



CLOSE-UP: MAKING A LIVING



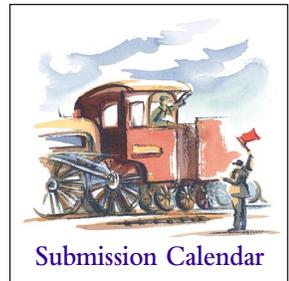
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

TOBIAS WOLFF, interviewed by Travis Holland:

There was a time when you could do very well as a short-story writer. People made amazing amounts of money for short stories back in the twenties and even into the thirties and forties...

Fitzgerald made quite a living, right?

Oh, it's amazing how much money he got. Unless I have this wrong, I think he would get \$25,000 for a short story. So there was a time when people did very well by short stories. But there can't be any reason now to do it but the love of the form. If you're very lucky, you'll place your story where a lot of people will read it. But you have to be lucky. Because the venues for short fiction are so diminished, even since I started writing. *Esquire* just does these little short things now, and the *New Yorker* used to publish two stories in an issue and now they do one. The *Atlantic* used to have a short story in every issue and now they don't have them anymore, they just have the fiction issue in the summer. *Cosmopolitan* used to publish serious fiction, *Redbook* and *Mademoiselle*. *Vanity Fair*. Those magazine don't seem to do it anymore. We who write



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short stories pretty much depend on literary journals now to publish our work, and they don't have much money. And so we do it because we have to, because something compels us. ■

JAMES LASDUN, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Wasn't it easier to exist as a poet in the sixties and seventies, outside the academy?

It wasn't as easy to live inside the academy as a poet. Now the academy employs tens of thousands of poets. And produces them every year, however many thousands of MFAs come out of the mill. Unfortunately, it's quite easy to get published but it's very hard to get reviewed. There isn't a matching critical culture. The newspapers aren't reviewing poetry. The *New York Times* hardly reviews it. Other newspapers hardly review it. There are these specialty papers. But everyone is kind of scratching each other's backs.

I have this sense that in the past poets did a variety of things—office managers, doctors, insurance agents. Now it does seem that, as you say, that poets are comfortable, which does seem to be against the grain of it.

Right. Too much of it can be very much against the grain. I am completely a beneficiary of this system. It's enabled me to live. I haven't done it solidly for seventeen years, but I have been able to raise a family here and all the rest of it. So I am biting the hand that feeds me.

You could make a living as a poet or as writer?

As a poet and novelist, being supported by the academy with teaching jobs. I don't want to sound hypocritical. I am part of this as much as anyone else. But I always tried to keep the teaching to a minimum so I don't have a full-time job or anything like that. I haven't tried to get one yet. The time may come when I have to. ■

JAY McINERNEY, interviewed by Victoria Blake:

I was once at a lecture in which David Mamet was asked the question, "Why do you write?" He said, "To be honest, if I could make as much money flipping burgers as I do writing, I would probably flip burgers."

I don't believe that answer for a minute! Really. I write because I would rather do it than anything else. That's a kind of compulsion. I chose writ-

ing as a career that I thought would pay me far less money than almost anything else I could do as a very educated, upper-middle-class white guy. I was poised to go to law school. Both of my brothers went into highly lucrative careers in banking and business. That was the sort of thing I was expected to do. The decision to become a writer was made as a conscious decision to forego the rewards of a more lucrative career. The fact that I accidentally made some money along the way was an unexpected bonus.

Only an idiot would decide to become a novelist in the hope of making a lot of money. Anyway, I'd rather write than flip burgers. Even if I had to flip burgers, I think I would still write. ■

SHAWN WONG, *interviewed by Anne de Marcken:*

Working at the University of Washington allows for continual reinvention. When I first arrived here in 1984, I was a professor in the Department of American Ethnic Studies, and was teaching a variety of courses such as Asian American Literature, Chinese American History, Asian American Media Stereotypes, and other Asian American studies courses. Later, I was transferred to the Department of English, where I became the director of the Creative Writing Program and then chairman of the English Department. As more Asian Americanists were hired in both English and American Ethnic Studies, it allowed me to look for other interests. I started teaching more creative-writing classes, and I started a creative-writing class at the UW Rome Center in Italy in 1997. At the time, I didn't know a thing about Rome, nor did I know Italian, but no one at UW ever said to me that I couldn't teach there. Now, ten years later, I've been to Rome seven times, and I speak Italian—well, survival Italian—and can lecture on various aspects of Italian art, architecture, and civilization. I am currently adjunct professor in Urban Design and Planning. I've been lucky to find myself working in such a supportive environment, and to be able to set foot in several departments and work collaboratively with professors from a variety of disciplines. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Why did you decide to go to librarian's school?

I'd always worked in libraries. I worked in the Newton Free Library in Newton Corner from the time I was fifteen until I was twenty-two. It was

the only job I ever had. I wanted to have a skill. I'd promised myself that I would never count on my writing as a way to make money. Even though I had a book contract when I graduated from Iowa, I never could have found a good teaching job. I also had an inkling that I wouldn't finish much work when I taught, though I enjoy teaching. I knew that I didn't want a permanent teaching job. My parents were academics and I wanted to leave the family business. I'm not saying that if someone had offered me a great teaching job, I would've turned it down, but no one offered me a teaching job and I wasn't qualified to do anything. I loved libraries. I'm extremely pragmatic, so I decided that I would go to librarian school. I would have a portable skill. I could live anywhere and get a job.

