

# Mark SaFranko: an Artist of Catholic Tastes

Mark SaFranko is an American author born on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of December Trenton, New Jersey. Despite having still succeeded in the US, he is more appreciated here in France.

He's in Nancy at the moment so we decided to make a reportage on what seemed to be a special man with a unique career. I've been lucky enough to get an interview with him and it made me find out more about the man and his background.

He grew up in what was considered as one of the most dangerous cities in the United States. He studied in Notre Dame High School, a Roman catholic college. He purposely went to school to avoid the Vietnam War draft lottery. Trenton was pretty "rough and industrial" according to him, lacking culture but based on very ethnic neighborhoods.

SaFranko has come a long way to get into writing. He first wanted to become a lawyer. But later on he realized he did not really like law because he was not interested by law or the government. He even said: "I felt like I would kill myself if I had to keep reading law stuff." During his youth, he didn't really benefit from an environment that would have put his interest into that field. His father was a firefighter and there were no books in his house or around. "There were no books within miles, it was culturally deprived, despite the fact I could take some random trips to the library."

But despite that he already got an early interest into Characters and he has always been a person who can find inspiration from anything and anywhere. "There is no secret for creating." He said recently during his time in Nancy. Before he wrote anything, he kept some notes about the adventures of his daily life, the people he met and the numerous jobs he had over the years. But he quoted: "most

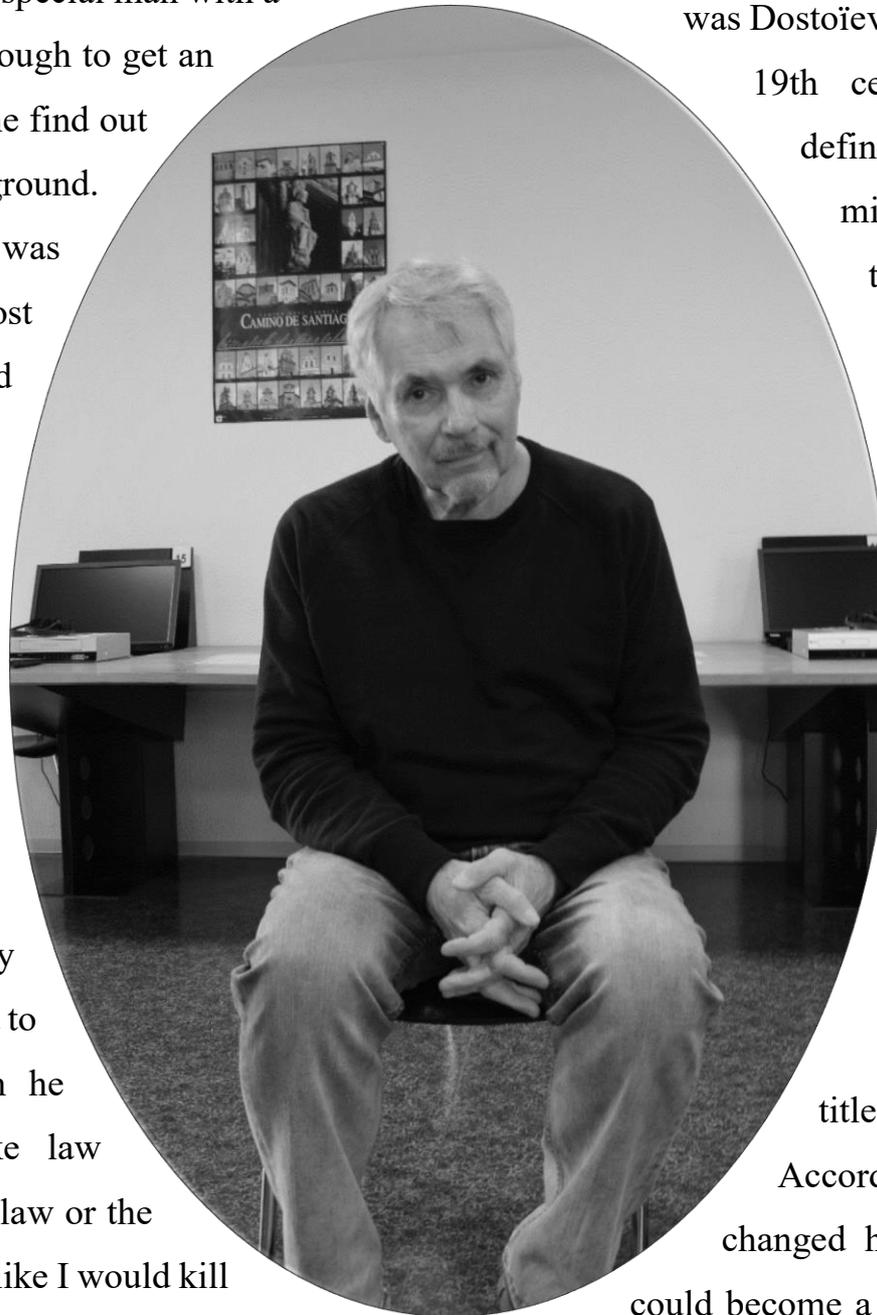
of the raw material I ever needed was stored in my head and it's remained there throughout the years."

