

# From Fiction to Film: an Interview with Author Tom Paine

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This past January, Tom Paine’s short story, “The Hot War,” led off the stellar literary magazine, *Zoetrope: All-Story*. Paine is the author of *The Pearl of Kuwait* (2003), a novel set during the 1991 Gulf War. His collection of stories, *Scar Vegas*, was a 2000 *New York Times* New and Notable book, a Barnes and Noble Discover Great Writers selection, and a finalist for the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. In addition to *Zoetrope*, Paine’s short stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *Playboy*, and the *Oxford American*, as well as in the anthologies *The O. Henry Prize Stories* and *The Pushcart Prize*. Paine (aka, Payne) has worked as a newspaper publisher and editor. He teaches creative writing to undergraduates and to graduate students in the Master of Fine Arts program at UNH.

***Zoetrope is one of the best literary magazines in the country. Tell us about it.***

**Tom Paine:** Francis Ford Coppola started *Zoetrope* with the idea that movies mostly come from great short stories like “The Birds” by Daphne du Maurier, which Alfred Hitchcock then adapted. By starting the magazine, Coppola figured he would have a trove of possible film ideas. They published a story of mine, “The Spoon Children,” and Coppola liked it enough that he gave me his own idea for a story and asked me to write a 30-page version of it. He, in turn, sold my “treatment” to TriStar and they turned it into a screenplay. In the contract for the treatment, I hand wrote on it that I wanted two

cases of Coppola wine in addition to the payment. The cases arrived a week later, one white, one red.

***Your new story, “The Hot War,” about a father’s grief for his daughter who dies after falling through pond ice, moves at a break-neck pace. Why the speed?***

**TP:** People have said that it moves really fast. I don’t think it’s as break neck for me as it is for other people. The story mirrors my sense of the almost rifle-shot trajectory of events nowadays. The speed to me has a poetic intensity, encompassing the father’s surreal journey and thoughts about global warming. Certainly for this poor dad, it’s a period of extraordinary grief.

***And then the quiet emotional points in the story come into high relief...***

**TP:** Thank you for seeing those. There are some moments in the story that I’m just happy that I wrote. Perhaps an artist feels the same way if he draws a beautiful line.

***Why do you like writing short stories?***

**TP:** You can do them in a day or a week or several months. Maybe for me it’s a holdover from being a poet as a teenager. I like that you can see the architecture like in a sonnet. My creativity seems to thrive on limits. You know, you have a beginning, middle, and end. And you can swim in different people’s lives in each story. A new story is like pointing to someone in South Station, Boston, and saying: I’ll write about her. The story is a stranger until you write it. You can meet strangers in a novel, but I like focusing on one person and zeroing in on their changes in the timed pressure-cooker of a plot. Stories also allow for experimentation with voice, tone, mood, and the color palette of the language. Voice is like song, and I like to sing in different keys. In the end, it’s fun to mix it up.

***Many of your stories have magic in them. What’s that about?***

**TP:** At the heart of many of my stories is the sense that life is worthy of romantic poetry and a sense of quivering awe. I want characters in my stories aware of the danger of realizing that there’s a tripline of miracle surrounding them all the time.

I’m a trafficker in epiphanies. Writing a short story is not just conjuring up an O. Henry plot anymore – for better or worse – although I try to bring that energy back in with a good snapper at the end. But ever since Chekhov and Joyce, the tradition is an epiphany-based story with characterization leading toward some awakening. In a sense an epiphany is a poem in the last paragraph, a little seismograph of the soul of the main character.

***How did you become a writer?***

**TP:** I grew up in Cranston, Rhode Island, an Irish Catholic kid in an Italian neighborhood. My father was a dentist. There was absolutely no interest in the arts in my family. Root canals maybe, but not the muses. I started writing sort of strange William Blake-like poetry in seventh grade, even though I realized it wasn’t helping my social life. Not that I had a social life: I carried a briefcase, wore plaid pants, and liked Latin. At Princeton, I was premed and was also in ROTC for the marines (I was their

first vegetarian, pacifist officer candidate). Yet when I graduated I didn't know what I wanted to do. All I did for a few years, like Bartleby the Scrivener in the story by Melville, was say "I would prefer not to..."

So, I balked and became a journalist. But I always knew that I wasn't a journalist. I liked to tell stories, even more than poetry, and I enjoyed hearing stories. I found life curious, and slowly recovered my love of the word "why." My daughter says I'd ask why of a fruit fly. And then, in my early thirties, I went to the MFA program in writing at Columbia University.

***I know you bring other artistic disciplines into your writing classes. How does that work?***

**TP:** I try to awaken my students' observational skills. For example, I'll have them draw each other's eyes. I just say, "Turn to the person next to you and draw their eyes." There's a breakthrough when you really see the human eye the way an artist sees it. If you see the little fractals of color, the exact shape of the pupil, and the shadow of its darkness.

UNH is rife with guitar players. Sometimes I'll have up to five students who play. So I'll ask them to take a song that they like and write new lyrics to it.

I'm doing this to sneak in the back door of art. All of which is a way to think differently about your boyfriend, your mother, your sister – to see them more clearly. A wise older friend told me when I was lost after college: "*to pay attention is to love.*" To be a better writer you're learning to pay more attention to your characters, and by carrying that over into your life, you are a richer human being. My students may not all become writers, but they will certainly learn to admire eyes like never before. And once you look more closely into the eyes of another, you end up awakening to the soul. It may not be on the syllabus of ENGL 625: Intermediate Fiction, but the real objective is awakening the creative soul of the young writer.

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