

'The Realist'

An Impolite Interview With Joseph Heller

Q. Has Catch-22 been banned anywhere?

A. No.

Q. Are you disappointed?

A. Not anymore. I'm really delighted because it seems to have offended nobody on the grounds of morality or ideology. Those people it has offended, it has offended on the basis of literary value. But I'm almost surprised to find that the acceptance of the book covers such a broad political spectrum and sociological spectrum as well.

This pleases me first because it pleases my ego, but next because I put an optimistic interpretation on it: I think there is close to a common reservoir of discontent among people who might disagree with each other and not realize that their basic disagreements might stem from the same recognition of a need for correction in certain areas.

I learned from Murray Kempton's column also—and this to my surprise—that it's quite an orthodox book in terms of its morality. He referred to its being almost medieval in its moral orthodoxy, which had not occurred to me. But of course as soon as I read his column, I realized he was correct. I suppose just about everybody accepts certain principles of morality. The differences appear in testing certain institutions against those basic principles.

There is a tradition of taboo against submitting to examination many of our ideological beliefs, religious beliefs; many things that become a matter of traditional behavior, or habit, acquire status where they seem to be exempt from examination. Or even to suggest that they do be examined becomes a form of heresy.

Now the book might be surprising in that respect, but—with the exception of a certain appreciation for lechery, which you wouldn't find among the basic virtues; you might find it among the deadly sins—I don't think

source: *The Realist*, Vol. 39 (November 1962), pp. 18-31. Reprinted by permission of the publisher and Mr. Heller.

there's any principle of morality advocated in the book with which most intelligent—even indecent—people will disagree.

Q. *Well, when I was reading it, I first did a double take when Yossarian is censoring the letters, and my sympathy immediately fell to the people who were getting these letters.*

A. Really? Well, that hadn't occurred to me. They probably have the same status as the victims during a Shakespeare play. When critics deal in terms of classical tragedy—when they interpret Shakespearean tragedy—they see this as an examination of crime, the tragic flaw, and the retribution as representing a certain system of justice; but they ignore, let's say in *Macbeth*, all those children of—was it Macduff or Malcolm?—his wife is killed, his children are killed, and Banquo is slaughtered. All the peripheral characters seem to be exempt from the working-out of this moral principle.

I suppose it had not occurred to me that these people getting these letters would be perplexed by them. I'm not particularly disturbed by that.

Q. *Maybe I'm hypersensitive. . . . Getting back to what you said about people not being offended, isn't this type of satire by its very nature subversive—in the James Thurber sense of the word—to the establishment?*

A. Oh, I think anything critical is subversive by nature in the sense that it does seek to change or reform something that exists by attacking it. I think the impetus toward progress of any kind has always been a sort of discontent with what existed, and an effort to undermine what is existing, whether it's barbaric or not barbaric.

So, in the sense that the book is aware of certain faults or shortcomings—as much, I think, in the make-up of the individuals' characters as in the make-up of a society—in that sense, it is a very critical book, certainly. But it doesn't necessarily follow from that, that people would take exception to it.

Q. *What about the people who are criticized?*

A. I've met nobody yet who did not identify with my sympathetic characters. And among the people who did identify were a few of the prototypes of some of the more reprehensible characters in the book. I think anybody today feels, for example, that he is at the mercy of superiors—who don't know his job as well as he does, who don't know their own jobs as well as he knows their jobs and who, he feels, hamstring him or limit him in the execution of his duty.

Q. *And this includes superiors?*

A. Oh, yes—this includes his superiors as well. It occurred to me at a certain point that even General Walker, at the height of his troubles, could

very easily have identified with one of my sympathetic officers, because he himself was being the victim of the Pentagon and the politicians in Washington who were jeopardizing everything, say, good—and preventing him from existing and performing work at the height of his capabilities.

Q. *Have you gotten any unofficial reactions to the book from Air Force personnel?*

A. I have gotten no official reaction. I've gotten fan letters from people in the service—at least two, I believe, from officers, one of whom is with the Air Force Academy, but he was writing to express his approval of the book as literature rather than expressing any sympathy with the ideas.

I think another reason I have not heard any objections is that most people are treating it as a novel and judging it in those terms, as a work of fiction rather than as an essay or as a propaganda tract. It's not intended to be a sociological treatise on anything, although it—the substance of the fiction—is almost an encyclopedia of the current mental atmosphere.

It is certainly a novel of comment; there are comments about the loyalty oath, about the free enterprise system, about civil rights, about bureaucracy, about patriotism—but these are the ingredients out of which to create a fictional narrative.

In writing the book I was more concerned with producing a novel that would be as contemporary as possible. I don't mean contemporaneous with World War II; it is contemporary with the period I was writing in. I was more concerned with producing a work of fiction—of literary art, if you will—than of converting anybody or arousing controversy. I'm really afraid of getting involved in controversy.

Q. *Are you serious?*

A. Oh, yes—I'm a terrible coward. I'm just like Yossarian, you know. It's the easiest thing to fight—I learned that in the war—it takes a certain amount of courage to go to war, but not very much, not as much as to refuse to go to war. I think that's the danger that the world faces today; war might be the easiest solution to problems, and one country or the other might rely on war as a solution, not because it's dictated, but simply because it's a way out of frustration.

Q. *I can't accept your implication, a minute ago, that involvement in controversy is necessarily a barometer of bravery—because I love controversy, but I'm a coward, too.*

A. No, I didn't mean that. I don't love controversy—I don't like personal controversy.

Q. *No, no, I don't mean personal controversy, I mean controversy of ideas—*

A. Oh, yes, that's fine—but when I have a complaint against a department store, I try to avoid making it in person, I try to avoid using the phone—I'd much rather put it on paper and avoid all danger of any personal combat.

Q. *Your book received some fanatically favorable reviews, but there was one stern critic who said: "If Catch-22 were intended as a commentary novel, [the] sideswiping of character and action might be taken care of by thematic control. It fails here because half its incidents are farcical and fantastic. The book is an emotional hodge-podge; no mood is sustained long enough to register for more than a chapter." Now I don't want to put you in the silly position of saying, "But I don't sideswipe character and action!"—*

A. Well, I do sideswipe character and action. I think that's one of the approaches to the book that gives it what effect it has. I tried to avoid, first of all, the conventional structure of the novel; I tried to give it a structure that would reflect and complement the content of the book itself, and the content of the book really derives from our present atmosphere, which is one of chaos, of disorganization, of absurdity, of cruelty, of brutality, of insensitivity, but at the same time one in which people, even the worst people, I think are basically good, are motivated by humane impulses.

And I tried to emphasize this by the structure, much the same way that many of your modern artists have resorted to a type of painting as being most suitable to the emotions they want to express, to the visions they have; and your very good contemporary composers are using dissonances and irregular tempos and harmonics to get this same feeling.

I did consciously try to use a form of what might be called dramatic counterpoint, so that certain characters suffer tragedies, and they're dismissed almost flippantly—a line or two might describe something terrible happening to a character, whereas whole pages might be concentrated on something of subordinate dramatic value.

And by doing that, I tried to do two things. One was to emphasize the sense of loss, or the sense of sorrow, connected with it; and also to capture this thing in experience which permits us to survive the loss of people who are dear to us, so that nobody's suffering lingers with us very long.

