



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*.

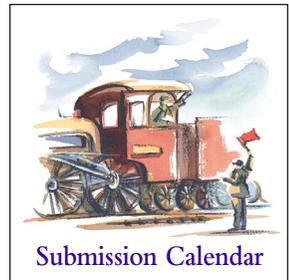
ANTONYA NELSON, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

I do think it's funny that James Frey tried to market that book as a novel and was told it was a lousy story and wouldn't sell as a novel, and then claiming it was factual made it possible to sell it. I liked that about it, that we're just interested in if it actually happened. ■

IAN MCEWAN, interviewed by David Lynn:

The distinction between fiction and nonfiction is one that really fascinates me, and I think some of the most interesting writing done in recent years has deliberately played with that boundary. W.G. Sebald, someone I admired a great deal, plays with this over and over again.

Recently in the U.S. we've had things that amount to scandals, although they don't strike me as that, where some writers have presented what are essentially novels or pure fictions as memoir or biography in some sense, and people have felt strangely betrayed by that, really furious and angry, as if there's a moral dimension to that confusion. What do you think of that? I



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think it is very recent that people have a faith that there is a truth that can be told so readily and are so abused when it turns out not to be that way.

Well, I feel a mixture of things. On the one hand, I think that there are things that are the case and there are certain other things that are not, and I'm not much in sympathy with the kind of relativism of, say, postmodernist criticism. I think we do know more now than we knew ten years ago about the natural world, for example. Fiction has always, right from its inception, certainly in the eighteenth century, liked to blur the distinctions. "In the town of M, stroke, in the year of..." So why is he not telling us the name of the town? Well, because he doesn't want to offend the real people who are living there. That old trick is one that we've all learned. I've constantly made use of real events, real people, or have my characters meet real people. In *Saturday*, Henry Perowne gets to shake the hand of Tony Blair, and it's the real Tony Blair, not the imagined Tony Blair. When someone says, "this happened to me" and it didn't, well I think the most fascinating thing about that is the outrage that follows, not so much the deceit. I know in certain recent cases there's been another matter, which has been plagiarism. In other words, you've stolen someone else's experiences or even imaginary experiences and claimed them for yourself.

That seems a different order of crime.

Yes, so this does seem more like pickpocketing to me, and for that you need to be fingered and named and shamed. But I don't know, it does show us that we care about these lines, and I think they ought to be drawn, actually. I do. I don't think we could just drift away in a cloud of unknowing relativism about this. Something happened to you or it didn't. Of course we all know that travel writing is fantastically smoothed and fictionalized, and many travel writers know that they collate events, leave out great stretches of boredom, make certain things happen in one place that probably happened in another, but it suits their purpose better or whatever...

It would be like actually transcribing the way people speak into dialogue. You would never write dialogue that mimics the way people speak; it would be boring and wretched. You're creating the illusion of reality. ■

DEBRA SPARK, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

In Curious Attractions, you are forthcoming with personal details, familial anecdotes, and so on, even though the purpose is to shine a light on how

you think about writing fiction. When you speak of your sister's death many years ago, readers begin to see how such an event might take shape in your fiction—certainly in Coconuts, where Maria Elena's sister has died, and in The Ghost of Bridgetown, in which Charlotte is sent to Barbados, in part, to escape the grief caused by her sister's death. How autobiographical is your fiction? And have you ever considered writing a memoir?

Well, my most recent work isn't autobiographical at all, except in the way all work is autobiographical. Lorrie Moore apparently once said something like, the relationship of a piece of fiction to an author's life is a bit like the relationship of a cake to all the ingredients in the cupboard. The cake isn't the baking soda—not by a long shot—but if not for the baking soda, you wouldn't have the cake. That said, in my first novel, there were elements of my family. Just to be rude, I like to say that the sex scenes were the only thing autobiographical in my second novel, but in fact, almost everything in that novel about the sister who died is true. That sister is off the page for the whole book, but when I referenced her, I often used true material. I probably was too close to my sister's death when I wrote that novel, and I really couldn't imagine past what had happened. The rest of *The Ghost of Bridgetown* is fiction, save for the fact that the book's clearly about a character's depression in the wake of her sister's death, and that was something I knew, of course.

