

Like living alone. Like living alone with a tiger... (continues for 3 pages).” See that’s not very funny right?

**KJF:** No, but it’s very beautiful. You and I were on an identical publishing schedule. We were writing the books, taking the same amount of time, they were coming out in the same year, and then you dashed off this, a Pulitzer Prize winner.

**ASG:** It took me four years. You and I were at a writing retreat together, the one that burned down in Napa, and I was doing workshops or something, and you came up and you said, “I haven’t written a word of my new novel, have you?” And I said, “No, I haven’t.” And we both went, “Oh my god, whew, whew.”

**KJF:** It was a great relief to both of us. The literary community has sustained some big losses recently, and I wondered if any of them are people whose books really mattered to you in a personal way. Are you a big Philip Roth fan, Ursula Le Guin, Tom Wolfe?

**ASG:** Ursula Le Guin, I mean absolutely. She was one of the most important writers.

**KJF:** Yes, she was astonishing.

**ASG:** And I have to say, I am a big Philip Roth fan. He seems like he was a rat bastard, and I could never manage to read two in a row because the way he writes about women is just hard to take. But as a writer, I learned so much from him in every book that I read that I just go back over and over. I think even for this book I read Philip Roth’s *Zuckerman Unbound*, which is a comic novel about a writer. I wanted to see what that was. Not his best, but still good enough. What did you think of him?

**KJF:** I have to admit that I read him several years ago, and the misogyny was just not fun for me and I stopped. I know that he’s really important to a number of writers who are really important to me, so I should give it another go.

**ASG:** A book like *The Human Stain* is both amazing and disgusting. There’s one chapter that’s all focused on one

woman, and you think, “I don’t think he thinks women are human beings.” She doesn’t even act like other characters in the book. She’s so artificial that it’s clear he just couldn’t figure it out. It’s so strange. I read books to learn from them for my writing; I’m not going to necessarily assign them for students. But for me, Philip Roth was not a fan of gay people for sure.

**KJF:** It may be best to know as little as possible about the writer. My friend Stan Robinson believes strongly that there shouldn’t even be an author photo. The spell you weave is broken by your face appearing on the back cover, is what he thinks. We should all be Shakespeare. After we’re dead, people should argue about whether we actually wrote those books.

**ASG:** I know what you mean. I stopped putting acknowledgements in my book because I thought it just ruined the spell when people turned the last page, you want them to go, “Ah,” but instead it says, “I would like to thank [my] agent . . .” It’s this terrible thing.

**KJF:** Put it at the beginning.

**ASG:** I put it in the Library of Congress description.

**KJF:** Arthur covers a lot of ground in your book, and I wonder why you chose the locations that you chose. And also I read that there was another chapter in which he goes to Vietnam, that did not make the final cut.

**ASG:** I cut that chapter almost at the last minute, I have to say. I cut out a whole chapter. I have been to all those places I send Arthur to because I was trying to earn a buck being a travel writer. I took a lot of notes because you’re alone in a foreign country. Vietnam I went to twice. I just took lots of notes and at a certain point I thought, well, maybe a character of mine will remember a trip he had or something. That’s where it came from.

I thought every alternate story will be him visiting some place, but then that all went away. I had two rules for myself, and one was that I could only put objects and details in the book that I had written down in my notebooks because I didn’t want to write a fantasy about another place—I think

## MINERVA ORTIZ

*Wild Dogs, 2007*  
Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 36 x 20 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

that leads to real trouble. My other rule was that the joke had to be on Arthur, that it couldn’t be on the people in the country because they’re perfectly normal. Things are working fine for them. He’s the thing out of place, and when things go wrong it’s because he’s misunderstood. The people in the book certainly speak more languages than he does, which is what you find abroad. They’ll speak four languages even when they’re working in a retail job. And you just think,

“God, you’re a better person than me. More sophisticated, well-read, and kind.” That’s what my rules were for myself.

—From a conversation at Bookshop Santa Cruz, May 24, 2018

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