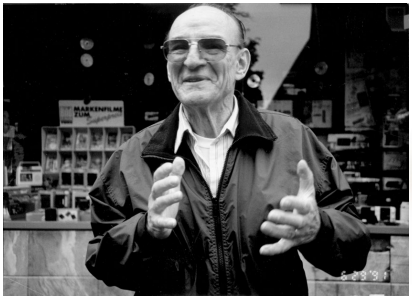

Close-up:

DEscription and detail

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

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

In each novel, there are many details that are fact, and others that are based on fact, and still others that are invented. When is it important to use actual details, and when does the imaginative work to better effect?

There's not one answer to that question. Every story, every novel will dictate its own answers to questions of research. **When you're writing fiction, you don't ever have to use anything real if you don't want to, but it's a lot easier.** If you're trying to create a convincing setting, you want to start with reality. You can't start from scratch because that's impossible. Given that that's the case, you use research to give yourself enough of the real-world fabric to get yourself in there.

In the case of *Wickett's Remedy*, I used research until I could look and see things without using research anymore. **Research at first was a mental tool to help me inhabit that time period and those people. If there were details that stuck out or grabbed me and I realized that I couldn't do any better than that, I used them.** Often the world is going to supply you with better things than you'll

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be able to come up with anyway. With *Wickett's*, so much was already there, I ended up not inventing much at all. There was no need to. But it totally depends on the book.

In *Bee Season*, all the salient facts are real. Using the real world as much as possible is neat because there is this indeterminate fuzzy blending line where the fact and the fiction meet and you don't really know where that is. Reading books like that makes a more intense experience because you can identify material that's true so that when material comes in that you're not sure of you can allow yourself to trust it. The real world can be your friend in that way. David Mitchell or Kevin Brockmeier try to integrate fantastical elements in their fiction, and trying to integrate the real world as much as possible in those can be a very helpful thing in gaining the trust of your reader. ■

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON, *interviewed by Margo Williams:*

I think it was Eudora Welty who said something to the effect of detail being the lifeblood of fiction, and I agree with her most vehemently. Much of my revision process is spent narrowing the focus of a draft, finding the key and telling detail rather than the vague and familiar generality. There are only a few writers who can give us those gorgeous litanies of details—Alice Munro comes to mind, and Melville—but for the rest of us, the goal is to imagine the singular detail, the one that opens up the narrative universe most efficiently and elegantly. Research perfectly addresses this need because it forces the writer to venture outside her own existence and experience. When I give the assignment to my students, they tend to balk at first, but once the research is incorporated into their stories, they rejoice. I've never seen it not improve a story exponentially, mine or anyone else's. And I have to say, both as a reader and a writer, I find it thrilling. The prospect of diving into a library or bookstore, scavenging for the perfect noun or verb, that small piece of language that will transform a sentence from generic to specific, makes me almost pant. ■

ELIZABETH STROUT, *interviewed by Ashley Paige and Lindsay Purves:*

Do you think it's true that writers often write about the same things over and over again—things they've been obsessed with their whole lives?

Absolutely. I'm a huge believer in obsessions. I think that they're fabulous

and I think that they're too often kicked out of kids at a young age, and that we sort of get homogenized. I think they should be encouraged as long as they're not hurting the child, like shooting heroin or something, because they reveal passion and that's essential, especially to a writer. There's a huge pull on us to be more like each other, but you have to allow yourself—dare yourself—to acknowledge those obsessions and compulsions and to go for it. Absolutely. I can chart my obsessions.

Tulips, doughnuts, pharmacists were all small obsessions. Bigger ones were older men, which obviously got played out in *Amy and Isabelle*. Doughnuts—I happened to be living near a doughnut shop and I was just eating them all the time. People in Maine eat a lot of doughnuts; I was bred on doughnuts. That's a small obsession. My mother is probably the obsession of my life.

The doughnuts and tulips are all part of an intricate web of details in your books. How do you make these details match up?

I'm always revising and making sure each thing is necessary. "Is this necessary or is it just gratuitous? Why am I doing this?" Then maybe by the end of the story there are other details that I realize need to be put in. I think the reader craves some sense of unity, which can take many different forms. It happens unconsciously for the reader, but the writer has to be responsible for giving the reader a sense of wholeness. You can do that in so many different ways, and one way is to make the details all have something to do with each other, to make them slightly connected, even if it's just shapes. Just so the unconscious mind of the reader is feeling and getting an experience that's the whole moment. ■

FREDERICK REIKEN, *interviewed by Eric Wasserman:*

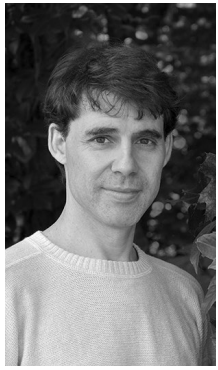

Photo: Barbara Brady Conn

You use period references in Day for Night*, particularly concerning the 1980s, that are rather subtle. For instance, mentioning a Sony Walkman or Skee-Ball strikes me as more interesting than simply naming a popular song of the time. How can writers use subtle detail to ground the reader not only in a place but, what is often more difficult to capture, a time?*

