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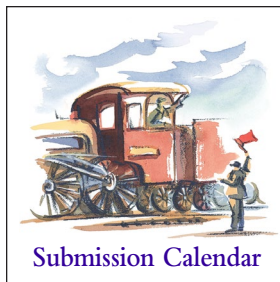
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

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

I'm not the kind of writer who knows everything before I start writing a book, or even while I'm writing it. I improvise a lot, and I change things, and in fact I've said a hundred times before that what I really like, in a way, is to find a story out. I like to remind people that the word *invention*, etymologically, comes from *invenire* in Latin, which means to discover, to find out, to find. So in a way, to invent and to find out are, at least etymologically, the same thing, and that's what I like. If I knew beforehand everything that was going to happen in one of my novels, I probably wouldn't even write it, because I would get bored in the process. I've done that in maybe one or two stories in my life, and I was bored, and found that it was almost like completing a bureaucratic task. ■

CHRISTOPHER COAKE,
interviewed by *Andrew Scott*:

I do like to challenge myself. A big moment for me during my MFA degree was a



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French-cinema course I took from the wonderful cinema scholar Judith Mayne. I loved seeing what some of the New Wave directors did—the way they were able to flourish, to change everything—within budgetary constraints. That same year I saw, in the theater, a reissue of Hitchcock’s *Rear Window*. It was revelatory, too, for the same reason. Hitchcock put himself into a box—almost literally—and, in pushing himself to get out, made one of my desert-island movies.

I wrote “All Through the House” in that spirit. I kept asking, could I tell a story without ever pointing the story’s “camera” anywhere but at a single meadow in the woods? Can I tell a story that moves backward, and still get it to resonate? Same with “Cross Country”—when I was drafting that story, I’d written a couple of exploratory pages with something very different in mind, without deciding the relationship between the man and the boy. And then it became an experiment—can I write another page? And another? Can I write an entire story without revealing the relationship? What sort of story would that be?

Others in the book are more traditional, but they still made me stretch. **What would a Slovenian woman’s voice sound like? Can I tell an emotional story (“In the Event”) in more or less real time, in the space of a night, without ever waking up a young boy? Those challenges were all difficult, and they all paid off. I had to walk a tight-rope with each one. ■**

D M GORDON:

There is plenty of advice available on how to structure narrative. Begin with the end in mind. Don’t begin with the end in mind. Travel blindly and surprise yourself. Make an outline. ■

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

When you are communicating with your characters, or your characters are communicating with you or whatever it is that’s going on, do you feel like there’s any chance that you are drawing upon something more than creativity?

Yeah, I think there’s quite a good chance. Many times during the writing I feel like I’m channeling something as opposed to inventing it. Without getting too mystical about the process, it would not surprise me at all if there’s

some connection between the process of artistic creation and some other aspect of human beings that may well have an existence or a reality beyond the apparent ones. ■

PETER HO DAVIES, interviewed by Jeremiah Chamberlin:

A friend of mine, Mike Hinken, a writer whose own work I admire, has a theory that writers who were formerly scientists have an inherent interest in systems and patterns, in identifying and classifying, and that those impulses might go a long way toward the way in which they utilize structure and form. Would you agree with this assessment?

I think that might be true. To look at the most recent stories of mine, those logical progressions aren't very far from certain things I enjoyed about science: you follow the progressions and they make sense, they fit together in certain ways. So I'm certain that those kinds of impulses played through.

But unlike someone such as Andrea Barrett or your colleague here at the University of Michigan, Eileen Pollack—both of whom also have very strong science backgrounds, and in whose writing scientific elements often show up, either in the lives of their characters or as story components—you rarely write about science in your work.

I guess that's because I was a bad science student. Frankly, I don't think I'd ever write about science well or with much authority. But also, while I was studying science in Britain, I was a double major. The degree was called "Physics and the Analysis of Science and Technology." I studied the history and philosophy of science as much as the physics itself. I remember being particularly struck by Thomas Kuhn's ideas of the scientific revolutions and the notion that scientists are engaged, most of the time, with what is known as "normal science." You work with an accepted theory and an accepted hypothesis without questioning them. But the more scientists work within a theory, eventually someone will bump up against the limit of it and find a flaw in it, a question mark, something that's not quite working, ultimately. Others will continue to work within the theory productively and usefully. Maybe even the person who discovers this anomaly won't pursue it immediately, but will just set it aside. But sooner or later, somebody will come back to that anomaly, and it will be the spark that destroys the current theory, forcing it to be replaced by something larger and bigger. We go in, we reevaluate the whole thing, and we create a new theorem. That's how science progresses, by these leaps forward, these revolutions.

The logical structure is a vision of evolution, in a way, but it's an evolution of ideas. That's great to me. Working through a story is the extrapolation of possibilities.

So do you see yourself “solving” rather than “creating” stories?

I think of it as a problem-solving activity, but one that's more complicated than, say, a physics problem because I'm creating the problem. Part of my task is to clarify what the problem is. In the early draft of a story, the workshop question is not “How do we fix this problem?” but “What exactly is the problem?” You have to spend a lot of time figuring out what is exactly problematic in the story. Of course, describing the problem is ultimately, perhaps, the end of the story. It's such a Chekhovian idea: we don't have to provide the answer; we just have to express the questions as clearly as we can. ■

GEORGE SAUNDERS, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Is there a clear relationship between the writing and your personality as you move around in the world? You have been writing twenty years, and you have been doing it in a certain way to refine certain things that you want to communicate, so are you a different person because of your writing?

