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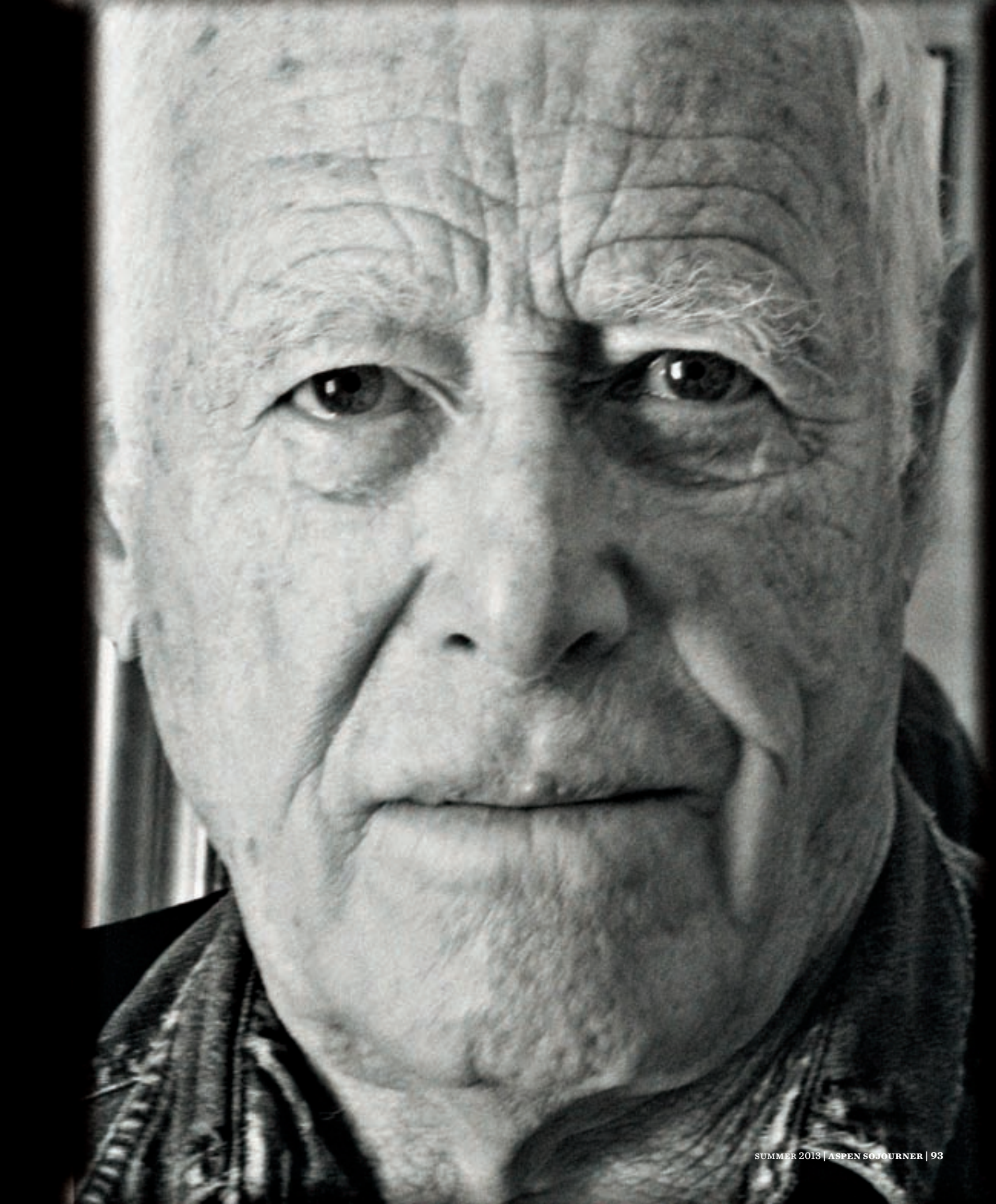
2013 IS
TURNING
INTO A
BANNER
YEAR FOR
JAMES
SALTER.

In April, Knopf published *All That Is*, the author's seventh

novel and first in more than thirty years. The UK publication at Picador followed in May. *The New Yorker*, *British Esquire*, *Harper's*, and *Departures* have all planned major articles on his career. Salter is the recipient of Yale University's first Windham Campbell Prize—with a stipend of \$150,000—for outstanding achievement in fiction. And on June 10, he turns eighty-eight years old. Just ahead of all that fanfare, Dexter Cirillo sat down with the venerated author to discuss writing, eating, Aspen, and more.

