

## **3 books coming from Troy native**

By **AMY HALLORAN**, Special to the Times Union

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Richard Selzer turned 81 this summer and has three books to add to his body of work, which includes a dozen fiction and nonfiction titles. SUNY Press has just released "Knife Song Korea" and "Letters to a Best Friend: The Private Correspondence of Richard Selzer"; a third book is due later this year from Yale Press.

In his letters, Selzer refers to his native city as "my beloved Troy," and still considers himself a Trojan even though he has lived in New Haven, Conn., for 50 years. A retired surgeon and professor of surgery at Yale, the author published his first book of essays about medicine in 1973. Locally, he may be best-known for his 1992 memoir, "Down From Troy", in which he draws the city in luscious glory.

We spoke by phone.

Q: Tell me about your novel, "Knife Song Korea."

A: In Korea, I kept a log, a diary, of my daily experiences in order to keep sane. It was an exhausting time, all day and all night, treating these people with whom I could hardly communicate. When I was transferred to Japan after a year and a half, I decided to turn (the log) into a novel, in order to spare someone's feelings. But that was more than half a century ago and I forgot all about it. I came back to Yale and finished my surgical training for five more years, and became a teacher of surgery, and practitioner, and I forgot ever, that I wrote this thing, because I wasn't really yet a writer. I didn't decide to write until 15 or 20 years later.

A couple of years ago, the University of Texas asked for my papers. So my wife and I packed up the attic and the basement. ...We just sent all those cartons of pages down, and pretty soon a man called up and said to me, "I've just read your novel," and I said, "Well there's some mistake, I haven't written a novel." "But I have it right here in my hand." And I said, those immortal words, "What's the name of it?"

Q: Do you feel nervous about it going out into the world?

A: It's hard for me to worry about my reputation, because I didn't become a writer for fame, or money. ... I wrote because I wanted to, because it satisfied me. It made me happy to write, and to provide my colleagues and the students who come after me with a literature. That was what I wanted to do. I believe I've done it, so if the critics don't like the book, well that's too bad.

Q: Does your correspondence continue with Peter Josyph, the best friend of your book of

letters?

A: Yes it has, and we have stayed great friends, and he has helped me a little bit in my writing. The older I get, the more disorganized I get, and I lean on him to help me keep things in order. He took all my letters and arranged them and wrote an introduction to it, and that will be published. Without his editorial effort, I don't think there would be a book, because I'm too lazy.

Q: How does your letter writing intersect with your other projects.

A: I always have been a letter writer, and I always have told stories too, and sometimes I tell lies. Not everything I write is true. When I write something down, it becomes just as real as if it actually happened. That's my imagination. The letter-writing is very important to me. I have other correspondences that I have kept over the years, but this is the most important one. I don't like everything I write, that is true. I pour it out onto the page, and when I read it over some weeks and months later, I think my god, did that come out of me, and I was appalled, and it did. It was revealing of my character and personality, so I do include it in the published work.

Q: Are you maintaining your routine of working at the library at Yale?

A: I do go there every morning. ...I spend the day alone. I have lunch usually all by myself, and I go back to the library and work for another two or three hours, and then I go home. Most of my time is spent rummaging in my imagination.

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