I think you shouldn't do it consciously as a writer. If you are trying too hard to incorporate period references then chances are good that you're just giving a catalogue of details,

in which case the best you will do is evoke the time and place, rather than grounding the reader in it. **I think what I am saying is that as a writer you need to be able to inhabit a time and place with your imagination if you want to create a compelling sense of it for the reader, to the extent the reader forgets that he or she is reading and just feels transported to another time and place.** It's easiest to do this if you've actually lived through that other time, but you can also do it with thorough research. Ultimately, it's a matter of being able to take either what you remember or have gathered and project it as a vividly imagined reality for yourself—a kind of guided fantasy that you are writing down as you have it. The subtle details should just find their way in of their own accord, in the same way that the best metaphors are not things you plan. ■

MARY GAITSKILL, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

In describing Veronica, Alison says, "From a distance, her whole face looked askew, puckered like flesh around a badly healed wound." How do you arrive at these evocative details, and is it difficult to find the details that nail the most essential aspects of character?

An image will spring into my mind, then I have to search for the right words to describe it. Translating the visual picture into words is the real task. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

An antique bowl appears in each of the three stories [in Specimen Days*], linking them through time and space. "Simon thought he could see the bowl on another planet some time in the next century, sitting on a shelf, where it would silently reflect an alien light. This small and fragile object, bearing its untranslatable message, was the entire estate of a woman who had intentionally deformed her child and then abandoned him. The bowl would travel to another sun, although it was neither rare nor precious." This is a device that playwrights often use to link scenes upon a stage. How did you arrive at the white bowl? What meaning does it hold beyond connecting the narratives?*

I wanted there to be an object that would be passed from person to person and story to story. It stands in, really, for *Leaves of Grass*, or any great book that has a life of its own, and outlives its writer and its readers. The object could have been all kinds of things. I settled on a bowl because it

has such resonance. I know I'll sound pretentious when I say this, but what the hell—I mean, the Holy Grail, that golden object James wrote about, etc. Plus it's an object and an absence. It's a thing in itself and it's a thing that wants to be filled with something else.

That last line reminds me of a comment you made about a scene in Marilynn Robinson's Housekeeping*, in which divers seek survivors after a train wreck. All they're able to retrieve are a suitcase, a seat cushion, and a head of lettuce. You loved that Robinson had chosen three inanimate objects, and one of them perishable. Why?*

I think I love that line in *Housekeeping*—I love almost all the lines in *Housekeeping*—primarily because it's such good writing. She evoked a disaster by focusing on three inconsequential objects and, by so doing, not only implied the greater loss, but said something marvelous about the simultaneous inconsequentiality of objects, and their stubborn habit of outlasting their owners. Everyone on the train died, but a suitcase, a cushion, and a head of lettuce survived. ■

LIN ENGER:

As young writers we were urged to write what we know—good advice, if it means that we should locate our stories in a tangible world we can feel and breathe and move through, populate them with people as complicated as those we love or joust with, and dramatize them with situations taken from the nuances and trappings of a culture we understand. Plot is artificial, the imposition of an order rarely found in real life. Plot we make up or piece together from other plots. What other choices do we have? **But the smell of the air when a storm is coming, the way a train whistle carries in the rain, the difference between a lever-action and a bolt-action rifle, the change in a child's voice when frightened—these things have got to be right.** And it's through these details, as they are filtered through our experiences in the world, that a story unfolds. ■

NAM LE*, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

How did your work as a lawyer—that day-to-day office job—prepare you for writing full time?

Mostly in a negative way. It made me realize all the things I didn't want in that lifestyle. **I didn't want to work for anyone. I didn't want to have**

to wake up for anyone. I didn't want to have to wear the stuff that they wore, and I didn't want to be mindful of the certain persona that one adopts in those situations. I didn't like the hierarchies, either. The work was the most interesting part about it, but as a junior lawyer, you don't always get the most interesting parts of the most interesting work.

What was your role?

I was an associate in mergers and acquisitions, and in corporate litigation. Litigation was quite interesting. In a larger sense, that kind of work teaches you to just get the words down. There's an ethos of discipline that the law instills. I don't think on the language level there was much cross-fertilization at all, but I will say that there are moments when you're drafting legal documents when you adhere to the precision of deliberate ambiguities. In a sense, I reckon I've both adopted that technique and evolved from it in my creative writing. At times, I'll go for a minimalist approach, and at others, I'll say, No, let's throw this tie away and put on some tracksuit pants and get indulgent. ■

E.A. DURDEN:

Photo: Abigail Seymour

Writing fiction gives me the perfect excuse to do what I have always loved: put myself in others' shoes. It is a kind of voyeuristic act, this business of writing fiction. You must sneak into the imagined lives of others. You are like a cat burglar, except you forget to steal the silver and get distracted instead by the types of food in the cupboards, or by a pile of old postcards on the bedside table, or a jar of maraschino cherries left open in the basement. You know what other cat burglars would go for—you know the standard list of valuable items, and you check those out along the way—but you can't help but be fascinated by the things that most burglars would never notice. You linger in these strange and lovely rooms, a trespasser, an observer, one who makes meaning from the tiniest things: a straw hat in the hall closet, a pile of buttons on the desk.

