

**Question 1: What did you study at Keene State College, and in what year did you graduate?**

After graduating from Keene High School with mediocre grades in 1959, I applied to KSC but was denied admission based on my ACT scores. To this day I don't know how it happened but I only had a 6 percentile in English, which meant that 94 percent of the people who took the test did better than I did. The then-dean of admissions, Fred Barry (who later become a friend) told me that "Some people are cut out for college and some aren't." So after a six-month stint in Uncle Sam's reserve army, I went to work for New England Telephone and Telegraph Company as a central office equipment installer. I thought that college was out of reach for me.

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy Nov. 22, 1963, played a role in my decision to quit a good job and reapply to Keene State. I happened to be working in the telephone office in White River Junction, Vermont, when President Kennedy was shot. Picture scores of steel bays eight feet high loaded with replays and wires. Below I could hear my fellow workmen concerned but in solidarity talking about the shooting. The effect was to make me feel my isolation. All work had stopped, so I could have come down and joined the crew. I chose to stay up there alone to think.

Encouraged by friends, I had already been contemplating giving college another try. I was an avid reader, hungry to learn more about my world. What was holding me back was a feeling of inferiority that I wasn't smart enough do college-level work. The president gunned down, me cut off from my fellow workers, combined to tell me I had to put aside my insecurities and start a new life. Shortly after the Kennedy assassination I re-applied to Keene State and this time I was accepted.

So worried was I that I wouldn't be able to hack it as a college student, I hired a private tutor, Isabelle Streeter, a retired Keene school teacher, in the summer of 1964 to tutor me in English studies. Her reading assignment was The History of Henry Esmond, Esq. by William Makepeace Thackeray, which I hated.

I started at KSC in the fall of 1964 as a history major. That first year I lived in my parents' house and concentrated on my studies, driven by fear of failure. The most pleasantly shocking event of that first semester was a conference with my Freshman composition instructor, Mr. Francgon Jones, to discuss my first paper. I spent perhaps ten hours on a Saturday writing the paper, which was a profile of John Westcott, a best friend and--in the parlance of those times--a nonconformist. I was terrified that Mr. Jones would humiliate me for my inferior writing.

Instead, he handed the paper back to me. The only mark on it was A+. He told that I had a unique voice and writing talent. He encouraged me to continue writing. How he could spot writing talent from one paper, I dunno, but it was a big moment in my life, the first time in my 23 years that anybody had told me that I might be good at something.

From there I wrote for the school newspaper, the Monadnock. I wrote very long papers for other classes, much longer than required. I discovered not only that I was good at writing, but that I loved doing it. At the end of that first year I had all A's and one B, tied with a senior for the highest average in the school.

In 1967 I published *Glory in the Morning*, the second short story I ever wrote, in a national magazine, *Cavalier*, a *Playboy* imitator. What amazes me to this day is that I went from being a non-writer to a competent writer overnight. Hard to tell for sure but I think one of the reasons that I had some success was that at St. Joseph's Elementary School one of the few topics I was good at and that I enjoyed doing was diagramming sentences. So maybe I internalized the geometry of language. When the time came to write I was ready.

One writing project at KSC that ended up having a profound influence on a book that I would write years later was a paper I wrote in a history class for Mr. Charles Hapgood. As a Keene native I'd always been fascinated by the First Congregational Church at the head of Central Square. In doing research for a paper on the history of the church I came across the History of Keene. I read all three versions and became fascinated with the story of the Nathan Blake captivity. I was already aware of the Blake story from the monument outside of Blake house on Main and Winchester Streets, but reading all the details stirred my need to create.

I immediately started writing a novel. I got maybe a third of the way down the page before I realized that I had no clue how to write a novel, nor did I have enough knowledge about the time period that Blake lived in to write anything credible. I thought, "Well, maybe someday." That day came decades later when I wrote my historical novel *The Old American*, which won a literary prize and received stellar reviews.

In my junior year something happened that changed my focus on writing from journalism and fiction to poetry. I read a poem, *Preludes* by T. S. Eliot. That work transformed my thinking and my sensibilities. I gave up writing prose and concentrated entirely on writing poetry. I switched my major from History to English with a minor in History.

