Close-up: Theme

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

KENT HARUF, *interviewed by Jim Nashold:*

Themes in your first novel reappear in all your books. Old people living alone, the harshness of ranch life, thwarted love, losing one family and gaining another, and the idea of violence and love being intertwined. These are specific themes that surface again in Plainsong.

I don't set out to consciously write a story about any one thing. What I'm trying to do is to write a story about characters who interest me and whose stories I want to tell. I don't feel very competent talking about what comes out of these stories. What you say seems plausible, but I promise you I had no notion in the composition of those books to write about specific themes. ■

ELIZABETH COX,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

There are several themes that recur in your work; one of them is forgiveness. In Familiar Ground, *for instance, the narrator states that it doesn't mat-*

ter what horrid thing happened: "What mattered here in this place, what mattered here on this day, not bright and warm, but covered with an early sodden light, was that all of this was but a subterranean rhythm. Something to be forgiven, consoled." Can you talk about forgiveness as a theme in your work?

I don't think I ever mean to write about forgiveness, but I think that every book so far explores that theme. I don't know if this next book has that theme or not. The first book was about self-forgiveness, the second about forgiving someone else, and the third was about asking for forgiveness. I wouldn't have said this before I wrote these books, but maybe I think forgiveness is the most important thing we can do. Theme arises out of the characters and their actions. A few years ago somebody asked my daughter what was the most important thing she would do. She answered, "Forgiveness." She was in her twenties. I said, "Good answer." She had to forgive her parents' divorce. There was a broken engagement early in her life. I hope I taught her that, but I'm not sure I knew it as well as she did. She teaches me. ■

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

*The twin sisters are very different, and it seems to frame the polarity of the novel [*Half of a Yellow Sun*].*

It does, but they are not as different as they seem—we come to realize that. I am really interested in family and how families work. And how we love and don't love, and that sort of thing. Really, I wanted to show war as a time in which people come together, not just a time people die. My brother was born during the war. And often I think about how my parents had a really difficult time, and lost everything they owned. But still my brother was born. ■

DAVID MALOUF, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

Australian men are extraordinarily romantic, though not boyish in the way American men sometimes are, especially in fiction. Much of what goes on in my books is a sort of secret male business. It's about an openness to experience and vulnerability that men can't otherwise show. I've always been interested in the secret codes of men's worlds. One of the things that may be stronger in Australia than some other places—it's what we think of

as being the mateship tradition, which presents a range of feelings that is expressible only because it's so highly coded—is that men work and play and depend on one another; they have to provide all sorts of comfort for one another. And all of that has to be coded in such a way that it won't be mistaken for overt or even latent sexuality. Men, especially in the way these codes work in Australia, have created a kind of possibility for the strongest forms of feeling to be there and for them to be relied upon without our ever mistaking the emotion that drives them. It's the kind of thing that made it possible for men to survive the WWII prisoner of war camps I was writing about in *The Great World*. ■

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

I write about race because it's the story of my growing up, which happened to coincide with the stirrings of the civil-rights movement. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Let's look at some of the themes in your work. There is the central theme of migration, the separation that families endure, and the effect of this on parents and children who survive that experience. Can you talk about how this continues to inspire your creativity?

We live in a world where people float between borders. When you come from such different circumstances and you end up in the United States, it's like space travel. Within hours you're on a different planet. The other effect of migration is that you have these extreme separations, and families having to come together again, and new communities being created. These are things that have always fascinated me. And because I had that experience of being separated from my parents for eight years, and rejoining a family where my youngest brothers didn't know me at all, those were things that I was working out in my own life. It all informs what I write about. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In "The Lives of Strangers," Leela visits India to get in touch with her Indian identity. Why is it important that after befriending the outcast Mrs. Das, Leela must then reject her?

This isn't something that I'd planned on. The story developed in that way organically. In some ways I would've liked for them to have a wonderful, healing relationship. Leela has learned important things about how to have a relationship and connect with another human being, which she never knew before. But still, she couldn't give up that part of herself and embrace another person completely. She wasn't ready for it. On another level, she had to find in herself the genetic memory that she'd rejected. When she saw her aunt speaking about her magician, Leela rejected that, until she discovered that deep down in herself there was a little bit of that, too.

Throughout your stories and novels there is a sense of the individuals trying to find home, and what home means. They pendulum back and forth between their lives in America and their pasts in India, trying to find some truth that will help their lives make sense. Is this something that can ever be reconciled?

Some individuals might manage to reconcile this, but for many of us, this is the great dilemma of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Where is home? We've become such a mobile society, how many of us live in the homes where we were born? We've moved into a whole new way of life, and the question *Where is home* becomes very important. It cannot necessarily be answered. Perhaps the only way to answer it is to create a sense of home inside of ourselves. ■

SUE MILLER, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Photo credit: Debi Milligan

In a New York Times *book review, Jane Smiley called* Family Pictures *"an important example of a new American tradition that explores what it means, not to light out for the territories, but to make a home, live at home, and learn what home is." Do you agree with this statement? Do you see yourself as part of this tradition?*

I do. There's been a lot of writing about this, so what I have to say may not be particularly fresh. The novel in English has a long tradition of being about the home. This "lighting out for the territories" was a new wrinkle at a certain point in American fiction, but became the American novel, more or less. The novel as it developed in other parts of the world didn't experience that *On the Road*, let's-throw-domesticity-away kind of thing. Read Leslie Fiedler, *Love and*

Death. It was especially true of the period I grew up in, when I was reading people like Roth, and Mailer, and Bellow. But you can write about an awful lot using the home, using elements that are very domestic. They are equally as rich; they demonstrate the human condition fully as much as books which represent fleeing or rejecting domesticity. In either case, the point is to have a character struggle against himself. Where you put him, what you give him to struggle against, is whimsical and entirely up to you—what you know and what you're most interested in. Whether you have him run off to Mexico, or whether you have him stay at home and make a decision about what to do with his autistic child, what you're trying to do is expose what makes him how he is, and how he thinks about fate as opposed to freedom.

I do think that Smiley is right about me as a writer. **There's no question as to where I've placed myself. I think we don't have much choice about this. I remember reading a passage in Cheever's journals—he'd just finished reading a new Bellow book, and his great sorrow was that all he could write about were small domestic things. I think we have what we have to work with.** I can't imagine starting now to try to write a novel about war. I see myself as someone like Ian McEwan, who *is* domestic, but then the world impinges enormously in his books, and often very violently. I think there are similarities in our concerns—his discussions of faith and belief, what man can control and what he can't control—these seem parallel to some of what I'm doing. Also the intrusion of violence is like what happens in a lot of my work.

He stays in the kitchen a lot less, though, I'll admit it. ■

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

The word faith *came up for me when I was reading both of these books and I wondered if that has any resonance for you as well.*

Well, it has to have resonance for me if I'm writing a novel about how people are paired off and whether they believe that they're going to stay together or not. Belief and faith are connected in the sense that Chloé has the belief, which is close to a faith, that Oscar is going to reappear on the scene somehow. Diana and David have the belief that they're matched. They don't have faith, because they're not like that. It wouldn't do to say all characters have faith, because they don't. But you know when you're writing stories you're also thinking about how these people are going to end up. What is the future going to hold? And when you get into the future, or

you speculate about the future, you're thinking about belief. You believe that certain things are going to happen, or you have faith that there will be certain outcomes. **Faith is related to evidence of things not seen. And what is not seen, in part, is the future, and what's going to happen to us. That's why I think about faith in relation to storytelling.** ■

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

I was intrigued from the start [of *Lying Awake*] by the idea of this predicament that this nun would have of trying to decide what is the right thing to do: What does God want, as opposed to what do I want personally? Is my relationship to God authentic or is it distorted? Is it based on my own selfish fantasies that I'm using to rationalize what's clearly a pathology, or is my test here to determine if I'm willing to sacrifice even my physical health in order to have experiences that bring understanding and joy to so many? During the whole time I was writing that book, I felt that that character was an exotic, so to speak. Very, very distant from my own experience. I felt that there was no real direct connection between this character and myself. I was intrigued by that problem and felt that was one of the reasons that it was so hard to write. In all the other books, there was something directly related to a conflict in my life that I could work into the story, and the resolution was a way of resolving dissonance in my own life, whereas this seemed to be an exotic problem. I thought, That's fine, writers are supposed to be able to do that. You're supposed to be able to move beyond yourself.

It was only at the very end, after at least five complete rewrites—there was nothing salvageable of the book, and I was so discouraged and so upset because I'd gone through so much and was worried that maybe I had simply written a bad book, that it was time to let go of it. But I didn't want to. I couldn't. I had to figure out what was missing. I remember thinking, This main character is a woman who's devoted herself to a search for God, to living by faith as opposed to by reason. Now, I've never had a religious experience, and I think of myself as someone who lives according to reason, and so it seemed to me that she and I were obviously very different people. But then toward the end of all of this, I asked myself, What have I dedicated *my* life to? I've dedicated my life to art, to writing. **What reason, what objective reason, can I give to justify this dedication that I have to writing, as opposed to, say, all the good I could be doing in the world instead of sitting at home and writing? I have no scientific evidence**

to suggest that art is worthwhile. My life is as much hinged on faith as hers. I believe that art is worthwhile. I believe there is value in trying to be a good person as opposed to being entirely selfish, all those things. But I have no proof that any of that benefits humanity.

That's what the story was really about all along: it's her struggle to maintain faith in her vocation. It's not about her struggle to maintain faith in God—that's not an issue. It's her faith in her vocation, that she's doing the right thing. And that's exactly what I was going through, struggling to maintain faith in my chosen vocation, writing. My last three books have not done very well, and, getting near forty years old and wanting to start a family, I've had to do a lot of deep questioning. My confidence was being shaken, wondering if this was really the smartest thing to be doing. Why did I keep writing books about nichey subjects that only a small number of people can enjoy? Should I be trying to write something that would appeal to a broader audience?

So when I saw that there was this connection between that character and me, that it was a struggle to maintain faith in what you really feel compelled, driven from within, to do, and I realized that I'm not that different from religious people. That was a huge revelation for me. And, in the end, it made me realize the value of what I'm doing, that in spite of difficulty and discouragement, in spite of maybe not getting a lot of response, there is something more important than that: this inner need to try to express something truthful, authentic. I'm grateful to be engaged in that search. I had taken it for granted before, I think. ■

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

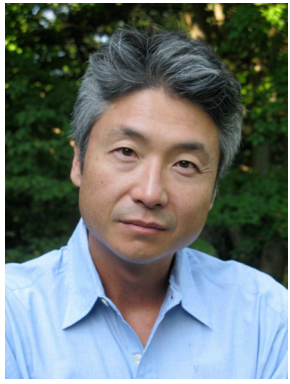

Photo: Annika Lee

The theme of invisibility comes up over and over in Native Speaker. *There is the invisibility of the immigrant, regardless of ethnicity, the invisibility of the nonnative speaker, the invisibility that Henry Park assumes as a spy. What draws you to the idea of the individual blending into the social landscape?*

It's about the draw and power and attractiveness of assimilation, and then its attending problems. There's a deep-seated human need to assimilate and be part of a group. It's a survival technique. We all talk about being individuals, especially in this

country, but really we're not. We're members of many different little groups. For an outsider like an immigrant, the idea is not to stand out, because when you stand out you get cut down. To be an individual is to be in a dangerous position. It's about the very overriding desire to join, but then most of that book, and especially in *A Gesture Life*, it's about the darker side of assimilation, and what people become when they've given up themselves. This invisibility is self-imposed, not like the invisibility of Ralph Ellison, which is imposed from the outside. This invisibility I'm writing about is a kind of self-protection, but it's not without ill effect. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

Loss, upheaval, estrangement, renewal, and reconciliation are some of the themes of the stories contained in The Laws of Evening. *When you conceived of this collection, did you intend to use these themes as a means of story unification?*

No, not at all. For a long time, I didn't even conceive of a collection, much less plan out the themes I was going to use. Publishing wasn't my concern at first. I started writing because I had a demanding and unfulfilling job in corporate tax accounting that I needed an escape from, and because there had been several deaths in my family. Rilke once told his young poet to write about his belief in anything beautiful. I read that passage years after I'd already started writing, and it was only then that I realized it was exactly what I'd been trying to do, in a clueless kind of way, of course.

The themes in this collection pretty much coalesced on their own. I didn't see them until fairly late in the process, and it was so illuminating and surprising to see the pattern that had slowly emerged in my work. I learned a great deal about my own basic preoccupations. For example, I'd never realized how important the concept of memory was in my overall outlook on life. Also, I'd never been fully aware of my fascination with those certain rare people who can successfully transcend the unfairnesses and misfortunes of life. I think it makes sense, in retrospect, that I found myself drawn to that nebulous period in Japanese history between World War II and modern times. Because what Japan went through on a large, national scale—you know, coming to terms with defeat, reinventing themselves—is exactly what all of us, as individuals, are forced to face at some point in our own lives. ■

CARYL PHILLIPS, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

In a New York Review of Books *essay, J.M. Coetzee wrote about the structure and polyphony in your work "as imaginative forays into a single body of work, the history of persecution and victimization in the West." He proposes that your work has a single aim: "Remembering what the West would like to forget."*

At this stage, if I were to say what the aim of my work has been, I think it's increasingly an exploration of the meaning of *home*. That's obviously connected with what Coetzee is saying. Home is connected to persecution and memory and loss. But it can be as simple, or as vague, as loneliness or isolation. If you looked at my work toward the end of the nineties, you may have seen large historical themes played out, small lives coming into contact with large historical themes. But I think these days, either as a progression or development from that, I'm much more concerned with lives, loneliness, isolation, and grappling with the meaning of *home*, not necessarily on the grand, global scale, but often on the domestic scale. I spoke earlier of the case of Bert Williams. Here was the pure, profound loss of a man sitting at a bar in Harlem, with drink after drink, being thoroughly unmoored despite being at the center of the culture because of his celebrity. There's no great global persecution in that, but there is, I think, a preoccupation with home and loss and belonging. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

Can a short story succeed by just describing a human experience or does it have to have a theme or message?

I would say that anytime you embark on a short story with a firm theme or message in mind, the story is in danger of failing. The product can come across as too heavy on its agenda. The most successful stories do end up having several themes working alongside each other, but they are organic to the material, and rise out of it naturally, often without the writer really even realizing it. The first part of the question—"describing a human experience," is a little more complicated. Doing this can certainly lead a writer into a good, full short story, but the human experience described must be layered and rich and textured and have a happening at its core. **One can't for instance just describe what he/she had for breakfast and call it a story, even though eating breakfast is a human experience. What all stories must have, I think, is a central happening. If nothing really *hap-***

***pens*, then you don't have a short story.** I often see this in workshop with early attempts at fiction. There will be some lovely and detailed description, or something that reads like a well-written journal entry. It's all fine and good, and students will compliment the writing, as they should, but I have to eventually pose the question, "What happened in this story?" If everyone looks stumped, or comes up with all different answers to that question, then there really was no clear central happening, which means what the student has written is not yet a story. This may sound overly simplistic, but you would be surprised how many early attempts at short-story writing lack the key ingredient of a happening. My favorite definition of a short story is also the shortest one I've ever heard: Something happens. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Many characters take on roles or discover parts of themselves previously hidden. For instance Kato, a businessman, becomes Roxane's accompanist. "He made what he felt to be wild presumptions in handing over his suggestions, but what did it matter? He was a vice president in a giant corporation, a numbers man, suddenly elevated to be the accompanist. He was not himself. He was no one he had ever imagined." One terrorist shows a talent for chess, another a gift for singing. What intrigues you about these undiscovered aspects of character that come out under dire conditions?

That goes back to *The Patron Saint of Liars.* There's a line in there that says something about somewhere there's a child drawing with a stick who would've been Picasso if he'd ever had any training. I've always been so fascinated with that notion. **All of these artistic geniuses arise in countries that promote education and health and have more money and more time. Art is a leisure activity. If you have to scramble for your food every second of the day, you're not going to make art.** Art is a luxury of time. I'm fascinated by the idea that in the Sahara there are people who would be Chopin, and people who would be Picasso, and people who would be Balanchine, but they don't ever in their lives get anywhere close to having the luxury of time to discover those talents. The terrorists who have been living that kind of life, a life that is about poverty and struggle and food and survival, and then they suddenly have this beautiful home in which they have all their needs met and all the time in the world. How do they develop? All that genius—the law of averages says that everyone gets an equal shot at it—all that genius is there. It's time and comfort and security that allows it to emerge.

From the first page [of Bel Canto*] there is both love and beauty set against a threat of violence. This counterpoint continues and builds throughout the novel, the presence of beauty in the midst of a violent and inevitably fatal standoff between the terrorists and the authorities. This dichotomy is also present in individual characters, such as the general, who shows concern as well as a very real threat of violence. What drew you to this dichotomy?*

Isn't that just life? Isn't that just reading the newspaper each day? It's the front page and the arts section. It's really, really horrible things, and really beautiful things, every single day, right there next to each other on the pages. In your own life, it's part drudgery and part love. You can blow it up. It can be brought to passion and melodrama, to true, true love and death. But if you reduce it in the same way that you would reduce fractions, take it to the smallest common denominator, it's the same thing, whether it's small or it's large. It could be the juxtaposition between going to the grocery store to get dinner, and then getting to have dinner with the person you love—what's boring, what's charming. If you took that to its highest level it could be making a truly great piece of art, and some little girl in Virginia getting kidnapped. Everything in life exists next to each other, and hopefully exists in some kind of balance. Maybe the trick is to keep it in balance, to keep pitching for truth, and beauty, and love, because the other things are there in great abundance. That's an interesting thing about art for me. This is a very violent and sad novel. I feel like it's my responsibility to keep making the case for the beauty and the art. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Photo credit: Jerry Bauer

Writing is very political. You're political in what you choose to write about and the way you choose to write about it. *Machine Dreams* was my looking at the world that had enclosed that small town where I first became aware of identity in myself and in others. I think of *Shelter* as being about the politics of family over the absence of family. I think about the story "Lechery" and *Shelter* as being connected. In "Lechery," a child makes a family out of what she can find, and she operates out of instincts that have been fractured by the world she lives in. Whereas in *Shelter*, I took four characters with secrets and put them in an extremely isolated, sensual, lush, fierce kind of setting, without

families. It was a passion play that is a group of children moving through an underworld, a rite of passage, into a survival they created for themselves. It combined a lot of my interests, because it was a book about jarred dimensions, one reality existing alongside another, how perception alters reality. I've always written about the politics of identity/family. ■

STUART DYBEK, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

It's always so difficult to assess the work being done in your own time. The present is contentious and messy, as it should be. It hasn't been winnowed as yet. I'm not going to try to start winnowing here in terms of individual writers. It's almost a reflexive statement, though no less true for that, that one looks for original voices. That quality, almost by definition, is always in short supply. **I will venture to say that, in my opinion, if there is a single significant problem for the American story to solve, it is the problem of privilege.** Writers who I generally admire address privilege in some way, whether it be thematic or through tone or choice of subject; something about their perspective, on some level, no matter how subtle, recognizes that privilege in America needs to be acknowledged, if not directly confronted. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Literature is often grouped in two categories: writing, which constitutes writing by men, and women's writing. Why do you think the two categories are spoken of as separate entities?

My dad said to me one time that he thought my books were good for a woman writer. And that was a high compliment.

I don't see much difference between the two. There are some generalities. These days, men seem to be more preoccupied with the kind of word play that women don't often become preoccupied with. I can think of few women who are engaged in the fracturing of language the way some experimental male writers are. But then you have somebody like Raymond Carver. I think he wrote in a style that a lot of women would be perfectly content to express themselves in. There is nothing terrifically male about his writing. It's simple, and it's not sentimental, especially the stuff he wrote after Gordon Lish was his editor. For the most part, everybody is pretty much involved in the same game because there are so many different things you

can do with the novel. The novel that questions the structure of society is one I think women tend toward. My daughter is a philosophy student in graduate school. She told me it's common for women who are interested in philosophy to focus on ethics, whereas men are drawn to language analysis. There is a similar dichotomy in the novel—a fascination with what language says about what kind of people we are and the investigation of how we should live.

You've said that psychological violence and sex are related. In A Recent Martyr*, you explore radical differences in the ways people perceive sex and religion. Emma and Pascal are attracted to violence and sex, while Claire feels her greatest trait is her virginity. Is this a way to examine extremes in the novel?*

That novel is heavily thematic and schematic, maybe too much so. The challenge for me was to try to make a good character who was somebody I could appreciate. I think it would be difficult to be a saint; it would involve daily struggle. I was trying to give some notion about what that struggle would involve, what the difficult things would be. Of course, for Claire it's that she doesn't like people much. Her desire to be with God is the opposite of what it should be, which is the desire to love. Hers is a desire to withdraw. In the church, those two choices have always existed. **Monks withdraw from the world; saints go out to the world: both are possible.** Then, the whole business of religion and sex is potentially a desire to experience transformation: the saint wants to be overpowered by God, and the ordinary lover wants to be overpowered by sex. John Donne wrote a great many poems on this subject several hundred years ago. I wanted to play with those ideas. I like the idea of a book about religion and sex, and so did the Catholic Church, I'm happy to say.

How did the Church react?

I was invited to speak at a conference about religion and writing. It was at Loyola, but I wasn't able to attend. I wrote back and said, "I have to tell you that I'm not Catholic." That didn't bother them. They wanted me to talk about writing on religious experiences. I was flattered and wanted to go, but I was teaching at the time.

What writers influenced you to write about religion?

Flannery O'Connor is instructive, especially in her notion of grace that we encounter in moments of extreme pressure and also her notion that to get a character to reveal his makeup, his true ethical identity, you have to really

put him under pressure. So in some ways, the plague is there in *A Recent Martyr* because it puts characters under the kind of stress that makes them reveal what kind of people they are. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

In "In the Machine," Lucas sacrifices himself to the machine that took his brother in order to save Catherine. In "The Children's Crusade," Cat sacrifices herself to save the boy, and in "Like Beauty," Simon sacrifices his opportunity to travel to a new planet in order to be with Catareen as she dies. What drew you to the theme of sacrificing oneself for another?

The human capacity for empathy, up to and including self-sacrifice, is to me one of our greatest qualities. It leaves language and opposable thumbs in the dust in terms of how we're different from other mammals. It's what I'd talk to an extraterrestrial about if he wanted one good reason why the human race shouldn't be vaporized. ■

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

That book [*Native Speaker*] was so important to me. I had so much exuberance for it. When you write a novel you often forget what you're writing about. It's strange but true—Faulkner said exactly that. But in *Native Speaker*, I never really did. I wrote on a piece of paper above my desk, "Language." Everything, every character and what they do, everything that Henry sees, every act precipitates down to him through language. Everything is an attempt at communication. ■

CARRIE BROWN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Are there certain themes or types of characters you find yourself revisiting in your fiction?

A reviewer once commented that I love an underdog, and I suppose that's true. I'm interested in what seems to me the harrowing ordinariness of an ordinary life, and maybe the underdog is the archetypal ordinary man. (Many Russian writers—Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov—see the "ordinary man" in that light: pervasively oppressed, suffering in a way that feels hauntingly familiar.) I am a great admirer of Iris Murdoch, who took her philosophical training at Oxford and then went on to write some thirty or so novels, a

remarkable achievement. I like her work because I like her characters' preoccupation with the state of their souls and the nature of goodness—their own, other people's, the world's. I'm interested in goodness the way some writers are interested in evil, perhaps, although maybe they're just two sides of the same coin. I'm interested in how we grapple with the ethical, moral questions in our lives. I see the challenges of our lives, the conflicts, in those terms, as questions of right and wrong, good and bad. **I'm interested in the emotional and psychological dimension of the struggle to be good, to live an ethically responsible life. I'm interested in how shockingly difficult it is to be good.** And I'm interested in our failures in that regard—exactly how we fail and why, how we console ourselves and others, how we forgive ourselves and others, how we fail to forgive—

This all sounds very abstract, perhaps, but it feels very, well, ordinary, to me. These issues feel present to me in the most ordinary life, under the most ordinary circumstances. The challenge is to render those lives, those ordinary lives, as dramatically as I feel they are lived, so that the characters' engagement with questions of moral goodness—their heroism, as it were—can be felt by the reader, and can be as gripping and unforgettable and important as a life lived on much more conventionally dramatic terms. William Trevor is an absolute master at this, I think. So is Alice Munro, Flannery O'Connor—

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

EHUD HAVAZELET, *interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

Photo: Sigrid Estrada

Thematically what interests me is exile. That's what I take as the central Jewish experience, starting with Adam and Eve. You're tossed. David [in the story "Like Never Before"] bounced around the country and bounced from his family to other families and has never known where he fits. Same thing for the father. To him, everything made sense, or had the potential of making sense, until the war. In "Lyon" he says, back in Poland he would have been in gymnasium [high school] now, looking at girls. Instead where is he? He doesn't know what he's doing. And to me, that's a central experience this century for many people. Salman Rushdie has written about it. Exiles are all over the place. We don't think of that as often as we should. I wanted David to find a home, and it would likely not be with somebody who is Jewish or traditional, because he's moved so far from where he started, those options aren't there anymore. Geographically—and I think of this in myself sometimes—he's slid all the way from New York to Oregon. If you don't hold on there, there's the ocean, the end. He's digging in here, making his stand. I'm glad you responded that way to Janine, because I like her a lot, too.

As far as this idea of exile is concerned, it seems that the farther your characters move geographically from the ones they love, the closer they are to them. Do you feel that physical distance really moves people closer spiritually and emotionally?

That's a good insight. I think it's a more common human experience or emotion than perhaps we recognize. Malamud said he wasn't able to write about New York until he moved to Oregon. Part of it is what we were discussing earlier about nostalgia. It's a hugely powerful emotion, and you don't necessarily value what you have until you lose it. The flip side is you can't stand what you have until you're away from it, and then you try to figure it out. When it's surrounding you it's tumultuous and you don't even know how to value it; you need to fight or acquiesce or get away from it. Exile is an elemental experience for many people.

It can be a rewarding experience as well.

It's got a long tradition in our literature. Ishmael has to get on a boat out

in the middle of nowhere to find any sense of meaning. Hawthorne writes about Young Goodman Brown having to leave Salem; all his characters are trapped. *The Scarlet Letter* is about exile. Huck Finn in the Territories, that's the only place he can find meaning. I think that's something that is essentially true, going back to the biblical story of the prodigal son. He wouldn't have been what he ended up being had he stayed home and been the good kid. He would have been the unprodigal brother that we don't even hear about who stayed home, took over the business, did what everyone wanted him to do. **Growth is often tied to exile. That's why age is so important.** As much as in many ways I lament getting older, I value it because I have lost certain things and there are opportunities that won't come back, and there are people I won't see again. What's taken away enriches me, which is the opposite of what I felt when I was young and felt I had to have everything at once. You don't even know what to do with what you do have. Exile is mirrored in our country, as well. I remember reading a statistic that for my parents' generation a person would live in two point something houses, have one point something jobs, and for my generation, let alone yours, it's like eight point something jobs and twelve point something houses. Well, that's what's happening. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Simon's character [in "Like Reality"] is a simulo, a robot designed to look like and behave like a human, but Simon doesn't feel human, even though he has all the working parts. "I'm not really all that interested in feelings, frankly. Not of the boo-hoo-hoo variety. But there's something biologicals feel that I don't. For instance, I understand about beauty, I get the concept, I know what qualifies, but I don't feel it. I almost feel it, sometimes. But never for sure, never for real." Simon's almost-but-not-quite human quality begs the question, what makes a human a human and is humanity something that can be simulated.