You get immersed in this thievery; you prowl and you pick, and if you're really graceful, and lucky, you disappear. You are like Michael Ondaatje's thief, who sneaks his way through *In the Skin of a Lion* and *The English Patient*. In the first, he is caught, imprisoned, and assigned work detail,

forced to paint the jail's roof the same color blue as the sky. After hours of tedious, dangerous work, he comes to a realization: if he, too, is painted blue, the guards will not see him. Ondaatje writes:

> And that was how he escaped…Buck and Patrick painted him, covering his hands and boots and hair with blue. They daubed his clothes and then, laying a strip of handkerchief over his eyes, painted his face blue, so he was gone—to the guards who looked up and saw nothing there.

Like the thief Caravaggio, we fiction writers must disguise ourselves; we must suit ourselves with stolen goods, in order to vanish into the lives of the characters we create. We do this not for the stereotypical reasons—because writers are screwy, or mentally ill—but because we seek a truth that can only be found through individual stories. And the more we disappear, the more of our story's "blue" we soak ourselves in, the more likely we are to escape the cliché, the expected, and arrive at the sort of wild, unvarnished truths that really make up our world. If most of us are quick to call the craziest events we hear on the news or from our friends "stranger than fiction," then most fiction must not be strange enough. For surely it is the job of fiction to portray the full spectrum of human possibility, to remind ourselves of everything we are capable of—from exploring the heavens, to breaking out of the clink. **As Flannery O'Connor reminds us, "Fiction is about everything human and we are made out of dust, and if you scorn getting yourself dusty, then you shouldn't try to write fiction."** You might have been told not to sweat the small stuff, but, in fact, the small stuff is all we fiction writers have got.

And so there you are, in someone else's house, painted the same color as the walls, creeping around, eternally compelled. You collect these tiny things and you bring them close to you, and they transform your understanding not only of the people whose lives you are studying, but of life in general—the "dust," the idiosyncrasy. You fall in love with the people you steal from—their hair combs and failures, brooches and breakfast cereals, the faces they make in the dark. Eventually you leave—like Caravaggio, we all have to leave sometime—but you don't forget. And here's the really perplexing part: after you've taken all these pieces from the house where you found them, from the lives to which they belong, and you've made something of them, they begin to look a little less shiny, less fascinating. And that's when you know you're done with that particular house, with that particular story—and it's time to move on to the next. ■

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

In many of my novels there are things that seem to be just episodic, things that seem to be just descriptions in themselves, belonging to what Roland Barthes called "the sense of the real." But later in the book it turns out that they were not so episodic, that in fact they were an important part of the story. Sometimes this is something I myself find out, and sometimes I foresee it. In my novels I try to have what I sometimes have termed a system of resonances, or a system of echoes, which is more than just mere repetition. If an image, for instance, reappears, it should also illuminate retrospectively the previous occasions on which it appeared. The reappearance of motifs, we could say, usually changes the motifs themselves. ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

You render character with a mere brush stroke, using metaphor and physical description. For example: "Miriam Naumann is a hummingbird in human form, her wings too fast to be seen without a stop-motion camera. The silver in her hair makes her seem electric, her head a nest of metal wires extending through her body." How do you arrive at these details?

That's all improvisation for me, literary jazz. The process of writing is having that appear. I get into a groove with it and I'm just going and going. It can be a problem for me because I can go a little heavy on that stuff and I have to cut back on it. When done right, it adds to the work, but it can get overbearing. When I'm right in there, that's the stuff that happens for me spontaneously as I'm moving through the language on the page. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

You work in some interesting facts about Catherine's job [in "The Children's Crusade"], taking calls about potential threats from around the city. "She red-tagged the Englishman and Jesus Mohamed, thus setting into motion the inquiries into their lives and natures that would cost taxpayers nearly fifteen grand. She wondered if these people knew, if they had any idea, how much money and muscle they could summon just by making these calls." How did you go about conducting the research for this novella?

The deterrence unit, where Cat works, is wholly invented. I thought about basing it on fact, but nothing the police actually do fit my purposes very well. I decided, What the hell, it's fiction, we get to make things up.

It feels real because it's grounded in physical reality and intricate detail about the job and the characters who work there with her. Was this sense of realism difficult to achieve?

Any sense of realism is difficult to achieve, and it's that much harder when you're trying to write convincingly about that which you've entirely fabricated, though the principles are fundamentally the same. This is something I always talk to my writing students about. **You want to choose a detail, or two or three, that conveys the whole, and ideally those details should be both accurate and unexpected, so the place or person in question feels both well and newly observed.** The central detail I picked for the deterrence unit was that it would be shabby and underfunded, staffed by people who are for the most part neither the best nor the brightest; that it would be nothing at all like the high-tech ultra-capability of, say, the TV series *24*. It didn't feel like much of a stretch—look at what we've learned about the operations of the CIA and FBI. Look at how the FBI has spent a gazillion dollars of taxpayers' money and still hasn't come up with an actual, working system of computerization.

This also provides a commentary on life in a post-9/11 society where the reality of terrorism has changed society's reaction to potential threats.

Anyone living in New York City—and probably anyone living anywhere in the U.S.—must feel more nervous in the post-9/11 world. How could we not? ■

IAN McEWAN, *interviewed by David Lynn:*

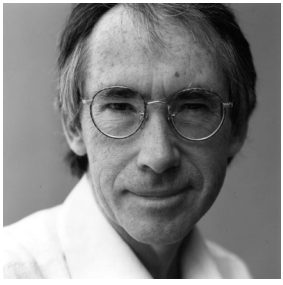

Photo credit: Eamon McCabe

Speaking of the pleasures of the language, that reminds me of the great American stylist John Updike. In an earlier conversation you mentioned to me that you particularly liked and admired his work. How have you found Updike important for you?

I can't claim him as an influence, much as I'd like to, because I've never really written like him. But there is the little twitch or spring or little "knight's move of consciousness," a phrase which I know I read in a book of his, but he claims not to know where it is, we can't find it and he thinks he almost certainly stole it from Nabokov.

Sounds like Nabokov.

A scientist friend of mine says that actually a famous neurologist of the twenties used this phrase. So, anyway, that's a hunt to be conducted. Still, it nicely captures the spring in the step of a good Updike sentence. Sometimes it's a matter of a word inversion, slightly off the normal nature of Standard English. He is a natural metaphor maker, simile maker. He has a marvelous eye. He is the one who follows Conrad's prescription to make you see. I mean I think he is the most extraordinarily visual of writers, and maybe that's what I admire in him above all and aspire to in my own writing—to make you see, to get to the heart of any emotional exchange or any transaction or any set piece. **It's crucial, in my view, to have the reader see, and that is not to say that you've got to lard the page with masses of description, but key, vivid, specific details, like little starbursts in the darkness, I think have emotional consequences. If you can see this then you can feel it.**

You don't want to get bogged down in metaphor. But Updike is full of these superb descriptions. When Rabbit, for example, rows his granddaughter out to sea and has a heart attack: the description of the vividness of light and water and sound before this terrible event happens. Clearly you're being set up or sense that there's some great physiological change occurring within Rabbit, and in this indirect free style you know that it's Updike, but it's also Rabbit, and that something terrible is about to happen. Why is the world becoming so vivid? Or in *Roger's Version*, when the character takes a thirty-page walk through a decrepit part of town and there's a description of a puddle with a bit of oil slick in it refracting light as in a rainbow. A couple of paragraphs I think there are just exquisite.

Do you think that this facility with images has something to do with Updike's fascination with visual art, his work as an art critic?

I'm sure—I think it must be inseparable from it and, I mean, no question that it's a different side of the same coin. He has a very strong visual sense. I like writers generally—and Nabokov is another who is supreme in this respect—who recognize that forty percent of the brain's processing is given over to the visual, and the visual region projects deep into other parts of the brain, of language and emotion. We are visual creatures and the novel, more than cinema, for me is ultimately a visual medium. ■

JOSHUA HENKIN:

I urge my students to find conflict in their stories, and to play out that conflict on the page. I need to remind them of this over and again because they are deeply conflict-averse. Their stories are usually well written, often with real attention paid to character, but nothing happens in them. They write

about watching—no doubt, in part, because, as writers, they are watchers themselves. They are also subtle to the point of obfuscation. They are terrified of sentimentality, so they rob their stories of sentiment, which is essential in fiction. Charles Baxter writes about some of these issues in his wonderful book of essays *Burning Down the House*. I encourage my students to read those essays. ■

SIGRID NUNEZ, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

In the case of your five novels—do you remember them?

I'm often surprised in what I have forgotten in them. For example, I have been trying to improve my German—so I said, "I know what I will do, I'll read my own books in German. I will know a certain amount, which will help me, and my mind prints are all in them, which will help me to understand them, and it'll help my vocabulary and help get a sense of the structure of the language." So I've been reading *Naked Sleeper* in German, and I am surprised in what I have forgotten. The book came out in 1996. I remember a great deal, of course, but I have forgotten quite a bit. Which is actually all right with me, except for the fear of repeating—which is bound to happen. I'm not going to read my own books to make sure—

What might you repeat, situations, a character?

No. A remark, an observation, maybe a name. Above all an observation of some kind, something I might have a character think or say that was already said by a character in an earlier book. That's my fear. And you'd look foolish if you did that, but—

Maybe not, some things are worth repeating. [Laughs.]

That might be, but I think you would look foolish if you inadvertently used something you'd already used in another book. But being a writer you have to accept that you are going to look foolish now and then.

As opposed to other occupations that guard you from looking foolish.

I mean in print. ■

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

Eleanor [in Disappearing Ingenue*] is confronted with loss in every story, and although the losses are traumatic, they do not ultimately debilitate her. She*

discovers unexpected and unconventional ways to cope at every stage of her life. Could you comment on what I see as Eleanor's irrepressible resilience?

I wanted her to be resilient. She needs to be. **It's a fact of life that hearts are broken again and again in different ways. We lose loved ones; our dreams are dashed. The key to growing as a human is to understand that, yes, hearts break, but they break open. With each breakage, we become more fully human.** On some level every story is a story of love, as well as one of innocence. Eleanor's heart breaks in some way in each story, but the experiences help her grow and understand as well as appreciate life more fully. There's a French saying that—roughly translated—says: "To understand is to forgive. To forgive is to heal." If Eleanor can understand, she can forgive. If she can forgive, she can heal. ■

ERNEST GAINES, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

I'm looking for something beyond what the average person will ever notice…my antennae are out for sounds, for physical things that I can see, and they pick up all sorts of things. I suppose that's what makes the writer different from the other person, that his antennae can absorb these kinds of things. ■

DAVID LONG:

You never want to supply something the reader can supply for herself. Descriptions of places, for instance. If you're going to set something in a café, you don't need to describe the café very much because people have been in cafés. It's like a Japanese painting—you just need to do a little of this, and that's a mountain range—what I call getting past what people already know. Your job is to provide those few critical details that supplement what people already know, and make it specific.