Originally, he wanted to become a composer (which he still wants to be) but his will to become a writer started halfway through college. One of his first major influences

was Dostoïevski, a famous Russian writer of the 19th century, "Discovering his works definitely awoke something in my mind." Henry Miller was also one of the first writers he liked and wanted to imitate. Like SaFranko, Miller came from a similar background and had no encouragement.

His first job however was in a Bank, an experience that didn't go very well according to him. He couldn't find time to read so a few times he was reading books under his desk. He ultimately ended up getting fired but it was during that time that one day he picked up a book titled "Henry Miller on Writing".

According to him reading that book changed his life and made him realize he could become a writer one day. That is the period where his will to be what he really wanted pushed him forward to achieve his goal. This is why he started looking for paths that could lead him to make his will be real. Aged of 21 he then was hired as a newspaper writer. Although he did pretty well, he described himself years later as a "terrible journalist". But one important aspect he would find very helpful from that job for his writing career was the window dressing. There were always formal deadlines to respect every time and he was trained to always get the work done in time. During that period, he was published on a daily basis, but he was still doing some creative writing on his own.



During that period it was not always easy as he had to do anything he could to maintain himself afloat, accepting any jobs, like loading trucks, driving cars etc...describing himself as a "ghost rider". He was always broke and would drink every night, in his own words he was "very miserable".

At the early stage of his career SaFranko did not really believe in himself, but he could count on his wife and also on a late Mystery writer named Mark McGarrity.

Dan Fante, American writer and son of John Fante who was writer himself played a major part both in his personal and professional lives. He was a turning point in his career specially with Europe recommendations. But he was as well considered as a close friend. For SaFranko, even if he mainly relied on his own throughout his career, friendship and support can be very helpful to succeed in this business.

**Mark SaFranko's life can be seen as extremely hard and hazardous, especially for French people who are accustomed to social helps. However, this incredible, eclectic background is precisely what forged the author's unique persona.**

"*Very cool and rock'n'roll*" are the words chosen by Olivier Brun to describe Mark SaFranko. Olivier Brun is a publisher for Editions La Dragonne, and I already presented him and briefly talked about his relationship with the American author in a previous article on L'Anglomane.

This description could seem quite paradoxical if we understood "cool" as a synonym of "laid-back" and "relaxed", because I don't expect people to immediately associate these terms with "rock'n'roll". Obviously, Mr. Brun must have said "cool" to represent the colorful, enjoyable, ecstatic mind of the author, right?

Well... let me try to nuance this. After reading some of the author's texts, and meeting him in CLYC a few times, I think I may have grasped just a bit more of Mark SaFranko's persona.

One interesting aspect can be found in *Travaux Forcés*. It was first published in the USA under the title *Odd Jobs* in 2010. It is the fourth installment of the Max Zajack saga, which started with *Hating Olivia*, back in 2005. Other instalments of the series include *Lounge Lizard* (2007) and *God Bless America* (2010). This first-person narrative tells the adventures of Max Zajack, a young man advancing through life, with quite a dose of sex, drugs and rock'n'roll.

Let me plant a flag here. Please, consider taking a look at this:

**Max Zajack**

**Mark SaFranko**

Actually, the author himself told us:

*"Max Zajack IS me."*

The many similarities between the author's life and Zajack's experiences are extremely obvious. Some anecdotes are direct transcriptions of what happened in Mark SaFranko's life. This doesn't mean the Zajack saga is a literal biography of the author; it just represents the infinite inspiration one can get from his own experiences in life, especially when they are as impressive as SaFranko's. Therefore, the adventures of Max Zajack become particularly significant regarding the author's persona.