People die and are forgotten. People are abused and are forgotten. People suffer, people are exploited, right now; we don't dwell upon them 24 hours a day. Somehow they get lost in the swirl of things of much less importance to us and to them and to the human condition.

So in that case I don't quarrel with the review; there was a definite technique, at the beginning of the book particularly, of treating people and incidents almost in terms of glimpses, and then showing as we progress that these things do have a meaning and they do come together.

Q. *That same reviewer also said: "As satire Catch-22 makes too many formal concessions to the standard novels of our day!"—*

A. I don't know what he means. I don't know whether his standards of satire should be accepted. There are formal concessions to the standard novel, certainly. You can't write a novel on piano. So as soon as you begin using words, then you begin making concessions to the form.

Catch-22 is not to my mind a far-out novel; it is not to my mind a formal novel. If anything, it was constructed almost meticulously, and with a meticulous concern to give the appearance of a formless novel. Now that's much different, in much the same way as with Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is possibly one of the most confusing novels when you first approach it, and yet there's a structure and tension in virtually every word.

Incidentally, it's turning out to be a very easy novel to read, because among the letters I get are many from people in high school and freshmen in college. I have a collection of letters that could be called love letters—from people of all three sexes, probably, and of all ages, and they're just rhapsodic in their enthusiasm.

I've yet to receive one letter that criticizes, but that may be that when people don't like a book they just don't write letters about it. What I do get is a kind of "God bless you" approach, or maybe a "This might save the world" feeling.

One thing I'm certain of, all these letters—and there must be about three or four hundred by now—I'm sure that the writers of each of these letters would like each other enormously if they met. People that I have met as a result of these letters—if they're in New York and I have seen them—there's almost an instantaneous rapport.

I think that comes from the fact that I express so much of my own views in the novel, and my own personality, with the result that anybody who responds to the book is going to respond to me. We meet, and almost immediately we're conversing like old friends.

Q. *I was talking to Ralph J. Gleason, and he was wondering how you feel about certain other writers' approaches to the insanity of our time. I'll name them one at a time. Louis-Ferdinand Céline?*

A. Céline's book, *Journey to the End of Night*, was one of those which gave me a direct inspiration for the form and tone of *Catch-22*.

Q. *Nelson Algren?*

A. *The Man With the Golden Arm*, which I had read earlier, became an almost unconscious influence in the form of this type of open hero.

Q. Ken Kesey?

A. I haven't read *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* yet—his book came out after mine—but I bought it a few weeks ago.

Q. Terry Southern?

A. I read *The Magic Christian* very quickly, and there were parts of it I liked enormously, and parts that just eluded me. I'm not a very good reader. I had not read his book before I wrote *Catch-22*, but I think those people Southern influenced through his book might very well have influenced me.

Q. Richard Condon?

A. I read *The Manchurian Candidate* and I read *The Oldest Confession*. When I read the review of *The Manchurian Candidate*, I was in about the middle of *Catch-22*, and I had a feeling, well, here's a guy who's writing the same book I am; I'd better read this quickly because he might have already written it.

And then I read it, and I think there's a great deal of similarity, first of all in the concern, or the use of political and social materials—or products of the political and social conflicts—as the basis for his book, and there's a great similarity in the attitude toward them, so that they are at once serious and at the same time it's almost like watching a kind of burlesque and also a kind of everyman show on stage.

There's a definite feeling of kinship with him, but I don't think they're the same kind of novel. Mine is, I suppose, an optimistic novel with a great deal of pessimism in it—there's a very heavy sense of the tragic—particularly toward the end, where I almost consciously sought to re-create the feeling of Dostoevsky's dark passages, and I have one or two allusions to chapters in Dostoevsky.

Q. In relation to the humorous aspect of the book, I want to ask you about the use of exaggeration as a vehicle for satire; do you think you may have exaggerated too much beyond the possibilities of reality?

A. Well, I tried to exaggerate in almost every case, gradually, to a point beyond reality—that was a deliberate intention, to do it so gradually that the unreality becomes more credible than the realistic, normal, day-to-day behavior of these characters.

Certainly, there are things in there which could not—well, there's one thing that could not . . . well, everything could possibly happen; nothing in there is supernatural—but it defies probability. But so much of what we do—without even thinking about it—so much of what is done in our day-to-day existence defies probability if we stop to examine it.

And this is the effect I wanted to achieve. Now, I was hoping to do this,

and with many people I succeeded, to make these characters seem more real in terms of their eccentricities carried to absurdity.

Q. You started to say that there was one thing in particular in the book that defies probability.

A. That's a scene which to many people is the high spot of the book and to other people it's the point at which their credulity was strained. And that is the incident—incident is an incongruous word for it—in which Milo bombs his own squadron and escapes without punishment.

I would say that more critics who praised the book singled this out as a triumph, with special appreciation, than any other single incident. On the other hand, most people in conversation, in discussing it, say that this was the one thing that they found hard to believe.

Now, I sincerely think that this is an impossibility; this is the one thing that could not happen—literally. I don't think that in time of war a man could get up and actually drop bombs deliberately on his own people and then escape without punishment, even in our society.

I think people in every country commit actions which would cause infinitely more damage to the national strength, to the national survival, to their fellow citizens; even commit actions which result in more deaths, physical deaths, as well—and be lionized for it; be made into heroes for it. But I don't think the actual act of killing would be allowed to escape punishment with everybody's approval.

Q. There are other things which I think go beyond the area of possibility. The soldier in white, for example, who is nourished by continuously being fed his own waste products intravenously—

A. No, he's not—well, yes he is, I suppose—that had not occurred to me. Of course, if you assume that there's a human being inside the bandages, then he could not be kept alive by his own waste products; that's a scientific impossibility. But if you begin to question, as I do, whether there is a human being inside, then it becomes a matter of economy just to keep using the same fluid to put back inside him.

But he is handled almost always as a kind of gruesome symbol of many things. In one instance, he is discussed as a middle-man. If you look at man—remove the conscience, remove the sensibility—well, if you look at his position in the nature of things, in one sense he can be no more than a middle-man: he takes matter, he absorbs it, he excretes it or uses it up, and this is a natural process in which he is just one tiny phase of the whole cycle.

As an animal, man is a vegetable. And that was the point of using the soldier in white that way.

No, he could not happen, I suppose, unless there was some gigantic conspiracy—it's almost supernatural—in which the reasons defy explanation; they decide to put this form swathed in bandages in the hospital and put nothing inside.

Q. Did you ever read Johnny Got His Gun—which was about a basket case—by Dalton Trumbo?

A. Oh, sure. The thing that I liked best about Johnny Got His Gun was that the *Daily News* wrote an editorial recommending it and praising it. It came out when the *News* was in its isolationist phase; anti-Roosevelt phase.

Q. I understand The Daily Worker was serializing it at the time, and they suddenly stopped right in the middle without a word of explanation when the peace pact between Stalin and Hitler was signed. . . . There were a couple of other areas in your book of probability versus possibility. Like eating chocolate-covered cotton—

A. Oh, it's not impossible that a man would try to market cotton covered with chocolate. It is impossible, I suppose, that they can eat it. And nobody does eat it in the book. In fact, when Milo gives it to Yossarian, Yossarian tastes it, then spits it out and says, "You can't give it to people, they'll get sick." So this is not done; in the book people do not eat chocolate-covered cotton, but there is a man trying to market it. Now, I think the corollaries of that. . . .

