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THE SEEDS OF OUR STORIES

PREFACE Talk at Cal Poly

October 10, 2007

Ruth Ozeki

First, I would like to offer my thanks to Cal Poly, Patricia Ponce & PREFACE book program, and to all the volunteers, both at the university and in the community, who have led discussions about *All Over Creation*, and to the students on the selection committee who recommended my book and lobbied to get me here, and most of all, to the students who read the novel over the summer.

Writing novels is a collaborative act. This is something I didn't realize at first. When I first started writing, I thought, "This is great. I'll be the author, and it'll be my job to come up with ideas for stories and characters, and I'll make the characters do what I want them to do, and of course they will comply because they're only fictional characters, after all, and eventually, when I decide the book's done, I'll lay down my pen, and that will be that."

Well, it turns out I was wrong on both counts. I realized my first mistake when my characters refused to submit to my control and do what I wanted them to do. And I realized my second mistake after my books and stories began to be published, and I had the chance to talk to my readers. That's when I began to understand that a book isn't "done" just because I've finished my part of it. After talking to my readers, I realized that my work is meaningless without them.

Without you. I rely on you, to pick up my books and open them and make them real.

So now I look at my work as a collaboration, and you as my collaborators. I sit in my little cabin in the woods and think up things and write them down, and eventually, several years down the road, you, for whatever reasons, pick up my novel and apply your

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eyes and minds and imaginations to it, and, through that process, which is a kind of magic or alchemy, really, the novel realizes itself. It does so only through your agency. Through your agency, it becomes what it's meant to be.



There's another common misperception, and one that you might be laboring under, which I'd like to clear up, too, before we go too much further. It's the misperception that because I'm an author, I'm also an authority. I don't want you to think that I'm some kind of expert, simply because I happen to be standing up here talking to you. This would be a mistake, and so I want to set it straight.

We live in a world of increasingly discrete and minutely defined areas of specialization, and academic institutions like Cal Poly are the bastions and training grounds for this kind of targeted expertise. This is inevitable. The more information-intensive the world becomes, the more specialized professions need to be. In our information-saturated world, specialists and experts are admired and respected and quoted and misquoted and well-paid for their expertise, and all this is natural and appropriate, or at any rate, it can't be helped.

Some people maintain that our mediated world of television and radio and newspapers and magazines and the Internet has created a kind of a cult of expertise, where experts and pundits are propped up in front of cameras to opine, and the rest of us are supposed to shut up and listen and buy into their message. The emergence of amateur-driven media phenomena like blogging and Wikipedia is perhaps a healthy reaction to this.

My profession, novel writing, is an exception to this trend toward specialized expertise, and that's because it's a novelist's job to be a generalist. You might say we're professional amateurs, whose job it is to remain curious about everything, in an indiscriminate and promiscuous sort of way. With this generalist's view of the world, we are able to notice connections between multiple and far ranging phenomena, and to pick out patterns emerging from the connections, and from those patterns, to fashion stories. Or that's the idea, anyway.

So, all this simply to say, I'm not an authority nor an expert. And my opinions don't matter...and I really mean that. It doesn't matter whether I'm a vegetarian or not, or whether I believe genetic engineering is a threat to biodiversity and the environment or not. I'm not an advocate of any particular position or stance, nor do I have a particular agenda. My role is simply to stay curious about what's going on in the world and to ask questions about what I see, and to describe it in the best detail I can, and in so doing, to sow seeds that produce the kind of collaborative discourse that we're engaged in, today.



Okay. Let's move on to my topic for today, which is potatoes. I thought I would tell you a bit about how I came to write a novel about the exciting world of potatoes, and the kinds of research I did and the real experts I talked to, and stuff like that. And then maybe if you have questions or thoughts, I'll try to leave time for you to share them, and we can talk some more, and eventually someone will tell us to stop.



One of the wisest things I've ever heard said about the proposition of art-making was a comment made by the son of a friend of mine. He's a painter, and he was sitting at the kitchen table, drawing the view out the window—which happened to be a vast and spectacular panorama of the Pacific Ocean just north of here—and what he said was:

“As soon as I put one mark on the paper, I have a problem...”

