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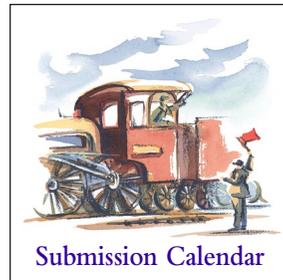
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

ELIZABETH COX, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

When I'm reading a story I look for some turn, some change, some event that gives a different perspective. In my own writing, I try to discover an ending, and I go a long while not knowing where the story is going. Sometimes the ending comes in the form of an image. In my first novel, *Familiar Ground*, the image was looking into the woods while driving somewhere and seeing a place that looked familiar—just a moment of imagining that you'd been there before. In *The Ragged Way People Fall Out of Love*, the image was people sitting around a table at dinner in Halloween costumes. Sometimes an image offers a larger perspective. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Because stories are different, they resolve themselves differently. Some stories lend themselves to epiphany, while some end with a question. Other stories end with a



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flash-forward of something that may or may not happen. Some stories will end with an inner realization for the character, not necessarily an epiphany, but an understanding or a re-seeing of something that's been there all along. Sometimes a whole new image will come in that is only tangentially related, but thematically related. I'm always reading other writers and what they're doing. I came to writing fairly late after I'd finished all my formal education, so books have been my best teachers.

How is a short-story ending different from a novel ending?

The novel has a different pace. It's like a big wave that has been building up and up and up and now it has to crash, whereas the short story is more subtle. It's not that big dramatic crashing at the end, but more like a dancer's movement, subtle and artistic. ■

PAM DURBAN, interviewed by Cheryl Reid:

The last lines of your most recent stories, "Gravity" and "Soon," seem to open up and are reminiscent of Chekhov's movement toward a larger perspective.

Certainly, I have learned that from him and from Alice Munro. The stories in *All Set About with Fever Trees* are much more definite in their endings than these others. Those stories try to wrap up in a way that I am moving away from.

"Made to Last" sticks out in my mind that way. The last line is, "Did you see what we've done?"

It's interesting that you pick that one, because when I was rewriting the stories for the book, that ending nearly drove me crazy, because the story went on beyond that into a lot of explanation. That was probably the first story where I discovered how to leave it there. I wanted to find that last image or that last note or that last place for the story to come to rest without having to bring it to some kind of closure. ■

ANDRE DUBUS, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Are there any stories you are most proud of?

They are mostly gone when I finish them. I remember the ones that were hardest to write. "Adultery" was hard, and I almost quit writing it a few times. "Dancing After Hours" was very hard, as well. I am fond of many of

the stories in *The Last Worthless Evening*. I like “Molly” and “Deaths at Sea.”

“Molly” was hard. It started from the point of view of a fishing captain who first sees the mother, Claire. It started on his fishing boat off the New Hampshire coast. Claire invites him over to her house for dinner. He’s the first one who sees Molly. I didn’t know how to finish it, and then a couple days later I realized it was finished, and that I just needed an epilogue. I wrote that epilogue with my daughter Cadence, who was three years old at the time, on my lap. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

You mentioned having to cut the epilogue that you’d written for The Good Brother. What did it cover?

Shit, they go up to Alaska and live happily ever after and homestead.

Joe and Botree and the two kids?

And Johnny and his girlfriend and their daughter. Coop is dead of a heart attack. There were some lawsuits. The ACLU was involved and they got charged with criminal syndicalism. They dusted it off, like this old prosecution charge I discovered. And then I thought, What are you doing, Chris? You can’t have this book and then have people go off to Alaska. It just was me trying to not let Virgil face the music, and that’s what got me so tore up over it. When I cut it, I started crying, because I realized that Virgil couldn’t just get off scot-free... ■