I did write an essay about my sister Cynthia. I wrote it in the year after she died. As for a memoir, no, I never considered writing one. ■

YIYUN LI, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Tell me some of the first things you told your parents after you got here. If you don't mind.

Okay, the first thing. American bathrooms have toilet paper. Because that's the first place you go when you get to the airport. In China, you will go to a public bathroom, and you have to pay for toilet paper.

Were they surprised?

Oh, they say America is rich country.

Your father—did he also go through the Cultural Revolution?

He did.

How old was he?

The Cultural Revolution was from 1966 to 1976, and he was born in 1938. He was twenty-eight; he was in the prime of his career. He was a special case because just like in “Death Is Not a Bad Joke,” he worked for the nuclear weapons industry.

Whoa.

Yeah. So, we actually lived in this compound where everybody’s father was either a mathematician or physicist, and we were, in a way, protected from a lot of things happening in the streets because nuclear weapons is the one thing that was valued by the government, so nothing could mess up this research.

So your life was different from a lot of people’s lives.

Yes. But on the other hand, there were still influences. One of my father’s friends made a joke about Chairman Mao, about how when people were quoting Chairman Mao, they were thinking about really dirty things. Right away he was sent down and gone. So my father said, “Don’t ever make jokes.”

That would kill a sense of humor. Is there a sense of humor in China? Is it a large part of living?

It’s not. Well, now it is. **Chinese language doesn’t have the word *humor*—the word *humor* actually comes from English.** We translate it into *yumor*, as *humor*.

Now, in my history, in my family history, one way you cope with difficult things is to figure out how to laugh about them.

How nice. I wish I had learned that. ■

DAVID LEAVITT, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

Edmund White said in an interview that he would never run out of autobiographical material. This seems extraordinary to me. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve run out of autobiographical material. But the thing I notice is that the further I move away from autobiography, the more autobiographical, on a certain level, my books become. There are preoccupations and concerns that I cannot get away from. Even if I can get away from certain places or times or people, I can’t get away from my fundamental obsessions. These

obsessions always remain the same: authenticity and legitimacy. To what extent does one invent oneself? To what extent are we invented by the world we grow up in? These are questions I keep returning to because I can't escape myself. As much as I would like to, on occasion, I can't become a different person. ■

RUTH OZEKI, interviewed by *Kyoko Amano*:

Was your father like the character Lloyd [in All Over Creation]?

My dad was certainly not a potato farmer in Idaho. He was also a linguist at Yale. But the similarity was this: he was doing a lot of work with endangered languages, and at the end of his life, he was very aware of the fact that he had not written up a lot of his knowledge of Iroquoian language. He was a very beautiful and very precise writer. But he was slow. So there was a lot of information he had that he hadn't managed to write about. He hadn't finished. I think he felt quite tormented by the fact that a lot of information was dying with him. I took care of him at the end, and it was difficult to watch, the torment that he went through. We have these things that we care about passionately, but if you die too quickly, if you die too soon, you've got all these unfinished projects. And it's heartbreaking, especially if your unfinished project is a language that is endangered. So Lloyd, of course, is confronting the exact same thing in his life. The metaphor is that in my dad's case, we're talking about languages; in Lloyd's case, we're talking about seeds. Seeds and languages are similar in certain ways, and the sort of poetic struggle at the end of both of these men's lives is similar too. Who do you entrust your knowledge base to? How can you ensure that your knowledge is perpetuated? That's the kernel of the metaphor I was playing with at the end of *All Over Creation*.

Did you feel the way Yumi feels toward her father?

I suppose the conflict she feels when she's taking care of her dying father, the anger that she feels, is something that I understand, because there's something enraging about the impotence that you feel when a loved one is dying and there's not a damned thing that you can do about it. ■

NAMI MUN, interviewed by Greg Schutz:

Miles from Nowhere is narrated by Joon, a teenage Korean girl, a runaway. Meanwhile, you're Korean American, and your dust-jacket bio reveals that you've worked as an Avon lady and a dance hostess—jobs that Joon herself holds at certain points in the novel. Customer reviews on sites like Amazon and Goodreads show some speculation about this book being autobiographical. I know this is something that's come up for you in other interviews as well, so maybe we should begin by setting the record straight: What is the relationship between Joon's experiences in *Miles from Nowhere* and your own life?



