

## A Life of Reflection & Invention: Gore Vidal (1925-2012)

By Jonah Raskin

The following interview with Gore Vidal – who died on July 31, 2012, and who was a consistent thorn in the side of America’s plutocrats and their politicians - took place on Overpost Drive in Los Angeles on December 10, 1985. That’s a long time ago, I realize, but the interview was never published, and after all these years it still seems timely.

It was our one and only meeting, though I’d seen Vidal often, and was entertained by his appearances on late night TV, especially with Johnny Carson. I’d also read many of his books such as *Burr*, 1876, and *Lincoln* along with essays published in *The New York Review of Books* and *The Nation*. Vidal was 60-years old when we met and still vigorous. Three years earlier, he had campaigned against incumbent Governor Jerry Brown for the Democratic primary election to the U. S. Senate from California and lost – though he didn’t see it that way. Ever since then, he had been spending much of his time in Italy.

Our interview began without small talk or preliminaries at noon, precisely, on a cold, gray day. It lasted for a couple of hours. Vidal had been writing all morning - the time of day, he explained, that he did his best work. When he came downstairs, he ushered me into an immense living room in an immense house. He was wearing a maroon robe and leather slippers. Through a mutual friend at Warner Brothers, I had explained a few months earlier that I was writing a book about the cold war and American culture and that I had already interviewed Kurt Vonnegut and Paul Bowles. Vidal sent back word that he was eager to talk.

When I read about his death, I **went** to my files and took out the notes from our interview. Vidal’s comments struck me as feisty, provocative, and insightful as they were when I first heard them 27 years earlier. The Soviet Union no longer existed and Reagan was no longer in the White House, but Vidal’s reflections on politics, power and sex seemed relevant. He had outlived most of his contemporaries, such as Bowles, Vonnegut, Capote, Mailer, Jones, Baldwin, and Styron. His **passing** seemed to close a chapter of American literary history that began in the 1940s and that had changed the shape of American culture.

**Raskin: I know that you go back and forth regularly from Europe to America. When you return to the States what do you notice again and again?**

Vidal: I read American newspapers and I think I’m in a mad house. There’s a constant smear job of foreign countries. Compared to Europe, this place is a shambles, but you can’t tell the American people that. They might get angry and feel that they were ripped off. They might begin to see that they’ve been ripped off by a military budget which makes a lot of money for a very few people who in turn pay for the elections of the candidates of both parties. It’s a circle of corruption.

Raskin: Do you feel that war hysteria is being whipped up now?

Vidal: There’s always war hysteria. It hasn’t stopped for decades. Listen to the media. And the educational system is so bad. Here we set ourselves up as a world empire and we don’t bother to train anyone to run it. We have presidents who don’t know where they are half of the time.

Reagan doesn't know the difference between the Medici and Gucci, except that his wife wears **one** and the other sounds vaguely familiar. The ignorance of the American ruling class is horrendous.

Raskin: How do you think the U.S. government should have dealt with the Soviet Union during the Cold War?

Vidal: I went there last year with Norman Mailer. We both had the same reaction: it's a second world nation and it's not a threat to us now just as it wasn't a real threat to us then. It's a sad country, dying to be our friend and our ally, which is the only proper political course for us to follow. Moscow is like Washington, D.C., full of young country boys and girls wandering around. Nothing works properly. Of course, Stalin was not an old sweetie-pie. He was an old-fashioned dictator and killed a lot of people. He was also paranoid.

Raskin: Are you in print in the Soviet Union?

Vidal: I'm probably the most popular American novelist in the Soviet Union today, but only the historical novels are in print there. They have a passion for American history. *Burr* sold 900,000 copies in an extremely expensive, illustrated hardback edition. *1876* appeared first in magazine installments, and now it's in book form, and they are now translating *Lincoln* into Russian. There are more Ph.D. theses on me in the Soviet Union than there are in American, which isn't saying much because there are no Ph.D. theses on me here that I know of.

Raskin: You've just adapted, for NBC TV, Lucien Truscott's novel, *Dress Grey*, which is about West Point. What was the attraction?

Vidal: I was born at West Point. My father and my two stepbrothers were graduates. I know most everything that's wrong with the place and a part of me believes that it should be torn down. But I'm also very much a part of the tradition. I've attacked West Point in print and they don't like it, but they still consider me part of the family. That's what *Dress Grey* shows: male bonding which is nearing an end because women are now cadets and because of feminism, too. I've turned Truscott's novel into a murder mystery story.

Raskin: Is there a message you want to get across?