Q. What about the loyalty oath scene, where they have to pledge allegiance hundreds of times and sing The Star-Spangled Banner all over the place—

A. Again, that is not a physical impossibility. You know, in the first outline of this book, when it was first conceived—in my mind; it was never down on paper—there were going to be a number of deliberate anachronisms, very conspicuous anachronisms—there are anachronisms in now that are deliberate—there were going to be a number of supernatural things taking place, without any explanation for them, so that the impossible—the physically impossible—would be worked in with the possible, and be recognizable.

And then, I forget the motive, I decided nothing in this book would be something that's physically impossible.

Consequently, even in the latter half of the book, where you have this whore with the knife coming up in all kinds of disguises, the effect I give is that she's moving from place to place with the speed of light, because the scale there is changed to give you fast action; but it's always two hours or three hours that go by, so that he pushes the girl out of the plane in Rome, then flies back to the airfield, and you get the impression that she's

waiting there, she's beat him there, and she stabs him, but if you look, he spends a few hours running to find Hungry Joe, the pilot, to fly him back.

So the explanation would be: in that time, she could've hopped a plane somehow and gotten there. In the first writing, she was going to pop up with a speed that would've been impossible. And then I decided, let's keep consistent about this.

Now there are, I suppose, things which don't even occur to me, like the soldier in white. But it's not physically impossible that somebody, for reasons of their own, would take this zombie—which is what he's supposed to be: a zombie, really, or nothing; and I don't know if there's much difference, let's say, between the human animal that lacks sensibility, and nothing but matter—but it is not physically impossible, it's improbable, that an organization would exist to perpetrate this kind of trick.

If any government wanted to, for reasons of their own, get some kind of wire-structured *papier maché* and cover it with bandages and pass it off as a man who's been seriously wounded in the war—I'm saying they could do it; that's what I mean by its not being physically impossible.

Q. All right, what about the family visiting the hospital and failing to recognize that Yossarian isn't their son?

A. Well, the only one who accepts him as the son almost instantly is the mother.

Q. Of all people. . . .

A. Well, it's easier for mothers to accept strangers—I've noticed that about women and men—women seem to be much fonder of other people's children than of their own, and men don't care; the only children men care for are their own.

In that scene, it makes no difference to the mother; she says, "What difference does that make?" The sailor says, "He's not Giuseppe, he's Yossarian." And I forget what the father does. In that unforgettable chapter, I forget what happens.

Again, it is improbable—certainly, it is improbable—but, again, it is not impossible that this conversation should take place. It's an unusual reaction, but not an impossible one.

Q. In retrospect, are there any important changes you would make in the book?

A. I can't think of any. I would not change Milo bombing his squadron because, on one level, this book is an allegory—not on a level, but there are passages where it becomes allegoric; there are other passages where it becomes realism—and I think that, allegorically, that is a consistent action and a most logical action.

It's no more improbable than other things Milo has done out of the goodness of his heart. What is improbable is not that a man should do this and find a *rationale* for doing it—Milo is very good at finding that—but what's improbable is that any society would permit it to go unpunished.

Q. *Some of the stuff that does go unpunished in real life makes it seem almost possible after all—*

A. Well, it is possible, for example, in this country, and in Russia, in England—it is possible for individuals to be murdered, put to death, without any legal sanction for it, and for the people who did it to be known and to escape punishment. That is conceivable. In fact, it's almost a daily occurrence here.

But Milo's action transcends this. It's a time of war, and he bombs indiscriminately, and it's an act of *physical* violence. It is conceivable to me that somebody might manufacture a food product or a drug product that would *poison* people, and the punishment for this would be slight; there would be extenuations if not justifications.

I don't think it's probable that this same person could indiscriminately run through New York, let's say, firing a machine gun, and escape without punishment.

It depends to a large extent, *always*, on whom your victims *are*. Or who you are. And in this case it was just an attack on his own society; it's the society, or the members of it, that are being attacked almost without discrimination. That couldn't—it's just inconceivable that it would—go unpunished.

I suppose if I re-read the book—each time I do read it, I find I'm angling for something; I'll read a chapter and I'll say, "Maybe I can make this into a recording," or "Maybe this would go well at Upstairs at the Downstairs [a New York night club]" and the next thing you know, I'm scheming commercially—but I think one thing I would probably do would be to cut.

And what I would cut would probably be language rather than incident. I did cut enormously. Bob Gottlieb, my editor, and a very tactful man as well, made only two suggestions, really. Let me say also that at the time I handed this book in, it was 800 typewritten pages, and his first reaction was that it's the most upsetting book he's ever read, and it's a splendid, splendid book, and he would publish it just as is.

I said to him, "Well, if you have any suggestions. . . ." And he said, "Well, of course, we'll talk about it. . . ." It was down to about 600–625 typewritten pages when it was finally submitted. And that's an enormous amount of cutting. He never said *cut*, but on the basis of his suggestions, I went back and made my own corrections.

With this suggestion in mind, I cut something like a third of the first

200 pages—about 60 pages—without cutting a single incident; it was all in terms of language or dialogue.

Even in its final version, one of the general criticisms against the book is that it's too long and that it does tend to be repetitious. Other people take this repetitious quality—they don't use that word—if they don't like the book, it's repetitious; if they *like* it, it has a recurring and cyclical structure, like the theme in a Beethoven symphony.

Q. *Now—this being quite unusual—your sympathetic central character is an atheist; was there any reaction to this, say by members of the clergy?*

A. None whatsoever. One of the nicest and earliest letters I got was from a member of the clergy on the faculty of Notre Dame. This flabbergasted me. I remember I was in the office at *McCall's* [Heller wrote the promotional copy for that magazine] when I got the envelope from Notre Dame, and it was addressed to me at Simon & Schuster, which meant it was in reference to the book. A chill went through me—the same kind of chill I got when I received this letter from the Air Force Academy—you know: *here it comes . . .* until I knew what was inside . . . and then I was amazed and delighted.

Then I realized that my amazement comes from my own naïveté about other people. I've been very naïve about the Republican mind, because a few friends I have who are Republicans embraced this book immediately; I thought it was a liberal book, and they said "No, it's not a liberal book, it's anti-everything."

And I was very naïve about the mind of the intellectual Catholic or the intellectual religious leader—a friend who was educated at Marquette told me about the Jesuit Catholic as opposed to many of the superstitions and practices and narrowmindedness of other Catholics. The book got a good review in *Jubilee*, which is a Catholic publication, and a fairly good review in the University of Scranton, which, I think, reads for the Index and classics books.

But Yossarian is the kind of atheist—I'm not sure he's an atheist—

Q. *Well, I'm taking his word for it—*

A. Does he say he's an atheist?

Q. *Sure.*

A. When?

Q. *When he's talking to Scheisskopf's wife on Thanksgiving.*

A. Oh, he had that argument over God. He says to her, "I thought you didn't believe in God." And she says, "I don't believe in God as much as

you don't, but the God I don't believe in is a humane God." So I suppose that is a giveaway, . . . but I don't conceive of Yossarian as an atheist any more than I conceive of the chaplain as necessarily believing in God.

I see Yossarian as having no positive attitude on the subject, and I see the chaplain as having no definite attitude on the subject. I would prefer to think of Yossarian as an atheist when pushed for an answer, but also as someone who regards any discussion of it as having no relation to the problems of the moment.

