

An Interview with Steven Lewis

Music: (Jazz)

Marshall: You're listening to Mr. Radio and I'm your host Marshall. Today's guest is a former mentor at SUNY Empire State College, a longtime member of the Sarah Lawrence College Writing Institute faculty, as well as a longtime freelancer. His work has been published in The New York Times, the Washington Post Christian, Science Monitor, as well as the LA Times and other publications.

He is also the senior editor Literary Ombudsman for the Spoken word venue [Read650](#). In his 50 plus years as a writer, he has published four novels, four non-fiction books, three Poetry Collections and three poetry chatbooks. Among his titles are *Zen and the Art of Fatherhood*, *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*, *If I Die Before You Wake* and three recent novels, *Take This*, *Loving Violet* and *A Hard Rain*. His most recent books include a novel, *The Lights Around the Shore*, and *Fire and Paradise*, a poetry collection co-authored with Elizabeth Bayou Grace. He is currently at work on a series of three novellas and is anxious to find out how they're connected.

It is my pleasure to introduce Stephen Lewis to the show. Welcome to the show, Steve.

Steven: Hi, Marshall.

Marshall: You know, I hate flying, but on a recent 3000 mile flight to California, I finished reading your recent book, *The Lights Around the Shore*, and it was the most pleasant flight that I've had in a long time, and I'm serious about that.

Steven: Oh my God. Yeah. . Oh, you're my best friend now. .

Marshall: But you know, your, your book reminded me of *Travels with Charlie: In Search of America*, which was written by John Steinbeck in 1961. Only the roles are reversed in your book Charlie is driving the car. How did you come up with the character of Charlie Messina?

Steven: You know, I, um, I don't come up with anything I, I know that sounds a little glib or maybe a little fake, but, um, I just sit down in front of the, uh, screen and start writing and, and very quickly a character shows up and I, I have written about a grumpy old man several times, so that must be something I'm particularly intrigued about and, and I'm growing into, by the way,

Marshall: You know, you, you mentioned that he, he's a grumpy old man and, uh, I was reading reviews that other people had of the book and they all mentioned grumpy old man, but I didn't see him as a grumpy old man.

I could really relate to him, 'em, unless I'm grumpy and I don't know it?

Steven: (laughs) No, actually, I agree. I, I, you know, I, I sort of used that just as a way

to, to throw out a big characterization, but I don't see him as grumpy at all, and I, I really like him. On the other hand, I have to admit, you know, full disclosure here, my wife thinks he's, he's a horrible human being, ,

Marshall: But does she think he's grumpy?

Steven: Yes, she thinks he's grumpy.

Marshall: All right. Well, I guess we're both grumpy and we don't know it, uh.

Steven: That's right. That's quite possible.

Marshall: Now, you, you say you just sit in front of the screen and come up with the characters, but, uh, I found out that you owned dogs named Jane Mel Dog Lewis, Gloria, and Plumpy. Did, did these dogs help you in creating the characters of Bad Breath and Dumbass, or, or this just came up as you were sitting in front of the screen?

Steven: No, actually, um, you know, uh, for a long time, uh, this, this may be more than you want, but for a long time I, I wrote commercially and for magazines and, and newspapers and stuff. And, um, at some point I, I grew weary of writing what I knew and began to write into what I don't know, to really essentially to find out what, what was going on inside. And the first time I did that was with the novel, *Take This* where, um, I was online in a convenience store down on Hatteras Island, North Carolina, and heard, I heard someone say, "take this" and, uh, I thought, oh my God, isn't, isn't that interesting? That's, you know, that's sort of what the universe does to all of us. And I went and I sat down and, and I. Immediately got came upon a scene where, uh, uh, the first grumpy old man opens the door and his ex-wife is handing him her engagement ring in prelude to the divorce. And she says, "take this".

Marshall: Ah-huh.

Marshall: So that, I mean, that was sort of interesting too, just to start. And from that point on every word, every paragraph, just sort of, I allowed them out and I tried not to interfere with the story that was unfolding. Um, there was a lot of editing work to be done after I got through the entire book, but each time I thought I came to a, a sort of a cliff, the story would write itself. Anyway, I, I, it's, it's an exhilarating way to write and it's the way that I wrote this last one.

