

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES MC MICHAEL

INTERVIEWERS: Spencer C. Olin, Michael Clark

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SO: My name is Spencer C. Olin, Professor Emeritus of History at UC, Irvine. Today, as part of the UCI Historical Records Project, I am interviewing James McMichael, Professor of English, award-winning poet, and, since the campus opened in 1965, co-director of UCI's prestigious graduate program in creative writing.

Jim is the author of *The Lover's Familiar* (1978), *Four Good Things* (1980), *Ulysses and Justice* (1990), *Each in a Place Apart* (1994), *The World at Large: New and Selected Poems, 1971-1996* (1996), and most recently, this year, *Capacity* (2006). He is the recipient of the Arthur Rense Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a Guggenheim fellowship, a Whiting Foundation Writer's Award, and the Shelley Memorial Award.

We are joined on this occasion by Michael Clark, Professor of English and Associate Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Planning at UC, Irvine. Mike and I will both pose some questions to Jim. Today's date is May 10, 2006. Our interview is being conducted in the conference room in Mike's office on the fifth floor of the UCI Administration Building.

Jim, thank you so much for agreeing to this oral history interview. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to have been your colleague for more than forty years. This interview will focus on several components of your distinguished career: first, the years prior to your arrival at UCI, including your undergraduate

and graduate education; second, your own professional career as a poet and a scholar; third, the early years in UCI's Department of English and the formative decisions made regarding the M.F.A. in English (in Creative Writing) in the late 1960s; and finally, the evolution of the M.F.A. in English in the subsequent decades.

First, could you fill us in a bit on some biographical details of your life?

Where were you born? Where did you spend your early years? Where were you educated? And what were the influences that led you to literature and to poetry?

JM: I was born in Pasadena. I'm a native son. I've been here most of my life except three years away visiting one place or another. I was in Pasadena until I went to UCSB.

The influences that I think of from my youth were the radio (1), since I'm that old, and (2) the minister at the Pasadena Presbyterian Church, whose name was Ganse Little. I was in the choir, which was the only reason I was ever in church. My choirmates would tell me they didn't really mind the church services, except for the sermon. I had no idea what they were talking about, because the way that man put phrases and sentences together was completely captivating to me. That aspect of the oral – hearing the radio, hearing Little's sermons, and seeing what could happen in language - were really formative for me.

As was Florence, who was the woman who, from day to day and pretty much from minute to minute, took care of me from the time I was one. She gave me the sense that whatever I said might be of interest, at least to her. My mother was a teacher and my dad was a Realtor, so they were off doing what they did and I

had Florence to myself until her husband came back from the war. I remember proposing to her when I was about three, and she said, "But I'm already married."

And I said, "Yeah, but he may die in the war." (laughs)

SO: (laughs) Early candor.

JM: Early candor. None of what might have disposed me to want to read and write would have taken in the way I think it did if I hadn't had the good luck of winding up at Santa Barbara, which had been a teachers college until it became part of the university. There were still some remnants in the faculty of people who had been there when it was a teachers college. Then there were the young Turks who were my teachers.

SO: Was one of those perhaps Bob Potter, by any chance?

JM: No. Hugh Kenner was one of them. Edgar Bowers was another. Homer Swander, Marvin Mudrick, who wrote reviews for *Hudson Review*. And Ben Sankey and two or three others. They taught me how to read. Each of them having a followable understanding of what it was that was in front of us.

SO: So you did both undergraduate and graduate work there?

JM: No, just undergraduate work there. Then I went to Stanford afterwards. Of course, Stanford's supposed to be such an upgrade from lowly party school, UC Santa Barbara, so I spent four years there complaining about how I wasn't learning anything in the classes I was taking. And I wasn't, but I was learning a lot from my peers, and that may be the way that graduate school should go. Instead of having it given to you by instructors, you put it together for yourself with people who are at the stage you are. It wasn't that I didn't love those years at Stanford. I did. But

gradually I came to understand that Stanford had a very inflated sense of itself. What it did do, through, was attract first-rate students. It was a wonderful time for me in that way.

SO: Well, thank you for that brief rendition of your early life. Let's move on to your professional life. *Faultline* is a journal of arts and literature published at UCI. Last year two issues of that journal were devoted to your career. The first issue, in March of 2005, was a limited edition called "A Tribute to James McMichael," and the second issue in the spring of that year included a substantial section on "A Celebration of James McMichael."

