

Interview with Chester Aaron
Author of *Symptoms of Terminal Passion*

Juanita: Thanks for talking with us today Chester. Please tell us what type of stories we can expect in your new collection “Symptoms of Terminal Passion.”

Chester: Stories about children, adolescents, thirty/forty-somethings, near-geezers. Stories about war and peace, love and hate, poverty, campus and farm. ‘Type of story’? I know the types of shovels I need for different work in the soil, the type of car I need for my way of life and the type I can afford, the type of mattress I lie on most comfortably. But ‘type’ of stories? I cannot concern myself with ‘type’ when I write or talk about short stories.

Juanita: What inspired you to write your new book?

Chester: The need to recall and describe for my own remorse and pleasure and for the remorse and pleasure of others, my 83 years of living in this too-often-cruel, not-too-often-beautiful, world. The retrieval and reconsideration of certain persons and events that have made me regret and/or celebrate some of my behavior and often the behavior of others.

Juanita: What are the themes that run through the stories in “Symptoms of Terminal Passion”?

Chester: As I rarely if ever think of ‘type’ I rarely if ever think of ‘theme’ when I write a story. ‘What is this story about?’ is less important to me than ‘How and why did this person react to this or that crisis’ that just began haunting me? The crisis, whatever it is, almost always delivers pain, physical or emotional, real or imagined: my being first among the troops that liberated the concentration-camp of Dachau; day-after-day of hunger in my home as a child and my mother’s tears and my father’s fury that their children here in America were hungry as he and my mother had been hungry when they had been children in Russia and Poland; a strike in the steel mill where I was working and the police on horseback riding down me and my friends in the picket line and beating us with truncheons; racism in the x-ray department where I was Chief Tech and my punishment by the doctors and hospital administrators for my disclosing that racism but my support from my entire staff, especially the Black workers; betrayal from a lover; the realization for the need for forgiveness after harboring real or imagined angers at a once-loving beautiful and talented wife.

Juanita: Do you have any favorites in “Symptoms of Terminal Passion”?

Chester: They are all my children but now that they have all left home, they are on their own. I have suspicions that one will be more successful dealing with the outside world than the others. Being proud and independent children, they will remember nothing about their daddy and go on to improve

or damage the world they inhabit so their own children can then bring scorn or praise, pride or shame, back home. Of the seven stories in this collection my favorite is the seventh and the first and the five in between.

Juanita: The idea of love winds its way through your stories. What are your thoughts on love?

Chester: I love love, I hate hate. I've given and received, and survived, both. I find myself, as I grow older, thinking more and more often about former friends and relatives I have loved. But to paraphrase Kris Kristoferson: love is just another word for something else to lose.

Juanita: It is evident in your writings, that you have a unique way of getting to the truth of the matter. Tell us about your ability to see and feel on such a deep level.

Chester: It is not true that 'the truth shall make you free'. It is true that I lived much of my childhood in not 'the shadows' but the 'darkness' of poverty and racial hatred in rugged coal-mine country but it is also true that during that same childhood I received so much joy and love that I find myself wondering now how that could have happened. My mother and father lived lives of not-very-quiet' desperation and I sometimes find myself wanting to apologize to them, at least try to explain to them, that I too, as they had, struggle to find joy in sadness. I write my stories about my struggle and some stories (in my mind) succeed, some do not, some almost do and must be set aside to be tried again.

Juanita: You have been a writer for many years, even when it was financially impossible for you to make a living. What is it about writing that has kept you so undeniably passionate throughout the years?

Chester: More and more, as I grow older and older, I have somehow gained the strength and courage to tell the literary establishment (meaning publishers, editors, agents, established and therefore powerful writers) in San Francisco and New York to kiss my ass. This, after they have let me know that I do not, and apparently do not want to, write the kind of 'literature' they can sell in the marketplace. Four years ago (after 15 books published, several translated, several award-winners, fiction and non-fiction, adult and young-adult) I decided that once again I needed an agent rather than rely on myself. I sent letters to 30 agents. Received one reply. That agent had written, 'Thanks but no thanks' across my letter and returned it to me. I asked her to please explain her response. She said, 'Let's face it, Mr. Aaron. You are 79. Why should I waste my time and money on you?' Over the following four years I published two young-adult novels, an adult novel (none through so-called main-line publishers) and, one month ago — thanks to Thomas Farber and El Leon Literary Arts — this collection of stories we are talking about, 'Symptoms of Terminal Passion.' Passion: the genes and the events that have decided my fate have joined forces to create an old man who is determined to tell the world not just how ugly that world is but also how beautiful it has, occasionally, been.

Juanita: Have you always been a keen observer of others?

Chester: Always. Even before, and especially ever since, I was beaten up by neighborhood kids because I was a Jew. I learned to box so I could fight back and, able to defend myself, could enjoy taking the time to consider the reasons and the ways people like myself, were able to hurt and to help others. As a soldier I have killed other humans, as an x-ray technician I have helped ease pain and even now and then helped save lives. I prefer the latter role.

