



CLOSE-UP:



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

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

Have there been some characters' voices that were easier to find than others?

I feel I got inside Jim in *Of Love and Dust* easily because I was thirty-three years old when I started writing that book, and I created him to be the same age. He uses the language I grew up around, living in Louisiana. Also, it wasn't too difficult to find Jefferson's voice, which is seen in his diary in *A Lesson Before Dying*, because I wrote the diary after I had been writing the novel for five years, so I felt I knew his character. Sometimes I have to rewrite and rewrite to get the exact phrases I want. I stick with south Louisiana and not places with accents I don't know anything about. ■

MAILE MELOY, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

Where do your own short stories typically begin? A scene or situation? A narrator's voice?

They almost always begin with a scene or a situation, often very small, always involving at least two people. But the stories don't go unless I have the voice. **It's like getting into a car with a tricky**



clutch, and you can either get it in gear or you can't. I think the voice has a lot to do with whether I can get the story in gear and make it go. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON, interviewed by
Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You've talked about your six "apprentice novels." Did you think of them in those terms when you wrote them?

Every time you do something, you try to do your best. I wrote those books over a rather quick time—two years. I never intended to become a writer. All of my orientation from childhood to college was as a cartoonist. But then, one idea for a novel occurred to me, and I had to write it because it wouldn't leave me alone.

Setting out to write a novel was something I was familiar with because I had friends who were writers. One very good friend, Charles A. Gilpin, to whom I dedicated *Faith and the Good Thing*, wrote six books by the age of twenty-six, then died of a rare form of cancer. I wrote my first novel, and it was rough. I realized that I needed to know more. I started another one immediately to see if I could improve things like character and plot. Then I wrote a third novel to see if I could improve structure. By the time I got to the seventh, I had read every writing handbook I could find. I understood a lot, but there were certain things I realized that I still didn't know.

By good fortune, I happened to be at Southern Illinois University, where John Gardner taught English. According to editors who had looked at my work, I needed to learn two things: voice and rhythm. Those were two things that John was quite good at. He was a narrative ventriloquist. John paid an extraordinary amount of attention to rhythm, meter, and cadence. And he was also familiar with philosophical fiction, which was the thing I focused on for those six books that I couldn't nail. ■

HA JIN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What are some discoveries you made as an evolving writer?

I think that if I really understand my material and speak from within the story, often the story will have its own demand for style. I think that's clear. For instance, look at *In the Pond* and *Waiting*. If you take out one sentence from each novel, they sound different. *In the Pond* is a comedy, and *Waiting*

is a tragedy. **The subject matter, the story itself, determines the style. Style is supposed to serve the story, not vice-versa. Sometimes as writers, we make mistakes and try to devise a style and make it fit the story. ■**

BARRY UNSWORTH, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

Do you research the language of each period about which you write? How much room is there for a modern consciousness in historical fiction?

We speak with the voice of our time. We have the sensibility and the modes of our day. We can't translate our own sensibilities into the past. All that's really required, I think, is that you should have a sense of the past, which I have discovered in myself over the years. This is one of the reasons that I write, for want of a better term, *historical fiction*. If one really used the speech forms and grammar and vocabulary of the period, it would be incomprehensible to a modern reader. It would be a type of expression beyond the normal capacity to read. Certain compromises always have to be made. You have to try to find ways in which the past can be constructed. The problem is not really to dwell on the past as such, but only to convince the reader, and convince oneself, that you are hitting the right note, that you are getting an authentic feeling of the period.

Then, through that, you must try to reflect the themes into the present. Without bringing conviction from the past, you won't be able to very easily bring conviction into the present, and you won't be able to do what I like to do, which brings analogies between the past and present. This interests me more than anything else when I write. It's a kind of sleight of hand, or confidence trick, or the usual fictional manipulation. **You have to just do enough to convince the reader that you're talking about a particular period and that you know that period. This relationship is very interesting and very complicated. ■**

MAILE MELOY, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

You have a great gift for writing both from the male point of view (as in your masterful "Aqua Boulevard") and about men (as in the story that opens your new collection, "Travis, B."). There is a wonderful line in "Tome," the first story in Half in Love, where the narrator, a competent female attorney, says, "I thought,



That's what it's like to be a man. If I were a man I could explain the law and people would listen and say, 'Okay.' It would be so restful." Is there a little bit of the author in that declaration? Is that why two of Half in Love's six first-person stories are told in a man's voice, as well as the only first-person story in your new collection? Can you share your thoughts about both female authors writing as men, and male authors writing from a female perspective?