In reading the various contributions by your colleagues and former students regarding your influence on their work, I am impressed by the number of them who expressed their "fear of being inept with words" in your presence. As Michelle Latiolais, the Director of the Program in Writing, wrote, "A conversation with Jim starts with the fork and knife to the meat, a cut to the center, the tines and blade pulling back, and there, there, center steak, that's where the conversation starts. I have never known anyone who can listen like Jim can, who can recount you back, and you may survive. . . ."

Were you aware that you had this impact on others? Were you aware that some people believe you look "straight into their soul"?

JM: Well, in this instance, we're talking about only one of those others. It was Michelle, and it sounds very much like Michelle. I'm touched by it. I guess the answer is that until Michelle told me that, I didn't know I had that effect on her. If I think about what it is she might be talking about that others feel, I would think it

would just be that I'm interested in what they say. I would certainly say something like what Michelle has said here about Mike [Clark], whom I've known for years and whom I feel I get from very much what Michelle is saying she gets from me. Not that I feel Mike's about to destroy me because he has such insight, but it's just – I think she's talking about paying attention.

SO: If I may suggest, knowing both of you a bit, it's attention but it's also, I think, the need to express one's views precisely and with economy and with no b.s. Those are, I think, compliments to both of you.

JM: Thank you.

SO: Brenda Hillman was a former visiting poet at UCI who now teaches at St. Mary's College. In her tribute to you, entitled "12 Small Things About James McMichael's Syntax," she asserts, "The economy of poetry enables a poet to build a world from experience within a matter of a few lines." That single sentence, it seems to me, contains several notable features regarding the writing of poetry: a poem's economy, the poet's human agency in the act of writing, and the significance of the poet's personal experience. Could you comment on these features of your writing?

JM: Starting with economy, what distinguishes poetry from other kinds of writing is something that's underscored or made an issue of because as you start across the page from left to right in reading a poem, you don't get all the way over to a justified right hand margin. At some point, you jump back to the left, which means you're leaving some white space out there to the right. Economy is something that then necessarily backs up into the form of what it is you're writing when you're writing a poem.

The issue of a poet's human agency in the act of writing becomes less clear to me all the time. It feels to me more and more as if what happens to me when I'm trying to get something down in lines is that to that point I've done everything I know how to do to make myself available to whatever turns up. Then, once whatever turns up turns up and I write it down in longhand, then it's either something that gets to stay or it doesn't get to stay. Writing from that point on is just a process of being a screener for what shows up for me from I'm not sure where. That may sound mystical. I do know it's me it's showing up for.

I know I have had things imprinted upon me that make what does turn up something that I would hope would be regarded as singular when it's read. And in whatever is singular about it, I'd also want to hope that there was something applicable to someone else. It's wonderful when that happens, when one learns that that happens with something one has written. It makes the whole process a less lonely one. But it feels less and less as if I'm the agent of what I wrote. And oddly, as the feeling of agency lessens, I feel as if what's there under my name is something I can give *more* assent to rather than less.

In terms of economy, one example that I thought of is two sentences that begin the last poem in this book, in *Capacity*. What I know about where those sentences came from was thinking about how to say something intelligible and inclusive about the bad luck most of the people in the world have in terms of where and when they were born. There are obviously better and worse places to be born, better and worse times. So I was thinking about how the word *nation* relates to natality, how to be native means that one is born in that place. The two sentences

that I thought of that tried to condense this whole matter as economically as possible were, "A place can be disposed so ill toward them that many lives are untimely. To a nation by one's birth to it belongs the law to carry through to their ruin all untimely lives." I had the feeling that that was a way to let that subject go and get on to the subject of what happens when anyone is born.

SO: Well, that is interesting because it, in a sense, segues to this question I worked up this morning. It's a little long-winded. Forgive me. In his foreword to your 1996 book, *The World At Large*, Alan Shapiro expresses his appreciation for your new ways of approaching the problems that have always vexed and troubled you. I quote now from Shapiro: "The sense of the unpredictable in life as both a source of value and of harm; the desire for immunity from danger, from pain and loss, and the recognition that such desire is itself a kind of danger; the need to impose order upon the world to make the world amenable to will and, at the same time, to acknowledge that the world necessarily alludes to terms by which we try to understand it and control it."