The sad truth is, when teaching goes badly, you go home and you can't write. When teaching goes well, you go home and you can't write. I'm not sure if teaching plays with the same part of the brain, but it certainly plays with the same part of the soul that feeds your writing. I wanted a job that I could leave at the office. Library work is like that. People kept saying to me, "You probably write when you're at the library," and I'd say, "No, I have to work. That's why I'm there." I didn't write when I was working, but when I returned home, I could do it. People would ask me questions during the day, but by the end of the day they were all answered. Writing is such solitary work, but it is also good to go out into the world and serve people. I don't mean that in some sort of "Mother Teresa washing the feet of the lepers" way. It is good to stand behind a desk and have people ask you to do things, and you do them. And you deal with colleagues. The thing that I didn't and still don't like about teaching is the lack of colleagues. Even if there are people in your department, you don't go to work with them. I love that about library work. I love hanging around the staff lounge and complaining and gossiping about people. That social interaction with coworkers and patrons is important to me. I still think about going back to library work because of that. After *The Giant's House* came out, I still worked part-time at the library. ■

ERNEST J. GAINES,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You began work on what became your first novel, Catherine Carmier, when you were sixteen years old. It went through many rewrites and titles. What did you learn through this?

I tried to write a novel that later became *Catherine Carmier*. Of course, I sent it to New York to a publisher, and they sent it back. We had an incinerator in the backyard, and I burned it. I was falling back in my class work, so I started concentrating on school. When I was twenty, I went into the army. I wrote a little bit. When I was twenty-two, I went to San Francisco State University to study literature and theater writing. Then I went to Stanford and was writing short stories during that time. Someone gave a lecture, and he told us that young writers would have a hard time publishing a collection of stories. So that day, I put the stories aside and said, "I've got to write something I can publish." That was in January of 1959.

I didn't have anything else for a novel but that one story I tried to write fifteen years earlier. I started rewriting it, and I wrote about fifty pages and won the Joseph Henry Jackson Award, which was an award given to California residents. That helped me get through 1959. I got jobs at the post office, a print shop, a bank. I would write in the morning and get these little part-time jobs in the afternoon. From '59 to '64, I wrote that novel over and over. I must have written it more than ten times. Each time I rewrote it, I came up with a different title. I was always changing things: somebody would die in one draft, and another person would die in the next. Malcolm Cowley saw it, and several other editors saw it, but no one was ready to publish it. I worked on it for about five years. ■

ARMAND ML INEZIAN:

There's a lot of mystery around how people become *successful* writers (even what it means to be a successful writer), but it seems to boil down to two camps. There are a few lucky souls who have basically won a lottery. Maybe they received a major award or hit the market with the right materials at the right time. This is one way to make it. The second way is to grind away like a glacier, slowly scouring the earth and moving ever toward the horizon. In this sense, writing literary fiction is not very different from other ancient arts like acting or painting. While it is my sincere hope to one day wind up in camp A, for right now (and for the last ten years) I'm part of group B. Most of us are in group B, actually, and I think what keeps us going is the secret belief that we will succeed despite the odds. Oh sure, there are writers who sound very humble, but you have to have some kind of ego to get through all the rejections. ■

AMY HEMPEL, interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:

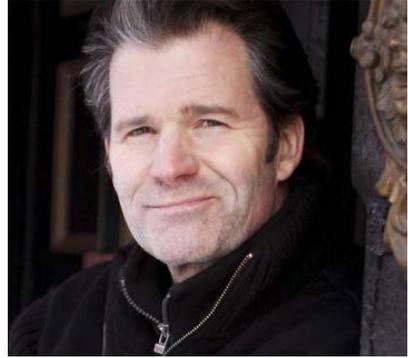
Does your teaching get in the way of your writing?

I haven't felt it to be in the way, but I'm not somebody who writes every day. I get a lot out of it personally, but I don't know that I get anything for my own writing. There are lots of things that sort of fuel your self-worth. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III,

interviewed by John McNally:

According to your bio, you've worked as a bounty hunter, private investigator, carpenter, bartender, actor, and teacher. Have any of these jobs helped you, either directly or indirectly, as a fiction writer?



The weird truth is I have worked at all those jobs, though in my publicity packet with Vintage, it's implied I did that work before coming to writing; in fact, I took those jobs to support my writing, mainly because—except for the carpentry work—they happened at night, which gave me mornings to write. Also, the bounty hunting and private-investigation work was a six-month job with a guy who did both, and I was his twenty-two-year-old assistant with an alias. Because of his own scrapes with the law over the years, he only hunted down killers, which meant I hunted them down, too, which meant I did things like sit in my beat-up Subaru for twelve straight hours watching the house of a contract killer's girlfriend, freezing my ass off, peeing in an empty coffee cup, writing down all she did: watch TV, talk on the phone, watch more TV, etc. I don't honestly know if these jobs have helped, directly or indirectly, my efforts at writing fiction. Now that I think about it, though, they may have in this way: sitting in cars watching strangers taught me to sit still and wait. To look more closely at things. To try and listen more keenly. Again, I know there are solid writers out there who outline their tales before they write them, but for me, the whole writing process is an act of deep mining. I've learned over the years—and with far more creative failures behind me than successes!—to start trusting the details that insist on being seen or noticed in some way when I'm writing them. This is all much more an act of watching what unfolds and then waiting to see what will unfold next, rather than a massive effort at manufacturing something, like a big

fat novel. So, the bounty hunting/P.I. stuff helped there, but bartending, which I did pretty steadily for ten years, did, too, because again I could just quietly serve drinks, and wipe down the bar and swab ashtrays and listen to all my customers open up their stories, one drink after another. Carpentry, on the other hand, after eight straight years of it, left me feeling more generally competent in the world, more capable of bold things. “You want that wall gone and a room built where there used to be a garden? No problem!” This hard-earned confidence—because I was a very inept carpenter for a long time—eventually seeped into my writing self. Why not write a five-hundred-page narrative that holds together? I just built a kitchen, bathroom, and new deck, didn’t I?