Vidal: There is no sermonizing, but I think the story will be shocking because it breaks down clichés and stereotypes about homosexuality. One of the characters – he's the best athlete, the best student, the best everything – is murdered and the military wants to cover it up. The hero of the drama who is heterosexual goes up against West Point and against the U.S. Army. The story shows him not only solving the murder, but also coming alive as a person in the process. He's a sort of bright Rocky, and what Rocky does with his fists and his body, he does with his brains.

Raskin: Does the fact that the drama is going to be on prime time suggest that our culture's attitudes toward homosexuality have changed since you first wrote about the subject?

Vidal: Yes, but I think that NBC wanted to do *Dress Grey* because it's titillating.

Raskin: On more than one occasion your biting comments on the authorities have gotten you in trouble with the authorities.

Vidal: I have a copy of my FBI files. There are a lot of inter-office memos that read, “Gore Vidal viciously attacked The Director.” It was always a capital T and a capital D. I had written several all-out attacks on J. Edgar Hoover.

Raskin: What else was in your file?

Vidal: *The Daily Worker* had done a review of my novel *The City and the Pillar* and the FBI clipped it. It was worse than the review in *The New York Times*. *The Worker* said that I was writing about decadent behavior typical of the capitalist system. In the 1960s, whenever I was on the *Today Show* and took a crack at Bobby Kennedy or criticized LBJ’s handling of the war in Vietnam, the White House would immediately ring up the FBI – the exact times are logged – and ask for my files. What’s in my more recent files – after 1968 – I don’t know because they won’t release them.

Raskin: Has writing about homosexuality proven to be as controversial as anything else you’ve written about?

Vidal: Homosexuality is still one of the hottest emotional buttons you can push. You know, I’ve never said anything about my own private life. No one knows whether or not I’ve ever been married or whether I’ve had children.

Raskin: I wasn’t prepared to ask.

Vidal: I wasn’t prepared to say, but that hasn’t stopped the media from inventing a whole persona for me. Of course, I’m not going to deny it and with the rise of gay liberation and now with the complication of AIDS I’m not going to be unhelpful to the cause.

Raskin: Did “fag-baiting” and “red-baiting” go hand in hand when your writing career began?

Vidal: Not at the very beginning, though Senator Joseph McCarthy brought them together, being a homosexual himself. That was the Dostoevskian twist to the whole thing. McCarthy was like a character out of *The Brother Karamazov* – a homosexual who used homosexuality as his most terrible weapon against his enemies, both real and imagined. McCarthy and his aide, Roy Cohen, were constantly sniggering about fags and they themselves were fags. That was an ugly bit of business, but then after the televised Army-McCarthy hearings McCarthy fell like Lucifer.

Raskin: Your first novel, *Williwaw*, was published in 1946 when you were 21 years old. At 22 you published *In a Yellow Wood* and at 23, *The City and the Pillar*.

Vidal: I must have been an ambitious young man.

Raskin: You weren't alone. There was Mailer, Styron, James Jones, and Jack Kerouac. The 1940s was a time of ambitious young men.

Vidal: We had something to be ambitious about. We thought that literature was at the center of the culture and that as the children of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos we would inherit their place. In due course we did, but by then the place wasn't much good any more. The novel had ceased to be central not only to American but to western culture as a whole. Novelists were pushed from the center to the periphery; Hollywood directors took our places.

Raskin: Soon after you published your first book you left the U.S.

Vidal: I didn't want to be part of the literary world here. I didn't like it. I didn't want to know other writers and I didn't feel as though I had a role to play.

Raskin: But you became part of a group.

Vidal: No. I didn't belong to any group, though Paul Bowles, Tennessee Williams, and Frederic Prokosch became friends. Paul, Tennessee, and I got on very well together, but as writers we didn't have much in common. There was no circle in the sense that, say, Auden, Isherwood, Spender, and Louis MacNeice belonged to a conscious group.

Raskin: A lot of writers in your generation were college graduates and went to writer's schools.

Vidal: I didn't go to college and neither did Carson McCullers, for example. Mailer and Styron did, but they didn't become college professors. Most of the interesting writers of my generation didn't stay at universities. If you needed money you went to Columbia – the studio not the university. You shook them down out here. The only really **first-rate** living American writer who kept up a continuing relationship with the academy was Saul Bellow. He was older than we were and he was able to master rather than be mastered by the universities. There were writers, such as John Barth, who came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, and who stayed in academia. I don't think it did their writing such good.

Raskin: You've been a popular novelist and yet the academic critics have on the whole either ignored you or condemned you.

Vidal: When I was 25 a whole chapter was devoted to me in the book *After the Lost Generation*. I was a major contender. Now I've been liquidated from many histories of contemporary American literature. In *American Fictions, 1940-1980*, Professor Frederick Karl states in a footnote that he simply won't be writing about me. I can understand now how Leon Trotsky felt. It's as though I never existed.