I don't think he's un-Christian in his feelings if we take the term Christian to mean what it ought to mean.

Q. Why did you have an Assyrian as the central character?

A. Because I was looking for two things. I got the idea, frankly, from James Joyce's placing Bloom in Dublin. I wanted somebody who would seem to be outside the culture in every way—ethnically as well as others.

Now, because America is a melting pot, there are huge concentrations of just about every other kind of nationality. I didn't want to give him a Jewish name, I didn't want to give him an Irish name, I didn't want to symbolize the white Protestant—but somebody who was almost a new man, and I made him Assyrian (but what I was ignorant of, for one thing, his name is not Assyrian; I've since been told it's Armenian).

But I wanted to get an extinct culture, somebody who could not be identified either geographically, or culturally, or sociologically—somebody as a person who has a capability of ultimately divorcing himself completely from all emotional and psychological ties.

Q. There was some speculation by a couple of my friends that you got the idea from William Saroyan's "Twenty Thousand Assyrians."

A. It was from that story that I first learned the Assyrians were extinct, or almost extinct. But my purpose in doing so was to get an outsider, a man who was intrinsically an outsider, who had the capability of being a complete outsider. It's very hard for a person really to shake off all his roots.

I like to think that I am not Jewish, but certain tastes for foods, certain odors, associations. . . .

Q. If you like Chinese food, too, that doesn't make you Chinese.

A. No, not the same way. I don't like Chinese food. And I don't like Jewish food. I think Jewish food is worse than Chinese food. But there's a consciousness. Even if I could forget it, other people won't let me forget it completely. And I imagine this is true of everybody. I have certain friends from the South who are always self-conscious.

That's the big myth about this country, by the way—the melting pot. It

isn't. They never melted. I think everybody in this country has a minority complex. Even the majority—they're guilty about being the majority.

Yossarian will be able even to be outside his own family tradition. You know, his family is never mentioned—I think it's never mentioned—brothers, sisters, father, mother. I forget now whether I refer to his grandmother and aunt, or other children's on the block. But he has no family. I'm not sure where he came from.

His background—you don't know whether he went to college or not—you assume he did because he gets in certain discussions and conversations which would presuppose a degree of education. I wanted to be vague in those areas, but the name would be the same, without making it one of these Restoration names, where the name itself suggests a word.

Q. My biggest shock in the book was to find out that Yossarian's first name was John.

A. I thought that was funny to mention just once. That it should be a name like John. There were certain instances in there where I just could not avoid putting something in because it made me laugh. I think, too, that he should have a first name, so that he doesn't become completely a symbol. I wanted to give him some orientation.

You know, he's not a perfect hero. There are certain things he does of which I don't approve. He has certain flaws in relationship to women, for example. Now, to an extent, it's joyous and robust, but it's not nice—it's not really gracious on his part—never to think of this girl by her name, but always as Nately's whore.

And there are other instances, in which he reacts—well, when he punches Nately in the nose, I think, is an indication of the extreme emotional state he's in, that he'd do this, but he himself is contrite immediately afterward. I certainly didn't want him to become the ideal hero. He's human, and the temptation to sell out when he's offered and he agrees to do it—is another indication of that. And I think *John* just puts him right back where he belongs.

If he were English, I probably would have called him Charlie, because the word Charlie in England has certain associations; it's a synonym for *chump*. A John is the name that call girls use to identify customers, so it's so typically *nebbish*, you know?

Q. Just for the benefit of people not in the know, what's the translation of Lieutenant Scheisskopf's name?

A. Shithead.

Q. Thank you.

A. Yeah, but who's not in the know?

Q. *I wasn't in the know; somebody had to tell me.*

A. I didn't know; I had to ask my secretary. When I got to him, and I had to give him a name, I decided I'd want to call him the German translation of shithead, and my secretary's roommate then was a Fulbright scholar from Germany, so I wrote down, "Find out. . . ."

But there again, that let me use an inside joke which pleased me very much, and possibly which other people didn't notice. At one point in dialogue, someone says, "I wonder what that Shithead is up to"—with a capital S there. I have a number of things like that which I like to think are only mine; it gives me an edge on the world. But one by one, I give them away.

Q. *All right, how about the background of the chaplain being an Anabaptist?*

A. There again, the explanation is similar to the one that accounts for Yossarian's name. I am not that well informed about religion, but I assume that Anabaptists are either extinct or not very militant. I was looking, again, for a religion that would sound familiar and yet would not have associations with any of our established religions.

So, the chaplain, by virtue of being associated with this kind of faith, could then be capable of certain acts, certain thoughts, and sympathies. They'd be a little more plausible, rather than anybody associated with a religion with which we're familiar, because people who think in stereotypes—well, people are stereotypes to begin with—and you don't want a rabbi or a Baptist minister, or a Catholic priest acting too far outside the stereotype or the circumference of behavior which other people think limits his action. They may not exist, but people have conceptions of how other people's professions act.

This gives the chaplain a certain amount of latitude of reaction and response in actions. Also, I didn't want him to be either sympathetic or non-sympathetic to any of these groups. He's really a religious man, but he's a non-denominational minister.

Q. *Jacques in Candide was an Anabaptist—*

A. I didn't know that. I've never read *Candide*.

Q. *That's funny, because some people I know have thought all along that this was one of your private jokes.*

A. I'll tell you, I got this letter from an English instructor who wanted to do a paper on *Catch-22*, and he asked me a whole load of questions, with a certain intent to know the symbolic value, and I replied as honestly as I could. He was right, I had not thought of it, that one of the prevailing ideas was one of withdrawal. It had not occurred to me. I know I have characters disappear, and I have characters who disappear by dying, and I

have Yossarian disappear at the end. I had not seen this pattern that extensively. So I learned something from him.

But then he got to miracle ingredient Z-247, which is mentioned at the beginning, as Yossarian is boasting, "I'm Pepsodent, I'm Tarzan, I'm miracle ingredient Z-247. . . ." He looked that up and found it's an element called Einsteinium, named after Einstein.

And then, toward the end, in that chapter, "The Eternal City," Einstein becomes the universal hero when Yossarian, just brooding, subtracted all the people who were suffering and all the people afflicted, and you might be left with Albert Einstein and an old violinist somewhere.

Now he had linked these two up!

Q. *You mean the secret ingredient and this reference to Einstein?*

A. Yes. He said he can't believe that's just accidental. That I picked this ingredient Einsteinium because of Albert Einstein.

Q. *And it was pure coincidence?*

A. Yes, I didn't know this. I just picked Z-247 right out of the blue.

Q. *In the process of writing Catch-22, did you ever change your mind about how you were going to end it?*

A. No. The ending was written long before the middle was written. I suppose right after I sold the book, I was riding on the subway one day, and I actually wrote the words to the ending—this was perhaps four years before the book was finished—and I didn't change it once.

I couldn't see any alternative ending. It had a certain amount of integrity, not merely with the action of the book—that could've permitted anything—but with the moral viewpoint of the book; the heavy suffusion of moral content which is in there, it seemed to me, required a resolution of choice rather than of accident.