The other jobs, the acting and teaching, probably influenced me, too. True acting makes you surrender to all the forces in you, whether you want to show them or not. It forces you to see and feel the difference between having an emotion and pretending or half-pretending to. It also, as a high art form, forces you to confront self-consciousness, probably the main stumbling block for anyone’s potential creative struggle: how do I get out of my own way? How do I stop caring how this performance or this poem, etc., makes me *look*?! The teaching, on my good days, taught me to be more consistently curious, inquisitive, and compassionate. On my *good* days! ■

LORRIE MOORE, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

Do you really enjoy being a creative-writing professor, or do you feel that it detracts from your writing?

Both. I enjoy it and, obviously, it also competes for my time. Of the many things one could be doing for work and for money, teaching creative writing is fairly nice in terms of still being related to writing, a kind of social and professional extension of your private literary work. It functions out of a different muscle in your brain, however. It makes you feel like you’re a regular person with a regular job—colleagues and coffee pots and meetings—and you feel like you’re in the world in some quasi-real way, and not just in your house day after day after day like a nut. ■

PETER CAREY, interviewed by Kevin Bacon and Bill Davis:

My feelings about advertising were always ambivalent. I was often enraged that I was spending my time doing it and, for years, when I first worked

as a copywriter, I would never socialize with my coworkers. I was sort of ashamed of advertising. But I also enjoyed it because, from very early on, it gave me enough money to write. From 1976 onward, I was writing every day. But I was uncomfortable with advertising. I certainly hated the powerlessness of the situation. This had nothing to do with morality; this had to do with control and power—somebody having an idea and wanting to sell it to a client and the client destroying the thing that you wanted—I hated that. I really actively hated a lot of the clients that we had. Not what they did, particularly, because mostly I was able, as far as business can be clean, to do things that were cleaner rather than dirtier. It was just an uncomfortable experience. All the time I was in it, I wanted to be out of it, but on the other hand, the money was giving me the freedom to write. In retrospect, I feel blessed with the experience and so pleased to have had it and to have known that world. It certainly gave me lots of tensions and things within myself which have fed my work. I'm very pleased to have that sort of experience within business, which most writers have not had. But I'm so pleased, so pleased, not to do it anymore. ■

ETHAN CANIN, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

I understand you're working on your medical residency in San Francisco now. What's your specialty going to be?

Internal medicine, which is regular old medicine. Although, if I had my choice, I think I would do emergency medicine. Not that I don't have my own choice, but if I were willing to leave where I live and spend another year in the training program. I love that adrenaline.

Do you have time to write everyday now or not?

Are you kidding?

No, not at all.

Well, I have time to write twenty-five pages of medical notes a day. I have not written a word of fiction since I started my internship.

Really?

Yeah. You don't have time to do your laundry. I don't go shopping. I eat canned food.

It's as brutal as we've been led to believe?

It is pretty brutal. I think medical school is not as brutal as people are led to believe, but residency is pretty damn brutal.

What do you do when you want to be insensible?

The nice thing about being in medicine is that it makes me want to write; it makes me want to do the things that are open-ended and crazy and imaginative and sort of dark. ■

ERNEST J. GAINES, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

I worked as a mail clerk in an insurance company and, as a matter of fact, that's when I started writing "A Long Day in November" [the opening story in *Bloodline*]. I used to sneak away from my work and lock myself in the bathroom. My boss always knew where I was, and he was always coming to kick on the door and say, "Gaines, come out of there." And I said, "You're disturbing a genius." And he'd say, "Okay, *genius*, come out of that damn bathroom."

The first drafts of "A Long Day in November" were written on face towels from that bathroom. Then, at night, I would rewrite them in my notebook at home. But I would be in there laughing sometimes because, even then, I thought it was a very funny story, and he could hear me laughing. He didn't think it was a genius working in there if I was laughing at my own work. ■

JIM GRIMSLEY, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

I understand you spent ten years writing Winter Birds, and then another ten years finding a publisher for it. How did you keep body and soul together during what must have been for you a real struggle?

I just worked full-time—most of that time, anyway. I worked as a clerk in a liquor store for a while. I worked as a person who takes phone orders for sanitary maintenance supplies in New Orleans: sanitary maintenance is *big* in New Orleans. Then I moved to Atlanta and got a job in a hospital as a clerk in the procto-ward; the procto is the place where they stick little endoscopes up you to see whether you're healthy at your rear end. So this was a very scenic kind of job to have and I progressed from there. In fact, I'm still at the hospital part-time to keep insurance. ■

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

In addition to writing like crazy, you are also the head of the Danish Medical Association's International Department. What does that mean? What do you do, and what do you like about it?