VALERIE MARTIN, *interviewed by Janet Benton:*

Sometimes I have dreams that are solutions to problems I’m having, and they’re inevitably stupid solutions. I had one not too long ago. I dreamed the solution for the end of this book that I had written six different endings for, *Italian Fever*. And I had this dream. I woke up and thought, That’s it, this is wonderful, that’s it. And I went back to sleep feeling happy. In the morning I woke up and examined my dream and it was just absurd. This couple goes off and starts pruning a rosebush. That’s how it was going to end. It was really not satisfactory, but the dream brain thought, Oh, great solution. I get sleepy when I’m writing a lot, and a lot of times I go lie down and I think I’m going to go to sleep, but instead, before I go to sleep I start to think of what to do, and it solves the problem. I know a lot of people

who do that. As soon as you lie down, all of a sudden it's clear. ■

MELISSA PRITCHARD, *interviewed by Leslie A. Wootten:*

“The Widow’s Poet” was scary to write, especially toward the end when I had no idea what was going to happen. I actually had to force myself to continue because I was so afraid of what I would discover as I moved forward. Kind of like Bluebeard—don’t open that door because you’ll see corpses hanging in the closet. I’d open a door and there would be a smaller, darker door, then another and another. I really had to summon all my courage to make it to the end. ■

ALICE MATTISON, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

In life, by some coincidence, we might both know the same Nathan, though in fiction, that could feel contrived. There is a major coincidence at the core of The Book Borrower, yet it feels quite natural.

We’re all afraid of coincidence, but I think very often when we’re caught up in a novel, we don’t even notice it unless it’s one of those thumping, thundering coincidences that come in at the end, and are just too neat and tidy, and make ending the story too easy. What’s important is that it not seem as though the coincidence is in there to rescue the book or to rescue the characters. Then it’s going to echo those nineteenth-century coincidences that almost depend on a universe organized by providence, in which the right thing always happens at the end. But if the coincidence starts the story going, or if the coincidence moves the story along, then it’s much less noticeable and feels like coincidences in life, which of course happen all the time. And if the characters say, Look at that, what a coincidence, and then just move on, that’s probably better than if the author tries to conceal it. ■

TIM O’BRIEN, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

Your novel, In the Lake of the Woods, is kind of a mystery wrapped in an enigma, and I think it’s probably your most technically difficult book.

I think so. It’s an odd thing: On the surface, it’s a very simple story. A man wakes up and his wife’s gone. Where did she go? It’s a traditional sort of search story, I suppose, on one level. On other levels, though, it’s not: I offer

a series of hypotheses as to what may have become of her. As I wrote each hypothesis—she drowned, she ran away from him, she left him for another man, she got lost, he killed her, they ran off together—as I wrote each of those hypotheses, I was convinced *that* was the answer. I ended up with a series of chapters that seemed to me equally credible. When I got to that point, I realized, My God, I can't put a traditional end on this book. Why hypothesize if you've solved the mystery? And I began then wrestling with hard dramatic and intellectual issues.

It occurred to me late one night, How can I submit this? What will people think when they read a story like this, with no answers at the end? And then other little challenges began popping up, and it occurred to me that, well, people are fascinated by the Kennedy assassination, for example, because we don't know. If Oswald had acted alone, and it was proven, there'd be no mystery. No JFK movie. I mean, you don't see many movies about the death of Truman, of old age. Custer's last stand remains with us—no survivors. Did Lizzie Borden take an axe? Amelia Earhart stays in the national mythology partly because we don't know what happened on that flight. There's a sense of not knowing that fascinates the human spirit, I think, and frustrates. The same for love: You know, you fall in love with someone and she seems to fall in love with you, and you ask her, "Do you love me?" and she says, "Yes." And then you ask, "How much?" And she answers, "With my whole heart," and then right away, you wonder how whole is her heart. We're all encased in our heads, and we can't read minds. There's a mystery about love because we can't enter that other person's mind. It's that mystery business that finally convinced me to continue this difficult book, knowing I'd be publishing a book with no traditional conclusion. ■

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

Where a story ends is where it ends—I've written on for four and five pages before I realize where the story really ends. It's difficult to delete those pages. That's why when I make changes to a story, I don't want the old versions of the story to be around, I don't want to see them—so when my computer says, "Replace file?" I always do. I think that's a strength of my writing. ■

DAVID LONG, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

There are things that happen to you kind of out of the blue. In order to answer this, you have to talk about some of the fundamental rules of fiction. I remember having a conversation with Bill Kittredge years and years ago about the role of accident in stories. The notion is that you can't end a story with an accident because it's dishonoring the contract you have with the reader. In other words, in a story, things happen because of who people are. *Action determines character* is the most fundamental principle in fiction. Action equals character. Character equals action. You do what you do because of who you are. Sometimes it's a question of reacting to something that happens out of the blue, but you react according to who you are, and another person would react differently. You know, an accident ending a story would be like writing a murder mystery that takes place in a locked room, and on the last page you say, Well, it wasn't really locked. That's what I call dishonoring the contract.