Q. *But you know what people will say—and this is one of the things I meant before when I asked about people who might've found the book objectionable—Yossarian deserts at the end. Now this is what people always say about pacifists and conscientious objectors: If this is the moral, then everybody should desert, and we would've lost the war.*

A. I thought I had gone beyond that point by a discussion preceding his act of running. The last chapter or two is almost in the nature of disputation, in which all the possibilities are discussed and resolved. The answer to that one—that if everybody deserts—then he would be a damn fool not to. When he says, "I'm tired, I have to think of myself, my country is safe

now," he's told, "Well, suppose everyone felt that way," and he says, "Well, I'd be a damn fool to feel differently."

I also tried to make it very evident that the war was just about over.

Q. *Would it have made any difference if the war weren't over?*

A. Oh, certainly. I mean if this book had been set two or three years earlier, before the beachhead, then it would be a completely different book.

Q. *Suppose he had flown that many missions, and it was still the middle of the war?*

A. Well, if the book were written then—if he had that many missions and the other conditions were the same, that he were being asked to fly more purely to help a superior officer achieve a promotion—then I would've had him desert, because the replacements are waiting there, as they are at the end of the book; there are replacements ready. So there would not have been any great loss as far as the military effort were concerned.

But if you postulate this situation: It's right after Pearl Harbor, and we don't have enough planes, and we don't have enough men, and Hitler is in a dominant and threatening position, then it would be a completely different situation.

I regard this essentially as a peacetime book. What distresses me very much is that the ethic that is often dictated by a wartime emergency has a certain justification when the wartime emergency exists, but when this thing is carried over into areas of peace—when the military, for example, retains its enormous influence on affairs in a peacetime situation, and where the same demands are made upon the individual in the cause of national interest; the line that I like very much is when Milo tells Yossarian that he's jeopardizing his traditional freedoms by exercising them—when this wartime emergency ideology is transplanted to peacetime, then you have this kind of lag which leads not only to absurd situations, but to very tragic situations.

I worked over certain lines very carefully. On that loyalty oath crusade, I don't remember the actual words, but a sentence is used to the effect that the combat men soon found themselves at the mercy of the administrators appointed to serve them. You have this inversion.

Now this is the kind of thing that happens very easily. There's no question that policemen are public servants, but they're not in a position of servitude in relation to the people that they're supposed to serve.

There's a kind of blindness which did carry over to peacetime. I recognize the difference that if a house is on fire you grab something and run out and you leave the door open; if the house is not on fire then it should be locked up.

The stimulus for certain action justifies an action. If the stimulus is not

there and the action exists anyway, then you've got a right to examine why you're doing it.

Q. *In the end, Yossarian deserts in order to find sanity in Sweden—*

A. But he's not going to get there, he knows that.

Q. *He's not?*

A. Oh, no. I mean he's told, "You'll never get there." And he says, "I know, but I'll try."

Q. *People aren't sure of this, just as they're not sure whether Franny is pregnant or not—*

A. They're not sure because they're hopeful he'll get there, I suppose. For one thing, he's choosing the wrong way. You could get there by rowing the way Orr did, but he's going to Rome, and he's told two or three times, "You'll never make it." Or, "You can't get there from here." But he says, "Well, at least I'll try."

There's also implicit—well, it's not implicit if people miss it—that this is an act of opposition or an act of protest. It's the only way left that he can protest without cutting his own head off. And he doesn't choose to do that; he's not a martyr. But the very act of doing what he does will stir up things, will stir up a certain amount of talk and dissension, will embarrass his superior officers. I don't think Sweden is paradise.

Q. *That's what my question was going to be. Whether or not Yossarian gets there, do you think Sweden doesn't have Catch-22?*

A. Oh, I don't know. Sweden was important to me as a goal, or an objective, a kind of Nirvana. It's important, if you're in a situation which is imperfect to an extent where it's uncomfortable or painful, that you have some objective to move toward in order to change that situation.

Now, in Yossarian's situation—his environment, his society, the world; and it's not just America, it's the world itself—the monolithic society closes off every conventional area of protest or corrective action, and the only choice that's left to him is one of ignoble acceptance in which he can profit and live very comfortably—but nevertheless ignoble—or flight, a renunciation of that condition, of that society, that set of circumstances.

The only way he can renounce it without going to jail is by deserting it, trying to keep going until they capture him. I like to think of him as a kind of spirit on the loose. You know, he is the only hope left at the end of the book. Had he accepted that choice. . . .

Q. *Is he the only hope? What about the chaplain and Major Danby?*

A. Well, until Yossarian makes that decision, he is the only hope. Major

Security police said the truck driver, employed by an electronic firm, had orders to pick up eight boxes of electronics equipment at the Comptroller General's office.

A. It's not out of *Catch-22*; I like to think that *Catch-22* is right out of circumstances like *that*. Things like this are inevitable. I think if you want to start clipping paragraphs from newspapers, you'll find that organization today, any organized effort, must contain the germ of continuing disorganization.

The most effective business enterprise, I should think, is a single proprietorship, where one man goes into business for himself and has to hire nobody. The next best possibly is two men as partners; they work harder—there must be some kind of mathematical ratio, particularly when it involves government, I think, because government is so *huge*.

And that includes the Army, for example. You're dealing with millions of people, and there are certain personality- or mental-types that are attracted to that kind of work, either because they can't get a job anywhere else, or because they like doing that.

I cannot imagine anybody who's really ambitious, anybody with any real talent, anybody of any real intelligence, choosing to place himself within a large organization, where he functions in relationship to dozens or hundreds of other people, because every contact is an impairment of his efficiency.

And the kind of person who would stamp documents or classify documents is a kind of person that would not normally be expected to excel in the matter of efficiency or in the matter of making astute judgments, value judgments.

Q. But you know that intelligent people do go into large organizations; the trend is more and more toward that—

A. I'm speaking mainly of government. I would say no, that there are certain types of intelligence that do well in business; I think that to succeed in business—and this is based on limited observations, but personal observations—to really get to the higher echelon of a large company requires at least one special kind of intelligence, and requires a great deal of energy and hard work and ambition.

At the same time, the company, the organization that these people manage, is *incredible*. I mean, nothing in my book—nothing in the wildest satire—goes beyond it. The inter-office rivalries; the mistakes in communications; the difficulties of finding people to promote who can do a job well—the amount of waste in the life of any corporation, at the least the ones I've been with, is just extraordinary.

Now, on the other hand, it's hard to find anybody you'd classify as an

Danby and the chaplain are sort of inspired by him. But, remember, a consequence of his accepting the compromise that's offered him—the rest of the men will then continue to fly more missions without protesting.

Now all the way through, there is this theme about the bulk of the men either being *indifferent* to what's happening to them, or not *knowing* what's happening to them. It occurs in their acceptance of Milo. Even in Yossarian's acceptance of Milo. Yossarian is actually fond of Milo, and I am too, as an individual. There's a certain purity of purpose about him. Even about his hypocrisy. It's not nearly as malignant as other characters in the book. Although he does the most damage.

There's that situation when Yossarian is kidding Milo about the time the mess sergeant poisoned the men: put laundry soap in the sweet potatoes to prove that the men don't know what's good for them. They all came down with this epidemic of diarrhea. And Milo said, "I guess that showed him how wrong he was." And Yossarian said, "No, on the contrary, it showed him how right he was. The men lapped it up and clamored for more." They *knew* they'd been poisoned, though they didn't know how, or why, and they really didn't care.