Photo: Brigitte Sire

Considering that I also left home for good at an early age, and that I've held some of the jobs Joon does in the book, I think it's very fair for readers to wonder if the book is autobiographical. Emotionally speaking, the book definitely expresses some of the feelings I have felt in my life, but the actual scenes, dialogue, events, etc., portrayed in the book are very much fiction. To put it in numbers, ninety-nine percent of *Miles from Nowhere* is pure fabrication. The remaining one percent represents what I think of as kernels of real life that provided the spark for that ninety-nine percent.

Of course, many writers use real life or real emotions as starting points. Bruno Schulz comes to mind. As does Kafka. If you read Kafka's journals and letters, you can see how his strained relationship with his father gets played out in his dreams, and then later on in his fiction. **Hemingway is also a good example, because he often chose not to write about the actual events of his life but used the knowledge of them to strengthen his story. Omission is a big part of my fiction-writing process.** I keep real-life events in a basement reserve of sorts and hope that their fumes will rise above the floorboards and infuse my narrative.

What do you make of the urge to read fiction as if it were memoir?

I think readers have a tendency to read fiction as memoir because they understand that writing doesn't occur in a vacuum—that a writer's imagination often begins in real life and real experiences.

So why did you choose to write fiction instead of a memoir?

Fiction is my default writing mode. **Whenever I witness something odd**

on the streets or hear intriguing dialogue on the trains, my first impulse is to drop these things into my fiction bank. I don't have a memoir bank. Fiction, to me, is running through the woods rather than running on a treadmill. It's freedom to make up characters, setting, situations, etc.—and through this freedom, I feel better equipped to express and explore my ideas. Writing about “true” events feels constricting. My hours on the planet are already filled with so many constraints, why add one more? And in case you haven't guessed it already, I also don't like following cooking recipes; I hate reading instructional manuals; and my ideal meal is something that contains numerous varieties and options, also known as Korean food. I also prefer writing about things without writing about them directly. Finally, I am also somewhat of a private person, which means I need the veil fiction provides in order to unveil deeper truths about what I'm trying to express. ■

TOM GRIMES:

I learned that when you write a memoir, the narrator is not “you.” It's a *persona* known as you, and this distinction is important.

I've written five novels, but writing a memoir is a completely different experience. In one sense, a memoir is easier to write than a novel, given that all the material—your life—is there, waiting for you to recall it, rather than, as with a novel, to generate it. But the difficulty in writing a memoir is deciding what aspects of your life are *worth investigating*, and then finding the story contained in the random events of your past. Readers are not moved by incidents alone; they are moved by *the meaning of the incidents* that have changed the way you understand your life.

Writers speak of universality in fiction. To me, a good memoir also taps into a universal emotion, not on purpose but by the memoirist's act of observing him or herself as a stranger. Now that my book's finished, I often forget events in my memoir because, essentially, I was estranged from myself while I wrote it. Again, this is completely different from my experience as a novelist. When I finish a novel, I'm lonely because I miss my characters. But when I finished my memoir, I felt as if my life had been lived by someone else.

Consequently, I produced a continually surprising book that, in the end, not only taught me who I was but who I am. **So if you attempt to write a memoir, keep in mind that what you know about yourself is less impor-**

tant than what you *don't* know about yourself, because the mystery of who you are is, ultimately, the story you have to tell. ■

JAVIER MARIÁS, interviewed by *Eli S. Evans*:

What was the impetus to publish Your Face Tomorrow in volumes?

The main reason was a personal one. There are two characters in *Your Face Tomorrow* that are quite openly inspired by two real people, two old men: the narrator's father is inspired by my own father. I have borrowed many facts from his life and his experiences, mainly during the Spanish Civil War and afterward. **The conversations that take place between the narrator and his father aren't exactly conversations I've had myself with my father, but they might have been.** The character of Sir Peter Wheeler is based on Sir Peter Russell, who was, until ten days ago—he died on the twenty-second of June—a very prestigious Hispanist who taught at Oxford for many years. His real name was Peter Wheeler, and when he was seventeen or so, he changed it to Russell. In the first volume of *Your Face Tomorrow*, it comes out that Sir Peter Wheeler, the character, was originally called Peter Rylands and then did the same thing, changed his name from Rylands to Wheeler, whereas the real man whose name was Wheeler changed it to Russell.