In *Travaux Forcés*, we are introduced to a character who cannot resist defying authority. In the second chapter, Max is working at a beer packaging factory. The job is simple, he is satisfied with his salary, however abysmal. Max is portrayed as a simple man who enjoys everyday pleasures, such as alcohol and quick sex with his unofficial girlfriend Sheila - or any easy girl, really. He takes life as it comes and doesn't plan things very early on. He doesn't

work hard to achieve ambitious goals; actually, Max just enjoys peace, more than comfort or public recognition.

But Max's peace is disturbed when he is confronted to a small man from Pennsylvania called Festrum. This machine manager is a caricature of the worst boss possible: criticizing every gesture of his subordinates, treating them like trash, just for his own pleasure. The peaceful routine of Max slowly turns into hell, to the point where everything he once enjoyed now seems to irritate him. This job he once liked eventually repels him. He gradually changes his mind and finally thinks this job is not good enough for him. The breaking point happens after a last unfair criticism from Festrum, as a result of which he is plunged into a tank of water after being pushed by a vengeful Max Zajack. This makes Max unemployed again, and he goes back to his hometown, Trenton, where his family lives. There, he has to face his father's temper and is urged to find a new job.

This chapter gives the reader a good taste of what is to come throughout the novel. Max gets a series of small jobs: he cannot stay in one place more than a few weeks, a few months at best. However, after this experience at the beer packaging factory, he reveals his goal and ambition to be remembered as a famous writer. He even uses this ambition a few times in the novel: first, to impress a newspaper editor and get a job thanks to his great nerve; second, to impress a girl, which does not work out so well.

This could be considered quite sad. However, the real tragedy comes from his job at the bank. No surprise, Max does a terrible job and he hates it. The only pleasure he finds comes from stolen reading moments. He is fascinated by a book, *On Writing*, written by Henri Miller. Up to this point, we could compare Max to a stubborn and

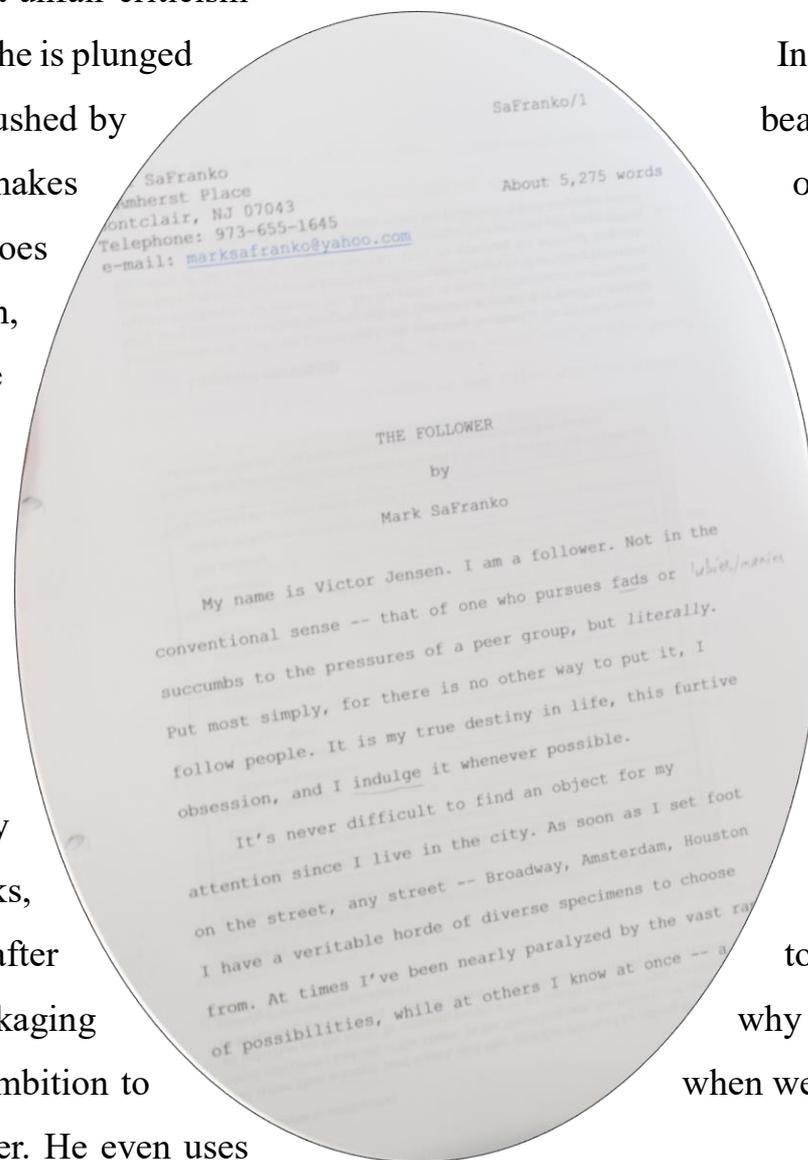
disrespectful teenager. But this moment in particular makes both Zajack and the reader understand that he is, first and foremost, a dreamer.

