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passa porta lecture 2015

David Vann

PASSPORT

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My mother has always been interested in the world. She brought my sister and me to Europe once when we were kids. I remember driving a Lego car at Legoland in Denmark, seeing English castles, and riding a pony in the Black Forest. She also studied German and Spanish and taught history. She dreamed of living in a thatched cottage. More recently she's traveled to China, Africa, and South America, and she was going to Mexico every year until the drug war brought grenades and machine guns to formerly peaceful town squares.

My father was not interested in the world. The one trip he had to Europe, forced by my mother, he refused to stop anywhere. Her videos are of towns passing, shot through a rainy car window. He traveled only to hunt or fish, in Alaska and California, and he would rise at 3 a.m. to hike railroad tracks to get to a pool for steelhead at first light but never to take an airplane. But I shouldn't say he was not interested in the world. He just wasn't interested in a passport or in towns or cities, anywhere. The speaking of other languages didn't interest him. He traveled in natural landscapes only, and in silence.

His brother, my uncle, is still like this. He has sailed with me from Spain to the Caribbean and from San Francisco to Panama, but when I've invited him to Turkey or Amsterdam or to a New Zealand summer to escape his winter, he's said he's just not interested. He'd rather stay at home in Idaho to play cards by the fire. He has family and a place and doesn't need or want more.

My own passport has been extended to 100 pages, the maximum. I've had book tours in 30 countries and visited another 30 on my own. I haven't lived in the US for years, and in fact I live nowhere. Governments won't allow this. I technically

have to have a “domicile.” Law in each country clearly states that a person is not allowed to have no domicile. This is about tax, of course. I have to pay full taxes to the US for the rest of my life even if I never step foot on American soil again, and every other country I visit would like to tax me also. The US and UK governments are the most tyrannical and unfair in their laws, but all government is tyranny, and fairness was never a part of law.

What I love is the freedom I do have. I just spent about six months in Vietnam (though I was very careful not to spend a full six months, of course, which would have triggered taxation of my worldwide income), and I have a 10-year visa for China. I particularly love visiting communist or socialist countries, it turns out, because their aping of capitalism is so revealing.

But my physical, political passport is nothing compared to the passport literature has provided, and this is what I want to discuss primarily.

I never saw my father read a newspaper, and the only books he read were westerns, mostly by Louis L'Amour. He had boxes of these novels, and I read them too, my earliest literary influence if you don't count *Curious George* and other children's books. The westerns offered a passport back to a time that never really existed, a time of self-reliance and self-defense in which goodness could be owned and one could know what was right. This was a dangerously closed world and fed my father's right-wing paranoia at the end before his suicide. He began to be racist, worried about the brown hordes coming over the border, and he feared and hated the federal government, and he acted more and more like a cowboy, finally killing himself with a pistol all alone in an Alaskan winter.

My uncle reads only Clive Cussler books, bestsellers offering espionage at sea. Or at least I think that's what they're about. I read only one of them, 35 years ago, so I could be wrong, but who cares.

Even my mother, who loves the world and travel, is extremely limited in her reading. When I was at Stanford as an undergrad and was writing short stories, I gave her books by Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter, and she finally admitted that they were just too hard and sad and she didn't want to ever read literary fiction again. She's read my novels, but I don't think she reads any others except the softer bestsellers.

More than half of Americans don't read a single book all year, and most literary novels, even by big names, sell no more than 5,000 copies in a population of 320 million.

In France, there are good booksellers in every neighborhood, people who studied and apprenticed for their role and are respected, people who read an enormous number of books every year and push their customers to challenge themselves to read better work, to travel in their minds. In the US, the chain bookstores Borders and Barnes and Noble pushed many independent booksellers out of business, and then the real damage was done by Amazon, using a cynical business model fueled by venture capital. They would make no profit but would cut the cost so low they would put an entire sector out of business. And the US government supported the monopoly using anti-monopoly laws, a tremendous perversion of justice. Obama himself gave a talk at an Amazon warehouse afterward saying these were good jobs.