And then he continued: “The rest of the painting is my attempt to work out that problem.”

I think the same can be said for novel writing. As soon as you put one word on the page, you have a problem. Because one word quickly turns into a sentence, literally, sentencing you, the writer to put in the time it takes to work out the problem you've created.

The first sentence I wrote down for *All Over Creation* is: “It starts with the earth.”

Okay, so now it's a big problem. Really big. Global, even. And it only gets worse, because in the next page and a half, I somehow manage to go and sentence myself to writing a novel about potatoes.

Who in her right mind would want to write a novel about potatoes? This was my editor's question when I told her my idea, though she was kind enough not to say it out loud. And we're not talking just about a single spud, mind you. No, we're talking potatoes on a planetary scale.

Of course, *All Over Creation* is not only about potatoes. It's also about family, about a prodigal daughter who returns home after 25 years to take care of her dying parents, about a stubborn father who feels that control is a substitute for affection. It's about friendship and reconciliation, forgiveness and love.

When I wrote those first damning paragraphs, I knew something about family. I knew about daughters and fathers, and about dying parents, and even a bit about reconciliation and love.

But it's fair to say that I knew almost nothing about potatoes, and it was clear to me from the start that I was going have to consult with potato experts and do extensive research in this field of potatoes. So I started by reading books, and I read about the ethnobotany of the first, or species, or proto-potatoes in South America; and about the

conquest of South America by the Spanish and the subsequent introduction of the potato to Europe; and about the re-invigoration and refinement of the potato by Luther Burbank, the father of the modern potato, who designed the Russet Burbank, which is the standard for every French fry consumed in America today; and about potato farming and breeding and marketing and distribution.

One of the things that I love about my job is that I get to be curious about the most innocuous things. Early on, I discovered a remarkable feature of this world of ours, which is that you can take just about anything in it, even the most humble and abject thing, and unpack it. If you're curious about things, you can unpack them and find stories inside. Have you ever thought of all the stories that are inside your running shoe, for example? Or the silicon chip in your computer, or the French fry that you pop in your mouth without giving it a second thought? Think about all the human lives and hands and minds that have touched, and been touched by, these common, everyday objects: the designers, the breeders, the planters; the factory workers, the diggers and peelers; the cutters and slicers and fryers and packagers and promoters; the shippers and handlers; the stockers and sales people; the butchers and bakers and candlestick makers.

It's fascinating, really, because if you're curious, the world is alive with stories. And what I love about my job is that I get to tease out these stories and create new stories from them.

So I threw myself into researching potatoes, and I made several extended scouting trips to Idaho and Wisconsin, where I visited large-scale industrial potato farms and small organic farms. I talked to seed farmers, and environmentalists, and food safety activists, and consulted with small town newspaper reporters, agricultural extension officers, community-supported agriculture organizers. I spent time at the University of Wisconsin, meeting with experts in the fields of potato breeding, potato taxonomy, and potato pathologies, as well as with rural sociologists and wild potato collectors, who travel to the wilds of South America, looking for new varieties of spuds.

One of my favorite experts is a wonderful man named Dave Spooner, who is the author of the evocatively titled book, "Potatoes and their Wild Relatives," which somehow made me think of this extended family of trashy potatoes living in a trailer park, drinking cases of beer and partying every night, until their neighbors, the Carrots or the Rutabagas, call the police.

And one of my favorite research stops was the USDA Potato Introduction Center, in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin, which is the entry point for all potato germplasm (which is the DNA) into the nation's potato-breeding programs and thus into the American food chain. And I have to tell you that when I first saw the sign for the Potato Introduction Center, I misread it. I thought it said the Potato Induction Center, and now I have this stupid image in my mind of all the little potatoes lined up, saluting, and marching off to

enlist in the American food chain, to become our dinner. I can't get it out of my mind.