Push your sentences until they say something interesting. Here's a tiny example, from Denis Johnson's story "Work." A badly hung-over man is helping a friend salvage copper wiring from his ruined house: "I felt weak. I had to vomit in a corner—just a thimbleful of gray bile." Picture the second sentence stopping at the word *corner*; picture it minus the word *thimbleful*. Keep coming back to your work. Sneak up on it. You don't have to solve all the problems at once. The more sittings, the more likely you are to find unusual things to add.

Name names. Make your writing physical. Use lots of exact nouns. *Food* is an idea; *black-bean soup* is a thing. Naming not only makes the writing more visceral, it makes the reader trust you. And use your own expertise, whatever "insider information" you have. Use words like *soffit*, *draw shave*, *spit valve*. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

What were the challenges in writing a story not only set in a historical time and place, but in the midst of an actual event?

Action scenes and journey scenes where people have to cross the mountains were difficult. The scenes where I had a big crowd were challenging as well. I had to write much broader scenes than I ever had in the past. It was like going from painting watercolors to painting like Delacroix. It was a leap for me to describe this crowd and the long journey. I had to create a sense of the journey by offering specific details about the rocks and the mountains and how the landscape changed. For the crowd scene, I had to pick out a person, and then another person, and I was only able to write the scenes when I was able to visualize it for myself so that I could go back to it again and again.

In both cases—the scale and the fact that it was set in a time I hadn't lived in—I found that writing details helped. Certain details added authenticity and I made use of lots of them.

How has addressing these challenges helped your work as you move forward?

Well, having done it once, it's less intimidating to try it now. So I feel I have a little bit more range. But as I was writing, I read a lot of books with large, almost epic scenes and watched how the writers handled them. That helped a lot. Movies, too, were helpful in that I would watch where the camera goes during a particular scene. When you're watching or reading with a writer's eye, you can't help but observe certain techniques. When you're in story mode, you learn from everything. ■

JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson*

No matter what the voice or style or technique of a piece, my work is always grounded in very physical, sensual detail. That has to be present because the work tries to go so far spiritually, and the reader can't move inward without being extremely grounded in the physical details of the piece. The piece can't move off without first being completely real and convincing. We're all concerned with what reality means. Does it mean anything? Is there anything besides this moment or this room? What are these dimensions that we inhabit in our thoughts, which are not physical, or in our dreams, or in our memories?

Literature is operating in that territory, in a dimension that isn't real, yet it can connect with the real in a way that's sensory. It can trigger memory that is actually sensual, such as memories of smells or feelings or tastes. You work your way into a psychic understanding through the real world. You do it every day in your life, and you do it in your art. ■

DAVID HUDDLE:

A writer's resource is his or her individuality. We all share a common humanity, and we're also infinitely various. The fiction writer hopes to articulate exactly that singularity of experience where each one of us sees, touches, smells, hears, tastes, thinks, and feels in configurations that are unlike those of everybody else. John Dewey must have had story writers in mind when he said, "The local is the only universal." Write the story of the blizzard from the point of view of the single snowflake. ■

ANNIE PROULX, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

What is useful is eavesdropping, listening, talking to people in an informal way, sitting around tables swapping stories, listening to kids. I might take notes, too. And I keep huge notebook sketches. I have one that's just physical descriptions: faces, postures, walks, the way somebody's elbows point outward, their complexion, the cast of their eyes, any scars, pockmarks, peculiar gaits, accents, odd ways of holding the mouth. So all these things I'll write down at odd moments as I travel.

When I approach a new novel, I know the characters I want and will look through to see if I can find a physical description that fits. I also work a lot from photographs, especially when I'm doing something that is set in

a particular period. I'll spend weeks with books of photography from the period and place, and study them very carefully, again to get the right kind of bone structure and build and clothing. ■

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

I have tremendous impatience and lack of interest in conventional description. It tells me absolutely nothing. Sometimes I can better describe a person by another person's reaction. In a story in my first book, I couldn't think of a way to sufficiently describe the charisma of a certain boy, so the narrator says,"I knew girls who saved his gum." So you're describing through somebody else…

Compression has always been hugely attractive, and rhythm, whether it's in a sentence or a line.

Why do some people dislike compression?

You mean they like everything spelled out. Certain critics go after you for that. I don't understand it—I really don't understand it. Because to me, I pay the readers the compliment. I mean, I'm acknowledging that they're smart enough to get it. They don't need everything spelled out. They live downtown, they've seen tall buildings. So I don't understand it. Because you don't hear—or at least I haven't seen it—the same complaints brought to poetry. I think that my concerns are more a poet's concerns and always have been. I don't understand why these things in a story would be criticized, whereas in a poem it's the norm, it's what you expect. But I guess some have certain expectations of what a story is—that a story can be this, but not that. I think it really has come from a more provincial sense, a restricted, limited sense of story, and what it can do. ■

RON CARLSON, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

In "Blazo," and in every story I write, I try to approach human problems step by step, in whatever situation the characters find themselves. In Kotzebue, Burns is put up against what he finds and doesn't find there—his mission, the cold—and what happens to him and in him creates the story. But if the story is about a man and a woman changing a tire on a remote highway—less inherently dramatic perhaps than a storm blowing up in Kotzebue—you've nonetheless got to convince me of the highway, the tire, the night, the margin, the shoulder, the gravel under their knees, the lug

nuts, the difficulty getting the whole thing apart and back together,and the smells. You must do that. But that's not what you're there to deliver. That's the way you're going to seduce me. What you're delivering is, Who are these people?