Maintaining a price control is the only way to protect independent booksellers and keep literary culture going. High

schools and universities aren't enough, because adult life is long and lazy. Public libraries in Europe also do a tremendous job of promoting literature, though US public libraries have failed and in fact are undermining our literary culture by allowing free use of e-books downloaded from anywhere.

The threats to literary culture are terrible right now. Worse than price cuts and e-books is the rise of the text without subtext. In blogs and Facebook posts and nearly everything online, writing is becoming an account of something only and not simultaneously about something else. Hundreds of millions of readers now think that it's okay if a text has no subtext, and this is what can most directly kill literature, because there is not a single example of a good work of literature without subtext. It's the one unbreakable rule.

And there's another problem. We are allowing past literatures and languages to die at a faster pace than ever before. When I was a professor at FSU in Florida, all the older requirements were gutted from the PhD program. A student could gain a PhD in English without reading Shakespeare (reading one of his contemporaries would suffice) or anything older. Linguistics, which is the field for studying our language and its history, was also cut (and one of my colleagues called Linguistics my personal fetish, while another called the entire field racist). The PhD in English became a PhD in Mickey Mouse. One of the professors in our Department of English, who moved on to teach in London, said that the English language was no longer important for his studies. Devotion to French theorists destroyed American departments of English decades ago, so I was used to

hearing this kind of crap, but I was thinking that teaching in England might be different.

There are more than forty of us on the faculty in the Department of English and Comparative Literary Studies at the University of Warwick, ranked in the top 10 departments of English in the UK (and number one in creative writing). We don't offer Old English. I'm the only one ready right now to teach it as a language course, and I've said each year that I'd like to teach it, but the department worries about finding enough enrollment. The past will have to die if it can't find enough fans now.

I visited Oxford last fall, to talk with a group of undergraduate students who have formed a literature society. They're required to study Old English during their first term, but it turns out they aren't really taught the language. They're not able to translate. Only those who choose the degree track which focuses on older literature will continue and be able to read Old English, and that's a dwindling minority. So even at Oxford the days of Old English are numbered. Where is the language supposed to survive if not in top universities? Have we forgotten that universities have a mission beyond numbers and popularity?

The other problem is Seamus Heaney. He has done more to bury Old English poetry than anyone else. He's done the most harm to the language for the simple reason that as we stop studying the original we have to rely on translations, and people read his now and think they've read Beowulf. But they haven't. Heaney has deleted lines from the poem, added lines that don't exist, and hugely changed the sound and rhythm and feel of the language. Here's one of his famously lovely lines, for instance: "He is hasped and hooped and hirpling with pain, limping and

looped in it.” The original is “in nidgripe nearwe befongen, balwon bendum,” which translates literally “in dread-grip near seized, baleful bends.”

I guess we can’t really blame a poet for making shit up, but most oddly of all, Heaney has actually flattened the poetry of Beowulf in many places. He’s taken lines that were poetic and made them not poetic. “Murder marked man-dream flown,” my very literal translation of the lovely “morthre gemearcod mandream fleon,” becomes garbled by Heaney with the following line into “marked by having murdered, he moved into the wilds, shunned company and joy”. Heaney has pumped up some lines unrecognizably and also garbled the poetry that existed in the original. And he’s followed other verse translators in systematically misrepresenting the meaning of the poem.

Heaney translates “Grendles modor, ides aglaecwif” as “Grendel’s mother, monstrous hell-bride,” but this idea of monster is entirely invented, and I haven’t found any translations that don’t make this error. “Aglaeca” means “fierce-one,” and this is what translators write when it refers to one of our heroes, such as Beowulf or Hrothgar. But when it refers to Grendel or his mother, they translate the same word as “monster” instead. Beowulf is about the goodness and badness in us, the legacy of Cain and Abel, with their descendents coming back together to wrestle when Beowulf and Grendel lock arm in arm. So to call one side monster is a gross misreading and refusal of what the Beowulf poet was saying, and Heaney follows thoughtlessly into this convention.