Don't Save Anything: *A Conversation with James Salter*

BY DEXTER CIRILLO



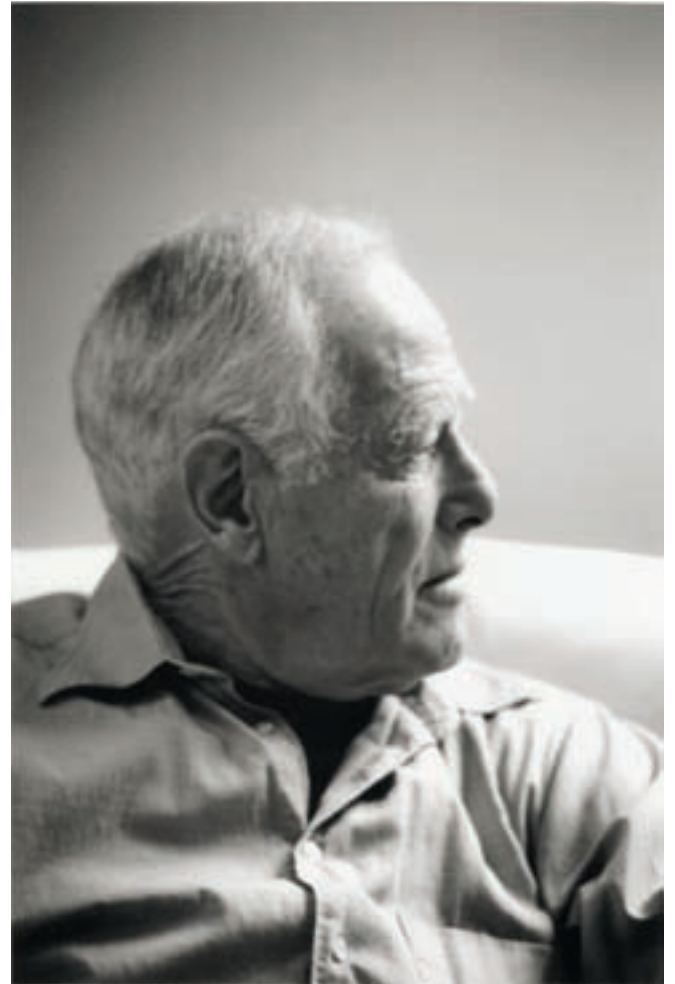
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hortly after my husband and I moved from New York City to Aspen in 1993, we were invited to a small dinner party to meet Jim and Kay Salter. “He’s a writer’s writer, you know,” the hostess informed me. In fact, I didn’t. So I quickly ran out to buy *A Sport and a Pastime*, my friend’s favorite of Salter’s works. Worried that I might face the hard-line questions hurled at me during my doctoral exams years earlier, I practically memorized the novel and even went back to reread Camus, since Salter clearly loved France. Instead, on the appointed night, I met a charming, inquisi-

tive, and slightly diffident man, who effortlessly deflected every question that came his way in favor of the stories others had to tell. That first dinner would be one of many the Cirillos and the Salters would share.

I would learn Salter’s own stories through his literature. Of mountain climbing and the real meaning of heroism in *Solo Faces*. Of the breadth of his life in *Burning the Days*. Of passion in *A Sport and a Pastime*. Of the joys of the table in *Life Is Meals*. Like the dinners and conversation he so clearly relishes, Salter’s writing is to be savored one sentence at a time. Or, as Susan Sontag put it: “Salter is a writer who particularly rewards those for whom reading is an intense pleasure.” In the April 2013 issue of *Harper’s*, the author Jonathan Dee wrote, “*A Sport and a Pastime*, in particular, is more eminently than ever one of the best, most sophisticated and moving American novels of its generation.” That Salter’s fiction is enduring is reflected in his many awards: the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Dusk and Other Stories* (1989); REA Award for the short story (2010); PEN Lifetime Achievement Award (2010); PEN/Malamud Award (2012); and the recent Windham Campbell Prize (2013).

Over the years of my friendship with Jim, my Salter library has grown steadily with each new publication, as has my appreciation for his stunning prose. Before the release of *All That Is*, I had a chance to sit down and talk with Jim Salter about his extraordinary career.

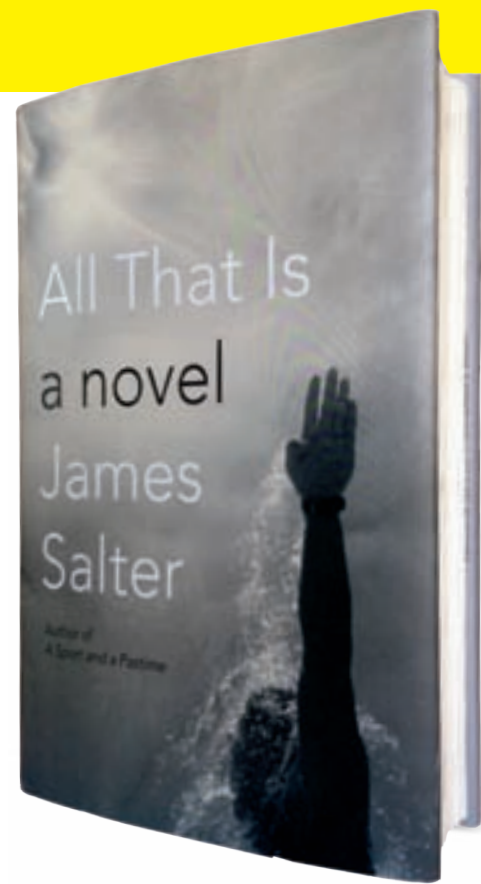


DEXTER CIRILLO: This is an auspicious year for you. You have just won one of the largest literary prizes in the world, and Knopf is publishing your seventh novel, *All That Is*, in April. Have you reached the pinnacle of your career?

JAMES SALTER: Well, I believe I’ve passed the pinnacle. It’s been a jammed-up year for me, beginning on December 12, 2012, with winning the PEN/Malamud Award. Then, at the beginning of March, the phone rang in Aspen at 7 a.m. Someone calling from the Beinecke Library at Yale asked, “Am I speaking to James Salter?” “Yes.” “I’m calling to inform you that you have won the first Windham Campbell prize in literature,” he said. “Yes,” I said. “And it comes with a cash award of \$150,000.” “Who is this?” I said.

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CIRILLO: Did you know you were being considered for the award?

SALTER: No. The whole process took place without any knowledge on my part at all. As it turns out, any writer in the world who writes in English, regardless of nationality, is eligible. I later found out that there are twenty-nine judges worldwide who make the nominations. The nominations then go to two juries. Their list goes to a third jury, and the final selections are made. You cannot apply for the prize.

CIRILLO: *All That Is* is a sweeping title for a book. Can you give us a sneak preview of the novel?

SALTER: The book is really about a journey through life, in this case, of an editor. It's also a story of what we now regard as a golden age in publishing, from 1920 to 1980, when there were legendary editors like Maxwell Perkins, Thomas Wolfe's editor, and publishing

houses like Scribner's, where publishing was more familiar than it is today. I didn't have a title when I began. Toward the end of the novel, "All That Is" appeared on a list—stood out on it—and became the one.

CIRILLO: It has been more than thirty years since you published your last novel. In the interim, you have published short story collections, poetry, memoirs, travel writing, and a book on food. Why did you return to the novel?

SALTER: I didn't make what might be called a decision to return to it. I was simply writing something that was too long to be a story. A book was its natural length. Also, I wanted to write one more book.

CIRILLO: Knowing that there is the possibility *All That Is* may be your last book, did that change your approach in any way?

SALTER: It didn't make me become solemn. And it didn't tempt me to sum up anything. I did want to write in a somewhat leaner, less showy language. As always, you try to put everything you have in a book. That is, don't save anything for the next one.

CIRILLO: Let's go back to the beginning of your career. You graduated from West Point in 1945 and were a commissioned officer in the Air Force. You served for twelve years and flew as a fighter pilot in the Korean War. You left a promising military career to become a full-time writer in 1957 when you published your first novel, *The Hunters*, which became a movie starring Robert Mitchum in 1958. How did your military experience influence your writing?

SALTER: Powerfully. My first book was about pilots in the war. I went on writing about pilots in a second one.



Left to right: Salter cutting logs to split for firewood in Aspen, 1979; Salter and Lorenzo Semple in Aspen, 1979; Salter standing by an F-100 jet fighter prior to a cross-Atlantic flight, 1960; Kay Eldredge (Salter's wife) in their kitchen, 1990; the Salters' house on North Street the year the couple purchased it, 1972; Eldredge and Salter at Aspen Mountain, 1976; at home on North Street, 1979.

CIRILLO: Did you study writing at West Point?

SALTER: No, the only writing we did was demerits and laundry lists. I was lucky because I'd gone to Horace Mann, a good preparatory school in New York, where English was intensive.

CIRILLO: You were born James Arnold Horowitz in 1925. When you published *The Hunters*, you changed your name to James Salter to separate your literary and military worlds. In 1962, you then legally changed your name to Salter. How did you pick Salter?