So there's a sense of the unpredictable in life, the desire for immunity from danger, the need to impose order upon the world, perhaps coincident with your evident interest in social planning and your love of maps. I was wondering if you felt Alan Shapiro did, at least, capture some of the most important things that energize you.

JM: I appreciate Alan's reading of my work, and I feel I recognize in the work that he was talking about exactly these issues. As I said to you earlier, I have to leave it to

him, or to whomever says whatever they say, about whatever it is I put down on the page. At that point, I have to abandon the writing to whatever happens to it.

SO: That's why I'm wondering if what you said a few minutes ago imposes too much agency on you in the act of writing, because there seem to be some predeterminant goals that inform your writing, which may not be the case.

JM: The will would be something that would get underscored if one was emphasizing one's own agency. And if you take the word *subject*, the will can subject things to itself willfully. I feel rather that what happens for me, and I think for many of us, is that we are subject to things that turn up in us that are singular for each of us. Those things press themselves in upon us and, at some point, if we have the capacity to do something with what's been pressed into us, we start pressing it back out. Then the way we press it out, if we're doing a good job of it, is probably going to reflect what got pressed in that we didn't ask to have pressed into us in that way.

One example that I think of in connection with planning is that the planning for multinational corporations doesn't seem to me very different from worrying that the Lakers may lose. One takes what precautions one needs to take in order to see if one can withstand unacceptable consequences.

SO: We'll move on to a slightly different issue, but I think an important one. In her brief tribute to you, your former UCI colleague in the Program in Writing, Judith Grossman, observes that she owes to you "the confirmation of [her] belief that poetic and prose fictions are not separate worlds." As the author of an important book on James Joyce [*Ulysses and Justice*], would you elaborate on Judith's observation?

JM: I agree with her that they're not separate worlds. It is only something formal, which I've already described, that separates them, and that is that prose makes its way out over toward the right margin and then it knows when to come back to the left. But it seems to me that though the formal differences between poetry and all other genres makes poetry have certain subjects and angles on subjects that are more consonant with it, less consonant with prose, still, it seems to me that what all forms of writing are dealing with is the same.

I got to a point in my career, after completing *Four Good Things*, of not knowing enough about what I needed to write next. I had meant to write about my marriage. What I didn't know about it was that it was at great risk and was about to collapse, which was something I didn't want to have happen to it, but it did happen. So as fate would have it, I made the mistake, in terms of my career, of taking up an entirely different genre, something that I'd never really done before, which was to write about writing. In doing that, it seemed to be something that my wife was sorry I had done because it was not in the interest of my following up on what had been a success in *Four Good Things*.

Q: A professional detour?

JM: A professional detour, and – she didn't call it schizophrenic, but I did. It made no sense. Not only was I writing prose now instead of poetry, I wasn't writing prose about poetry, which would have been closer to being a good career move. By this I don't mean to characterize Linda as somebody who was careerist. I don't mean that. But she was right. It was not a good career move for me at all. But there was no other move to make. I really didn't know what to write poems about at that

point. And in the process of writing the book on Joyce my marriage dissolved. But also in the process of working on the book, I learned things that I needed to know in order to get on with poems. I'm not sorry not to have had that detour and I'm glad I've stayed with poems since I finished the book on Ulysses about sixteen years ago. Mike was very helpful to me in finishing that book.

MC: Can I ask you, Jim, if it was a sufficiently positive experience, and was the critical reception sufficiently positive that you have another fiction book that might be in your craw?

JM: Another non-fiction book. I don't, no. One may turn up, but I don't have one now. I didn't expect it to get placed by Princeton. That was a wonderful surprise. I would not have thought it would have managed to do that. I was glad that it was, quote/unquote, "well published." I like the book. I'm not sorry that I took that detour. There was nothing else to do. It kept me off the streets. (chuckles)

SO: In addition to expressing her agreement with you regarding the close relationship of poetry and prose fiction, Judith Grossman also refers to you as "both an elegiac and a philosophical poet." Frank Bidart calls you "a philosophical poet who is not afraid of psychology." To what extent does formal philosophical inquiry inform your poetry? Mike has suggested that he finds in *Capacity* – Heidegger?

