CLOSE-UP:

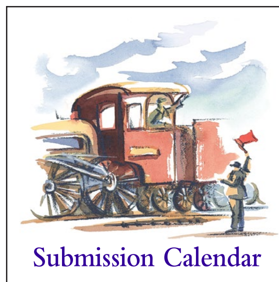
REVIEWS AND AWARDS

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

ANTONYA NELSON,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What was it like for you, as a young writer, to learn that Raymond Carver had chosen your story "The Expendables" as the first-prize winner in the journal American Fiction *in 1988?*

It was great. I don't know what to say beyond that. By all accounts, he was a generous man who read voraciously and had enthusiasm for other people's work. At that time I had a new baby. I was thrilled, but the award wasn't the biggest thing on my mind. When my first story was accepted by *Mademoiselle*, that seemed to me a huge step. When my first book was taken and when the *New Yorker* accepted a story were watershed moments that resonated. The thing is that I always keep raising my own bar. It becomes a desire to not just have more but to do more, to do something different. **I bore myself if I repeat stories.** I wrote *Nobody's Girl* with the notion that there weren't many third-person-narrated novels with a single point of view. Most novels are written from first



Submission Calendar

person or third-person-multiple points of view. In creating that project for myself, I was able to up the stakes and have something new happen inside of myself, as well as outside. ■

ALEXANDER PARSONS, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

Since winning your first major award, which brought about the publication of Leaving Disneyland*, you've won other well-known awards, most notably a literature grant from the NEA and a Chesterfield Fellowship for screenwriting. There's been some talk lately of the value of these awards—that too many writers can't get along without them, or that we depend too much on this outside funding to support our writing. What do you say to those who oppose grants and other funding for literary artists?*

I don't know who gets by on such awards. After taxes, you're lucky if you've got enough to buy a few Happy Meals and a used laptop. That said, they're quite valuable professionally if you're a teacher, as I am. Like a book that gets published but is largely ignored by the wider world, such awards are a professional credential that helps make the case that you are a step above a semiliterate chimp and thus worthy of educating today's youth. Enter academia!

I don't think that there's a problem with private or state organizations funding artists, though the result is probably that a lot of bad art gets produced alongside the good. I mean, would anyone argue that the Medicis shouldn't have supported Michelangelo or Botticelli? It takes a lot of time for an artist to mature, but art is one of the hallmarks by which we measure the worth of a society. And if you look at the list of those who receive, for example, the Nobel Prize for literature, you'd have to say that the vast majority of the recipients are excellent. Gabriel García Márquez and J.M. Coetzee are pretty much as good as it gets. The real undercurrent to this question is that there are writers outside of the mainstream power structures who feel neglected, and I don't doubt that many of them are fine writers. But my experience as a writer and editor has convinced me that if you're good and you can afford postage, sooner or later you'll get published, if that's your goal. Editors mainly want to see fine writing. And it's worth noting that even in the age of corporate consolidation, there's an unparalleled proliferation of excellent small presses that provide venues for writers who don't happen to be celebrities living in Manhattan and Los Angeles. ■

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

You've gotten very good reviews for Half of a Yellow Sun. *What is your sense of the response?*

I don't read reviews. But I am really pleased and surprised, absolutely surprised that the U.S., that Americans and the American press are treating this book with respect. And I don't care if it is reviewed badly—it's that it's been reviewed. People are engaging with it. I didn't know what to expect. I really didn't. ■

KEN BARRIS:

There is a schism that runs through my life as a writer. It is the difference between public and private self. I don't mean the public self in the obvious sense, one who appears in public, talks, grins, reads, and signs things? I mean the person who has to deal with hostile reviews, rejection slips, sometimes disappointing sales, and near misses. To do that demands the cultivation of a thick skin, or some kind of thickening of the skin you have. The problem is that to write poetry, short fiction, novels—which is what I write—you need to be a thin-skinned observer. The membrane between yourself and the world has to be permeable and soft, flexible, prone to tear.

This difference is linked to the coil spring of my writing in the first place, which is that I grew up feeling mute about life. Things happened to me in childhood, I did things, without feeling that I was really there. Somehow, in ways I cannot explain, this turned into a driving force that led me into writing, into the articulations of fiction, and with it the creative and monstrous and liberating lies you can work into the medium, remaking the world in ways it should and shouldn't be. This muteness, I believe, this unprepossessing silence still underlies my work as a writer. The verbal noise I produce therefore comes from its opposite. It is this mute person, still present, who struggles to deal with the troublesome material causes and effects of the industry.