At the Millennium, when everyone was being asked about what the coming century might bring, Stephen Hawking, the physicist, said he thought the technological changes would be nothing compared to the biological ones. Cloning is with us already, and if they can't actually clone humans now they'll be able to soon enough. The fetus will be manipulable in utero, which will make it possible for parents to have children who are smarter, stronger, and prettier than they might otherwise be, and it's not hard to imagine that that option will be much more widely available to the

rich than it will to the poor. Thus the possibility of actual races based on economics. Not to mention the all-but-inevitable development of computers that can think and create—would that make them to some extent human? I don't know what makes humans human, but I feel confident it's one of the big questions looming in all our futures. ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Photo: Getty Images

Wickett's Remedy *is set in 1918 in South Boston during the influenza epidemic. What interested you about writing a historical novel, particularly about this subject?*

I wasn't interested in writing a historical novel. The subject grabbed me by the neck and I had to follow it. I had finished *Bee Season* and it wasn't out yet. It was that in-between year when you're done but you're just waiting. I knew I was ready to launch into something else but I didn't know what it was going to be. I was reading an article in the *Times* that listed the five worst epidemics of all time and the 1918 influenza epidemic was on that list, and I'd never heard of it before. There was a whole spate of nonfiction books about it that came out after this, but they hadn't come out yet, and I was floored that I'd never heard of this. The more research I did, the more I realized that I absolutely had to write about it.

Why do you think this epidemic grabbed you by the throat?

Well, there's the whole morbid fascination, and also the fact that this major thing had happened and then had been effectively erased. **I became aware of the fragility of memory, both individual and collective.** There are examples everywhere, but this is the one that made me realize that we are a species who forget some of the most important, horrible, terrible things, and I wanted to talk about that. ■

LOUIS BEGLEY, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

The care with which you write makes it so obvious that, as you say in another context, there is no hamburger helper in your stories. My sense of you is that

the precision of your description well serves the focus of your attention—social interaction and manners. Something that is perhaps a throwback to earlier times…

I do write with some care and I rewrite compulsively. So indeed….

Some care?

Well, yes, by the time I have finished I think I have trimmed away everything that is not essential. I have a very difficult time really, dealing with the question of the subject matter of my books. Because it seems to me so very natural and uncontrived. I am in love with Hemingway's observation that when he wants to send a message he goes to the post office. [*Chuckles.*] I don't send messages. So you see I write themes that interest me. In this, the theme is betrayal. Betrayal in a marriage, what that does to the betrayer, and to the person who is betrayed, and also to the third person. The point of departure in this novel is actually its ending. I wrote the ending before I got going on the beginning except for the very first scene. I knew the scene in the café, John North putting his hand on the shoulder of the nameless narrator (but in fact listener) and saying, "I have a story to tell you I have never told before." I knew what the theme was and what I wanted to accomplish. I knew the ending and for the rest I simply used those materials that seemed to come to hand that I know that I am able to handle.

Sure, if you were a different person and had grown up in Wyoming and went to the University of Texas you would be writing about something else…

Yes.

I get that point. I am not suggesting that there is anything inauthentic.

Nor is it a philosophical position that I want to write about this kind of person or that kind of person.

I know you wouldn't be about writing crack addicts and homicide cops à la Richard Price.

Right. I don't know them. The only addicts I know are rather desolate children of friends. It's something, of course, that has been dogging me: the question of why do I write about this, why do I write about that? Why don't I keep on writing exactly the same thing that I wrote about in *Wartime Lies*, my first novel? The childhood of a little boy in Poland during the German occupation, a noble subject, great theme, the inhumanity of the Germans, the inhumanity of Catholic Poles, cosmic suffering, injustice, etc. Well, I

have written that book. I cannot write the same book over and over. So I write what involves me as I go on. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

The hostages and terrorists [in Bel Canto*] speak so many languages between them, that communication is a constant issue. The music is the easiest way for them all to relate to one another, to become united.*

In every book, I set up a problem for myself that's just for me. In this book it was, "What would you do if you had a book in which your characters don't have a common language?" I started out with the translator. I took him and his work as far as he could go, and then he burns out. He can't keep up with the workload. Then slowly there's a transition between Gen's responsibility and Roxane's. Her role gets larger—I'm not talking about the part in the book, but the part of language versus music—they have a kind of exchange. More and more, people begin to conduct themselves through the music. They relate to one another through the music. **At first, Mr. Hosokawa and Roxane need Gen to speak for them, but after a while they start humming to one another, and then they can just be together. How can people learn to simply be together without having to express themselves verbally, constantly?** It's a three-tiered process where they go from having an interpreter, to having music, to really being able to exist in peace with one another. Mr. Hosokawa learns the art of invisibility, of true silence, from Carmen, so that he can move around the way that she does without anyone seeing him so that he can be with Roxane. At the same time, Cesar picks up the torch of singing, which means that singing doesn't belong only to Roxane. It's all flexible and connected, and hopefully it has a sensible arc to follow. ■

EHUD HAVAZELET, *interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

If you were to ask me what's the greatest turn or the greatest development we've seen in our literature in the last thirty or forty years, I'd say it's the emergence of women writers, that there are people like Alice Munro and Grace Paley, Flannery O'Connor and Katherine Anne Porter who are giving their version of the world to counter the Faulkner, Hemingway—especially Hemingway—notion of how the world is put together. And I think I come at the world from their angle. The defining moments aren't, finally, warfare and heroism and seduction.

Or killing a bull?

Right. The important questions are who will keep the family together or who is going to be responsible for it falling apart. I don't mean to suggest that women are stuck solely to the traditional roles, but that they have perhaps an innate way of looking at the world that is more organic, has more of a sense of something that needs to be held together, as opposed to something that needs to be ripped to pieces. That's what I respond to, in any case. Women writers have us leaning in that direction, and it's about time. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You've been called a master of the domestic drama because most of your work focuses on problems anchored in the family: adultery, illness, anxiety. Why have you tended to explore family situations?

Most of what one feels compelled to write stems from a deep, emotional uncertainty. In my life, as is the case with many people I know, the most uncertain things are relationships with those I'm closest to. I have family members in the small, nuclear unit, as well as the larger unit, toward whom I have a great deal of affection, and there are others toward whom I have tremendous antipathy. It's typical in family situations to be forced into contact, repeatedly, with people you don't particularly like.

You work out your future social abilities and relationships based on what you learn when you are young. For me, these relationships have always been familial. My father and two of his brothers owned property in Colorado, and we would all go there each summer. During the winter, we lived in Kansas, close to my mother's family. There was a constant, rotating band of family members in and out of my house and life.

I'm not entirely sure why I write about family, but I do know that it hasn't stopped interesting me. **You meet and leave other people at different stages of your evolution, whereas family is made up of people who are links in your life, who know you over the course of time and have your complete curriculum vitae in their heads.**

How is this related to the family as our main battleground, as you've called it?

Middle-class American writers are always going to look for conflict as a source of tension within the family. People question this subject mat-

ter because young workshop writers often write about their families and homes. This is because the family is where they've experienced conflict. They aren't being recruited into guerilla armies at the age of thirteen. In some other countries, drama exists elsewhere, outside the house. Most often in America, the trouble seems to come within the household. At certain times, writers are called to defend domestic fiction.

In what way have you been called to defend your work on a specific level—as a woman writer, for instance—that differs from having to defend it regardless of gender?

There are plenty of men who write about family, but when I'm asked to explain what I do, it often seems that there's some implicit understanding that novels or stories that tackle political or societal drama are serving more serious masters. It's not necessarily that the treatment of characters in these works is a masculine one. It's just that the terrain outside the home is often considered more important. I don't think it is. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

When did you realize that you could use that humor in your fiction?

I wrote rhyming, metered verse from the time I was a child until high school. To become a writer, I had to learn to not always go for the easy laugh. **The short stories that I wrote in college were flip and jokey. I have learned how to avoid that, but now I wish my work were funnier. I would like to write a comic novel sometime because now I think I could do it.** I'd like to write something like *A Confederacy of Dunces*, which is a deeply moving and essentially comic novel.

Has that desire to not be so outwardly funny led you to darker subjects? If you take away the humor, many of your stories contain dark moments: a father abandons his children to strangers; a husband murders his wife.

I don't know why I always end up going toward such horrible subjects. I love horrible family stories that make you say, "Oh, my God, I can't believe that." I always end up killing off people when I don't want to.

Is that what you strive for—a mixture of humor and despair?

One of the pieces of advice Allan Gurganus gave us is that you should try to make your readers laugh and cry on every single page. **There are fre-**

quently award-winning books in which there is no humor and nothing leavening. I cannot stand those books. They purport to be realistic, but they aren't. With no humor, there is no mirror to life. I think that in all the horrible moments of my life, there has been something absurdly and hysterically funny. One day we were trying to move my great aunt Blanche, who had Alzheimer's, to the nursing home. We sat down to breakfast with her and she was wearing a red sheer blouse over a black bra, which was on backward. It is a detail that my friends still remember when I mention Blanche. That's the way of the world. That's how it works. ■

MICHAEL PARKER, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

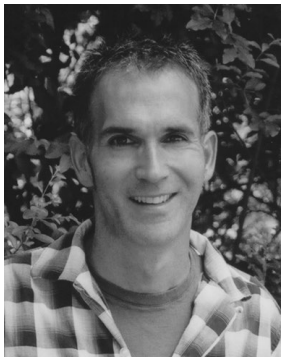

Photo: Cate Parker

I wrote a couple of these stories [in *Don't Make Me Stop Now*] ten years ago, though most of them were written in the past couple years. All of them are love stories—in that they are about love, or our attempts to love—but I didn't really set out to collect a bunch of love stories. I just follow my obsessions. It seems I'm obsessed with love, how it defines experience, how it seems the only thing worth pursuing and yet the most difficult human act to perfect. ■

ERNEST J. GAINES, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Catherine Carmier is a simple story about a guy coming back to the old place and visiting the old people, and he has changed so much that he doesn't fit in anymore. When I was writing that book, I used Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* as a model. I read something from it every day. It's about a young doctor who has just finished university and comes back to the old place and falls in love with a beautiful woman. He loses her and dies. My character does the same thing, but he doesn't die. He has to go away again.

In that novel, you explore a situation—a young man who leaves Louisiana to receive an education, then returns—that you examine in your most recent novel, A Lesson Before Dying.

My characters can't get away. Miss Jane tries to walk to Ohio, but, of course, she never gets out of Louisiana. Charlie in *A Gathering of Old Men* tries to run away, but he has to come back. I guess all my characters are like that; they go far, and then they return. They must face up to their responsibilities.

Your characters seem to know that they must accept responsibility and go on because it's the graceful thing to do.

They have to make the effort to go on, and sometimes it brings death. But they must make that effort before the moment of death. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Jefferson must stand before he will be executed. Marcus in *Of Love and Dust* can't escape, but he rises before he dies and becomes a better human being. There are certain lines they have to cross to prove their humanity. I could not write about or focus my attention on a character who did not have these characteristics—a person who struggles and falls but gets up, who will go to a certain point even though he knows he might get killed. **That's a common theme in all my work: those who cannot escape by running away, and those who go to a certain point even if it means death.** For example, in *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant will not try to run away anymore. I think Vivian is going to keep him in Louisiana.

There's a great sense of optimism in your work. Even though Jefferson cannot escape execution in A Lesson Before Dying*, he can find peace. Because of this, you turn a potentially devastating book into something redemptive.*

I made both Jefferson and Grant tragic figures because I wanted this to be a story about more than just a young black man sitting on death row. I needed someone to go to the prison and teach Jefferson, but also someone who would learn while teaching. Grant is also in a type of prison because he is unable to live the way he would like to live. I had to discover how he could break out of that. Jefferson, of course, finds release in death, and Grant must take on the responsibility of becoming a better person, a better teacher. ■

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

I was really attracted to *The Bright Forever*, not only because of the intersections of people's lives and the responsibilities that we have to one another, but also because I was very drawn toward this story of ordinary people whose lives all of the sudden become extraordinary, and how they live with that and how they go on from there. ■

MAILE MELOY, *interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:*

All of the stories in Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It *remain surprisingly close to the sentiment of the book's title: the characters are often torn*

between what they have *and what they* want. *Did you discover this theme in your stories once you started gathering them together, or did you arrive at the theme first and then write stories toward it?*

The stories were all written at different times, over several years, and I didn't think I had a collection for a long time, and I didn't realize how much they had in common thematically until I read them all together. My editor, Sarah McGrath, suggested the title, which had always been there near the end of one of the stories, waiting to be noticed. It's from the A.R. Ammons poem that is the epigraph of the book, and I think it's the kind of title that adds something to the book, and helps bring it together.

Do you see any significant differences between the stories in your first collection, Half in Love*, and the stories in* Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*?*

The titles reflect the big difference: ***Half in Love* is more about people who can't help but withhold part of themselves, and *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It* is about people who don't want anything withheld from them. It's a more assertive book in a way.**

The stories are also longer, and I'm older, and I've tried to do things I couldn't do in *Half in Love.* ■

LYNNE TILLMAN, *interviewed by Brian Gresko:*

Photo: David Shankbone

Do you know when you sit down to work on a piece whether you have a short story or the start of a novel?

A lot of times I'm writing a shorter piece because I've been asked to contribute to something. The demand from a museum will be, "Could you write an essay?" and I always say, "I'll write a story," with rare exceptions. Three of the stories in my latest collection, *Someday This Will Be Funny*, I wrote for Steve Erickson's magazine, *Black Clock*. It's a beautiful magazine out of CalArts, where Steve teaches.

The first story I gave to him was "Later," the Marvin Gaye/John Lennon one. Steve primarily does themed issues, and this was for "Music of the Imagination." He'd asked a bunch of writers to do a piece around the idea "What if Miles Davis and Jimi Hendrix actually had made a record

together?" Before Jimi Hendrix died, they were intending to work together. I love Marvin Gaye, and I thought it would be interesting to pair him with somebody who, for one, was more famous and white—John Lennon. I imagined they were friends, going to work together at some point, which they never do, presumably because of Marvin Gaye's being murdered by his father and John Lennon's assassination. That the lives of both of these men were cut short by murder was something remarkable, and that cultural resonance stays in memory. This led me to thinking about their two anthematic songs—Marvin Gaye's absolutely brilliant "What's Going On," and John Lennon's "Imagine."

When I finished the story, Steve, who knows an enormous amount about popular culture and music, asked if I knew that those songs came out within three weeks of each other. I didn't. Isn't that amazing? I didn't add it, because I didn't want that fact to become much more important than it should be in the story, which is supposed to be about these men being so different and yet having many similarities.

"More Sex" is another story that appeared in *Black Clock*, for the sex issue, and "The Unconscious Is Also Ridiculous" was for the sports issue. You can see I'm sort of a contrarian, because I would think that the approach to a sex issue would be sexier than what I wrote, or the approach to sports would be more sporty. ■

AARON GWYN:

Show me a list of the masterpieces of world literature and I'll show you a list of trouble.

The Iliad: you want a nice girlfriend, end up bringing down the wrath of the gods on your own army. *The Odyssey*: you try to get home safely with a boatload of your buddies. Only you make it back. Some guy's already trying to date your wife. In fact, a bunch of guys are trying to date your wife. *Inferno*: afterlife is pure hell. Though walking around and watching is kind of fun. *Hamlet*: your dead father rises from the grave and tells you to kill your uncle. You end up murdering his chief advisor, two high school friends, and the guy whose sister you dumped. She's so grief-struck she drowns herself. *Moby Dick*: a whale bites your leg off, so you enact a quest that will kill your entire crew and yourself. *Ulysses*: you're the only Jewish guy in Dublin and someone is dating your wife and doing a very fine job of it. *Grapes of Wrath*: no food, no money, situation's so dire you have to go to

California. *The Sound and the Fury*: you might be an idiot, a crazy Harvard freshman, or a redneck, but your sister is too big of a tramp to care.

The secret, I believe, in writing well about trouble, is choosing carefully the kind of character who will be most *troubled* by his/her trouble. What is a trial to one person, might be downright relaxing to another. The trouble in your story must push the character to a point where s/he will make a decision to escape his/her trouble. That decision, if we are dealing with a bona fide story, will always mean that the character who exits the story won't quite be the same person who entered it. The trouble has changed him/her irrevocably. There is no going back.

This is one of the distinct features of the story, separating it from anecdote or sketch: **folks in stories change, and the story is about that moment when they change. And it suggests that even in life, we never make changes of any kind without trouble.** ■

PERRI KLASS, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

Your stories often deal with women trying to juggle career and family. One of your reviewers praised passages in your work "ruminating on the deck that is generally stacked against women and mothers." Does this comment please you?

I guess I understand it—though I don't particularly feel the deck is stacked against me, or against people like me. I think the juggling that you talk about is part of a busy, interesting, complicated life, and therefore worth writing about and worth reading about. But I can certainly see that there are people—women, mothers—with a very difficult set of expectations and imperatives, and many stories worth telling. ■

EHUD HAVAZELET, *interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

Many writers drawn to magical realism are also intrigued by religion. Rushdie comes to mind. Something that I found interesting about "Eight Rabbis on the Roof" is that, while it seems to embody a magical realism perspective and style, of all the stories in the collection, this one doesn't seem to be as concerned with religion as the others.

I come at religion from the side, because I grew up in a religious atmosphere. I spent most of my life running from it, rebelling. And now I find

things bubbling up in terms of my experience and my relationship to the past and my relationship to my family. The father in this story is religious, but it's not the religious aspect of it that interests me. **If I'm interested in religion for the stories, it's how it affects people and offers, to some, a chance for transcendence or escape or purpose, and to others a curtailment of those things, the notion of somebody's values being forced upon you.** It's another way that people look for meaning and look for control and look for verification of their view of things, by having support from others.

But I am intrigued by the notion of belief: it has tremendous power. If you believe things they can happen. They don't necessarily happen the way you want them to, however. The end of "Eight Rabbis" is not the way Birnbaum would have choreographed his reunion. There's no handholding, no sense of "It's going to be fun now." But there is inclusion, which I think on a deeper sense is what he wants. ■

MELANIE RAE THON, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

The first two scenes in Meteors in August *portray violence juxtaposed with religion. What relationship do you see between the two?*

I think that violence and grace often illuminate each other. Flannery O'Connor [*Everything that Rises Must Converge*] talks about that mystery in the most eloquent ways. Our country has flourished through violence and, because of that, I have a sense we are still caught in a state of upheaval. Wars define the history of the United States: without the Revolutionary War, we would still be a colony; without the Civil War, we might be two countries instead of one. The Indian wars allowed for vast expansion, and the two world wars defined our international mission. We began by fighting to have a country; then we launched into a conquest of native peoples in order to make it larger. **I think that violence and the myth of "regeneration through violence," as writer Richard Slotkin calls it, are very much parts of our national character and our mythic vision of ourselves. At the same time, many immigrants came to America because they wished to worship with freedom. The fusion of religion and**

violence, worship and conquest, is, I think, quintessentially American.

Were the stories in First, Body *written with a common tone in mind?*

I wrote the stories in *Girls in the Grass* over a period of thirteen years, and I spent about four years on *First, Body*. I didn't begin with a plan for a collection, but the stories emerged from the idea that there are moments in people's lives that change them completely. Some people reach a line and step across it—or are catapulted across it. After that, nothing is ever the same again. I became interested in those moments and the people who survive them. The first story that I explored was "Little White Sister." A fifty-four-year-old black man sees a white woman in trouble and decides he can't help her. When she dies, he knows he'll feel the weight of that decision for the rest of his life. This is not the kind of experience that makes you think, "I feel wretched today, and I'm going to feel bad for a year." This is a moment where a person's entire life is realigned, where he must re-imagine everything that has ever happened to him in light of what he has chosen *not* to do on this particular night.

I kept coming across amazing tales, ones that inspired me but that I didn't even try to fictionalize. I read about a man who may have killed his own son. He went into a blackout—he was drunk—and the child was dead when he woke the next day. He probably killed the child, but he can't ever be sure. Perhaps he failed to protect his son from an intruder. Either way, he believes he's responsible for the child's death. Now he's in prison for life in Alaska, trying to live a decent life and educate other people. I kept wondering how a person finds the courage and strength to live past a catastrophe. How do we remake ourselves after we are shattered?

So the stories in *First, Body* rose out of that central mystery: Who do we become on the other side? If you're responsible for another person's suffering or death, how do you learn to see yourself with any kind of compassion? For Jimmy, the narrator of "Little White Sister," mercy comes from his recognition that he is bound to the woman who dies. Through his sympathy for her, through his capacity to begin to imagine how they are alike, he realizes their grief has made them equals. This is Jimmy's moment of grace.

Your narrator in Sweet Hearts*, Marie, keeps going through permutations of the Catholic catechism. What is your understanding of her process?*

Marie has endured enormous loss in her life: when she was eleven, her mother drowned, and she is still trying to understand this tragedy. Now her

sister's young children have become outlaws. How do we make sense of our sorrow and misfortune? Do we think we "deserve" punishment? For Marie, that's a dangerous and destructive philosophy. She is a person of deep faith who is not afraid to question God—but she also hopes in God. She believes redemption is possible for every human being. Even in the face of the most extreme act of violence, she seeks evidence of grace, a vision of mercy that will allow Flint to feel compassion for his victims.

Marie enters the rigid catechism again and again in order to break it apart and find her own answers. The Word of God is not a final, static statement of law in Marie's mind; it is the Living Word, ever changing. She believes we must rediscover our own moral conscience in each individual circumstance. Human law does not allow this. Perhaps her deafness, her isolation, has given her freedom of thought. Almost all her speech is the inner speech Vygotsky describes.

By imagining the life and death of Lucie Robideau, Marie glimpses a God who is both incomprehensible and tender, a God who comes not to judge or punish, but to share our pain and suffer with us. ■

T.C. BOYLE, *interviewed by Diana Bishop:*

Why did you want to write about Frank Lloyd Wright?

I've written about some of the great American egomaniacs of the twentieth century, people like Alfred C. Kinsey and John Harvey Kellogg, who don't see other people as viable except as cogs in their machine. The bad guy in my novel *Talk Talk* was like this—he was a classic narcissist, as were Kellogg and Kinsey. And of course, Frank Lloyd Wright was cut from the same mold. You're either on his boat or you don't exist. That personality really, really fascinates me because I'm exactly like that, and so is every novelist.

Because as a writer, you see everything and anything around you as grist for the mill?

Writers should, presumably, be able to empathize and enter into other people's minds, and I think the best ones certainly do that, but on the other hand, we're still in our own universe, you know—our books, our lives—as opposed to anybody else's. And that is the danger of the kind of egomania that it takes, I think, to create something. So I'm very fascinated with these other guys, to see how they've ruined their lives. Maybe writing about them provides a cautionary tale for me.

How does the theme of creative egomania tie into another of your favorite themes—the theme of man as just another animal in nature?

I think it's a question of the dominance of a single regime or a single person or a single gang. That's what the world is all about, it seems to me. I don't always feel compelled to write about the same theme, incidentally, although the theme of man as animal often plays a part. Another thing that interests me about Frank Lloyd Wright, for instance, is that his apprentices and the people who worked for him—like the denizens of *Drop City*—were part of a big sort of hippie family. Of course, with him being the autocrat at the top of it, but nonetheless, it was a cult. And I'm very interested in cults, too, as in *Drop City*. Or *The Inner Circle*. How can you give up your individuality, your own personality, to some strong man? To somebody who might arguably be doing a great project, like Kinsey, or Frank Lloyd Wright, or might simply be leading you into darkness? How can you give your individuality up to them? How can you trust anyone in any field to lead you if you're capable of thinking and acting for yourself? It's the flip side of the egomaniac. The follower. That type fascinates me also. How could you be like that? Because I'm not. I grew up in America in a time where I could be a punk and do anything and say anything I wanted. So many people are willing to give up their freedom and their individuality for this false sense of security, that Daddy will protect you, whether that daddy is the church, or politics, or a dynamic leader in any field. I wonder about the price you pay. That's basically what I was just talking about in *The Inner Circle*, as well, of course, in talking about us as an animal species, especially as Kinsey tried to separate our animal and spiritual natures in reducing our sexuality to a purely instinctive animal drive. ■

MICHAEL PARKER, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

How important is music in your life as a writer? It emerges as a significant element in If You Want Me to Stay, *of course, and the book's title is taken from the great Sly Stone track.*

Mine was not a particularly literary adolescence, though it was filled with the music of the day. I had older siblings with great taste in music, so I was fortunate to grow up listening both to Top 40, which seemed to me more exciting in the sixties and seventies than it does now, but also bands that would never get any airplay—Velvet Underground, Fairport Convention, and later, when punk broke, Patti Smith and Television. I suppose because

I grew up in such a small, remote town, this music became my link to the outer world, though of course music—especially when you're young and confused and filled with longing and anxiety and curiosity—is a supremely interior pleasure. Like literature, you share it with the rest of the world, but only partially, as the emotions it evokes are unique to your own desires. So very early on, it became both a way to connect to other people and a very private and sacred thing in my life. Much later, when I began to write seriously, most if not all of my work seemed to be thematically concerned with the discrepancies between the inner and outer lives, the tension between them. It seemed only natural, then, that music would enter into the work in a major way.

After *If You Want Me to Stay* came out, I was asked by my publisher to write a short promotional essay about the use of music in the book, and I found myself struggling, not to mention reluctant, to put it into words. I knew that music, in that novel and in my work in general, emerges as a source of sustenance and spiritual nourishment during difficult emotional moments. But that seemed too obvious to say. My best friend and best reader, when I talked to her about this, said to me, "You write about music because it comes close to expressing the inexpressible, and your characters are always struggling to communicate their desires," and of course this made perfect sense to me, though I could never have put it so succinctly into words. ■

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

Do you ever complete a book or prepare for it to be published and then worry about how it might be perceived?

There are times when I feel sort of exhausted with myself and think, "Why are you doing this?" The book that I'm just starting is about a white family who adopts two black sons. The adoptive mother dies early on. So there's a white father and a white son of natural origins and then two black adopted sons. The black mother comes back and the white brother falls in love with her. I'm thinking, "Christ, give yourself a break. Why are you doing this?" And I don't know. It's just again and again what's interesting to me: family and origin issues, how families are constructed, issues of race. Again and again, these are the things that I find compelling. ■

KAREN RUSSELL, *interviewed by Brian Gresko:*

Do you see Swamplandia! *as a coming of age story?*

I heard Antonya Nelson say that all stories are coming of age stories, which I really like, because people hear "coming of age" and think *To Kill a Mockingbird* or whatever we all read in seventh grade. But Nelson's idea was that coming of age means you're getting new information, there's a new challenge or event, and you're going to have to expand as a character—at whatever age you're at—and you're going to become something new as you move through the experience.

The story that felt at the heart of *Swamplandia!* was Ava's story, and that is about this kid trying to wrestle with her grief. She does grow up over the course of the book, but the novel also tackles the whole family in grief, so it's kind of a collective coming of age. ■

NAMI MUN, *interviewed by Greg Schutz:*

The first story I wrote for *Miles from Nowhere* was "Club Orchid." In that story, Joon is both vulnerable and strong, and I suppose I liked the tension this dichotomy created on the page, especially when she tries to describe the very adult setting and situations. I went on to write several more stories about her, and maybe a year or two later, I noticed how all of the stories revolved around Joon trying to make money to survive. For example, she works as a dance hostess in one story, sells Avon in another, sells newspapers on subways, etc. That's when I realized that these stories, while self-contained, could also be cogs working toward a larger narrative arc.

I also made a crucial decision right then—to keep the episodic structure, primarily because I felt it gave a truer, more visceral reflection of Joon's fractured mindset. ■

CARRIE BROWN:

A reviewer once commented that I love an underdog, and I suppose that's true. I'm interested in what seems to me the harrowing ordinariness of an ordinary life, and maybe the underdog is the archetypal ordinary man.

Many Russian writers—Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov—see the "ordinary man" in that light: pervasively oppressed, suffering in a way that feels hauntingly familiar. I am a great admirer of Iris Murdoch, who took her philosophical training at Oxford and then went on to write some thirty or so novels, a remarkable achievement. I like her work because I like her characters' preoccupation with the state of their souls and the nature of goodness—their own, other people's, the world's. I'm interested in goodness the way some writers are interested in evil, perhaps, although maybe they're just two sides of the same coin. I'm interested in how we grapple with the ethical, moral questions in our lives. I see the challenges of our lives, the conflicts, in those terms, as questions of right and wrong, good and bad. I'm interested in the emotional and psychological dimension of the struggle to be good, to live an ethically responsible life. **I'm interested in how shockingly difficult it is to be good. And I'm interested in our failures in that regard—exactly how we fail and why, how we console ourselves and others, how we forgive ourselves and others, how we fail to forgive.**

This all sounds very abstract, perhaps, but it feels very, well, ordinary, to me. These issues feel present to me in the most ordinary life, under the most ordinary circumstances. The challenge is to render those lives, those ordinary lives, as dramatically as I feel they are lived, so that the characters' engagement with questions of moral goodness—their heroism, as it were—can be felt by the reader, and can be as gripping and unforgettable and important as a life lived on much more conventionally dramatic terms. William Trevor is an absolute master at this, I think. So is Alice Munro, Flannery O'Connor… ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

The world is packed with people who can write well, but the only way a writer is going to stand out is to be completely emotionally honest in a way that resonates deep down in a reader's mind. You can call it soul, or outlook on life, but whatever it is, it's a certain aura about your writing that's a result of every experience you've ever had, every emotion you've ever felt. And that aura, that insight, is the most important thing you have to offer.