It was my poems that later got me into the Stanford graduate school of creative writing. I was accepted by the English poet

Donald Davie. Later, I switched back to fiction when I took a class with Wallace Stegner, but that is another story.

I'm incredibly grateful to the instructors at Keene State, several of whom became my mentors. To name a few: Robert Collins, James Smart, Ella Keene, Malcom Keddy, and of course Hapgood and Jones. But the professor who had the most influence on me and who I grew to depend on for advice and encouragement was David Battenfeld.

Note that my creative writing class at KSC taught by Keddy produced at least three writers who published books. Besides myself there was Joseph Citro and Marilyn Treat.

As I mentioned earlier I started my undergraduate career at Keene State in the fall 1964, so I was part of the class of 1968, but I didn't actually graduate until 1969 because I took a semester off that I spent in New Orleans where I worked at DePaul Psychiatric Hospital as a night attendant.

Let me add that I got through Keene State with the help of the GI Bill and a number of time jobs at Keene businesses, including pantograph machine operator at Markem Machine Company, laundryman at Elliot Community Hospital (now Elliot Hall at KSC), landscaper laborer for Cheshire Landscape, gas pumper at West Street Texaco, and my favorite job, driver for Ideal Taxi.

My first published work outside of the Keene State College environment was a piece I wrote for the then-Keene Shopper. The editor and co-publisher, Barbara Shakour, liked the piece, paid me a small fee (can't remember the figure), and offered me a job. I will always be grateful to her showing faith in me as a writer when I was just starting out.

**Question 2: Were you the first member of your family to graduate from college? And, if so, what experiences led you to attend college?**

My dad, Elphege Hebert, had only six, seven, or eight years of schooling (he was never quite sure himself how many years he spent at St. Joseph's school.) He went to work in the mills at around age 14 or 15. My mother referred to him as "a good man and a good provider," which among Franco-Americans is considered an honorable status in life. He was a gentle man who never swore, never spoke disparagingly of anyone, and never displayed any signs of racial or ethnic prejudice. While I was growing he worked 55 hours a week, one week days and one week nights, in a cotton mill that could legitimately be called a sweat shop. I know because my dad got me a job there in the summer between my sophomore and junior year in high school.

At the end of the summer he asked me, "How did you like the shop?"

I told him I didn't like it.

He said, "Good, I never want to see you in there again."

My dad was not an educated man, nor was he intellectually curious, but he was a faithful reader of The Keene Sentinel newspaper and the American Legion magazine.

My mother Jeannette Vaccarest Hebert had a high school diploma and a certificate making her a Registered Nurse, specializing in obstetrics. She was very proud of being an RN. In her old age she revealed that she had been in the convent from age 18 to age 23. She didn't leave because of doubts of her faith (she remained devout until she died at 85), but because she wanted a family.

I don't know of any college graduates on my father's side of the family, but my mother's oldest brother, and the man I'm named after, the Reverend Joseph Ernest Vaccarest, was highly educated through the Roman Catholic Church. In addition to English, he spoke fluent French (his native and preferred language), Italian, Latin and sign language for the deaf, which he learned in order to communicate with a deaf parishioner.

My Uncle George Vaccarest, younger than Father Vaccarest but older than my mother, was a graduate of St. Anselm's College in Manchester, New Hampshire. He went on to become an executive with the telephone company and was instrumental in getting me that job with the phone company that I mentioned earlier.

Father Vac (as he was known) wanted me to attend St. Anselm's, or so my mother told me, but he died suddenly at age 63 when I was fourteen. My mother, the best person I ever knew, was subtly anti-intellectual. She was supportive but suspicious when my brothers and I attended Keene State, because she was afraid that being exposed to ideas at a secular university would weaken our Catholic faith. She was right.

The most profound influences on me to seek education beyond high school did not come from my family, but from my closest friends in those years I was working in the telephone company: William Sullivan (not the KSC William Sullivan), Margaret "Maggie" Ware, John Westcott and his then wife Ramona Scadova. I was always a reader, and my friends also were readers. Bill and Maggie were college students in the days I worked for the phone company. They would recommend books they were reading for their classes, and we would have long bull sessions relating to the ideas they learned in class. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was actually getting a college education before I officially started college.