When I asked him permission to base the character on him, I asked if I could use his real name, Russell, and then I asked him if he would prefer that I call the character Peter Wheeler, which was his original, almost forgotten name. He said, "Yes, I would like that, because this way I could know what happened to Peter Wheeler." But everything I say in the novel about Peter Wheeler's professional career coincides with the career of Russell, including his recruitment during World War II by the MI5 or MI6. So of these two men, one of them, Russell, had been born in 1913, and my father had been born in 1914, and by the time I was writing the first volume they were already very old. And you know those ages are so fragile, and in a way I saw that they were curious, and that they were even—*estaban ilusionados* [they were excited]—about it. But not just to read it, because of course I could have sent them a Xerox of the typescript, and I did, in fact, read the parts having to do with my father to him. But I noticed that they somehow wanted to see this published, and I thought, *If this takes me two more years to finish the whole book*—and this, of course, was when I was only foreseeing two volumes—*who knows? Maybe they won't live to see it at all.*

And, well, my father died six months ago, and Russell died ten days ago, and besides the sadness that those two deaths bring me, I am glad that at least they could see two of the volumes published, and probably the volumes in which both characters inspired by them most appear. On the other hand, they're still alive in the novel, and I still have to write a few things about them both, and I don't know how easy that's going to be now. ■

ELIZABETH STROUT, interviewed by Ashley Paige and Lindsay Purves:

Does your interest in people ever interfere with your relationships with them, if you're always paying attention to the way they're dressed and the way they move?

You'd have to ask the people. From my point of view, I seem to spin all the plates. It's like, as I'm talking to my neighbor about whatever it is we're talking about, I'm thinking, *How would I describe those teeth? There's a particular way her teeth are.* But I've done this all my life, so I think, *I don't think she knows that I'm trying to figure out how to describe her teeth.*

Our job as writers is to be as honest about what it means to be human as we can bear to be, and it's not an easy job. I don't mean that as complaining, because we are very lucky people to have this job. I think it requires being truthful in our sense, and using whatever experiences come our way and whatever observations we've absorbed. Not everyone's going to be happy about it. ■

K.L. COOK, interviewed by Lucrecia Guerrero:

I have read that you are now working on a new novel that focuses on the man Laura Tate eventually marries. If you originally created Laura Tate to better understand your mother, do you feel that you and your mother have been brought closer?

Yes, I'm about a third of the way into a novel, *The Man Who Fell from the Sky*, which focuses on the man Laura marries. He's also an important character in a few of the *Last Call* stories. This book is, in effect, the third book in what I like to think of as the *Last Call Trilogy*. **If *The Girl from Charnelle* is a love letter to my mother, then this new novel is one for my father.** I am currently the age that my father was when he died, so this is a particularly significant moment in my life to be writing this novel. The

book, of course, is fiction and largely invented, but his spirit animates the novel—which doesn't, by the way, necessarily make it easier to write. ■

SABINA MURRAY, interviewed by Leslie McGrath:

*How did you arrive at the idea of centering the stories in *The Caprices on the Pacific* campaign, and how did that time and place allow for an exploration of conquest, writ both large and small?*

My identity does figure in somewhat with that book. When the Japanese war machine pushed through Asia my family was, first, decimated, and, second, impoverished. **I grew up knowing that things can go really, really wrong and that history is personal. My grandfather was killed in that war, also an uncle who was thirteen years old.** Bodies routinely clogged the gutters of wartime Intramuros, and these are things that defined my mother's childhood. How does it define me? There's a hole there, a black hole that informs with absence. *The Caprices* was an attempt to plank over it, to see the shape of it. Of course, once started, things evolved differently. I didn't want to write another book about three generations of strong Asian women, even though there is plenty of easy inspiration for that sort of thing in my family. I became fascinated with the idea that Japanese colonialism replaced European colonialism, and that's what led the movement of the book. That's conquest writ large. I do write about soldiers, but what happens in the provinces and with civilians is as important: there's an upper pain threshold past which suffering becomes inconceivable—so I was interested in individual suffering. That's conquest writ small. That book starts with a woman standing on a village street and ends with the dropping of the atomic bomb. *The Caprices* can be read as an exercise in widening focus. ■