The USDA Potato Introduction Center, or NRSP-6, as it's known in the trade, is a gene bank for potatoes, and it's amazing to think that the DNA of every McDonald's French fry you eat has come through NRSP-6.

NRSP-6 is a part of our national gene banking system, which is called the National Plant Germplasm System, and there are similar gene banks for almost every other major food crop like wheat, tomatoes, corn, etc. Our National Plant Germplasm System is a part of Intergene, an international association of gene banks.

And just as an aside, if you're interested in the truly fascinating world of gene banks and seed politics, I recommend you read an article in the August 26, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker* magazine, by John Seabrook, called "Sowing For Apocalypse," about the planet's first global gene bank, nicknamed the "Doomsday Vault" that's being built deep inside a mountain in Norway.

These gene banks in our National Plant Germplasm System seek out useful plant DNA that has been collected from the wild, and then disseminate these collections freely to interested users. Most users are professional plant breeders and researchers, affiliated with university, and sometimes corporate, breeding programs, but anyone, even non-affiliated amateur breeders, can receive germplasm, too, which is a really amazing example of open source and public access in this day and age of increasing privatization.

So at NSRP-6, they collect samples of the seeds of different varieties of potatoes, and when I was there, they were maintaining 4709 collections or varieties. That's a lot of potatoes, and a lot of work.

It's a lot of work, because in order to fulfill their mandate to preserve the germplasm and provide access to it, they have to keep the collections viable and alive, which means they have to reproduce the seed from all these 4709 collections every year or so. To do this, they have to grow out the plants, which requires a program of extensive and carefully controlled hand pollination in order to maintain the purity and integrity of each variety of potato, because God knows, plants are highly promiscuous. If left to their own devices, they will have sex with just about anyone.



Warning: the following contains material of sexually explicit nature. Listener discretion is advised...

In nature, the bumblebee is the primary pollinator of potato plants. And for those of you who don't remember this from Intro Biology or your sex education classes about the birds and the bees, here's how it works:

1. The bee comes along and buzzes a male flower, causing his anther to vibrate.
2. This vibration knocks off the pollen, which sticks to the bee's fuzzy hindquarters.

3. The bee then bumbles off, taking its sticky load to a nearby female flower and depositing it there, completing the sexual act, etc., etc. Hand pollination, by contrast, is manual stimulation... basically giving a potato plant a hand j— well... I think you know what I mean.

The head gardener at the USDA Potato Introduction Center is this guy named Chico. Chico has this little contraption that he made from a door buzzer, which he uses to simulate the bee and to fool the potato flower into releasing its pollen. It's basically a vibrator, and I imagine it's very sexy, if you happen to be a male potato.



So...as you can see, this is all extremely exciting stuff. I brought all my research and gleanings back home to my cabin in the woods, and I started to write. And write. And write. My friend, who is also a novelist, read an early draft of the book, which came in at about 900 pages. Weeks—well, actually it was a few months—later, she called me up and said, “Congratulations, Ruth. You’ve just written the Moby Dick of potatoes.”

This did not bode well. My editor was also not exactly pleased to receive all these many pages, but as I said, she is a very kind person, and as she carefully excised about a third of the manuscript, she gently assured me that my readers did not need to know everything there was to know about the methods of breeding potatoes...

But it's so interesting!, I told her.

At which point she reminded me, in case I hadn't quite gotten the point, that Herman Melville would never have gotten a publishing contract in this day and age of bottom lines and corporate publishing. And in the end, we agreed to eliminate the more arcane bits of potato trivia from the novel, and this is precisely why novelists need editors: to save us from our blinding enthusiasms.



But this still doesn't really answer the question: Why potatoes? The truth is that when I first started thinking about All Over Creation, I was drawn not to potatoes, but to the controversy around genetically-modified organisms, or GMOs. I had just written *My Year of Meats*, which was a novel about industrial meat production, and I was interested in issues of food and human identity. I was toying with the idea of writing a novel about a farming family and their first encounters with genetically-engineered seeds. There were multiple aspects to the topic that appealed to me: As an environmentalist, and a consumer, and as someone who routinely eats food, I was concerned about the safety of GMOs and the rush to get them to market; as a novelist, I was drawn by the potential for dramatic conflict. GMOs were controversial, and the issues surrounding them had generated a lot of passionate debate.