Now Yossarian doesn't care—this does not motivate him—this business of selling out the other people. At this point he has become estranged from them, as individuals. But one of the consequences of his accepting the medal would be that everybody *else* would continue to fly more missions without protest.

And yet there is also this hint of dissatisfaction, because while he's ostracized in the daytime, at night different people keep popping up and asking him the same question, "How are you doing?" But in the daytime they won't associate themselves with him. Even Appleby, who has been the perfect model of a very good combat man, begins to have misgivings toward the end and pops up out of the darkness to tell him that they're going to offer you this deal, and he's beginning to become disillusioned with the concept of following orders because they're orders.

Q. Let me just read this little clipping to you—it sounds as if it's right out of your book:

STOCKHOLM, NOV. 6 (AP)—Security arrangements within the Swedish armed forces are under scrutiny following the recent disappearance of 24,000 secret documents from the offices of the Comptroller General of the Armed Forces, it was disclosed today.

The documents were gone for nine days before a civilian truck driver returned them, saying he had picked them by mistake.

The documents contained full information on Swedish ammunition supplies, estimated ammunition needs in case of mobilization and locations of Swedish munition dumps.

but when the need becomes critical, then—if I might quote an old philosopher—goodbye, Charlie.

Q. Do you think that, in the film version of *Catch-22*, Major Major should be played by Henry Fonda or by an actor who looks like Henry Fonda?

A. Assuming that that's left in the movie version, then I would say an actor who either looks a little like Henry Fonda or who looks nothing at all like Henry Fonda.

But, you know, I must have 40 to 60 characters in this book; there's so much, just physically, that won't be able to go into a picture. And you start thinking, what are those things that are most valuable, which you want to keep? One of the first things you have to put in the nonpriority category are those things which are funny and nothing else.

And what are most valuable? Well, the things of continuity, the theme of insanity accepted without any eye-blinking, the feeling of frustration—of impotence, actually—a succession of scenes where the characters just can't do anything, physical or mental.

This chapter that comes earlier, that people don't talk about as much as I thought they would, which impresses me enormously every time I think of it—it's a scene in the nose of the plane, where Yossarian is there with Aarfy, the navigator, and he tries to tell him to go out to the back of the plane, and Aarfy smiles—because he's not afraid of the flak, and he does not hear what Yossarian is saying.

And Yossarian—mounting frustration—between guiding the pilot out, turning around and being poked in the ribs by Aarfy, and hitting the ceiling because he thinks he's dying, and then finally he's slamming Aarfy with all his might, and Aarfy keeps smiling—it's like hitting a sofa pillow. And he bursts into tears in utter frustration; the whole thing has become so unreal to him. Well, there's a sense of inability to get across something so simple in a time of danger.

The truth is so simple and so evident. Later on, he's bleeding, he's wounded, and Aarfy is there again. And you have almost the same scene repeated. He thinks he's been hit in the testicles—he hollers, "I lost my balls!"—he's sitting in a puddle of blood, and Aarfy doesn't hear him, and doesn't understand. And Yossarian says, "I'm dying and nobody knows."

The truth—the dangers—are so obvious and so simple, yet he can't make himself understood. That is something I'd want to keep in the picture version. I want to keep this sense of injustice—the element of the tribe—the judges waiting to judge, having this tremendous amount of power of force behind them.

intellectual as being associated with a business. To me, and I think to most people who have a high degree of intelligence, creative intelligence, business is boring after a certain point. There really are no new challenges.

The kind of choice becomes between showing the gross profit 4 million dollars one year, how do we boost it to 4½ million the next year, how do we keep it from slipping back—and after a while you really don't give a damn.

And I begin to wonder whether the people involved really care about it is a profit thing. I think they care about it in terms of (1) their own security and (2) their own ego-fulfillment. It becomes a personal challenge rather than distributing more gaskets.

I don't think they really care about the stockholders—the widow who is dependent on increased dividends—it's just even like a beaver building a dam. A beaver builds a dam—I don't know why a beaver wants a dam, by the way, but I have a feeling that it may not even need the dam—it builds a dam because it's a beaver. And a person trained to one occupation, even when he gets to the top, he continues doing accountancy because he's an accountant.

Q. I have a few real-life items in mind which, I think, say more about what *Catch-22* is than any definition possibly could, and I'd like to get whatever reactions they evoke in you. Item: The Department of Welfare has finally revised a long-standing rule so that now, when a public assistance case is closed because of the death of the person who had been receiving the public assistance, it's no longer necessary that the deceased person be notified by mail that he won't get any further public assistance.

A. It does not surprise me at all. That's like that educational session in the beginning of the book, with the rule Colonel Korn employs: to cut off these embarrassing questions; the only ones who would be allowed to ask questions were those who never did.

But it does not surprise me. There is a law of life: People in need of help have the least chance of getting it. Here again, we can almost establish a mathematical relationship. The chance of a person getting help is in inverse proportion to the extent of his need.

And this is true of mental cases; this is true in social work; it's certainly true in business; it's true of people who want credit; it's true of friendship.

Now, that happens with Major Major too. I hate to keep referring to my book—I love to keep referring to my book—there's a line about Major Major: Because he needed a friend so desperately he never found one.

I think it's certainly true of mental cases. A person who's in out-and-out need, who's on the verge of suicide, who is paranoic on the strength of it, is going to get no help from anybody; a mild neurotic will be encouraged to see a psychiatrist, his friends will want to help him and indulge him,

Ken Barnard Interview with Joseph Heller

Husky, tanned and good-natured, Joseph Heller hunched over a luncheon plate of gefilte fish he had just spooned from a jar.

Far from the flak sent up by his wildly satirical novel, *Catch-22*, and the movie made from it, he sat in his Fire Island cottage attired in walking shorts. Around his neck was a long string of love beads made by his 18-year-old daughter, Erica.

"She told me that after about three days, I'd get used to them," he said. "This is the third day and, you know, she's right."

Erica and her brother Teddy, 13, were spending a few days with their mother, Shirley, shopping in Manhattan, so Heller was taking advantage of the quiet to work on a second novel. Unlike *Catch-22*, it is not a war novel, but it deals with a corporate executive who, not unlike Yossarian in *Catch*, worries about how his life is to end. The first draft is on long, yellow legal pads, in longhand.

The Hellers will have been married for 25 years come next October, and says he: "Neither one of us has ever had a divorce. We're beginning to think there's something wrong with us."

While Lucy, Heller's beagle, joined me in listening attentively, the author talked about the movie, in which Alan Arkin portrays the desperately unhappy bombardier, Yossarian, and the book he started in 1953, *Catch-18*.

"*Catch-18?*"

Right. That was the title under which he wrote the book. As he recalls it, "The first chapter was published in 1955 in *New World Writing* No. 7. It used to be a quarterly anthology that published parts of books people were working on. When the book was done, they were ready to set type as *Catch-18*."

"Then one day when I was working for *McCall's* (in the promotion department), I got a frantic call from my editor who said: 'Come over here. Something terrible has happened.'"

"The something terrible was they had just read in *Publisher's Weekly*

that a few weeks before *Catch-18* was to come out, Leon Uris was publishing a novel called *Mila 18*. Leon Uris was then very well known because he had done *Exodus*. They felt it would have been disastrous to have two books coming out with the number 18 in the title. If people had to make a choice, they would choose his rather than mine.