DEBRA MONROE, interviewed by Victoria Barrett:

*Let's talk about the relationships between memoir and fiction and between fiction and life. Any reader of your whole body of work—two story collections, two novels, your new memoir—will recognize themes and ideas, but also images and events. Your books, and *A Wild, Cold State* in particular, have always felt very real to me. And *On the Outskirts of Normal* is, not*

unexpectedly, true to your life. What is the difference, for you as a writer, between fiction and memoir?

The only difference between writing fiction and writing a memoir is that in writing fiction you have more freedom to create form. In fiction, you can manipulate and invent as you drive images toward meaning. That's the primary task in both genres: to force details to interact, and, in the end, to find meaning in them.

But you can't play fast and loose with details in a memoir. You can't augment or invent. You use details from life, and the craft decisions are selection, omission, and emphasis. Some details in life do portend and communicate. Others are random. Some have meaning that eludes us for a while. **In fiction, every detail means something, or you get rid of it. Writing a memoir, you are swamped with details from life, and finding out which ones mean something, and which ones don't, and what they mean, is harder work.**

It's the same work we do as fiction writers, but the field of focus changes because you can't invent. And your perspective narrows—we don't have a truly dispassionate relationship with our invented protagonists, but we can see an invented protagonist's blind spots more clearly than we see our own.

Even if my fiction has always been at least emotionally autobiographical, there comes a time in fiction when form takes over—you're writing a story, not recording a life, and so you impose a story-shape. You have freedom to depart from reality to impose that shape. You don't with memoir.

This is especially true about crafting the ending. It is part of the "rhetoric" of memoir to, at the end, draw conclusions, or seem to seek them. So putting a story-shape on real life—an ending that casts new light on the beginning and middle—is a delicate act. I had to craft an ending that felt authentic and factual, not mythic or escapist. In life we have few "endings" that are truly a clarification of the preceding events, and so a story-like ending is not real. Perhaps the ending of a memoir is a mere wish, the hope that you have learned and understood, more than it is a set of events or a conclusion. For me, the conclusions were tentative, and they didn't close the story as much as they closed an epoch, and implied another about to commence.

Your fiction, as well as the memoir, draws on your life a lot. How do you get the distance many writers feel is necessary to fictionalize life? Or do you see that distance as unnecessary?

A certain amount of distance is essential. Too much is a mistake. Many books have been written by writers who subscribed to the “write what you know” adage. *The Great Gatsby* and *Dubliners* come to mind. Having read Chekhov’s 900-page biography, I’d add him to the list. Virginia Woolf, too. I don’t think there’s anything inherently wrong with using autobiographical details as fodder. The misstep is to assume your life is a work of art. Even in a memoir, figures and details from life are the raw material that have to be crafted into a pattern, a shape. The necessary distance arrives as we create form. ■

J. KEVIN SHUSHTARI:

My biggest blunder was the constant use of exposition. I explained *everything* and left nothing to the reader’s imagination. At Boston University, my overly expository narratives drove my classmates crazy.



I was perplexed. How would my readers understand if I didn’t explain? People often assume that as a doctor, I write about medicine, but this is rarely the case. I’m the product of an Iranian Muslim cardiologist father and an Irish Catholic dairy-farmer mother, so my stories often deal with cross-cultural issues. The concept of home and the yearning for what is familiar are common themes for me. I need to transport my readers into a strange new world, one where well-educated, dark-skinned immigrants in three-piece suits drive tractors across hayfields to spread manure. Of course, I assumed I had to explain their customs and language. How else would the reader understand?