Yes, yes. What happens is that the things that get brought forth when you are working on a story then become things that you can drape your personality around in a certain way. You knew that this was a tendency in yourself, but having written it, then it's concrete and you can jump to that next level.

It's like saying, “I didn't know I thought that.”

Exactly, and when I was younger I thought it was the other way around. I thought you had to figure out who you were and then type it. Now it feels much more like you don't know who you are until you have worked—it happens for me over a course of months. You finish something—and even then it's not the intellectual part, it's the visceral part—you see you have made this thing. Like **I just had this “CommComm” story in the *New Yorker*; through the long process of working on that, I figured out something about how I want to proceed with my life from here.** Just a small—I couldn't express it—a small thing. I kind of knew it before, but



Photo: Beowulf Sheehan

having written the story, there is no looking back. So the process of having the subconscious purify that—

I don't think I have heard anyone say that—that is, to talk about the intimacy of their own creative process affecting their life decisions. They always seem so separate.

It is discrete, but then I noticed—well, it never happened when I was young and I wrote a story quick—but as I get older and I am taking longer and longer, I have a feeling that the subconscious mind is forming itself behind the story that you are working on in some way. And if you go slow enough, it overtakes the story at the end, and that's that epiphanic thing that people talk about. And then for me, it's nice that it happens—

If you go slow enough.

For me that's how it is. Because then when you go slow enough, it's a feeling. When you are going fast, your conscious mind is driving the car: “This is a story about patriarchy.” Good. But when you go slowly, you don't know what it is. And suddenly your concept of the story has to get junked at a certain point, and your anxieties about the story's inadequacy are what the whole story is about, and the whole thing changes. It doesn't happen that often, but when it does, it's really good and cool. ■

EDWARD P. JONES, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Day to day, as you are forming these stories, are you sitting somewhere on a bench?

No, no, I can be watching a DVD and be moved by something that's unrelated to what I am thinking about. And I can stop it or think it through. Or I could be on the bus or walking in the street, which was the case with the novel. Over ten years it was a matter of standing someplace, thinking about a particular event, and then connecting it with what went before and what's after.

You strike me as having an unusually strong power of concentration.

I don't know—it may be it's because I don't own a cell phone, so it hasn't zapped my brain. I don't have a car, so I don't spend my time thinking about the best route from point A to point B—I let the bus driver and the subway do that. ■

BENJAMIN PERCY:

Most writers are conservative. By that I mean they lock their best ideas in a vault and take pleasure in the richness of their stores, like misers with their money. Maybe you have moleskins full of hastily scribbled notes. Or a corkboard next to your desk messy with images, structural blueprints, articles ripped from magazines. Or at the very least a folder on your computer labeled “Stuff.”

For every story or essay or poem you write, you withdraw one image, two characters, maybe three of the metaphors you have stockpiled—and then slam shut the vault and lock it with a key shaped like a skeleton’s finger.

I used to be the same way, nervously rationing out my ideas.

Tony Earley (the author of *Jim the Boy*) cured me of that. Years ago, I was talking to him about his story, one of my favorite stories, “The Prophet from Jupiter.” He said that he put everything he had into it. “I was tired of holding back,” he said. **His stories up to that point, he felt, had been good. But he wanted to write something truly great, an earth-shaker. So he put every last drop of himself, all of his best material, into a single story.**

And it worked. “Prophet” appeared in *Harper’s*, scored a National Magazine Award, and to this day is widely taught and anthologized.

There was a price. After he finished the story, he lay on the couch feeling emptied, carved out, certain he would never write anything again. This lasted for two weeks. And then the well filled back up.

I decided to follow Tony’s advice. I put all my chips on the table. I went all in. The story “Refresh, Refresh” was a game changer for me, not only because of its success, but because it changed my approach to writing. Now I never hold back. I dynamite the vault and let all my treasure pour out. Every story is an “all in” story.

Though I at first experienced the same vacancy as Tony—the feeling, upon finishing something, that I would never write again—my imagination soon trained itself to recover speedily.

The writer is always a careful observer, but if you are constantly evacuating your imagination, your eyes and ears grow even sharper, and you lean forward with hunger for every experience, knowing that it will offer up a card to add to your hand.

This is, after all, a gambler’s trade. All in. Always. ■

ELIZABETH McCracken,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How do you bring a story to life?

The first thing that comes to me, generally speaking, is the narrator, the main character. Once I come up with some sense of the voice, I have to teach myself how to think like that character. I have to completely give my own imagination over to the character.

I hate hearing myself talk about this because it sounds like I'm mystical in a way that I'm not, or that I attribute it to something other than the human imagination, which is all that it is.

There's no point in coming up with too much plot before I know a character's voice. But it's important that I have some sense of plot because if I don't, I write in circles. Once I do, I have to be willing to let it change completely with how the character thinks. Once I finish a first draft, the second part of rigging up the story is to figure out the pattern so I can get a sense of structure and plot. I know that the character and the thought process will change while I write. I have to rewrite quite a bit to make sense of things, to understand a character.

