



# CLOSE-UP:



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**Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.**

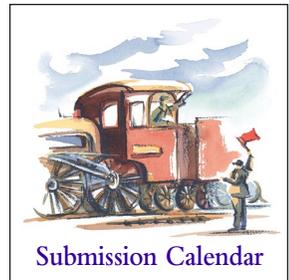
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**DAVID MALOUF**, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

The two main characters in *Johnno*, who are certainly real and separate people, are in some ways playing that game we all play. We become different people for whoever it is we're talking to. In a way, both characters are more themselves, and at the same time too much themselves to be real, when they're with one another. Johnno always plays up to the idea that Dante has of him; Dante feels forced to be the kind of person Johnno sees him as. ■

**SHAUNA SINGH BALDWIN**,  
*interviewed by Kris Babe:*

*Could you talk a little bit about the emotional work of the writer? What kind of work do you have to do as a writer to fully embody those characters?*



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I need to understand the emotions even of those with whom I disagree. I need to be nonjudgmental, whether I'm talking to a Nazi, or a former colonist, or a brown sahib. I remember coming out of a few interviews with former British colonists before writing *What the Body Remembers* and just weeping, because I couldn't believe the views I'd heard. And yet, given their worldview, what they said was completely logical. As a storyteller, you wouldn't have conflict without such different worldviews. At the same time, to understand is not to condone. The narrator can put things in perspective.

*Can you give an example?*

Sure. In *What the Body Remembers*, I used a story from an interview. The story I was told was that somebody was "so stupid," he wore a night suit to attend a wedding. I knew the socio-economic background of the interviewee; I also knew that the "stupid" person was a villager who couldn't have known the difference between a lounge suit, an evening suit, and a night suit, and who must have told the tailor to make him a night suit. And I felt the pathos of that should have been the focus of the story. So I chose to show it from the point of view of that well-meaning but poor villager.

A fiction writer can make such changes to bring out the pathos of a person's life, so the reader feels the suffering of another human being. To me that's the most wonderful side effect of a novel: it encourages our empathy.

*Can writing stories about war make you cynical?*

Sometimes I become cynical and forget the lyrical. When that happens, the writing turns to joyless work. **To me, allowing human beings to be complex and sometimes contradictory is the fun of writing. That's where I can discover my own humanity or recover my own compassion. ■**

**MAILE MELOY**, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

*After thinking about your story "Red from Green," I realized how many of your stories include attorneys. In addition to that story, I can think of "Tome," "Garrison Junction," "Kite Whistler Aquamarine," "Thirteen & a Half," and "Travis, B." Did I miss any? Why do you think you've included so many attorneys in your writing?*

The easy answer is that I grew up with a lot of lawyers around, so it's a job for which I have a vocabulary at hand. But the deeper answer is that being

a small-town lawyer with a varied practice—there are no corporate lawyers in the stories—is a job that puts you in contact with extraordinary circumstances. **Ordinary people deal with lawyers only when something crucial and possibly extreme is happening in their lives, and so it’s rich territory for stories. And lawyers are themselves good storytellers, or should be: they have to build a narrative and convince an audience that it’s true. ■**

**LEE MARTIN**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*You’re very good at dialogue and I wondered if that’s one of the areas you especially focus on in your classes.*

There’s certainly a spectrum. I mean I break it down into five areas. You’ve got to know characterization and structure and detail and point of view and language, and of course language is kind of the catchall for a lot of different things, but dialogue fits in. What I try to impress on my students is that the thing that makes you or breaks you as a writer is almost always what you can do with characterization. It circles back to what we were talking about earlier as far as seeing as completely and as honestly as you can, and so I often start a fiction workshop by sharing the opening of Tobias Wolff’s story, “An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke.” It’s in his first collection *In the Garden of North American Miners*, and I share the first two paragraphs. The opening line is something like Professor Brooke had no real quarrel with anyone in his department, but there was a Yeats scholar named Riley whom he could not bring himself to like. I tell my students that everything you need to know about characterization is in that line. **What he’s doing there is laying out a line and then he’s turning it, and when he turns it, he makes the character dynamic in the sense that he’s capable of emotion in different directions—contradiction. ■**

**ANTONYA NELSON**,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*Do you know the full histories of the characters in your story cycles, even though you give us only glimpses of them with gaps in between?*

One of the complicated things for me to do would be what Larry McMurtry [*Lonesome Dove*] has done so admirably in his work. He has novels in which primary characters of other novels appear in subordinate roles. He wants a full secondary character who has a whole life that he can immedi-

ately call up to make the most temporary appearance on the page convincing. But on the other hand, his characters' histories can be crippling. You can tell that their histories sometimes get in his way. You can make big mistakes by doing this. You realize, suddenly, that a character couldn't have come back at this time because you wrote another story where he was off in the war or in the asylum at that moment.

I don't know what happens in the gaps between my stories. If I wrote too many stories with the same characters, I would spend an awful lot of time making maps. It's better to erect a new family, which is precisely what I did in *Living to Tell*. There are some basic similarities between the Mabie family and the Link family, but I didn't want to be bound by the Link family history. The central defining events of that family would start taking on weight that I wouldn't want to deal with in this novel. ■

**PERRI KLASS**, interviewed by Charlotte Templin:

*I'm sure you have been complimented on your ability to create child characters. Of course, as a pediatrician, you have a lot of opportunity to observe children.*

I do, and I often wish I could do them better justice—it's hard to make children as individual as they are—sometimes easier to do with badly behaved or dislikeable children—but that may be true of adults as well.

*In Other Women's Children you make many allusions to literature about dying children, and sometimes quote it. You are critical of the nineteenth-century tendency to use children to allow people to have a good cry, to indulge the emotions. I think, though, that your stories have a lot of potential for sentimentality. How do you guard against sentimentality? Does the general hopefulness of your stories work against sentimentality?*

I meant some of what I said in *Other Women's Children* as tribute to the sentimental power of the dying-child story, even while I resent it now and then. **But there's no way to guard against sentimentality if you write about sick children—I think I meant to go ahead and acknowledge that and embrace it.** ■

**MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*In each of the novellas [in Specimen Days], Lucas, or Luke, is a deformed*

boy with a heart condition that kills him. In the first novella, we get to know Lucas before he dies. In the second novella, he's already dead, and in the third, he's deformed and on his way into outer space with a sense of hope and possibility. What purpose does Lucas/Luke serve in these interconnected narratives?

**It's hard for me to talk about a character in terms of his or her purpose. If they're fully developed, I don't think they have anything quite so simple as a purpose. I mean, what's my purpose? What's yours? We could talk about the work we do, the people we love, and all kinds of things, but that's not quite the same as "purpose."** I can tell you that each of the three main characters gets what he or she wants by the end. Lucas goes to heaven (in a sense), Catherine attains absolution, and Simon starts to become human. ■

### **CARRIE BROWN:**

It seems to be true that I like to write about older men. Maybe I just like older men in general, although that might be a dangerous confession. It also seems to be true that I often write about characters, even if they're not the main characters in a story, who are flawed physically or emotionally and psychologically in some way—people with mental illness or mental retardation, people who are blind or deaf, people who are “crippled” in some way. I have a disabled child, and her life has made me aware of the enormous complexities of a life lived on those terms, but I don't set about deliberately trying to elucidate those issues. ■



Photo: Jerry Bauer

**ELIZABETH McCracken**, interviewed by  
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*How did Peggy take over the narration of The Giant's House?*

I came up with the idea for *The Giant's House* when I was supposed to be paying attention in rare-books class in library-science school. I thought about it for a couple months. I had worked some on the novel when I was in school and then I got a fellowship at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. I sat down and spent two weeks working on the version

that wasn't about Peggy. I had plenty of time to dedicate to the work, so I started to write Peggy's voice just to get a handle on her. In the first version, there had been one throwaway line about her. Then I thought, Well, she is going to be a more important part of this book and I'll start to write in her voice. She compelled me in a way that the other characters didn't. ■