Marshall: But still, I, I, I felt that your description of, of the way the dogs act and, and behave, you have to own a dog in order to be able to, to describe what's going on.

Steven: Oh yea, no, ab absolutely. I mean... my wife and I have had dogs up until very recently when Plumpy passed away, uh, for more than 50 years. There's never been a time and living with a dog, uh, you know, and living with children, (laughs) uh, are somewhat similar. You, you see how they respond to you and what, and um, and in some ways the dog is the best traveling companion you could possibly have.

Marshall: I'd like to ask you a question about something else. In both books that I read, *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*, *A Hippies Guide to the Second Sixties* and the one we're discussing now, *The Lights Around the Shore*. I noticed interesting chapter titles. What, what goes into your chapter title selection process?

Steven: In *Fear and Loathing of Boca Raton*, which was intended as a more commercial book I looked for, and the publisher looked for, enticing titles that would grab a reader's attention and make them buy a book in *The Lights Around the Shore* the titles were really, uh, geographic. They, they, they're intended to. Uh, since I was such, I was playing with time and space throughout that whole book. It was sort of putting people in the correct time and geography so that, that they were able to get sort of immersed in the story or maybe even lost in the story as it went along. So it was two very different things, but it, I mean, like I was saying before, that's my writing life took a turn, maybe 15 years ago into, each book being an unplanned journey.

Marshall: I'm interested in, in your saying "unplanned journey", you were talking about this when you know, you're looking at the screen and uh, things just come up, but there's certain things that I'm really curious how, how you go about doing, for example, you're describing your experiences driving the stick shift car, and more importantly, one thing that really struck me, and I don't mean this to be a pun here, you take something as mundane as preparing a Lucky Strike for a smoke. How, how do you go about turning something mundane like that into something that I thought was kind of extraordinary?

Steven: Oh, thank you. Uh, because you know, in writing the way that I try to write, the present moment, the moment that I'm writing about becomes more important almost than, than anything around it that the, the ways that, that he would take his Lucky Strike, and I, and I drew that directly out of my own experience for far too many years, I smoked Lucky Strikes and, uh, there was something almost, um, sacramental, about the way that you opened it, that way that I opened up a pack and got the cigarette ready. And part of that, again, more unintentional than anything is, is to put the reader in the, in the moment to get a real visceral sense of what, where Charlie is at any given time. And if I could do that, then I have, then I have somehow caught the reader's attention deeply enough to have that person come along with me into, into, uh, into an unknown territory. I don't know if that makes sense, but...

Marshall: Uh, unfortunately, because, because people aren't smoking as much these days, I...

Steven: (laughs)

Marshall: I don't think, I don't know if people can appreciate what goes into tapping down a, a cigarette pack and, and getting it all ready for...

Steven: Right.

Marshall: ...one cigarette. But, uh, it, it was illustrated very well in, in your descriptions there.

Steven: Well, that's, that's wonderful, does my heart good to hear that.

Marshall: You know...

Steven: Yeah...I, I don't, I, I actually don't think we necessarily have to, um, know the experience in order to experience it, and I think really good writing or, you know, I mean, since you do a lot with music, um, you know, I, I can listen to, to really old blues people.

and, and I, I get a sense of a, a, a real sense, a deep sense of who they are and what their lives are all about. And I'm about as far from an early blues man that, that you can get.

Marshall: Well, I'm surprised that you say that because, uh, I, I noticed that you're, you have a, an interest rather in music that makes its way into your writing. For, for example, you referenced Dylan's "*I Dreamed I Saw St. Augustine*", which comes up again in this selection from this book, which I asked you to read for us. Uh, would you care to introduce this selection for us?

Steven: Well, uh, Charlie, uh, Charlie is, um, has had a cardiac event and, um, and, and falls into a coma. And when he wakes up, 48 hours later or months later. And that's the whole, that's the whole deal here, is it's how far was he, how long was he in a coma? Uh, and and what was he thinking while he was in a coma or experiencing, uh, went nevertheless when he wakes. He, uh, sees his wife and his grown sons and tells them that, uh, uh, , he quotes the line from, from Dylan's, uh, I, I saw Saint Augustine live as you and or me, and he also saw his dead daughter and a dog that, um, shows up throughout the rest of the book.

