



CLOSE-UP:



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

HA JIN, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*It's interesting that *Waiting and The Crazy* are both set in a hospital. Is this a setting that you're familiar with?*

When I was a soldier, I was hospitalized for two months, so I was quite familiar with army hospitals. Also, my parents-in-law were army doctors, and I often visited their home in an army hospital. As for the hospital in *The Crazy*, I did nurse a professor for two afternoons, so I had the immediate contact with that hospital. ■

DAVID MALOUF, interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:

*Another character in *Johnno* is the town itself, Brisbane. It's always in the background. In some ways, the real antagonist of each of the characters is not the other character but the place. You grew up in Brisbane but left Australia in your mid-twenties and didn't move back until ten years later. Did you feel a certain responsibility to write about Brisbane?*

That is a first book. But it's a first book of somebody



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who was thirty-seven when he wrote it, and who had read a lot of books and had time to grow. It's the book of an experienced reader. Its claims to innocence, which are present in the writing, are entirely false.

I was aware that almost all the cities in literature—Balzac's Paris, Dickens's London, or Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg, for example—are not real places. They're literary places that have displaced the real ones. In putting a place on the map in literature, you don't just record it. You create it. If you can do that well enough, it becomes such a magical place, even to the people who live there, that it replaces the real one for them. I knew perfectly well that this was possible. Until I wrote *Johnno*, I didn't know that I could do it.

You've described this as "mythologizing" a place.

Places are established in our memories by *feeling*. That's why the atmosphere of a place becomes so strong for a reader. ■

DEBRA SPARK, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

Place is an important element in your fiction, especially the role of the Caribbean, since each of your first two novels are set there. Many writers struggle with the notion of place, how it serves up large slices of imagery, metaphor, conflict, and so on. What is your take on place, and what's being praised when a reader delights in a book or story's sense of place?

I don't know exactly how to answer that without stealing from a lecture I love by Rick Russo called "Location, Location, Location." He talks about how our sense of character comes from our sense of place, and I certainly think in that regard of how one of the first things I want to know, when I meet a new person, is where they come from. I know some people think it is a boring question to ask a person, but I think there's so much information in the answer. ■

FREDERICK REIKEN, interviewed by Eric Wasserman:

Place is where everything seems to start for me as a novelist. Before I can even begin to think about my characters, they usually have to be attached to a specific place, which is the first step in activating my imagination. **In fact, a strong sense of place is crucial to my writing process, precisely because it gives me something to attach imaginatively to long before I know all the quirks and habits of my characters.** One of the biggest dis-

coveries I made while writing *Lost Legends* was that with New Jersey I had more archetypal places to choose from than I could even make use of. You can't get any more archetypal than the Meadow-lands, and even without Bruce Springsteen, the Jersey Shore has a mythology all its own. As the book evolved I became conscious that I was carving out a landscape that for me was as resonant as Arthurian Camelot, and in most cases a lot more interesting, since I had lived there.

A sense of place certainly crosses over ethnic boundaries and even different artistic forms of expression. Bruce Springsteen says that he felt a great sense of accountability to the people he had grown up alongside when writing Darkness on the Edge of Town. Did you experience anything similar when writing Lost Legends?

Absolutely. I felt it throughout the writing process. I would go so far as to say that what I felt was far more than accountability. I grew up in Livingston, New Jersey, where the book is set. All through grade school I was part of a very close group of friends, but after my parents separated, I began attending a private school and then moved away in eighth grade. Over the next six years I would live in the towns of Summit, Short Hills, West Orange, and South Orange. Since I was, of course, preoccupied with simply trying to succeed in my adolescence, I didn't think about how much I'd lost when I left that town and that group of friends behind.

While I was writing the book, it was as if I was going back to that lost world, where all of my life's "legends" seem to have sprung from. In my imagination I would visit those streets, see all those places, and I did feel a strong compulsion to get every last detail correct—not only street names and landmarks, but even stores that have not existed for twenty years. It seemed imperative that I double-check everything, though I rarely found that I'd made any sort of mistake. In fact, the only mistake I know of is that the yak cage is apparently not next to the penguin cage at the Turtle Back Zoo, and I learned this from someone I'd never met who wrote to suggest that I check my facts next time.

