

## Writing with Sheila Ascher

*We never intended to become a collective or a collaboration, we only intended to be helpful to one another. Once, toward the beginning, we did try to write a novel together in the ping-pong fashion the term collaboration suggests (and, apparently, really does mean for some co-authors). It was a disaster and since then we've become what we consider to be a true collective: developing as writers in extremely close communication (though never, for example, working in the same room), providing constant mutual editing, criticism and so on.*

*The first time we sent out a story for publication, it was "written" principally by one of us but the other had spent a good deal of time editing it, re-organizing it, getting it into shape and it seemed natural for both names to be on it. When it was published, the editor (Rosalie Frank, the astute founder and editor of Panache) had cut down the full names to S. Ascher/D. Straus. We saw the Ascher/Straus in that as the emblem for the third thing that arose from working jointly.*

*We've already written a piece on our joint work procedures ("On Literary Collectivity") which accompanied two stories in the Co-authored Prose section of Chelsea 36. Re-reading it now most of it seems either interesting or true, but also surprisingly exterior, something bordering on a manifesto of literary collectivity rather than anything personal or descriptive. This points up a difficulty in writing about "collaboration." The collectivity is a tremendous field, its methods only sometimes purposeful, with many subtle connections, cross-currents and influences, and all of it entwined in a relationship. Joint work of any kind requires great intimacy, trust, mutual respect, even shared experience. A certain discretion, or the sheer difficulty of talking about such a large and complex field (one moreover that is close to the bone), prompted the other co-authors in the Chelsea issue, for example, to write utterly behind a screen of irony, vaguely and abstractly. Even though they were, apparently, talking about short-term co-authorship, the fact that the work was undoubtedly rooted in personal relationships imposed the difficulty of talking or not talking at all about something as if it were a matter of methods and procedures.*

*Our own solution to this difficulty was to talk outside the situation, theoretically. The fact is that no writer writes the way he or she does for any aesthetic or other reason or because of a decision to do this or that. Hundreds of things inflect the surface, tone and general aesthetic orientation of one's writing, but all authentic writing ultimately has to do with individual rhythms, emotional codes and relations to life that aren't chosen. Theories are nothing more than defenses of what one happens to do, frequently provoked by stupid critical misunderstandings of one's aims. There are truly no useful proscriptive aesthetics.*



Ascher/Straus

While some works are written utterly independently (SHEILA ASCHER'S CHRONICLE, for example), a common procedure for us is this: both of us live through the same experience; each of us takes notes on the experience; one of us decides to do something coherent with it and uses both sets of notes to do so. In a conventional, superficial sense that person is the "author"—and the final work certainly has the formal, linguistic and rhythmic consistency of single authorship. My view is that this is how anything approaching "collaboration" can work (certainly over an extended period of time)—more or less the other side of editing as collaboration or collaboration as editing (as literary scholarship has now revealed The Wasteland to border on). In this sense there have undoubtedly been many unknown "collaborations," of a more profound kind than those that are known, in the history of writing.

Recently, a tabloid-mentality reviewer in a small press journal, reviewing our Letter to An Unknown Woman (Treacle Press), tried to use the fact of co-authorship to discredit the discontinuity of the narrative and the discontinuity of the narrative to discredit the idea of co-authorship, asserting that Ascher and Straus had apparently alternated pages without reference to what each other had done. In fact, Letter was written in the peculiar collaborative manner I've described.


A simple truth (psychological, sociological, economic, etc.): I might not be writing at all if I hadn't formed an alliance with Sheila. Almost impossible to survive as a difficult, "free-lance" writer in the American culture. Both of us are highly idiosyncratic, aesthetically ambitious writers who seem unable to comfortably do anything less than full tilt.

Both of us come from working class, culturally blank backgrounds. It is, perhaps above everything, an alliance against the low ceiling of aesthetic ambition and energy imposed by the culture on the non-elite class writer.

The same statements probably can't be made about Sheila—a person of such remarkable certainty and strength that sociological considerations might have slowed up but never derailed her destiny.

Collaboration of a more literal, overt kind is involved in a series of large scale "environmental" fictions called SPACE NOVELS (see THE BLUE HANGAR and Some Propositions for the SPACE NOVEL in Interstate #12)—which are less intermedia works than polyvalent, multi-textured written works—books of varied written surfaces—either adapted to, dispersed in and minutely attentive to public spaces or using architecture as a structuring principle, a new physical, materially permeable ground of being for the book. The non-written elements of the SPACE NOVEL are less those of other media than the readymade surfaces of given sites. The radical discontinuity of these



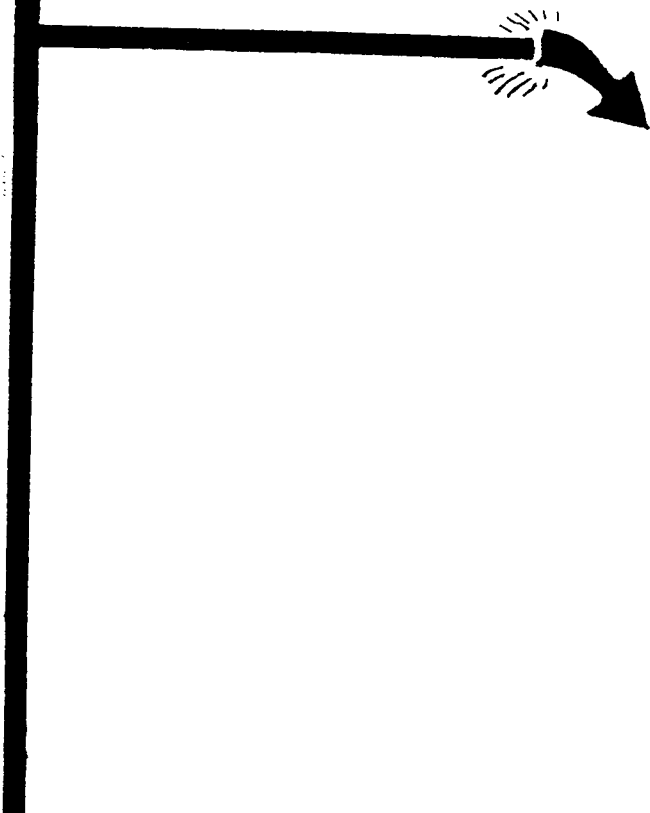


*works encourages the disjunction of different voices and methods—probably the only occasion where, within one work, there are sections written entirely by two different hands.*

*12 SIMULTANEOUS SUNDAYS is a SPACE NOVEL that post-dates the aesthetics and history outlined in Interstate. The availability of a whole gallery space and a concurrent 12 week performance series, so that a book could be built up publicly in time (no way to read the book without following its process) were the incentive for us and the factors determining the project's nature. The ultimate scale of the book was enormous, utterly reversing the reader's usual relation to the small volume held in the hands, its boundaries enclosed by ours, dwarfed and clipped off by the world. In this scale the book is laid against the world, reads the world in a way that has nothing to do with imagination or realism.*

*Among other texts, essays, calendars, narratives, the principal text of 12 SIMULTANEOUS SUNDAYS is SHEILA ASCHER'S CHRONICLE (September '76). The CHRONICLE is a vast project of Sheila's in which a site is read continually, noting subtle changes and relations among things, lives, events, seasons—utterly appropriate for an event in which Time becomes Space, linear development becomes simultaneous.*

*Dennis Straus*



**Ascher/Straus**