I have no advice for aspirant writers, or experienced writers, or anyone else. **If I could handle the gap between the marvelous creative life of writing, with its freedom and astonishing interest, and the sustained, sometimes bruising encounter with matters of publication, distribution, and recep-**

tion, I would probably be dispensing advice right now, in this very article. (If you've worked it out, please drop me a line.) However, what I can do is live with this schism, accept it as part of any artist's life. I can use the pain and disruption it sometimes causes to drive my creative work. At times it looks and feels like some kind of freak accident, but it's really an energy source, if only you can find a way to tap into it. Think of the abyss as a wind farm, and your tumble into free-fall as a generator. ■

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

You came into a lot of publicity when Oprah Winfrey chose A Lesson Before Dying *for her book club. How did you feel when you learned this?*

She called me personally, and I didn't believe it was her. She said, "This is Oprah Winfrey. I'd like to speak to Ernest Gaines." I said, "Speaking. Oprah Winfrey? Of the television show?" She said, "We've chosen *A Lesson Before Dying* for the Oprah Book Club. This is all hush-hush until I announce it on my show." I said, "It's okay with me, just as long as I can tell my wife." Oprah came to Louisiana, to the plantation at False River. We spent two days together.

A Lesson Before Dying *had won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1993, but did you feel a rush of new readership because of Oprah's influence?*

Oh, yes. Before, the book was selling well, but it was selling to high schools and libraries. With Oprah, it sold to the general public. There were between eight hundred thousand and a million copies printed as soon as she announced it. Everybody knew *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, but they never knew who wrote it. Now, they know Ernest Gaines wrote *A Lesson Before Dying* because they saw me on the show.

How do you feel about all the attention?

It doesn't really affect me. **I'm happy people are reading the book, but other than that, I just do the same thing.** I teach. My wife and I still go to the same restaurants. We still visit our friends, things like that. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Part of the business side of writing is awards. You received a lot of recognition for both The Giant's House *and* Niagara Falls All Over Again. *Does it feel*

safer now because there's a market for your books?

I think there's a good chance that there's *not* more of a market. With literary fiction, I'm not sure a writer's career is ever made or guaranteed. It's certainly not after one successful book. I deeply despise what I have written when I'm finished with a project. If you had asked me about *The Giant's House* after I finished it, I probably would have said that it's a bad book. Sometimes with first novels, if you're lucky, a certain kind of excitement goes into the publication. Literary taste changes quickly. If I take it seriously when it goes well, I have to take it seriously when it goes badly. I would rather not put myself in that position. ■

HA JIN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

You were a juror for the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. In the past thirty years, twenty Nobel Prize winners were previous nominees, winners, or jurors of the prize. What would be the ultimate achievement for you as a writer?

How can I say that? Really, I have to look at it book by book, story by story, and poem by poem. Writing is not something you can draw a map for. It's like building a house without a plan. You can only build the work piece by piece. Luck also plays a big role in this process. I can't think about what type of writer I will become, but I know where I was born. I am from mainland China. I grew up in another language, in another culture. In the English language, there has been a wonderful tradition of prose writers. I think I am close to the tradition of writers like Conrad and Nabokov, who wrote in English though it wasn't their first language. I continue to follow their way rather than to be involved in a cause or a new wave. I want to write literature. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Neither I nor anyone else connected with the publication of *The Hours*—my agent and editor primary among them—expected it to be any kind of success, certainly not in terms of sales, and I'll always love both of them

for forging on anyway, and publishing with great enthusiasm a book that seemed to have no commercial future. **I—we—figured it would be my arty little book that would sell a few thousand copies and then limp with whatever dignity it could muster over to the remainders tables. Which indicates, I suppose, that since no one can possibly know how a novel will be received, we might as well just write whatever we want to write, and hope for the best.** n

SIGRID NUNEZ*, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Do you read reviews? I noticed there was quite a variety of venues—from the women's magazines to the Wall Street Journal [*for* The Last of Her Kind*]*.

I feel very lucky with the reviews that that book got. There were some very good reviews.

I did like Elizabeth Benedict's in the New York Times.

Me, too.

It was well written and hit the right notes.

I was thrilled with it. It was in the daily *Times* and also, I agree, it was well written and generous. When I was young I remember hearing about writers who said they didn't read their own reviews. I remember thinking, "I don't know if I believe that. That seems so strange. How could you not read your reviews?" But when I started publishing I discovered that nothing could be easier than not reading reviews, and that in fact one had to force oneself to read them. Because even the good ones can make you cringe. I do read my reviews, but now I understand perfectly why some people don't, or don't want to. And sometimes what I'll do is put off reading them. I'll collect them and wait for the right moment and then sit down and read them all, getting it all over with at once.

Among other things, you have the good fortune to continue to be published, which is one of the fears that writers have about not getting reviewed.

Exactly. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How do you respond to reviews of your books? Many critics called The Giant's House *"a modern fairy tale."*

There are words that get applied to certain kinds of books. I think "fairy tale" is frequently used, and it's actually more often applied to women's books. I can think of two reasons it was labeled as a fairy tale. One is that it contains a giant who lives in a cottage. The other is that it's set in Cape Cod in the fifties, in a world where nothing outside touches the inhabitants of the town. There's a single mention of Elvis Presley. That's the only current event that has any significance in the book whatsoever. I certainly didn't do that to make it a fairy tale. Just like I was originally worried about being accurate about the vaudeville houses in the new book, I began to panic with *The Giant's House* and think that I should mention the Korean War every single page. ■

JAMES LASDUN, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Do you read your reviews?

I do. I do. I probably shouldn't, but I do. Some people claim they don't; I am never sure I believe them.