Think of it as a two-person quest story: Two people on a highway changing a tire. Two people in space trying to fix the solar-star dish that powers the huge space vehicle taking refugees off the doomed planet. Either way, it's the same story. You have to convince me of the star dish and space suits, but after you've got my shirt caught in the machine of the story and you've drawn me in, what you're really going to crush me with are these hearts and these people. Who are they? How are they affected by the pressure they're under? ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

In the story "Seed," radishes serve as a metaphor. You write, "But these radishes had no juicy crunch. They were as rubbery as boiled jellyfish and required rigorous chewing. Shoji didn't seem to notice—he was often exhausted when he came home—and lately Masae fancied that he was absorbing the radishes' essence. Since they had come to Tai-huen, something about him had shrunk in an indefinable way, as if an energy that once shimmered right below the surface of his skin had retreated deep into his body." How did you develop this metaphor?

I think it comes down to using details that you're familiar with. I happen to love food in general, so it's always fun to use it as metaphor. Grated radishes are actually a common dish in Japan— you mix them with dried whitebait and a little soy sauce. Fresh radishes have that nice juicy crunch, but old radishes get tough and rubbery because they're trying to conserve what little water they have left. When you're exposed to something all the time, it's much easier to see them as metaphor, to find fresh parallels. ■

KENT HARUF, *interviewed by Jim Nashold:*

There's quite a bit of understated humor in your books. In The Tie That

Binds*, one of the funniest scenes is when Edith is milking the cows and the cow's tail slaps her in the face.*

I intended that to be funny, and corrective of the romantic notion that milking cows is glorious or fun. Part of it was also my own revenge for when I milked cows as a way of making a living for my family once. It was a good education, and it was hard work. I started milking at three in the morning and went back again at three or four in the afternoon. What I describe in that scene actually happened to me. An old cow wrapped her tail around my head and I wanted to kill her. So it was my literary revenge on an actual cow.

You lovingly re-create the detail of ranch life, which is fast disappearing. Such details as cutting hay or taking care of cattle are integral parts of your writing.

I've been interested in ranch life since I was a kid and heard my dad talk about it, and then spent time with my brother on his ranch. I do know something about that, but I'm no expert. It's very important to me to get those details accurate. The passage of the cow wrapping her tail around my head was read aloud to me by a dairyman on New Year's Eve. We were both drunk enough that he called me out to the kitchen, opened *The Tie That Binds*, and read that passage to me, and then stabbed his finger on the page and said, "That's exactly right, goddammit." That to me was the greatest compliment I've ever had, because it came from somebody who knew exactly what I was writing about and who was an expert. ■

ANNIE PROULX*, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

Have you kept up with friends or acquaintances you made in Newfoundland?

God, yeah. When we were talking about the details of things, I was going to tell you this story about a couple who came down to visit. This detail never would have occurred to me. I haven't written it down anywhere, but it's a great story to tell. This couple lives up on the Great Northern Peninsula, at the far end where the only trees are low-growing tuckamore, no trees higher than your waist; it's all bare rock. They came down two falls ago and stayed at the house when the leaves were at their height, and the day they came we had a big hugging and squeezing and so forth. It was nighttime and we ate a big dinner and all that. And the next morning they went out onto the deck, or the wife went out onto the deck. She came back in with

her eyes on stalks and she says to her husband, "Come out 'ere!"

"What is it?"

So he goes out there, and they're talking excitedly, and I thought, What the hell is it? Maybe they're seeing deer up on the hillside. They have moose in Newfoundland, but not much else. And I went out there, and they turned to me with this expression of ecstatic surprise on their faces and they said, "They makes noise!"

"What makes noise?"

"Leaves! The leaves is making noise!"

You know? The wind blowing through the leaves? They had never heard that. Here are two adults who had never heard wind blowing through leaves. And that's the kind of thing you want to watch for. You've got to find these things out. There's nothing like a fresh eye—and that's my best example of a fresh eye in a place. No one who lives in New England would have noticed wind in the leaves ever, ever, ever. It took someone from away to see it: the value of the outsider's eye. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

You choose physical details that draw your characters quite distinctly and also serve to create an intimacy between the characters and the reader. For example, in The Mistress of Spices*: "Geeta's grandfather still walking like a military major though it has been twenty years. His shirt ironed stiff with pointy collars, his steel-gray pants perfect-creased down the front. His shoes, midnight-black Bata shoes spit-polished to match the onyx he wears on his left hand for mental peace." How do you arrive at these carefully placed details?*