Marshall: Let's take a listen to you reading that selection. .

Steven: Great.

(Reading by Steven Lewis)

"So", Dylan whispers again, eyes flooding, pausing, then glancing through the window with the sparkling green yard. "So what did Saint Augustine say to you?"

"He didn't say anything. Mom's right? I don't even believe in God. In fact, it didn't seem like he even noticed me. Maybe it wasn't St. Augustine, just some drugged out bum in robes. Anyway, I thought he was St. Augustine and he was just standing there next to Joni. I'm sure it was her. Then some dog came up to them."

"Dog, Bad Breath? He's dead too dad."

“They're all dead Dylan. All three. Augustine, Joni, the Breath. This dog was nothing like the Breath, except he was fat.”

“Just some random dog?”

“Yeah, you know, kind of an overweight blockhead mutt. Black, thick tail wagging like an obese lab. Do you remember Dizzy Gillespie? The black lab we had when you were little?” Dylan nods. “Like him, but different fat, and the three of them were standing in line at a lobster roll stand on the cape.”

“I don't know what to say dad, sounds a little far out to me.”

“I'm not saying it isn't, but I'm not making it up. And as far as I can tell, I'm not crazy.”

“So”, Dylan continues. “What do you think it means?” He looks away toward the marsh. Charlie takes his hand off Dylan's knee and stands up straight. “You see something?”

A brisk shake and then a clip, “No”, but Charlie knows Dylan did. Moments later, after the air in the studio has gone still, the two of them, breathless, Charlie murmurs, and then wouldn't you know it? The damn mutt showed up at the back door yesterday turning his head from side to side. Then quickly glancing back toward the kitchen Dylan Whispers, “Dog? Where's the dog?”

“I guess you can't see it?”

“I can't see it.”

“Right, you can't see it, but I'm not crazy, son. I'm just finding out that once you stepped through a veil, you can see things that were hidden in all those gauzy layers that keep us cocooned. Things that were always there, but just never noticed. You know what I mean?”

“Yeah. No. I guess.”

Dylan scans the studio and stares out through the window into the marsh. “You do know I can't see a dog.”

“Yes, Dylan.”

“So where is it?”

“Right here” Charlie says, pointing to the side of his shoe, “and now you're looking at me like you're really afraid I'm crazy.”

Dylan's flat smile grows toothy. “Well, you're right. I am definitely afraid that you're crazy Bat Shit Looney Tunes, if you really want to know.” He presses his lips together then adds, “But I have to say that I almost kind of like it, after the last, how many years Bat Shit Looney Tunes would be a relief.”

Marshall: That was a selection from *The Lights Around the Shore* by Stephen Lewis. Read by my guest Stephen Lewis.

I have a, another question, but I hope I get it right. Okay. Uh, you, you, you can correct me if I'm wrong here towards the end of your book you seem to shift your writing from writing in the third person perspective to the second person point of view. Am I correct

in that?

Steven: Absolutely.

Marshall: What made you approach the story in this way?

Steven: I originally wrote the, I started writing the first draft in, in the usual third person, past tense, and then because I, because the book quickly evolved into something about parallel time and moving and moving from one time period to another and having some time periods overlap. I got increasingly interested in, first of all, in the subject and then how to present that, and so it actually wasn't just at the end that this, that the, that the piece shifts. The book has something like six sections. There's some of it that's written past tense. First person, past tense, second person, past tense, and third person past tense, and the same thing with present tense. There's no future, so I guess I was right about six. Anyway, there are six parallel overlapping scenes that go back to give that that sense that, , uh, not just *deja vu*, but things that are happening now have already happened and will happen again in the future. And that sort of the bottom line is that we can, if we get across that threshold, we can experience every moment of our lives as if it's happening simultaneously.

Marshall: When I got to that point in the book, it, uh, became like a *Twilight Zone* episode for me. I, it, it really, uh, it was very, very powerful I thought.

Steven: Well, God, , we need to have a drink together cause you are officially my best friend.

(both laugh)

Marshall: Uh, would, would it be a, a spoiler alert to explain your title choice for *The Lights Around the Shore*?

