

J.R. Möhringer reads at the International Theater in Frankfurt. April 19, 2007.

J.R. Möhringer

I'm just gonna read you a little bit from the closing of part one. Because this is of course a book about my relationship with a bar, but it's also a...about my relationship with a woman, my mother, and this is about a particular moment when my mother administered to me while I was losing my mind. I was seventeen years old and applying to Yale university. And the ??? this took, for me to think I could apply, for it even occur to me to apply when I heard the yearly income around that time was around six or seven thousand dollars, and a year at Yale was close to 20,000 dollars. So we were applying out of sheer want, desperate want, knowing that education was the only way out of this horrible apartment we lived in at this point in Arizona, next to this terrible canal that gave off all kinds of mysterious odors, and Yale was the only way that we saw of getting out, but also my mother and I shared this fear that we were born, we were the kind of people who were destined to never get in. Anywhere. When I was a kid, we would drive around these beautiful neighborhoods on Long Island, and we would look in the windows of these classic houses just two peeping toms, gazing at the lives that people were living in these beautiful homes with these beautiful furnishings, and, and the lighting seemed better and everything in these lives seemed so far from us, and so getting in was something we thought was always going to be beyond us. And that's why, writing this essay, I was suddenly seized with a kind of mania. Because the essay was what I felt was my only shot. The essay that you clip to your college application. And this is just a brief little description of of that moment in our lives together.

'It had to be simple but complex, sparse but lyrical, Hemingwayesque and Jamesean at the same time. It had to be careful and conservative, but also fresh and bold, evidence of a young mind teeming with insights. It would determine the course of my life and my mother's life, and either make up for the mistakes of all the men in the family or perpetuate their tradition of failure, and it could be no longer than three quarters of a page.

'Before beginning my essay for Yale, I made a list of big words. Only the biggest words I felt would force the admissions committee to overlook my many deficiencies. At seventeen years old I'd developed a philosophy on big words that was no different from my philosophy on Cologne: The more, the better. My word list – and thank God my mother saved these word lists in a box in the back of a closet: Provisional, strident, bucolic, fulcrum, inimical, behemoth, Jesuitical, minion, eclectic, Marquis de Sade, S.O.D., aesthetic. Can you imagine the essay that resulted from that word list? A body read some of these essays, and they said that they made the letters of the UNO-

bombers sound like Emily Dickinson [laughter].

I loved words, their sound, their power, without understanding or appreciating their precision. And this led to one jaw-dropping sentence after another. "Try as I might", I wrote, addressing the admissions committee directly, "I feel unable to truly convey the emphatic pangs of hungry ignorance that attend this my seventeenth year, for I fear that my audience is well fed." As my fingers flew across the keys of the second-hand typewriter my mother had bought me, I could hear the Dean of Admissions at Yale summoning everyone into his office. "I think we've got something here", he'd say, before reading a few choice passages aloud.

My mother, however, after reading my essay, chose three small words to express her opinion: "You sound insane." [laughter].

I ripped the essay from her hands and stormed into my bedroom to try again. I began a new essay, a wordier essay about my "ambition" to attend Yale. I was quite taken with this word: "I have ambition," I proclaimed, "in the sense that one would describe the man who wishes to outrun a speeding train as ambitious. And the behemoth bearing down on me: Ignorance." I thought it sounded brilliant, and again my mother flatly rejected my effort.

Over the next few weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas, my mother and I shouted and slammed doors and shoved my notebook back and forth, arguing about words. She would stare at me, and I could almost hear her wishing she'd never taught me to love words, had never shown me those flashcards when I was a boy. And I would stare back at her and wonder if her car accident – she'd recently been in a car accident – had caused some brain damage the doctors hadn't detected. [laughter] Or was this woman simply unable to appreciate top-flight writing? I brought my many drafts to Bill and Bud, the booksellers with whom I worked, who told me that my mother had been far too kind in her appraisal.

With the December 31 deadline just days away, I walked out of my bedroom brandishing another essay.

"Worse than the last," my mother said, handing it back.

"That essay will get me accepted," I shouted.

”That essay will get you committed.” [laughter]

To spite her, I went back into my bedroom and battered out a slapdash essay with not one big word. Just a plain and simple description of working at the bookstore with Bill and Bud, how they taught me to read by giving me bagfuls of books and talking with me patiently about literature and language. I wrote about how they transmitted their enthusiasm for books, and how I saw Yale as an enlargement of this experience. Dull as yesterday's dishwasher. I thrust it at my mother.

”Perfect,” she said. I was never so confused.

On new year's eve my mother and I drove to the post office. The day was windy and bright. She kissed her fingertips and touched the envelope before I dropped it into the mailbox. At home we ate a pizza, and when my mother went to bed I climbed up to the canal and looked at the water, listened to some drunken Arizonians across the way singing “Auld Lang Syne”.

Spring came. I spent every warm night on the canal, wondering if the admissions committee had decided about me that day, or if they would decide in the morning, or perhaps the following afternoon. I looked at the stars reflected on the water's surface and wished on each one, “please, please.” I didn't know what I would do if I didn't get in. As a backup, I'd applied to Arizona State University, but I couldn't muster any enthusiasm for going there. If Yale rejected me, I thought, I'd probably just light out for Alaska.

Sometimes I let my mind run with this fantasy, pretending that the canal was a wild river in the Yukon, where I lived in a log cabin, fishing and reading, subsisting on Grizzly bear meat, hardly ever thinking about Yale except on snowy nights, sitting by the fire, combing the lice out of my beard and petting my dog Eli.

Whenever I climbed down from the bank of the canal and returned to the apartment, I'd find my mother awake, working at the kitchen table. We would talk a while about everything but Yale, and then I'd go to bed and listen to Sinatra until I fell asleep.

On April 15, a letter arrived. My mother put it in the middle of the kitchen table. We might have stared at it all day if she hadn't begged me to open it. I took the letter opener she'd bought me when we visited Yale and slit the envelope. I removed the one sheet of onion skin, unfolded it and read silently.

”Dear Mr Möhringer. It is a great pleasure to inform you that the admissions committee has voted to offer you a place in the Yale class of 1986.”

”What is it?” my mother said.

I continued to read in silence: “I am also pleased to notify you that your financial need has been met.”

”Tell me,” my mother said.

I handed her the letter.

”Oh, dear God,” she said, reading, tears filling her eyes. She held the letter against her heart. I grabbed her and danced her around the living room, in and out of the kitchen, and then we sat side by side at the table, and read the letter over and over. I shouted the letter, she sang the letter, and finally we fell silent. We couldn't say anything else, we didn't dare and we didn't need to. We both believed in words, but there were only three words for this day, this feeling: “We got in.”

[applause]