But you could *start* a story with an accident. One of my early stories that I like still is called "Home Fires." A man survives an accident that should have killed him. The question becomes: What is he going to do with it? That's now information in his life. He drives over an embankment, and finds himself at the bottom of this long hill, unscathed except for having lost a tooth. He meets up with two women who are camping, running away from their homes together. They suggest to him that there's a possibility, since this occurs in the wilderness, that he could easily disappear.

He could be presumed drowned and the body never recovered. So he suddenly has the option of starting a new life. So he has A or B. A being: Go home. B being: Start a new life. And he chooses C, which is: Go home and start a new life. ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Early on in the narrative, you let it be known that all of the terrorists will die in the end. Why did you decide to reveal this up front?

Because I don't want to have the reader racing through the book [*Bel Canto*] wondering if they were going to live, if they were going to make it. They're not going to make it, and that's not the point. We're all going to die. We don't know how long we're going to live, and none of us will feel that it's long enough. It really isn't about quantity, it's about quality. These people

have short and beautiful lives. I want the reader to focus on their life, rather than on their death. Also, it puts the reader in the same position that it puts the characters, which is, they know how it's going to end, and yet they put it out of their minds. So many readers have said to me," I read that line, but I made myself forget it. I turned away from it. "That's what the characters do. They know that it's not going to work. At the end everyone will say, "Of course this is where it was going. I didn't want to believe it."

That's how we are with our own death. We know that we're going to die, and yet we willfully turn away from it everyday to enjoy our beautiful life. There's something I refer to as the Love Story syndrome, in which Ryan O'Neal says, "This is about Jenny. Jenny is dead." So you don't go into that movie wondering if she's going to beat the cancer. She's not going to beat the cancer, so you spend the movie looking at this beautiful girl in her average and charming life which is all so heightened by the knowledge of her imminent death. And even then you think Jenny's going to pull through. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE, interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

Your novels deal with understanding character, and how a person can make a life in a difficult world. Do you consider yourself an optimistic writer?

That's such a funny question for me because it goes to the heart of the matter. When I was a little girl, I was given a five-year diary. I wrote in it a few times, little entries full of angst and disaster, and at the end of each entry, I wrote, with no irony intended but in clear desperation, "We are all well and happy." Shortly after my first novel [*A Fortunate Madness*] was published, I met a salty old newspaperman who had read the book and said to me, "Nice, Susan, but you know there are no happy endings."

Like most writers, one of the things that draws me to this work is the desire to create order in a random world, which is, of course, an acknowledgment that there are no happy endings. However, in thinking of optimism—particularly of wresting light from darkness—then ultimately, though certainly dark, I think of myself as an optimistic writer. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, interviewed by Stewart David Ikeda:

You've said that ending your story "Saul and Patsy Are Getting Comfortable in Michigan" with an accident might have been a mistake. You bravely and miraculously amended this in its sequel, "Saul and Patsy Are Pregnant." Budding writers often struggle with the impulse to end a story by ending its lives, as you did there. But they are always impressed—and heartened—to hear that fiction can evoke such deeply felt responses, such as the rather violent encounter you had over these characters. Can you describe it, and how it made you feel?

I had come close to completing *Through the Safety Net* when my office mate at Wayne State University, named Dennis Turner, told me that he had liver cancer. Dennis had come from New York, from Queens, and when he first arrived here in Detroit, he thought that the Midwest was the end of the world. Then he discovered that he loved it and felt this was the right place for him to be. And when he was dying, I began to think about people who had relocated themselves, found themselves in some places which they found geographically unsympathetic, distasteful, and I began to think about a story like that. It's always been my impression that people on both the East and West Coasts consider the inhabitants of the Midwest to be lacking either intelligence or taste, or both—simply for living here.

I thought I'd get some of that off my chest in the story, and some of my anger from my friend's dying. And I thought, if circumstances can be that calamitous for him, I can write a story in which the reader is taken as much by surprise by the death of my characters as I was—I am—by the death of my friend. I intended to make a couple as lovable as I could, and then send them through the windshield of a car at the end.

