

40) Is it true, as Marianne says, that "Men never give up anything for women"?

SV: The reason why fiction is superior to philosophy is that it doesn't deal in abstractions and generalizations. It doesn't purvey non-existent absolute truths: it presents truths while suggesting also their limits. Marianne Hardwick, the character who makes this statement, is an intelligent woman speaking on the basis of her limited experience - that is, she is speaking of her father and her husband. What she says is certainly true of them. And to a certain extent it is also true of Mark.

42) What is the hope for a world ruled by statements like "I trust him; I have his balls in my pocket" (Lyndon Johnson)?

SV: What I find interesting about this statement is what it reveals about one of the ways in which people exercise power. I hoped to give people a laugh with this - a bitter laugh, perhaps, but a laugh just the same. I certainly laughed when Sen. Eugene McCarthy described to me how Lyndon Johnson said this, holding court while sitting on the toilet.

43) Why do you like lizards so much?

SV: Because they are beautiful, they change colour, they eat about like lightning, they're clean, they're quiet and they dart flies and mosquitoes. When we're by the sea a lizard sometimes comes into the house and settles on the wall for a day or two, and it's very nice to see it there.

44) "What is there besides money?" someone asks on page 176. Yes, what is there, Stephen?

SV: The character who asked himself this question discovered a moment later "to his own intense surprise and bewilderment" that "there was something in him stronger than greed: he could hate, no matter what the cost. It was his finest hour."

45 - 46) Pauline Marshall says on page 179 that "The way to enslave a man is to be his slave". Later she says, "it's no use trying to improve the character of any living thing" (but she means men most of all). Do you agree?

SV: Pauline Marshall is the mistress of Marianne Hardwick's very rich husband. She employs a private detective to spy on the wife in the hope that the detective will discover something that will lead to a divorce and allow her to marry the husband. She has that kind of intelligence. She has great faith in manipulating people. As for what I think, I allow the characters to follow their sensible-sounding notions and see where it gets them.

47) Marianne Hardwick "vowed that she would never read a newspaper again". But you read newspapers, don't you? For what, if they are infested with bad news?

SV: What you quote expresses how Marianne felt at the moment, after a disappointing election campaign. Of course we have to know the news, good or bad. On the other hand, people spend too much time reading newspapers. To be able to interpret the news, they should read more novels. Proust was right: "the real news is in novels".

48) "... powerful men must be feared." How can we sleep at night after reading a sentence like that?

SV: The meaning of the sentence, in context, is that Mark, having an affair with the wife of a powerful man, should have been more careful.

50) Eshelby called Stendhal and Balzac "the Mozart and Beethoven of literature". Do you too?

SV: Actually Eshelby is quoting from an essay of mine which was later published in Truth and Lies in Literature.

51) "A good novel gets better with every reading... That is the secret of happiness, not reading but re-reading," Eshelby says. Do you agree?

SV: Yes.

52) "A little bit of private money buys a lot of public money in most parts of the world." Not all parts? Weren't you being a little optimistic in saying "most"?

SV: Nothing is true all the time everywhere. Not all public officials are bribable.

53) Do you agree with Hardwick that "absence kills all emotions"?

SV: Hardwick says this because he would like to believe that his wife has forgotten her lover.

54) "Ruin is one misfortune after another, the fatal mistake is many mistakes, the fatal blow is many blows - and who can count all his enemies?" Do you know of any potion to neutralize the ferocious disenchantment of this sentence?