There's a long and distinguished lineage in western literature of stories dealing with

mankind's hubris. Tales warning of the dangers of ingenious technology coupled with carelessness have been around ever since Daedalus first fashioned his waxy wings, strapped them to his son's slim shoulders and sent him flying toward the sun, or Dr. Frankenstein first stitched up his sad monster. Something about these organisms and this new technology was tapping into our deepest human fears and desires: our desires to control life and to trespass into the realm of the gods; our fears of the unknown, and of defying the laws of God or Nature or Life itself. The struggle seemed Biblical, and I remember re-reading Genesis, and thinking about the Tree of Knowledge and the Tree of Life, and getting very excited about the mythic elements in this struggle over GMOs.

So I felt I had a promising subject for a novel. All I needed was a vegetable. I was considering all the food crops that were being genetically modified: corn, cotton, soy, canola were among the contenders when I opened *The New York Times* on Sunday, October 25, and saw on the cover of the magazine section a picture of a potato. I'll read a section from my novel (*All Over Creation*), so you can see how that experience translated itself into the fictional world:

He slid the folder across the desk to Elliot. Inside was a copy of the *New York Times Magazine*. Centered on a stark white cover was a demented Mr. Potato Head, with two bolts stuck in its neck and a badly stitched scar on its forehead. Perched on its head was a tin skullcap, attached to an electrical coil that spiraled off the top of the page. Its wonky plastic eyes were looking in opposite directions. The tag line read, "Fried, Mashed, or Zapped with DNA?"

Inside, spread out over two pages like a *Playboy* centerfold, was a long, plump, beautifully reticulated potato. Elliot scanned the article. The journalist had started off small, almost poetically, the tale of a man planting a new type of potato in his backyard garden, but the target of his attack soon became clear. The guy talked toxins. He named names.

The contents of the article looked bad enough, Elliot realized, but the title was genius. Printed across the tanned, genetically engineered skin of the centerfold tuber, in a pastel font, were the words "Playing God in the Garden."

With its power to appeal to a broad-range demographic, that title was truly dangerous copy. Elliot sighed. It was a PR disaster.

Of course, unlike Elliot, when I saw the title, "Playing God in the Garden," I was overjoyed. The article was written by Michael Pollen, and it's the essay that eventually became the potato chapter in his book *Botany of Desire: A Plant's Eye View of the World*. If you've read this wonderful book you'll know that in it, he discusses the codependent and deeply symbiotic relationship between people and plants, and he uses four plants, each paired with the human desire it satisfies, to illustrate this human-vegetable co-evolution. The plants and their corresponding human desires are the following:

- apples, which satisfy the human desire for sweetness
- tulips, which satisfy the desire for beauty
- marijuana, which satisfies the desire for intoxication
- potatoes, which satisfy the desire for control

Pollan's article delivered exactly what I was looking for: a food crop that co-evolved with and enabled our human desire for control. I made my decision on the spot. I would write about potatoes, and the way we humans try to play God by seeking the fruit of knowledge—of expertise, if you will—which would enable us to exercise our control over the essential irreducible substance of life itself, through gene splicing and genetic engineering.



Of course, now I had created a really big problem. I had to learn about gene splicing and genetic engineering. This was truly a challenge. It was a challenge because it's a hugely complex field, and I didn't understand it. It was a challenge because I still can't say I understand it, and I'm not alone. Nobody understands the behavior of genes, and new research is always emerging to turn what we thought we knew upside down. And it was a challenge because the ecological impacts of this emerging and imperfectly understood technology, applied and commercialized and released into our environment without a full understanding, scared me. They still do.