It's a thing that developed out of a student job I had when I was an undergraduate at CCNY in New York. At that time I worked for the World Medical Association, which moved to France, and I moved with them. Then I got to know Copenhagen, which I loved, and was offered a job, so I moved there. The thing that's great about working for the Danish Medical Association in the international department is that they know that I have this other life and they don't mind. For many years, I kept it secret because I was afraid they might mind, but they have been supportive. When I went back to take my MFA and PhD, they also were supportive. Denmark is a wonderfully humane place to live, where you have long holidays. I have six weeks annual holiday and two weeks of personal-development time every year, and there are lots of long weekends, and a thirty-six-hour work week. It's a great job for a writer to have. As a result, I am very dedicated, and try to give the job my best. I travel a lot, which can also be tiring, but it can be stimulating.

Humane is the right word.

Yes, I think I've been fortunate in that respect. For some years, I was kind of sorry that I didn't go into the university system and try to make a career. I have taught in MFA programs, but not full-time. Now as I look back on it, I can retire in six years and be a full-time writer then and not worry about working, hopefully. So I'm not sorry for the strange coincidences that placed me in that profession. ■

MARGARET ATWOOD, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

How is your life different now than you anticipated it would be when you were twenty-one and publishing your first collection of poems?

In Canada at that time, it was not really possible for anyone to make a living writing. I would say the possibility now is about the same as it is in the States, namely ten percent, but it is a possibility. At that time, which was about 1961, there were very few Canadian publishers and the few who did exist were reluctant to publish novels by Canadian authors because they thought it was too much of a risk. I think in 1960 there were five books

published the entire year in English-language Canada by Canadian authors, and about twenty books of poetry, which would include pamphlets and little things like that. So my expectations were quite low. I certainly thought that I would have to go to a more cosmopolitan place where there was more of an audience. It was usual for Canadians of my generation to go to London, because they could get into it more easily than they could get into the States, believe it or not. Then things calmed down and it became equally difficult either way. I ended up, in fact, going to Harvard instead of to England. I thought I might be a literary writer and have an audience of maybe a thousand people. That's about as far as it went. So I had more of a John Keats idea of myself—starving in the garrets, writing masterpieces, dying of TB—you know, those romantic kinds of things.

Is this less romantic but much more satisfying?

Well, of course the older you get the more you appreciate having, for instance, your own bathroom. I lived in rooming houses for a while, and I'm not sure I could do that now with the alacrity with which I did it then. I think I've done the rooming-house days of my life.

So things have certainly turned out very much differently from what I expected at the time.

More favorably?

I thought that I would always have to have a day job and write in the evening. I did that for a long time, and I'm just as glad not to have to do it, particularly with a family. If you have a day job, a family, and you try to write, that's really about one more thing than you can manage.

Do you think that you're much more productive without that stress?

Oh, no doubt about it. I taught university for years. You can write poetry under those circumstances, but it's very difficult to write long prose fiction. ■

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

You have taught in MFA programs. How has that felt?

I've enjoyed it a lot. It's a very creative process but, for me, it takes away from my writing a little bit too much. I find that going into the story and trying to find the kernel of what works in it is extraordinarily creative. I

had a wonderful class, but I feel very itchy when I'm not writing, when I'm not working on my own things. Being a teacher takes an immense amount of dedication, obviously, and you're reading a lot of different voices. I'm the only one to hear my own voice in my head. I have found working at conferences to be a much better working situation, for me at least. That's not to say that I would turn down a teaching post in the future, but I don't think I know a lot of writers who are full-time teachers. The ones that do enjoy it perhaps, and they can pay bills and things like that. They also love being in that community. I love conferences because they tend to be about five to ten days. They tend to be in beautiful surroundings. People are just bursting with the energy of writing, and they tend to be about craft issues, not about getting published. It's a celebration of writing. The Napa Conference where I met Pam Houston was a celebration where writers could talk about authors they love. Where they could talk about why things work in stories. I think it's a combination of things: You are in a beautiful setting. It's for five days. This little society forms that you know is going to break apart. There's a lot of magic that occurs in that.

I was also doing a very nutty commute. I had accepted the position at San Francisco State. We had moved full time to the woods, and one day a week I would drive two hundred fifty miles, teach the class, stay overnight with friends, and drive two hundred and fifty miles back out the next day.

So who knows what part of you didn't like it. It could have been the damn car.

It was the driving part for me. We live near Humboldt State University, which is a wonderful place, and they have a good writing program, and perhaps once I finish the novel, once I'm well into the novel, and I feel like it's a vehicle that indeed is moving forward and not sideways or backward or stalled, I'll pursue it again.

When you were teaching, did you get into it enough that you discovered what it was that you were trying to communicate to your students?

I did, and actually I found that when you teach, you learn about writing all over again. That was wonderful. I found that I was changing my idea of what a story was for myself. I tend to like big stories. I want to pack so much in there that it feels larger than a story, larger than its pages. It's hard to describe, but I like the idea of novelistic short stories, and I think of writers like Chris Tillman, Charles D'Ambrosio, who's from Seattle, Michael Byers, someone you've published. These stories just knock

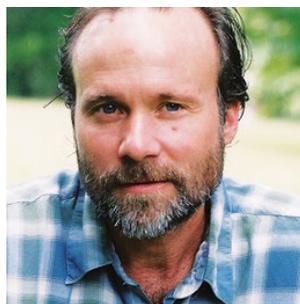
my socks off; they somehow keep going in waves that are overflowing, bursting, that are incredibly well crafted. When I say that they're bursting at the seams, I don't mean that they're hectic, but they point you, the reader, in so many different directions. That's what I tend towards. In the class, you get a whole quilt of things. And I found myself appreciating material that was extremely short—fifteen pages or less, something that I would probably not undertake at this point, but I hope I would undertake in the future. But just different ways of telling stories, telling stories that happen in extremely short periods of time—an afternoon, say.