Often I get a very strong visual image of the character. I'm always happy and thankful that it happens, because it doesn't always happen right away. Quite a lot of the characters in *The Unknown Errors of Our Lives* don't have physical descriptions. In that case, what I'm doing instead is focusing on their mental habits. It's not so much their physical attributes that I'm concerned with but their mental states. This is another way of making a character come alive. In that book, I realized I was moving toward something different—not consciously necessarily, but I noticed that I was more inter-

ested in describing characters through their thoughts or internal habits. In this book, you're very aware of the tone of a character, and the whole tone related to the work. I'm thinking particularly of a story like "The Blooming Season for Cactii." We see everything through Mira, the main character's eyes, and it's not until almost the end of the story, when she looks in the mirror, that the reader sees what she looks like. Yet by then we very much know who the character is. ■

MARIA FLOOK, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

You often use the lyric image to reveal character and to instill a deeper resonance in your narrative. For instance, in the story "Rhode Island Fish Company," a teenage girl has a tattoo that's oozing. The narrator, her aunt, recalls seeing statuary in Greece. "I had seen marble limbs discolored, worn concave at the wrist and fingertips, marred by centuries of human touch. Unchecked, these habits of adoration can wear away their subjects." Readers feel the narrator's struggle to give the girl space and not smother her with love. How do you arrive at a particular image? How do you then develop the image into a revelatory statement about character?

That's like asking how a poet writes poetry. It's an eruptive and only partly controlled mechanism in its first manifestations. The psycho-intellectual disturbance that an image creates works to engender a parallel between external and subconscious elements in the narrative. The lyric image evokes an instant recognition, unlike exposition,which accrues differently. Image is supreme statement. It's the lightning-bolt instant when perception crosses over from intellectual wisdom to spiritual knowledge. En masse, lyric details are a magic adhesive in fiction; they are the marrow jelly in the skeleton, and without it a narrative would seem staid and anemic. But there's always a risk that the lyric detail will be disruptive or distracting,so it's a constant struggle to find the image that propels the emotional current, but doesn't sweep you off course.

Regarding the image you mention, I have seen ruins and art treasures that have been deformed by tourists' manhandling—and I suppose this goes into the image bank that writers have stockpiled and nurtured throughout our lives. The image surfaces, it strikes, but it's not a conscious decision. We recognize the immediate connection it has, and then we try to write it down as well as we can.

Of course physical description must be impelled by real experience and by

real-life sightings of our world around us. But there's another element in writing physical detail that has to do with sensibility, vision, even attitude. Writers have idiosyncratic, even idiopathic ways of seeing. The writer John Berger writes, "Seeing comes before words.… The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled.…"

Recently, I reversed a familiar idiom in conversation. By accident, I said,"I'll see it when I *believe* it." But this reversal makes sense to me. Seeing requires belief. Belief informs our vision. To see requires we have unity with our subject.

In regards to the actual "things"and "stuff"that I notice and later put into writing, of course I'm always eyeing the curious, threatening, or compelling instants I might witness. These come from both urban life and from the natural world. In my memoir, I describe burrowing beetles, insects that climb into a mouse or small animal corpse and make it wriggle and twitch so it looks like it's come alive. They're also called marionette beetles because they can move a dead animal as if it were on puppet strings. ■

JOHN McNALLY,
interviewed by Stephanie Kuehnert:

Photo: Wake Forest University

What was your writing/rewriting process like with "The Vomitorium"? Can you compare it to what you went through with other stories?

I wrote the first draft longhand over a series of days while sitting up in bed at night. It came together relatively fast for me. The Roman theme didn't come into play in the first draft until about a third of the way through the story. Ralph was originally going to be dressed as something other than an Etruscan. While I was writing that story, my wife was taking Latin, and her professor was telling her things about the Etruscans. She would tell me these things as I was literally writing the story, and on the third day or so of writing, I realized that Ralph would be the perfect Etruscan. After that, the Roman stuff threaded its way into the story and ended up playing a large part. It's what one of my professors, Allan Gurganus, called the story's "third element"—that is, the sort of detail that can be removed from a story, but with it in the story, you end up with something richer, more three dimensional (hence,"third element"). I can't imagine the story without the Roman details. It, of course, affects how the story ends.

I bring my own obsessions and/or quirks into my stories. That's why, say, *Planet of the Apes* references might show up in my fiction. I was a huge *Planet of the Apes* fan when I was a kid, and you can't shake that sort of thing. As an adult, people give you odd looks when you reference a movie like that; but in a short story, it's funny and weird and maybe a little obsessive on the narrator's part, but it's okay. My own life works its way into my stories more and more these days, but in quirky details, rarely in obvious, autobiographical ways. ■

MONICA WOOD:

You should certainly strive to make your reader see what you see; the trick is in finding details that allow for an accurate vision. Learn to include only the details that matter—the ones that suggest more than they describe. Say your character is a wino living in a refrigerator box. You could describe him from head to foot, including his missing teeth, the corrugations on the cardboard box, the broken laces in his boots. But who are you really describing here? Any wino, that's who. What's interesting about this particular wino, however, is that he is vain. The only detail that matters, the only one that suggests to the reader a character rather than a caricature, is that he wet-combs his hair every morning with a carefully placed part. That's the detail that will let your reader see beneath the surface. ■

ELIZABETH COX, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

When I'm writing a story or novel, I don't think about craft. When I'm editing I think about it, but not when I'm writing it. I use detail in order to see the moment. To be inside the moment we must use the senses, to see the cloth someone is wearing, to feel a breeze or the brush of a hand, to hear a door open, to taste an apple or a lover's neck. The use of the senses brings the physical experience closer. That ends up being craft, but when I'm writing I'm not thinking about the physical sense, I'm actually smelling, tasting, hearing, seeing, touching. Later, during the editing process, I make the moments more clear. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum*

I've written an essay about how most writers now don't describe faces anymore, either as an index to character in the way the nineteenth-century novelists tended to do, or as a dramatic inflection. You are more likely to get descriptions of clothes or body language than you are of faces. I just wanted to ask myself why.