Sitting in Ha Jin’s fiction workshop at BU—he was trying tactfully, once again, to tell me that most of my exposition was clumsy and just plain boring. “Pretend we are already part of the culture,” he said. “Pretend we already understand.” **He suggested using clean, unfettered prose and leaving out all but the most essential information. The omissions would actually strengthen the work, he explained. Finally I got it, and a leaner prose style slowly began to emerge, one based more on action, and less on explanation and reflection.** ■

WILL ALLISON, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

Last year I came across a quotation about writing: “Stories start in autobiography and end in dream.” That pretty much nails it for me. I have a personal connection to most of the material in *What You Have Left* (e.g., I grew up in Columbia; my grandfather owned a dairy farm there; my father was a NASCAR fan and used to take my brother and me to the races; alcoholism, Alzheimer’s, and Karsakoff’s syndrome are all present in my family; etc.). **By the time the book was done, though, the autobiographical impulse was barely discernable to me.** The material had been thoroughly fictionalized. It had become part of the dream world of fiction. ■

KENT HARUF, interviewed by Jim Nashold:

What I try to do is write out of some deep emotion about something. I’ll hear something, or see something, or know something that touches some deep emotion that I’ve been feeling about any number of things, and that new awareness connects up with some older, deeper emotion, and my novels come out of that. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

All writing has a certain level of autobiography, whether it’s emotional or actual autobiography; we’re always drawing a little bit on our own experiences, and I am no different. I don’t write pure autobiography because I want the freedom to make things up. However, I do feel like I need something actual, something real to keep me going, a feeling that there’s something at stake. Often including actual events along with the fiction gives it a sense of reality. In *The Dew Breaker*, for example, there are actual people in there that others might recognize. For the characters to have actual people next to them lends a kind of reality and gives the fiction a parallel in real life, and that keeps me writing, gives me a sense that the characters and their troubles really matter. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How do you handle recognizable characters in your fiction?

No one’s recognized themselves, because no one character is based on any one person. They’re always a combination of people. In *Night Talk*, for

instance, the way that August taught his daughter about the world was very much the way my brother taught me about nature, but August is not like my brother, and my father wasn't similar to August. I use bits and pieces of people until a character comes alive in his own right. If I stay too close to a particular person, the character never develops completely.

Machine Dreams was set in what I remembered about my hometown, although by the time I wrote the book, my hometown had vanished. That's another thing about autobiography. By the time you write about something, it no longer exists. Memory is so faulty and so selective, that it's like the blind man and the elephant. There may be a certain piece that's very similar to what you remembered existing, but the whole is a very different reality than anything that really happened. ■

ALICE MATTISON, interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

How much of your work is autobiographical?

All through my writing life, in fiction and poetry, I've used the circumstances of my life, but I seem to need to use them metaphorically, so that only later do I realize the connection. I'll write about a family in turmoil because I'm in inner turmoil. The scenarios in the stories embody the conflicts within me, but it's as though all the characters are parts of myself. I've urged my students to do this, too. Sometimes after I've finished writing a book, I realize what it's about, emotionally, for me.

Hilda and Pearl, for example, is a novel about loss and what one loses and what one keeps. It's about a woman who loses her child and who loses a whole lot about her marriage, mostly mutual trust, but she gets a friend, an intensely important friend, who is her sister-in-law. I had started having vision problems in the 1980s, and somebody asked me if I'd ever written about my eyes. Subsequently, I wrote an essay about the vision loss, "The Disappearing Teapot," but at the time I said no. But then I realized that *Hilda and Pearl* was about that loss, and I had never known that. When I lost some of my vision, I began writing better fiction, and I think that was the loss and gain behind the book, though it was probably about other things, too. There are slight connections to my family, but I don't write directly autobiographical stuff, or hardly ever.

In what ways did your fiction improve?

Maybe it became more urgent. I don't know if the vision loss caused the

change, but surely it's possible—when outward seeing deteriorates, the imagination could become stronger. ■

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

Big Fish is total fiction. There was no dying father, or even particularly ill father, in my own life at the time when the book was written. Obviously the myths and the death scenes are all created. People sometimes think the death scenes are transcriptions of things that happened between me and my dad. But the deeper truth, the more important part, I think, is the emotional truth behind the story, which does exist in my own life. The desire to understand the person—my dad—who probably had more of an effect on me than anybody else. So that is the furnace that drives the book. ■

SANDRA CISNEROS, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Let's talk about the disclaimer at the beginning of the book Caramelo. One might almost think that you didn't want to take responsibility for what was in the story. But that certainly isn't true...