Whereas you want to have a few seasons involved.

Right. Exactly. Exactly. So I found that experience to be really valuable. I could feel a sense of movement in myself, an appreciation for different ways of tackling what a short story is. It was an academic exercise taking these stories apart—some of them that were quite good—seeing how they were put back together again, seeing ways in which they could perhaps be put back together that would make them more successful. Certainly that was my job, but also seeing how this person arrived at that point was really valuable.

BRAD WATSON, *interviewed by*
Robert Birnbaum:

The first book [*Last Days of the Dog-Men*] allowed me to apply for real creative-writing teaching jobs. I had worked in journalism, and then I went back to adjunct teaching, and I had to get another job after that because it wasn't paying well enough. I started writing public relations for the University of Alabama, did that for four years, and then I got the book contract, and I went back to teaching in the English department for two years as a lecturer. So I applied for this job on a lark; I didn't think I'd get it. They liked the book, so I wound up at Harvard. It's really my first appointment as a creative-writing teacher. ■



STEPHEN DIXON, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

What you get is a whole bunch of MAs and MFAs all fighting one another to get positions as teachers in universities that pay very little and demand

five writing courses to be taught a week. That would be the end of your writing for the time that you're teaching. I teach two to three classes and that is more than enough, plus all the other duties. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

You teach at different universities and workshops around the country. How does the travel and moving around, not to mention the actual teaching, affect your writing schedule?

It has a directly negative affect. No, that's not true. At Iowa, I was teaching a class that I invented, a class in novel writing. This came about because when I was teaching at Eugene I had a workshop with seven people, two of whom were working on novels, and their classmates had read their novels over previous semesters. This is the best situation you can be in if you're writing a novel in a workshop. They brought in their twenty pages, and still it was unsatisfactory. The people in the program were smart, respectful, and acute critics, but even though they'd read the other work, it was still like peeking in through a keyhole. Any criticism of the work becomes bogged down in things that aren't important in the early drafts. We learned that novels in their tender stages need a different kind of attention than short stories do. Prescriptive advice is a term I hadn't heard before Iowa, and it's not recommended; it's when you tell the author what should happen rather than what's wrong and leave the solution to the writer. Personally, I love prescriptive advice. I'll reject it if it's wrong. Novels can benefit from this kind of advice. So my idea was to teach a class in which we read a different student's novel each week, fifty to a hundred pages. We didn't line edit. We gave a whole project critique. The first half of the class we talked about the work, and the second half I spoke about novel writing with some specific reference to the work at hand. I hadn't known how the novel writing class would turn out, but it went really well. With that class, more than usual, I would say something, then go home, and say, "You fool, you've been talking to yourself!" So I was articulating things that had been a concern for me in a way that I wouldn't have without teaching. Other than that, I don't get very much work done when I'm teaching because I'm away from home, and I also tend to travel to see friends in the area who I haven't seen for a long time. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

I applied for a job at the University of Singapore. I was hired by D. J. Enright, who's a writer. He's a poet and a very prolific essayist. He's nearing eighty now. He hired me as lecturer in Jacobean and Shakespearean study.

You had a background in that?

No, not exactly. My background was in science. It meant that I had to do quite a lot of homework, but of a pleasant kind. It meant that I had to sit down and do a quick study and learn about Shakespeare and his contemporaries and the Jacobeans. So, I read about twenty or thirty Jacobean plays. I had to form opinions about them. I read some of the criticism. That was all in the space of just a few months. Then, I was there lecturing on *The Winter's Tale* and *Coriolanus*, which were two Shakespearean plays. I taught them line by line. And after three years there, I really felt it was time to go. I'd had it with academia. I suppose after the first year I really wanted to quit my job. I'd always fantasized about quitting. In *My Other Life* I have a chapter about quitting my job and just leaving and going and doing something entirely different, which is giving a very wealthy man poetry lessons. I had fantasized that—just walking into the office and saying, “By the way, I quit.” I had done that in Uganda. It's quite nice quitting jobs. It's a tremendous feeling of liberation—quitting and just walking into the sunset.

One of my favorite parts of My Other Life concerns your time as a penurious novelist and book reviewer in England. What was your time on New Grub Street like?

In retrospect, it was sort of romantic and interesting. Grub Street is not a good place to live. Just grubbing and hacking and trying to write a novel and trying to raise a family. It's very poorly paid. Just being a freelance writer is extremely precarious. I found that I was reviewing books every week and trying to write articles and working on a novel. Or I was always working on a book and I thought, *When will it come? When will my ship come in and I'll stop having to do all this tedious stuff?* You know, the intrusive stuff, staying up late, reading a book, working on my novel the next morning, in the afternoon reviewing the book, doing the book review, bringing it in and then trying to keep a book going. But, at the same time, trying to earn a living. I was impecunious. I stopped being that probably in the mid- to late-seventies. So, I've had twenty years of solvency. Quite nice. Anyway, I never had a private income. I never really wanted a job. I

suppose if I could have worked at a job and done it, it would have been one thing. But I always thought I'd like to make a living by writing. Many people in London were doing the same thing. Many people that I knew well who are very well known writers now. Jonathan Raban is one. Clive James is not so well known in the States, but he was another one. Martin Amis is one, and Julian Barnes. All of us, old and young, were reviewing books in the seventies and early eighties. Then, you could sell the book for half price after you were finished reviewing it. If it was a really expensive Life of Alfred Lord Tennyson, it might cost ten pounds and you'd get five pounds from the used-book dealer. I remember it as being pleasant, and in a way, companionable. The strange thing is that I wrote about four hundred book reviews. I counted them. I never reprinted any of them. They're all well written, but they were just notices, eight-hundred or a thousand words. To reprint them seemed ridiculous because it was just a book that came, that went, and there were a few jokes in the review and maybe a few insights. It seemed very insubstantial. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, *interviewed by Janet Benton:*

You mentioned thinking about your work when you lie awake at night.