**MARY GAITSKILL**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*At one point, Veronica says, "How do you think Stalin and Hitler wound up killing so many people? They were trying to fix them. To make them ideal. There's violence in that, hon." You do not idealize your characters, choosing instead to show their faults as well as their virtues. Do you agree with Veronica that there's violence in trying to idealize people, or characters or anything, for that matter?*

I do. It's not murderous violence necessarily, but both Hitler and Stalin were after ideals that were impossible to achieve—ideals that at first blush were quite admirable. I hear something like it in the way that people talk about their health, mental or bodily. People think that if they eat everything right and exercise and take the right herbs and supplements that they're going to have perfect control over their health, mentally and physically. I try to take care of myself, too, but sometimes there's an obsessive, rigid quality that has a total lack of gentleness or respect, that wants to force the body and mind into this perfect instrument, which it can't be. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*You've said that you began to write fiction when you lost the knowledge of how to write poetry. What were you not able to do in verse that you thought you could achieve in prose?*

When I started to write fiction, I wasn't interested in character or characterization the way I was in verbal textures. As a graduate student, I studied modernist novels, like Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood* and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, which are sentence-driven at least as much as they are character-driven. I emulated those books, but the fiction I wrote as a result didn't do what I wanted, and I couldn't figure out why. It may seem as if I moved from poetry to fiction because there wasn't room for the expansion of characterization in poetry, but that's not true, because I wasn't working with characterization in fiction in those days, either. Between 1974 and

1984, when *Harmony of the World* appeared, I discovered that I couldn't write fiction without learning some basic rules of characterization. Purely language-driven fiction did not work for me. I thought the fiction I first wrote had characters in it, but when I look at it now—on those days when I can bear to look at it—the first thing I see is that there are none.

*What do you find in your early fiction?*

There's a visionary world powered by great anxiety and a manic exuberance. There are nightmarish features. Pasteboard figures wander through a world of excluded middles in cartoonish ways. When I wrote those stories, I thought I had many wonderful sentences that stood on their own.

*What moved you from language-driven to character-driven fiction?*

My first ambition in this regard was to be less ambitious. **I thought that since these grand schemes I had for brilliant visionary writing had turned out to be neither brilliant nor visionary, I had better do something else. The stories that I wrote as a consequence, those collected in *Harmony of the World*, are closely observed stories of the sort of characters whom I knew, people I had met in my twenties and early thirties in Minnesota, Michigan, and western New York. When I sat down at the typewriter, I thought, "I'm not going to try to storm the heavens with this."** I tried to put recognizable people onto the page: old Polish-American piano teachers; young women with unhappy love lives. **I set myself a goal of what I call "recognizability," and that means simply that I paid more attention to visual detail and the actions a character takes under conditions of stress.** I also was attentive to the ways people talked, which I had never spent a minute on before. I tried to write prose that was not grand but serviceable.

*Do the stories and novels now begin for you with character?*

All of it is character-driven now. I start with the characters and have some fairly clear intuitions about what the plot will be, but that's secondary.

*Before you begin to write, how long do you spend getting to know your characters?*

I spend months on that, mostly daydreaming my way through it. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*How does compassion work in your creative writing and your teaching?*

It is everything. **I'm not sure we can write about characters unless we are compassionate, which means, of course, seeing everything. Being compassionate, I think, means seeing all the sides of a person, all the capabilities, without judgment. If the author begins to judge, then he will begin to ask the reader to judge, too, in the same way. The reader will balk when an agenda is felt. At least, I do.** So if I'm judging a character I have to back up and look again in order to get myself out of it. A lot of writing, I guess, is trying to get out of the way—to get myself, my small-mindedness out, so that something else can be seen.

In teaching, as I see students create a character, I ask questions that require a different look at that character. Many undergraduate students will write something very judgmental about a father or a mother, with the young person being completely in the right. So I ask them to write from the point of view of the father/mother, and they are forced to get out of themselves as “victim” and to see a different side. That's an obvious way, but I also ask questions to help the author avoid creating one-dimensional characters. That's the kind of compassion I teach: a way of looking that is not narrowly your own. Then of course, I'm constantly brought up short as I try to practice what I teach. ■

**LEE MARTIN**, interviewed by  
Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*Your characters are never easy or simple characters—they have a lot of mixed things going on, sometimes very hard, even dreadful things, sometimes of their own doing—but you obviously have compassion for all of them. Where did you learn compassion?*

My wife should answer that question. She told me once, You have the perfect blend of your father's fire and your mother's good heart. And I think it's true that most of my life has been tightropeing this fence between my father's brutality and my mother's compassion and good heart. I want to temper that a little bit by saying that even though my father and I had a very difficult time in my adolescence—you know, going back to your comment



about the complexity of characters—my dad, to be completely, completely honest about it, even though he was a quick-tempered and brutal man in many ways, he was also a kindhearted man in many ways as. So I can't say that I learned compassion only from my mother, because I can remember many times my father giving money to people who were down on their luck, doing favors for people, etc., etc. He was a goodhearted guy. It's just that he had encountered circumstances in his life that were too much for him and that he had to respond to, and he responded to them with anger. It took me years and years to understand that.

*In your writing, you give the poor, the brittle, the lonely, the unlucky, and the fragile room to suffer as they do in real life, but you don't let readers put them aside. They cannot be simply labeled. Is that deliberate or is that just how they are for you?*

I think that's how most people in general are for me. I really think that one of the first obligations of the writer is the act of empathy, trying to understand who these characters are and how they came to be who they are. **I am always interested in what information there is from the past that has come to bear as people live their lives forward.** One of the challenges that I always set for myself, and I think most writers do, is to see characters in all their complexity, as fully and as completely as I can. I like to set myself the challenge of saying, Okay, here's this character. Now, how can I find the opposite within that character?

*So you do in fact look.*

I think in those terms. The longer that I write, the less self-conscious that is, but I can remember early on in my development as a writer, one of the first really important things I learned was this whole issue of how characters and situations contain their opposites. And as a writer I think about how to look for that and how to dramatize it.

It coincides with the way I view people in general. It goes back to what we were talking about as far as growing up in that sort of home environment and the caught-between-two-cultures thing—learning that you can never put a single person or a single situation into a simple container. ■

**AMY BLOOM**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*You tackle extreme situations in this book, such as a mother's experience with her transgendered daughter, a man with Parkinson's who wants his lover to*

*assist in his suicide, and incest in the case of Lionel and Julia; yet you never rely on the sensational, but delve into the darker corners of the character's lives. What draws you to the heart of these difficult narratives, and how do you not fall into the trap of letting the sensational aspects overwhelm the story?*

It might be partially because I don't find them that sensational. Aside from the transsexual thing, which I think is unusual. Maybe there are a lot of other people over forty who don't encounter death, don't encounter divorce, don't encounter illness. Who has these charmed lives? No one's marriage ends, no one dies, no one is unhappy? Who are these people? I know what you mean, though. There are writers who pick a subject and think, "That'll get them." But that's never how it seems to me. It's always about the people. ■

**MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Catherine lives in post-9/11 Manhattan, a city under siege as young boys begin suicide-bomb attacks [in "The Children's Crusade"]. How did you arrive at the idea of an innocent child posing the threat rather than the dark-eyed, dark-skinned terrorist we see on the evening news?*

I think of all suicide bombers as children, though most of them are considerably past the age of twelve. Terrorism implies, to me, a childlike singularity, a capacity for dividing the world into good and evil, and a disregard for other lives—an almost conceptual inability to fully acknowledge the lives of other people. Children are cruel—or, more accurately, unempathic—in a way most adults are not. Just spend an hour on a crowded playground. ■

**LEE SMITH**, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

*You treat your characters with humor, but also very gently. You might paint Melanie, who daydreams about Clint Eastwood in "Interpretation of Dreams," so that she's ridiculous. But you don't.*

Oh, but I love Melanie.