Why do these things matter so much? Well, this was our world, and this book was very much written for all those guys I grew up with. One of my grade-school friends who read *Lost Legends* commented to me that he loved reading the scene that takes place at the Little League field, had forgotten that the main field was called the Treat Field, and wondered how I had remembered that since they renamed it sometime in the eighties. In general, all of my friends from Livingston were amazed by how much

of that landscape I remembered. As I explained, though, this world was etched inside my brain and body in a way that it would never have to be for someone who had continued living there, gone through high school with the same people they'd always known, and experienced the kind of continuity I did not have.

When *Lost Legends* came out, I did a reading at a bookstore in Livingston. A lot of those guys were there, as well as other people I'd gone to grade school with. My former next-door neighbor was there with her parents, and asked if I'd based the character of Juliette Dimiglio on her—I hadn't. My fifth-grade teacher was there. My first girlfriend's parents were there. It struck me then that writing *Lost Legends* was very much my way of going back to that lost world, of telling a story that would represent all these people, as well as a story that would—in some oblique, metaphorical way—apologize for having left. Without devolving into sentimentality, I'll tell you honestly that I feel a great loss from having fallen out of that context and losing the immediacy of those friendships. Almost amazingly, many of those guys I grew up with continued to stay the best of friends through college and beyond. They've all been the groomsmen at each other's weddings. Two of them live on the same block in Short Hills now, and put each others' kids to bed. Although I get together with them all once or twice a year now, it's not the same as if our lives had continued to be intertwined. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS, interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

In your future works do you think you'll continue returning to Japan?

I'm not sure. I've really enjoyed writing about Japan, and I'm not sure if I've exhausted it yet. When I first started writing, I naturally turned to Japan because it was the place of my childhood, which is usually the root of self-discovery. Also, I really enjoy the process of translating the sensibility of one culture into that of another. But there's a whole American side of me that I may want to tap into. For now, I'm comfortable not knowing. All I know is, whatever I find myself most fascinated with is what I'm going to follow. ■

CHARLES BAXTER,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

With the exception of First Light, much of your work is set in the fictional

town of Five Oaks, Michigan. What does this setting—and the cast of characters you weave in and out of your stories—provide you?

It's the joy of creating a model-train layout. I know where everything is in that town. My son once made a map of it so that I wouldn't get confused about the location of various businesses in relation to the river that goes through it.

As a Midwesterner I don't have the advantage, or the disadvantage, of calling upon areas that everybody knows about, such as New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles—instantly recognizable places that have certain rules that lots of people know. I also don't have some of the more recognizable features of Southern or Southwestern writing. As a young man, thinking of myself as quite an experimentalist, I decided to do something absolutely conventional and characteristic of Midwestern writers, which was to create a community and stay with it, in the way that writer Sherwood Anderson did. I hadn't expected to stay in Five Oaks as long as I have. It has as many disadvantages to me as it has advantages. But I do have this cast of characters, and I know where everything is. This is my world. I couldn't set *The Feast of Love* there because I needed a community where everybody talks all the time, and Ann Arbor is full of people who give lectures, go to therapy and sit around talking all day and evening.

We even get glimpses of Five Oaks in The Feast of Love, when Bradley visits the town to retrieve his dog from his sister who lives there.

It's the economics of character. Once you've created a character, you don't throw him away. You just save him or her for the next available opportunity, as Philip Roth [*American Pastoral*] does with Nathan Zuckerman. It saves wear and tear on the brain cells. I have a handful of people, including Saul and Patsy, whom I've written stories about. **The truth is that you can say most of what you want to say about human beings and their behavior with a relatively limited number of characters if you send them through enough fiery hoops. ■**

JAY MCINERNEY, interviewed by Victoria Blake:

Your book, The Good Life, is set in New York. I understand your enthusiasm for New York, but have you ever felt the city to be a constraint for your novels?

Absolutely. New York is crazy. All the sounds and the sense of the city.