Yeah, it's kind of a discipline that I perfected when I really did have a lot of things to worry about, mostly money. And I would lie awake at night totaling up lists and figures and trying to figure out, How am I gonna get through this month? But since I was usually working on something, I found that if I would just say, Stop with the figures! and figure out what's going to happen next in the book, I would instantly go right to sleep. ■

STEPHEN DIXON, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

Not unlike the protagonist, Nat, in Interstate, you came to marriage and fatherhood at a rather advanced age.

Late. I was making twenty-five hundred to three thousand dollars a year supporting my writing habit. I met my future wife and I wanted to marry her. She said, "If you want to marry and have children and you're forty-four, you're going to have to get a better job." So, I got my Hopkins job and have taught there since. To have a family is the only reason I'm teaching.

How did you fall into the Hopkins job then?

That was a good one. The general editor of the poetry/fiction series at Johns Hopkins University Press was a man who had accepted a story of mine maybe ten years before. I saw an advertisement for this series. I saw his name. I didn't know him but I sent him a collection of stories and he accepted the stories for the Johns Hopkins fiction series. He said that there was a job open and did I want to go for it? I said, "I don't know." It would be real work. It would mean immigrating to Baltimore. My wife-to-be said, "Do you want to get married and have a baby?" So, I went down there. They liked me and they took me. That's how I got the job. It was great. I got a book published and got a job.

It was kind of like a quid pro quo family in a way.

And this guy became the spiritual godfather of my children. ■

DANIEL WALLACE, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

You did a wonderful drawing for us several years ago, the old man and the cane. And you said you think about what you will be like when you are old. What will you be like when you're old? And why do you think about it?

Oh, don't you ever think about what it's going to be like when you're seventy?

Only when I'm having hot flashes, mostly.

I guess I worry a lot. I shouldn't think about it. I should be more present.

I didn't mean that.

No, I should be more present. I should live in the present moment more. But being a writer, not having a real job, not having a retirement and all that, you wonder what's it going to be like.

Will I be able to eat?

Will I be able to eat? What kind of job will I be forced to do? There are people bagging groceries that shouldn't be doing it: You are sixty-eight years old. You should not be doing this. But they've got to eat. Will that be me? I don't want to do that. Although, you know, I can't really put myself in their shoes, and go, Oh, I'd be miserable. They don't look miserable, really. I think even then it's up to you to make the choice to be miserable or not. But I do think about that, and that's not how I see myself. I don't see myself working in a grocery store, but especially now that I sold the movie, sold

the book [*Big Fish*] to the movies—it changes everything. The contract should be arriving literally any minute. So I'm able to get a house now. I've never bought a house before. I've never bought anything before, except a used car.

Oh, that's so exciting. You have a family?

I have a son and a daughter. I'm divorced. I've got real responsibilities. It's not just me. Although that had been my plan, when I started out learning to write. I said, Well I'm not gonna get married because I don't want anybody else to have to suffer for my choices. I'm not gonna have a family because I can't afford to.

You planned on a hard life.

I know. It's working out a lot better than planned. ■

CHARLES BAXTER,

interviewed by Stewart David Ikeda:

As a young writer, your work was supported by the NEA, the Guggenheim, and others. Now, as a mentor for beginning MFA writers, you regularly witness their struggles to win scraps of writing time—much less financial compensation—along with continually slashed arts funding. Do you have any practical or political advice for these writers just starting out?



Photo: Keri Pickett

I didn't start to receive that sort of support until I had published a number of stories. I wrote those stories while I was doing something else—I could teach at Wayne State because of my PhD. I didn't get an MFA, and the problem in some sense with MFA degrees is that they give young writers wonderful, powerful tools for examining their own work and others' works, and for engendering work. What the MFA does not do is guarantee a job, so we now have more than ever a cadre of young writers with no means to support themselves in a culture in which, as you point out, the economic means of the middle class seem to be shrinking. Not a pretty picture. I am at times bemused—no; I am *alarmed* by my own participation in this. Last fall, with the new MFAers at Michigan, I stood up and said, "Listen, we're not guaranteeing anything. It's important that someone say to you at the moment you come in, 'We can guarantee nothing except two years of time

in which we will be looking carefully at your work.”

I don't like to give advice. I always think older people who give advice tend to sound like Polonius. I particularly don't think that I need to give young writers advice about how to support themselves, since that is a personal nightmare from which everybody's trying to wake up. I do think that writers ought to remember that it doesn't matter what you do—I don't care what any writer does to put food on the table. I don't think writers should feel their status will be put in jeopardy if they work as plumbers, or sanitation workers, or as secretaries. What I do think you need is a love for the art. You need a group of friends who can support you so that you don't spend all your spiritual energy loving yourself because nobody else is paying attention. You've got to keep up your self-confidence, however you can do that.