*Is that it?*

Yes. I have to like the characters that I write about, even if they are ridiculous. I often write about fools of one kind or another



Photo credit: Roger Halle Photography, Mebane NC

because I sort of am one, but I'm most interested in what makes people the way they are. Rarely do I create a true villain, because it's rare to find a true villain. Usually once we understand what shapes somebody, they don't seem quite so bad. I sometimes think I would like to have been a shrink or a psychologist or something. Or a beautician. They are psychologists, too.

*Do you think a source of irony in your books is related to the fact that most of us walk around thinking we know what's going on when we don't?*

**I don't think we have a clue. Most of my characters generally are, as I believe most people to be, mostly well-meaning within the context of what they can understand.** Which for all of us is not a lot.

*Is that one of the pleasures of writing? Pitting the character's narrow band of understanding against what life brings?*

That's right. Another is something Ann Tyler, one of my favorite writers, said: "I write because I want to have more than one life." The older we get, the more we realize we're stuck in this one body, in this one personality, with this one husband, with this one family. **You finally get beyond the point of thinking, "Well, I'll just go off and get a PhD in anthropology." You realize there's a whole range of things that you will never do, of things and people you will never be.**

As life gets more and more limited, there is something wonderful about being able to get inside the skin of people unlike yourself. I'll never get to be Melanie, but it was fun to be Melanie for a little while. It offers a kind of self-therapy, a way of coming to terms with situations I don't understand, with people I don't understand. I try to put myself in their shoes, feel some empathy and see what they are up to. ■

**SIGRID NUNEZ**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*Do you have any interest in seeing where your characters go, or what happens to them later?*

That's a very interesting question. **The truth is, I have never cared what happens to my characters after I finish the book.**

*I'm surprised—I assume that the writer invests so much in the characters, making them alive and vivid, that they care about them—*

Yes.

*So it seems odd that once the book ends you no longer care.*

Well, it's not really that I don't care about them, but that the story that I set out to tell is over and I don't find myself thinking about their fates after that last page. I really don't. I can't think of any character that I have written about that I later thought about the life of that character after the story I tell. I'm not sure why. It's interesting—

*It's interesting to me because I recall a number of novels that authors went back to, continued, though the writers claim they never intended to carry the story forward. The most prominent of these is Richard Ford and his Frank Bascombe trilogy. Julian Barnes did the same thing with the couple from Talking It Over, revisiting them some ten years later in Love, etc. I'd bet there are other writers who have asked themselves what happened to a character years down the line. I don't think Frederick Busch intended to continue the story in Girls.*

That's probably true. In most cases the writer didn't know. Somehow that character returned and tugged at the writer's sleeve and said, "Well, I'm back. Deal with me." I have to say I would be totally surprised if I were to return to any of the characters that I have written about.

*Nona and Roy are left in such an interesting pregnant situation.*

Right, they are in a completely new life situation and you want to know how she is going to cope, that's true. And yet now—since you have put this before me and I am thinking about them and actually I am seeing them—I have to say that that novel, which would be about their life with these children that they have adopted—

*No longer in New York City, to Minnesota?*

The idea of writing a novel—when I try to think about how it would be—it would be a novel about their marriage and the children, and I can see it doesn't interest me.

*Because you have said everything that you wanted to say about them?*

I'd say because I feel that the issues I deal with have been fully explored by the end of the book. ■

**HA JIN**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Little Owl [in The Crazyed] is an interesting character, retarded and therefore crazed in a different way than Mr. Yang. Jian Wan's roommate said that "China was a paradise for idiots, who were well treated because they incurred no jealousy, posed no threat to anyone, and made no trouble for the authorities—they were model citizens through and through." Little Owl's presence is at times a source of irritation to Jian Wan. Besides the obvious social commentary, why did you include him?*

I wanted to show that madness is quite prevalent. When I was an undergraduate and a graduate student, I ran into men like Little Owl. They were banished to the countryside, and then the schools took them back. They were crazy. The schools didn't know what to do with them, so they would just roam around the campuses talking nonsense all the time. It was quite common. Little Owl's presence in *The Crazyed* shows the kind of madness that is not always contained. ■

**CHANG-RAE LEE**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*What drew you to his obsession with flying in Aloft?*

This is one of those things that starts you out on a character. I had this idea of Jerry as a certain kind of person, not knowing the exact details. But once I figured out that he was a man who liked to fly his own small plane, that's when it clicked for me. I began to think of him as not just an abstract character but as the protagonist and teller of the story. Metaphorically his flying seemed right to me, and in terms of language it reflects the kind of yearning he has to be on this other level in his life. It's very different than Doc Hata, whose language is so compacted and careful and constructed. Jerry's is very free and loose. He riffs all the time, and he feels at liberty to talk about anyone or anything. It appealed to me to do something quite different than in *A Gesture Life*.

*In Aloft, Jerry Battle is preoccupied with Harold Clarkson-Ickes's attempt to fly a balloon around the world in what is both a heroic and foolish adventure. Why did you include this story in the narrative? What did you want to show readers about Jerry? There's this idea of glamour and danger and daring in what the balloonist was doing.*

That's the ideal version of who Jerry is or wants to be. In his life, he's just a guy who flies his own little plane over his own patch of land in good

weather only. It's very human. He's not an explorer. He's not a dashing, swash-buckling sort of fellow. He's not the fighter pilot that he wanted to be. It seemed natural that he would pin a lot of hopes upon Sir Harold, just silly, private, human hopes, and be crushed when Sir Harold meets his end. Jerry is a very careful guy. He likes his security and comforts, but he still dreams. The book is about the struggle to shake himself out of that comfort, and he does it vicariously through Sir Harold. ■



**ROBERT OLEN BUTLER**, *interviewed by Heather Iarusso*:

Fiction ultimately is the art form of human yearning, and that is essential to the work of fictional narrative art. A character who yearns is not the same as a character who simply has problems. A lot of characters have problems, but the problems have not yet resolved themselves into the dynamics of yearning for this writer and this character. That yearning is at the heart of all temporal art forms.

All works of art, I believe, are organically whole down to the tiniest metaphor; everything must resonate into everything else. At the heart of that is that the character yearns for self or for connection. The yearning dictates every other choice. They also are the things that generate what we call plot, because it is the efforts to fulfill a yearning that are thwarted or blocked or challenged that then provide the elements of plot.

The reason the yearning is so rare—and it is very rare, indeed—in the work of inexperienced writers, is that they often have trouble manifesting this yearning in a natural way in their stories. A story is not ready to be written until you have an intuition about the yearning of the character in your unconscious. I think it's a way of averting the eyes: If the passive central character is simply beset by problems, just moving through a world of incident that's really not been shaped by any kind of dynamic from within the character, it's a safe world. It's a calm and detached world.

*When you're writing, how aware are you of the essential yearning of your character?*

If you're asking me do I sit down and analyze it in some rational way, the answer is no I do not. But I am aware of it with every word I write in the sense that it is the thing around which all other forces are bending. Every choice is being influenced by the dynamic, striving desire inside my characters. ■

**LEE MARTIN**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*You're very good at dialogue and I wondered if that's one of the areas you especially focus on in your classes.*

There's certainly a spectrum. I mean I break it down into five areas. You've got to know characterization and structure and detail and point of view and language, and of course language is kind of the catchall for a lot of different things, but dialogue fits in. What I try to impress on my students is that the thing that makes you or breaks you as a writer is almost always what you can do with characterization. I often start a fiction workshop by sharing the opening of Tobias Wolff's story, "An Episode in the Life of Professor Brooke." It's in his first collection, *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*, and I share the first two paragraphs. The opening line is something like, "Professor Brooke had no real quarrel with anyone in his department but there was a Yeats scholar named Riley whom he could not bring himself to like." I tell my students that everything you need to know about characterization is in that line. What he's doing there is laying out a line and then he's turning it, and when he turns it, he makes the character dynamic in the sense that he's capable of emotion in different directions—contradiction. ■

**ANDREA BARRETT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*It's interesting that you weave actual historical figures into the cast of "Ship Fever" and other stories. What does a narrative gain from this?*

A certain verisimilitude, I suppose. There were doctors and politicians who were very important during the Grosse Isle epidemic, and any person invented or real might have brushed by or known of those people at the time. It seems helpful to include those persons in the frame, not so much in the center in the direct action, but to put them around the edges so that the whole fiction will feel more real to the reader. ■

**KENT HARUF**, *interviewed by Jim Nashold*:

*Certain characters recur in your novels. Is there a conscious re-creation of them, or is it just the type of person that grows out of the story you're trying to tell?*

It seems to grow out of the story I'm trying to tell, but there are similarities between the narrators of each book. I'm interested in men who are decent people and who're flawed, but still trying to do the best they can, but don't always succeed. In fact, they don't often succeed. ■

**DAVID KOON**:

There is a danger for writers, especially those who have talent. The danger is that a writer can be so concerned with making a perfect article that she cores out a story's heart, and leaves it grammatically and stylistically perfect, but empty of feeling. The belief in my heart of hearts is that a lot of people in fiction today are simply not taking risks with their characters (I hate it when somebody says this kind of shit to me.... What the hell is risk anyway? You want me to write on top of a speeding car? While bungee jumping? What?), and it is a crying shame.