However, I was curious, and I had lots of questions. I visited biotech laboratories at the University of Wisconsin, and met with experts and specialists in plant genetics and molecular biology. It was fascinating research, and incredibly exciting, and I learned quite a bit about gene splicing. And in the process, I learned about scientists and novelists, too. What I learned is that we have a lot in common, and this was somewhat surprising to me. At university, in part due to the tendency toward specialization that I talked about earlier, we divide general knowledge into numerous fields and departments, and somehow have come to believe that people who go into the so-called "humanities" are fundamentally different from people who go into the so-called "sciences."

However, the truth is that scientists and novelists are quite similar. We are problem solvers, but it's more than that. We create the problems in the first place. We see the world and immediately we problematize it. We problematize the world, then we pick it apart to see how it works, so we can understand and describe its workings in elaborate detail. We do this because we are curious, but also because we are control freaks, and knowledge is power.

It goes back to the notion of control. The world isn't good enough as it is, and so we are not content with simply describing it, we feel compelled to rewrite it, too. We have to

recreate it from scratch, to make reality conform to our prescriptions and our sense of narrative propriety—the way we think the world ought to be. This is what I try to do, as a novelist, and this is what some of the scientists and genetic engineers were doing, too.

This was a bit of an epiphany, and while I was talking to these specialists and experts, it occurred to me that if I had been a bit more scientifically inclined, I probably would have been a geneticist, too. Gene splicing and biotechnology are cutting edge. These people are real visionaries. They have really, really good imaginations. They are creating novel lifeforms. Quite literally. Novel creations! Think about it.

Of course, so am I, but my novel creations are fictional. Theirs are real.

One of my characters from AOC, an MIT dropout-turned-ecoactivist named Geek, has this to say:

“Genetic engineering is changing the semantics, the meaning of life itself. We’re trying to usurp the plant’s choice. To force alien words into the plant’s poem, but we’ve got a problem. We barely know the root language. Genetic grammar’s a mystery, and our engineers are just one click up the evolutionary ladder from a roomful of monkeys, typing random sonnets on a bank of typewriters.”

Now, Geek was exceedingly stoned when he said this, and I do not agree with him. Having spent time with scientists, I can tell you that they are nothing like a roomful of randomly typing monkeys. They are very smart, very concerned, very impassioned and dedicated truth-seekers, often underfunded and cut off from reality, which is what happens when you are a research scientist working in a lab. I don’t fault them for this. I’m a novelist, and I spend most of my time underfunded and cut off from reality, too.

The difference—and what seems to me to be the danger—occurs when the scientifically theoretical becomes technologically practical. When so-called “pure” science becomes “applied” science. When novel creations leave the laboratory, and become commercialized and enter the “real” world.

This is what worries me. I mean, I’m a fiction writer. I can sit in that little cabin of mine, re-imagining the world, and feel safe in the knowledge that nobody is going to take my little inventions and try to actualize them, apply them, or make them real. As a result, there’s a limit to the amount of damage I can do.

But the same is not true for scientists. Science cannot remain “pure.” Science will always find an application, and the boundary between “pure” and “applied” is becoming increasingly blurry as public funding is cut, and universities have to rely on corporate dollars to keep their science and technology programs alive, competitive and current. But when corporate profit is the engine driving scientific investigation, unsexy and unprofitable line items like precaution and rigorous long-term testing are often eliminated from the bottom line in the rush to capture market shares.

The fact is that living organisms reproduce, and once released you can't recall them, the way you might recall a faulty tire if you find there's something wrong with your design a few years down the road. And this is worrisome because the outcomes of applied science are often unexpected and deadly, as we are finally learning now, in this industrialized, toxified, rapidly warming and ecologically depleted world of ours.

But as a fiction writer, I told myself that I didn't have to worry about these things. There's no such thing as applied fiction, and I comforted myself with this thought. I repeated it often, "There's no such thing as applied fiction. There's no such thing as applied fiction." I repeated it during the 2000 presidential elections and the Florida recount, and the UN Security Council Hearings, when Colin Powell described Iraq's programs to manufacture weapons of mass destruction.

I repeated it right up until the day that the United States started dropping bombs on Baghdad, and then I stopped. Because of course there is such a thing as applied fiction, and there's no limit to the amount of damage that it can do.