I wrote the story “Harmony of the World” because I thought my life as a fiction writer was over. All those novels in those blue typewriter-paper boxes, nobody had liked them; a friend of mine said that my imagination was poisoned at the source. My first book appeared when I was thirty-seven; I wasn't a spring chicken. *Patience* is the watchword. *Silence* and *exile* and *cunning* are good ones, too. It's hard to endure poverty in a culture that has contempt for it, but if you like what you're doing, you can stand it for a while. ■

CAROLYN CHUTE, interviewed by Barbara Stevens:

Do you ever think to yourself, Why am I doing this?

Why am I doing it? Because I can't do anything else. On my bulletin board I have a Kurt Vonnegut quote. It sometimes makes me feel a little bit better. He says, “When I write, I feel like an armless legless man with a crayon in his mouth.”

That's it! That's it. That's great.

People think you just sit down and whip things off. I worked for years for no pay. I work all the time. Except now I do get this monthly amount from the publishers.

From your earlier books?

No. For the one I'm working on now.

Doesn't money still come in on the others?

No, because they gave me such huge advances.

People think best-selling authors are rich. Why aren't you rich?

The IRS takes thirty percent. You take fifteen years for no pay to write a book. You get paid all at once and the IRS considers it a windfall profit. Also, it's our sole income, almost. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How long did you teach at Queens College?

I taught for four years as a graduate assistant. I liked teaching, but it exhausted me.

Do you ever think of teaching again?

I think I would teach again if I needed the money; as long as I don't, I won't. ■

RICHARD RUSSO, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Any interest in teaching again?

Um... [long pause] No. No. I miss the students. But not enough. I miss the experience of the classroom.

Writer-in-residencies?

No. The truth is I'm having a ball. I'm reading more than I've ever been able to read before. And I'm writing more than I've been able to write before. That's the life we all dream of, is to be able to read and to be able to write. If were to teach again I would have to diminish one or both of those activities, at least by some. ■

ROBERT WRIGLEY, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

What does it mean to you to be a poet-in-residence?

Well, it's very important to me that what I do as a poet, what I do as a writer, be seen as work in the real sense of the word. That is, it's what I do for a living. Like most poets, I can't make a living writing poetry. I get paid

for most of the poetry I publish but I don't get paid enough to live on. It'd be a miserable living, that's for sure. So, I teach. I've got a very supportive and understanding administration. They also see part of my job as being a poet, as writing poetry. They want me to be a producing, practicing poet so that I might teach people what I know.

They even give you reflective time?

That's sort of built into the system, as it were. I think that's got to be built into the system for anybody who teaches, too. So much of teaching is thinking about how to approach what it is you're going to teach. Actually, the classroom time itself is comparatively minimal. So, you've got to have that. If you're teaching writing, you're part social worker, you're part shrink. You get to confront a lot of things that you wouldn't think you would have to confront in a classroom situation. That's part of what I love about it, too. ■

ELIZABETH COX, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How does your teaching feed your writing life?

My reading feeds my writing life. My teaching takes away from my writing life. The effort I give toward a student's work is the same effort I give my own work. I read their stories more than once, live with it, so the energy is spent. I don't resent that. I can still work, but usually I have to wait for a time when I'm not teaching in order to write with focus. While teaching, I take notes, work with images and scenes, develop characters, but I can't get completely into a novel until I'm not teaching a course. So teaching doesn't feed my writing, though it feeds my life. It's a different part of my life that I have to balance with writing. Besides, it's my paying job. ■

BEVERLY LOWRY, interviewed by Stephanie Gordon:

Many, if not most, American writers fund their work by teaching creative writing. Do you feel that teaching writing is genuinely productive for a writer?

The problem I have with it is simple. Time. Oh, and mind. The thinking you do, beyond class. I tend to get very interested in people and what they are doing with their lives and their work. So it takes time and psychic energy from what I might be doing. This is normal. This is ordinary stuff.

Also, I haven't been able to read the way I want to read, since I have to read for work, either for my classes or for my own research. I don't have time to read for love, which probably disturbs me most of all. And sometimes I have moments when I think that I've said it all; I have nothing else to give or to teach anybody. These moments occur for all writers who also teach. Not teaching isn't a good idea; and there is the other thing—I like it, I learn from it.

I tell you what teaching does: it keeps you on your toes. Teaching nonfiction, especially, because you have to keep up. If you have a student from Afghanistan, as I do, and she's writing about leaving her country as a child with her family, going to Pakistan and then moving here, you can't help her unless you know something about her background. And we have a large Muslim population at Mason, and it's also ethnically diverse, and I have to keep up with other cultures in order to be able to teach well and to help my students. They ask tough questions, and you have to be able to form a good answer. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

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BAXTER, Charles. Novels: *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Feast of Love*, *First Light*. Story collections: *A Relative Stranger*, *Through the Safety Net*, *Believers*, *Harmony of the World*. Books on writing: *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*.

BENTON, Janet. Interviewer. Works as a writer and editor, has an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Teacher of creative writing, editing, grammar, and composition at several universities, and works with authors on work in progress.