Ann Patchett, one of my best friends and my best writer-friend, thinks a lot about her work before she begins to write. She wrote her first two books quickly, that is, the actual writing, because she felt that what she had in her head was right. I can sit and think for months, but the minute I start to write, things change completely. I've learned that, for me, thinking too much about what I'm writing is merely a form of procrastination, at which I am a champion. In order to think about writing, I have to be writing.

But when you're involved in a novel, isn't it always on your mind?

My work demands a lot during the hours I'm not writing, but I don't write every day. I binge write. I go through periods where I write every day for hours at a time. But weeks will go by when I don't write. Frankly, when I'm not writing, I don't think about it. I always tell myself, pathetically, that those times are probably valuable for my work because I think about it subconsciously or I allow myself to forget about what I'm working on so that it's fresh when I get back. If I take a month off from a book, I really take a month off from it. When I work, I work eight, twelve, occasionally sixteen



Photo: Tom Langdon

hours a day. People always say that writing pays terribly if you work it out to an hourly rate—maybe fifty cents an hour. My rate is higher because I don't work that much.

I do a lot of outside writing when I work. I need to write stuff that I know I'll throw away. There are times when I write seven pages to get one very clever line. I believe I'm quoting Ann directly: she would kill herself if she worked the way I do. It's inefficient. I throw out many, many pages, but I do it cheerfully. I take it for granted. Often, I write pages in the voices of characters who I know won't narrate the book just so I can get to know them. **One of the dangers of writing a first-person novel is not paying attention to the other characters.** In order to get into the other characters, I need to do something else. And like I said, I can't do it by just wondering, "Well, what does this character think?" I have to discover their voices. In some ways, *The Giant's House* is flawed because an antisocial person tells the story and the other characters are not particularly clear.

I always think I will write something that happens within two weeks in the time that I am writing—late twentieth, early twenty-first century—and that it will be very funny, but I always get waylaid somehow. ■

TIM GAUTREAU, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Do you feel a responsibility to show readers something that verifies a truth they know, but have not realized they know?

Writing provides a certain amount of self-discovery. Much that a writer expresses comes from his subconscious, that realm of the nearly known. He might not ever talk about, for example, the erosion of the institution of marriage, but he might embody the concern in a story or novel.

Flannery O'Connor said that when she was writing "Good Country People," she didn't know what was going to happen in the story. She was surprising herself, and she knew it was a good story because if she was surprised, certainly the reader was going to be surprised. What she means by being surprised is that the story blossoms and that the blossoming is connected to the previous events of the story. She didn't know that Manley Pointer was going to open a bible and there was going to be whisky inside the hollowed-out text. When she wrote it, she probably said, "Yes, this is where this story has been going from the first sentence."

Did you write in a similar fashion as O'Connor did, or do you outline before you begin to write?

I wrote a two-page, double-spaced outline for *The Next Step in the Dance*, which I revised as I wrote. The first draft was out of control because I wrote it in little snippets of spare time. I have to have a big block of time to work on a one hundred twenty thousand-word manuscript. When a semester would start and I would drop it for a month, I would forget what I was writing about. I'd come back to the manuscript and think: Who are these people? Why was I so interested in them?

Barry Hannah [*Airships*] called me and asked if I'd like to be writer in residence for one semester at Ole Miss. I went up there, and I was separated from the ringing phone and the grading for about five months. I jumped on that novel and the characters never got out of my head. I rewrote it, cut it, rearranged it, added to it. I sent it off to New York and shortly after received a contract offer. ■

D.B.C. PIERRE, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

There's a performance in writing, a kind of energy, that I love. I can sit for ten days and hack away in an intellectual fashion and only come up with a single set of reasonings, but if I sit down with passion and let that passion be carried along the wave of an idea, the work seems to have energy as well. There's the emotional component. The more emotional I am when writing, the more emotion the reader will notice in the work. Then I don't need to make too many decisions, either, because I know instinctively what has to go in instead of thinking about the mechanics of it. I describe this as an odyssey because I'm often making these discoveries from scratch. ■

LEE SMITH, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

When you're writing, are you talking to yourself, to your characters and readers about what a particular character is facing, about struggle and coming to terms?

No, I'm not. *Possession* is more accurate. When I'm writing, I'm just telling a story. I'm just totally "out of my mind." I'm not Lee Smith. I'm not myself *doing* anything. Later, after it's published, somebody will say, "Well, this is about such and such," and of course, it will be something I feel strongly about, like the role women have had to play in Appalachia, about birth

control and how important it is for us to try to have some control of our lives—and these are fairly new ideas, still fairly radical ideas. But when I’m writing, I’m not thinking of any of that. I mean, I’m just not *there*. ■

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG:

Take your time. I was blown away when the playwright Naomi Wallace told me she doesn’t show anyone her work until she has spent two years alone with it, and that she reads forty years forward and backwards of the time period she is setting her work in. ■



Photo: Goodman Theatre

EDWARD P. JONES, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Have you published all the stories that you have written?

Yeah, what happens is that once I saw this woman from the title story of *Lost in the City*, then over months and months, other situations and stories came to me. For example, the first story is “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons.” And the person who gave the girl the pigeons in 1955 was a man named Miles. Well, God knows, I can’t find any particular day or moment or anything that had me all of a sudden think of 1901 and this young, married woman comes from Virginia and is unable to sleep, and is standing outside and sees this bundle hanging from a tree, and that happens to be Miles a few days old. Where that came from I don’t know. But so that’s what I did. With *Lost in the City* it was always a book of stories. I didn’t have a piece here and a piece there, and say, “I have enough pages for a book.” The same thing with *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*. It was always like that.

Unlike most story collections, which are literally collected from the writer’s output to date, there is a greater cohesion intended with the way you put the stories with each other?

Yes, exactly. I wanted, as much as I could, to have most of the stories about people that started in the South. And I have to stretch things because most of the people I knew came from North and South Carolina and Virginia. I don’t recall meeting anyone from Arkansas. There is someone from there in these stories, also Mississippi and Louisiana. Alabama. My effort was to try to include as many Southern states as I possibly could. Yeah, it was always a whole collection. ■

JENNIFER ANNE MOSES:

First: if you want to write well, you have to read well. That means reading all the time, with passion and attention and alertness, and shunning crap. No *People* magazine or the latest chick-lit or tell-all movie-star biography. Second: you have to show up at work if you want the work to get done.

Actually, there is a third thing about writing that I want to share—and it's something that I myself just recently became aware of, even though I'd been practicing it, on and off, for years. And it's this: allow the story that you are *supposed* to be writing to flow through you and out your hands in the form of typed, written words. Chances are that if you struggle, overthink, ruminate, and lose sleep over a project, it's not really meant to be—or at least not supposed to be in the way you are going at it. None of which means that you aren't going to rewrite, and rewrite, and rewrite. It just means that when you rewrite, you're going to have help.

It's like what the Talmud says about the birth of each child: “There are partners in the molding of every human being: God, the father, and the mother.” (Nidah: 31) I mean, get real: you think that Henry James or Edith Wharton or Leo Tolstoy or Alice Adams wrote all those great books by *themselves*? Call it what you will—creative inspiration, God, Jesus, Buddha, the muses, Satan, flow, presence, or Zen—but the great stuff always comes out only when “you” get out of the way and *allow* it to come. ■

PATRICK HICKS:

I write every day, usually in the early morning and then again around lunchtime. For poetry I always use a pencil and save every draft of my handwritten work. For me, poetry is organic and I need to see the graphite of the pencil scratching the paper. When I write prose, I pound away at my computer, and I like the quickness, that feeling of taking dictation from my characters. In both cases, though, I read each draft of my work aloud. I've been told that I laugh to myself and use different voices for my characters when they speak, which is odd, but if it gets my work published I'm not complaining. One last thing: I let the story change if it wants to change, and I try to surrender myself to my characters. They're the boss. I'm not. ■

KATHERINE VAZ:

My father has painted every single day of his life—he once covered his father’s car tarp with his rendition of the Last Judgment—and it is this quiet, steady, joyful focus that infuses my habits as a writer. So often, people think of “discipline” as a cold, steely business, instead of a habit of calmly wading in and agreeing to get carried out to a deeper place. ■

THOMAS E. KENNEDY, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

It took me, I guess, from the time I was thirty-one or -two until I was about thirty-eight—and that was fairly intensive work—before I was able to write a story that was publishable. It was from that point, that story, that I found the way that I could write, found out how to reach the material and how to shape it into fiction.

Of course I have to ask you: What is it that you found out? How did you get to that place?

It was a strange process. I had been working very hard at it, but the problem, my problem, was—and I think maybe a lot of aspiring writers have this problem—I couldn’t get free of my mind. I couldn’t learn how to write with my whole being. That was the key for me.

One of the things that was hardest for me to learn was to try not to understand everything; you can’t understand everything. Life is a mystery. There’s a mystery in fiction as well. I asked Robert Coover once whether he at some point fully understood his stories, and at what point that was, and his answer was very enlightening. He said that his best fictions were not those that he wrote so much as those that he allowed to be written—that he allowed free movement to whatever it is in us that combines all of these elements into a story, that he just catered to that spirit and gave his skills to that spirit, and allowed the thing to be written. ■

RICHARD BAUSCH, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You’ve kept up such an amazing endurance—eight novels, three collections of stories. Do you see yourself at any point concentrating on one genre?

I hope it will always be both. I’d like to write twenty novels and books of stories. I don’t know if I’ll wind up doing it, but I’d like to.

I don't think of writing as hauling things up out of myself, like drilling oil out of a well. I think of it as a path I walk. In fact, I'm convinced that's the secret. If you think of yourself as containing the material, then everything becomes limited by what you can contain. I mean, you can empty a well. But if it's a path you're taking—hell, you can go anywhere, right? So when I sit down to write, I'm not thinking about pulling stuff out of myself. I'm thinking about going somewhere, walking around, and seeing what I find. And there's never a time when I sit down and it isn't there. You just walk the path. There is a tremendous amount of work you can get done doing that. There is no part of that that's not fun. I never worry about whether or not it's good. I don't care, right then. I'm walking the path. I know that if I can bring enough attention to it, and be honest and open to it and not cheat it, it'll be fine. Whether it is the best I've ever done is not anything for me to worry about. ■

ALICE MATTISON, interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

*Was it difficult to write the scene in *The Book Borrower* in which the characters finally address the coincidence?*