Right. They have someone read them to them. [Laughs.] ■

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Chinua Achebe said this wonderful thing about you. What happened when you read that?

I was in tears the whole day.

[Laughs.]

No, I was. I was overwhelmed. I had for so long hoped that he would say something about my work. And I was told he had read *Purple Hibiscus* and that he liked it. But this was from his son and I wasn't sure if his son was just being kind to me. When my editor sent *Half of a Yellow Sun* to him, I didn't want—I didn't want to hope for too much. I thought, I don't want a blurb, just have him read it. I will never forget when Robin [Dresser] called and said, "Achebe has just called and he wants to give a blurb," and when

she read it to me, because he is so important to me, because I really respect his work—I just started to cry. I didn't know what else to do. And then of course afterward when I came down from the high of it, I thought, "Oh my God, now there is this huge expectation, if he thinks this of me will I live up to it," and that sort of thing. But it was very—

It's an anointment. [Both laugh.]

It's a frightening one, but it made me happy as well. ■

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

Some people believe The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman *is an autobiography with an introduction by Ernest J. Gaines.*

Several people reviewed it as an autobiography, and many bookstores keep it on the autobiography shelf. **There was a famous magazine in New York that called me for a picture of Miss Jane because they were reviewing the book. I said, "You know, that is a fictitious character." They said, "Oh, my God!"** They had already written the review, and they wanted a picture to go with it. My agent had tried to sell it to a couple women's magazines, but they turned it down when they realized a man had written it. As long as a woman would have written it, it would have been great. I was in Orlando, Florida, talking to some people, and one guy said, "Mr. Gaines, may I ask you a question? How long did you have to interview that old lady before you had enough material to write the book?" ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

I've heard you talk before about how the big three milestones in your writing life were the first story accepted, your first book, and now we've been talking about your first appearance in the New Yorker. *Now that you've reached those milestones several times, how do you mark accomplishment?*

At this point, I'd be happy to just have a story or two a year in the *New Yorker*. I really would. I'd rather have stories in the *New Yorker* than a new book at this point, because they get read there. And they don't get read in book form. It seems to me that if you're going to be a short-story writer, the best thing for getting a readership, for getting a reaction and having the attention that you want drawn to it, is to publish a story or two a year in the *New Yorker*. Honestly, if that's what happened from now on, I'd

be delighted. That'd be plenty for me. At this point, a collection of stories just seems like—well, what's the point? No one buys them. I mean, *Some Fun* got reviewed, and they were very nice reviews, great reviews in very good places, and it's not going to be released in paperback. It's just very discouraging.

Some Fun *incorporates the awards you've won into its cover design. With the ironic title slapped over the top of all these awards, and from what you've said, it would appear you don't take these awards too seriously. They're good to have, but you don't get hung up on them.*

Yeah. I mean, it's nice when they're accompanied with some money. But they don't mean anything, ultimately. I am very grateful. I don't mean to sound ungrateful. But it doesn't mean anything except that somebody read it and liked it. That feels good. But **it's not as if you're climbing some ladder with the awards. They're not situated as steps, escalating me swiftly toward writerly heaven. They're just sort of there. I'm very happy about them, but they don't make the next thing more possible or plausible.** It really is still just about sitting down and writing a story. ■

SHAWN WONG*, interviewed by Anne de Marcken:*

In an interview, one book critic questioned whether or not Asian-American people actually talk about race and identity, because he had never heard an Asian-American person talk about race, identity, or racism. A male book reviewer complained that there was too much talking about relationships in the novel, while a female reviewer loved that aspect of the novel.

The novel was never reviewed in the two major newspapers in San Francisco, the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *San Francisco Chronicle*, despite the fact that I was born and raised in the Bay Area, that San Francisco is predominately Asian, that the novel is set in San Francisco, that the *Los Angeles Times* ran their review of *American Knees* on the front page of their book-review section, and that an article published a year before the publication of my novel in the Sunday magazine of the San Francisco papers on Asian-American male and female relationships (the subject of *American*

Knees) generated the most reader mail in the history of the newspaper. The decision to not review the book still remains a mystery. The *San Francisco Chronicle* once ran a review of my 1991 anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, on the front page, which even I thought was extreme. One's own hometown can run hot and cold. ■

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

What did writing the first novel teach you about writing the second?

Writing the first novel taught me only how to write that novel. For the second one, I made a decision to come out of my comfort zone. The thing I found easy with *Vernon* was to get into the skin and talk through the mouth of that character. After I won the Booker Prize, I had major internal tussles. I seriously, seriously want to become as good as I can. I define good as being able to write and cry or laugh spontaneously at the page as I write. I'm enchanted with the idea that I'm sitting in the dark and almost charging a battery with energy. I hope to share that energy with the reader as we sit together in the dark. If I can make that journey rich, then I'll be happy. After the Booker, it obviously wasn't useful for me to think I had made it or reached anything spectacular. It was much more useful to think I had been given permission to proceed. It did put a duty on me not to capitalize on that success and take things easy. I couldn't say, "You can do this now. Just churn out another, similar novel." I've made the decision to be as good as I can, and I'm not going to be able to do that if I'm safe and comfortable. ■

TIM GAUTREAUX, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

How attached do you remain to your work after it has been published?