Steven: As with a fair amount of, of things in my writing life I stumbled across that poem. That's all. Um, and, and suddenly, you know, it's like I could see. , I could see myself, or I could see Charlie looking out and, and realizing that, um, that poem, you know, hearing that poem, thinking about that poem, that, uh, and that whole notion of parallel existence and parallel lives it, It just fit. And, you know, it, it in a way, I'm, I may be going far a field here, but I think a lot about, about, you know, being in love or loving someone is that it's never a conscious decision. And, you know, and when I think back at 54 years of marriage, you would look at my wife and I and, and say that we, you know, we're almost unsuited for each other. And, uh, it turns out that we're, you know, in a funny way, perfect for each other because of things about each other that we, that, that don't fit. Anyway. I mean, I'm, I'm going far field here, but that title came out of a poem that I stumbled upon and realized it had something to tell me rather than me telling a reader something.

Marshall: I didn't realize it was a poem. I, I discovered that it was a, almost like a ballad,

uh, song. And when I, uh, when I heard the, uh, singing, then I looked at the cover of your book and everything started to make sense in a different way. I, I was curious about the, the cover, who designed your cover and what went into that, that?

Steven: That, that's one, uh, a wonderful serendipity. I have, uh, a friend from high school, Marjorie Weiss, who's a painter. And, um, I have, I haven't, I've only seen her probably three or four times in the last, since whenever I graduated in high school in 1964. Um, and, but I see her stuff online and, uh, this part, you know, this particular, uh, painting or digital painting, I think it really was, uh, just struck me. And, and not only did it strike me, but since Dumbass or Saras who came, the dog that came into the story, uh, I could see him in that, in that painting. A little bit of serendipity, but anyway I Called her up and asked her if we could use the painting. And uh, another high school friend actually designed the cover for the publisher.

Marshall: Speaking of high school, were you a, a gearhead as a teenager, you, you have a, a great way of describing how a stick shift car operates, so I, I was just curious if, if you had no gear head experiences in high school?

Steven: No, not really. I mean, I, I drove a stick shift, but it was, uh, no, I was pretty much an empty headed high school kid. Played sports and, uh, saw my girlfriend and, and, and that was, that was pretty much my life. But it goes along with what we were talking about just before, about creating a moment. Um, there's something about the, the actual physical act, the physical properties of anything that we do that, uh, that I'm not only interested in, but that draws a reader into a situation. Um, if, if anything, if I have any intent, it's to stop. It's to stop a reader from thinking and be, or being an observer and being part of whatever the scene is. And the scene comes from something very visceral

Marshall: I mentioned in the introduction that you also have three poetry Chapbooks. For listeners who may not be familiar with Chapbooks, can you explain them for us?

Steven: Yeah. Chapbook is, is like a really, it's a short collection of poems. Um, Usually they're, I can make range from like 16 pages to 32 pages, but they're, many of them are like half a book of poems and small poetry presses put them out. Uh, not only as a means of, of, you know, of saving some money and all of that, but really it's, it's almost, uh, um, the right format for reading poems. You know, if you have 15 or 20 poems, that's, that's a nice collection. You can go through and read it and you can, and you can put it down. You come back to it. Uh, some big poetry collections are almost overwhelming and poems get lost, but the chat book is just a short book that's all like a chapter.

Marshall: Chatbook sounds to me like chat bots. And I, in addition to, to writing you, you're also teaching. And...

Steven: Yeah.

Marshall: I was wondering if, uh, you could share any of your teaching experiences.

Steven: Sure.

Marshall: And I'll, I'll get back to Chatbot and how that relates to my question in a second.