Let me try to explain. When you pass the age of ten and go to Disney World, nobody rides the teacups. The teacups were cool then, but now—no! As an adult, you want to ride the Screaming Eagle Death Drop with the Double Loop-de-Loops. As adults, for some reason, we want the thing that might kill us and dismember us and spread us all over hell and creation. The reader wants that danger, too. But in fiction, as in roller coasters, the danger for the schmo who simply rides is (usually) all an illusion. The real danger in fiction is always solely over the head of the writer. It hangs there like a big chunk of concrete at the end of a rope. And for many writers, the pressure of that is too much. It is just too easy to move your chair out of the way and write dead fiction.

Push as a writer. Press your self through your fingers and keyboard and onto the page. But—you say—if the writer pushes too far, then she slips over into the pink-chiffon hell of melodrama, and the reader drops the story like a sack of shit and never looks in the direction of that writer again. True. That's why it's hard to let your characters turn back flips and break dance and do all that other stupid crap that characters are prone to do: because there is always the danger of looking stupid, of looking like you

are not in control of the situation. (And in writing, it is all about control, isn't it? One of the greatest compliments we can give to a writer is "Look at the control she has over her language/characters/plot/structure/etc.!") But the greater danger—the hidden danger, the siren's song—is in not letting the characters do it. And it is so dangerous because, while a writer might feel safe bringing forth a story like that and handing it over to a reader (and the reader might even love it because there is nothing to bitch about), it is quietly dead. It is worse than dead (as they say in B movies), it is undead—a staggering horror brought to life by shoddy means and sent reeling across the surface of the earth.

All in all, people doing writing that matters are easy to spot. They are the ones who—when they sit down to write—frown instead of smile. They are the cool sons of bitches out there on the edge of the cliff, on top of a soapbox, holding a sideshow fat lady in their laps, sitting in a chair tipped up on its back legs and balanced over the void. ■

**PAM DURBAN**, *interviewed by Cheryl Reid:*

*There is a real balance in your work between the good and the bad things in life.*

You have to grow beyond that childish point, as the narrator does in *The Laughing Place*, where everything has to be perfect or it's terrible, that swing of absolutes. Both things can be true, and that's what you learn as you mature. It's what it means to be a mature human being; that is, being able to hold things that are in absolute opposition to each other in your mind at the same time and accept both. Not accept evil, but accept its existence.

*When you create a character, do you see these tensions existing within an individual?*

If there is anything I am pleased with about myself as a writer I guess it's that I've become more accepting of dimensions in people. I can see people clearly, I think, because I am not committed to an idea that they have to be one way or another. I like what Marilynne Robinson says, that writers can't get in the habit of seeing people as collections of symptoms that need curing. It's the symptoms that interest us as writers—those difficulties or weird things about people, the things that make them unhappy, or the things that cripple them. Those are the things that make them interesting as characters

and not problems to be solved in stories about them. It's people's mistakes that make them interesting.

*Charles Baxter has a chapter in Burning Down the House on "Dysfunctional Narratives" where he says you don't have to solve their problems.*

I love that chapter. He talks about establishing blame, and as soon as blame is established, the story is over. And that is certainly true of a lot of stories. ■

**ALLEN MORRIS JONES**, *interviewed by David Abrams:*

*Some people have said they find it hard to believe that Last Year's River was written by a man because you've really gotten inside the character of Virginia and have really pegged how a woman who's going through this traumatic experience must feel. How do you react when you hear that?*

I'm very flattered by it, of course. But I didn't sit down and sweat over how to explain a girl to the audience. There are certain things that I consciously did with Virginia—you know, she's a seventeen-year-old girl from a privileged background, she's going to have attitude problems with her elders, she's going to be preoccupied with clothing, she's going to appear more confident than she really feels—that sort of thing. A lot of what you put into a character is subconscious. Every character you write inevitably is a part of you. Where else does it come from?

Oddly enough, Henry was a harder character for me to write. Originally, he was just a foil for Virginia. But soon I started writing scenes which alternated between their points of view. To the extent that he was the strong, silent cowboy type, I flirted with cliché. So I felt I needed to give him some pretty serious hangups, and that brought him to World War I and the conflicts with his father and his somewhat ambiguous past. And, in the end, he became a much more interesting character to me. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I'm not sure we can write about characters unless we are compassionate, which means, of course, seeing everything. Compassionate, I think, means seeing all the sides of a person, all the capabilities, without judgment. If the author begins to judge, then he will begin to ask the reader to judge too, in the same way. The reader will balk when an agenda is felt. At least, I do. So

if I'm judging a character I have to back up and look again in order to get myself out of it. A lot of writing, I guess, is trying to get out of the way—to get myself, my small-mindedness, out so that something else can be seen. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

There are about five questions you can ask yourself about stories, and they're not foolproof, but they're useful. One is, What do these characters want? Second is, What are they afraid of? Third is, What's at stake in this story? Fourth is, What are the consequences of these scenes or these actions? And the last one is, How does the language of this story reflect the world of the story itself? Now, if a writer is writing a story and looks at you and says: I don't know what my characters want. I don't think they want much of anything. Then, the story is in trouble. If you don't know what's at stake in the story, it means that nothing stands to be gained or lost in the course of it. Something has to be risked. The characters have to want something or to wish for something. They have to be allowed to stay up past eleven o'clock and to make mistakes. If there's a flaw that many beginning writers have, it is that their characters don't risk enough. They are just sitting in chairs having ideas. I had a student a few months ago, when I was in residency at a university, who said, I don't want my characters to do anything, I just want them to think through the problem of nature versus culture.

*That's not exactly a story, is it?*

That's what I tried to tell her. But she was determined to write a story about issues. I mean, this is an old thing to say, but if you want to write something about issues, write an essay. That's what essays are for. If you want to see the consequences of ideas, write a story. If you want to see the consequences of belief, write a story in which somebody is acting on the ideas or beliefs that she has. But that's why it's important to have a sense of what your characters want. ■

**ANNIE PROULX**, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

*In all the books, I've noticed a pronounced fondness for having male protagonists, quite often males who are hooked up with pretty hellacious females. With these male characters, you usually show more sympathy than with the women. What's going on there?*

The answer is so simple it will make you throw up: I was the oldest of five girls. I grew up in a family of five girls. If there's one thing I know, it's women and girls. And I don't find them interesting to write about. I find men much more interesting, you know? I didn't know any men when I was a kid, except my father. So it's more fun; it's more interesting.

Also, most of my life the things I've liked to do, the fishing and canoeing and tramping around in the country—this was before everybody got into the outdoorsy number—those were activities where there were not many women; it was mostly men. So I palled around with guys most of my adult life, and felt more at home with the direct approach to things that was then labeled “masculine.” Now you can find women like that, too, and I know a lot of women whom I like a lot. Just great women out there.