I've been lucky. So far I haven't had a really bad review. I'm sure that if somebody really puts a pasting on something I've written it won't be fun to read, but I'll try to learn from those things. Generally, negative comments don't come out of thin air. They are based on something. One reviewer of *Same Place, Same Things* said there was a kind of sameness to the structure of the stories. That sent up a red flag with me. I went back and I checked the stories to see if there was some validity to what he said. Naturally, there are similarities in the stories as far as setting is concerned and social level of the characters, but I didn't agree with his comment. Nevertheless, I do take it seriously. ■

THOMAS BELLER, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

You mentioned your next book.

I have been working on something for a while but I couldn't say I know what it is. It's one of the things where I've got several boats sailing and I am hoping that they will converge into an armada. But at the moment they are all pointed in weird different directions.

When you are writing you are not thinking of how it comes to market?

Oh my god, no! Jesus. Who is thinking about that?

Who? My impression is that most writers are.

That's not true.

They say, "I am writing this novel. And it's going to have a title and my agent is going to ask about and my editor and..." They are locked into—the phrase of the moment—the delivery system, and people they deal with are seeing it through the lens of commercialism.

I know, but at least not me, and not some of the people I know who are writers who I am friends with—I don't feel that's the motivation. That reminds me of this really annoying—fascinating though—but annoyingly stupid review that came out around the time *The Sleepover Artist* came out. It was Matthew Klam and Sam Lypsite and another guy and myself reviewed.

Together in one review?

Together, like a trend piece about something.

That does a disservice to everyone?

It doesn't have to. It's often very interesting to write about a bunch of different, even disparate books and writers and think about them as a group. This woman somehow got into this remark that suggested that this was all—we were calculating our work. We were going to create this sort of persona—

A new Brat Pack?

She wasn't implying we were a gang. But in each of our cases we were purposefully moving into some kind of niche. I think she actually said *marketing* ourselves. It was not even naïve, it was belligerent. It was willfully ignorant and belligerent of the process, which is so much less calculated than that. ■

ALICE MATTISON, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

Photo: Ben Mattison

*"In Case We're Separated" was chosen for B*est American Short Stories. *When you wrote it, did you have any idea it would attract such attention?*

Oh, I knew instantly. [*Laughs*] No, I did not. No. I thought it was a very quiet story. In fact, I'd made up my mind in writing my new stories that I was not going to struggle as hard as I perhaps had before, to make up stories that covered some ground and had consequences in the real world; that I was going to allow myself to write stories about basic family relationships, as I had in the 1980s, in my first collection, *Great Wits*. I felt shy about "In Case We're Separated" because I think it is very limited in subject matter; nothing much happens in it that's very dramatic, so it was the last story I thought would win a prize. I had been on the list of notable stories in the back of *Best American Short Stories* something like seven or eight times, but a story of mine had never made it into the book. I was shocked when I got the call.

Did you dare hope for it?

The Law of Relinquishment states that if you really want something you've got to forget about it, or stop thinking about it. Maybe not stop wanting it, but certainly stop focusing on it. And that's what happened with that story. I came home one night and there was a message on the machine from Katrina Kenison, the series editor, and I expected it so little that as I listened to her, I was thinking, What, we have a friend in common? She's having a fundraiser? I really thought she'd be calling to ask me about some unrelated professional thing. I'm very grateful that they took it. It was exciting.

At this stage of your career, what happens after recognition like that?

What happens is every time I go into a bookstore and I see that bright red cover, I go, "Woo! Hello," which is very nice. Sometimes you just don't know when something may make a difference. So many people read *Best American Short Stories*—maybe it'll make them interested in reading something else I wrote. ■

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

Your work has received wonderful praise. Are there certain descriptions that have been most meaningful to you?

Well, I was very, very happy with what Andre Dubus had to say about the last collection. I admire his work infinitely, and that he would read the stuff and make such a generous statement about it meant a lot to me. Andre, in fact, said something about my first novel that moved me a lot. He talks about its spirituality, and that particularly moved me, because a couple of people had rejected the novel because they found it too carnal—that word was actually used: excessive carnality. So when Andre's first reaction was to call it spiritual, I was happy, because that was what I was after in the book.

That must have hurt you.

I really felt that sense of frustration: Can you ever communicate?

One of the things that a writer, a published writer, suffers is being subject to that. Maybe that's why some people pretend they're going to write, going to send out their work, so they don't have to deal with that sort of risk.

Well, that's the thing: **if you don't say anything, no one can contradict you.**

May I ask specifically what Dubus had to say that so pleased you?

Sure, I think I even happen to have it here… "Kennedy's stories are as good as any I've been reading in the past ten years or more. His characters are full, alive, and each story is rich and deep. He writes with wisdom, and it is perhaps that wisdom which turns some of his stories of great sorrow into something triumphant. The title story is worth the book's price. It is funny, gloomy, terrifying—in the diving scene—and joyful." ■

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

I'm especially proud of the very complicated structure and time stuff going on in that book that none of the critics noticed. I was still reading reviews back then.