No, I actually wanted to admit that characters were based on real people. But I wanted to also say and be truthful that it's based on real people but it isn't autobiography. Many books that you read, they have those disclaimers that say that none of the events and none of the people are based on real life, and so on. Well, I don't believe that. I think that, as human beings, many people touch us, especially people we love the most, and we can't help but do character sketches when we go to our art. I felt that I was taking some real filaments of my life, some real memories, but I was embroidering from that and departing from that and leaping ... especially plot. So much of the plot was invented. Even if the characters were not. ■



Photo: Alan Goldfarb

ELIZABETH COX, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

How much of your work is autobiographical?

Probably all of it, but I change it, or else it comes from something I've heard about. I use events from my life, and then I revise them. My brothers

comment on how strange it is to read names and places that are familiar, yet events have been changed, or to see a mixture of both brothers in one character. I take from everything I see and hear, from my own secrets and the secrets of others. I use everything, I just don't tell it straight. I don't use it in a way that is strictly autobiographical. The break-up of a family was written right after my divorce. Some of the things that the children said were from my own kids, but what happened in the book is not what happened to me. The pain of it is true, though. I wanted to put the pain in straight. ■

MARY GORDON, interviewed by Charlotte Templin:

I think it was Annie Dillard who said that one challenge for the memoirist is deciding what to put in and what to leave out.

Yes, and in that it's not unlike the shaping of fiction. In the end, there is a form; there is a shapeliness that makes demands, and it's really a formal or almost a rhythmic question.

Would you extend that at all? Is memoir writing not that much different from fiction writing?

It is and it isn't. It has formal demands, demands of shapeliness the way that fiction does. There are some things, which, if left out, would make an untruthful record. Memoir has a responsibility to truth, or the truth as best as you can tell it. That is to say, if you willfully suppressed something—well, there is no point writing a memoir if you don't want to tell the truth as you see it. To deliberately fudge something that made you look better, or made someone else look better—that's the kind of issue that comes up in memoir that does not come up in fiction. In fiction, it doesn't matter if you want to make the character look better or worse; you do that.

One of my students was telling me about a memoir by Toscanini that was distorted to enhance the image of the writer.

I have a lot of trouble with Lillian Hellman. The books work very well as literature, but they are morally flawed. There are moral issues in memoir that don't come up in fiction.

Pentimento is a wonderful book.

It is wonderful, but it's quite untrue.

William Zinsser said one writes memoir to justify one's life—to oneself, presumably.

I think that is very true. I think that if you're a writer, you only believe you've got something right if you wrote it down, and I think it's a way of checking if you have understood yourself correctly. ■

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

For my money, you're usually gonna come up with something a lot more interesting if you take some of the emotional truths that your life presents you with, and then rediscover them through re-imagining them and going from there. That's how I do it. That's what makes it fun for me.

If you stick too closely to your own experience, you have a built-in ceiling to that story. It's not going to go anywhere, or it's not going to go as far as it could. ■

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

I see myself and the selves of my characters as being a collage of a lot of different things, of real experiences, and things that were made up, and things that I saw on television, and things that I read—fantasies, memories, desires. It's a patchwork.

I was talking to my mom this summer, and found that neither of the first two things I remember in my life ever happened. I remember them very vividly. One of the things could have really happened when she wasn't around, but she was there in the other memory. I remember it vividly, but apparently it didn't happen. My advice is that if you don't like to hear that, then you should never ask your mom about these things. It's very interesting to see how much we're able to superimpose our own version of our lives on the events of our lives. People say, "The past is the past," but nobody's ever talking about their whole past. Everybody's editing. Everybody's doing what, in a sense, a fiction writer is doing—taking snippets of detail, the ones that seem to matter, the ones that seem to count, and assembling them into a life. It's what I do when I'm putting myself together, take these snippets and put them together into a coherent form.

What's interesting to me about that is that I don't think it's stable or permanent, but always subject to revision. That's one of the things that a couple of

people in this book [*A Stranger in This World*] are doing. They're suddenly having to find new versions of themselves because the old persons would never have done that. I've noticed, from watching people, that when you've lost the version of yourself, you really have lost something of value. Whether or not it was particularly accurate, or particularly useful, or particularly constructive, or made you happy—having to move from one version of yourself is essential. ■

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

When we published “Backmilk,” you provided a wonderful picture of your great-grandmother. What gifts do you imagine she would, or has, bestowed upon your children?