I was asked to speak on BBC Radio 4’s Open Book with Mariella Frostrup about Penguin’s poorly-done release of Tales of the Ancient North, which includes an old and bad translation of

Beowulf. Di Speirs, who invited me on the show, wants to encourage discussion of Old English, and her daughter is currently studying a thimbleful of Old English at Oxford, but Mariella Frostrup read an intro which fetishized the field, talking about elves and ogres and such, and she wouldn't allow me to compare any lines of translation, and all of my comments about Heaney were edited out. Radio 4 had just aired Heaney's entire Beowulf translation, and I understand that he was much loved and is now dead, but it's awful that people think his translation is Beowulf. It should be called Seamowulf. And it's awful that my criticism of his translation couldn't be aired and awful that I wasn't allowed to compare translations. This is how the language becomes buried and forgotten, and do we really have no interest in our literary and linguistic heritage?

Writers are still interested in it, even in America. Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* and Annie Proulx's *The Shipping News*, for instance, are powered by the paired heavy stresses of Old English meter and heap together content, cutting out grammatical morphemes. I do this in my own novels, also (which Peter Kemp, reviewing for the *Sunday Times*, called gibberish, hating any reminder of the older tongue), and I think it's fair to say that the most enduring legacy of Old English is the meter. This is what appeals to writers. But the satisfactions of studying that language and poetry and culture are many, and I hope everyone will throw away their copy of Heaney, grab a literal translation such as John Porter's, which isn't without flaws but is closer to the poem, and I hope universities in both the US and UK will reverse their trend of allowing it all to just die. Because this is

the most significant passport literature offers, not cross-cultural understanding now but a way to reach back in time.

I've been working on my translation of Beowulf nearly every day for three years now because it's pure pleasure. I don't know that it will ever be published, but I love the immersion in our older language with its paired heavy stresses like a heartbeat, offering access to an earlier mind that sees the world in chunks of content, the sea as a whale-road and body as a bone-house. The Anglo-Saxons speak to our current time because they live in a fallen world, looking around at the ruins of a better time and wondering what happened, knowing it was their own fault. They also speak to us because of their lack of faith. In between us and them is more than a thousand years of slavish faith, but the Anglo-Saxons were uneasy, like us. They're reachable. In their poetry, we can find moments of recognition alongside the strangeness of this earlier language which apprehends the world more directly, and that's what I find exciting. It's what heritage is, cultural and linguistic, being able to find yourself in a past moment and having your vision changed by contact with the strangeness of that moment.

Let's think about 2,000 years ago. Who do we know from then? Do we know anything, really, about Jesus, about how he felt on a particular day or what he was thinking? Can we find any of Caesar in his bombastic third-person accounts of himself? But if we read Seneca, we know what his asthma felt like, the sounds he heard outside his window. We know his terrible misreading of the Aeneid that reveals what it means to believe in Stoicism, so we know his mind by knowing its limits. Seneca, the personal essayist, offers the clearest passport back.

The Greeks take us farther back. The roughness of Euripides' *Medea*, its failures as a play, reveal something of his messy genius. I love this contact. I've written a novel now about *Medea*, but set farther back still, in her time 3,250 years ago, not in Euripides' time, and I've visited archaeological ruins throughout Egypt, Turkey, Greece, Italy, China, and many other places to try to fill in something of the void where literature ends.

But there's no filling that void. I love the ruins of Ancient Egypt, and I was the captain of a reconstructed sailing boat from Hatshepsut's reign 3,500 years ago, studying the carvings in stone, and rebuilding then sailing an ancient ship along that shoreline that hadn't changed. It was the closest I could get physically to stepping back in time, but it was so empty compared to what words might have offered. Last year Mikhail Shishkin said in his lecture here "that words can express nothing," but this is idiotic. If only we had words from these Egyptian voyages to the land of Punt. The Egyptians might have taken us 6,000 years back, but then imagine if we had writings from Jericho, from the people who built the first wall and tower 12,000 years ago. I would give anything to know, through words, what it felt like to be human then.

