

# 10 Questions



The author of nine books, McCullough has written three award-winning presidential biographies

## Historian **David McCullough** discusses the death of letter writing and how Picasso was a big old bore

**Your new book, *The Greater Journey*, is about a bunch of mostly artistic Americans who moved to Paris from 1830 to 1900. Why them?**

We know a good deal about the time when Franklin, Adams and Jefferson were in Paris and more than a great deal about Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein. My feeling was that this period brought to France a group who are among the most interesting and important figures in American life. I also feel very strongly that history ought to be seen as a great deal more than just politics and the military.

**Who was your favorite character from the book?**

[Sculptor] Augustus Saint-Gaudens is one of my favorite characters in my writing life. Infinitely interesting man, complicated, immensely talented and important and a great American story. An immigrant shoemaker's son, was put to work at age 13, street kid in New York who was determined to excel. Remember, there were no schools of art here, no museums. If you wanted to become an architect, you went to Paris.

**How did Samuel Morse go from portrait painter, before he went to Paris, to inventor?**

The fact that Morse was a brilliant painter did not mean that he couldn't have other ideas. While he was in Paris, he got the idea for the tele-

graph and for Morse code. When he perfected the telegraph and went back to Paris to secure a French patent, he encountered the daguerreotype, and Daguerre said it would be fine if Morse took photography back to the U.S.

**You use letters a lot in your research. Whose mail would you like to read today?**

William Trevor's, because he is perhaps the greatest living writer in English.

**We don't write letters on paper anymore. How will this affect the study of history?**

The loss of people writing—writing a composition, a letter or a report—is not just the loss for the record. It's the loss of

the process of working your thoughts out on paper, of having an idea that you would never have had if you weren't [writing]. And that's a handicap. People [I research] were writing letters every day. That was calisthenics for the brain.

**We often can't understand how people in the past could have owned slaves or not educated girls. What do you think people will wonder about us?**

How we could have spent so much time watching TV.

**You started a biography of Picasso but didn't finish.**

To me, it just wasn't a very interesting life. Yes, he changed his female companionship periodically, and he painted a lot of paintings, but he really didn't do much.

**Ever wish you still worked at *Sports Illustrated*?**

No. I got wonderful training. I learned a lot about writing. But I was ready to move on.

**It wasn't because of the editor who had a big stamp that read DULL?**

[Laughs.] You heard about him? He'd stamp your work. And he wouldn't tell you why. You'd have to work it over.

**Are you still using that 60-year-old Royal typewriter?**

I've written everything I've ever had published on it. It's a superb example of American manufacturing. Sometimes I think it's writing the books.

—BELINDA LUSCOMBE



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FROM LEFT: ALEXANDER HO FOR TIME; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; HOWARD SOCHUREK—TIME LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES