



That's one of the miracles of fiction: that I can write a scene in which the characters eat curried mussels, which I happen to love, and that even if you can't stand curried mussels, the scene can come across as a pleasant event to you. If it's well written, it will. If I'm writing well, then despite the fact that Nathan means what he means to you, my Nathan will be the person he should be in my book and will have his own personality despite your different Nathan. ■

**MARY YUKARI WATERS**, interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

*In the story "Seed" you refer to desert flowers, their brief and isolated blooms. How did you choose the title "Seed" for this story?*

**I was interested in the idea of *seed* as something small and tenacious that bides its time during bad conditions, that just keeps waiting and waiting until it's safe to bloom.** Some seeds survive, but a lot of them don't, especially in the desert. That's the strange thing about life: the random nature of what actually ends up surviving. I think people, too, have seeds inside them, like the main character in the story. You wonder how that brief encounter at the end of the story is going to survive in her mind, and whether it will flower years later in some strange, unexpected way. Or if it will survive at all. ■

**JAY McINERNEY**,  
interviewed by Victoria Blake:

*How did you arrive at the title Bright Lights, Big City?*

It's the title of a blues song. I'm a big blues fan from way back. Actually, **I learned about the blues in Japan of all places, but you know, you have to go around the world to discover what's at your back door.**

I always loved that title. I always just loved that song. It's a very simple song, but it encapsulates the whole urban plotline, really. The whole urban adventure. It goes...well, allow for the male point of view. It goes, boy comes to city, boy meets girl, boy loses girl...boy who's entranced and seduced by the bright lights of the big city! The lyrics go: "Bright lights, big city went to my baby's head. Tried to tell the woman, but she don't believe a



Photo: Dan Callister

word I said.” It’s kind of the same story as the book.

***Did the title come before or after the book?***

**It came late. For me, titles come early or very, very late.** And *Bright Lights, Big City* had all kinds of bad titles. I had a lot of titles that had to do with the name of the club in the book, which is called Heartbreak, which really was a club in New York. I had all kinds of cutesy wordplay: *Dancing at Heartbreak, Dawn at Heartbreak. Missing Person* was one of the titles, referring to the dead mother. Just dreadful titles. I had a bunch of them, including, by the way, *Less than Zero*.

*Less than Zero was the original title?*

That was one of the titles under consideration.

*A coincidence?*

Well, shit. Right? That was in college. I didn’t know Bret Easton Ellis existed.

*Have you talked to him about it?*

Yes, and we both agreed that *Less than Zero* was a much better title for his book. Luckily, *Bright Lights, Big City* now seems perfect for mine. I wish I’d put the Jimmy Reed epigraph in the novel. At the time I thought everybody knew that song, but now I realize that it’s a pretty obscure song. ■

**THOMAS BELLER**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

We live in an age of mega anthologization. I’ve put out three anthologies and been in a number of them. And it’s almost the literary version of iTunes. The album concept is diminishing and now we are getting these mixed tapes. This *Coach* is actually quite good and I am pleased to be in it. So, “Do I reread my stuff?” Not really, except when I get the book I’ll definitely reread it and maybe even reread it twice. Or rethink some point, you know.

*And do you make “corrections”?*

My story in here was originally called “Live Wires” in *Seduction Theory*. I had a long discussion with my editor at the *New Yorker*, Roger Angell, about the title.

His pieces that have been appearing in the *New Yorker* are fascinating on

a formalist level in terms of just what he is doing, in terms of how he is structuring them and approaching this kind of memoir genre. He is quite an interesting writer, and there were moments when I wished I had been in the room so that I could have asked follow-up questions. Particularly talking about the *New Yorker* casuals [Talk of the Town] and being influenced by his stepfather [E.B. White], who he said would mostly be known for his children's books. And I said, "Wait, wait, let's talk about that style E.B. White had of creating golden miniature cities out of almost nothing in these 800- and 1200-word pieces."

At the time I remember he wanted to not call my story "Live Wires." And in my mind that story is about a Hanukkah party where this kid brings home his girlfriend who is not Jewish and also a bit older than he is, and he is overly anxious about it. And he at some point looks at his mother and girlfriend and thinks of them as these two live wires and doesn't want them to touch. So I advocated for that title, and the other side of the argument was that a title should just be like a handle. You pick up the story with it. That's a very Roger Angell *New Yorker* attitude—which is a funny thing to say. This is where I wished I could have jumped in, "Yeah, baseball, absolutely." Angell has this weird thing by which he is such a utilitarian and pragmatist in a literary sense and wants clarity and lucidity, which is so important, but, you know, he was Donald Barthelme's editor, who was the most absurd, non-linear person—I shouldn't say the most, but an example of a very non-utilitarian writer.

I had been told "Live Wires" was obscure for a title, but I insisted on it when it appeared in *Seduction Theory*. For the reissue I said, "Let's call the damn story 'The Hanukkah Party' and do a little Carver re-title," and so this reissue has that. ■

**LORRIE MOORE**, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

***Where does the title of your novel Who Will Run the Frog Hospital? come from?***

**It comes from the title of a painting by Nancy Mlad-enoff. I saw the painting after I had begun the novel, and I was still at the beginning, at a fairly vulnerable place, where many things could fall into it. There's always that place in a manuscript, when you're working on it, where things can just fall in and become part of the batter,**



Photo: Zane Williams

**so to speak. And then there's a place later on where the manuscript has closed up and you're just working within the narrative.** I came upon this painting in a gallery in Madison, at one of these vulnerable, open moments in my manuscript, and to me the painting was just so perfect and so funny and so great that I bought it and turned it into a fictional painting in the book—one of the characters paints—and I actually used the title of the painting for the title of the novel. Of course, I got permission from Nancy to do all that. She was really great: not only a great sport but also very interested to see this happen to her painting. It was all very curious and intriguing for her.

The title and the painting refer to a couple of different things metaphorically. It's a picture of two girls who are whispering, and there are frogs in the foreground in front of them, frogs who are injured. One is in a splint. One has a bandage around its head. And it looks, when you first see this image, as if the girls had been kissing the frogs, roughly, and had injured them, and the frogs had still somehow failed to turn into princes. So in that way, it seemed like a feminist witticism to me. I was very interested in that image, and that idea is in the book. The idea that these frogs are injured by boys and that the girls are there to rescue them is also part of the painting and the book. It is also something the two girls in the novel do as children: They go to the swamp and try to save the frogs who have been shot with BBs by boys in the neighborhood. And of course there's a reference to a medical institution in Paris as well, and some argumentation about who will actually supervise and manage the place. So the book's title refers to several different things. ■

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

*Why did you change the novel's title from Leavings to Shadow Play?*

I was asked to. Virtually everyone to whom I showed an early draft said that *Leavings* was an inadequate title, or it was distasteful, or it would incur the irony and sarcasm of reviewers. One of the meanings of *leavings* is “leftovers.” One of the other connotations is of waste, offal or *ordure*, as the French would say, shit. It's just asking for trouble. I changed it, but it seemed that by changing it I lost something: a thematically announced focus for readers. Because that book really is about leavings—about leaving other people, about the things they leave behind. And, to some degree, it is about *ordure*; it's about waste. I could see the logic of what they were

saying, but a number of writers have told me it was a shame the novel shed that title. ■

**JAMAICA KINCAID**, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Now I've become very interested in names, and I came to it through the garden, through the naming of things. The invention of plant nomenclature came about through a man named Carolus Linnaeus inventing that system. He first applied it to plants from the New World. The names they were called by the people who knew them were not honored, and that was how that system came into being. They would not have agreed to that system being used on the plants with names that they, the Europeans, knew among themselves, but they agreed to it starting with these captured things, renaming them. It's no accident, no coincidence, that, for instance, names are such a controversy with Africans in this part of the world. They can't decide whether they're Black, Negroes, African-Americans, whatever, and they're often rechanging their names, because naming is a part of possessing. You make a claim and you name it. It's deep. So in that sense I started, unknowingly, this inquiry on myself because I'm very interested in naming. ■

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

*What about the characters' names? I read that you find them in the phone book. Do you find them all in the phone book? Diddy Shovel? Biscuit Paragon? Aren't some of them inventions?*

Yes. No. Phone books are part of the writer's arsenal. I keep notebooks of names and, when I'm working on a book, I want the names to fit the place. If there's one thing I hate, it's a name that's instantly forgettable, and that's because I'm a reader. I spend a lot of time reading and I don't like to lose track of the characters, and if the characters have good names, I remember them.

I will get the names from phone books, bulletin boards, from tourist information, from bibliographies, lists of fishing guides, park attendants. Anybody! Newspaper advertisements. Stories. Not the whole names, mind you, just first or last. If you're ever looking for names, by the way, Chinese historians have the most amazing names of anybody anywhere.

So, what I'll do is take literally hundreds of first names and hundreds of last names, and make lists of them on opposing pages. And then when it comes time and I've got my character from my other notebook—my character's physical description—I go to my name notebook and poke around until I find a first and a last that fit together okay for that character. And there we are. ■

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

*The title of your novel-in-progress is Big Buckra. Could you explain the title?*

*Buckra* was a black term sometimes used to describe white people. I kept coming across it in the slave narratives gathered by the WPA Federal Writers Project. I've read all of the South Carolina narratives and most of the Georgia narratives.

*These were oral histories passed down and recorded by the WPA workers?*

In the thirties, the Federal Works Project sent out writers to interview people who had been born into slavery. That's the historical record we have of the voices of people who were born into and lived in slavery. It's a tremendous archive of interviews. And most of them still exist in typescript, and that's how you read them in the books. In several of the South Carolina narratives, people would say, "Our white folks was all big buckra." Big important white people. But there is always an irony, of course, in how they were using it. ■

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

*What importance do you place on the names of characters? What do you consider when choosing names? [In *Saved*] Warner James, or Warn, the preacher who seduces Evie, is particularly interesting, as are Josie Wire and Beckett.*

Those names came quickly, without thinking. I laughed when the man said his name was Samuel Beckett. I like when names come in from the side like that, as if I were overhearing them, just learning them myself. I mean, I don't plan anything ironic or subtle, I just want the name that fits the character. ■

**AMY HEMPEL**, as interviewed by  
*Debra Levy and Carol Turner:*



“Tumble Home” is an epistolary novella comprised of a single letter. The narrator is writing to the painter, and the painter is never named. It doesn’t really matter, in a way. I shied away from naming him because I have a horror of the “made-up” thing. The writer Sam Michel has a devastating phrase—when his own work isn’t going well, he says, “It’s just another made-up thing.” I didn’t want a made-up thing in the middle of this long narrative. I rarely name anything. ■

**PAUL THEROUX**, interviewed by *Michael Upchurch:*

*You have some awfully unusual names in your books—Parker Jagoda in Chicago Loop, Orlo Fedewa and Mister Phyllis in Millroy, and many others. Do you keep a names notebook?*

Every so often I do, or a name occurs to me. I have been known to make long lists of names. In all the notebooks, the working notebooks for novels, I have pages of names. I read obituaries just for the names. I was very glad and felt vindicated when I saw that Henry James did that—and I’m no Henry James, we know that. But Henry James’s notebooks push on for a couple of pages, then you see long lists of very funny names, always terrific names, and he got them from the *Times* obituaries.

Nothing’s worse than having a character and thinking: “I had a name—I just can’t think of it.” ■

**SCOTT ALLIE:**

If a title doesn’t come to me as soon as I have the idea for the piece, I try not to worry about it, and try to find the title in the prose somewhere, pull a phrase out that stands alone. I had a book I was editing that needed a title, and in one of the stories there was something about dusk, and the phrase “the remaining sunlight,” which I thought would make a good title. So I’m always holding out for one of those to show up.

But in a story I was working on last year, there was no title presenting itself. And there was something about the characters that I had no place to



spell out in the prose. It is a father-and-son story, a pretty ugly one about personal disappointment, and both characters happen to be magicians. It's suggested in the text, but there's nowhere that it's spelled out. **I thought of a song by Lou Reed, called "Halloween Parade (AIDS)." He said that when he played the song for friends, initially just "Halloween Parade," no one understood that it had to do with AIDS. What that song is really about is the wonderful people in the Village's Halloween Parade, and how many of them are gone now. But he never says in the song why they're gone—the song's in praise of them, not agonizing over what got them. So he put the disease in the title, to pull it together. When I read that he'd done that, I thought it was really strange, but then fifteen years later I'm doing it myself: "The Magicians." The title became a way to say something that had no place in the prose. It might seem a little precious, but it solved a problem. ■**

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

*I thought it was odd that the word May comes up so often in this book [In the Snow Forest].*

Is that true?

*Yes. Both in terms of the name and just the month.*

Oh, that's funny, because "May" was the first story, my first good story. I don't like it very much now... Richard Ford wrote a wonderful essay where he talks about how books are provisional. You write them over time. I'm not as eloquent perhaps as Richard Ford, but I would say that I try to think of them as snapshots, and hopefully they're snapshots of yourself. Even if the writing was not about yourself, it's about you at a certain point in your life, and what interests you at that point. And yet you have to hope that you're not wearing a Nehru jacket. Or platforms, or something particularly foolish.

I think it might have been an unconscious thing. "May" was a story that I had written—I was writing full-time at that point, and I hadn't sent anything out—and my wife, Janet, said to go to this writers' conference. They have these things called writers' conferences. And I said, Well, you know, what are they? She described them to me, and I said, That sounds good, and she said, There's one in Napa, California. I think this woman, Pam Houston, will fall in love with your work. So I said okay, and Janet knew

that I wouldn't do anything until she sent away for the application. I filled it out, and I sent "May." Pam was extremely effusive about the work. It was a wonderful thing. She took me under her wing and I think, subconsciously, there must be some of that coming out in there, that the word *may* was on my lips. Also, May is typically the first month that we can get into the cabin up in Trinities. There's still snow in May. We hiked, just recently, in June and came across snow.

*So it's an opening point.*

It's certainly an opening point. It's when winter is holding on by its barest, but it is still there, and spring is just exploding. It's among my—I always say "this" is my favorite time of year up here in the mountains—but there's something very, very special about May. And it's usually the earliest we can get into our cabin without snowshoeing.

*So May represents access.*

Exactly. It's permission and it's access in other ways. ■

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

*How do you come up with the titles for your stories?*

I read a lot of poetry, so periodically I steal from poets. I do give them credit. There are a lot of Dylan Thomas titles in that first collection. For instance, "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" is from a Dylan Thomas poem. In the latest collection, the title "Stars at Elbow and Foot" is from the Dylan Thomas poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." Sometimes they come from my imagination, or sometimes from things I've heard people say, like "A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You." Usually I don't have to struggle a lot, though sometimes I do.

*How did you decide to use hymns for the chapter titles in Love Invents Us?*

I listen to a lot of gospel music, so that was just a labor of love. ■

**DANIEL MASON**, interviewed by  
Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

*The name of the book—because we’ve just gone through naming with Mother Knows, I know how hard names can be to come by. How was it for you, with this? The Piano Tuner is a lovely name.*

I like the name a lot now. It was *Salween River Fugue* when I sent it to the publisher, which I liked because I thought it captured both the musical and the Burmese sides of the book. But every time I mentioned this name to anyone, they all said, What? Because who would know the Salween River? And the word *fugue* is not a word people use on a day-to-day basis either. So I had this feeling that they were going to want the name to be changed, and they asked if I had any ideas for another name for the book. *The Piano Tuner* had always been one possibility. I knew that there were some other books called *The Piano Tuner*, and so I didn’t think I was allowed to use the name. Then I learned that names aren’t copyrighted.

*I can see why you’d want to use the original name, but I can also see why it would have been difficult.*

I think *The Piano Tuner* is wonderful. I had thought of it, and my agent had recommended it, picked it as a name that he had liked. So I started thinking about it again—maybe this is a good name. I liked it because the book really is about him, the piano tuner. ■



Photo: Joanne Chan

**BRAD WATSON**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*When did you decide on the title for The Heaven of Mercury?*

Just last year, when I thought the book had something in common with *The Divine Comedy*. Because of Finas being guided by Birdie’s presence in his own mind through some of the things that had happened in the past. So I thought there was something of a parallel there. I was looking through a new translation of *Inferno*, and then I picked up my old translation of *The Divine Comedy*, and when I looked through *Paradiso*, I saw *The Heaven of Mercury*. The town was already Mercury, by that point. I turned to that chapter and it turned out to be about betrayal, and I thought that fit. Also, a heaven on earth, not necessarily paradise, but one in which there was

communion with the dead, seemed to fit. I don't pretend to be a Dante scholar. ■

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

Eleanor's variety of names reflects the many transformations and incarnations she goes through in her various decades of life. As a girl, nicknames are often dropped on her, and she rolls right along with them. Jaz, for example, is what her father calls her, and she never knows why. Moo, Mooser, Nors, and Noser are nicknames friends give her. The various married names—Eleanor Luther, Nora Bettinger—are representative of how women—particularly of my generation—were trained to trade in their own last names for their husbands'. If you divorced and remarried, you simply traded names again, kind of like trading baseball cards. Pearl Marvel is a nom de plume from Eleanor's brief stint as a romance writer. The name Nora materializes as she gains maturity and a greater sense of self. ■

**DANIEL MASON**, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

I had problems with the Burmese words. I knew that most readers wouldn't be able to pronounce them. It's a problem with a name like Khin Myo, the character in the book. Her name is very difficult to pronounce. Almost everyone who I talk to about the book will say, The woman, what's her name, how do you say her name? or, How do you say that town? I thought of using a Burmese name that would be easier to pronounce. The boy has an easy name to pronounce—Nok Lek; anyone can say that. And yet Khin Myo is such a typical and beautiful-sounding name there that I couldn't stay away from it. ■

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

*Titles. Do they come to you, or do you think them up? What purpose do you think they serve?*

Sometimes a story can do perfectly well without any specific title. You don't remember the title for very long and it doesn't matter. But with some stories, the title is extremely important... **With my book, *Believers*, the title is quite important because all of the stories in that book are about moments in which a character either chooses to believe or not to believe in something that he or she has been told or that seems to have happened. I've had titles changed**

on me. My first novel had a different title, but my agent and editor said you can't use this title. And my second novel had a different title than the one it eventually had. *The Feast of Love* is a title that I've always had for that book. Just always had it right from the start. I knew where I was going with it. I didn't know how I was going to get there, but I always knew that the book thematically was going to be about love. ■

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

I changed the names of all these places, but I use my family names. For example, the parish, Pointe Coupee, where I come from, I call it St. Raphael Parish because my stepfather, who raised me, his name was Raphael. The town I call Bayonne, it's based on the town of New Roads, Louisiana. But Bayonne was the maternal name of my grandfather's people: his mother's people. And the river there is called the False River, but I have a brother named Charles, so I name it the Charles River. So not only do I use the names and the characters indigenous to the area I come from, but I also use my folks' names. In *My Father's House*, I used St. Adrienne, the town where Philip Martin is a minister. My mother's name is Adrienne. ■





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