What you end up doing is blocking the city out, stepping over bodies in the street. You stop looking up, which is of course precisely what you shouldn't do as a writer, as an observer, as someone upon whom nothing should be lost. The worst thing you can do is to put blinders on yourself. I was very pleased when an architect friend of mine said to me, "It's amazing. I think you should be so jaded by now, but you're sort of like a little boy from Iowa who just came to the city yesterday and can't quite believe it." If I ever lost that quality, I think I would become a pretty poor chronicler of the city. ■

JOHN McNALLY, interviewed by Stephanie Kuehnert:

Where did the idea for "The Vomitorium" come from?

"The Vomitorium" is one of three stories in *Troublemakers* that are connected by the same narrator, Hank. "Smoke" was the first one that I wrote. A few years later, I wanted to return to those characters. I wasn't taking a workshop. I just wanted to write another story with Hank and Ralph, and my first impulse, as I remember it, was to set the story during Halloween. From there, I really didn't know where the story was headed. I usually start with more than a holiday or a season! Although, for my new book—*The Book of Ralph*—I set out to write a Christmas story, and, naturally, it became more twisted and dark than celebratory. So maybe I write about holidays more than I initially thought. ■

ALICE MATTISON, interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

You were in the midst of writing The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman when September 11 happened. How did that day affect your story?

I started writing in February 2001. September 11 came along as I was writing, and by then it was fall in the book as well. Of course I stopped and thought, Why am I doing this?—writing, that is—and then, as with a lot of other writers, about two days later it was the only thing I could do that would make me feel any better. And as I said, I was addicted to it at this point—I couldn't stop. I thought of putting September 11 into the book, but that seemed exploitative, and I didn't. Later, though, I realized that the plot made more sense if September 11 happened in the book. I hadn't specified a particular year, but now I made the book take place in 2001. There was quite a bit about September 11 in the early drafts, and some of the first people who read it were somewhat put off by that.

They were reading it very soon after.

About a year later, in fact—it took me a long time to have a draft I could show anybody—and by that time September 11 had been taken over by the right wing, so that it had become impossible to talk about it without sentimental and mindless mouthings about patriotism, which was not what we were all feeling when it took place. In some of the drafts it almost seemed as if I was playing into that, and I included less about it in revision. My editor and I talked at one point about taking it out, and not having the book take place in 2001 at all, but by that time September 11 felt integrated into the book. It's funny about fiction. You get to make it up, but every once in a while you feel that if you made up one particular thing you'd be lying. You get to make it up, but there's truth. ■

PERRI KLASS, interviewed by Charlotte Templin:

Novels about the workplace and about work are not all that common.

No, they are not. One of the reasons perhaps, and I don't mean this in any kind of negative way, is that I think that many writers today study writing, and they haven't necessarily spent time in other workplaces. There are things that you can imagine about workplaces, but I think this kind of intensity is hard to imagine unless you have put in months and years. ■



Photo credit: Marion Ettlinger

VALERIE MARTIN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*Human interaction with animals is prominent in much of your fiction, especially in *The Great Divorce* and *The Consolation of Nature*.*

I didn't realize how much I was preoccupied by animals until I wrote *The Consolation of Nature*.

So that wasn't a conscious choice?

It wasn't. They were always present, and now I realize that from looking at my earliest stories. New Orleans is full of strange, transforming experiences. Transformation into and out of animals is the basic stuff of myth, and I've always liked those kinds of stories—

Did the story of the Catwoman of St. Francisville, in which a woman turns into a panther (or at least believes she does), in The Great Divorce come from an actual legend?

It was totally fabricated. One reviewer referred to it as “a beloved local story.” I read a story when I was a kid about a woman who lived on the Mississippi River who supposedly had a centaur living in her house. He would come to New Orleans and go to the opera with her. You couldn’t see the horse-like part of his body because the opera box hid it. The woman would later be seen disappearing down the alley on the back of a horse. There is a movie called *Cat People* about a woman who turns into a cat, and there have been two versions of that. One takes place in New Orleans. When I wrote *The Great Divorce*, I hadn’t seen the original film. One reviewer claimed that I had stolen from this film and didn’t credit it. I had never seen it, so I went and rented the film. My daughter and I watched it. She said, “Oh, Mom, this is creepy, it’s so close.” ■

ANN PATCHETT, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Elements of Catholicism are present in each of your books. The Patron Saint of Liars is about signs from God and takes place in a home for unwed mothers run by nuns. The characters in Taft go to church. The priest, Father Arguedas, plays a large role in Bel Canto. Religion plays a natural part in the narrative.