In that sense, a work of fiction can be, and should be, every bit as emotionally "real" as a memoir. I think that's partly what Virginia Woolf was talking about. If you ask ten different writers to look at a tree, they'll all see it differently, as if each one was wearing different colored glasses. And that's because each writer sees it through his or her emotional context. I think it

goes back to the themes we were talking about earlier. Writing is a way to get these themes out so you can see your own self in a clear light. And in the process of being honest with yourself,you might reach another reader who has similar issues buried deep inside. When that connection happens, it's magical. ■

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

Themes run throughout your work, where the same idea repeats itself. Do you revisit scenes or sections of dialogue because you feel you've reached a new understanding of the matter?

It's not intentional. I knew I had written about abortion, for instance, in "Finding a Girl in America," and I didn't look at it again. I didn't want to go back in that direction in "Falling in Love" in *Dancing After Hours*. I told a priest who is in the workshop about my situation, and I said,"I've got another abortion story, and I've already gone there twice in stories. Do I have to go back again?" He said, "Yes." So I did.

That doesn't bother me. There's a lot of repetition in a lot of writers I love, probably because of their passions, fears, what we love as humans. It doesn't bother me; it's just unintentional. ■

ETHAN CANIN, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

No matter what I used to write—I could start a story about two lesbians on a sailboat—it would end up being about a father and a son somewhere. No matter what I wrote, that used to come out. Then, it sort of changed. As you write more and more and more, you begin to find your obsessions or themes.

I think what surprises you, and what seems to be deflected off some hard core at the interior of what you're writing, ends up being what your novel's about, or what your life's work is about. It's not what you thought it was about. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The transformation of the individual that is an inevitable result of immigration is a central theme in all of your books.

Immigration was a major transformative influence on my life. In some ways it is what made me into a writer. Before I came to this country I had no idea of wanting to be a writer. It was after I moved so far from my culture and faced the conflicts that come with such movement that I had a subject that I felt passionate about.

Immigration made me realize something that I hadn't thought about until I came here, and that is that we use the word *America*, which really means something different to each immigrant who comes over. And the experience of America is so different for each individual. For our children growing up here, who are the products of immigration, what does being American mean? "The Unknown Errors of Our Lives" is particularly concerned with the move back—immigration begins a movement that really only ends when there's a corresponding movement back to the home country. In this book, I'm focusing in a number of stories on that movement back.

In a way, your writing is like a movement back.

Yes, it's a way for me to revisit, to reconnect, to re-understand. ■

RUSSELL BANKS, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

It's historically true, at least for Americans, that when people are unsure about what it is to be themselves, their novelists start writing historical fiction. In the 1830s and '40s it was not that clear what it meant to be American. Fifty years after the revolution you could ask, Why aren't we British? Well, politically we're not, but really, Why aren't we British? So Hawthorne writes *The Scarlet Letter* and you have Cooper, Irving, and the major novelists, both South and North, of that era, writing historical fiction. I think there's something like that going on now [1998]. There's a certain confusion and lack of confidence in what it means to be American; and novelists are essentially, at bottom, mythmakers—mythmakers with regard to social identity, the tribe's identity. A storyteller is basically creating, always, a myth about what it is to be whoever you are in this tribe. Why are we in this tribe and living in this corner of the planet instead of some other? ■

PETER CAREY, *interviewed by Kevin Bacon and Bill Davis:*

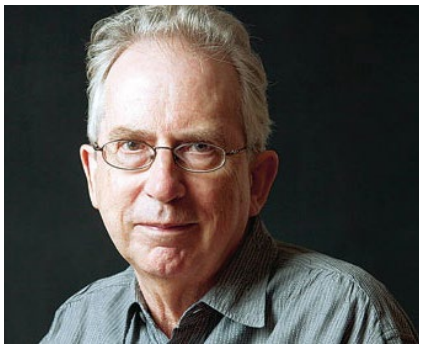

Photo: Ashley Gilbertson

If you're an American and you arrive in Australia, the first thing you'll feel, I think, is how familiar it is. You've flown twenty-two hours and yet you don't seem so far from home. And yet the two cultures are profoundly different. We have a very un-American history, and will tell ourselves very un-American narratives. Your country tells success stories; ours does not.

This is a great simplification, so please excuse me. On the one hand, you have a country that begins with a first fleet of convicts, while the other country's first fleet is religious refugees. There's a major difference. Australia is basically an irreligious country. We can have a prime minister who says he doesn't believe in God. I think it would be impossible for you to have a president who said that. Also, the experiences of our early pioneers were harsher than yours. Basically, we went west and found death. Our great stories are about people who were lost, who couldn't find food or water, and died; your stories tend to be about success. Your people went west to wealth and success—not that there wasn't tragedy along the way. Generally our narratives are to do with failure. We're suspicious of success, and I think you can look at this also in relationship to our convict past—this underclass group and its feelings about success: When somebody leaves the group and is successful, that's a betrayal for us.

All our heroes,all our great stories are about failure. The military thing that we celebrate most is ANZAC Day, which is about Gallipoli, a peninsula in Turkey where our young men were sent by Winston Churchill in a doomed military venture where they died—just died and died and died and died. That's our great story. A total defeat, the whole thing. There was no point to it; they landed in the wrong place and they shouldn't have been there anyway.

Do you think you could write a success story?

Pretty tough. It does appear to be difficult for me to do. I was telling my wife my plans for the new book, and she was sitting there listening and nodding, and I could see that she thought it was interesting. I got to a certain point and she said, "Don't tell me what happens now. They die, right?"

So I said,"I can't help it."

This is where my personal condition does, in some way, echo, through chance perhaps, the national one. I find it hard to imagine happy endings. ■

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

Because I've been on tour with *The Feast of Love*, and because I'm now getting reviews of the book, I've been thinking about the reactions that some people have had to it. One of the things I've noticed is that in the generation of people who are in their twenties and early thirties, the word *love* is almost embarrassing, and I've been trying to think about why that is true. One interviewer said to me, "You don't really think, do you, that people talk about love anymore?" She was about twenty-five. Now, that comment was one that has set off my mind to search for a reason why the comment should exist in the first place.

There was another review of *The Feast of Love*, in a little magazine called the *Barcelona Review*, which said that the title was dreadful. And the reviewer went on to say that it's a dreadful title because no one, neither a man nor a woman,would dare carry a book with the title *The Feast of Love* onto the subway. The sense of it being that it's too old fashioned, it sounds like a romance novel. I don't know how my mind is organized. All I know is that at various times in my life I have certain preoccupations, certain things that I can't help thinking about. And right now I can't help thinking about why it may be the case that we've come to a point, culturally, where a title like *The Feast of Love* could be embarrassing to people. So that's what I'm trying to think through. Whether it's because we have a culture of irony now and of cool emotional responses…

There's a writer named Vivian Gornick, who wrote a book called *The End of the Novel of Love*, and she said in her book that people don't expect love to supply the meaning of their lives anymore, and they don't read novels about love in order to find that kind of meaning. It's an interesting idea that I think may very probably be wrong, but it's an interesting idea all the same.

These questions have a lot to do with the kinds of stories people tell. And the kinds of stories they want to read or think about. I mean, it's one thing to say you shouldn't be talking about love in an abstract way. But it's another thing if you're teaching a class and someone comes in and says you

can't write this kind of story anymore. Nobody will read it; no one will care about it. So these are not just literary questions. Literary questions spill out into cultural matters, into theoretical matters. They're all connected.

Do you have ideas about trends in writing that you think we might be moving toward now?

[When he was an old man,] the composer Virgil Thomson was asked where he thought music was going, and Thomson replied, I don't care where it's going, I want to know where it's just been. Though you're tempting me to become a prophet of sorts. I know that recently we have been through a period of fiction in which there's been, for a lot of reasons, a lot of attention paid to abusive behavior and to shame. You have to ask yourself if you have [social] trends that lead to stories about abusive fathers, abusive relationships, stories that are very concerned with obsessive-compulsive or addictive behaviors. I'm sure you see stories like this come into *Glimmer Train* all the time. What is the next stage after that going to be? And I will tell you, honestly, I do not know. I wish I knew. I would like to say, Oh, the kinds of stories that I'm writing would be the sorts of stories that we may see next, but I have absolutely no certainty of that. I don't know whether I'm in a vanguard or a rearguard. Whether I'm at the front or the middle or the back. ■

HA JIN, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

One theme in your work is the man striving to define himself amidst a society that wants to constrain him to a rigid role that does not necessarily match his inner experience. For instance, in Ocean of Words*, the story "Love in the Air" describes the plight of a soldier who falls in love with a civilian, which is not allowed. To make matters worse, she's of another class, yet he pursues his love. Also, Jian Wan, the narrator in* The Crazed*, struggles to understand what he wants for himself in the midst of a society that wants to define him.*

There is always confinement in China for every individual. They have to find a way to survive and develop and grow as a human being. For me, the theme of confinement is not a very conscious thing. It's just a part of the story. And it's everywhere, inside, outside. It's part of Chinese society, the culture, the customs. It cannot be avoided. It's present in everything, and so it seeps into my work. ■

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

ADICHIE, Chimamanda Ngozi. Novels: *Half of a Yellow Sun*, *Purple Hibiscus*. Story collection: *The Thing Around Your Neck*. adichie website

BANKS, Russell. Recent novels: *The Reserve*, *The Darling*, *Trailerpark*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Cloudsplitter*. Story collections include *The Angel on the Roof*. Nonfiction: *Dreaming Up America*.