It was a hard scene to write. That book was written on a computer, but I had to write that particular scene on a typewriter, and I had to write it in a different room. Sometimes I think the things that we write are located in the air above us. But sometimes, for some reason, there's a column of air somewhere else that we have to get under in order to receive a piece of writing, and in that case, the column of air was in my bedroom. So I had to go in there, and I had to bring the typewriter with me on a rolling table and write the scene in there. It was hard. I did have to break through something to do it. ■



Photo: Ben Mattison

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

*It sounds like writing *Big Fish* was a somewhat unstructured process.*

I've never plotted anything before. Actually, I've tried to plot, and it does exactly what you say it does. It saps the life right out of it. Why do it? I enjoy writing because I like to find out what's gonna happen next. It's the same thing that happens in my whole life—I mean, I have relationships with other people because I'm interested in what's gonna happen next. If

you brought me a book of my life that said, Well, you're going to fall in love with somebody and you will do this and then this, and you gave me the plot of the whole thing, why go ahead and do it? Even if you're going to be happy. I don't see any reason to go through with it. The mystery is part of what makes it interesting for me, and if it's not interesting for me, I can't imagine how it's going to be interesting for you. ■

ELIZABETH COX, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In "Saved," Josie Wire wants to save Beckett by offering him the Bible, but it's only when she offers herself that Beckett is truly saved, in that he abandons his original intention, and, instead, he is confronted with his own unwillingness to violate her. This is an unexpected turn of events. How did you arrive at this?

I did not know this is what would happen. I didn't know anything going into that scene. I love the position of ignorance. I love to approach a story or a scene as though I'm reading it instead of writing it. That's the fun for me—not knowing where it's going. I didn't know what Beckett was going to do until he did it. At the time, I was merely watching them. He could've done anything. I was afraid he was going to hurt her; but I also knew he was not evil. I also didn't know he would tell her his real name, or what his real name was, until he said it. When I'm working in this way of discovery, I feel most located in my imagination. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

When you started [The Mosquito Coast], did you know Allie would be silenced by vultures plucking out his tongue? Or was that one of the imaginative discoveries?

That was one of the discoveries. I knew he was going to die, and I knew at what point in the book he was going to die. I just wasn't quite sure how it was going to happen—whether he was going to die from a bullet, whether it was going to be an accident, or whether his kids were going to kill him. Then, thinking about it, when I got nearer to it, worked up to it, I saw that that wasn't going to happen. They can't do it. They should do it—but if they do it, they're going to be marked by it. That was an interesting technical problem.

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

I discover the story as I go. Very few of the stories do I know ahead of time. In *Blue Spruce*, for instance, there are maybe three pieces where I had the whole story in my mind the instant I thought it up. There's a story called "The Vote," which is like a day I actually spent, and so I knew the plot line. But stories like "Attraction," or "Blue Spruce," or "The New World," any of the longer stories ... "Lightening," no. "Perro Semihundido" was the hardest story to write because I just simply didn't know what I was doing. These stories take six weeks to three months to draft out sometimes, and then longer to revise. Often, I'll let them sit for a while. What I'm finding writing the novel is it's like walking through the woods with a little flashlight—you just hope it doesn't conk out on you; you're smacking it against your leg; you can see just beyond your shoes, you know? ■

DAN CHAON, interviewed by Misha Angrist:

[Frank] O'Connor wrote at length about his method of composition. Specifically, he talked about reducing the story to four lines or less and committing it to paper in skeletal form, adding layers with each revision. He actually talked about his students using algebraic terms to condense their premises to their most elemental forms. "X marries Y. Y dies. X visits Y's parents in Ireland but does not mention that Y is dead." The implication is that the writer must know the ending before he or she starts. How often is that true for you?

Almost never. When I don't know the premise, then it's pretty safe to say I don't know the ending—or even much else sometimes. For example, when I sat down to write "Passengers, Remain Calm," I started out with that image of the snake with a girl in his mouth. From there, I "discovered" the little kid walking around the fair with his uncle, and then found my way to the rest of it. I had no idea what the story was about when I started it; I didn't know that the uncle and the kid were even in the story until they suddenly appeared. As I began to ponder why they were there together, background information began to come to me and the details filled in bit by bit. So, in that case, I discovered the premise last; it was as though it was built backwards. Sometimes as you write, you're feeling your way through the tunnel and the light begins to turn on as you go along.

It can be easier with those stories where I know the premise going in, but even then, not always. With "Big Me," I had the premise [young boy spies on a man in the neighborhood whom he perceives to be an older version

of himself] and had written the first four pages in one night. I thought, “Oh, this is great—this is going to be fun.” Then I spent something like four years trying to figure out how to finish it.

So when you had that germ of an idea and those first four pages, you didn't know that the kid was going to confront his older self at the end?

No. I didn't know what was going to happen, and that was part of the problem. I think there was a version of it where the kid's mother and the guy were having an affair—I tried all kinds of bizarre things before I finally had the kid go in there and just talk to the guy. And even then, I had no idea what the guy was going to say. So knowing the premise doesn't always make things go smoother for me. ■

MATTHEW SHARPE, interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

Do you think it's important to have a disciplined plan as a writer—for example, writing every day, having intentions and goals and reaching them?

Oh yes. Otherwise, I'd die. I think the more you show up at the computer or the writing pad, the more likely it is you will discover the inspiration. There's a nice metaphor, which I am going to mangle, from Mary Oliver, the poet, where she talks about this wild part of yourself that doesn't want to be tamed, but if you show up at the same place and time every day, and you offer it your rigor, it will trust you more, and it may be more likely to show up, too. ■

RON CARLSON, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

Is that a pleasure for you in writing, to sit down and let yourself go wherever the writing takes you?

Well, pleasure's an interesting word, and an odd fit for what's happening when I'm writing, but I'll take it anyway. The answer is yes. I'll go into a story and about the fourth or fifth day, as I'm working on it, it starts to dawn on me, and then, yes, then pleasure breaks. It breaks when I start thinking, “Oh, whoa, I want to read this story.”

When I start a story, I don't exactly know what it will be like when I'm done with it. But I know that I'm going to get it. When you're a writer, you spend days in the room without knowing what you've got, but you're still



Photo: Ben Mattison

willing to keep reeling it in and following it. You're willing to be true to it. It may mean you have to write thirty pages to get fifteen. The big secret to such writing is the ability to stay in the room. The writer is the person who stays in the room.

That feels like it might come from the Baba Ram Das school of writing. "Be here now."

People have accused me of it. They say, "You're talking Zen here."

And I just say, "Zen this: The secret is to stay in the room." Who can do it? Nobody. It's hard.

All the good writing I've done—and this is the truest thing I'll say to you today—all the good writing I've done in the last ten years has been done in the first twenty minutes after the first time I wanted to leave the room. I've learned to stay there and keep writing. I think, "Oh, I'll just go get some coffee." Well, I love coffee, but I don't really want any coffee at that moment. What's happened is that I've confronted a little problem that's got me kind of rattled. I can't identify it. I don't even know I'm rattled. I just don't want to go on. A threshold's come up between me and the page, and I want to get out of there. I have a Mr. Coffee in the kitchen and, when I get to it, I find I also have a Mr. Refrigerator. There's Mr. Kitchen Table, Mr. Newspaper, Mr. Big Long Couch, Mr. World Outside the Window, and honest to God, my career as a writer is over and I'm dead in the water.

So I've learned to stay there. I don't really want any coffee. What I want to do is avoid this problem. So what I do is say, "Why don't you just stay here another minute, Ron." And, before I know it, it's an hour later and, man, I've solved it! I've gotten through to a point where I'm breathing again. I'm breathing. I'm over the threshold and the problem, and I've managed to get myself down the road.

Then—and I suppose this is good news—I've learned that the cup of coffee I fix afterward is really good. Staying in the chair improves the quality of that beverage.

The bottom line is, I'm very careful with myself. I pay attention.

I take care of myself. And I tolerate the discomfort of ambiguity, of not knowing where I'm going. When things aren't going well, I just counsel myself to hang on a little longer. Not too long. Just a few minutes. Just long enough to get through the rattled energy and over that stress threshold back into the writing.

And I know, when I start a story, that I'm going to get it, which comes from having written over a hundred stories. It's harder for someone who's writing her third. The biggest difference between us is that I'm willing to tolerate the unknown.

Flannery O'Connor said the writer should be the person who is most surprised by her story. If the writer isn't more surprised than the reader, then the story isn't any good. That's an astounding thing to say, but it's true. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, *interviewed by John McNally*:

Trust your imagination; don't try and figure out your stories ahead of time, because that's walking the high-wire with a big net under you. We were all born with the ability to imagine and dream endlessly, terrifyingly, gorgeously, wildly, etc. Our job, it seems to me, is to work mercilessly on finding the truest language to bring out whatever it is that needs to be brought out. Which is one thing a good writing class or program can do! And, much like having children, the writer doesn't even get to choose what comes out, or how. So get in your daily sessions—if all you have is twenty minutes, then take it anyway; you're at least getting blood through the umbilical cord to that growing fetus. Don't think about the work or talk to anybody about it in any specific way; do other things in your life that make you feel good, because if you rely on writing to do that, it will disappoint you, especially if you're going deeply enough. And only quit writing if you find you can do that and still be you! ■

RICHARD BAUSCH, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais*:

When Bishop dies early in the novel [In the Night Season], that throws away all the reader's foundations. Because of this, the reader is never allowed to get comfortable. The intensity of the racism and the unexpected elements of the story make it quite suspenseful.

It's ironic because the death of Bishop is not a race crime. "We're equal-opportunity criminals," one of the killers says. The scariest character in the novel for me is the recreational killer, the one who shoots the cows. In the scene where he kneels down and unzips his pants in front of the boy, I didn't know what he was going to do. It scared the hell out of me. I didn't even think about what he might do. What he does is bad enough, but it

wasn't what I was afraid he was going to do. And I didn't know, while I was writing, what he was going to do.

When you write a book like that, where plot is pretty heavy, you have to be aware of what you're doing a little more; it can't be arbitrary. But still a whole lot is stuff that you're dreaming up, and you don't know what's going to happen, how it's going to work out. I had no idea how the book was going to end, or if the boy and his mother were going to make it. It took me three days to figure out whether the boy lives. And when he did live, it wasn't resonant enough. I thought about the sheriff. I went away from it for a while and wrote a couple of stories. When I went back, I realized the sheriff had to have lost a child early, and then it could count. So I had to go through and re-earn the whole thing. I had to make every scene between him and the wife be about the lost child. And the only way to do that was to make it be the anniversary of the child's death so it's really weighing on his mind. It took about two months of going through and redoing everything just to make that one moment resonate as it should. I like to tell students about that experience because, as a writer, you have to be willing to take great pain to make it work, or to make it work better, anyway. It probably would have worked okay if it weren't for that, but it wouldn't have worked for me. It needed more. ■

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

I feel as if I've been talking about myself and these stories [*A Stranger in This World*] for a week. In some ways, it all runs together and I feel as though I've been one big nerve ending. But I'm happy to talk about approaches to writing and about where it comes from, because it's one of the things that has taken me a long time to learn, and I wish I could save somebody else the time that I spent learning for myself. Not so much my idea of the self or my idea of where writing comes from or my idea of what kind of characters are instrumental—that's all just personal. But the idea that it takes a long time and it's a learned thing as opposed to something that you were born with. It's something that I find myself going back to again and again. When I talk about where my writing comes from and all the rest of it, to some extent it is bullshit, because what I'm doing when I'm writing is so unconscious—it's so much before the conscious level. I'm playing the English professor, after the fact. I'm not doing that kind of analysis when I'm writing my writing. ■

LYNN FREED, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

In reading through your novels, starting with Heart Change, Home Ground, then moving on through The Bungalow and The Mirror, one can see the development of your craft. You've often referred to Heart Change as a "teething novel." How would you describe the others in terms of what you struggled with or sought to develop by way of craft?



Photo: Nancy Crampton

I never think of craft. I try not to teach it, either. I don't believe that craft creates the writer. Practice does. When I say "teething novel," I mean that there are lapses of ear in there. There are riffs that go on too long. And also quite a bit of what I refer to, thanks to Natalia Ginzburg, as "singing"—prose that takes off into song. With the later novels, I fell more comfortably into my own voice. And my timing was more precise, more crisp. But the real thing that makes a novel live is something far beyond craft—it's something that is not codifiable. It is the life that comes with the novel, as the novel is being written. All the craft in the world cannot hide a novel that doesn't want to be written. I've written both types, and I won't say which is which. ■

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

I think I have a lot of patience for drudgery. I think it was John Gregory Dunne who said that writing a novel is like laying pipe, just laying a lot of pipe. If you can't make yourself sit still for that, then you can't do it. You can't rely on inspiration. I don't even believe in inspiration. I just believe in working. Work generates work. What frustrates me horribly is not knowing what I'm going to do next. And so you force something to happen. A lot of days, you know that by the end of the day you'll have some words on paper, and they'll be scenes and incidents and exchanges that you don't have any knowledge of yet. It just comes out of no place. So you're forced to rely on that process of things coming out of no place, and that part's nerve wracking. Some people would say that you have to love the possibility of it. Well, that's a little flaky for me.

I can look at days I've spent in the process of working on this novel and I can see there's stuff I like, and that I didn't have any knowledge of ten minutes before I wrote it. That's what I mean by "Work generates work." You can't sit around thinking. You have to sit around working. ■

THOMAS E. KENNEDY:

When I was starting out, I took what undergraduate courses were available to me. My first help was the advice of a college professor to keep a journal in order to loosen up my style. I was seventeen, and four years of keeping a journal more or less everyday—sometimes just a couple of sentences, sometimes many pages, sometimes with gaps of weeks or even months—did indeed get me in the habit of writing, and writing freely. To learn to write freely is important. ■

STEPHEN DIXON, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

Is there a point when you're writing that it seems as if the writing is coming out of your fingertips?

The first draft. The first draft is like a reel that comes out of my head. Very often, I don't know where it comes from. In fact, when I sit down to write a story, it's usually the day after I have finished a story or finished a novel. So I sit down feeling like I'm a bum. I'm not working at anything, and my life is a waste. I'm only happy when I'm writing, so I must sit down and write. I sit down the next day. I say, "Well, what are you going to write about?" I don't know. The best thing is to just let the imagination unfurl. I write the first thing that comes into my head. Maybe there's a line that's been circulating in my mind since I finished the last story or novel. I put that line down on the page. Immediately, magic occurs. Characters develop, and I have to chase them all over the page until I'm finished. Sometimes, I'm finished without even knowing it. Suddenly, there's a last line and I've finished the story. It might even be a great last line. I don't know where it came from, but I'm not going to question it. I have never questioned my creative process. It has always worked for me. I've never had a block. Something always comes. If something comes that I've done before, I just scrap it and start something else. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

What has been the hardest thing for you to learn about writing?

Without a doubt, the hardest thing is disciplining myself to write every day. I'm ashamed to say I've never gotten the knack of it. It depresses me terribly. It's like being on a diet every single day of your life, in the sense that I'm constantly falling off the wagon. There are periods when I'm so

distracted by work or giving readings, etc., that I don't write for days, even weeks. I also find it hard to write when my house is a mess, which is the case much of the time. I do get on a good cycle occasionally, and I try to get my good writing done then, before the cycle peters out. I'm starting to wonder if some people just work better in cycles, rather than in a linear, write-every-day-without-fail approach.