"So we spent about two weeks of great, great depression and soul-searching trying to come up with [19] another title. We actually deluded ourselves, three adults—me, my editor and the woman in charge of promotion—that there was no substitute for 18. It had to be 18. We were too rational; we were behaving like lunatics. We had to find an explanation for the feeling, and I found the explanation. It was that it's the only number that begins with a vowel, and *Catch* ends with a consonant. And that's why no other number sounds like it. And they accepted that!

"Then we found another exception. 'Eleven' begins with a vowel, but we couldn't use 11 because it has an extra syllable, and there was a movie out then called *Ocean's 11*."

"For two weeks I was going through *Bartlett's Quotations* looking for ideas. Then my editor called up and said, 'I've got it; I think I've got it. Don't say no too quickly. I want you to think about it.' So I said, 'Well, what is it?' and he said: '*Catch-22*.' I said, 'Yeahhh, that's it.'"

"He and I liked the fact that the number 22 has a relevance to the novel because so many things do repeat themselves. The soldier in white comes back a second time, the dying soldier sees everything twice, and the chaplain thinks that everything that happens has happened once before. For that reason the two 2's struck me as being very appropriate to the novel."

So *Catch-22* was published in 1961 and the following year Columbia Pictures paid Heller a total of \$125,000 for the movie rights, which were eventually conveyed to Paramount, under whose banner the movie directed by Mike Nichols is now playing.

When the novel first appeared it was panned by *The New York Times*, which later contritely featured a cover story on Heller in its Sunday book review. *Catch-22* never did sell enough copies in a single week to make the *Times*' best-seller list, though it did rack up sales of 32,000 copies in the first year before the paperback appeared and became an instantaneous best seller.

Heller's most recent statement from his publisher shows that into the early part of last year there have been purchased [24] 575,000 copies of the paperback edition. The sales will undoubtedly be stimulated further by the movie.

Heller still grimaces when he remembers the review of his book run by *The New Yorker* magazine. "Oh boy! I mean, *The New Yorker* attacked me and the book. They were real nasty."

People are always asking Heller, who flew 60 missions as a World War II bombardier, why he waited until 1953 to begin the novel about the hapless Yossarian and his zany bombers.

His reply: "I started the book when I was ready. There's a line in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* when he asks his parents, 'Why did you have me?' and the father replies, 'We didn't know it would be you.' I didn't have *Catch-22* to write until I began writing it. It's not as though I postponed writing that particular novel until 1953 when I had the idea and began it. I don't think I could have written or even conceived it right after the war.

"What *Catch-22* is more about than World War II is the Korean War and the Cold War. The elements that inspired the ideas came to me from the civilian situation in this country in the 1950's when we did have such things as loyalty oaths to say when we were at war in Korea and MacArthur did seem to be wanting to provoke a war against China, when Dulles was taking us to the brink of war against Russia every other week and it seemed inevitable that we were going to plunge right into another major war.

"Until that time we were in a process of restoring ourselves. The same factionalism, the same antagonism, the mortal enmity that exists between groups today in this country existed then as well. But to me it was a new phenomenon. I chose the war (World War II) as a setting because it seemed to me we were at war. Certainly that was the start of the civil rights movement, for example. There were whites who wanted to kill every black. I remember those really disgustingly terrifying photographs of little children going to school in Clinton, Ky., and New Orleans—little black kids going into kindergarten and those white monsters with clubs—the women snarling and cursing and their faces contorted by such hatred.

"Then there was the same type of antagonism developing between (Senator) Joseph McCarthy—and Nixon and his committee—and people who, well, it then was called the Communist conspiracy. Teachers and Quakers were being fired. There was a kind of war going on between groups.

"I see *Catch-22* as not about World War II. It certainly does not reflect my attitude toward that war. For everybody after Pearl Harbor, it was a war we wanted to fight—a war we knew had to be won. It doesn't reflect my emotions of combat, which were different from Yossarian's. An important point in the book is that the war in Europe is drawing to a close as the danger to Yossarian from his own superiors intensifies. He was able to say in the end of the book that the war against Germany is just about over and the country's not in danger any more, but he is. It's essentially a conflict between people—American officers and their own government. They are the antagonists of *Catch-22*—much more so than the Germans and Hitler, who are scarcely mentioned.

"The combat men found themselves at the mercy of the people who are employed to serve them, the administrators. In order to get their flak suits they have to sing the Star-Spangled Banner twice; in order to get the maps they have to recite the Pledge of Allegiance; and they suddenly find themselves enslaved by those officials whose original function was to be of service to them.

"I think we've had such a situation continuing since the end of World War II, and the novel applies even more today."

Heller believed he was distorting ridiculous systems of logic that an entrenched officialdom can hatch. The symbolic novel he thought he was writing has been transformed by ensuing events into a realistic novel. A propos of the development, he summons a wry smile as he asks: "Remember reading in the papers about this general and the master sergeants who were investigated for watering PX (post exchange) booze and sending money into Switzerland?" The smile [27] becomes a hearty laugh as he adds: "To me the funniest part is that they took back their medals!"

For 15 years after the war it was impossible to persuade Heller to get aboard an airplane. He still thinks you have "to be nuts or have a potential for being nuts to become a pilot."

He flew more than 20 missions before he saw a plane shot down with men bailing out. "Till then it was a lark. Even when the missions were dangerous, I was too stupid to realize it. It was like a movie to me."

It was his 37th mission—his second to Avignon—which is described in the book and movie and left him looking forward passionately to becoming an ex-flier. During it, the co-pilot went "a little berserk" and grabbed the controls away from the pilot. Heller was in the nose of the bomber and did not know what had happened. For a while he felt they had lost a wing and were going straight down. He had just seen an engine blow up on the aircraft ahead of his ship with a wing falling off, the plane going down and no parachutes coming out.

"Then suddenly after we dropped our bombs," he says, "our plane started to go straight down and I was pinned to the top of the cabin. The co-pilot had thought we were climbing too steeply and would stall. He grabbed the controls to shove us back down. We went down and I thought I was dying.

"Then the plane straightened out and flew through flak and my ear-phones were pulled out. I didn't know my headset was out. You know, when you press the button to talk, you hear a click, but I pressed it and heard nothing, so I thought I was already dead.

"For a while the rest of the crew couldn't hear me, and when I did plug in I heard this guy—the co-pilot—hysterical on the intercom yelling, 'The bombardier doesn't answer. Help him! Help him! Go help the bombardier.' And I said, 'I'm the bombardier; I'm OK,' and he said, 'Go help the

gunner.' He was shot through the leg and that's in the book and movie. But I added to it and had him shot in the middle."

Heller made a promise to himself that if he survived the war he would stay off airplanes. For years he was true to his word. Then he spent 24 hours on a train from Miami to New York—"and that's when I changed my mind: I decided I'd rather be dead."

Being especially facile with humor, dialog and chase scenes, Heller has hired out for script work on such movies as *Sex and the Single Girl*, *Casino Royale*, and *Dingus Margee*.

But unless he needs the money, he's not looking for movie assignments: "I would rather spend my effort on something I value and has a greater possibility of endurance. You can say much more in a novel than you can in a movie. But I'm very good at rewriting movies. I can do them like lighting because I'm good at dialog and humor, and I can characterize quickly."

He admits that he suffers through the construction of expository passages in his novels, always looking forward to when he can break into dialog.