It's odd, but it's sort of like a guardian angel looking over us. There's a great deal of ancestor worship in a lot of African cultures, and I wonder if some of that hasn't rubbed off on me, because I feel very aware of my great-grandmother, and yet I know almost nothing about her. Much of what I write is filling in gaps of stuff I couldn't possibly know. That's how I came to write “Backmilk.” It's a merging of my life and my daughter's life, because I couldn't really tell you what happened in my own infancy. But I can see my daughter's birth, so I merge the events together... I would like to think that I am getting an idea of the importance of spirituality. It seems so hokey, so corny to us when we're younger, and there's also the if-you-can't-explain-something-it-doesn't-exist idea that so much of our culture has.

Writers often start with autobiographical materials that they are pushed internally to write. Do you have recommendations for people to help them create a piece of fiction that works?

One thing is to try not to embellish too much. I mean, you can add things from other people's experience that relate. I like to throw everything into a story. Someone tells me there's too much going on in a story, I'll throw in more stuff, because life is complicated, and I think a story should be as well. There are so many things that are acting upon us. If you want a simple motivation-action sort of story, then you should go into the juvenile-literature section. Life is not that simple. But at the same time, they should trust their experiences. I oftentimes have my students write down the strangest job

or the worst job they've ever had, or whatever seems to stand out in their minds. One person used to clean out chicken cages, which to me would be the most awful job in the world—the stench, and I'm not a vegetarian, but what a cruel existence. I had a professor who used to repossess wigs. If they didn't make their payments, he would go and get their wigs. I had to wear the Winnie the Pooh costume. I was claustrophobic, and my head was stuck in a honey jar like in the story. You should just trust the material. That's where I get in trouble. After I first write a story, I spend all the drafts trying to take myself out of it. I mean as a writer, taking out clever little sentences that don't belong, or forced humor, or forced pathos. Though I don't think you ever really succeed...

My stories usually are a combination of my experiences and the experiences of other people. The novel I'm working on is bizarre and darkly comic, and yet almost everything in it either really did happen or nearly happened, or is an exaggeration of something that happened. Yesterday, I saw a pair of very expensive sunglasses in the bottom of a urinal and started thinking of what the story was behind that. Did they belong to a very fastidious person that would never touch them again? And then, of course, nobody else would. There are so many stories going on. ■

PAUL THEROUX, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

I put in “Lady Max” all the happy moments: my London happiness. That's a story about writing in London, for anyone who's wondered what the writer's life was like in London if you were of that age. It was set around 1978-'79. How old was I then? Thirty-six, thirty-seven. I don't know if that's old or young. I felt very much on top of things, in some respects. In other respects, I was sort of living on Grub Street. Jonathan Raban was part of that life. Martin Amis was just a little guy working as an assistant at the *New Statesman*, and I used to see him every so often. And then there were more grand figures around, like Angus Wilson, V.S. Pritchett, Anthony Burgess.

So I deliberately wrote that story to encapsulate that wonderful experience—the experience of living in London, writing during the day, the winter. I always loved writing in the winter when it was dark. ■

KATHLEEN TYAU, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Nearly every story in this collection [A Little Too Much Is Enough] appears to revolve in some way around food. Why food?

It's not really food but eating that fascinates me. Chinese and Hawaiians are very fussy about what they eat. I know they're not the only ones, but they're the ones I know best. Once my mother came to visit me in Portland. She drove down from Seattle with two of my uncles and an aunt. But they couldn't stay long because they had to drive back to Seattle in time to buy fresh crab before the market closed. I was disappointed, but I didn't take it personally. I mean, you just grow up knowing what's important. One day, I sat down and wrote a list of foods I remembered eating and then just started writing. I turned this list into titles—such as “Uncle Joey's Squab,” “Avocado Uncle,” “Spoon Meat,” and “Fifty-Dollar Pineapple”—and before I knew it, I had started writing a book. ■





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