

## Richard Kalich

in conversation with Lucy Sweeney Byrne

It is clear, when talking to Richard Kalich today, that he is a novelist whom, once you hear of him, you wonder to yourself how you haven't heard his name before. He is not a writer one would describe as prolific. He has endured writer's block and the terror of creative writing for a sustaining portion of his life. As he says, he's read too much and knows all too well the standards his work will be held up against. A daunting task, he says, when your first literary Gods were no less than Dostoyevsky and Thomas Mann. This understandably has held his output down. Having said that, the works he has produced over the years, have been of exceptional quality, as is reflected in the recognition he has received from the academic and literary elite. Kalich has won The American Book Award and has been nominated for both a National Book Award and The Pulitzer, and his writing, in its daring experimentalism, surreal absurdism, and especially because of the dark demonic depths he has mined of the human interior, has been favourably compared to writers such as Kafka and Beckett. Needless to say, this is no lightweight author we're dealing with.

I talk to Richard (he prefers to be called Dick), and almost immediately I grasp that he's exactly what you would expect when one thinks a New York literary writer, an avant-garde post-modern novelist—and then some. Kalich is opinionated, quick-witted, funny, and simply brimming over with all of the things he has to say about the spiritual impoverishment of our contemporary age. We discuss, among other meandering subjects, the death of the word, the loss of Transcendence, the diminishment of the Self, artistic inspiration, films and musicals, and, of course, the release of his current most recent publication, *Central Park West Trilogy* (2014), a collection of three of his critically-acclaimed novels; *The Nihilestete* (1987), *Charlie P* (2005) and *Penthouse F* (2010).

**LSB:** The first question I pose to Kalich, is an attempt to create a tidy summary of his writing (silly me). I say that his novels (there are four in all - added to those collected in the Trilogy is *The Zoo*, published in 2001) have been described by critics as 'postmodern fables', suggesting, by definition, that they are designed to convey a particular moral. Does he consider this a fair conception of his work? And if so, what is the moral message he is attempting to convey?

**RK:** No, I don't think it's correct to define my writing as fables. There are themes, yes, but I'm not trying to offer some categorical cure-it-all to the problematic situation of Man. I'm neither theologian nor a politician. My concern in my first novel, *The Zoo*, was loss of inner life. After long years of writer's block, the novel just exploded out of me. Thirty days. All too quickly to really do it justice. With my second novel, *The Nihilestete*, I was taken by the spiritual diminishment and the all-pervasive powerlessness that I felt was taking over our culture which in turn prevented and inverted my lead character's full expression. Such is the motive-force behind the almost banal, cerebralized cruelties he harbours upon his arch-enemy, the artist, Brodski. The artist, of course, representing spiritual fecundity. The novels themselves are metaphorical. I see the world metaphorically. The first thing that happens, is that I see an image in my mind. This image is the epicentre of what I build my narrative around. It provides the beginning, middle and end for my story. The image just comes to me. It's a sort of poetic gift.

I'm told some Poets see the world like this. For example, with *The Nihilestete* I saw a limbless being strapped to a wheelchair, a prosthesis attached to his arm stub which served as a hand, struggling to paint on a canvas held just out of his reach by an ominous male figure. The image gestated in me for a long time, five years, before I finally found the courage to write the book.

**LSB:** Why is that?

**RK:** Fear. Dread. The Terror of Creation. More specifically, for me it's always been the fear of judgement. Dostoevsky or nothing. I carried that burden with me the better part of my entire adult life.

**LSB:** But why so hard on yourself? You never outgrew it?

**RK:** The best I can offer is... I grew up in an orthodox Jewish home. My father was a Cantor. But even though early on I rejected any traditional notion of a God construct, I made my literary heroes into Gods. I was still a product of a culture of Transcendence. It was an easy enough illusion to fall victim to. Upon reflection I'd say my worship of Thomas Mann, who wrote in the Old High German, cost me, at the least, fifteen years. Fifteen years before I was able to let go and write in my own voice. My twin brother, Bob, is just the opposite. He's a visceral writer: he can spontaneously write what comes to his mind. Then, of course, he needs me to edit his work. But for me, writing has always been too important; as much a feat of self-overcoming as having the talent and fortitude to get it down on paper.

**LSB:** How did you overcome the fear and take that first step into actually writing?

**RK:** What happened with *The Nihilestete* was that Bob wrote and published a novel, *The Handicapper*, which became a bestseller. I was seeing an analyst at the time for creative block, and I'll never forget his words when he said to me: "Get out of here. You don't need me any longer. Now that your brother has written a book and been published, you're ready to write yours." And he was right. With twins, it's chicken and egg. The next day I sat at my desk and tried to write *The Nihilestete*. Nothing came out. I tried again next day. Again nothing. I had another novel in me at the time, not as deeply embedded as *The Nihilestete*, but gestating inside me for years just the same. So, on the third day I punched out a few lines. In thirty days, as I said, I had my novel, *The Zoo*. It came out whole. All of a piece. I had no idea how or why, but I knew I wasn't going to stop. Today I consider *The Zoo* my young person's novel. A fledgling effort. But it freed me to write *The Nihilestete* which followed almost immediately after.