No magazine wanted to take the story, so it appeared in the book without a previous publication. When the book came out, though, that story received quite a bit of attention. Contemptuous attention by *Publishers Weekly*, if I remember correctly, which found that the accident at the end was not convincing. But it convinced some people—particularly people who became fond of these two.

It was in a literary setting, at a poetry resource-center meeting in Detroit's Book Cadillac Hotel, a place that's now out of business. A group of Michigan poets used to meet every year for readings, workshops, things of that kind. And I remember *Through the Safety Net* was on display there and, at one point, a woman came up to me and grabbed me by the lapels and said,

“You have the nerve to kill off that nice pair of lovable people!”

But I did have the nerve. It was exactly my point. ■

HA JIN, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I always know the main direction of the story. Otherwise, I will waste a lot of time. Without an ending, I can't start a story. Sometimes I plan an ending; it needs to be revised later on. But from the very beginning I need a sense of the direction, or I'll be groping around without knowing where I'm going. ■

CHANG-RAE LEE, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Your endings are distinctive, and each gathers up the threads of the story and spins a wonderfully resonant image that carries the narrative into some unknown future. Native Speaker ends with Henry helping his wife dismiss her speech class. She pronounces each student's name as they leave. “Now, she calls out each one as best as she can, taking care of every last pitch and accent, and I hear her speaking a dozen lovely and native languages, calling all the difficult names of who we are.” What does a great ending accomplish, and how do you arrive at your endings?

It's more like a feeling than anything intellectual. When you're toward the end of a book, a lot of things are building up. There's pressure that keeps accruing in terms of all the ideas that you're talking about and all the language and all the emotion. It points you toward a certain kind of feeling at the end, whether it's explosive or quiet. In that book it was going to have to do at least emotionally with what Henry's left with, after all that language. With each book I felt that the person was in the right place in the world he's in and he's thinking about the right things in terms of what's gone on. Jerry Battle's off by himself, but still close by. He's with the family but without them too. He's not at the center anymore. That felt right to me. It's a question of where the story wants to place the character. With Henry, he's in a mask but he's still there at ground zero for these young kids learning the language. That seems to me the right place for him. The word *difficult* was something I made sure to think about and put in. The difficult part speaks to the turmoil and frustration that he's seen and experienced, and saying that it's not easy to have all this difference and variation, though still embracing it. ■

THISBE NISSEN, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

There's a bit of a cryptic message that I didn't entirely notice until I closed the book [The Good People of New York]. A bit of a secret, sweet and romantic. How did you decide to put that in there? Did you have it from the beginning?

The chapter about going to Zinnia, the psychic, was taken from a kernel of a story about a widowed woman who had gone to a psychic, and that psychic somehow was only seeing the letter *D*. It was just that weird. So sometime after that reading, she was sitting at a bar, and there was a man who was very attractive to her sitting down the bar—they had this very intense chemistry going on. When he finally came over to introduce himself, his name was Dennis Dee. And they wound up together. It was so bizarre, but I loved that story and wanted to use it.

The last chapter was based around that anecdote, and another friend's story of someone standing up and doing this incongruous toast in the middle of a meal, and everyone thinking, Oh God, okay, here we go. I'm not really positive how I came to put them together. Maybe I started just by choosing a name that started with an *S*, and then thought to myself, Oh my God, what if he's the one? Wanting to plant that in there. Maybe my wanting to take care of her, or wanting at the end to feel like Roz was on a right track. She's such a strong person; she had gotten thrown by things that had happened in her life that she never expected to happen, and I think there was a little bit of me wanting to give something back to Roz. It seemed okay to have that—it was okay to have that romantic notion that maybe he was the boat she wanted, that it was all right, and you weren't stupid to think it, and you weren't silly or flighty or romantic to think it. Like maybe if you keep your faith a little longer, maybe that'll come. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The biggest obstacle in terms of the writing itself is finding something that keeps you writing and allows you to finish pieces. I was always struggling with that self-doubt about what I was doing, sometimes with the material and sometimes just with the process itself. Someone gave me the best advice I'd ever had. I couldn't finish anything I had started because they never lived up to what I had in my mind, and this friend said that my writing never matched my vision because the mind is infinite and there are only so many words in any language. Once I settled with that, I could continue to write. ■

ELIZABETH COX, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I love the moment when something turns in an unexpected way. I love wandering into a place, then having something happen that wasn't expected to happen. This process is part of the discovery, and keeps me from manipulating or creating an agenda. I have a note to myself on my desk lamp: Offer a life, not a text. I think this is a quote from a theologian—Niebuhr, I believe. Anyway, it sounded like a good one to remember. ■

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

When people talk about tragedy, they talk about somebody who was walking down the street and a cinderblock fell down off a building and killed them. That, to me, isn't a tragedy. It's just one of those random things in the world. It just comes along and squishes you like a bug. It has nothing to do with what you want or what you're after.

For me, tragedy involves the will. It involves trying, striving. A tragic hero is someone who's trying for something and, usually through their own fault, falling short. That's one of the things I'm always dealing with when I'm trying to teach writing. Students will be cooking along with: Are they going to break up or are they not going to break up—and then they get into a car accident. It all comes back to the whole idea that actions in the story should somehow reflect the characters, the people that are in them. The outcome of those actions should have something to do with them. ■

DAVID LONG, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Endings of stories are magical. It's real hard to find that little click that transforms everything in the ending. John Updike is a master at it. That last little snap, I call it cranking it over one more crank. A lot of times it happens just in words, something's embodied in a word. There's a story, also in *The Flood of '64*, about a Wobbly organizer who is hanged: "The Last Photograph of Lyle Pettibone." A young boy takes a photograph, the first important photograph he's ever taken. So he's developing the film in the basement of his father's hotel, and he sees the pictures of a wedding party he'd taken earlier, the official guests, "Everyone dignified before the camera...and there at the end of the roll, Lyle Pettibone, uninvited, hanging from a trestle just west of town. "It's the idea of being uninvited—that one word unlocked all the energy of the whole story for me.

Another example from an earlier story, called “Morning Practice.” One time my mother, who’s a cellist, was about to put her cello in the car when somebody called her back to pick up some music, and then she just backed over the cello. In my story, a young woman has come home to be with her father after the mother has died and they realize the cello is missing. Then they realize that it had been taken to be repaired, and so they have to find it. It becomes a mission for this girl to find her mother’s cello. They finally find it, and she has this revelation: It hasn’t been fixed yet. It’s just a pile of wood. It means nothing after all of that. But she then walks down these long stairs, back to the street, with her father, “unaccompanied.”

Again, that word—*unaccompanied*—unlocked the whole energy of the story. It was a pun in the sense that it was a musical term, but it meant that they were together, the two of them.

And that was the end.

Yes. In those cases, some aspect of the story was unlocked by using a critical word right at the end. Often there’s something more dramatic than that, but there should be something right at the end that turns it. ■

BRAD WATSON, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

I was surprised but pleased by the way The Heaven of Mercury ends. Something echoes and reverberates at the end.

When I was writing it I realized I had this chapter with Birdie’s spirit wandering around and hovering before this boy on a beach-house deck—I had that around for two or three years and didn’t know how it was going to work into the book. When I was writing these last drafts, I began to realize there was some echo in the sense there is this boy on the deck, there is Finas’s grief over the loss of his own boy, the sense of Finas being a boy when he first loved Birdie, and the vision of the butterflies which had resonance for me in connection with Birdie wandering around as a spirit. It was one of those things that began to feel more and more right, the more I got there. I wasn’t at all certain that this ending would work, even though I had it as an ending, those lines, actually for a couple of years. The book made its way after a little backwash, made its way back, feeling done and right. If I kept at it and waited long enough this book would kind of form itself, almost like a planet forming out of the particles. I just had to be patient and let gravity do its work. ■

MARK SALZMAN, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

I was so moved near the end of Lying Awake, when she looked around the room and tried to etch the scene in memory, praying that whatever her own future might be, God would reward her sisters for their generosity of spirit. I'm very conscious of trying to etch things in my memory. And I wonder if there are things like that for you?

Oh, yeah. There are moments where I can hear myself saying, Let me remember this. Let me make this a deeper picture so it doesn't fade, because you know that it's so precious. It's so ephemeral and it's going to disappear. If only I could have this preserved so I could taste it again later. It's such deep yearning. Yeah, it was a great joy to be able to use that image, finally, because that's a feeling that comes up a lot. ■

AMY BLOOM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I think a good ending hangs in the air like a musical note. It's just done. I don't think my endings are bound to ambiguity. I do think there's an avoidance of tying things up with a bow. But it's not the same thing. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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