But that's the subject of another talk at another time. For now, I want to leave the realm of the political and go back to the personal world of novels and potatoes.



The practice of making art is always utterly personal. It might not start out that way—you might start out thinking that you're going to write a book about running shoes or potatoes or the politics of food—but the minute you make the first mark on the page or write that first sentence, you find yourself suddenly confronted by the problems that are most persistently and profoundly personal. And once confronted, you have to dig deep inside, and put in the hours—or years—necessary to come to grips with the problems you've both invented and invited.

After doing all this research, I knew I was going to try to write about the ways we try to control life and death. More specifically, I knew I would write about a daughter who is trying to control, and ultimately fails to forestall, the death of her father.

This is where the notion of control became very personal for me. I want to talk a bit about this, and in order to do so, I have to tell you a bit about my dad.

My dad grew up on a farm in central Wisconsin. During the Depression, when he was a young boy, his family lost the farm and everything else they had. His parents turned to religion. They became evangelical Christians and my father did, as well.

When he was eighteen, he borrowed five dollars from his high school English teacher and went to the University of Wisconsin. During his first year there, he visited a geology exhibition and saw geological evidence that convinced him that the Earth had not been created in seven days, or even 10,000 years, whereupon he suffered a crisis of faith, and turned to the sciences to satisfy his curiosity. He wanted to major in physics but he

didn't have enough money for the lab fee, so he decided to study mathematics and then linguistics, instead.

He became a linguistic anthropologist, and ended up at Yale, where he was a Sterling professor and taught for over forty years. He liked Yale, but he never thought much of New Haven. When he and my mother first married, he bought a little house in a development of identical houses, built in the 1950s for GIs returning home from the war. The developers had bulldozed all the rich topsoil, and hauled it away, and then built the houses on the sand. It was a barren and lunar place. People scattered lawn seed that washed away when they watered. They stuck cuttings in the ground and watched them die, and cursed the developers even as they bought back the precious topsoil, bag by bag. My dad wanted flowering dogwoods, but only a hardy species of thorny locust survived. He tried to grow corn and raspberries.

He missed farm life. I grew up listening his reminiscences, these intensely nostalgic stories about the way that apples used to taste—juicy and sweet, not mealy and sour. About eggs with bright yellow yolks, encased in sturdy shells that didn't crumple in your hand. About tomatoes that were succulent, not insipid like cardboard. He disliked and distrusted the food he called "store-bought."

He missed the tight knit community of farmers, and failed farmers, and dispossessed farmers who, like his own father, had lost their family farms to large dairy conglomerations and never stopped blaming themselves for what they perceived to be their personal failure. Never mind that losing the farm was the logical outcome of economic policies which ensured that corporate agribusiness would get larger, and which drove small family farmers into bankruptcy. These hardworking farmers, like my grandfather, were firm believers in the American Dream. You could succeed if you worked hard, they believed, and if you failed, it was your own fault.

The farm of his youth was my Dad's lost Eden, and he yearned for it all his life. His intense agricultural nostalgia formed part of the emotional landscape of *All Over Creation*, as did the complexity of mixed emotion I felt at his death.

Fictional characters are not real people. My father was not Lloyd Fuller, and I'm certainly not Yumi—at least I hope not! Unlike Yumi and Lloyd, my father and I were very close, and when he died in 1998, it broke my heart—the death of a parent usually does. But what surprised me, and disturbed me, and shocked me more than even the grief and loss, was the anger I felt. To some extent it was the rage that any child might feel at being abandoned by a beloved parent, and as such it's fairly normal. But there was more to it than that. I was enraged because I was powerless. No matter how much I might have wanted to, I couldn't control his dying. Day after day, I watched him fade, and there was nothing I could do to prevent this excruciating and—to me—unacceptable outcome.

Now I'm a Buddhist, and Buddhists are supposed to be very philosophical about

death. We have extensive practices around being with the dying. I knew better than to take his death personally, and I knew better than to think I could control his dying or anyone else's. So, what was wrong with me? Where did that futile desire for control over life and death come from? What was the source of this impotent rage?