**LSB:** So even between those first two writing projects, your writing changed significantly. Do you think it has continued to change and develop over time?

**RK:** Yes. Definitely. Some themes and concerns never leave me. Powerlessness, for one. The diminishment of Self, for another. The shrinkage of human possibility and, by extension, the human cost because of such diminishment. That's why those banal, cerebralized cruelties permeate all my books, not just *The Nihilestete*. But at the same time, as I've changed and grown over the years, so have my novels. My awareness of the choices I have at my disposal when writing fiction. The use of language or the decision not to use it... and levity, form, play, especially play. Also, with the technological developments happening in the world, the statement I wanted to make through my writing inevitably changed. The result of this excess of digitalisation in modern living is an important shaping theme in my later works. I've integrated all of these into my writing. *The Zoo* for example, though an allegorical novel, was for the most part written in a naturalistic, linear style. So was *The Nihilestete*. My later works are far more

experimental. I understand the possibilities of the novel so much better and, amazingly for me, I even have the inner freedom to use them.

**LSB:** Like you did in *Charlie P*?

**RK:** Yes. *Charlie P* is not only a breakthrough in dissonant post-modern form, it's also high comedy. I actually found myself laughing while writing the book. A first for me, as neurotic as I am. Additionally, with the transformative technological changes happening in the world, my interest evolved to include the web, the screen particularly, and its effects on loss of Self in a different, much more radical way than before. And its concomitant by extension... Self-invention.

**LSB:** This is why you wrote *Penthouse F*?

**RK:** Yes, but what's interesting is that I metaphorically understood the implications of the screen even before there was such a thing as The Computer on the market. I had never seen one, much less knew they were in the making. But, still, on the very same day I finished *The Nihilisthete*, I had had an image in my mind of a man sitting in a closet of an apartment watching a boy and girl. The novel was originally going to be titled "Transfiguration of the Common Place". And I was going to write it in a naturalistic style. However, over the years it evolved into a meta-fictional narrative which allowed me to explore modern man's voyeurism and self-invention associated with living in our current time of digital and online communication. Think of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter... It's a comment on the consequences of the image usurping the word; on the crushing depletion of Being; on the flattening and emptying effect the screen is having on the Self. Especially young people. It's a terminal paradox, as Kundera calls it. The more information and freedom we have on the outside, the less inside. How we adapt, adjust, learn to live with these changes in the future – that's another thing altogether. My concern today is in our transitional phase: "Attention must be paid".

**LSB:** Yet, you still didn't write *Penthouse F*.

**RK:** No. Before I could actually write *Penthouse F*, years went by. Decades. Not until I saw the film, *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, and I realised others were catching up to my vision. I scribbled an almost illegible first draft, sent it to a writer-friend in Europe, and was told that the work had great possibilities. Even so, I still couldn't write it. My lifelong terror of 'letting go' still immobilised me. First, I had to get past a painful love affair and write another novel, *Charlie P*—about a man who lives his life by not living it. For the first time in my life I was able to let go. Really let go. Play.

**LSB:** How was that?

**RK:** My twin, Bob, says when he's going good at the typewriter he's dancing. With *Charlie P* I danced. Took great chances. Risked it all. I felt I was so obsessed with the character inside me that whatever I experienced during the course of the day, whatever the first thought or image I saw upon awakening in the morning, would be filtered through that prism. And so *Charlie P* was born. Be it a baseball game, a chocolate malted (I love them), a macho man or the girl next door, I would allow that image to become the chapter of the day. Sometimes no more than a line or two; other times a paragraph, or a page, or three. As a result, the novel's structure itself would reflect our disjointed, disconnected lives. And the character himself, Charlie P, rather than the narrative, became the structural basis of the novel. In the course of writing the novel I

came to realise that the fecundity of language inside me was what was guiding and informing my writing.

**LSB:** So Charlie P's life and experiences are based on your own daily thoughts and doings?

**RK:** Yes and no. There is a difference: I'm neurotic, the character's psychotic.

**LSB:** What made you want to experiment with these postmodern methods in your writing?

**RK:** It evolved almost subliminally. Just as our world today is incoherent, fragmented, fractured, random, disconnected, fortuitous... so am I. It wasn't so much I deliberately set out to. It sort of evolved naturally. The form and style suited me. It's who I am, both as a Person and a Writer. A comfortable ontology of self and world. And, of course, on a wholly different and conscious level, I understood decades before that words were becoming the enemy of writers. I'd been saying as much to writer-friends for years, but most scoffed. But I was right. The computer has not only corrupted language, it's changed it. We've nothing left but aborted syntax, linguistic shorthand. We're a tired generation, people don't want long novels or embellished prose. Readers no longer possess the depth or the imaginative concentrative powers to immerse themselves in such a task.