When he finds a job as a journalist, he understands this fatality that a dreamer cannot possibly find peace in this kind of bread and butter work. As he puts it himself, in the French translation:

*“On ne peut pas se forcer. L’aspirant écrivain se voit comme un artiste avant tout ; il a besoin d’une cachette pour rêver et s’épanouir.”*

In this passage, we understand the terrible beauty in Max Zajack's uncontrolled way of life. The world and society are not easy on artists and dreamers. They don't fit anywhere, because their real power and richness come from a great open mind, full of ideas and ideals. Authors are often innovators, explorers, and they manage to make their readers evolve emotionally, intellectually. Artists make one's soul grow. Sadly, despite its primordial importance in the development of society, thinking takes too much time. And since time is money, why bother thinking, why bother innovating, when we can just do cold calling?

This is what I understood from reading *Travaux forcés*. However, I also had the pleasure to take part in the writing activities at CLYC, the university language lab. These activities were the perfect opportunity to hear more from the author and to be directly confronted by his approach on writing. We were even given the opportunity to read one of the author's short stories, *The Follower*. As its title suggests, this story revolves around a man whose hobby is to follow strangers in the street, men or women



alike - except he sometimes manages to have consented sex with some of the girls. This short story was inspired by Mark's perception of New York, where many people walk in huge crowds, full of strangers, without the slightest idea of who they are, what they did, where they're going.

"I have no idea whether this guy I just brushed shoulders with is a murderer or just a regular good guy", he said.

After reading it, we spent some time discussing the character's motivations. We imagined what would happen after the surprising end of the short story. Every time someone would summarize some of the texts they wrote themselves during the sessions, Mark SaFranko would find them interesting. He sometimes even joked about stealing some of these ideas.

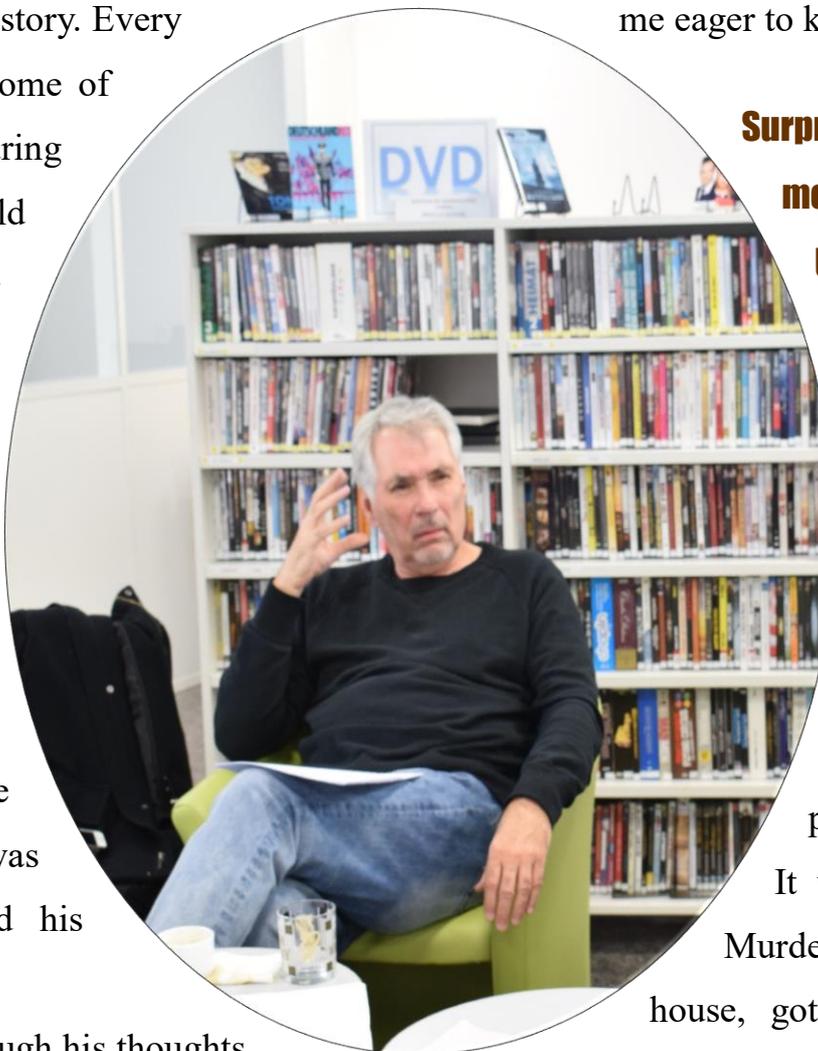
We also spent some time discussing philosophical topics about the meaning of success, perception of life, and destiny. Mark SaFranko has some strong beliefs concerning destiny, and the tragic death of his dog, just as he was reaching France, sadly reinforced his outlook.