BAXTER, Charles. Novels: *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Feast of Love*, *First Light*. Story collections: *Gryphon*, *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*. charlesbaxter.com

BEGLEY, Louis. Eight novels, including *Shipwreck*, *Wartime Lies*, *About Schmidt*, *Matters of Honor*. louisbegley.com

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

BISHOP, Diana. Interviewer. Work in *Watershed*, *10Spot*.

BISHOP, Melanie. Published in *Georgetown Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Florida Review*, *Puerto del Sol*. Prescott College.

BODWELL, Joshua. Interviewer. Work in *Threepenny Review*, *Ambit*, *Poets & Writers*, *Art New England*, *Fiction Writers Review*.

BOYLE, T.C. Twenty-two books of fiction, including *San Miguel*,*When the Killing's Done*, *After the Plague*, *Drop City*, *The Inner Circle*, *Tooth and Claw*, *The Human Fly*, *Talk Talk*, *The Women*, *Wild Child*. tcboyle.com

BROWN, Carrie. Novels: *The Rope Walk*, *Rose's Garden*, *Confinement*, *The Hatbox Baby*, *Lamb in Love*. Story collection: *The House on Belle Isle*. Sweet Briar College. authorcarriebrown.com

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

COX, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Slow Moon*, *Night Talk*, *The Ragged Way People Fall Out of Love*, *Familiar Ground*. Story collection: *Bargains in the Real World*. Wofford College. elizabethcox.net

CUNNINGHAM, Michael. Novels: *By Nightfall*, *Specimen Days*, *The Hours*, *Flesh and Blood*, *A Home at the End of the World*. Nonfiction: *Land's End*. michaelcunninghamwriter.com

DANTICAT, Edwidge. Novels: *Breath, Eyes, Memory*; *The Farming of Bones*; *The Dew Breaker*. Story collection: *Krik? Krak!* Travel: *After the Dance*. Memoir: *Brother, I'm Dying*. Two novels for young people.

DIVAKARUNI, Chitra Banerjee. Novels: *Queen of Dreams*, *Mistress of Spices*, *Sister of My Heart*, *Vine of Desire*. Story collections: *Arranged Marriage*, *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives*. Published in *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker*. Author of three books of poetry and a children's novel. chitradivakaruni.com

DUBUS, Andre. Six story collections, his last being *Dancing After Hours*. Novels: *The Lieutenant*, *Voices from the Moon*. Essays: *Broken Vessels*, *Meditations from a Moveable Chair*.

DYBEK, Stuart. Story collections: *Childhood and Other Neighborhoods*, *The Coast of Chicago*, *I Sailed with Magellan*. Poetry: *Brass Knuckles*, *Streets in Their Own Ink*. Western Michigan University.

ELLIS, Sherry. Interviewer. Editor of the anthology *Write Now!* Interviews in *AGNI Online*, *Post Road*, *Writer's Chronicle*.

GAINES, Ernest. Books of fiction include *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Catherine Carmier*, *Bloodline*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, In My *Father's House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. Essays: *Mozart and Leadbelly*.

GOLDBERG, Myla. Novels: *The False Friend*, *Wickett's Remedy*, *Bee Season*. Essays: *Time's Magpie*. Stories in *Harper's*, *McSweeney's*, *failbetter*. mylagoldberg.com

GRESKO, Brian. Interviewer. Work in *Huffington Post*, *The Millions*, *Atlantic*. briangresko.com

GWYN, Aaron. Novel: *The World Beneath*. Story collection: *Dog on the Cross*. Work in *Esquire*, *McSweeney's*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Poets & Writers*. aarongwyn.com

HARRIS, Katherine Perry. Interviewer. Work in *So to Speak*, *Writer's Chronicle*, *The Writer Magazine*.

HARUF, Kent. Novels: *Eventide*, *Plainsong*, *Where You Once Belonged*, *The Tie That Binds*. Published in *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Best American Short Stories*.

HAVAZELET, Ehud. Novel: *Bearing the Body*. Story collections: *What Is It Then Between Us?* and *Like Never Before*. Oregon State University.

JIN, Ha. Novels: *War Trash*, *Waiting*, *The Crazed*, *In the Pond*. Story collections: *Under the Red Flag*, *Ocean of Words*, *The Bridegroom*. Three books of poetry. Boston University.

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

JOHNSTON, Bret Anthony. Story collection: *Corpus Christi*. Editor of *Naming the World and Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*. Harvard University.

KLASS, Perri. Novels: *The Mercy Rule*, *The Mystery of Breathing*, *Recombinations*, *Other Women's Children*. Story collections: *Love and Modern Medicine*, *I Am Having an Adventure*. Nonfiction includes *Treatment Kind and Fair*, *Every Mother Is a Daughter* (co-author). perriklass.com

LEE, Chang-rae. Novels: *The Surrendered*, *Native Speaker*, *A Gesture Life*, *Aloft*. Princeton University.

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

MALOUF, David. Novels: *Ransom*, *Untold Tales*, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon*, *Fly Away Peter*, *Johnno*. Story collections: *The Complete Stories*, *Dream Stuff*, *Child's Play*, *Antipodes*.

MARTIN, Lee. Novels: *The Bright Forever*, *Quakertown*. Story collection: *The Least You Need to Know*. Memoirs: *From Our House*, *Turning Bones*. Ohio State 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*. Memoir: *An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination*. elizabethmccracken.com

MELOY, Maile. Novels: *A Family Daughter*, *Liars and Saints*, *The Apothecary*. Story collections: *Both Ways Is the Only Way I Want It*, *Half in Love*. mailemeloy.com

MILLER, Sue. Novels: *The Senator's Wife*, *Lost in the Forest*, *The Good Mother*, *Family Pictures*, *For Love*, *The World Below*, *While I Was Gone*, *The Distinguished Guest*. Story collection: *Inventing the Abbotts*. Memoir: *The Story of My Father*.

MUN, Nami. Novel: *Miles from Nowhere*. Stories in *Granta*, *Iowa Review*, *Evergreen Review*, *Witness*, *Tin House*. namimun.com

NASHOLD, Jim. Interviewer. Co-author of biography: *The Death of Dylan Thomas*.

NELSON, Antonya. Novels: *Bound*, *Talking in Bed*, *Nobody's Girl*, *Living to Tell*. Story collections: *Nothing Right*, *Some Fun*, *Female Trouble*, *The Expendables*, *In the Land of Men*, *Family Terrorists*. University of Houston.

PARKER, Michael. Novels: *The Watery Part of the World*, *If You Want Me to Stay*, *Virginia Lovers*, *Towns Without Rivers*, *Hello Down There*. Story collections: *Don't Make Me Stop Now*, *The Geographical Cure*. michaelfparker.com

PATCHETT, Ann. Novels: *State of Wonder*, *Run*, *Bel Canto*, *Taft*, *The Magician's Assistant*, *The Patron Saint of Liars*. Memoir: *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*. annpatchett.com

PHILLIPS, Caryl. Ten novels, most recently *In the Falling Snow*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Foreigners*. Nonfiction: *A New World Order*, *The European Tribe*, *The Atlantic Sound*. Six plays. carylphillips.com

PHILLIPS, Jayne Anne. Novels: *Quiet Dell*, *Lark & Termite*, *Shelter*, *MotherKind*, *Machine Dreams*. Story collections: *Fast Lanes*, *Black Tickets*. Work in *Granta*, *Harper's*, *DoubleTake*, *Norton Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*. Brandeis University. jayneannephillips.com

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

RUSSELL, Karen. Novel: *Swamplandia!* Story collection: *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Work in *New Yorker*, *Granta*.

SALZMAN, Mark. Novels: *Lying Awake*, *The Laughing Sutra*, *The Soloist*. Memoirs: *Iron & Silk*, *Lost in Place*. Nonfiction: *True Notebooks*.

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

SCHUTZ, Greg. Interviewer. Work in *Sycamore Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Juked*.

SCOTT, Andrew. Interviewer. Fiction: *Modern Love*. Work in *Writers Chronicle*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*. Ball State University. Andrew Scott website

SHREVE, Susan Richards. Novels include *A Student of Living Things*, *Plum & Jaggers*, *The Train Home*, *Daughters of the New World*. Memoir: *Warm Springs*. Co-editor of *Skin Deep*, *Tales Out of School*, *Dream Me Home Safely*. Numerous children's books. George Mason University. susanshreve.com

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

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

TILLMAN, Lynne. Novels include *American Genius*, *No Lease on Life*, *Cast in Doubt*. Story collections include *This Is Not It*. Nonfiction: *The Life and Times of Jennette Watson and Books & Co.*

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

WASSERMAN, Eric. Interviewer. Story collection: *The Temporary Life*. Chapbook: *Brothers*. ericwasserman.com

WATERS, Mary Yukari. Story collection: *The Laws of Evening*. Stories in *Shenandoah*, *Triquarterly*, *Manoa*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Zoetrope*, *Best American Short Stories*, *The Pushcart Book of Short Stories*.

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