Anyway, the two novels both demanded male protagonists. They were not set in a time or a place when those stories could have a chorus of voices ■

**KEVIN CANTY**, *interviewed by*  
*Linda B. Swanson-Davies*

*The characters in this collection [A Stranger in This World] are frequently denying truth, even when they know themselves better than what they're pretending, and they know how things are going to turn out, but it seems like they still prefer to deny what they know. What do you think would happen to us if we were not able to fool ourselves?*



Just look at anybody else. You can see their lives so clearly. In some ways it's like trying to see your own face in the mirror. It's yours. It's too familiar to see. I'm not sure someone without the capacity for self-deception would truly be a human being. I don't think it's intrinsic, but I don't have a version of myself that's fixed, so when I refer to self-deception, I'm not even sure who's doing the deceiving and who's the self and who's the rest of it. It seems more complex than that. I think it's more a chorus of voices rather than a single voice inside. For some people, that might be different. Some people are really driven and they want to go forward. I was struck by that, driving around L.A. Some people get up in the morning wanting to succeed and go to sleep at night wanting to succeed. They manage to shut off a lot of the rest of their lives. That was the feeling that I got when I was riding with people in elevators.

I'm sort of jealous of that kind of singlemindedness, but I'm not sure that I wasn't making that up.

*And you won't ever know.*

I'll never know. That's the thing about writing: You are trying to decide what it's like to live a life that's not your own, and you'll never know. But, on the other hand, if I really thought that you would never know, if I really thought that we were on different planets, that what goes on inside the mysterious caverns of your mind was fundamentally different or fundamentally incomprehensible, then I couldn't write. Not to minimize the difference, not to say that we're all the same or that we all want the same things or all work the same way, but I think that you can understand. I think you can intuit your way into another person's life.

That's really what I'm trying to do: What's it like to live that life? What's it like to be that person? ■

**RICHARD BAUSCH**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais*

*It has been said that your writing blends the best of women's and men's writing.*

I'm very proud of that. It makes me feel good. I have women come up to me all the time and ask me how I know things and how come I can do that. The answer is simple. What you do is think, first, of a person, and then write. I learned it with my first novel, where I was writing about a priest. I was going around trying to think what a priest would do or say. You have to be honest enough and open enough to the experience and be whoever this person is and feel whatever he feels. Fiction is empathy. It is trying to feel like somebody else. It is getting out of yourself and into other people. Somebody will say, "Well, a man can't possibly write from the point of view of a woman very convincingly." And, of course, they've never read Henry James or Leo Tolstoy, or Chekhov or Shakespeare. ■

**CHARLES JOHNSON**, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

*One of the things I noticed in Middle Passage is that each of your characters speaks some substantial truth. There are no unnecessary characters.*

Although I think that in most fiction there's one character who bears the

author's message or burden necessarily, and all the others are foils or straw men, my characters pass through a social world in which everybody they meet has a truth which they pick up on and learn from—sort of Hegelian in that respect—so that by the end of the story, there is a grand vision, a larger truth, that the main character experiences. So the truth is not static, but is something to be achieved. It's always a process and the more people you encounter the more your sense of understanding about the world deepens. I think that's one of the reasons the characters all speak something that's important to whoever the protagonist is.

*Captain Ebenezer Falcon is a hateable guy—but not totally.*

He's a loathsome character, a monster of the ego, but he is, I hope, interesting. And he has reasons for being who he is and thinking as he does. John Gardner used to emphasize that with all of his writing students. It's John who put it in front of me in a very clear way when he was looking at chapters that I was writing for *Faith and the Good Thing*. There is one character—the husband of Faith—who was based on a good friend of mine; but I objected to many of his ideas, and so I used him as a straw man in the novel. John wrote in the margins: "Shame on you. Why present this character to us just for us to dislike this person, or to disagree with him? Why not dig as deeply as you can into his motivation, his background, his biography, his thought process, so we can understand how someone can inhabit this position?" And, you know, I think he was quite right. You have to see each and every character in their totality and from their own perspective. We can disagree with them, but they have integrity as human beings that has to come through at some point in the fiction. I think writers have to do that with every character. You have to walk a mile in everybody else's shoes within that book, every major character's, at least. ■

**CAROL ROH-SPAULDING**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*In the story we published, "White Fate," there's a line that's so beautiful: "It was a bright and breezy morning, the kind of morning when his heart always lifted with a little chirp of abandon, filling him with the brisk promise that some of the things he had always longed for could still be his." How did you ever write that sentence?*

That's simply an autobiographical experience; I've had that very feeling and I put it into Mr. Song. I don't have it all the time, but it's this sense of hope and vitality and freshness that sometimes hits me on good days. There's a

lot of longing involved in there, too. I want to be cautious because I can't speak for Korean culture or for Korean-American culture, but there is this state of being called *han*. It means lots of things. There's a river, you know, named Han, and it's also a surname. There are whole books on *han*—it's this sort of psychological state that is characteristic, they say, of Korean people, because of their history. China trampled through, and Japan, and over the course of centuries they've always been occupied by one country or another. It's a little like the Japanese sense of *sho no na gai*: It can't be helped. It's a little bit fatalistic, but what's more, it is longing, a deep-seated longing that never really goes away. A deep, wistful kind of longing where you can experience other emotions, but still feel that at the bottom. I think I've inherited that, and, even though it can be productive in some ways, it's a difficult thing to live with. I tried to get that into Mr. Song's life—that he is a loving person, a compassionate person, and a burdened person at the same time. You can be very loving and burdened. ■

**ANTONYA NELSON**, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

*How do you work between inner and external landscapes, so that the plot develops, the characters follow their own idiosyncratic paths, and the issues nonetheless stay in focus?*

I think that the internal and the external have to play off each other. I'm frequently telling students to make use of what I call "Acts of God" to establish a character's identity. It's hard to come up with a character who hasn't got anything to react against.

*What do you mean by "Acts of God" in this context?*

I can use an example from the first book [The Expendables], actually. Three characters are in a car. As they are driving along, they witness children mistreating each other on the side of the road. They drive right by a disturbing spectacle, something that should make them stop. That's where a story in that first collection began for me. I wanted to know, Who are those people? For any real, coherent answer, I had to back up from the question, which becomes the last scene in the story, and consider what kind of people simply drive by instead of stopping. I had to consider what was compelling to me about people who would not stop.

In the end they are people who are exceptionally messed up in their own relationships, particularly in the moment they drive by what's happening at

the side of the road. And what's happening there in some way reflects the relationships in the car. Two men and a woman in the car, two boys and a little girl on the side of the road. Characters are created quite frequently by how they react to an event. The novella, "Family Terrorists," begins with a family that's gone through a tornado. The youngest child in the family was in the womb then, fully formed, but still inside. She's always felt somehow separate from the central drama of the family, out on the periphery. The story begins there—with that notion of a storm and her being protected and not present, and, though formed, still not fully formed. Her sense of being just in the shadow of the family's life prevails. She has that sense of being the shadow child, and she's formed by that more than any other thing. "Acts of God" doesn't always mean storms and traumas and floods and famine. They're frequently much more mundane, like illness in a life. All of us are formed by what happens to us as much as by what we do to exert ourselves in the world. Maybe more so. As writers, we tend to think we have to keep coming up with outward-directed action—plots that move from the inside out—rather than having the character react to the external world. But much can happen in the world that can generate equal movement within a character's psyche. ■

**VALERIE MARTIN**, *interviewed by Janet Benton:*

I want my characters to be as complex as possible, and I don't think of them as good or bad. I make a case for them. Because that's really what you do when you write a novel, you make a case for the way a person is, the way you apprehend them. ■

**CAROL SHIELDS**, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

*After Daisy goes into her depression in The Stone Diaries, several people theorize about why she's depressed. Why do you think she went into the depression? It's more than losing the column, isn't it?*

Of course. Although, I think that's a very big part. It's the theory of one of her children. All these people have different suggestions. Her son thinks that she's thwarted her intelligence. Her old girlfriend, Freddie Hoyt, thinks that she just didn't have enough of a love life. I think that all these surmises are right and they're also all wrong. But coming together, they form the whole sense of her loss. I don't think people have breakdowns for one particular reason. I think it's when several events, or several memories, coin-

cide and bring about a failure of nerve, which is what she suffers. ■

**GEORGE CLARK**, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

The character of Uncle Blas came from a photograph of a black butcher, which I thought was a fitting occupation, who had fought in the Bay of Pigs. There were lots of Cubans in Angola who were fifty years old, unlike the American Army, where most retire after twenty years. I wanted a soldier who had fought at the Bay of Pigs and in Angola. In the photograph, he had this enormous goat belly, one of those tight bellies, where if you hit it, it would hurt your hand; but the rest of him was very fit, and he was jet black with a huge cigar and a beret. He was bare chested, wearing dark blue dungarees and combat boots, and I thought, He's perfect! I can't just make up a character. Some people can, but I can't. There has to be some element, something I've read or seen. ■

**ALICE MATTISON**, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

*The intersecting stories in Men Giving Money, Women Yelling relate to one another much the way people in a small town do.*

Yes, or a small city. Each story raised questions that the next one answered, sometimes about the plot—why something happened—and sometimes about the characters. In a story called “The Hitchhiker,” there's a woman named Charlotte whose friend Daisy tells her about something going on in her life. Daisy is a teacher, and she's slept with a student. I thought Daisy was an interesting character, and I began to suspect that she knew something she wasn't telling. This has happened to me a number of times: A minor character becomes more interesting to me than the major characters. The more I thought about it, the more I thought Daisy was lying when she talked to Charlotte; that she hadn't told her the whole story. And sure enough, when I got her to be the spokesperson—in a story called “Selfishness”—the story she told was quite different, much more complicated. She stayed in my mind after I finished that book, and eventually she became the main character of *The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman*. I knew Daisy was going to do something bad, something destructive. And then I started thinking about a headline that I had once seen, years ago: “Two-Headed Woman Weds Two Men; Doc Says She's Twins.” Then it took me months to work out the story. ■

**ANDREA BARRETT**, interviewed by  
Sarah Anne Johnson:



I've been working with some of the same characters now through the last three books. You've probably noticed, in *Servants of the Map*, that there are things that hark back to previous books. Often these days, as I'm working on one story or novella or novel, I'll get a glimmer of somebody else in this gigantic family and what might have happened to them in some other time. Actually all the people are related, but you can't see it yet.

*It's thrilling when they come back. I loved seeing Ned and Max again in "The Cure." It adds a new dimension to the work.*

Most of the people in *Servants of the Map* and some of the people in *The Voyage of the Narwhal* are actually related, sometimes in complicated and distant ways, to the Marburg sisters in *Ship Fever*. They are various ancestors of theirs. The book I'm trying to start now will show more clearly how everyone fits together. I have a big chart in my office that's quite insane looking, all these wings and people through all these centuries over all these countries. But I don't think it's actually important to the stories. They stand alone, as do the novels, so it's not that it's some endless saga or set of sequels. More that this has been important for me as an idea-generating device. It's very fertile for me. When I'm writing something about Max, I can wake up one morning and think, "But what about Clara?" Then I'll be writing about Clara and her daughters, and I'll wake up another morning and think, "What was Gillian doing when she was eighteen?" And on it goes. And that's nice. I don't seem to run out of material.

*Throughout Servants of the Map, The Voyage of the Narwhal, and Ship Fever, several characters recur, and their stories unfold in new and intriguing ways. For instance, Nora, Ned, and Denis Kynd first appear in the story "Ship Fever," then Ned is the cook in The Voyage of the Narwhal, and Ned and Nora are reunited in "The Cure" in Servants of the Map. What draws you to revisit your characters and continue to explore their lives?*

They're alive for me. I spend so much time with them that when a book is done or a story is done, the characters don't disappear from my brain. I made them, and I live with them for a long time, and then I send the story or the book off, but they're still there. They seem, in some senses, to con-

tinue to live their lives without me. Sometimes, years later, it's as if I can go back to the barn in Pennsylvania where they have all been living and open the door and catch up with them. I don't know what that's about either. I seem unable to dismiss them. It does feel like death to me. Not to revisit them feels like killing them off. To lose those people from your life when you've had such an imaginative connection with them is too difficult. This way, I refuse to let them die unless I kill them off on the page.

*The appearance of these characters throughout successive works, their individual growth and development as characters, gives them the sense of having a life beyond the pages of any particular story or narrative. It gives them a sense of individual existence that engages readers more deeply in their unfolding stories. How much of this is intentional?*

It wasn't intentional at first. It surprised me and I went with it, and for a while I did it more or less unconsciously. But since the publication of *Servants of the Map*, a lot of people have asked me about this. Inevitably, I've had to think about it consciously, to try to understand what that linkage does and what I'm doing. That's been interesting for me as a writer. It wasn't a planned thing, but I've been brought to consciousness about it, so I'm much more aware of it in what I'm writing now. I've had to admit to myself what I'm doing. That's often true for us as writers, not just with regard to this question, but with regard to all sorts of things we do, the characters we make, the themes we revisit. At some point in reviews or conversations someone will point out to us what we're doing. Often we're not conscious of it, and then we're forced to become conscious of it and to integrate that more deeply. That's interesting. I learned a lot this spring as people pressed at that point and made me think about it. ■

**RICHARD BAUSCH**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*You really get inside your characters and make them come alive. The two older men in your novel The Last Good Time are older than you, but you seemed to have had no trouble creating their voices. Do you become close to all your characters?*

Oh, yeah, all of them. I understand perfectly that they are constructions and that they are made up. But it's like when you were a kid and had imaginary friends. You were always thinking about them. You saw with their eyes, and you had some of their memories, which is really a kind of wonderful thing. Mary Lee Settle talks about her characters like it's gossip. She'll say, "Guess

what she did today,” about one of her characters. I sort of picked some of that up from her. I wish I could tell you something that could be revealing about this, but I really don’t know how it works. It just comes with the character, thinking about it, dreaming it up. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I do sometimes plan to have several stories with the same character, but I have never thought of the advantages. It could be a limitation; I don’t know. I prefer reading stories. François Mauriac said, “I don’t know why anybody writes long novels. You could always write another novel about the same people.” ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*Why are you so sure you are not going to revisit Saul and Patsy? I have heard other writers say that they are done with a story: Julian Barnes with Talking It Over, which he revisited with Love, etc., some ten years later. He now will not foreclose on another installment of these characters’ lives. Richard Ford said he was done with Frank Bascombe after Independence Day [which is a continuation of The Sportswriter].*

I would not revisit them because I am no longer as interested in them as I once was.

*Today. At this moment.*

Today. I don’t find them, now that I have written about them at the length that I have, as interesting for me as they once were. [*Long pause.*]

There is a certain kind of inner resonance that I feel about characters when I know that I am about to write about them. I feel full of them. And the process of writing often feels like an emptying out of that fullness: the knowledge I have of them and also the feelings I am going through on their behalf. I feel as if that’s gone now with them. That it was not gone before—but it is gone now. ■

**CAROL ROH-SPAULDING**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

My story “Brides of Valencia” is an exact retelling of a Eudora Welty story. I told the editor [at White Eagle Coffee Store Press] this is what I’m doing.

I'm stealing this story, basically—it's a tribute to her, and maybe I didn't get it right, but that story is one of my all-time favorite stories. It gets me closer to the sensation that I'm always trying to articulate, but can't really articulate. The young woman is on a journey. My theory is that what she has in her life is joy, and she is not large enough to contain it. She needs to get away from it for a while so that she can get some perspective. We think of other emotions as being too much to bear, but they're usually negative emotions. The capacity for joy is something that many people don't have, and we're only given it in moments. No one has it all the time, not even the Dalai Lama, you know. How do we as humans sustain the largest emotions even when they're beautiful ones? To me the story is a journey, a way for her to get away from that, to step out of it, because there's every sense that she's going to return to the life she has and be fine.