JM: Being is what there is when beings that have come to light are no longer there. That's a paraphrase of Heidegger, certainly. I think the impact of Continental philosophy is very strong, certainly very strong in *Capacity*. What I know about Continental thinking is entirely self-taught. When Leotar was here and I sat in on his classes, it was unmistakable that he and everybody over there who is concerned

about the subject of philosophy gets a training that nobody here gets. Of course, Anglo American Departments of Philosophy are entirely analytic and seem completely at home with coming up with zinger examples of this or that. It seems like one of the most tiresome disciplines I can imagine. I don't know how anybody can bear it.

Q: Our colleague in philosophy at UCI, a fellow by the name of David Smith has encountered this throughout his professional career. In intellectual terms within the discipline of Philosophy, he's kind of odd man out.

JM: I don't know David, I do know Ermanno [Bencivenga]. When I think about why philosophy has the appeal to me that it does, what I come to first is how little it leaves out, how much it seems devoted to considering everything. I feel that's a good discipline.

SO: Let's go back, in a sense, to UCI. Why did you accept a faculty appointment at UCI, and were there early indications to you that literary studies at UCI would flourish as they have?

JM: I had been offered a job at UCLA, which I accepted, and Hazard Adams had offered me a job here in the fall of 1964. Hazard invited me down. He was over in the trailers on the other side of the marsh, over by the botanical gardens there on Jamboree.

SO: North campus.

JM: North campus. I didn't want him not to understand that I had already taken another job, so I called him and told him that I had. He said, "Come down anyway." So I came down. We got in the car and he drove us over to a place where you could

look at what is now the [Langson] library. It was a cut into a hillside. That was it, there was nothing else. That was as close to construction as anything on the physical plant came at that time. We spent three or four hours, and I really enjoyed his company. He didn't try to get me to change my mind. I drove back up to Pasadena where I was staying and then two days later got a letter from him telling me I ought to change my mind. I remember his argument was that UCLA was a commuter school. (laughs) I thought, hmm.

Q: Not the first time false advertising has been used to _____.

JM: I can't tell you how glad I am that it worked. Good grief. Just in terms of being in a discipline-the writing of poetry- that in the mid-sixties didn't really have any standing in departments of English. Writing poems just wasn't something somebody was going to get tenured by doing. And I didn't believe that I would get tenured on it here.

Q: Was that the case? Was poetry so demeaned?

JM: Well, it's not that it was demeaned, it was more that you just had this straight line that was understood you would follow. If you're in an English department, you do what everybody else does, you don't do something different. There weren't M.F.A. programs. That craze hadn't started yet. So I didn't know that what I was signing on for when I called UCLA and told them I wasn't coming was that I could, indeed, in a few years, learn that I *might* get tenure by writing poems. And it was worth the risk. I surprised myself by no longer writing essays on literature, which I thought might help me get tenure. I started writing poems. My first book of poems did get me tenure. It would not have done that in many places at that time, in 1970.

Q: Do you attribute that to Hazard's influence on the Department of English and the School of Humanities here at UCI?

JM: Yes, because he did have it in mind to have a trinity at the department. There was English and American Lit – I guess that was the Father. The Son was poetry and fiction, and the Holy Ghost was comparative literature. (all laugh)

SO: Well, that's interesting. You are aware, perhaps, of his quip about why he wanted McMichael on his faculty? About your baseball skills?

JM: Yeah, but he wasn't sure that I could hit. (all laugh)

SO: I don't know where I saw that. Maybe it was in an oral history and it was twenty-five years ago, or something. Do you have some other comments about Hazard? I mean, this is interesting about his prescience with regards to poetry and to you. Do you have some comments about his larger impact on the building of the Department of English and his contributions as dean of the school?

JM: I know less about the latter. I know less about how that went with Humanities. I don't know why he wouldn't have been able to foresee that the writing programs could turn into what they've turned into. I mean, there was no reason that that might not have happened. I can't imagine that he's sorry it has. I think it's just been a wonder.

MC: You know, Hazard's also a published poet.

JM: And fiction, academic fiction.

SO: That early one, which was a kind of a precursor of David Lodge, I think. The Academic Tribes, a sort of dissection of the craziness of academic life.