Through his texts, but also through his thoughts and attitude, anyone would agree with Olivier Brun's description: "Very cool and rock'n'roll". I definitely do. SaFranko is an impressive character. He seems to listen and look at everything with great and profound interest. His pride and confidence are very subtly mixed with his thirst for ideas and experiences. No matter the topic or the situation, we would always look at him and wonder what is going through his mind. He is cool, because he is a mysterious, funny and likable dreamer. He is rock'n'roll, because he has had the bravery to stick to his ambitions and

his ideas despite a life that was not meant for dreamers, and that made him regularly go through hell. I would also add that Mark SaFranko is humble and realistic, two aspects that I find really honorable, especially coming from a person who keeps struggling to find the success he deserves in the US.

If reading Max Zajack's inspiring adventures proved to be quite enjoyable in itself, taking part in these debates was extremely enjoyable. In a few sessions, I had experienced a staggering testimony of a real, accomplished and somewhat tortured writer. Mark SaFranko's advice made me eager to keep on writing myself.

**Surprisingly, SaFranko's stories are far more successful in France than in the USA.**



Although American, Mark SaFranko has had a hard time getting a public in his home country. His first novel, *The Favor*, was published when he was 26 years old, but his next novel wasn't published until he was in his mid-40's. It was only when he turned 50 that Murder Slim Press, a British publishing house, got interested in *Hating Olivia* and eventually published it in 2005. That was the true start of his career as a writer of novels.

The path he has followed is similar to those other American writers belonging to what is referred to as dirty realism once had to walk too. But first of all, what is dirty realism? The term was first used by Bill Buford in 1983, who was the editor of the literary magazine *Granta*, and that's how he would describe the genre: "*Dirty realism is the fiction of a new generation of American authors. They write about the belly-side of contemporary life – a deserted husband, an unwed mother, a car thief, a pickpocket, a drug*

*addict – but they write about it with a disturbing detachment, at times verging on comedy.*” So dirty realism addresses the daily difficulties faced by lower classes in America just because they didn’t get the same opportunities as other citizens. Dirty realism cries out that the American dream is dead. One of the writers of dirty realism he has been more compared to is Charles Bukowski. They both create an alter ego whose lives share many characteristics of those of the authors: they are struggling writers with unstable jobs, and unstable sex-life. Bukowski had to find its public outside of America, in the Hispanophone countries. For Mark SaFranko it was specially in France that he made a name for himself.

But what is the reason why these two authors weren’t successful in America? Mark SaFranko has already tried to answer to these questions in some interviews. This is the answer he gave to an interviewer from Toro magazine: “*The only thing I can say is that, at least in the United States, there’s never been an audience for what you would call confessional writing*”.

This is quite similar to what he told at the *Anglomane* about his life and career. He thinks that the main problem is that people in the USA don’t really dig confessional fiction, which is characterized by a first-person narration and the exposure of the narrator’s obscure secrets and motivations, a great deal of which are part of the actual writers’ life. And, as SaFranko explained in another interview for the 3 A.M. Magazine, “*If an artist doesn’t make money, America has no need for him or her*”. He says that publishing houses used to have some space for experimental novels but that now they are only interested in blockbuster material.