You don't read them anymore?

I haven't read any since *Violence*. Right before *Violence* came out, I said I didn't want to read any more reviews.

What happened to make you decide that?

I wish I could say it was integrity, but it was just mortal fear. I had written this book that was about domestic violence, and it had all kinds of dark stuff in it, and I was afraid I would read something the critics would find to derail me. It was a book that was line-by-line rather awfully scary. I said, "I'm not going to look at the reviews. What I'll do is wait until it's all over and then look at them in the summer." The book came out in January, and I toured it all over the country. I remember, that summer, I was coming from the car walking toward the porch to go into the house, and I thought, "Well, it's July. I can send for the reviews now." But it didn't matter. The book's history was mostly over, and it didn't matter anymore. It would have felt like reading old news.

Does your wife, Karen, still read reviews of your books?

My editor, Robert Jones, sends them to her. She will read them, but I won't want to know what they say. I have a really good publicist for my latest novel, *In the Night Season*, and she sent the reviews to Karen, who said, "Well, the reviews are dumb." So I don't want to know.

You've written book reviews for the New York Times Book Review *in the past. Do you still write them?*

I like writing reviews. I have an agreement with the people I write for that I have lots of lead time, so if I don't like the book, I can say I won't review it. I generally won't hit a book in print, because I don't feel that serves any purpose, unless the writer is really arrogant, or obviously careless.

What is the transition from writer to reader? Do you judge books you are reviewing by what you try to achieve in your own work?

I try to read the book on its own terms to see what the writer is doing. I try to find something to admire. If it is interesting at all, then I can find something to admire. The trouble is, if it doesn't interest me, I call my editors and make them mad by saying I'm not going to do it. I want to be remembered as a kind reviewer who is really looking to like things. I think silence about a bad book is fine.

Does that possibly come from you as a writer more than as a reader?

Both, because a reader is going to make up his own mind. I really don't think reviews have much to do with whether or not a book is good. **I don't think reviews have ever sold any books for me or stopped me from selling books.**

What do you see as the function of reviews?

I really don't know what it is. Maybe the function is to let someone read enough about the book to be able to say something about it at a party. Maybe it's a service for people who don't have enough time to read the books. ■

THISBE NISSEN, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

There was a little more attention when Anchor put out the second edition of *The Good People of New York*. They then had publicity people really working on it and able to do stuff, so there was a little bit more exposure. When the University of Iowa put out the initial edition, there were reviewers who somehow found it and cared about it and wanted to review it. So it felt like the people who were taking the time with it actually cared. But now it's being delivered to people all over, whether they like it or not. And there's been much more media stuff, and my face is life size on the back of the book. You know, there's all this publicity and media stuff that has to do with trying to sell the books, and blah, blah, blah. So, now it feels a lot more like, Oh God, people are looking, and not everybody is going to have good things to say. I wish that I could say I have been weathering it better than I have. I have not. It's been a really rough couple of months.

Because of the feeling of being exposed, or have people been unkind?

Some people have been really unkind, and I don't have a very thick skin.

No, you couldn't have and have written that book.

I don't have a very thick skin at all. **I have this weird compulsion to feel like if I listen to the good things people say, I'm also somehow morally compelled to listen to the bad things.** I come out of a workshop background where you go in and you listen to everything that everyone has to say, and you figure out what's useful and what's not, and the people who say, What the hell is this, you learn to, you know, learn that maybe they don't understand your project or something, but—

You know that in the workshop setting they respect the process; for the most part, they respect what's involved in doing it. Whereas out in the world you have people saying whatever they feel like saying about your book with no regard for the author whatsoever.

Right. And you don't know what's going on for them. You don't know if maybe they wanted to review a different book, but they wound up with

yours. Or if they're pissed at their editor. Or what the last ten books they read were—maybe they're so sick of mother/daughter stories they can't even stand them anymore. Maybe they hate New York stories. So you're standing there, never knowing what direction something's going to come at you from, and you have no idea if somebody's going to pat you on the head or punch you in the stomach, or both at the same time. It's a horrible, horrible feeling, and I'm not taking it incredibly well, at all. I'm doing maybe a little better now. It was hell when I was at home waiting for the tour to start. Just sitting there, plugging my name into search engines eighty-five times a day—you know, the knowledge-is-power thing.

Did it help you, or not?

No, it made me feel horrible.

It scared you before you went out there.

Yeah, it scared me before. But I thought I was going to feel better going out on the tour, feel a little more in control, like at least I'm there and I'm talking to people and they're seeing me.

In person, as a person.

Yes, a person who wrote this. This is real, this is what I do with my days. Still, I don't process the reviews well. And there have been some really mean things said.

Well, I haven't seen them.

Good. Maybe you're not reading the schlocky magazines they get published in.

Yeah.

I don't know that I'm developing a thicker skin. I don't know that that's in me, really. People keep saying to me, Thisbe, don't read them, don't read them. And I may be getting closer to the point where I just can't. It's really doing a little more damage than I think I can sustain.

When you need to recover from something, what do you do?