JM: Yeah. He knew a lot about that.

SO: I think that's an important point, that Jim wasn't the only one doing those kinds of writings. But maybe this is why Hazard was comfortable with a new direction.

MC: I think so. But I think it was characteristic of the department, that what was a definite line in many places wasn't necessarily the most desirable.

JM: My memory of the first two years was that the ten of us who were hired the first year all did two of the three. My memory of the second year on is that no one who was hired did more than one of the three. And I can't think of an exception. Bob Peters might be close, but Bob was certainly presented in the department as a Victorianist, not as a poet. So we had some questions about what he was going to want to do once he came to UCI. But Hazard, when we had those questions, answered them by saying, "Well, he's a Victorianist." Then once he got here, he wasn't.

SO: My memories of Hazard are of a more distant nature, but I think he was an extraordinarily significant faculty member, not just to your department and to the school, but to the campus as a whole. He brought a sense of high academic standards. I always found him an imposing person personally, almost stern and unapproachable in some ways. And all of a sudden he would shift and become the most amiable guy. He was very complicated, in my experience with him.

JM: Jim Calderwood would characterize him as having an Easter Island face. (all laugh)

SO: Could you, Jim, for a few minutes discuss the origins of the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing and its subsequent development over the years, because it is a jewel in UCI's crown, to use a corny phrase.

JM: I don't remember any discussion about how it should go, ever. I'm sure they took place. But whatever got said was like drawing the plans for a house on a napkin. It was that kind of thing, and I don't remember any high-powered thinking being turned into action, which is to say that how it went came back to Charles Wright and to me, to Oakley, and to Don Heiney. It came back to the four of us, and we didn't meet that often. We talked with one another from time to time, but those talks never turned into any kind of plan for it. The four of us were in place, as I remember, until Charles went to the University of Virginia in the mid-eighties, or maybe '83, '84, somewhere around there, '83 I think. So that was a bunch of years already. By that time, but seems to me that most of what continues to be in place was in place.

So the changes in faculty, that very limited number of faculty, didn't really affect very much what happened. From this end of things, it's clearer to us that I guess it ever was that one of the things that *could* distinguish us from other small programs is that any student isn't going to have to pay more to go to school here than any other. We're not going to have there be the kinds of tiers that there are in other programs.

I think the thing that's most detrimental about such a tier structure is that if it's in place, then what happens in the workshops could be really confusing, because what happens in the workshops is that you put your work there on the page, everybody's got a copy of it, and it's fair game. So you're not doing anything, really, in workshop more than giving the best reading you can of what you get there on the page, and that reading is both descriptive and normative.

You're trying to identify the parts that are strongest, weakest; say why they're strongest and weakest; and give the writer the best chance to go back and make it better. So that emphasis on judgment is something that I think can operate much more effectively if you're not walking into the room as one on the first tier of the third.

We do what we can to keep parity in place all the way through. It gets messed up at the end of their two-year tenure in the program by the prizes that are awarded. Of course, Humanities Associates and everybody that gives them money for these prizes thinks they're doing this wonderful thing, and they are in one way, but it can also be divisive. What we had to understand pretty quickly- and I don't think we understood it the first year but we did the second-is that we've got to make the judging for those prizes be extramural. We can't at the end of the time we've worked with these students, say, "Yeah, here's somebody who's A grade and you're kind of B-." That isn't good for anybody.

One thing that's good about the prizes coming is that, in some ways, it kicks them out of the nest. It tells them that their work from that point on is going to be judged by people who aren't as committed as we are to have the two-year-and in some cases, three-year – term that they're here be one in which they can concentrate on getting as good at what they came here to do as they can get.

SO: Well, to that extent, there was, in fact, a bit of planning then (1) to be cautious about developing a pecking order and (2) to keep your program small at a time when I could imagine there would be a lot of pressure to take something excellent and make it bigger for the greater glory of UCI.

JM: Or the dean.

SO: Or the dean or whoever wants to—

JM: -take congratulations for it. We would make the programs bigger if the quality of the pool of applicants argues for it. As soon as it does that, we'll do it, and we'll do whatever has to be done. But at this point, even now, taking ten out of four hundred and fifty applicants, there are two or three of those that we're bending over backward to take, and we don't want to be doing that.

SO: Is it ten? I thought it was supposed to be six.

