a while, and I liked the idea, but it led me ultimately to remember Eliot's opening line about the Magi

coming to the manger in, I think, “Ash-Wednesday”\*—“a cold coming we had of it”—and I gave it up after that. So I guess I’ll have to wait around for another line to drop in . . .

∞

\* The line is actually from Eliot’s “Journey of the Magi.”