Steven: (laughing) All right. Um, you know, I, I, I, I've taught everything from ninth grade through, uh, graduate school, but probably the most, the most important day. I, I think in my, my teaching life was, uh, was one day I was, I was over in Poughkeepsie and over in Milford, Millbrook New York, and, uh, teaching a bunch of high school seniors, and they all did absolutely miserably on, on a quiz that I had made up. And, and it was, . It was so disappointing cuz I realized they really hadn't heard anything I had to say. And then, uh, I went to my college class that night in New Paltz and uh, and we were talking about some book doesn't matter. And I realized that they also hadn't heard what I had said to class before, that they, they had their own ideas and. . I got home that night and, uh, I got a call, uh, I got a call from one of my kids', English teachers, saying they hadn't been doing homework. So it, it was just one of those days and I, and I, you know, after a, a hard night, I realized that my job as an English teacher or a writing teacher was not to tell them what they needed to learn, but to listen to them, um, what they got, and then re and then if I could redirect the conversation. And so I began to think of myself more as a, a, uh, as a doorman, you know, minus the epaulettes and the, and the stripe down the side of my pants, where I would invite students into the room, make sure they're comfortable, and then ask them what they, uh, what they thought and, um, it changed my life as a teacher, uh, tremendously. Not that there aren't ups and downs, but, um, giving, giving students the voice or giving the students equal part in the discussion, first of all, especially with high school kids, made them do homework. They, they did the reading.

Marshall: The way I, I want to weave chatbot into this is that, now I, I, I'm finding out that they have these AI chat bots...

Steven: Right.

Marshall: ...where a student can just tell the computer, okay, write me a story about, uh, an invisible dog. Uh, how, how can you deal with that as a teacher?

Steven: You know, I, um, it's, it, it's somehow, In my mind align with what I was talking about before, about, about love, um, that no matter how much these chat bots can do, they, they can never create the magic that a good writer does in a book or a musician or any artist of any of any kind. Um, it's harder if, if you're asking to look at a student's essay about F. Scott Fitzgerald or something, but it's still missing the, the soulful expression that each student would have. I know they're, they're creating programs to, to, to check these chatbots, but, um, uh, I, I don't think they could ever create a short story or a poem or, or a novel that that would, that would reflect the the inner life of person. I mean, if something happens in the writing that's magical and a computer

can't do that.

Marshall: Unfortunately, we are running out of time. However, I don't want to disappoint my listeners and I asked some listeners to send in questions and I want to fit this last question in if you don't mind?

Marshall: Sure.

Marshall: Again, I asked readers to pose some questions for you, and one question is tied to a piece that you wrote about for *Spirituality and Health*, and it was titled "Mark Man" and Rob from New York wanted to know more about your tattoos. Could you try to answer Rob's question?

Steven: I've always liked tattoos up to a certain point and um, because I'm Jewish there, I have this notion that this was, this, this was, um, something that one, one should never do. And, uh, and whether it's true or not, it was like you couldn't get buried in the Jewish cemetery, which wouldn't interest me anyway. In any case, I, I got a, uh, I got a small tattoo of, of Hatteras Island, which was sort of my, my sanctuary. It still is to, to a large degree on my arm. And, um, it was, it was like, um, I felt it was like one of the more of audacious things I had ever done. I had stepped over a line, um, and as soon as I left the studio in Woodstock, New York, uh, I, I wanted to go back in and get another one, and that's been the experience. I, I probably had 10 tattoos, uh, on my arms, and they're all, they're, uh, each time is the same thing. I, uh, there's something about decorating my body with things that are, or symbols that, images that, that are very meaningful to me. And, um, they, they sort of lived beyond me. Uh, that's all. Uh, there's just something wonderful about getting a tattoo that I can understand that a lot of people wouldn't.

Marshall: I hope that answers Rob's question.

Steven: I do too.

Marshall: But I'm, as I said, we're, we're running out of time. But for readers who are listening to this, where can your books be found?

Steven: The usual places. Um, Amazon, you can order 'em from bookstores. A lot of them are probably out of print just over the years, but you can almost always get it on Amazon and, and just because I like independent bookstores more than Amazon, um, you can go and, and they can, a small bookstore can order anything that you want that's still available.

Marshall: And do you have a, uh, a website?

Steven: I do stevenlewiswriter.com.

Marshall: Very good.

Steven: And, and, and as long as I'm plugging myself, I, I do a poetry, uh, newsletter called poemsfromthecrag.com.

Marshall: I will put all of those in the link to this show so that people can, uh, can just click on it and get to it right away. Steven Lewis, I'm so happy that you were able to take the time to speak with me, and I hope to hear from you again real soon.

Steven: Me too. Thank you Marshall. Much, much appreciate

Music: (Jazz)

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