One of the best ways of getting an idea of the divergence of his reception in the US and in France is by reading the article “*J’aurais toujours Paris*” which he wrote in English for a magazine but never got published. He starts by thanking 13e Note Éditions, his former main editor before their closure in 2014, without which he wouldn’t be known in France. Then he tells about the time

he had and event in an American bookshop and only 8 people turned up, 5 of which were his friends. He compares this experience to a book signing in Paris. When he arrived, people had been waiting for him and they were remarkably excited to meet him. That’s when he realized that all the disappointments he had had to endure could at least be left behind. In France people appreciate his work. Even if he doesn’t have a huge public, publications like the Rolling Stones and Le Figaro have reviewed him, this last one describing him as a “*must read*”.

### **The A.R.I.E.L. project made us, students, discover an artist who was already well-known in France.**

Thanks to the A.R.I.E.L. project – Auteur en Résidence Internationale en Lorraine, many French students, including me, were able to discover Mark SaFranko, an American writer. The project includes different activities and interviews in the Grand Est region, and even once in Belgium, and here is my experience in one of SaFranko’s activities.

I’ve met him for the first time at his third workshop at the CLYC of the university, and I was really surprised. Some people told me a few things about him, and I began to create this image of him in my head, an image that was totally wrong. Mr. SaFranko is a very nice man, friendly and open to discussion. Albéric, a third-year student in Etudes Culturelles who went for the first time at one of SaFranko’s workshop, even told me afterwards: “He never hesitated to share personal feelings about his work and life, he seemed more interested by our perception of his work rather than promoting it.” He was with three professors of the faculty, in the DVD-room of the CLYC, and around him, in a circle of chairs, some students. I can’t talk about the first workshop, or the second, since I wasn’t there, but I will tell you how was the third one.

How do you imagine a “Creative Writing workshop”? Surely with some writing, since it’s in the title, and maybe some talking. Truth is, there was no writing this time. For three hours we just talked. An author has always something interesting to say, and even though you don’t write, just by listening to him you can learn a lot. How? Simply because we talked about life, personalities, but also about characters and stories ideas. The workshop began with the reading of one of SaFranko’s short stories: *The Follower*. The plot is about a man who likes to follow different people he finds in the city, to observe their lives. Only two people had read it before coming, so to begin with, the professors and the author agree to give everyone some time to read the story, since the purpose of the day was to discuss it.

After reading it, Claire, one of the teachers, asked to a group of four participants to go in another room and prepare some questions they had about the short story. The others were finishing their reading. In the meantime, I listened and observed what was happening: where each participant went to read, how they were doing, what the teachers and Mark SaFranko were talking about. It was really interesting to do so, if I was there as a participant, I could not have done it. This time allowed me to know more the author: he is open-minded, funny, and easy to talk to.

Anyway, let me take you after all this. When the time was up, everyone was reunited again in a circle around the teachers and the author, and the “Q&A” (Questions and Answers) began. Albéric, one of the two who read the short story before coming, asked quite a lot of interesting questions. There were deep questions that allowed

SaFranko to digress on different topics, not just on the character of *The Follower*, but also on the reality behind this story, or how he got the idea, or what the meaning of life was for us (it was a philosophical moment). We talked about many things, for almost two hours, before we finally took a break.

This short break had something magical: at the end of it, we were only height. The others had gone. Seeing that, the teachers wondered why so many people left before the end of the workshop. Maybe they were disappointed, maybe they were too surprised of how it went, maybe they had other things to do and couldn’t stay until the end. We will never know what was wrong – if anything was wrong – and how to change the next workshops so participants stay until the end.

In any case, we were still in a circle – a smaller one – talking again about the meaning of life, and then Claire asked us if we were interested in something special for the next workshops, if we wanted to do something in particular. For example, Albéric said that he was interested in everything around writing – “As a writer, this workshop, and the technical insights offered were immensely helpful”–, and Louis, a member of this reportage, told it would be interesting to do a writing project – solo or in a group – like they did in the first workshop.

I will leave you to one of the questions we discussed during the last hour: to be a vampire, is it a curse since you cannot die, or is it a benediction because you can live forever and do many things? Think about what it means to be alive. Is the important thing the fact that we can all die at any time, and so it’s important to do things? Or, as some believe, is this life only one among others?