SALTER: Well, I made a mistake obviously—it's much too colorless. When I wrote *The Hunters*, I was in the Air Force and hadn't made the decision to give up my commission or career. And I didn't want myself stained by being literary. That wasn't an asset, especially at that time. The service may have changed. I tried to pick a name as far from my own as possible to be anonymous. The novel was serialized by *Collier's*, and pilots read it. I was asked if I had. Who do you suppose wrote it? The pilots knew it was accurate. They found it interesting. Nobody identified the book with me to my knowledge.

CIRILLO: In 1967, you published *A Sport and a Pastime*. That put you on the literary map. It also forever identified you with France. When did your love affair with France begin?

SALTER: It began before I ever went to France. You fall in love because of what has been written about a place. Hemingway, who I read as a boy, had written about France—I read *The Sun Also Rises* and said, "I want to go there." The *Normandie*, the most luxurious liner ever built, burned down at the French Line pier in New York in 1942 when I was a boy. You could see it burning from all over the city. Everything was written about France in those days. French restaurants were the height of dining. French women were considered the most sophisticated, the most chic. However, when I first went to France in 1950, Paris was in terrible shape. It was not that long after the war. It was in the winter. The buildings were freezing. Everything was threadbare. Even so, as we drove down the avenues, there was the grandeur, Notre Dame, the great hotels, the buildings along the river. I said to myself, "Yes, this is it."

CIRILLO: In 1969, you wrote the screenplay for *Downhill Racer*, starring Robert Redford. How did that come about, and how did you prepare for it?

SALTER: Originally, I had been asked to write a film for Roman Polanski. He was replaced, and Redford was cast and took over the film's life. In 1968, we went to the Grenoble Olympics for two weeks to be with the US Ski Team and to absorb real detail. Bob Beattie was the coach then. He still lives in Aspen. The star of the team was Billy Kidd, who had a somewhat withheld personality. A blond kid on the team, famous for having broken his leg three or four times, was from California and was named Spider Sabich, and Redford immediately recognized him as the ski racer he related to. I thought he was superficial but later found out I was completely wrong. When Sabich lived in Aspen afterwards, I knew him and admired him tremendously.



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY JAMES SALTER

CIRILLO: Your 1979 novel *Solo Faces* is a compelling story about the terror and exultation of mountain climbing. It started as a screenplay and then morphed into a novel. Did you do a fair amount of climbing yourself to prepare for the novel?

SALTER: Yes. I was still working with Redford, whose favorite climbing story was “one man falls, the other can’t pull him up and must make the decision to cut the rope and let him go.” Well, it doesn’t exactly work like that. I contacted Royal Robbins, who was the moral spirit and soul of American climbing, as well as the preeminent climber. Without much enthusiasm, he agreed to talk to me. He and Gary Hemming had made the first ascent of the American Direct route on the Aiguille du Dru in Chamonix in 1962. I wanted to see that route and asked Robbins if he would go with me to Europe. I paid for his ticket and his wife’s. Of course, I didn’t climb the Dru, but I did climb, some of it with him and Tom Frost for a year, including routes around here: Monitor Rock, the Grotto Wall, the east face of Long’s Peak.

CIRILLO: In 1981, you wrote an essay for the *New York Times* about Aspen, remembering your first trip here in 1959, when the Jerome Hotel had the only switchboard in town. If there was a fire, the fire truck went to the Jerome and waited for the deaf bellboy to bring out a note from the operator telling the firemen where the fire was.

SALTER: That has to be an apocryphal story. We’ll have to check with the fire department. What I do know is we always gathered at the end of the day in the bar at the Jerome Hotel. That hasn’t changed. But the hotel has.

CIRILLO: When did you move to Aspen, and what prompted the move?

SALTER: In New York, I happened to meet someone who was working as a bellboy at the Jerome, a skier and ice skater named Lefty Brinkman, who had been a 1948 Olympic silver medalist in ice skating and was a director of the Aspen Ski School. This was in 1959. He said, “You have to come out to Aspen to ski.” I did, and in 1968 I stayed.

CIRILLO: You divide your time between Aspen and Bridgehampton on Long Island. Where do you do most of your writing, and what is your process of writing?