Some of the great scenes that I recall from movies were where an actor said something with eye movement—some facial gesture that might have lasted a nanosecond.

The Quiet American is a good example, the way Michael Caine uses his eyes in his acting. And two of Charlotte Rampling's most recent films, *Under the Sand* and *Swimming Pool*, are all eye acting. In the essay, I was particularly interested in what Paula Fox does in some of her novels. She likes to crowd her characters, get them into very narrow spaces, put them under a great deal of stress, so that they are constantly having to look at each others' faces to see what the subtext is of the remark that each one has just made. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson*

You often use a metaphor as more than just a point of comparison. You use it to further paint the world of the characters that exists beyond the page. In The Mistress of Spices*, for example: "But today the light is pink-tinted like just-bloomed karabi flowers," and "Saturday comes upon me like the unexpected flash of rainbow under a bird's black wing, like the swirl-spread skirt of a kathak dancer, fast and then faster." While the narrative isn't talking about the kathak dancer or the karabi flowers directly, here they are adding a glimpse at the world of the characters. Are you aware of this as you work?*

This comes fairly organically. What I'm trying to do is to think the way the character is thinking, and what are the connections the character will be making depending on their background. Human beings often think by analogy and by remembering and by comparing. So that when we're faced with something new, we think, not even consciously, but subconsciously, "This is like…" And not every character will do that. Some characters don't think that way. ■

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

CARLSON, Ron. Novels: *The Signal*, *Five Skies*, *The Speed of Light*, *Truants*, *Betrayed by F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Story collections: *A Kind of Flying: Selected Stories*, *At the Jim Bridger*, *The Hotel Eden*, *Plan B for the Middle Class*, *The News of the World*. Nonfiction: *Ron Carlson Writes a Story*. Arizona State University. ron carlson

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

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ENGER, Lin. Novel: *Undiscovered Country*. Work in *Ascent*, *Great River Review*, *Wolf Head Quarterly*. Minnesota State University. lin-enger.com

EVANS, Eli S. Interviewer. Work in *n+1*, *Quimera*.

FLOOK, Maria. Novels: *LUX*, *Open Water*, *Family Night* Nonfiction: *Invisible Eden*, *My Sister Life: The Story of My Sister's Disappearance*. Emerson College. mariaflook.com

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*.

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HEMPEL, Amy. Story collection: *Collected Stories*. Brooklyn College.

HENKIN, Joshua. Novels: *The World Without You*, *Matrimony*, *Swimming Across the Hudson*. Stories in *Ploughshares*, *Southern Review*, *Yale Review*, *Triquarterly*. Brooklyn College. joshuahenkin.com

HUDDLE, David. Story collections: *Not: A Trio*; *Intimates*. Novels: *La Tour Dreams of the Wolf Girl*, *The Story of a Million Years*. Anthology: *A David Huddle Reader*. Several books of poetry. University of Vermont.

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

KUEHNERT, Stephanie. Interviewer. Novel: *I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone*. stephaniekuehnert.com

LE, Nam. Story collection: *The Boat*. Fiction editor of *Harvard Review*.

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

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

LONG, David. Novels: *The Inhabited World*, *The Falling Boy*, *The Daughters of Simon Lamoreaux*. Story collection: *Blue Spruce*. Nonfiction: *Dangerous Sentences*.

LYNN, David. Interviewer. Story collections: *Year of Fire*, *Children of God*. Novel: *Wrestling with Gabriel*. Editor of the *Kenyon Review*.

MARÍAS, Javier. Novels in translation include *The Man of Feeling*, *Dark Back of Time*, and the trilogy *Your Face Tomorrow*. Numerous collections and works of nonfiction.

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McINNIS, Susan. Interviewer. Center for Distance Education, Fairbanks, Alaska.

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NUNEZ, Sigrid. Novels: *The Last of Her Kind*, *A Feather on the Breath of God*, *For Rouenna*, *Naked Sleeper*, *Mitz*.

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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

PRITCHARD, Melissa. Novels: *Phoenix*, *Selene of the Spirits*, *Late Bloomer.* Story collections: *Disappearing Ingenue*, *The Instinct for Bliss*, *Spirit Seizures*. Arizona State University. melissa pritchard.com

PROULX, Annie. Story collections: *Bad Dirt: Wyoming Stories 2*, *Close Range: Wyoming Stories*, *Heart Songs*. Novels: *That Old Ace in the Hole*, *Postcards*, *The Shipping News*, *Accordion Crimes.*

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STROUT, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Burgess Boys*, *Abide with Me*, *Olive Kitteridge*, *Amy and Isabelle*. Queens University. elizabeth strout.com

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

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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*.

WILLIAMS, Margo. Interviewer. Work in *Beacon Street Review* and the anthology *The Big Picture*.

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