JM: It's six and four. It's six in fiction, four in poetry.

SO: But that's been forty year, then, that you guys have been doing that. That strikes me as phenomenal at a time when the campus ahs just surged around you.

JM: But we've kept it there. I guess we wouldn't have been able to if we hadn't gotten such good reviews. Of course, those reviews are not just *U.S. News and World Report*, or wherever it is they turn up, I don't know where they turn up. But it's the publication records of our graduates.

SO: A few Pulitzer Prizes don't hurt.

JM: No, they don't hurt at all.

MC: Could you talk a little bit about that publication record? The program has been extraordinarily successful by just that crude measure of getting poets in print, let alone getting poetry in print. Is there something about the program, do you think, that produces writers that are able to get that kind of substantial recognition from their peers evaluating the publication? Is there something about the program that it

is aimed in that direction? It's so much more effective than most programs can even hope for these days.

JM: I think that relative success has a lot to do with the fact that we *are* the most selective of writing programs. We're able to be the most selective because we've kept it where it is. So if we know what we're doing when we read the applications, we're getting the ones who are not only the most promising but also, to some degree, already the most accomplished. Even if they're students in their mid-twenties, some of them have already shown that within a year or two they can write poems that are going to get some attention.

Now, the quality of what anybody writes has a pretty loose connection with whether or not it's going to succeed as a publication. I think about literary prizes as not necessarily proving that the recipient doesn't write well. It's such an upside-down world in terms of how these prizes are handed out. And I've gotten some, so it's not some kind of sour grapes on my part. Prizes seem like they have a very accidental relationship to the quality of what I consider the best writing. But at the same time, writing well doesn't necessarily have to mean you won't get it published. And depending on how astute editors are, good writing is going to get itself placed. I'm always grateful when one of our poets or one of our fiction writers, whom I think knows what she's doing, gets published.

I think the whole thing starts at our having been able to be as selective as we've been. Then that means that editors *know* we're able to be that selective. They *know* this is a program to look to. I think the program took off in the mid-eighties entirely because of fiction, because of how many of the fiction writers in

workshop in the mid-eighties got books placed. It made editors start to look at UCI, and, of course, those editors talked to other editors, some of whom are involved in the labor of love that is poetry since there's no money in poetry. Poets don't have the chance to sell out the way fiction writers do. So, on the coattails of fiction, I think some of the poets have gotten noticed and have done well for themselves. Then there's the good luck of Yusef Komunyakaa having been one of ours. He and Gary Soto and Garrett Hongo, they attract attention to the program.

[end side A, begin side B]

SO: Jim, I'm aware that sports – including baseball, basketball, fishing, and golf – are important to you, perhaps others as well. However, your close friend and distinguished colleague, Michael Ryan, has described your stubborn unwillingness to watch a Laker game unless you know they had won. What's that all about?

JM: Mortality. (chuckles) I died too many times. Years ago, I died too many times. Then there was taping a game, and once that was in place, I just spared myself that experience. Of course, we don't experience death. We experience everything else, but we don't experience that. Just last week I did everything I could while the game was being taped not to know what was happening Thursday night, understanding that Thursday night was it. I went to great pains, which I won't detail, to protect myself against the results of that game. Then, because it felt so bad, I took a sleeping pill afterwards.

SO: I love your passion about this. I was ghoulish enough to watch the damn thing.

JM: Well, I watched the game Saturday, because my son, who is twenty-seven today, was here, so we could go through it together. And there was nothing to go through because it was over in ten minutes, and perfectly painless.

SO: But you were talking about the great game.

JM: Yeah, the overtime game.

SO: I was ghoulish enough to watch the Saturday game as well...

SO: Well, Jim, thank you once again for letting us interview you. I wonder if there's anything else you'd like to add before we wrap this up?

JM: Well, gratitude to you and to Mike. I thank you, Spence, for your thoughtfulness in putting these questions together and for doing this thing that you're doing. And you're doing it in connection with an institution that it's very hard for me to imagine my life without. Just the notion that I can be paid to have another bad day at my desk is just astounding to me. It seems absolutely gratuitous. My life has turned around that gift of being able to pursue whatever it was that I was going to make, both as a writer and as a teacher. It just amazes me that such a thing can happen.

SO: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW