



Elisabeth Burmeister, daughter Helga, and baby Anneliese Brauner, ca. 1937.

CLOSE-UP:



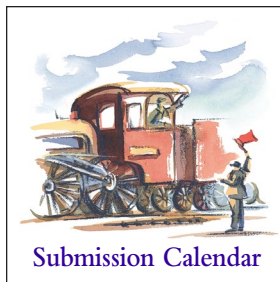
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

MELANIE RAE THON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You said that reading wasn't a large part of your life when you were young. Did it surprise your family when you began to write?

They were surprised. I wrote dreadful poetry and a few short stories when I was in high school. My mother thought I was going to be a lawyer or maybe a judge or even an artist like my older sister, but she was the one who helped me find *Wuthering Heights* and *Anna Karenina*. It's not a bad beginning, really—Tolstoy and Emily Brontë and *The Ghost of Dibble Hollow*, which is a book I want to recommend to everybody. **As soon as I started college, I told people I was a writer. I was incredibly naïve. I had no idea what it would mean to live as a writer or what it would cost me. ■**



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

Did you keep a journal when you were a kid? When did you start writing?

I always wrote.

Oh did you?

Yeah, crazy things like being eight years old and deciding, Okay, today I'm going to write the next Bobbsey Twins mystery. My mother was a reader. She was a grade-school teacher. It's interesting that her maiden name was Read. Before I started grade school, I would stay with my grandmother Read while my mom was teaching and my dad was working on the farm. I remember my grandmother would shut off half of the house in the winter so she didn't have to heat it. She had a bedroom that was right off the kitchen, so she just spent her time in that half of the house. In the shut-off front bedroom there were built-in bookshelves that had all of my grandfather's books. My grandfather was dead, so I never knew him, but in the afternoons, when my grandmother and I were supposed to take our naps, I would always wait till my grandmother was asleep and then I would sneak into the cold front bedroom. I would sit on the cold linoleum floor and just hold books in my hands and turn the pages. I couldn't read them. I'd just turn the pages, and I loved the way they felt. I loved the way they smelled. I was in love with books. So this love affair with the written word started before I could actually read the written word. Also, I was really fascinated by Mom as a teacher. She would come home in the afternoons and she would have these books with her, and lesson plans and papers that she would sit at the kitchen table and grade that night. I remember being in love with the rose shade of the grading pencil. At one point I said, Okay, Mom, I'm going to make a test for your students. I had all these odd questions on there like how many stars are in the sky, how many cigars can one man smoke in a day. And my mom, bless her heart, she said, Okay. Yes, I'll take these to school. I doubt she actually gave it to her students. But a combination of those things—my grandmother, my grandfather's books, and then my mother being a teacher.

So when she was doing her books and her schoolwork, she must have been able to extend her focus enough to let you in, so that it was a friendly time for you.

It was a beautiful time. Some of my fondest memories are sitting around the kitchen table and doing my school lessons while she was doing hers. As I got older, and could actually help her, I would grade things.

You could not help but be a teacher.

I guess so. I mean, I always wanted to be. You know how lucky we both are to be doing the things that we love.

I know. It's really true.

It is. **I think of all the jobs I had before, all the factory work I did, and the farm work. My wife and I got married really young. I was nineteen and Deb was a week away from her eighteenth birthday.** I was between my sophomore and junior year in college, and about the only classes I passed were lit classes that I was really interested in, because the other times I was just in love. I didn't want to go to class, so at the end of the year, the grade-point average wasn't particularly good. Mom and Dad had agreed that Deb and I would pay the rent and the food and all those things, but Dad would pay tuition. Well, at the end of that year, Dad said, I don't think I'm going to pay the tuition for those kind of grades. So I dropped out and we left.

Oh, wow.

There's a section in *Turning Bones* where I write about the first time I had to confront my father after literally flunking out of school. He was sowing a field of soybeans that day, and I filled up two buckets with soybeans and walked down to the field. When he got to the end of a row, the planter being empty at that point, I went out and filled up the planter buckets for him. He just looked at me and said something like, Make sure you fill them even. And that was all he said to me. We spent the rest of the afternoon, my father going from one end of the field to the next, and me coming out to fill the planter. The two of us together sowed that field, and that was the day that I fully understood what it was to be a man. To take responsibility for your life, and, no matter what your life had given you, to keep going to that end of the field and back to this end of the field, and to have this sense of duty and responsibility. ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Let's talk about your development as a writer. How did you get started writing fiction?

I don't have any other skills. I was one of those kids. When somebody said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" when I was five, I said that I

wanted to be a writer. I don't know where that came from, but it came very young and it never seemed to stop.

What did you do to develop your craft?

It depends at what point at which you're speaking. I came home from school and wrote a lot of stories. **I read copiously. I spent an enormous amount of time alone. I've always been a real loner. I have the exact disposition for the job.** I have no attention deficit disorder. I can sit in a straight-backed chair for eight hours and read Proust. I might have a hard time sitting in a straight-backed chair for eight hours when I'm trying to write, but even then, when I'm on a roll, when I'm really into a project, I can do it. ■

ALLEN MORRIS JONES, interviewed by David Abrams:

How old were you when you first started writing?

I published my first short story at the age of fourteen, mostly due to my eighth-grade English teacher, a woman by the name of Billie Flemming, who has really been the only significant academic encourager of my writing. She arranged to have one of my short stories published in a children's magazine. I think it was called *The Children's Album*.

Do you remember what prompted you to start writing in the first place, back when you were a teenager?