Of the hundreds of writers I've now met at about 70 literary festivals around the world, only a handful are reading in Latin, and none that I know of are reading in Old English. I've only met one who reads in Greek. But this wasn't true in the past. Writers had classical educations. Another great difference in the past is that literary theory was written only by writers, who actually knew something about writing and could never have come up with such idiocies as saying that "words can express nothing" or "the author

is dead.” Fuck theorists now and their circle-jerking. They’ve been at the forefront of stripping requirements from programs and burying our literary past. They also have no interest in living writers and want to bury our literary present.

If you’ve read any of my novels, you’ll know that I’m a neoclassical writer, that I write Greek tragedy but expressed through description of the landscapes of a rural American west. And so you won’t be surprised to hear my following recommendations:

Universities must continue to require the study of older and ancient literatures and languages, even if students don’t want to sign up, and even if the programs lose money and don’t seem sexy. A PhD in literature must require study of every period of that literature and facility with the languages of all times of that literature.

Governments must protect literary culture through price controls and tax breaks and funding for festivals, prizes, public libraries, and organizations such as Passa Porta.

We must individually support our independent booksellers and literary organizations.

Facebook won’t allow you to delete your account, but you can just never visit it or any other social media site ever again. I haven’t visited any site in almost a year now.

Stop reading crap that has no subtext, and stand up for elitism, the idea that only experienced reviewers should review books, for instance, not nincompoops on Amazon who think that the use of a sentence fragment must mean a lack of editing.

Okay, obviously I’ve gone off the deep end here, and no one is ever going to listen to or implement any of my

recommendations. I realize that Old English is simply going to die and is effectively already dead, and that the same goes for enjoying Ovid or Euripides in the original. Movies have taken over, and no one even knows what a novel is anymore. I don't think any reviewer has ever noticed, for instance, that with the exception of *Caribou Island*, all the rest of my novels are actually stretched novellas. They're an entirely different literary form but just called novels by everyone. And e-books will probably eventually destroy the great booksellers even in France, and people will feel happy enough to read crap which is about nothing instead of reading literature. And the cost of all of this will not mean mass starvation or illness or death or anything measurable. But I just think we should recognize that we are in a time without precedent, a time which is not like other times in which people complained about literature taking a dive. The closest comparison would be the introduction of TV, which hugely reduced literature in everyday lives. And maybe that was already the great destruction and the internet is only an aftershock now. But I just want to say I think it sucks. I think the passport back in time that literature offered was valuable and that we're lesser without it.

David Vann (1966) is an American writer and author of *Legend of a Suicide*, *Caribou Island*, *Dirt* and *Goat Mountain*. Vann's work has won several important prizes, such as the Prix Médicis Etranger, the Grace Paley Prize for Short Fiction and the L'Express readers' prize. His work has been published in over twenty languages, such as Dutch, French, Spanish, Danish, Chinese and Korean. He is currently professor creative writing at the university of Warwick in England and writes for magazines such as The Atlantic and Esquire.

Vann was born in Alaska and had a rough childhood. The vicissitudes of his family history and childhood has been a source of inspiration for his work, as his first book *Legend of a Suicide* (2008) is a semi-autobiographical short story collection. For 12 years, no agent would send out his first book, so he went to sea and became a captain and boat builder. Based on those experiences he wrote *A Mile Down: The True Story of a Disastrous Career at Sea* (2005), a veritable story about his adventure in the open sea and the confrontation with his dreams. His first novel, *Caribou Island* (2011), captures the drama and pathos of a couple whose failed dreams and tragic past push them to the edge. Following novel *Dirt* (2012) offers an exhilarating portrayal of a legacy of violence and madness.

Besides his work of fiction, Vann has also published non-fiction such as *Last Day on Earth. A Portrait of the NIU School Shooter* (2011) which relates to the shooting that took place in Northern Illinois University in 2011. His latest work, *Goat Mountain* (2013) is a provocative story about the most primitive instincts, the ties that bind us together and the consequences of our actions.

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