SPARTANS INVEST IN UGANDA’S CONSERVATION FUTURE
I’ve been a fan of Harrison’s work since the mid-2000s, when I found myself adrift in East Lansing while my wife worked on her PhD at MSU.

That first year I was disoriented by most everything, from the nasal “A”s to Lake Michigan. I needed a guide, someone to explain the spirit of the place, not just the names of the towns and landmarks. I stumbled onto the books of Harrison, who ranks at or near the top of famous writers among MSU alums, if not on the list of most prominent living American writers.

Linda and Jim Harrison at the gravesite of William and Mary Wordsworth in St. Oswald’s, Grasmere, Cumbria, England, circa 1960s.
arrison, an acute observer of culture and landscape, families and his own personal foibles, and who has mentioned MSU in most of his books, was more than up to the task. His work helped make Michigan feel like my second home. His books have kept me company no matter where I’ve lived since. This sense of connection is one of the gifts of all great fiction. Many times over the years, I thought it might be nice to tell the man as much, face-to-face.

Then, amazingly, miraculously, Harrison relented to a media intrusion, allowing me, as a writer for the MSU Alumni Magazine, to spend time with him at his casita in Patagonia, Ariz. We even adjourned to the nearby Wagon Wheel Saloon, which appears in his latest (and 37th) book, The Big Seven, released earlier this year, and its 2012 prequel, The Great Leader. Both books feature a flawed anti-hero protagonist, Simon Sunderson, a retired Michigan State Police detective and MSU grad.

**HUMANITY**

Harrison doesn’t do suburban angst; he prefers real-life grit. There are moments of grace, yes, but his stories brim with betrayal, heartbreak and generalized bad behavior—
all an inescapable part of being human, Harrison would say.

As I arrived at his home one afternoon in February, my nerves nearly got the best of me.

“Holy crap,” I thought, considering how I might tell him what he means to me. “Harrison might shoot me or kick me out if I blubber something maudlin and sentimental. What the hell am I going to say?” My feet crunched on the gravel driveway as my mind played this loop, interrupted only by the vague feeling that I might very well be sick.

Just as I was thinking I’d email his assistant and tell her that the interview was off, that I’d fallen ill, the door opened and Linda, Harrison’s gracious wife of 50 years, welcomed me into the kitchen.

Next thing I knew, Harrison himself was lumbering down the hallway, in old khaki cargo shorts and shirtless. He’s burly, though smaller than I expected, and I noticed his cane, topped with an elaborate carved snakehead handle. “I use this to beat Republicans,” he’d cackled.

I was more or less speechless for the next 15 minutes. Harrison took my mute condition in stride, directing me to the back patio where we could sit in the sun. I wondered in passing: “Jeez, should I take off my shirt too?” Instead, I pulled down my MSU hat, turned on the recorder and sat back while my heart rate returned to normal.

Harrison lit the first of countless American Spirits and launched into a sort of wandering, discursive storytelling—starting with a jaguar that last year wandered up from Mexico and was spotted near his home.

“That’s a big boy. They can kill horses or cows, jaguars can,” Harrison said, peering at me through the smoke. “I like the idea that they’re around. It’s a good feeling.”

For the last half century, Harrison has wandered through the spectrum of literary genres, bagging success in them all: poetry, essays, screenplays, cooking columns, novellas and novels. Of late, public sightings of Harrison, 77, are increasingly rare. Articles, and his own recent essays, mention frailty and mounting health problems.

Though clearly physically diminished, Harrison is still very much at work. He said he was working on a poem before I arrived. And he said he daily prowls his imagination for stories and poems, which continue to pour forth. A book of his poetry is coming this fall, a collection of novellas is being edited and a new novel is in the works.
“BARRING LOVE I’LL TAKE MY LIFE IN LARGE DOSES ALONE—RIVERS, FORESTS, FISH, GROUSE, MOUNTAINS, DOGS.”

—Wolf: A False Memoir

Ed Begley, Jr.
A WANDERING SOUL

This Midwest work ethic, which Harrison pokes fun at in his writing, has at least occasionally deserted him. In the 1950s and ’60s he bounced between life as an MSU student and one as an itinerant poet. Eventually, he earned a few comparative literature degrees, though only after quitting “about 10 times” to flee to one of the “dream coats,” often hitchhiking with little but a box of books tied with rope and the typewriter his dad gave him for his 17th birthday, along with some fatherly advice.