I call my mommy on the telephone and I cry. Sometimes it helps. My friends have been wonderful, reminding me of who it is I am and what it is I care about and why I do this in the first place, and that I wasn't writing to please critics. I was writing because it's what I do. And I lose track, you do lose track of that. **The world, the input, gets to be too much, and your**

head starts spinning too fast and you think, why do I do this at all, why am I out here waiting to get punched in the stomach, what kind of idiot am I?

Authors are so vulnerable. I don't know how you do it at all.

Well, I'm learning. I really wish I were learning in a more graceful way. Somehow everybody else looks a lot more graceful about it. Like they've got their way of dealing or something. It always seems, I always think everybody else has their act together and I'm the one who's just splayed out there, flailing. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Photo: Keri Pickett

Do you pay much attention to reviews?

I'm in a kind of Zen position now. My wife said to me, "I have a review from the *L.A. Times*, do you want me to read it?" and I said, "No." I do sometimes find that I ignore good reviews and obsess over the bad ones, trying to figure out whether they have a point—whether there was something that was missing in the vision of the book that I should have seen but somehow overlooked.

As opposed to picking out some trustworthy commentators?

I'll give you an example of a good somewhat mixed review. In *Book*, the magazine that Barnes and Noble puts out, Sven Birkerts had a review of my book. He had some reservations about the last one hundred pages and the direction that the book was taking. I thought that was a perfectly legitimate question to raise. But when a reviewer seems not to have read very carefully or to have an a priori agenda that has been brought to bear on their criticism, then I feel I can learn nothing from this.

You're aware of The Believer*'s stance on literary criticism?*

I have always had the sense that if you are going to write a genuinely unfavorable review of a book you need about twice the length that you need to write a good review—simply so that you can establish your points and make them with some coherence. Literary conversation—give and take—has always had snarkery in it. Heidi [Julavits, editor of *The Believer*]

wants everybody to play fair. But this is the world. I think there is a certain amount of constructive destructive criticism. You just have to know how to do it. If everybody is being nice to everybody else, nothing is going to be accomplished. **The worst kind of snarkery is pushed on us by the tendency, in at least the popular press, to create dualisms. Yes, no. Thumbs up, thumbs down. One star or four stars.** Or what a lot of magazines do: they give it a grade—as if the work of four or five years could be reduced to something schoolish. That is a manifestly mistaken notion.

And there seems to be so little respect for the effort. Not that effort alone warrants immunity from criticism.

What it presupposes is that artists are entertainers. We've hired them to come out and do their little shows for us, and if we don't like the show we can give them a thumbs down. Or give them one star and tell them to get off the stage so we can get the next harlequin on stage. It comes from notions of art as amusement. ■

VIKRAM CHANDRA,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

How do you respond to criticism of your work?

I hear of writers who say that they never read their reviews, but **I find myself interested in them. They are, after all, reactions to my work, albeit from a group of readers who are hugely overworked, overfed with books to a point well beyond satiation, and who are obliged to have an opinion about fifteen times a week.** So, I read the critics, but with a very large dose of salt. You can't get too happy about a good review or be destroyed by a bad one. It's important to remember that early reviews are generally wrong about great works of art, or even about good ones. These early reactions might make some sort of immediate difference in sales, but the life of a book is much longer than the life of a critic, and your work will find its own way in the world. I think you have to be skeptical about reviews in general, and keep yourself close to the ground and keep on working. Remember the pleasure of the work, and keep on working. ■

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

The funny thing with *Lying Awake*—because the writing of it was so difficult and the fulfillment of realizing in the very end why I needed to write

this book was so satisfying—is that I felt that it was a complete experience when it was done. I was convinced that this was going to be one of those books that only the author could love—it was so obscure, the subject, and so quiet. I thought I'd get to be satisfied if there were maybe be a few people that would enjoy it. But the irony. It shows you what I know. ■

CAROL SHIELDS, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

The Stone Diaries *was short-listed for the Booker Prize. How disappointed were you that you didn't win?*

I wasn't disappointed. It's funny. I got a whole lot of letters afterward. **I was thrilled to be listed. Of course, it means a tremendous boost in book sales if you are even listed**. I was very close to winning. It was a bit of a heartbreak. But I admire Roddy Doyle tremendously. I went for dinner and had a great time and met all the big stars. It was a very thrilling time.

Is there a lot of backbiting that goes along with the Booker Prize? I've heard that there's a lot of jockeying for position. Is that taking place mainly among the publishers?

Apparently there is a lot of backbiting and a lot of money put into promoting to get writers on that list. I didn't see it. People were enormously welcoming and kind to me. My publisher is a small publisher and doesn't have the kind of money to boost me onto the list. It didn't work that way for me. ■

BOB SHACOCHIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Swimming in the Volcano *must have taken you—*

Nine—almost ten—years. I'm glad it's over.

Will you be sick if I ask you to talk about it?

Of course not. Look, I just got this. I don't know if you saw it? The front page of the *Chicago Trib* book review—

Congratulations!