Raskin: You have described yourself as a writer of the 1940s. Looking back how do you see that decade?

Vidal: During World War II we got a big dose of intelligence when European refugees came here. Hollywood was a brilliant and exciting place to be – the Athens of the modern world. I was just a young soldier, but when I was on leave I was able to hang around the studios and go to parties. I got to know Aldous Huxley; I made friends with Christopher Isherwood.

Raskin: And after the war?

Vidal: The five-year period from 1945 to 1950 was an extraordinary interregnum. We were not conducting either a hot war or a cold war and there was a sudden explosion of the arts. Jerome Robbins and George Balanchine were at their best. Tennessee Williams's *A Street Car Named Desire* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* were on Broadway at the same time. The 1948 bestseller list included Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms*, and my third novel, *The City and the Pillar*. We had a Renaissance. Then in 1950 we went to war in Korea. Then we had McCarthyism.

Raskin: You think that the cultural scene was profoundly altered by the political changes?

Vidal: Once we consciously became a garrison state we had a decline in the arts. The constant fear of war created a climate in which culture on both sides of the famous Iron Curtain was distorted.

Raskin: How do you evaluate your own novels of the 1940s?

Vidal: They have more social than literary value. *Dark Green, Bright Red*, which is about revolution in Central America, has certain contemporary relevance, and *The City and the Pillar* has something mythic in it that still works. There's a Huck Finn/Tom Sawyer mood that strikes a cord with a lot of people. But in general I'd have to say that I had not yet found my own voice.

Raskin: When did that happen?

Vidal: About 1950, when I was writing *The Judgment of Paris*. Then, for about ten years, I had to stop writing novels. I went into theater, television, and movies.

Raskin: *The City and the Pillar* got a bad review in *The New York Times* and after that your literary career went into a tailspin.

Vidal: By today's standards *The City and The Pillar* is mild: it reads like John Galsworthy. But in 1948 the theme of homosexuality provoked a hysterical reaction. Orville Prescott, the daily book reviewer for *The New York Times*, and the most powerful critic in the United States, told my editor at E. P. Dutton that *The City and the Pillar* was a disgusting work and that he would never read, much less review any book by Gore Vidal. In the early 1950s, the daily *Times* would not review me, and two of my best books, *The Judgment of Paris* and *Messiah* were published then.

Raskin: So, to evade censorship you took the penname Edgar Box and published three murder mysteries: *Death in the Fifth Position*, *Death Before Bedtime*, and *Death Likes It Hot* in 1952, 1953 and 1954.

Vidal: I felt very much as though I was living under a regime in which I had to survive by using a pseudonym. *The New York Times* gave excellent reviews to the Box books in the 1950s. Then, in the late 1970s when I published them again in one volume and revealed for the first time that I was the author, *The Times* gave them bad reviews.

Raskin: And when you wrote for TV and for Broadway in the 1950s did you also use a pseudonym?

Vidal: At the TV networks my books and my reputation didn't count against me because nobody had read my books. It was a totally commercial atmosphere.

Raskin: What about the blacklist? Did you run into that problem?

Vidal: They had a marvelous euphemism for it. They called it "Continuity." Each time my name came up as a possible scriptwriter, they had to clear it with "Continuity." I had no problems because while I came from a political background, I wasn't caught up in any ideological causes. If I'd been ten years older and in W. H. Auden's or Stephen Spender's generation, I might have fought against Franco in Spain. I might even have joined the Communist Party as so many **writers** had.

Raskin: Did you see the blacklist in action?

Vidal: If I wanted to use a particular actor in a performance I did see it. I remember saying that I wanted Agnes Moorehead and being told, "we'll have to clear it with Continuity." They'd go off and report back that I couldn't use her. **I'd** ask why but they **wouldn't** tell me. Then, a few months later I turned up on the set and Agnes Moorehead was here. I'd ask what **happened** and I was told, "we don't know." It was Kafkaesque and made no sense at all but it went on for a long time. In the 1960, when Dick Cavett was on ABC he told me that there were still some people he couldn't use on the program. Sometimes it was frivolous; the head of the network didn't like Zsa Zsa Gabor, for example – but more often than not it was overtly political.

Raskin: When you write your historical novels do you look at the past through the lens of the present? In *Lincoln*, for example, didn't the issues of the 1980s shape your view of the 1860s?

Vidal: No! First, the issues aren't the same. Second, if you impose the politics of today on the past you get a novel with a thesis and that would ensure a bad novel. I extend myself into another era. I try to think as they thought and while that's difficult it's not impossible to do.

Raskin: Who are the American writers for whom you feel the strongest affinity?

Vidal: Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edith Wharton. I read them as though they were my contemporaries. I can't do without them.

Raskin: You've been especially harsh on some of your contemporaries, including the Beats.

Vidal: I came down on them harder than I should have. Recently I reread Kerouac's *On the Road* and I found it very good.

Raskin: Kerouac was a close friend, wasn't he?

Vidal: Jack was a sweet guy. I met him in 1950 and he had great appeal. We used to go to the Metropolitan Opera together in black ties. Near the end of his life when he went around telling everyone that a Jewish, homosexuality conspiracy was taking over the world he made no sense at all. But before that I reacted strongly against his notion that whatever came into your head was important and should be written down. Of course, there's always a Kerouac coven.

Raskin: So you didn't feel comfortable in the 1960s?

Vidal: From my point of view, the 1960s celebrated absence of mind. It was a decade of euphoria.

Raskin: What about the sexual revolution of the 1960s?

Vidal: The sexual revolution took place because of the Second World War. Country boys went into the army, and discovered things in Europe they didn't know existed. They got blowjobs, which they didn't know about before they went into military service and were shipped overseas. It's all in Doctor Kinsey's report that came out in 1948, right after my novel *The City and the Pillar*. Kinsey sent me an autographed copy of his report in which he wrote, "With congratulations on your work in the field."

Raskin: You've written warmly about President Kennedy. How do you see him now?

Vidal: He was very witty and I was very fond of him, but I knew him too well to be taken in by the Kennedy mystique. Look at his record. He messed up in Cuba at the Bay of Pigs. In Vienna he had a disastrous meeting with Khrushchev, and at home he had no interest in the black rebellion.

Raskin: Who are the outstanding American literary critics?

Vidal: We've never developed a culture of serious criticism. We never had a Matthew Arnold. It wasn't until Edmund Wilson came along that we began to get something like criticism, but that was a brief period. It's as though it's un-American to criticize. There's either praise or damnation and it's always so sectarian. The critic usually hates a certain book because the author is a bad person.

Raskin: What about Ralph Waldo Emerson?

Vidal: Well, yes. I'm an Emersonian, but I can only take Emerson in very small doses. He's part of my Puritan nature, and I can see how I derive my own point of view from him, because to be a

Puritan is to judge yourself as well as others. You must be an impartial judge. I draw that particularly from Emerson, one of the few American writers from the mid-nineteenth century who was well informed about Asian religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism.

Raskin: In 1982, you ran in the Democratic Party Primary in California for the U.S. Senate and you lost.

Vidal: But I received nearly a **half-million** votes and spent almost nothing on the campaign. I got to see how politics is financed. It's not until you've actually been in a race that you find out the direct role that money from the aerospace industry – Boeing, Lockheed, and Northrop Grumman – plays in the political system.

Raskin: When you were campaigning I heard you speak on the campus of UC Berkeley.

Vidal: Thousands of people came to hear me, but the press insisting on saying that I was very unpopular. On TV they showed two sleepy students and the voice-over of the announcer said, "Of, course, Vidal couldn't attract a crowd." What they don't want you to know, they don't tell you. Take, for example, the corruption in the aerospace industry in California. It's astounding. Poor Jerry Brown, for all his liberal credentials couldn't quite explain why he liked the B-1 bomber, which is totally impractical militarily but totally necessary for him to endorse for his campaign coffers.

Raskin: You're writing about politics again aren't you, in your new novel, *Manifest Destiny*?

Vidal: I'm doing a sort of *Citizen Kane*. William Randolph Hearst is one of the main characters. What a formidable man he was! The story begins with the Spanish American War in 1898 and ends with the American Empire in place in 1919. *Manifest Destiny* will be the concluding work in my series on American history.

Raskin: What do you think is your best work?

Vidal: That's difficult to judge. I divide my work into two categories – the inventions and the reflections. *Lincoln* is a reflection. It's my thoughts about him. The inventions – *Myra Breckinridge* and *Duluth* – are a lot of fun to write and I get inspired. I prefer the inventions to the reflections. A lot of people could write *Lincoln*, but not many could write *Duluth* or *Myra Breckinridge*. *Lincoln* was agony to write. I knew exactly what's going to happen. I know that he's going to be shot. There's no surprise.

Raskin: How do the inventions begin?

Vidal: I hear a voice and the voice starts to take over. I become the character, as I did with *Myra Breckinridge*.

Raskin: What motivates you to keep on writing? Fame? Money?



Vidal: I don't need fame. I don't need money. I don't know what I do need, or what I think, or what's apt to happen in the inventions as opposed to the reflections until I write them. In *Myra Breckinridge* I learned about the characters as I went along. When I started *Duluth* I didn't know how the story would end. Writing the script for *Dress Grey*, I discovered a large body of my own experience I'd never confronted. That's why I go on writing. It's a fascinating process of self-discovery.