His father spent $20 for the used typewriter so his son could become a writer. But he told the teenager that he needed to “meet the world” or he wouldn’t have anything to write about but himself. Harrison shared this history in his 2005 autobiographical novella-length essay, Tracking, written in a dreamlike third-person voice and containing several fond recollections of New York City, a frequent destination. “It was obvious you could make a home (t)here,” he wrote, “a true home being a habitat for the soul.”

Back at MSU, Professor John Wilson, who was in charge of Harrison’s scholarship and was later director of the Honors College, pulled the necessary strings whenever Harrison returned to East Lansing. Harrison met Linda there and they welcomed their first child, daughter Jamie, now a novelist in Montana. “When I’d come back from New York or Boston or San Francisco, I’d meet up with Johnny Wilson and he’d always give me my scholarship back,” Harrison said. “I think he was a repressed writer too and he cared about what I was up to in my wanderings. I was all over the place.”

These days Harrison is more rooted. Travel is problematic for him, particularly after a recent failed back surgery. He and Linda winter in Patagonia and spend the rest of the year in Livingston, Mont., where their daughters and grandchildren live.

In our hours together, references to family far outweighed those to the literary or Hollywood scenes. I racked my brain for a question I’d never heard him answer and decided on parenting, since we both have daughters. “You have your work cut out for you,” he said, after learning of our similar plights.

“I asked if he had any parenting advice. “Yeah, listen,” he said.

He continued: “Girls often think nobody is listening to them. So listen carefully. You’ll have problems, sure, but they’ll resolve themselves because they know you love them and you’re listening to what’s going on. That’s the best of what I know.”

A PLACE IN MICHIGAN

Though he left Michigan for good in 2002, Harrison retains a soft spot for his home state, which he’s mentioned in nearly all of his books. He seems especially fond of the Upper Peninsula. In a 2013 essay on the UP for the New York Times travel section, Harrison wrote: “On my first trip there, camping and fishing with a friend, we were lost for two days though we never felt imperiled. We caught trout near a waterfall and slept wonderfully aided by a little booze and the thundering water.”

Harrison lived in the Upper Peninsula off and on for 20 years. He holed up near Grand Marais in a small cabin, which he bought seeking respite from the excesses of Hollywood screenwriting. (Four of Harrison’s novels, including Legends of the Fall, were turned into films.) He fell in love with the cabin and still mourns having had to sell it. There was no better reprieve from Los Angeles than returning to “a fairly remote cabin off a two-track road where when you try to sleep at night you hear a river flowing, probably the best sound on earth,” he wrote in the Times piece.

Was MSU, one of the nation’s most populous campuses, overwhelming for the self-professed claustrophobic? “They had some good faculty, that’s all I cared about,” he said. “If you can make your own little world inside the bigger world, you’ll survive.”

Seated in the small world of his patio, Harrison looked content and secure, almost like a sleepy bear on the verge of an afternoon nap. Bears figure prominently in his fiction, where he often alludes to their status as semi-magical beings for Native Americans, another Harrison obsession.

He recalled trying to make it as a New York poet during one of his many hiatuses from college. “I walked a lot and so had sore feet and was hungry all the time,”
Harrison said if he hadn’t lost sight in one eye while quarreling as a boy, he might never have become a poet and writer. His work has been compared to Faulkner’s and Hemingway’s.

said Harrison, who has been proudly hefty most of his life. “I came home skinnier and my dad quipped ‘Well, you lost more weight. Ideally one of these times you’ll return home and weigh nothing.’

Of course Harrison’s bawdy poet-at-large-in-the-world stories are legion. “Have you heard of the Crazy Horse in Paris?” he asked. It’s maybe the best known club of exotic dancers in the world, he explained. “Anyway, the owner is a fan of mine. Once when I was in town she invited me to dinner in the girls’ locker room. What was I going to say? No? I had my picture taken with a bunch of the girls and gave it to Jack (Nicholson), knowing he’d be jealous. He used it to do a painting of me at the Crazy Horse. I’ll show it to you in the hall. Very funny.”

Later, I’d slap my head at forgetting to take him up on this offer. The anecdote sounded familiar, though, so I pulled out Harrison’s 2002 memoir, Off to the Side. I found the story and photo on page 96. “Standing there with my arms around the moist bevy I simply trembled,” Harrison wrote. “I’ve addressed several thousand people in a theater with far less agitation. This was a clear case of too much, the moral equivalent of drinking a magnum of ’49 Lafite Rothschild in thirty minutes. I felt the aftershocks, the tremors, for days…”

I closed the book thinking it was nice to know that Harrison can be rattled too.