BIRNBAUM, Robert. Interviewer. Editor-at-Large of the literary and cultural website IdentityTheory.com

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CANIN, Ethan. Novels: *America, America*, *Carry Me Across the Water*, *Blue River*, *For Kings and Planets*. Story collections: *The Palace Thief*, *Emperor of the Air*. ethancanin.com

CAREY, Peter. Novels include *His Illegal Self*, *Theft: A Love Story*, *My Life as a Fake*, *Oscar and Lucinda*, *True History of the Kelly Gang*. Story collection: *Collected Stories*. petercareybooks.com

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GORDON, Stephanie. Interviewer. Work in *Writer's Chronicle*, *Studies in American Indian Literature*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Studies in the Humanities*, *GSU Review*. Auburn University.

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JOHNSON, Sarah Anne. Interviewer. Editor of *Conversations with American Women Writers* and *The Art of the Author Interview*. sarahannejohnson.com

KENNEDY, Thomas E. Advisory Editor, *Literary Review*. Novels include *A Passion in the Desert*, *A Weather of the Eye*, *Kerrigan's Copenhagen*, *A Love Story*; *Bluett's Blue Hours*, *Greene's Summer*, *Danish Fall*. Story collections: *Cast Upon the Day*, *Drive*, *Dive*, *Dance & Fight*. Nonfiction: *Realism & Other Illusions: Essays on the Craft of Fiction*. Fairleigh Dickinson University. thomasekennedy.com

LASDUN, James. Memoir: *Give Me Everything You Have*. Novels: *Seven Lies*, *The Horned Man*. Story collections: *It's Beginning to Hurt*, *The Siege*, *Three Evenings*, *Delirium Eclipse*, *The Silver Age*. Four books of poetry.

LEVASSEUR, Jennifer. Interviewer. Editor, with Kevin Rabalais, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published*.

LEVY, Debra. Interviewer. Work in *Columbia*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Carolina Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

LOWRY, Beverly. Novels: *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life*, *The Track of Two Desires*, *Breaking Gentle*. Nonfiction: *Her Dream of Dreams*, *Crossed Over*. George Mason University.

MARTIN, Valerie. Novels: *Trespass*, *Property*, *Italian Fever*, *Mary Reilly*, *The Great Divorce*, *A Recent Martyr*, *Set in Motion*, *Alexandra*. Story collections: *The Consolation of Nature*, *Love*. Biography: *Salvation*.

MCCRACKEN, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Giant's House*, *Niagara Falls All Over Again*. Story collection: *Here's Your Hat, What's Your Hurry*.

MCINERNEY, Jay. Novels: *The Good Life*; *Model Behavior*; *The Last of the Savages*; *Brightness Falls*; *Story of My Life*; *Ransom*; *Bright Lights*, *Big City*. Story collection: *How It Ended*. Two books on wine. jaymcinerney.com

MCNALLY, John. Novels: *America's Report Card*, *The Book of Ralph*. Story collection: *Troublemakers*. Editor of four fiction anthologies. Wake Forest University.

MOORE, Lorrie. Story collections: *Collected Stories*, *Self-Help*, *Like Life*, *Birds of America*. Novels: *Anagrams*, *Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?*

PARVIN, Roy. Story collections: *The Loneliest Road in America, In the Snow Forest.* Nonfiction in *Northern Lights.*

RABALAIS, Kevin. Interviewer. Editor, with Jennifer Levasseur, of *Novel Voices: 17 Award-Winning Novelists on How to Write, Edit, and Get Published.*

RUSSO, Richard. Novels: *Bridge of Sighs, Empire Falls, Straight Man, Nobody's Fool, The Risk Pool, Mohawk.* Story collection: *The Whore's Child.*

SCHUMOCK, Jim. Interviewer. Author of *Story Story: Conversations with American Authors.*

STEVENS, Barbara Lucy. Interviewer. Journalist and fiction writer who teaches writing at Rhode Island College.

THEROUX, Paul. Travel-writing books: *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star, Dark Star Safari, The Great Railway Bazaar, The Happy Isles of Oceania, The Pillars of Hercules.* Fiction: *Elephant Suite, Jungle Lovers, Saint Jack, The Family Arsenal, The Mosquito Coast, Milroy the Magician, My Other Life, Kowloon Tong, Picture Palace.*

TURNER, Carol. Interviewer. Work in *Byline, Cottonwood Review, First Intensity, Flyway, Love's Shadow: Writings by Women* (anthology), *Many Mountains Moving, Owen Wister, the Portland Review, Primavera, Rag Mag, Strictly Fiction, Sulphur River Literary Review, Glimmer Train Stories.*

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

WALLACE, Daniel. Novels: *Mr. Sebastian and the Negro Magician, The Watermelon King, Big Fish.* Stories in *Yale Review, Massachusetts Review, Best American Short Stories.* University of North Carolina. danielwallace.org

WATSON, Brad. Novel: *The Heaven of Mercury.* Short-story collection: *Last Days of the Dog-Men.* Also published in *Story, Black Warrior Review, Greensboro Review, Dog Stories.*

WONG, Shawn. Novels: *American Knees, Homebase.* Editor of *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* and other anthologies. University of Washington.

WOLFF, Tobias. Story collections: *Our Story Begins: New and Selected Stories, In the Garden of the North American Martyrs, The Night in Question, Back in the World.* Novels: *Old School, Ugly Rumours.* Memoirs: *This Boy's Life, In Pharaoh's Army.* Novella: *The Barracks Thief.*

WRIGLEY, Robert. Books of poetry include *Anatomy of Melancholy* and *Earthly Meditations.*

Glimmer Train Press publishes both
Glimmer Train Stories and *Writers Ask.*

Co-editors: Susan Burmeister-Brown
and Linda Swanson-Davies

Typesetting and layout: Paul Morris

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