Thanks. I haven't even read it yet. I suppose it's good, or they wouldn't have put it on the cover. And look at this—the front page of the *L.A. Times* book review. **Reviews of this stature are so important to me because all of the mass-market magazines**—*Time*, *Newsweek*, *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*,

Atlantic, the *New Republic*, *Vanity Fair*—the list goes on—**have chosen to ignore not just my novel, but my body of work. To them I don't exist.**

"In these days of fast-food prose and predigested fiction, Swimming in the Volcano *provides a feast, a book heavy with language and thick with story." That's a wonderful review!*

I'm an extraordinarily lucky person. I really am. In fact, I even think I'm blessed. I mean, you can always hope that things would work out this way, but you really can't hope too much. It's dazzling and daunting.

Does it scare you?

Oh, it scares the shit out of me.

Especially when you're planning on doing a trilogy.

Right. It's absolutely terrifying. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

How has the success of Bel Canto *impacted your writing life?*

Not at all. **When I do interviews after I've won prizes, people want to know how it will affect my writing. Sadly, it doesn't affect anything. It's sort of like someone asking, "How does that great new haircut affect your writing?"** Sentence to sentence, it doesn't do anything for me. I'd like to say that it's terrible, that I have this terrible burden to live up to. It's not even that. It's nothing. When you're alone with your computer trying to write a novel, nothing helps, nothing hurts. It's just you and your dog, alone. ■

ANNIE PROULX, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

A phrase in the title story of Heart Songs *caught my eye, when the main character feels a "secret revulsion at the thought of success." Your success has been raining down on your head in a big way this past year, and I wondered—*

I'm not going to answer this question! I see where you're going! No! Okay, sure. At this point all I want is to go back to my little corner with my books and my pen and my pencil and paper, and get back to work. It's been a great ride; I've met some wonderful people, but I wouldn't want to do it every day. **It's a great place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there, in Prize Land**. ■

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

Photo: Joanne Chan

Your book The Piano Tuner *has received such magnificent response. Is it scary for you? You seem to me to be the kind of person who knows that a person doesn't master anything all at once.*

I thought it would be very difficult because by nature I'm a shy person. I don't like public attention. I don't like being recognized. And so in a way it did sort of take me by surprise. I mean, I wrote this story that I liked and I wanted it to be published. I wasn't sure, but I thought it was something that maybe I could get published, and I wanted to do that. I didn't go into it wanting to have a lot of people read it, but all of a sudden it happened. I was very afraid that it was going to change relationships with friends, professors, patients. That still worries me. I don't feel like anything bad has happened so far, but I also think that it's taken a lot of balancing. I think being in school is great.

You're still struggling every day.

Right. And medical school levels everything, so I'll get maybe a smile and every once in a while I'll meet an attending doctor who's in a higher level than me in the hospital who's read the book, and they'll say something—maybe they liked it or they play piano or something. That conversation will last a minute and then, boom, they're off asking questions, and if I know the answer, great, and if I don't know it, I don't. So the wonderful thing about medicine is this hierarchy of knowledge. If you don't know it, you don't know it, and it doesn't matter what else you do outside. It has a way of forgetting the rest of the world.

That's nice. I bet that really is very helpful.

It helps a lot. It's tough to start writing another book, knowing that someone's going to read the book. But this time I wrote in Brazil and it was fine. Writing here [in the States] is harder because there are all these distractions, but when I was in Brazil I didn't have reviews in front of me. I didn't see the book in bookstores. No one really knew who I was.

The reviews were great!

It's wonderful to get good reviews, but for writing, a good review's bad,

because then you want to repeat what you did before. It's best to be completely separated. I didn't have *The Piano Tuner* with me when I was writing, which helped me separate from it.

So you'll be fine.

Well, hopefully. ■

DAN CHAON, *interviewed by Misha Angrist:*

I'm very happy that people like the book, but it can mess with your head. When *Among the Missing* got selected as a *New York Times* Notable Book, I thought, well, that'll be the end of it. But then these year-end-best-of lists started coming out and it was on several of them. I just can't help but think that there will be punishment for all of the positive attention somewhere down the road. My next book is doomed.

That's the spirit!

In this business the gratification is always delayed—I wrote most of those stories [in *Among the Missing*] years ago. There's an impulse to say, "Hey, just leave me alone and let me write the next book." In a perfect world, you'd get your pat on the back the moment the last page of the last draft came out of the printer. Still, I can hardly complain. ■

MATTHEW SHARPE, *interviewed by Sherry Ellis:*

The Sleeping Father *was rejected by more than twenty major publishers before it was published by Soft Skull Press. After publication it received a lengthy review in the* New York Times, *it was selected for the Today Show Book Club and the same month in a* New York Times *interview Anne Tyler said, "And my favorite this week is a fresh, funny, quirky book called* The Sleeping Father." *How have you coped with this novel's amazing reversal of fortune?*

By enjoying it immensely.

So you've been able to cope with success?