‘LANGUAGE-DRUNK’

Harrison has always been a voracious reader. He said he often visited MSU’s botanical garden near the Red Cedar River to read and reread James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. It was a balm to what he called his youthful mental instability. “I still adore the book … because of the wild use of language,” he said. “You know, Auden said something like: ‘Poets should be language-drunk.’”

Speaking of drinking, another common Harrison theme, we sipped only cold water on his patio, to my surprise. The shadows grew longer and the 90 minutes I’d been granted were nearly over. I’d started to pack up when Harrison donned a T-shirt and suggested we head to the Wagon Wheel, the saloon in town.

On the 20-minute drive to town in Harrison’s old white SUV, we were passed on the left by a car that was clearly speeding. “Look at that [unprintable],” Harrison growled, stepping on the accelerator. I wondered, “Is he going to ride the car’s bumper? Brandish
the cane?” When we got close I said, “Hey look, it’s a Michigan license plate.” Harrison’s scowl faded as he eased off the gas.

The sleepy bear roused himself at the saloon, where a sign reminds patrons to leave their firearms at home, and the talk quickly turned more colorful. Alas, much of that conversation is not fit to print here. However, it shows that the literary rascal still has it in him—a good sign for his fans, as the blue stuff is part of the vitality of his writing.

After we ordered our drinks, Harrison riffed on why he agreed to see me. He said he wanted his friends to know “I’m not dead yet.” He paused and looked mirthful. “If any of those [expletive] read.”

While good-natured curses fairly flew at the watering hole, Harrison’s days of excess, whether on the road or at the table, seem long gone, mere recollections now. What remains on the page and in the flesh is a mind full of literary references. Also, a wry sense of humor, which illuminates life’s moments, including this one, as we enjoyed the fading, warm desert light while 2,000 miles away East Lansing froze in one of its worst winters in recent memory. “Do you like my rose garden?” he asked, grinning and gesturing at the tavern’s surroundings. The late afternoon sun was spilling over the ratty side yard, cheap plastic furniture splayed across a mostly bare-dirt patch.

PARTING
I didn’t want it to end, but it was time. Harrison said Linda had dinner going on the stove. Beer unfinished, he made his way slowly out of the bar and I thought of the many paths in his life, which is so tied to Michigan, and which in a reliably sturdy fashion has yielded so much poetry and prose to the delight of so many. I was teetering on the brink of irreconcilable homesickness when I started reading him years ago. This night, on his way out of the Wagon Wheel, Harrison himself teetered, leaning heavily on his cane. I wondered how this man, so vibrant on the page, got so damn old and frail? In my time with him, I kept thinking of lyrics from Guy Clark’s song Desperados Waiting for a Train: “To me he’s one of the heroes of this country; So why’s he all dressed up like them old men?” Harrison, unsurprisingly, has answered the unasked question with a line of his own poetry. “Our bodies are beautiful women never meant to be faithful to us,” he said with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, moments before our goodbye.

Should I have told him what his writing meant to me? In the end, I simply paid for our drinks, something Harrison never lets guests do, the waitress informed me. “I’m glad you didn’t turn out to be a [unprintable]” he said as we left. I couldn’t stop smiling at this, maybe the highest praise I’ve ever received as a writer.

I watched him gingerly get into his car and drive away. Looking over my notes later that evening, I kept thinking of something else I’d like to tell him. I could text him, but I’m fairly certain his only nod to modern communication is a fax machine. So, perhaps more appropriately, I’ll write it instead:

Jim, may your body stay true awhile longer so you may continue writing. It’s a good feeling knowing you’re out there, still hunting literary big game even in your twilight—which happens to be the time of day the jaguar is most active, too.

Jim Harrison earned a BA and an MA from the MSU College of Arts and Letters in 1960 and 1966.

GALACTIC
Sitting out in my chair near Linda’s garden a mixture of flowers and vegetables, pink iris, wild poppies, roses, blue salvia and veronica among tomatoes, green beans, eggplant and onion.
I think that I sense the far-flung galaxies and hear a tinge of the solar winds, maybe not possible but I think it so.
With so many infirmities I await the miraculous.
Galaxies are only grand thickets of stars in which we may hide forever they say.
Where is my dead brother I want to know?
The universe is wilderness. No one answers the phone because no one has hands, just minds.
The hands have been forgotten back on earth.

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About the author:
Geoff Koch is a writer in Portland, Oregon.
He worked at MSU from 2004-2009.
Jim Harrison is his favorite living writer.