I don't want to get on a big crusade about this, but so much fiction that's considered good right now—well, I don't want to generalize, but Welty has a quality in her writing, and I think to a certain extent Katherine Mansfield has this, too. It's an affection toward their characters. I'm not sure that's the best description of it. They're quite as capable of irony and wit as anybody writing today, but there is this other quality that I just don't see in contemporary fiction. It's a kind of freshness and innocence she has toward her characters—a wiseness that is not jaded. I love that quality.

Welty's story, "The Bride of Innesfallen," was published in the *New Yorker* in 1955, and I don't think anyone would even bother to read it today because it doesn't do what fiction does nowadays. I know there are literary fashions, but I don't think people have the time anymore for a story that does what "The Bride of Innesfallen" does. People also don't know how to respond to "Brides of Valencia," because it's really sort of plotless, and yet it's telling, I think, a very important story. ■

**LEE MARTIN**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*In your writing, you give the poor, the brittle, the lonely, the unlucky, and the fragile room to suffer as they do in real life, but you don't let readers put them aside. They cannot be simply labeled. Is that deliberate or is that just how they are for you?*

I think that's how most people in general are for me. I really think that one of the first obligations of the writer is the act of empathy, to try to understand who these characters are and how they came to be who they are. I

am always interested in what information there is from the past that has come to bear as people live their lives forward. One of the challenges that I always set for myself and I think most writers do, is to see characters in all their complexity, as fully and as completely as we can. I like to set myself the challenge of saying, Okay, here's this character. Now, how can I find the opposite within that character?

*So you do in fact look.*

I think in those terms. The longer that I write, the less self-conscious that is, but I can remember early on in my development as a writer, one of the first really important things I learned was this whole issue of how characters and situations contain their opposites. And as a writer I think about how to look for that and how to dramatize it. ■

**PAM DURBAN**, *interviewed by Cheryl Reid:*

I don't see how you can write about somebody who is alienated and doesn't believe in or care about anything. What's there to write about? That's part of the problem with a lot of stories I see. There is only so much you can say about that condition. All of my characters want something or are trying or struggling with something. And maybe that's just an old-fashioned sense of fiction. The alienated stuff strikes me as sentimental, finally. ■

**VIKRAM CHANDRA**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais*

*In Red Earth and Pouring Rain, Sanjay says to Abhay, "The stories cease to be yours the moment you write them down." What is your relationship with your characters after you have completed a book?*

It's like sending children out into the world, really. It's difficult to control how other people see them or react to them or engage with them. I did mean that when I wrote it, that stories cease to be yours the moment you write them down, and I still agree with Sanjay. What the characters become when they are out in the world is sometimes strange and foreign from what I intended them to be. They get rewritten, reinscribed, in the lives of my readers. I still feel close to those characters, but they change, and I change. I was looking at *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* the other day and thinking that it feels like it was written by somebody else. You get distant from the person who started the book. ■

**SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE**, interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

*In Skin Deep: Black Women & White Women Write about Race, the anthology you co-edited with Marita Golden, you talk about Prudential, an African-American woman who keeps recurring in your novels, including The Visiting Physician and A Country of Strangers. You write that “Prudential Life Insurance is the only character I have ever imagined who has appeared more than once in a book of mine, and always her role in the story is to witness the action with clear eyes that see the world for what it is.” The character, you say, is a gift who clearly has the role of seer. Why do you think this particular character stayed with you, in this role?*

The first time I used Prudential was in *Dreaming of Heroes*. She’s in her thirties, a survivor of segregation in Washington, D.C., during the late sixties. I liked her but she wasn’t central in that book. I didn’t imagine using her again, although I was fond of the name Prudential Life Insurance, taken by her parents from a sign advertising life insurance. Then I wrote *A Country of Strangers*, about a family of whites and a family of blacks in the early forties in Northern Virginia; Prudential is a main character. That book is her best role. She’s a cranky, daring, sassy little girl compromised by fate with nothing to lose. I loved writing about her. She appears again in *The Visiting Physician* as an older woman. She’s there more as a salute from me because three is magic, so I wanted her to have one more story. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*In each of your novels and many stories as well, there is an outsider, a marginalized character who gets by on the kindness of the people around him. In Familiar Ground there is Soldier, in The Ragged Way People Fall Out of Love there’s Zack who lives in the cabin, and in Night Talk there’s Capp. I love these characters, and they work to inform the narrative in many ways.*

I always have these characters in my books. I think that the other characters might be defined by their relationship to these marginal people. I don’t know, maybe I think that we are defined by this relationship—whether we ignore it or participate. These characters work more like an image, though I use them as characters. They come from a recurring dream image I’ve had. The character was first an animal, mute but with enormous vulnerability, dependent on those around him. I’m glad I’m not a critic, because I don’t know why they keep showing up. ■

**MARIA FLOOK**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

*How does a story come to you?*

I start with a character who intrigues me. I want to invent a world around him, but he's somehow demanding it. I didn't pull him out of a hat. He comes from all my demons. He takes over the page. He takes form and becomes his own man, almost, but he's that edgy, relentless anxiety made flesh again.

I'm interested in writing about risks people take to attain something that's out of reach—love, safety, family bonds that have broken. There are a lot of walking wounded out there with long journeys left before them. These are my characters, I think. I'm comfortable with them. I don't choose who I write about. They just surround me. I'm interested in writing about risks people take to attain something that's out of reach...

*Did you know Willis would be a driver for WASTEC in Open Water? How did you come up with that?*

I have a real interest in working-class occupations for my characters. I guess because I've had my fair share. I mean I wouldn't know much about Wall Street situations, you know? If you can give some realistic information about the working lives of characters, you are giving them footing in their worlds in a larger context than they might have if you kept them in their kitchens and living rooms. I've worked in banks, in fish processing plants, as a waitress, as a corrections officer; I worked in a factory that makes velveteen boxes for the jewelry industry in Rhode Island. They weren't real velvet, but some kind of stinking resin they sprayed onto these little boxes from high pressure nozzles. It wasn't good to breathe it.

If you can put your character in some sort of job setting or working conditions a lot can happen. WASTEC was a very low-end and ill-suited occupation for Willis. You wanted him to get out.

One of my favorite work settings in recent fiction is the emergency room in Denis Johnson's brilliant story "Emergency." He has his characters working beyond their job capacities. His main character is lovelorn and doped up and has deeper problems than the hapless patients he attends to, but putting him in that setting, with the hospital routines and familiar details, skewed just right by Johnson's relentless wit and edginess, helps the reader see him as a hero. ■

**ANN PATCHETT**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*Bel Canto hosts a huge cast of characters, yet each is distinct and leaves his or her own impressions on the reader. How do you create unique characters without running the risk of one character blending into the next, or falling out of the reader's consciousness during the story?*

I read a lot of Chekhov. Honestly, there is nobody who does a better job with a one-sentence walk-on character having a complete and distinct personality than Chekhov. It's something that I've studied for years and years. He never lets anybody fall through the cracks, no matter how tiny. If it's just a postman bringing a letter to the main character, you know that postman. No one is a throwaway character. You don't have to present a full life history—we're all distinct. We're distinct at a glance, and your characters should be distinct at a glance. ■

**CAROL SHIELDS**, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

*Daisy Goodwell Flett, the main character in The Stone Diaries, is really involved in the process of reinventing herself. Tell about her shifting voice in the book.*

The voice varies from first person to third person here and there. But it's always Daisy's voice. It's always her consciousness. Even when other people offer their versions of her history, they're all filtered through her consciousness. This was the trick of writing this book which purports to be a kind of autobiography. At the center of Daisy's life there's a void. She is, in fact, like many women this [previous] century, erased from her own life story. There are no photographs of Daisy in this book. There are lots of letters in this book. But they are letters she receives. The letters that she writes, no one saves. She's one of these women who never quite achieved what she might have, certainly not in the eyes of other people. In fact, I had a letter from someone after this book came out. She said, "I wish Daisy had tried a little harder." I wish that, too. But I think that, like ninety-nine percent of the women of this century, she felt the full weight of social and political constraints. She did not make the record. She was unable to try harder. No one gave her permission to try harder. We have novels about those women who tried harder and made it. But we don't have many novels about this great milk that lies beneath the thin layer of cream. That was the life that I wanted to look at. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I want to use physical details and spiritual light and darkness in such a way that a reader experiences them and becomes the character, goes through what the character goes through. But when I'm writing, I always become the character. I just go through the story with the character to see what is going to happen. ■