These were the very personal questions that I wanted to answer for myself, and I wrote *All Over Creation* in an attempt to do just that. The novel grew from this soil. As you know, it's the story of a potato farmer, Lloyd, and his Japanese wife, Momoko, and their wayward daughter, Yumi. It's a story about reconciliation and growing up, and about the ways we try to control life, and fail, and learn to accept what we cannot control. The novel starts with an abortion, and ends with the kinds of decisions we must make at the end of a life. And sandwiched in between these two key events are the myriad of changes that have occurred in the past quarter decade on the American farm.

One of the most disturbing changes on the farm and on the planet is the loss of biodiversity. As Momoko loses her memory to Alzheimer's, she starts to forget the names of the endangered seeds that she has been carefully propagating in her marvelously fecund and rampant garden. Lloyd watches this. He knows that the seeds will be lost, and he despairs.

This is actually one of the most personal parts of the novel. My dad was not a farmer, despite his longing for that bucolic life. He was a linguist who worked with endangered American Indian languages. He was an old school empiricist, a true expert and specialist, who logged thousands upon thousands of hours doing field work, recording, taking painstaking notes, and learning the subtleties of Oneida and Iroquoian pronunciation, syntax, and diction. He'd been doing that since he was an undergraduate in the early 1930s, on a WPA project in Wisconsin. And one of the saddest things about his dying was the fact that in the specialized repository of his expert's brain—a brain that I admired and loved more than perhaps any other brain I've ever met—there was a wealth of irreplaceable information about endangered languages that was going to die with him. This idea of the erosion of diversity—linguistic and semantic, of language and of seeds—was, to me, one of the saddest metaphors to underscore the story I was trying to write.



As a writer, language is my field, and words are the seeds I work with. As such, I feel that it's part of my job to help keep language from becoming insipid and barren, and words from losing their diversity and vitality. I feel it's my job to fight linguistic monoculture and extinction.

I started this talk by saying that my opinions don't matter, because I'm a novelist—a professional amateur—not an activist or an advocate. My job is to raise questions about

what I observe, not to be a proponent for a single stance or position.

But the truth of the matter is that I am an advocate. I'm an advocate for rampant curiosity, and for questioning, and for open debate. And I'm an opponent of censorship, willful or constructed ignorance, and the abuse or impoverishment of language. And I'll close with a quick example of what I mean.

When I was writing *All Over Creation*, I learned that the phrase "Idaho potato" is a registered trademark, and as such, technically speaking, if I wanted to use that phrase in my novel about potatoes growing in Idaho, I would need to capitalize both the Idaho and the Potato—and possibly even display the registered TM mark next to every occurrence of the phrase—or risk being sued for trademark infringement. This, of course, is impractical and absurd, and would probably never happen. But it could. And this seems to be a metaphor for the question of control that runs through *All Over Creation*. Who owns and controls life? Who owns and controls language? Can life forms be patented? Should corporations be allowed to appropriate our commons and privatize our public resources, be they genetic or linguistic, geologic or environmental? How much control should we allow for-profit entities to exercise over our lives, our minds, our stories, our health, our happiness? These seem to me to be questions worth asking, and areas about which we should be very curious, indeed.

"Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form." This is a line by Vladimir Nabokov, from his novel, *Bend Sinister*, and if it is true, then it's a novelist's responsibility to be insubordinate, to question the status quo and to make visible the often invisible mechanisms that maintain it—mechanisms like corporate advertising, political propaganda, and public relations spin and doublespeak, which shape what we perceive to be our reality. It's a novelist's responsibility, and a reader's responsibility, too, to question what is happening in this world, fashioned and controlled as it is by experts.

So, in closing, I invite you to continue the collaboration we've started here tonight. I urge you to ask questions. To be wildly and promiscuously curious about the world we live in, and to participate in the inquisitive subversion of what appears to be. There's an old injunction from the student protest movement in the 1960's that I'd like to invoke here: "Question Authority." This seems more important now than ever. 