Juanita: Your stories are written with such deep emotion and vivid description, many readers feel that they lose themselves in your stories, experiencing the words as though they were their own. What are your comments on the effect your stories have on readers?

Chester: First, the question flatters me and I appreciate it. I try, like an actor trained by Stanislavsky, to become the character the story is about, or the character telling the story which is about someone else. It is very challenging to write about, or from the viewpoint of, someone other than yourself. That challenge is one of the joys I find in writing fiction. My many experiences have given me opportunities many writers have not lived long enough to have or other writers, who are as old as I am, have lived the sheltered life that provides few challenging experiences. A few illustrations: writing a young-adult novel when you are middle-aged or old; writing about (or from the viewpoint of) a character who is not just from a different class or background but a different gender. I published a novel recently about rapes of women students on a college campus. My major character is a young woman student. (I am a man, very old, a professor.) She interviews women who have been raped. How can I dare attempt that subject, that character, that story? One reason: because when I was a teen (male), I was raped for six months by my boxing coach. I got him finally so that he will never again rape anyone. Every victim, male or female, is me. The most flattering comment re. that book (from a woman reviewer:) "I was sure the author was a very talented young girl, then I believed the author was a sensitive older woman; I was shocked to discover the author was a man." It doesn't get any better. Now I will try to be Bill Gates writing about going hungry.

Juanita: "Passion" is in the title of your book, and from recent reviews of your book, it is clear you are a passionate man. What are your thoughts on living a passionate life?

Chester: I'll be better able to give you a more comprehensive answer when I celebrate my 103rd birthday. I find myself hoarding my most passionate contempt who offer their passions for sale on the screen, on the stage, on the page, on the street corner, at the bar. Their passions born of having lived secure and comfortable lives. Exceptions, whom I passionately admire: writers who have been challenged from birth to defy not security but crippling racial or physical or emotional or economic threat.

Juanita: How did such a prolific writer end up a highly regarded garlic farmer?

Chester: By being a prolific garlic grower every morning in the field and a prolific writer every afternoon and evening in the house. I am more fortunate than 99.99% of most farmers because I can write about (and sell) articles and stories about farmers and how most of them, especially the non-corporate farmers, lose money feeding those fortunate who have the money to buy the food produced. I need to and am able to write about the social and emotional and political scars farmers take to bed with their minds and bodies each and every night. To hell with what food tastes like or how daintily it is presented at the newest soon-to-be-dead Beverly Hills café. I am driven to write about the people, man and woman, who sell their harvest to the chef who might just possibly pay the bill before his café collapses and the famous actor or actress is photographed at the table. For me farming is a passion born of peasant parents and grandparents. Writing is a passion born of my need to keep the dreams and fears of my peasant parents alive. When I was a child my Russian father cured my ear-aches and tooth-aches with raw garlic. In combat in WWII I saw wounded Russian soldiers pull garlic cloves from their pockets to rub on their wounds. After Dachau I lived to write about that experience and my other experiences (boxer, student, x-ray technician, union organizer, sheep-rancher, professor, garlic-grower, retired geezer.) Now, sitting on my deck in the evening, under the redwoods, I think of my past with pains and pleasures and think (the title of one of the stories in 'Symptoms of Terminal Passion'): Hey, it's not a bad life!

Juanita: Chester, What do you ultimately hope readers understand about life as-you-see- it, by reading your book “Symptoms of Terminal Passion”?

Chester: ”Life as I see it.” I don’t think I can answer that question honestly. I don’t write to persuade people to a certain view. If I did I would write an essay. Reading “Symptoms of Terminal Passion” will, I’m hoping, please readers as much the writing of these stories pleased this writer. I hope the reader walks away from these stories not “thinking” so much as “feeling.” I don’t trust intellectuals who trade in “thinking”, I trust people who do (emphasis here) DO things: box, fight for a cause, love their children and demonstrate that love, try to change the evils (whatever they might be) to “good”. That’s sophomoric, perhaps, but if one reader walks away from one of these stories thinking about hope and love and trust in their fellow or sister man or woman I am more than satisfied.

Juanita: How can readers find out more about you and your other books?

Chester: They can find my various other books on “Google” or at “Amazon” and they can visit my website (www.chesteraaron.com) or they can call me and invite me to their home for supper.

Juanita: Chester, thank you for this great interview. It was truly a gift to talk with you today. Your unique perspective and writing talents shine in your new book “Symptoms of Terminal Passion.” Do you have any last thoughts for your readers?

Chester: Check back with me in 20 years. What are now my “last thoughts” will be my “first thoughts” then. In truth: my last thoughts might be to think about not just me but all writers and artists and composers and dancers as yourself with a sense-of-the-world just slightly different from the sense-of-the-world you had before we met. If you see me on the street, drop a buck in my tin cup or, man or woman, kiss me. Hey, try both.