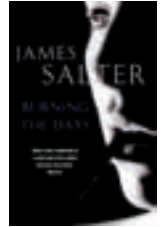
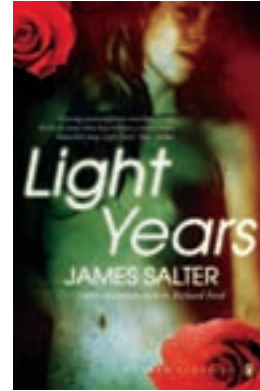
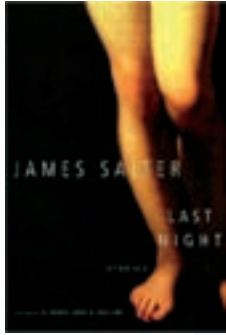
SALTER: I write in both places. I usually try to write something else before I get really started for the day. I might write a letter or some notes for myself so as not to have blank-page fright. Sometimes, I read a paragraph or two to remind me of the level, usually of a writer I have no possible connection with—*The Book of Common Prayer* or Chaucer or something like that to clear my mind.

CIRILLO: You and Kay have become famous in Aspen for your intimate dinner parties with many of your literary friends—John Irving, Peter Matthiessen, Toby Wolff, Jorie Graham, to name just a few. In 2006, the two of you published *Life Is Meals—A Food Lover’s Book of Days*, which grew out of more than 1,000 dinner parties you have given together. What is the importance of the dinners to you?

SALTER: Well, first of all, the meal is the central act of civilization. I think I said something a bit lofty on the jacket of the

WORKS BY JAMES SALTER

NOVELS *The Hunters* (1957; revised and reissued, 1997) /// *The Arm of Flesh* (1961; republished as *Cassada*, 2000) /// *A Sport and a Pastime* (1967) /// *Light Years* (1975) /// *Solo Faces* (1979) /// *All That Is* (2013) **SHORT STORY COLLECTIONS** *Dusk and Other Stories* (1988) /// *Last Night* (2005) **MEMOIR** *Burning the Days* (1997) /// *Gods of Tin* (2004) **POETRY** *Still Such* (1988) **MISCELLANEOUS** *There and Then: The Travel Writing of James Salter* (2005) /// *Life Is Meals: A Food Lover's Book of Days* with Kay Eldredge (2006)



book about this, “What would one know of life as it should be lived, or nights as they should be spent, apart from meals.” The most important thing to begin with is the company. Sometimes the guest list can be very offhanded, but you try to invite people who are entertaining. It’s useless if people have nothing in common. Hunter Thompson came to dinner several times, but he wasn’t a wonderful conversationalist. He was a show.

CIRILLO: Peter Matthiessen has said, “There is scarcely a writer alive who could not learn from [Salter’s] passion and precision of language.” You have been widely praised as “the contemporary writer most admired and envied by other writers.” You also have frequently been called a “writer’s writer.” How do you respond to that?

SALTER: Well, I appreciate Peter’s comment, but “writer’s writer” is just a cliché picked up by second-rate critics and passed along. I think it started with a piece in *Esquire* a long time ago in which the author described me as “the best little-known writer.” It’s now become a pejorative term, somehow suggesting

only another writer would read my work. It’s like saying he’s a winemaker’s winemaker. It doesn’t mean anything. In my experience, writers are generally very parsimonious in their praise for other contemporary writers.

CIRILLO: How would you describe your work?

SALTER: I don’t know. I try to write things that are better than I am able to write. I also try to write things that I would very much want to read. I write about a certain terrain, a certain portion of humanity and life—everyone does. You have your own ideas and obsessions that you circle around in every book. For me, it’s the emotional, the physical, and the sexual life—generally between a man and a woman.

CIRILLO: You may be the last writer on the planet who still writes in longhand.

SALTER: I don’t think so. I like the physical connection with a pen and paper. I used to have good handwriting, and the efficiency of it cannot be matched. You don’t need a device of any kind to sit down and make a note, write a thought. Writing is tactile. That’s one of the joys.

CIRILLO: Who are the writers you have most admired? And who are the writers you feel have influenced you?

SALTER: When I was young, I was influenced by the American writers of the time, especially Thomas Wolfe. I’ve gone back and read him, even though he hasn’t remained popular. He also influenced Jack Kerouac [who went to Horace Mann ahead of Salter]. The world really was enlarged for me in my forties when I met Robert Phelps, who was a writer and critic with a particular level of taste. He introduced me to Colette and Isaac Babel. He brought to maturity my interest in reading. [In 2010, Counterpoint Press published *Memorable Days—The Selected Letters of James Salter and Robert Phelps*.]

CIRILLO: As you approach your eighty-eighth birthday, what do you think your place in American letters will be?

SALTER: Well, I imagine I’ll be listed as a novelist and short story writer of the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. Of what importance, I’m obviously unable to say. Maybe a book or two of mine will make it through. All writers hope that. ●



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