**MARY MORRISSY**, interviewed by Ana Callan:

I think what most of the characters in *A Lazy Eye* have in common is that they're pretty ordinary people but they're emotionally *in extremis*, and they have a skewed vision of the world. I didn't actually set out to write disturbing stories. I suppose I am a bit taken aback that people find them so disturbing, because I think they're verging on normal. Except in obvious stories like "Rosa," where they abandon the baby in the department store, which is an act of complete moral abandon. But generally speaking, I think the characters are the darker side that everybody has. What I've done in these stories is to indulge the darker side and explore that. ■

**THOMAS E. KENNEDY:**

One of the things that I suggest in workshop when people are having trouble with a story and a character is to just follow the character. Stand behind or to the side, be a fly on the wall, follow that character through some familiar route down a street, into a hotel, whatever, and see what that character encounters. Because the things the character comes upon will be meaningful objects, meaningful encounters, and bring out what's interesting about the character. Just follow the character through a day. What you come up with might not be pages that you'll use, but might lead you into the place where the story starts. ■



Photo: Laurie Hertzal

**KEVIN CANTY**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*In A Stranger in This World, the first story that I read is the second story in the book: "Dogs." I was thinking that I would go have lunch, sit with a glass*

*of wine, and relax with the book. Well, I read the first page, and I had to stop and collect myself. I think it was because you were using language that was exactly representative of what you were saying—I felt very unprotected when I was reading that story.*

That's one of the things that I try to do as a writer. I think most of us think that we're here, and people who do bad things are a different class of people, separate from us somehow. I don't really believe that. I think that we have a lot of capacities in us. Often it is very hard to say in advance, "I am the sort of person who would never do that," because then you do that and you discover things inside yourself that you might not like. Anyway, that's sort of a fancy way of saying that a lot of what I'm trying to do is reduce the distance between the reader and the character so you can't say, "Oh, that poor idiot! I'd never be like that." My experience has been that, even though most of us stay on the rails most of our lives, trouble isn't only visited on other people. There are ways to get off the rails, and people do.

Harry Crews said that all fiction was about people trying to do the best they can with what they got to do with—you have to say that in a deep Southern accent to make it sound profound. In that striving is where I find the movement for my stories. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, *interviewed by Stewart David Ikeda:*

*Is it fair to say that you must love your characters as they develop?*

You must try to love them. People whose company I enjoy in life would quite possibly bore me if they were in stories. Generally speaking, fictional characters have to be on a road that's going to lead toward some kind of interesting trouble. They must be pleasingly guilty of various kinds of misjudgments and good judgments. I think this business of "lovability" is a dangerous area for writers; more than a few writers have been seduced into thinking that characters should be charming and lovable. I don't think so, you know; I think they have to be interesting. They have to have enough of, let's call it the Velcro factor. We have to be able to attach ourselves to them and they must attach themselves to us. So there must be things in them that we discover and recognize. ■

**CAROLYN CHUTE**, *interviewed by Barbara Stevens:*

In fiction you have to create characters to be living beings. It's like being

God. You can't mess with them. You have to let them develop and become what they want to be. If you don't approve of something, you've got to let them do it, whether you like it or not. ■

**ELIZABETH COX**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

When I first work with a character he or she is flat. The character begins by speaking in ways that feel directed by the author. The dialogue is horrible and no one seems to be speaking convincingly. I have to stay with these people until they come alive on the page, until they begin to speak and act in ways that are more their own. But sometimes a character comes in whole. Anytime I write about a seven-year-old boy he comes in as a complete person. Seven-year-old boys are easy for me. Maybe I am (actually) a seven-year-old boy disguised as a woman.

The more difficult characters have to be lingered with, like staying around people you know until you know something more about them. You might think you know how they would behave, then they surprise you, and your idea dissolves—they become alive outside your ideas of how they are. I create scenes and go with these characters to different places. Maybe we go to the zoo and I see something they are afraid of, or maybe they have an argument, or someone comes to see them. The more places (scenes) we go, the better I understand their behavior.

*How do you keep characters sympathetic, that is, not too good or too flawed, but a realistic combination of both?*

If a character is too nice, then I have to wonder what he or she would do to reveal selfishness, envy, jealousy, meanness in order to make the personality real. If a character is too demonic, I have to create vulnerability. I don't usually realize what needs to be developed until I get far into the story. For instance, I'm working with a man now who is probably too good. I don't know when I will see a side of him that makes him a little more human—maybe something he fears. I always wonder what a character's secret is. I'm curious about people's secrets. Even sitting by someone on the plane I'll ask what their secret is, and often, to my horror, I am told. I don't ask that question as often as I used to. ■

**ANDRE DUBUS**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*Your stories are driven by character, and you've said your characters often control the fate of the story.*

In my story "Miranda over the Valley," the character gets so bitter, and I kept rewriting the ending, but she kept doing the same thing.

*It sounds like you feel your characters hold the ultimate responsibility.*

Yes. I only got nineteen words today, and I don't even know what the characters are doing in this story I'm writing. I've got to take a couple days off until they show me something. If I would have finished that section today, I would have been screwed. It's a new section, and I don't know what's going on, so I'll take a few days off and then see what happens.

*So do you see your characters as somewhere outside your mind? Where do they come from?*

I think they come from their actions and what they are thinking and feeling. My job is to figure out what they are feeling. I will have a physical description and some history in my head before I start a story. I'm writing a Western now, and I know this character who is a black cowboy in Southern California. I know his family went from Chicago to California during the gold rush, and his father set up a church in Los Angeles. That's not the story, but I know that.

*Do you feel you know more about your characters, even things that don't get put into the stories?*

I want to know about their religion; their sensual habits; how they feel about death, life; where they are from; whom they are kin to. But that's not always what I get to know. I'm thinking about my story "Dancing After Hours." All I had with the female character was her age and that she thought she was not pretty. I don't know where she's from, and I don't know anything about her family. Since she doesn't mention much about religion, I assume that is not part of her life.

If I can finish this Western, I'm going to try this one again: a Catholic family, French one side, Irish the other, with a martyred nun. I wanted to have her martyred in El Salvador. I either copped out, or I made a tactical decision. I've never been to El Salvador, and I don't know any Spanish. I thought, why go through all that work to find a violent country when we live in such a violent country? I try to see the characters, to know some of

their history. I will think about characters for a long time rather than just start the story and see what they do. I like to feel I can get inside of a character. I used to tell students to write sketches. I told them they should know if their character prefers a bath or a shower. I like to think I know that. Now, with this story I'm writing set in 1891, they don't take many baths. This is a sequel to one I wrote last year, and nobody has taken a bath yet. ■

**CHARLES BAXTER**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

With Chloé in *The Feast of Love*, the first reaction most readers will have, I thought, would be, Here's this young woman, only about nineteen or twenty, and she's infatuated with this guy Oscar. Oscar's infatuated with her. They're not going to be anything more than comic relief in this book. We don't have to take her seriously, partly because she seems to be flighty. And partly because she's innocent. And partly because we generally don't take young people like this especially seriously. But what if you defamiliarize things a bit? What if it turns out that they actually know something, the two of them? About real passion that the other characters in the novel only dimly understand. What if it's Chloé and Oscar, who look like nitwits at first, who really have got the secret to something? What if you write it that way? So that's what I did.

*It certainly worked. I think you're right about how easy it is to dismiss a girl in a coffee shop, who's dressed a little silly and talks funny.*

We don't pay any attention to those people, but the whole point of fiction is to make us pay attention. To bring our attention in a society full of distractions back to people we wouldn't have noticed otherwise. ■





# CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

[www.glimmertrain.org](http://www.glimmertrain.org)

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