If you have religion, it has to be about religion. Religion is part of my life, but my life isn’t about religion. It’s there. I’m a Catholic, and I believe in God. It’s a backdrop, and it seems logical to put that in books. I want to write books about black people and white people that are not racial books. I live in the South. We’re white and we’re black. We’re with each other every day. But we’re not thinking, “I wonder how you feel about the oppression of your people.” You just live your life with people. I never see that in books. ■

DANIEL MASON, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

The amazing man named Twet Nga Lu—the guy with the talismans embedded all over his body. The image of his being killed, having the talismans removed, being decapitated and boiled down to a syrup medicine—

Which was then sold.

Yes, which was then sold.

That story made me want to write about the Shan States. When I was thinking about where I could set this story, I thought maybe I could set it in western Burma or eastern Burma. Or maybe it could be about the French in China. Then I read the story of this man who was boiled down in his death into a potion that was then sold, and I thought this is better than any fictional story I could ever make.

It could leave your mouth hanging open for a week.

Right. It's an extraordinary story. And he's still famous in the Shan States. I met a Shan reader who came to me and said that when she was a little girl, long after he had died, if she was making mischief her mother would come to her and say, Be quiet or Twet Nga Lu is going to come and get you. He's still sort of the boogeyman in the Shan States. I thought it was amazing.

Well, what do you think—is there any chance that a person boiled down to an essence would be a healing substance? Can you think of any possible physical reason?

No, unless there's something paranormal that's going on. You know, unless the man really has supernatural powers and he's protecting you.

That whole thing creates the most incredible image. I just couldn't believe it.

That's why I love history. I've always felt that I didn't need to make anything up because the history itself was so good. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

The first novella in Specimen Days, "In the Machine," takes place at the beginning of the Industrial Age when Americans worked in factories at repetitive jobs that deadened the spirit. What drew you to set a story during this historic time in New York City?

Specimen Days was meant, from its inception, to begin in the Industrial Age and conclude in the future. **Mass production changed human life forever. For the centuries preceding we were primarily an agrarian people living in a natural world, according to our needs and the seasons.** Then, literally overnight, most of us were part of some immense process, making a part of a part of something. Universal time didn't exist until relatively recently, with the establishment of transcontinental railroads. Until

then, it had been two o'clock in my village, three in yours. But we needed to agree on the time so we wouldn't miss our trains. It also took a full generation for the factory owners to get their workers to understand that they had to show up at the same time every day, even if they had enough money for the moment and just didn't feel like working that day. Last detail—there was, in the nineteenth century, an active campaign, I mean with posters and such, to link poverty with shame. Until then our notion of poverty was more like our notion of cancer—it simply struck some people and not others. But if we're not ashamed of being poor, we won't show up for work consistently. In short, it was a profound change, and it was the beginning of the world in which we live now. ■

LEE K. ABBOTT, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

Place is a crucial element in your fiction. It's hard to imagine your stories taking place in, say, Chicago or Tuscaloosa. What's your take on place in fiction, and what's being praised when a reader delights in a story's sense of place?

Have you read Miss Welty's essay called "Place"? (It appeared, methinks, in an issue of the *South Carolina Review*, in the mid-fifties.) In it, she makes the following argument: "Nothing happens nowhere." To me, the evocation of place is yet another way of making the story real, of giving it its special authority. My place—the nearly infertile stretch of America from West Texas to Eastern Arizona, south of Albuquerque—is the acreage in which I learned everything I know, or find important, about our species. Best of all, peculiar to that place is the language by which I came to know, oh, first love and first death, the "firsts" that are so dire and so memorable. In any event, the writer has to make place palpable so that I, the reader, will believe it. And, sheesh, belief is the point, isn't it? ■

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

In almost every story in the book [A Thousand Years of Good Prayers], I really felt like I could see into the personal lives of the characters, and how they felt they fit into the whole human fabric. That was surprising to me. But since you talked about how there was nothing private, that makes more sense. And since there wasn't much mobility, people knew each other's families for generations.