When I'm not writing, I'm not consciously thinking about it. I'll immerse myself fully in cooking, or watching TV, or whatever else I happen to be doing. I'm a great believer in not pushing or straining when it comes to creativity, which is probably just an excuse for laziness. But I do think there's some validity to it. Looking back, I think that my best writing has been the kind that just seemed to float up to the surface of my mind on its own schedule, when it was formed and ready. ■

CAROLYN CHUTE, *interviewed by Barbara Stevens:*

When I work, I sort of go into a very quiet, almost meditative state, not dreamy, but kind of. It almost feels sometimes like you're psychic, like you're pulling in something that already exists. It feels like that.

I feel that the best fiction that comes from us comes from our subconscious. It comes from associations, and it comes from moments in your life that were highly dramatic. I think that's what we tend to work on all the time, these little highly dramatic moments that really touch us. ■

DAN CHAON, *interviewed by Misha Angrist:*

Tell me about your work habits. Do you have a set time every day when you write?

I do, but I don't always get a lot done during that time, at least in terms of getting words on paper. Much of the work is going on in the back of my mind during that period.

There is a kind of "waiting for inspiration" aspect to it, too. I can work for months and not get a lot done, and then suddenly everything will come together fairly quickly with all of the pieces I've been working on.

Do you work on multiple stories at any one time?

Always. Very often I'll have maybe five or six things going at once. I'll move

though each one of them and see where I can get. If I can't get anything, then I'll start something new.

What about for the novel you're working on now?

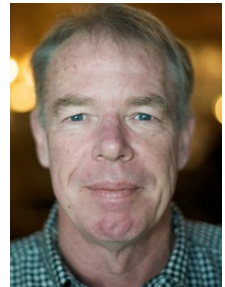
I've been using a similar method: I'll work on multiple chapters at the same time and start a new chapter if I get bogged down. The problem has been that my editor wants to see what I've got, and most of what I've got is chapters that are only partially done. ■

TIM O'BRIEN, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

What interests me as a human being is when someone sits down beside me in a bar, or a restaurant over dinner, and says, "I gotta tell you what happened to me today. You're not going to believe this..." And it's those words—"You're not going to believe this"—which give me the expectation of something extraordinary, which stories are. That's why we tell a story, because it's out of the ordinary. I've become more of an emotional person since I began writing. I'm trusting more in my instincts as a human as opposed to my instincts as a man doing analysis or intellection. I love stories. And now I'm starting to trust more in story, not knowing what happened to my character—where did she go? And not even knowing some of the secrets inside John, or whether he had something to do with his wife's disappearance. Never knowing, and yet trusting in story to be sufficient. And that's a good feeling for a writer. No moral, no point to it sometimes, Story is its own meaning, self-contained. What's the point of *Huckleberry Finn*, for example? Don't leave home? What's the point of *Moby Dick*? Don't get obsessed with whales? Novels and stories don't have single points; they are what they are. And *In the Lake of the Woods* is what it is. It's a love story about a woman's vanishing. And a story about love gone bad. And betrayal and secrecy. It just is what it is, and stories ultimately are that. ■

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

When I was an undergraduate, when I was twenty or twenty-one, I was trying to write. I could move the words around on a page, but I had nothing to say. I haven't read that many writers under thirty who I thought really had it together. I think it is unusual.



It seems the pattern is that people tend to come to writing later in life than is so in a lot of other disciplines. I think that really has to do with the ability to sit there. One thing I know is that when I was twenty, I thought that to write a story you'd be standing on the roof and lightning would strike you and the story would come to you, and you would write it down and then you'd go out and have a beer with your friends. It's a damn shame it doesn't work. It really is. It would be a nicer way to live. My whole experience with being a writer has been that it's the patience to sit there in your chair and wait for the words to come, wait for the ideas to arrive, to slow down long enough to really see every sentence, every paragraph. I just couldn't sit still that long when I was younger. ■

RON CARLSON, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

Every story is a journey into the unknown for me. I start out with germs and identified moments that I carry into the story. Everybody has those. Flannery O'Connor said anyone who's survived a childhood has more information than he'll ever use as a writer. But having those germs, those identified moments, isn't having the story. I'm not writing it down. What we're doing as writers is writing it *up*.

Take a story like "The Hotel Eden." It's set in a London hotel I was once in, with a strange little parlor that turned into a pub after eleven o'clock. The interior was about the size of a Volkswagen van. It was really very odd, and I've had a strange feeling about it all these years. When I went into "The Hotel Eden," I went into it in the grip of that energy and with three people, because I'd been there with two friends. Three of us and that room.

Those were the germs, the identified moments. But even with those in hand the core question remains: What's this story going to be about? And when I sit down to it, I don't have the answer. How do I find out? By being true to the physical world. By typing along and staying with it. Sometimes I know quite a bit when I start a story. Maybe as much as three quarters of it. Many times I won't know much at all. I always have a strong feeling for the material, though, and I approach stories trying to find out the truth underneath the experience, whatever that is.

Do you know it when you have it?

You do. But I don't know if *knowing* is the right word. You feel it. The strangest feeling comes over you. You can't make it come. You can't think

your way into it. And if it's coming, you can't stop it. That would be like trying to keep your face from turning red when you're embarrassed. You can't. If you're true to the people in your story it's going to happen. If you aren't, it won't. ■





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Glimmer Train Press publishes both *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

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