Impossible to say, really. I've always been a voracious reader. I can barely remember not being able to read. By the time I was in second grade, I was hiding Louis L'Amour and Hardy Boys novels inside my math textbooks, seeing what the Sacketts were up to when I should have been memorizing multiplication tables—a math handicap that exists to this day. I can barely balance my checkbook. For a certain personality type, it seems that writing is a natural extension of reading. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Many writers are born from their early interest in reading. How did you know you wanted to write, and what did you do to develop your craft?

I wrote *The Hours* in part because *Mrs. Dalloway* had such a profound early impact on me as a writer. I read it when I was in high school, and although

it wasn't of course the first book I'd read, it was the first one that showed me what could be achieved using only ink and paper. I'd never seen such complex, rhythmic, graceful sentences before. I remember thinking—remember, I was fifteen at the time—Wow, she was doing with language something like what Jimi Hendrix did with his guitar. There aren't many of us who insist on the connection between Virginia Woolf and Jimi Hendrix, and I'm proud to be one of the few. Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* didn't turn me instantly into a writer—that happened years later—but it did turn me into a reader.

I didn't start writing until I was in college. I'd wanted to be a painter, and labored at painting for years before I began to realize that I wasn't really gifted enough. I kept getting discouraged, starting over, getting discouraged again, and finally just sort of packing it in for the day and going back to my dorm to get stoned. I started writing fiction as a consolation of sorts, without expecting it to lead anywhere, and quickly found that the attempt to convey life on the printed page was endlessly consuming to me in a way painting had never been. I've come to suspect that what we call "talent" is inextricably linked to a bottomless fascination with the process itself; that an artist of any kind possesses, among other qualities, the desire to do it and do it and do it until it comes out right. Over the years my convictions about my abilities have waxed and waned, but I've never once lost my interest in writing itself. ■

PERRI KLASS, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

I am very, very attached to many of the classic girls' books of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many years ago I wrote an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* called "Stories for Girls about Girls Who Write Stories," and I think one of the reasons I feel so strongly connected to those books—including *Little Women*—is that they tend to be stories about growing up writing—and reaching for some level of writing professionalism. ■

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Have you always aspired to be a writer?

I thought I was a writer when I was a child. I grew up in a place where being a writer wasn't particularly venerated. When people ask when I

began, I thought I was a writer when I was four. [*Laughs.*] And it was a university town, but it was also a place where the people who were respected and venerated were the physicists and the mathematicians and the doctors and the lawyers. So a writer, hmmm... ■

The literary tradition in Nigeria, is it nascent? Burgeoning?

No, no, it's not necessarily nascent. It's been there and was there—my family lives in Achebe's house. I grew up in that house, where Achebe has actually lived, and there were a number of other writers in Nsukka. There is a wonderful tradition of writing coming from that university town. But again, the books were loved and people respected it, but it wasn't—parents didn't say to their children, "You are to be a writer."

They don't say that anywhere. Where do they say that?

There is some respect with the idea of being a writer.

Sure, but no parent will tell his child to be a writer. Especially immigrant parents.

Yeah, I was just going to say that. Yes, immigrant parents, no way. ■

TIM GAUTREAUX, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How far back in your memory does storytelling go in your family?

Before television and air conditioning and before people were mobile, family members would gather more often. Families were closer in the old days because once a family would generate in a community, it tended to stay in that community. We're talking about the forties and fifties. People would sit on the front porch because the house was too hot to stay inside until 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

My uncle had a large camp south of New Orleans in Hopedale, and the family would go down there about every weekend. The men would drink beer, and the women would gossip. There was always dancing because there was a jukebox, and the kids would just do whatever kids did—buy firecrackers and mooch money for the slot machines or to buy a Coke.

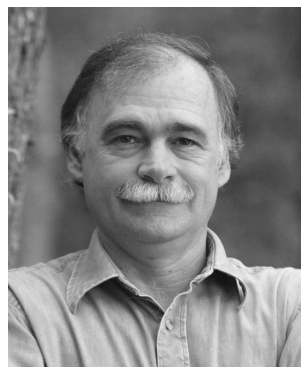


Photo credit: Randy Bergeron

When the kids ran out of things to do, they went over to sit with the adults. The big people were always telling stories. The men would almost always tell the stories, although the women would sometimes tell them too, but they liked to tell elaborate stories about their medical operations.

The men would tell stories about work. To me, they were ancient, but they were in their sixties and seventies. They were retired riverboat men, tugboat pilots, or railroad men. My father was a tugboat captain. Their tales had a certain structure and were spontaneous; one man would begin, “Yeah, one time I jumped off the back fantail of the *Johnny Brown* when she got her hawser wrapped around a propeller, and I had to chop it out with a hatchet under water.” The other old guy would say, “Well, that ain’t nothing. I was on the Third District Ferry the time the *Sipsey* came between the hulls and cut the pilot house in half with a smokestack.” Another one would say, “Wait a minute. That tugboat wasn’t named *Sipsey*.”

There would be this fantastic interweaving of stories because one man would make up facts, and the others would catch him, and their “facts” would throw the story off on a tangent. These sessions taught me about the spontaneity, the organic structure, and the emotion that is involved in storytelling. Today, I see the short story not primarily as an intellectual endeavor but as a cultural artifact tightly bound with a necessary narrative structure.

Were you drawn to storytelling from an early age?

Somebody bought me a portable typewriter for Christmas, and in the mid-fifties I got a pen pal from Canada. One of my childhood pastimes was typing two- and three-page letters to this guy in Canada every other day. **He would tell me about what things were like in Canada, and I would tell him about things here. After a while, I ran out of things to talk about, so I started making up stuff.**

Was that your first experience in fiction writing?

Probably so. Lying to pen pals. ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How did you get started writing and what did you do to develop your craft?

I’ve been writing for as long as I can remember. Writing is all I ever wanted to do. I remember sitting at my grandmother’s table using crayons to

illustrate this story I'd just written about Edgar Allan Poe arising from the grave. I've always been morbid and I've always wanted to write. **When other kids were playing house or playing school, I'd sit at an electronic typewriter and pretend I was writing a novel. I developed by writing. It's all I've ever done.**

I was an English major at Oberlin College and took creative-writing classes there. I went to summer nerd camps where you can take creative-writing classes and I've been part of informal workshops. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

When you were twelve years old, your mother gave you a journal and told you to write. Did she have any idea what she started?

She started lots of things, most of which didn't succeed: clarinet lessons, piano lessons, dancing lessons. None of that stuck with me because I wanted to be a cartoonist. My mother had many artistic interests, and she shared those with me. I found the journal attractive because it gave me a place to write my thoughts. You're absolutely free, in a journal, to say whatever you want.

And that's why she gave it to me; she wanted to read it. But I couldn't get away from it after I began. It evolved into a kind of writer's journal. I put them aside once I'm done. By then, it has served its purpose of helping me clarify some of my thoughts. I think it's an extraordinarily good tool for beginning writers because it helps them get accustomed to thinking about experience in language.

I tell my students that it's difficult to write sometimes, just to get to the writing, to sit down and finish a story. But if you write each day, even just a paragraph in your journal, you're never outside the creative process. When I write fiction, I hardly touch my journal. ■

KENT HARUF, *interviewed by Jim Nashold:*

What were some of the books you remember reading?

As a kid I read books that weren't great literature, but I read all the time. I read a lot of Western stories about horses and cowboys, all the Black Stallion series, *Green Grass of Wyoming*, *Thunderhead*, and *My Friend Flicka*. I

was very much interested in Western stories at that time.

Were your parents readers or storytellers?

My parents read a good deal every day. My dad read mostly biographies and history and newspapers. My mom read fiction, and also read us parts of novels when we traveled to my grandparents' place in South Dakota. My father was a great storyteller, and told stories after dinner. The stories I enjoyed the most were about his own background growing up on a homestead in North Dakota, and about ranch life. As a family, when we were on vacation, we took turns telling stories. Somebody would start, then somebody else would pick it up and move it on. So that was part of our entertainment. ■

ANTONYA NELSON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You've said that your parents weren't prohibitive with your reading material when you were growing up. Was this from an early age?

Our house was open. My parents taught literature at Wichita State University. They were connected to their graduate students and to the politics of the times. They marched in peace protests. Lots of people, including writers, passed through our house. My father was friends with Allen Ginsberg, who wrote a series of poems set in Wichita. There's one poem, "Wichita Vortex Sutra," in which Ginsberg claimed that I am the little girl. Our house was always full not just with books but with the notion of writing—not just writing but cutting-edge writing. My parents always allowed me to read anything. I read *Valley of the Dolls* and then *Emma*. I can remember reading *The Naked and the Dead*, and I can also remember finding my father's pornography library. **That kind of freedom, that kind of trust, is rare. They permitted their kids to be exposed. Ironically, they didn't have that trust with food. They were a lot more restrictive with that than with my reading diet. My eating habit, I should point out, is horrible, while my reading habit is terrific.**

Your parents were both teachers in the same department, and now you're married and you teach in the same department as your husband. Does it surprise you that your life echoes your parents' this way?

Sometimes people say, "Of course you're a writer. Your parents were English professors." But I have four siblings who don't write. I think I've chan-

neled in this direction because I had a desire to please my parents and because **I have an inclination to read and write. I have a brother and sister who are both psychologists, and this comes from the same background and the same type of interest: to sit around and hear stories all day, to be invested in human stories at a high level.** ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

I would read what my mother and stepfather read. People say that it's not whether your parents read to you but whether you see your parents reading serious literature that makes the difference. I have no memory of anyone reading anything to me as a child, but I have many memories of my parents engaged in serious reading. ■



Photo credit: Melissa Ann Finney

ELIZABETH McCracken,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Beginning as a teenager, you worked at libraries for many years. How has your relationship with books developed through this kind of work?

A lot of writers say that when they first went into a library they were awestruck around all the books and developed a great respect for books. For me, the experience was the exact opposite. I shelved fiction from the time I was fifteen until I was eighteen, and the main thing I learned was that books are objects. Like all teenage shelvers, the part of the job I hated was the work. You need to be a fairly obsessive-compulsive person to enjoy alphabetizing books. But I loved being in the library. I spent a huge amount of time reading books while on the job—classics, classics that had fallen out of favor, and young adult books, which my mother didn't approve of because she feels that teenagers should be reading *The Human Comedy* or Dickens. I lost a lot of respect for books in a healthy way because I looked at the jacket photos and thought, "Practically anybody can write a book." Many people treat their books as sacred objects and put acetate covers on them. I get lipstick on them. I read in the bathtub and while I eat. I don't fold down corners, and I never write in books—there's nothing worse than somebody who writes in books—but I use cocktail napkins or whatever comes in

handy to mark my place. **Library work gave me the sense that books are non-sacred objects that people can use.**

What made you seek a library job when you were that young?

It was either that or waiting tables. No, that's not exactly it. I was not perfect at getting books back to the library on time. There were times when I was in debt to the public library and wasn't allowed to go back. A huge benefit of working in libraries was not having to pay the fines.

I was a clumsy, socially backward teenager. I didn't want to waitress or work in a coffee shop or sell cookies. On my fifteenth birthday, I went into the library in Newton, Massachusetts, asked for a job, and got one. I worked at that same library until just before my twenty-second birthday, which is when I went to Iowa. That library building doesn't exist any more, but it heavily inspired the library in *The Giant's House*. Much more than any person or thing that I've ever written about, there is a direct correlation between that building and the fictional building in the novel.

Did you write during those early years?

I was a kid who always wrote. I didn't write much fiction, but I wrote rhyming verse. Actually, I probably wrote plenty of fiction, but I was better at metered verse, so I've chosen to remember that as what I wrote. ■

HA JIN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You served in China's People's Liberation Army for five and a half years. You hadn't had much formal education, nor had you been widely exposed to literature. Is it true that when you were on the front you found a Chinese translation of War and Peace?

Someone made that up. I was a regular soldier on the front, where it was very difficult to get any books. They just weren't available. Later, when I transferred inland to headquarters one hundred miles from the front, I began to have access to literary books, but nothing like *War and Peace*. *Don Quixote* was passed on to me, but I had it for only one day. I couldn't read all of it before I had to pass it on to someone else.

Since Mao had closed the schools in China at the start of the Cultural Revolution, was that your first experience with literature?



Photo credit: Jerry Bauer

I don't know if it was a genuine experience because I didn't have time to read it carefully. My first real experience was with two textbooks my parents sent to me that contained ancient Chinese poems. I read many of those poems and memorized some of them.

When did you decide you wanted to study literature?

In the early days, when my parents sent those textbooks, I was interested in good poems and literary works. This didn't mean that I wanted to study literature. When I decided that I wanted to go to college, I planned to study science. I wanted to be an engineer. **We were living in peace, and I realized that I needed some kind of education. When I took the exams, I couldn't compete with the science majors because I didn't go to middle school or high school. You can't teach yourself chemistry; you need a lab.** So I was a rather weak applicant. Then, I became more interested in the humanities, but not in writing. Philosophy was my first choice, then classics, then library science or history. English was my last choice. ■

LEE SMITH, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

I have always wanted to be a writer. I have always written. Even as a child, I wrote all these dumb little things, and I just didn't think of a reader for a long time. I mean, I was writing seriously all the way through college. I wrote my first novel when I was in college. I didn't have the notion of a reader then, so it never bothered me whether somebody would even read it, much less like it.

Did you grow up in a family of storytellers?

Oh, yeah. I grew up in Grundy, Virginia, which is not at all what you think of as Virginia. You think of houses with columns and wealthy people and a certain elegance and grace, but Grundy is the roughest place you've ever seen. That southwest corner of Virginia is much more like West Virginia. It's coal-mining country where the Appalachian Mountains are straight up and down. There's nothing scenic there. It's not at all like the Blue Ridge.

No rolling hills.

No. It's not pretty. It's hard, hard country where I grew up.

And did people tell stories?

My whole family—well, they won't shut up! And in a way I was particularly

receptive because I was an only child. I grew up surrounded by relatives. On my father's side—the Grundy half—there's still a houseful of cousins living on one side and the other half across the road—just tons of people. But because I was an only child, I also had time to read a lot and reflect a little bit more. My own children have not turned out to be readers, exactly. I think it's because they were born so close together and they all amused each other so much. But that wasn't my childhood. I was very receptive to all this storytelling that went on in my family, by women as well as men. ■

ERNEST J. GAINES,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Was writing always something you thought you would do?

I did not know I wanted to be a writer when I was a child in Louisiana. It wasn't until I went to California and ended up in the library and began reading a lot that I knew it. I began to read many great novels and stories, and I did not see myself or my people in any of them. It was then that I tried to write.

There were few people on the plantation who had any education at all, especially the old people my aunt's age and my grandmother's age. **They had never gone to school, and they didn't have any books. I used to write letters for them. I had to listen carefully to what they had to say and how they said it, the words they tried to use. I put their stories down on paper, and they would give me tea cakes. If I wanted to play ball or shoot marbles, I had to finish writing fast. It was then that I began to create.** I would write about their gardens, the weather, cooking, preserving. I would talk about anything. I've been asked many times when I started writing. I used to say I started writing in the small Andrew Carnegie Library in Vallejo, California, but I realize now that I started writing on the plantation. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

When I was a kid, my hero was Johnny Bench. He was a catcher for the Cincinnati Reds and they won the World Series in the late seventies, and he was my hero. I played Little League, but I was the shortest catcher in the league. In the meantime, they finally got a library in town and my mother would take me in. It was a very small library. You could only check out four books per card.

So I got library cards in my name, my brother and sisters' names, and my dog's name. That's a fact. I would go in there with five library cards, check out twenty books a week, every Saturday. My mother would drop me off at the library, and she would go to the grocery, and come back to pick me up. She'd leave me a grocery sack. I'd fill it with twenty books and get out of there.

Finally, I went to the librarian and I said, "Look, I want a book on baseball." There are a lot of baseball books aimed at children that are sort of like, "There's a new kid in town. He's great at baseball. Everybody likes him. That's all I wanted to be. Everybody would like me because I was good at something." So I said, "I want a book on baseball." And she goes to the card catalog and she says, "Is there anything you like?" And I said, "I like Johnny Bench." And she doesn't know who that is so I say, "He's a catcher." So she looks up "catcher" and says, "Oh, come here. I have a book for you." She takes me to this part of the library I'd never been in. She pulls out this book and hands it to me and I say, "Oh, great." I check it out. I go home. I start reading it. It's *Catcher in the Rye*. I stayed up all night and read that book when I was twelve years old. I could not believe it. I'm getting a funny feeling right now just remembering it. It tore me up. It just made my hair stand on end. I could not believe that you could write that way. That book probably had more influence than any single book I ever read. I never read another juvenile again. I couldn't believe you could write like that. I went from Hardy Boys to *Catcher in the Rye*. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, interviewed by Nancy Middleton:

I didn't grow up among writers. I didn't have mentors. I was really not in a milieu that had anything to do with writing, although my parents respected books. I never knew a writer. I just knew I wanted to do this. It was as if that life was somewhere and I had to find it and enter it. I had to break into it.

How did you break into it?

Well, I had always written. Since I was about seven, I had planned to be a writer. But it was an imaginary thing, you know? I would do this. It would happen to me. And I wrote. But I rarely did anything practical about it like sending my work to editors. I was brought up at a time when women were very passive. The idea was that your life would happen to you, that a girl didn't have to do anything. You would get married, you would have chil-

dren. And these things do tend to happen—well, not so much anymore, but they did then. We lived in the passive mode. We didn't go out and make our lives.

I did editorial work. I worked in Boston at *The Writer* magazine. I worked in Harlem at a fair-housing program. I did public-relations writing. I did proofreading. I taught freshman comp at Hunter College. And I did some translations. I did lots of things. But none of it was writing. And then I went to graduate school. My almost-doctorate was in comparative literature.

When the women's movement began I was in my late twenties, early thirties. And I watched the way my husband pursued a career. It came over me that if I was going to be a writer, I would have to do something about it. Go out there and do it. So I dropped out of graduate school. I decided now or never. I knew that I was not a scholar; I was getting ill at the thought of writing a thesis. I thought I'd drop out for a year or so and write a novel. And I did, and I liked it so much I never went back to school. ■

ABDELRAHMAN MUNIF, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

At a young age I was a very good reader, and it seemed to me that novel writing was a horizon in which I was interested, and which I could reach. Gradually, as other horizons were closed off—and since I didn't have very much interest in being an employee in a larger context—I tried novel writing. So, I imagine, it really was my first choice.

When I was editor-in-chief of the magazine *Oil and Development* in Baghdad, I told my employers that you could find at least fifty other people who could be editors-in-chief of the magazine, doing what I did—but you couldn't find fifty novelists. And it was my wish to persevere and to pursue novel writing. Of course, I think it's part of the mission of any artist, no matter what kind, not only to depend on his gift, but to depend on himself and on hard work. If he has a gift, if it is there, he can improve it with effort, enlarge it, and build upon it.

What connection did working in the oil industry have with your writing gift?

There is, in our country, a punishment of being an employee without actual employment. It was my punishment. After having spent nearly two years in this shaming condition, of being an employee without work, there was this gap for which I thought the novel might be a solution. We have a saying:

In love or other matters, it's like smoking—it starts as a game or flirtation and ends up as an addiction. When I had written my first novel, I had the feeling that this may have been the right path after all, and that I could continue doing this. ■

ANNIE PROULX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

I was writing fiction when I was a kid, but, you know, not seriously. Every now and then I'd write a story, and then I wouldn't do it for years, and then I'd write another story. Some of them would be published, but I didn't try very hard, didn't actually start doing it seriously until 1979. Then I knew I really wanted to write fiction at that point. ■

HENRY LOUIS GATES JR., interviewed by Jim Schumock:

My father subscribed to Alfred Hitchcock's magazine. He's still a detective-novel junkie. *Time* would come. *McCall's* would come. My mother got a lot of magazines. We had those Reader's Digest condensed books and other books. My father did crossword puzzles. Every day, he still does the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. We were two hours west of D.C., so we'd get the *Baltimore Sun*, the *Washington Post*, the *Cumberland Sunday Times*, the *Cumberland Daily Times*. Reading? It was a culture of reading. ■

BOB SHACOCHIS, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

When you hear people talk about talent, I have no idea what that is. All I know is that at a certain age, some kids fall in love with language.

What age do you think it is?

Well, I think it's quite early. I'm not sure, but certainly by the time you're six or seven things are cooking and you're suddenly one of those kids who needs a book in hand. Eventually, that develops into wanting—at least for people who are destined to be writers—to contribute to what you've been taking, taking, taking, and you think, Well, I'd like to give back.

Almost altruistic.

Well, I would hate for it to sound that altruistic because, by that time, it's become a passion of yours. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

Given the questions that hum in your mind, was writing an inevitability for you?

Well, I really like to read and always have, and I was raised by English professors, so I'm sure that had an impact. But of the five kids in my family, I'm the only one who pursued literature and writing as a life work. So perhaps it wasn't inevitable. I was my mother's first child, and they lavished a great deal of attention on me. I remember reading flash cards when I was three or four and being encouraged to read and write very early. I took to it, and I was always rewarded for it. So I think it was just a combination of things. I did not expect to be a writer. I thought of writers as being a fairly distant group of beings—like movie stars. Out there. Celebrities. Somehow unreachable. It was a dream occupation, not a reality. My daughter says she wants to be a fairy when she grows up. A fairy princess. I think that's how I must have thought of writers. As otherworldly. But if it was a dream for me, it was one I took more and more seriously as time went on. I guess you have to if you're going to dedicate your life to it. A dream like that has to mean something pretty large to you. ■

JIM GRIMSLEY, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

I was born in North Carolina to very poor parents. I grew up in eastern North Carolina, which is a notably poor part of that state. It is mostly tobacco farms and tobacco farms, cotton fields now and again. I grew up in one little town called Pollocksville. We lived there all of the first eighteen years of my life, and then I went away to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to attend college.

I started writing little books when I was eight or nine years old in imitation of the books I was seeing in elementary school— you know, the Peter Rabbit books where the rabbit's getting in the garden and the human's got to keep him out of it and all that stuff. I'd take little cards and make these books up and tie them all together, and basically that told me what I wanted to do. And I really never changed my mind, and stuck with it through all the next twenty years. ■

LYNN FREED, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

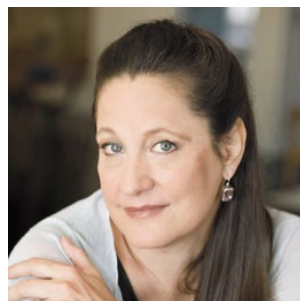
When did you know you wanted to write?

I can't remember ever wanting to write. I just wrote. At first, as a child, and for a number of years into adolescence, I seemed to write partly to show off. I'd write a story or a play—I wrote a lot of plays, mostly awful—and I'd run downstairs to read it to my mother. She was a completely honest critic: harsh and fair. If she came forth with praise, I knew that what I had written wasn't fake. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How did you get started writing?

I was always a reader, the kind of kid who read constantly. Very early on, it seemed to me a way to be bigger than I was, know more than I should know, travel more than anyone I knew had traveled.



I came from a small town in West Virginia, and people there were very stationary, much less mobile than the rest of the country. Most of the people I knew—and I think it's still true of that place—tend to move in and out for jobs much less. They tend to be really connected to the land and the region, and they tend to have had several generations of their families there. It was a very isolated, intense type of world. Early on, I saw reading as a way of both escaping that, and deepening it. Reading seemed to be very subversive, and writing later became the same. Reading led to writing for me. I started out writing poetry in high school, and by the time I was nineteen or twenty, I'd started writing short prose pieces. Those developed into the one-page fictions in my first book, *Sweethearts*, which was published by a small press. I taught myself to write fiction by writing those very compact, spiral-shaped pieces. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, interviewed by Rob Trucks:

It was always there. I drew and wrote stories since the second grade. I constantly drew pictures in school. I was an A student who was bored out of my skull in school, and I would get in trouble a lot. I realized the way

not to get in trouble was to draw. I drew all the time and I wrote stories in grade school for spelling class.

You had to define twenty spelling words a week. So I wrote the definitions and the teacher said, “Chris, this isn’t right.” And I said, “Oh yes they are.” She said, “No, they have to be dictionary definitions.” What she wanted me to do was open a dictionary and transcribe what was in there, which I thought was stupid. I said, “Look, I know these words. I don’t want to do that.” And she said, “Well, why don’t you just write a story and use all the words to prove you know them.” So I thought, Okay, great. I started writing a story a week in spelling class. I had her for two years’ worth of spelling. I hated her guts.

What about now?

I still hate her guts. She gave me twelve licks with a paddle once. It was a school record. She gave me six for misbehaving, then six more for laughing. It was either laugh or cry. She beat the hell out of me. It’s not one of those, Oh, she did me a favor. She didn’t. That was not the favor I needed.

Do you still have any of those stories?

Yeah, I have them all. I have everything I ever wrote. ■

NOMI EVE:

Writers were always my heroes. They were always the most magical thing that one could be, and I read voraciously as a child, like a lot of writers do. I have memories of stacks of library books. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I know that you were a biology student. How did you go from science to writing fiction?

By a long, confused road. I initially went to graduate school in zoology, which didn’t work out at all. Later on, I studied medieval history for a couple of years in graduate school, but I didn’t stick with that, either. In and around those two things, I had about thirteen jobs in ten years, none of them related to each other, and none but the last two related to writing. It took me a long time to figure out what I wanted to do. It really wasn’t clear to me. I kept trying awful jobs and fumbling around.

I did finally just start writing and I can't actually account for that, except that I've always been such a passionate reader. I loved reading and loved books and wanted to write, but I didn't understand how anyone became a writer. I didn't know any writers, and I didn't know about graduate programs in writing. But one day, I started writing a novel. I worked on that for about six years, and eventually had to throw it out, but in the process, I learned something about writing and I began to meet other writers, and all that was helpful. It was a long road, though. ■

JOHN McNALLY, *interviewed by Stephanie Kuehnert:*

When did you start writing? And when did you write the first story that you really felt was a keeper?

I started writing in the fourth grade. I was an overweight kid who watched a lot of television. We had to write a play and perform it, so I wrote about an overweight superhero who'd go into a phone booth to change his clothes but couldn't get out again because it was too tight of a fit. I remember the teacher and the students laughing. The play was a hit! Sad to say, but I suppose ego is what kept me writing. I wrote a nonfiction book about film comedians when I was in the eighth grade, typed it all out on a manual cast-iron typewriter, and tried to find a publisher, but only one would even look at it. I tried writing a science-fiction novel. When I first started college, before I took my first creative-writing course, I was writing some sentimental crap about a high school romance.

The first story that I wrote that was a keeper was "The Greatest Goddamn Thing," which I wrote the summer after I finished my MFA. It was the first story that seemed organic from the get-go; it seemed to have taken on a life of its own, even as I was writing it. Before that, everything was mechanical. I tell my students that you have to learn about craft, but it's like learning to play pool: You work on, say, a bank shot or on slicing the ball off the rail and into a corner pocket, and you keep doing that over and over and over, but then one night, it all comes together. It becomes second nature, and you don't have to think about it anymore—you don't have to line up the shot, you just hit the cue ball and everything falls into place. You run the table. I wish I could say that every story that followed has felt that way, but it hasn't. Only occasionally—and rarely—does that happen. ■

ALLEN MORRIS JONES, *interviewed by David Abrams:*

I published my first short story at the age of fourteen, mostly due to my eighth-grade English teacher, a woman by the name of Billie Flemming, who has really been the only significant academic encourager of my writing. She arranged to have one of my short stories published in a children's magazine. I think it was called *The Children's Album*.

Do you remember what prompted you to start writing in the first place, back when you were a teenager?

Impossible to say, really. I've always been a voracious reader. I can barely remember not being able to read. By the time I was in second grade, I was hiding Louis L'Amour and Hardy Boys novels inside my math textbooks, seeing what the Sacketts were up to when I should have been memorizing multiplication tables, a math handicap that exists to this day—I can barely balance my checkbook. For a certain personality type, it seems that writing is a natural extension of reading. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, *interviewed by Janet Benton:*

In what sense do you think your childhood in New Orleans was advantageous for you as a future writer?

Well, it's a real spooky-story place. Everybody tells stories a lot, though I think that whole Southern storyteller thing is a myth. I think people tell stories all over. In New England, in small towns, everyone's got a weird little story. But I guess the atmosphere here is kind of gothic. And of course if the weather's warm, you can sit outside and chat all the time; stories tend to come out of that. The history of the place was interesting to me, and as a child I always was interested in learning about the people who lived here. I read the old stories about pirates in the city, and Madame John's legacy, and Madame Lalaurie, who had the slaves chained in the attic.

MARY MCGARRY MORRIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

How did you become a writer?

My parents were both avid readers, and so from them I learned a great respect for the written word. In grammar school, I was taught by nuns who expended every bit as much devotion and energy on writing and reading

skills as they did on catechism. I had nuns in high school as well, but there were a few lay teachers. One of these was Walt Moore, who spoke of symbols, irony, the reasons for living and loving, the soul, tragedy and folly, heroes and fools. He was the most demanding and interesting teacher I had ever had, and I always hated to have the bell ring at the end of his classes. ■

ALBERTO RÍOS, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

In an essay in Ironwood, you wrote that you've always written, even as a little boy, but when you were young you "called it nothing," and you didn't tell anyone about it.

I think if I had been writing something and I called it poetry, I might have gone to a poetry book or a poetry teacher—even though we didn't have any—but I might have tried to do that. And I think that would have been wrong. It wouldn't have been my poetry.

Could it also have been tainted by the boys on the streets? By your buddies? Was there an urge not to appear bookish?

Profound! A profound urge. It was more than not wanting to appear bookish. Whatever our perceptions are, they're strong, they're social, they're what guide us through life and let us do all those things that we do. I know that in growing up, as I was writing in the backs of my notebooks, it felt like I was getting away with something. I did homework in the front, and when I would turn my notebook to the back, I was doing what nobody had told me to do. There was no explanation for that. I was getting away with something. Because I couldn't show it to anybody. I couldn't turn the back part of the book in to a teacher, and I didn't know what that stuff was. If I gave it no name, I also didn't know where to take it.

We didn't, in fact, have a poetry teacher. I lived in a very small town. I would call it a tough town, whatever that means. But the most immediate thing it meant to me is that if you're doing something at school that nobody tells you to do, you're different, and different isn't good to a child. And I was clearly doing something nobody else was doing. They did their homework and they were out of there—if they even did their homework. So I couldn't show it to a teacher, and neither could I show it to my friends. I'd be exposing myself in some way as something I couldn't explain even to myself. How could I explain it to them?

It's interesting that a secret became a life.

Well, I think it is.

You know, I couldn't show it to my parents, either, because kids can't do that. So there was some sense of hiding, and they would ask me, "Well, shouldn't you be doing your homework?" It was not that I was afraid of my parents, but I knew they worried about me and what I should be doing.

As I got into high school, it's not like I couldn't figure out what I was doing, but I didn't change the mechanism. I knew that if I showed this work that—first of all, I would still be different because I was doing something others weren't doing—but if I showed it, I'd be writing, which was a curiosity, period. And I'd be writing poetry. Given the stereotypes, there was nothing to be gained. I wasn't threatened by it, but it wasn't going to help for me to show my work and to have it be labeled. If I wasn't going to use adjectives for it, I certainly wasn't going to let anybody else use adjectives for it. And so I think my writing became forcefully mine. ■

LYNN FREED, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How did growing up in the theater help shape you as a writer? Did it influence your desire to write?

I didn't grow up in the theater itself, but as the daughter of parents who were in the theater. There is a difference. I could never stand to be on stage, at least not literally. But when you grow up in a family like mine, in which performance, both formal and informal, is prized, you're never quite off-stage. As the youngest child, I soon found that the way to attract and keep attention was to perform as myself. Not necessarily the self I was—whatever that was—but the self that I divined they might wish me to be. In this case, it was clown—not an uncommon role for the youngest child in such a family.

Writing was as natural as playing. In addition, we had to write a lot for school—and from a very early age, five or six years old—essays, stories, plays. Every week, there was a story to write for school. My sisters, of course, paid no attention to what I wrote. They were involved in their own tumultuous lives. And my parents worked like mad. When I had a chance, usually before supper, I would take my efforts to my mother. ■

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

My first publication was a poem about the sun that I wrote when I was in the third grade. It was put in an anthology of children's poetry; I won a contest for it. I've always thought that writing was something I could do and something that I wanted to do. ■

ROY PARVIN, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

You said that your mother was a storyteller.

I remember going to the Jersey Shore as a kid, and, after a meal, when we couldn't go into the water—that magic hour and a half?—she would tell stories about her family. Her family is a very large family. I would always ask her about the stories, ask her to tell it again. She would tell them over and over—she had a lot of good stories. I would ask her about the stories from very weird angles. Like about a person who's only tangentially involved in the story. And she would answer me, and I think that she knew that I was asking about point of view. Things like that, and she enjoyed it as an intellectual exercise. She could, of course, also have said, "Roy, I've told you this story fifty times. Go in the water, the hour and a half is up." But she enjoyed it. She loves stories. I grew up in a household where the *New Yorker* was read.

For a long time, all I really wanted to do was write one successful short story. I mean, that was my life goal. I think that it takes a certain kind of reader perhaps—I was talking about this with another writer, a more sophisticated reader—to understand short stories. You don't have three hundred pages to get to know the character. A lot of times, you're left with feelings, sometimes unsettled feelings. And the reader is just getting warmed up after thirty pages. Anyway, my mother, I think—from reading short stories, from always loving stories—understood what I was doing. I would ask her, "Well, what would happen, what would have happened if that story happened in Florida instead of New Jersey?" I was finding out writer tricks about how to tell stories. She went with me on all that stuff.

I remember my first year in college, in 1975, a book came out called *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* by Larry Woiwode. It was a very influential book in my personal history. I thought, This is wonderful. This is what I want to do. I remember going home, and my mother had read him in the *New Yorker*, and it was a sort of shared thing. We didn't each have the vocabulary to talk

about the material, but what we could talk about was how moving it was. Which is sometimes more important than being able to talk about craft issues. And we had that. It was sort of being understood in the world by somebody else. It's really very, very nice to have it happen with somebody within your family.

So even though my brothers were perhaps making fun of me for writing from time to time, I did feel rooted in the idea that writing was a good endeavor to pursue.

What good fortune.

Yeah. It really was. We did that even in high school because we went to the beach every summer. By then I was surfing and everything, but I'd come in and I would make her tell stories. And she would tell them slightly differently, you know, things she would remember, perhaps some embellishments. It was really a lesson in storytelling. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

I was very proud of terrible poems I wrote in the third grade, verses in which I rhymed “true” and “blue.” In the fifth grade, I wrote a novel, which shouldn't impress you too much. It was forty-two pages of huge handwriting. My parents saved it. The story was straight out of English novels for girls and was called *Carrie at Baxter Manor*. Its middle chapter had the exciting title “Danger.” Martin in *Lily Dahl* has a book called *Baxter Manor* among the volumes that clutter his apartment—a private joke for me alone. By the time I was fourteen, I was loudly declaring to everybody that I was going to become an “author.” I was a pretentious little idiot, but I think pretension is necessary for all writers. You have to get over it later, but it's good to live out various personas. That's what writing novels is—enacting other people. ■



Photo: Dan Callister

THOMAS E. KENNEDY, interviewed by *Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I tried a little bit in my high-school quarterly, a poem or two. I wrote a lot in my journal, and thought of myself as a writer for many years before I

had a right to. By the time I was about twenty-four, for a year or two I had made a real try at it and I had some encouragement. I was an undergraduate at the time. I had a break in my education while I was in the army, and had some encouragement from my teachers. But then for one reason or another, I didn't consistently try for some years, sort of set it aside a bit, always taking notes and writing in my journals and such. Then by the time I was in my thirties and had moved to Europe, I really started to try. ■

MARY MCGARRY MORRIS, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

I wrote as a child, all the ordinary and wonderful things children write. I remember writing a story in fifth grade about two children struggling through a blizzard, trying to make it to their cabin. In the story, one child says to another, "We ain't gonna make it, Sister." The teacher circled *ain't* and *gonna* in red ink because those were slang words.

"Yes," I tried to explain, "but that's how that character talks." "Not in my class," she said with the finality of authority. But I knew without doubt that I was right and she was very wrong.

I guess what happened is I never outgrew the play acting, the make-believe that was constantly in my head. You know, Now you be Julia, and I'll be the king. It wasn't just stories, but voices, characters that not only needed to be expressed, but were a way for me—as a child and certainly now—to reduce horror and beauty, disorder and joy, to more manageable elements in order to make some sense of the world. Or at least take a little of the sting out of it. ■





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www.glimmertrain.org

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SCHWARTZ, Lynne Sharon. Story collection: *Referred Pain*. Novels: *Disturbances in the Field, Leaving Brooklyn, Rough Strife, In the Family Way*. Nonfiction: *Ruined by Reading, Face to Face*. lynnesharonschwartz.com

SHACOCHIS, Bob. Books of fiction: *Easy in the Islands, The Next New World, Swimming in the Volcano*. Essays: *The Immaculate Invasion, Domesticity: A Gastronomic Interpretation of Love*. Regularly contributes to *GQ, Harper's, Outside*.

SMITH, Lee. Twelve novels, including *Guests on Earth, On Agate Hill, The Last Girls*. Story collections include *Darcy and the Blue Eyed Stranger*. North Carolina State University. leesmith.com

TEMPLIN, Charlotte. Interviewer. Nonfiction: *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation*. Interviews in *American Studies, Missouri Review, Boston Review*.

THON, Melanie Rae. Novels: *The Voice of the River, Sweet Hearts, Meteors in August, Iona Moon*. Story collection: *In This Light: New and Selected Stories*. University of Utah.

TRUCKS, Rob. Interviewer. Nonfiction: *The Pleasure of Influence: Conversations with American Male Fiction Writers, Cup of Coffee: The Very Short Careers of Eighteen Major League Pitchers*.

UPCHURCH, Michael. Interviewer. Novels: *Passive Intruder, The Flame Forest*. Book critic for *Seattle Times*.

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