Without these friends feeding me their learning, pushing me, and giving me confidence, I never would have gone to college.

**Question 3: Do you draw inspiration for your work from any particular writers/people?**

I've been influence by hundreds of books and periodicals. Just to name a few: In boyhood: Comic books, hunting and fishing magazines, in particular Fur, Fish, and Game, Nancy Drew mysteries, a dozen or more Tarzan novels, books by Jack London, The Swiss Family Robinson by Johann David Wyss, and Needle Hal Clement.

My favorite novel of all time is Death Comes to the Archbishop by Willa Cather. I read that book in high school, on my own, not as an assignment, and I thought, this is the best book I've ever read. I re-read it last summer and I thought, this is the best book I've ever read. This time around I read it as a love story between two men, though there's no sex in it. It pleases me that Cather, though best known for her books about the West, is buried in Jaffrey Center, New Hampshire.

When I worked for the phone company it was Mark Twain and his crazy sense of humor that kept me more or less sane: in particular, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, Pudd'nhead Head Wilson, and The Diaries of Adam and Eve. My novel Mad Boys is kind of a confluence of Huck Finn and Jack Kerouac's On the Road. My favorite "reference book" is The Devil's Dictionary by Ambrose Bierece.

John Gardner's novel The Sunlight Dialogues hugely influenced the writing of The Dogs of March. It's as if Gardner gave me permission to write about ordinary people using metaphorical language. I was also influenced by his how-to book The Art of Fiction.

In college I rejected Ernest Hemingway because I couldn't find any characters that I could identify with. I loved John Steinbeck's style and vision, in particular Of Mice and Men, but I thought his stuff was overly romanticized. I thought William Faulkner was a windbag, though I did love his novella The Bear. I liked F. Scott Fitzgerald's This Side of Paradise, but I loathed The Great Gatsby, which I thought was the most overrated novel in the literary canon. What I loathed was that Fitzgerald demeans working people. The only guy in the book with a real job is a dope and ends up killing the wrong millionaire. My favorite book that I love to hate is James Dickey's Deliverance, in which he demonizes country people. The very idea that these local guys would want to bugger city men--it makes no sense. These are not characters--they are literary devices.

I pretty much ran away from the American novels that were hot when I was in college. As one shaping an identity, I was looking for characters I could identify with. I found those characters

at Keene State in a course on 20th century British literature taught by Dr. Robert Collins.

The Leonard Bast character in E.M. Forster's novel Howard's End seemed much more truthful to the kind of person I was than all those Hemingway characters. In fact, I named my protagonist in The Dogs of March Howard in honor of Forster's book; furthermore, the working title of the first draft of "dogs" was Howard's End. Another character I identified with was Oliver Mellors, the gardener in D.H. Lawrence's novel Lady Chatterley's Lover. Gee, the working guy gets the girl. That happens sometimes in the movies, but as far as I know not in American canonical literature. A novel that had a profound effect on me was Coming Up for Air by George Orwell. A regular, flawed man goes back to his hometown. That book wowed me, because it was another of those books that gave me permission to write about ordinary people.

Another Brit writer of that period who influenced me was Virginia Woolf. I wanted very much to learn to convey the thoughts of characters as well as their actions. I found Faulkner and James Joyce too self-consciously artsy and, ultimately, not true to actually how people think. But Woolf's Mrs. Dalloway provided me with another wow. Her technique of indirect interior monologue, sort of authorial interpretation and rendering of thoughts, as opposed to Joyce's more direct method, was closer to what I wanted to do.

**Question 4: Is there a specific character from your writing that has left more of a lasting impression on you than the others?**

For some characters, perhaps most, I have to find an aspect of my own experiences and emotions to understand them. I'm guessing that for me creating a character is like a method actor getting into his role. For example, when I was writing Spoonwood, I carved wooden spoons so I could feel what Frederick Elman (a.k.a. Latour) could feel. After I finished the book I lost interest in spoon carving. There's a certain necessarily artificiality to this process, artificial because with a huge cast of characters the author can't know them all in depth. But every once in a while, I'll stumble upon a character who seems to inhabit my persona and comes across--dare I say it--effortlessly. For me that has happened with the character of Howard Elman, Caucus-Meteor, and Cooty Patterson. They do things and think things that I would never do. And yet the writing comes easily and often with joy and without ego, because the inspiration--if that's what is--doesn't seem to originate from me, but from some outside and greater force than I am capable of delivering. It's the kind of feeling that makes me think I

understand the Biblical writers. They really did believe they were writing the word of God, because maybe they were. Maybe Howard Elman and Caucus-Metoer are not my characters. Maybe they were delivered to me through divine agency for a greater purpose. None of this is likely true. I'm more reporting a feeling than a fact.