He has no desire to do an entire screenplay. It would take as much work as turning out a novel—"and yet it's not autonomous. Movies are made with a popular audience in mind, whereas in a novel I can write for my own audience and myself. I can't write unless I give it everything I've got. When I was writing advertising presentations, which I was doing when I was writing *Catch-22*, the reason I was good at it was that I put as much imagination into those slide shows as I was putting in the evenings into *Catch-22*."

Heller kept his distance from the filming of his novel. A formal invitation was extended to him, but he regarded that as a courtesy, deciding that he wasn't really wanted. He didn't care to go to the movie locale in Mexico since he thought he would be in the way and might make people nervous.

"Also, I've been on the set when movies were being made and it's the dullest procedure in the world," he says. "If you're not involved in working on that thing, it's monotony. And it would be irresponsible for me to be raising questions or setting goals if I'm not the one who has to achieve them. I had only one conversation with Mike [28] Nichols and (scenarist) Buck Henry. They had me read a script—I think it was the script before the final—and wanted my opinions. I gave a few.

"I told them what I liked about it and a few things that would give me concern if I had to make the movie. Nichols was intelligent enough to ignore a couple of my suggestions. One or two things I thought would not work worked beautifully in the film. This was another good reason why he was smart to keep me away."

After he saw the movie, alone with his wife and daughter and Nichols in a screening room, he took the director aside and told him he was overwhelmed, that it was "maybe the best picture I ever saw, which was honestly the way I felt about it—and he was relieved.

"The opening was so hypnotic that by the time the titles were finished, I forgot it was a movie about a book I had written and I was just waiting to see what would happen."

He regards the picture version not as an adaptation, but rather a translation. In Heller's view, most adaptations of books and plays don't work: "They don't make particularly good movies. One reason is that they stick too closely to the architecture of what is essentially a literary work. I think what Nichols did was exploit the visual potential of the cameras, and there are many setups that seem to me to be almost museum paintings."

Heller says he is "delighted beyond words" that Nichols didn't go for easy laughs or yaks. As Heller puts it, "*Catch-22* is anything but a comedy. It's almost heartbreaking." Before the screening, he feared that the movie might be frivolous or irrelevant.

Heller and his wife were in agreement on the scene that had the greatest emotional tug for them. It takes place in an Italian brothel that the American military police have raided. A lonely old woman remains, answering Yossarian's questions, and when he wants to know what authority the MP's had for the raid, she tells him they cited the maniacal regulation that is the book's title—or, as she [30] phrases it solemnly, "Catch-a-22."

The old man seen earlier who thought he could accommodate to any situation is gone, dead, and she sits there confused. Says Heller: "She does it all almost without changing expression and a tone of resignation.

"She's sitting there smoking a cigarette—I don't think she even looks at the camera. She's not crying; she's not upset. There's just such a philosophical weariness in what she's saying—that everything's been smashed and there's no way to stop it. You've seen that room only once before and it's been filled with people. They didn't focus on a sex scene even then. You see girls in the background and guys hanging around, and now it's empty, a kind of cathedral-like room. That's a scene with a sense of despair and futility."

Two scenes he thought could never be rendered on the screen. One shows blackmarketeer Milo Minderbinder, played by Jon Voight, having his own base bombed in a deal with the Germans. Heller was worried about its inclusion because in the novel it's allegorical, not literal. He felt people wouldn't believe it on screen, but now rates it a "most effective" scene.

His second misgiving concerned a sequence for which he admits having "a genuine distaste" in the script. Had he been consultant or writer, he would have argued against it: "Yet on the screen it's a completely visual

this novel." Then a big laugh emphasized his fervent wish: "I may never have to work again!" [65]

Clayton L. Balch Yossarian to Cathcart and Return:

A Personal Cross-Country

Preflight

Catch-22 first flashed across my awareness in 1962 as I spun a supermarket paperback book rack. A B-25 suddenly flew by backward and my aircraft recognition circuit activated: "B-25—combat—1944—flak—seventy missions—Corsica. Being still half in love with my programmed soul, I was gratified that the circuit tested operationally OK."

"Ah," I thought, scanning the book, "a reminiscence of World War II flying, and one in which I had participated! No doubt a romantic (sexual), patriotic (blood and guts), potboiler." So I read it. I think that my initial reaction was one of puzzled amusement. I suppose that I had wanted the romantic-patriotic. Instead, I seemed to be drawn into an intellectual exercise because of the convolutions of the plot, which was punctuated with hilarious anecdotes. It was years before I realized that *Catch-22* was really a profound philosophical confrontation and that my laughter had long since turned hollow and died.

But in 1962, I was as diverted by the superficiality of Heller's humor as I had been diverted by my own shallow perceptions of the actual events of 1944-45 in Corsica. I believed that any horror or nightmare associated with that earlier time existed, surely, only in the crazed mind of Yossarian, who obviously had "had it"—the World War II phrase for combat fatigue. I therefore set all that aside and found great reward in comparing my own reminiscences of people and events.

Journey

It was, of course, Corsica and not Pianosa. And, although the 340th Bomb Group had been bombed, it was by the Germans and not by Milo's com-

SOURCE: This essay was written especially for this book.

thing. You see, without knowing what Nichols had in mind for each scene, my comments could have been irrelevant."

He's referring to the interlude showing servicemen waiting in line at a brothel in Rome. Heller recalled its impact: "You see these men standing in line and it's a long line; it seems endless in memory. This is one of the haunting qualities about the movie. Memory creates things and distorts what was thought. I've seen it twice and it's still one scene I think they shot in slow motion even though I know it hasn't been."

"Those guys are standing in line and not moving—most of them American soldiers, a few sailors—and the line just winds and turns the corner, and there's the girl at the desk who's selling them admission to the whorehouse. I got a feeling from it that they've been there since the world began and they'll be there till it ends."

The title of the novel he's trying to wrap up this summer is *Something Happened*. Very different from *Catch-22*, it's set in a New York corporation and deals with a man in his 40's who's not getting on as well as he'd like with his children or his wife.

As the author describes it: "He's got a very good job and he doesn't like that any more either and wonders what he's to do with the end of his life, if anything, and knows inwardly that he's not going to do anything about it. The title is ironic because actually nothing happens. His biggest concern—if you want a plot line, and you're going to think it's facetious, but it's true—is whether or not he's going to be allowed to make a three-minute speech at the company convention."

Heller, who's 47 ("I know I look 22, but I'm really 47"), numbers very few performers among his friends. Exceptions include Alan Arkin, Richard Benjamin and wife, Paula Prentiss, and Eli Wallach. He thinks that maybe his candor and sense of humor may be upsetting when he's talking to actors.

"Performers live lives of anxiety," he says. "If they don't know now what they're going to be acting in when they're finished with what they're doing, they get feelings of being unloved and unwanted. I've seen this even with the biggest Hollywood stars. They get panicky when there's nothing ahead of them."

In his heart he knows that *Catch-22* is an excellent movie, but he has to wait a while for most of his reward from it. He's due to receive 2½ percent of the profits. But the picture, with interest charges, cost about \$16 million to make. Add on advertising, promotion and other expenses, and it may have to take in as much as \$30 million before profit can be counted.

Glancing down at the manuscript of *Something Happened*, he went on, "I hope the film will be so successful for me that I won't have to finish