Luckily I'm the same miserable schmuck I was before I had this success. I have a couple of day jobs. I was teaching at Columbia University and at a small experimental public high school in the Bronx called Bronx Academy of Letters. Just having my regular teaching duties made my life not that

substantially different than it was before the success happened. And we're just six months into my success and it could all end tomorrow. Sometime this winter I read Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations*. I'm trying to maintain an Aurelian kind of stoicism about the whole thing. The success is not really me. It's just something that's happening to me. It was a hair's breadth away from not happening and it could easily end in the near future. I hope I'll continue doing what I've been doing, which is writing and teaching. ■

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

Patrick White winning the Nobel Prize must have helped boost Australian self-confidence.

It must have boosted our self-confidence. It must have. There is a great lack of confidence, which is part of the Australian character, which is part of our historical situation. That feeling of being sent to the other end of the earth because we'd done something wrong or that we were second-rate. Somebody said that Australia was made by psychic losers. We weren't just convicts—we were sort of the second sons, the people who were not going to inherit. So, in the Australian character, there's a profound lack of confidence, and to feel that somebody who was an Australian might actually win the Nobel Prize mattered. To understand, go back to what happened when I won the Booker Prize, and how nonliterary Sydney could have an impact because this Aussie boy went over there and showed those bloody Brits a thing or two and got the Booker Prize. So, you shouldn't underestimate the effect of the Nobel Prize. I don't remember it, but I must have felt it.

How do you handle your own personal success?

Badly. But I don't want to mesh personal neurosis with the national pathology. I'm someone who was reasonably shy and socially inept, but who was also wildly ambitious, and I finally achieved some, well, fame I guess you could call it, in my own country, and I found that personally uncomfortable. It's difficult to have people waiting for you to finish your sentences, to walk down the street and have people smile at you when you're not used to it. So it was personally a great relief for me to come and live somewhere else where that was not happening. I won the Booker Prize in London and left almost a day later. I did a day of press and just left. And when I came back to Australia and arrived at the Sydney airport, there were total strangers coming up and shaking my hand, which is not what

you expect of literature in Sydney, Australia. It was really an extraordinary and alarming experience.

Then there was some viciousness and some envy, and anybody who has lived in a small town knows what that's like. It's part of human nature, but we Australians just sort of carry it a few stages further than you'd expect. We have this story called "The Tall Poppy Syndrome." Somebody misunderstood me and thought I said "Tall Puppy," but it's poppy, the flower, and once one poppy grows taller than the other, we like to lop its head off. So, I felt that I'd become the tall poppy. It was a little hostile, so I was pleased to leave for that reason, but I didn't leave for just that reason. **It's only in novels that people do things for one or two reasons. In life we do things for twelve, thirteen, fourteen reasons, and the other reasons we've forgotten.** ■

ROY PARVIN, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

You've gotten wonderfully generous reviews. Great reviews. All earned. We all need to feel understood, we all need to feel like we belong in some way. Do these reviews give you some of that?

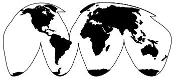
It will be interesting to see the second time around. The first time around, I felt like it was happening to somebody else named Roy Parvin. When you see your name in the *New York Times*, first of all, the book is already done. The thrill for me with stories is sending them out to magazines and getting them accepted. That's a very fresh thing that happens because it happens sooner after the story is written. But I do find it very cheering that it was understood in the world. I found it also very instructive to see what different reviewers brought to the table. I learned a lot about myself. **It was exciting, but I've also felt like, this is nice—but it's not what the writing is about. *Writing* is what the writing is about.**

I remember when *Drown* came out, by Junot Díaz, a writer that I enjoy. I had seen his stories in the *Paris Review* and the *New Yorker* and *Glimmer Train*, and I would think, This guy is a writer. And when his book came out, the week after it was reviewed, it was in the editor's choice in the *New York Times*. I said, you know, I'd be able to die—that's what I want. And then I was lucky. I was fortunate enough to have mine in there, and I remember seeing it and remembering when I saw *Drown* in there. It was not the experience I thought it would be. Isn't life always like that? I think that sort of critical success is wonderful. It is a feeling of being understood

in very, very profound ways. But you also realize that you understand the stories even better than they do in some ways.

I had a fairly disastrous situation with my first agent, who is a perfectly good agent, but not for me. **I think in a young writer's mind, an agent will give the work cachet. That it'll create some buzz, but you really have to create your own buzz on the page.** And the reviews brought it home all the more. I have them. I don't look at them anymore. I think with my next book, I'll look at the reviews less when the book comes out, because I'll know in my heart that the material is what I wanted to say, for better or worse. It might not be good, but it's what I wanted to say at that point in time.

The *New York Times* had a wonderful article about first-time authors—it came out about a year ago. It was about how the second book is so difficult; a first book closes doors because you've already written about things. As a writer you hopefully want to be always reinventing yourself. I was reading about Rick Bass, that for a year and a half after his reviews, he was very self-conscious. I think that that's a natural thing to have happen. I'm sure Rick was wondering, Is this a Rick Bass story? You have to throw that away. As he said, you have to learn that everybody's not always going to love what you're doing, that if you hold the first success up to everything that you write, afterwards it's going to be an albatross around your neck, so you have to learn not to do that. Those are my lessons to young writers. Just enjoy the writing. This is the best part of it. It doesn't get any better. ■



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