I didn't realize there were so many male protagonists until I put all the stories together. I think part of the reason I like a male perspective is that it gets me out of myself. I wrote "Aqua Boulevard" at a time when I was working on "Tome" and other stories about women in the West, and I felt like I had that voice down pretty well, but I was so *tired* of it. So I started a monologue, not knowing where it was going, in the voice of a seventy-year-old Frenchman (mimicking a seventy-year-old Frenchman I know and love), just to get out of the rhythm of my own voice. And it was hugely freeing. So then I had to add other characters and make something happen. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE, interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

The importance of observation for the writer— isn't it everything, in a way? This is something I have said to students. A story may be told a million times, but only you can tell it. A writer brings what he or she sees to a reader, and in that translation is empathy and originality and the humanity implicit in recognition. ■

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

You seem to be comfortable writing things that people tend to steer clear of—a lot of first person and a lot of inhabiting people who are way outside yourself.

I didn't actually start writing in the first person until my sixth novel, and I didn't start writing the voices of women until my seventh book, which was *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*. The thing about the artistic unconscious is that, well, first of all, it's scary as hell there, and that's why to be an artist means never to avert your eyes, because your impulse, your deepest impulse, is to flinch, to look away. That's why so many writers are very comfortable in their heads—it's safe there.

And a little dull.

Yeah. So if you go into your unconscious and you don't avert your eyes and you do that day after day, story after story, book after book, eventually you will break through to a place where you are neither male nor female, neither black, white, red, nor brown, neither Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, nor Jew, neither Vietnamese, American, Albanian, Serbian. You are human. And if the authenticity comes from that deep place, and if your life experiences are eclectic and broad and intensely observed on the surface levels as well—because that's important—then you can draw that universal human authenticity up through the vessels of characters who might be, on the surface, quite different from you.

Part of the reason artists are who they are is so they can reassure the world that the things that seem to divide us—race, gender, culture, ethnicity, religion—are not nearly as important as the things that unite us. And we never question the artists' ability to do that in realms that I would suggest require a greater leap of imagination than leaping over matters of gender and race and so forth. For example, I am a middle-aged white male, born in the Midwest; I am an only child. A year ago last December, my parents celebrated their sixty-eighth wedding anniversary. And not a day has gone by when we have not been in contact with each other, and most days the word *love* is freely and sincerely exchanged.

It is a greater leap of imagination for me, I would suggest, to write in the voice of a middle-aged white male from the Midwest who came from a large family which suffered an early divorce and where the word *love* was never used, than the voice of a ninety-year-old Vietnamese woman who is an only child whose parents stayed together forever and was in a family where love was overtly expressed. We never question the artist's ability to leap over all those other kinds of issues, the deeper issues. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You discover over time what you can do and what you can't. Not everything is a matter of choice. As a young person, it became clear to me that no matter how much I admired Wallace Stevens or Henry James, I could never write like them. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, interviewed by Janet Benton:

I once heard you say something like, “If people are questioning the details in your story, if they’re saying something doesn’t seem plausible, the real issue is that the voice isn’t doing its job, because if the voice is strong enough, people will believe anything.” I mean, look at the first line of Kafka’s “Metamorphosis.”



Photo: John Cullen

Right. I don’t *believe* he turned into a cockroach.

So is that what takes awhile when you’re working on a book in the beginning, finding the voice?

It does. Once I find the voice, then I feel quite free and happy. I mean, in that hundred pages of this New England book, *Property*, I had a lot of trouble getting started. I often start too early in the action of the novel, and I wind up writing, say, forty pages before I get to the beginning, throw those away, and go on. At first I can’t hear the voice: It’s not coming in very clearly, it’s uneven, or I don’t know who this person is.

And what’s the feeling when you get the voice?

You just have this sense of ease. I mean, it’s a hard thing to describe. It’s not mystical, but then it is kind of mystical. It’s like meeting somebody. Presumably all these are voices that I somehow know. A lot of them are combinations of voices, I think. Some characters speak in the manner of people I know. Paul’s diction in *The Great Divorce* is very much a combination of some Kingsley Amis characters and John. So it’s a voice that I’m familiar with, certain turnings of phrase, certain ways of putting things. I guess Mary Reilly’s voice was the strangest to come by, because it really is so completely different from anybody I know. ■

CHANG-RAE LEE, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Don’t listen to anyone else. It’s great to get opinions and advice, but you need to follow the particular private passion or obsession that you have for a story, giving no quarter to anything else. In the end, that’s where writers come up with something unique. That’s why novels still mean something even in this age—they’re distinctive performances, utterly singular and surprising. Follow your passion. Feed your obsessions and in the end that will work best. ■

JULIA ALVAREZ, interviewed by Mike Chasar and Constance Pierce:

Certainly in Homecoming, and less, perhaps, in El Otro Lado, you use various traditional forms in your poems—in Annie’s anthology, for example. Do you feel any tensions between working in these forms and claiming and cultivating your own voice at the same time?

Well, I move back and forth. I want every room of our mother’s mansion—or our father’s mansion, as the Bible calls it—I want to claim them all. Why can’t we women write our own sonnets and sound like ourselves and not just be in sonnets as romantic decoration? Why can’t I want that?

I want a sonnet to be a place where a woman can have a cup of coffee and talk to a woman friend about something. And I want the sestina to be a form in which a woman who is Latina can put in Spanish words, then English words, since words and the repetition of words is so much what a sestina is about, and to have that weaving of the two languages. I want to be able to move into all these spaces and to populate them with voices that are human and humane, that sound to me like the people whom I know.

It’s not like, “Throw the white men out, here we come!” Their voices can be wonderful, too. It’s just that I shouldn’t be trying to write like a William Butler Yeats. ■

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

You’ve said that the mind of the story has an attitude, or a personality. Do you have a particular attitude that you find yourself writing?

I think it’s different in every story. Every story has an intelligence behind it. I’m on shaky ground here, theoretically, because I’m not sure I’ve worked this idea all the way out, but I know when I read any writer I’ve read a lot of, there’s something that transcends the individual work.

But every individual work has its own voice, as opposed to the writer’s. If the story’s in the first person, then the voice of the story is the voice of the person telling it to you, and sometimes these are clearly invented voices. Other first-person voices you can almost assume sound like the writer, but even so, there’s something that makes each individual work different. In some larger way there is an intelligence that transcends it, that is uniquely that writer’s.

I don’t know if I’m capable of talking about my own work that way. It’s a lot

easier for somebody to look from the outside. I can see that the voices of a number of the stories are related somehow. I notice that there are words I reuse and that there are sentence rhythms I find myself falling back on, and habits of composition. ■

STEPHEN DIXON:

My style didn't drive anyone crazy at first because I didn't have a style till my thirties. My early style was readable and functional and forgettable and inimitable because nobody would want to imitate it since it was the style of other writers, Hemingway and Saroyan, mostly. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, *interviewed by Nancy Middleton:*

At one point in Ruined by Reading you say that what you love to read isn't necessarily what you end up writing. That the subject chooses you—and even the style.

It's true that the subject of the story chooses you. But it's the style even more. I wrote about this in connection with Natalia Ginzburg, who wanted to write very lush prose, yet writes extremely spare prose. Bruno Schulz, a Polish writer who died in World War II, is a very fantastical and wonderful writer. His work is rooted in the banal, as my writing is, but he lifts his subject up out of the banal until it becomes surreal—an act of levitation. And I think, why can't I do that?

But you sit down to write and what comes out comes out. I don't mean you don't have any control—there's a lot of revision. I'm an obsessive rewriter. I love the rewriting process. Still, the result is not totally under the writer's control. ■

TOI DERRICOTTE, *interviewed by Susan McNinis:*

I was thinking about what attracts an artist to—not even to the material—but to that certain kind of energy that stays consistent. Over and above the content of the work, or even the themes of the work, there's a kind of a passion that artists have that is recognizably the mind inside the poem, or an energy inside a poem, inside the work of art. I think that's really what we like or dislike about artists. ■

BEVERLY LOWRY, interviewed by *Stephanie Gordon*:

I do a lot of discussion with my students about line editing and the creation of a personal writing style, or voice. My hope is that they will develop their own writing style, backed up with their own research and materials. So I suppose I am teaching a general merging of all those different elements. I also try to impress on them the need to write the book *they* have to write. However, the development of a personal voice is very important for a beginning writer.

Phillip Lopate came last year, and I suddenly had all these students writing what I called [laughs] “Lopatian” essays, which means that they were complicated, against the conventional grain, and sardonic. I emailed these students and told them that they didn’t have to write in his style—it had taken Phillip a while to develop his way of writing, his voice and attitude, you know, and they shouldn’t just go in there and try to please him by trying to sound like him. Or not necessarily. But in the end, some of them did it anyway and did it pretty well. So in that case maybe it helped. ■

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

I can’t understand a story without understanding its sound. That, for me, is the glory of writing. That’s where I find excitement and heartbreak and sadness and melancholy. That’s where I find it all. Unless I find that language, it’s hard for me to understand the story at all.



Photo: David Levenson/Getty

Jerry Battle comes to life in *Aloft* because of how he expresses himself. His particular American vernacular is something that I found, and if I hadn’t found that I couldn’t have written his story. He could have been a side character, but not the hero. That’s what sustains a first-person novel. Holden Caulfield is an interesting young man, but what we remember about him and delight in is the smartness and edge of his language.

Do these books come to you with that voice?

Yes, Jerry did and Hata did. In *Native Speaker*, Henry Park is trying on a lot of different voices. That’s something I was consciously working on. An exploration of language as a costume. The next book, which is in third

person, I had to find a voice for as well; more of an overriding voice, but a voice. ■

LYNN FREED, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I wrote some very bad, sentimental, predictable short stories while I was a girl. And then a few stories that were better. And then two novels. And only then did I find a voice with which I was comfortable, with which I was at home. This voice came first with a story, “Foreign Student,” and then, more strongly, with *Home Ground*.

I have no rules for this process of finding one’s voice, but I do know that, for me, it took time. Years. A decade or more. In other words, it took a lot of false writing to come upon a voice in which I could tell the truth as I saw and felt it—to know the truth as it was revealed through the writing.

This, I suppose, is what authenticity on the page is all about. It is an aspect of ear. So much of training in writing lies in the training of the ear, which is what I emphasize in workshops. What is more difficult to get across in this age of instant gratification is the time it takes, the lifetime it takes, to come to this. If ever. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE, interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

You have said before that for some writers, there is only one story. Why do you think this is so?

It depends on what fires the imagination. For the writer with one story, the story is often his own. But one story also pertains, I think, to the territory a writer takes on—returning again and again to the same actual, spiritual, personal landscape. The writer is recognized not only by voice, but also by a kind of repetition of character, place, subject, metaphor, or all of these things. ■

CAROLYN CHUTE, interviewed by Barbara Stevens:

Did you always have your own style?

I have learning disabilities. I have a lot of learning disabilities. I have a real problem with memory. I have a real bad problem with...word recall. And as I work, I can’t even hang on to a thought. It’s just gone. Some people say,

Oh, that's because you're a Gemini, but I just have a real struggle when I work, and I think I've had to work around those disabilities somehow and develop what I could do, and what I could do was work with dramatic situations, because I did have a lot of mess in my life, dramatic kinds of things.

I am a dramatic person. I have very strong feelings about things. When I get mad I bust up the house. When I'm happy I'm dancing around the house, and everybody's got to hear about how happy I am. So when I work, I work around that drama, around that sense of drama, around that sense of everything being very deeply felt. ■

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

A lot of writers tend to use very similar voices from story to story, similar characters moving through different circumstances. The voices in your three pieces are quite different from one another. How do you manage that?

I like to do different voices because what intrigues me about a story is the voice. So much of the stuff that I do is in first person. Not all of it. With *Big Fish*, you're not really sure what person it's in.

It feels first person.

But it's really first person about somebody else. The death scenes are in first person. He's saying, My dad did this, my dad did that. It is first person but he's never saying "I." In "The Main Thing," I had to rewrite the first paragraph or two, the first couple of pages maybe, fifteen or twenty times before I got the exact rhythm of the voice. And once I got that, I was able to get the character. Without knowing how he talks, I can't understand who he is. I can know all this stuff—you should be able to know when your character was born, what kind of childhood he had, what kind of socks he has in his drawer, but that information is not what catapults me into the story. I don't know that it's necessary to know all that information to write a believable character.

You draw a picture with the words that you use and the sound of the words that you use, the rhythm. It's like hearing somebody doing a great impersonation of a famous person. It makes no difference if you don't look at the person. You believe it is that person. So if you have the voice down, then I think that you've got the character down. Then you have to have a situation for the character to live in and something to happen. With this story, once I got the situation of the basic compulsion, the friction that made the

engine of the story go—which was his being overly admired by somebody he admired—all I had to do was to refine my idea of who the character is supposed to be. Once I get into that, then the story really moves quickly. But the beginning moves very slowly until I get the voice. And every story's different in that way. The voice defines the story for me. The last novel I wrote was very voice-centered as well. The character's a little unstable. That was all inspired by the way he was talking to me. ■

AMY BLOOM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

How did you develop your own way of writing a short story?

Ignorance is a wonderful thing. I read a lot of short stories. I didn't know any other writers. I didn't talk to any other writers. I didn't read any books on how to write a story. I guess the stories were taking shape inside of me, and I do read quite a bit. The voice was there. I don't understand it any better now than I did ten years ago. I'm grateful, but I have no idea. ■

JOYCE THOMPSON:

Not everyone would agree with me, but I think that every story has a unique voice. Every writer has a unique aesthetic. These are complementary but not exactly the same thing. The right voice for a story seems to know the story and tell it easily and well. The wrong voice stutters and stalls out.

It's not uncommon for writers to feel as if they've "channeled" a story, as if a voice found and used them to bring a story into the world. These tend to be the times we transcend our limitations and do our best work. Needless to say, if this happens to you, be available. Get to your keyboard and let her rip. Also note that it won't happen every time you sit down to write. It seems to be a reward for faithful practice, kind of like a karmic dog biscuit. Sometimes it's how one gets seduced into being a writer in the first place.

How do we stay open to new voices over a span of decades? Be at pains to stay open in every way possible, in mind, body, heart, and spirit. Avoid numbing routine. Refuse to think shopworn thoughts. Periodically learn new skills. Put yourself in uncomfortable situations. Exercise regularly. Read poetry. Listen hard. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

What's your process like when you're working on a novel?

It's the same process no matter what I'm working on. I work according to language. I work starting with language, so that my process is simply to work my way into the next sentence. Sustaining the voice of a book is level one, where I have to stay to move forward. I work very slowly, until I find my way into the middle of the book and I know what to write next by reading what I've already written until I know where to go next. ■

SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE, interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris:

What do you think is the hardest thing for writing students to learn?

Voice and character. Fiction—at least narrative fiction, which is my particular interest—is character, and character is difficult to create. To invent a credible and sympathetic character with the abstract tools of language is a tall order. The reader must know from the start with whom he is keeping company. I like to draw whimsical stick figures but have tried and failed in three-dimensional drawing, finding it too difficult to give shape to the image on the page.

And voice. I think of voice as some mysterious combination of one individual's true language and language itself, akin to riding a bicycle. Remember? Holding onto the handlebars, swinging your legs over the bar, feet on the pedals, pedaling, tumbling. Then magically, one day, you balance the bicycle. And away! You may get old and rusty and tired, but you will never forget how to balance. It's in your bones. ■

SIGRID NUNEZ:

You have a relationship to the world and to people and there is so much that you don't let people see. Of course, that's true of everyone. There's something about writing passionately or intensely that enables you to expose yourself, in a way, and show your mind at work and your imagination at play and what kind of sensibility you truly have. This doesn't have to be in an autobiographical work; this can be in any kind of writing.

I don't think that much of all that comes out in your daily life, so I think that you're showing *so* much of who you are and how you feel about things, and your view of the world, through your writing. Absolutely. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

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Typesetting and layout: Paul Morris

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