**LSB:** So with *Penthouse F* you changed your style.

**RK:** Yes. I deliberately created a computer-like linguistic style, a metafictional form which became even more condensed and fragmentary. As I've said, this style began evolving years earlier. Today writing needs to be economical. A simple image suffices. What a naturalistic writer like my brother says in a page or ten, I try and say in a paragraph or at most a sentence or two. As a result, no postmodern novelist should be compared with a naturalistic one. Not even if they are twins. They are light years apart.

**LSB:** You seem to be quite nihilistic regarding the modern world. Do you really think all hope, in relation to art at least, is lost?

**RK:** The world has definitely changed. As I said, I'm a product of the transcendent culture. For me, Being has always been measured by existential possibility. But there are no great wars to be fought any more, externally or internally. Today only fools, comics and fundamentalists Believe. One may as well pursue the forty virgins as join a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Instead of the transcendent realm we have the meta-material, bio-electronic age. In this situation high art is no longer dying, it's dead. Young people today have no oracular connection to the word. Nothing possesses sacral means any longer. I'm not religious, but there has been an undeniable loss in the significance of the Self. Everyone is special and no one is. The self-surpassing dimension of man has gone the way of all flesh. What's left is protoplasm, a nihilistic landscape, interchangeable body parts. Earthly concerns dominate. Survival, a wife and two kids, one friend is as far reaching and expansive as modern man dare. In such a climate, depth, more than anything else, has been lost. And with it high art. Immersive art. People don't care, or have the capacity to care about high art any longer. Lady Gaga reigns supreme. And that's what I write about... the grist for my mill.

**LSB:** And what, if this is the case today, do you foresee for our collective future? Are there really no exceptions to this bleak outlook?

**RK:** I'm not an absolutist. I don't profess to know how it will all end. I do know there will always be that small percent of the bell-shaped probability curve that will always need more.

That crave authentic human expression. And I also know that human history resides in a continuum. That it's a never ending story. And so I believe that the self-same ontological structures of Man will preserve... We're an adaptable species. Resilient. So as long as there's that small percent of people pursuing meaning in the world, there's hope for authenticity. In fact, if you read any of my novels closely you'll see a ray of hope. It might only be the dimmest glimmer, the merest question before the reader turns the final page, but it's always there. So, no. I'm not completely nihilistic. I believe that as long as we can still ask questions about the meaning of it all – there's hope for an authentic life.

**LSB:** Would you consider yourself to be one of those who has suffered in the name of your art? Your brother, Robert, has said of you; "...he gave everything to his art... He is 100% the artist. He thinks, breathes, lives and sacrifices everything for the sake of his work".

**RK:** Well, brothers have a tendency to idealize their siblings. And, of course, more often than not with a certain kind of artistic temperament it's Either/Or. Either art or life. I certainly gave the best of myself, the truest of myself, to literature. It was terrifying. Writing, reading, and the two times I have fallen in love - they have been the centre of my life. The rest was for the most part distraction. Living on the periphery of existence. That's why I've spent so much time writing screenplays and pursued a career in Hollywood. It was easy. It didn't cost me anything. Anything that got me away from writing, really writing, that fear and trembling, I ran on all fours to, until I eventually ran out of excuses or time and had to come back to my work again. I'm presently writing a musical for Broadway. This writing demands so much less of me. It's all craft, very little soul searching. And it's enjoyable. Light. No judgement by my own standards. I was sufficiently professional to sell some of my scripts to Hollywood, but because I had such self-disdain for the level of the writing, because I never took it seriously enough to get the best out of myself, though I came close, I never really made it through to the top tier.

**LSB:** I, for one, hope you don't regret not dedicating yourself to writing popular movies.

**RK:** I have to admit a certain part of me would have liked major Hollywood success. The German novelist, Henrich Boll, says that Americans are made up in equal dosages of lofty idealism and material decadence. Well, if that's the case (and it isn't today: 'lofty idealism' no longer exists), I fell for both hook, line, sinker. But, still, the best in me was never consumed about making it big in Hollywood. For certain, I take great pride in having written three acclaimed novels.

**LSB:** And finally, what's next from Richard Kalich?

**RK:** Well, as I said, I'm working on a commercial musical. But I also have another novel in me, which I don't want to say too much about. It's still gestating. Let's just say, it starts where *The Nihilestete* ends.

\*\*\*

**Richard Kalich's** *Central Park West Trilogy*, including *The Nihilestete*, *Penthouse F* and *Charlie P*, is published by Betimes Books (2014), and available for purchase here: [getBook.at/CentralParkWest](http://getBook.at/CentralParkWest)

**Lucy Sweeney Byrne** is Site Editor at BooksGoSocial.com.