**Question 5: When did you first become interested in creating art, and how did you first begin to produce it?**

I had an interest in drawing before I had an interest writing. Back in high school many people of my generation doodled in their notebooks during study halls. The girls drew fashion models and clothing and the boys drew cars. Drawing used to frustrate me. I could not draw cars as well as my friends, and actually I had no interest in drawing cars. I wanted to draw, but I didn't know what, nor how. All I knew for sure was that like everything else I tried I was a little less than mediocre. Since I couldn't draw cars, I drew geometric shapes every which way. Drawing in the abstract instead of realistically freed me up. I liked doing it, and I liked the results, but I never expected anybody else to like it, and I never took drawing seriously. In those days I viewed school as kind of a part time prison, and drawing was just something to do to pass the time while I was incarcerated, so I didn't do it outside of school.

I resumed drawing around age 20 when I was working for the telephone company. At the time I didn't know I had an ache to create art; all I experienced was the ache, not the need-for-art part. I bought a sketch book, read pamphlets on how to draw, and went to work in my spare time. I tried to draw faces of men I worked with at the phone company. The result, in a word, was Disaster. Some people have a natural facility for drawing realistically. I was not one of those people. Some people without the natural ability luck into a situation with a good teacher and mentor who teaches them to draw. I was not one of those people. The result was frustration and discouragement. I quit drawing. When I started to discover myself as a writer the ache to draw vanished.

When Medora and I returned from Stanford and Medora went back to Keene State to finish her undergraduate work, she got a part time job as an assistant to Joselyn Brodie, who was then director of the Thorne Art Gallery. Thanks to Medora I was exposed to painters and sculptors. Though I was not doing any art myself, I became an art appreciator.

Decades went by until late in the 1990s I found myself director of creative writing at Dartmouth College. Our generous

budget allowed us to bring in speakers every term. We used to advertise these events with flyers made up in Microsoft Word and post them on various bulletin boards across the campus. I thought those flyers were lame and wanted something better for our program. Computers were just coming into their own, and I bought Adobe Photoshop to make posters. But the files to make 11-by-17 posters were too big for my computer, so I settled on Adobe Illustrator.

It was working on Illustrator that revived my interest in creating art. For a couple years I raided the Dartmouth art library for books on art to further educate myself about art. These days youtube is my go-to format for art appreciation and instruction. Around the year 2010, I decided I didn't want write anymore. I wanted to teach myself to become a digital artist. But I soon discovered that I could not write and also teach writing--I felt like a fraud. So I decided keep writing until I retired from Dartmouth. My plan, upon retiring in 2015, was to quit writing and draw images from my books. By then I'd discovered the iPad, which became my favored platform for drawing.

Alas, I stopped drawing, except sporadically, in 2017 when I started writing again. I can't seem to draw and write at the same time. It's one or the other. I'm still a mediocre artist. I don't think I'll ever get good. Some days I can draw, but more days I can't. I seem to do my best work when I'm doodling. I don't know what the future holds--more writing or more drawing? But I'm excited to find out.

**Question 6: What do you hope for Keene State Archive's patrons to learn/experience from your donated collection?**

Maybe I'm just nosy, but I always want to know the story behind the story. Of course I hope people will read my books, and of course those who do will read them in their way--and that's fine and as it should be--but some people, like myself, may be interested in the story behind the story. That is what I am trying to provide with essays and drawings that will accompany the Darby novels. As for the novels themselves, I want them to be available to readers as long as possible. I feel the best way to do that in this day and age is digitally. So my singular thought for the collection is: Perfect! And for Keene State I have two words, Thank you!