Generations, yes, because you didn't have the freedom to leave this place

whenever you wanted. You usually were assigned housing so everybody got stuck together. Also, there was this residency policy; like, for instance, I was born in Beijing, I had a Beijing residence so I could live in Beijing when I grew up, but if you were not born in Beijing, or did not have residency, you could not move into Beijing. You had to stay where you were. There was really tight control of farmers because the government didn't want farmers to go into cities.

Which they're now doing, right? Why is that?

The situation in the countryside is so bad.

And why is it so bad?

Poverty and injustice. **Injustice is a big thing in the countryside, because if you are the head of a village, you basically have the power to determine other people's deaths. It drives people to the city. And the beginning of capitalism. Workers know they have a certain kind of freedom with capitalism. ■**

RUSSELL BANKS, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Wil Haygood in the Washington Post asked why more writers aren't using Africa as a setting for novels.

It's off the radar and it's scary, too. To Americans particularly. We think it's a European problem, in a way. They were the colonial powers in Africa. We weren't. ■

JOHN S. WALKER:

Some say writers are made by place: where they grew up and lived, the roads they walked, or the alleys of tenement apartments through which they ran. Others, that writers aren't made at all, but make themselves, somehow, through the sweat and crafting of years. I don't know. I can't imagine Richard Wright as Richard Wright without his growing up in Mississippi, or Baldwin without Harlem or his Paris. Did Faulkner discover Yoknapatawpha, or did it discover him? Remove O'Connor from Georgia and what stories would we have? Or say Hemingway never went to war. Say there never was a war.

But there was. And he went.

I write stories, novellas, and novels, and I wonder what makes a writer. Kurt Vonnegut described writers as loping around like gut-shot bears. I like that. Barry Hannah has said writers observe everything. That they stare, like cows. Many writers have talked of the importance of place in their work and in their lives. The land they dwelt in ends up dwelling, somehow, unavoidably and deeply, in them as well. The soul of a writer absorbs it all, even if unconsciously.

Maybe it's simple as our childhoods: those temporary Edens, such as they were, the good and the terrible, that we once knew and had to leave, but that never have fully left us. We carry them, and then are driven to write either toward or away from what they were and who we are.

You can't go home again, wrote Thomas Wolfe. Then for the rest of his career all he did was write about home. American literature itself rises and falls on the simple story of the search for a home. Twain's Huck Finn, Hawthorne's Dimmsdale and Hester, Melville's Ishmael, Hemingway's Nick Adams and Jake Barnes, Fitzgerald's Gatsby, back to the pilgrims themselves coming ashore encountering myth as reality.

One of the most profound of our epics in Western literature reduces itself to a very elemental story: A man named Odysseus, after twenty years at war, just wants to get home. *Nostos*, the Greeks called it. *Return*. It's where we get our word *nostalgia*: the longing to return to a familiar wound.

Wounds, like brands, are what make us. And it is out of such wounds that many of this country's best stories have been written. ■

VALERIE LAKEN, interviewed by Peggy Adler:

You and your husband were rebuilding your house at the same time that you were working on Dream House. Can you speak to the relationship between working on a house and writing a novel?

There is something very reassuring about houses. Really the two things that define a house, any house, are that it is meant to endure and meant to protect an intimate group of people. That's stating the obvious, I guess, but what I mean is that basing a novel around a house was a way of anchoring a project that terrified me to a stable and necessary object.

At the same time, lots of people live with the fear that their home *won't* endure—that it'll be taken away by the bank or blown to bits in a hurri-

cane. The past few years have given us ample news reports to support those fears. And although homes may generally protect us from the elements, lots of people also receive their most painful wounds inside their homes. So I was interested in the ways that homes can be both nurturing and damaging.

Dramatically speaking, placing a home at the center of your book—as so many other, better authors have done—is also very useful, because **a home can bind your characters together and force them to work through their conflicts. After all, narratives don't just require conflict or tension—which we can have with any stranger on the highway, fleetingly. What a story requires is characters who are in conflict but can't walk away from each other.**

Charles Baxter used to say: “Crowd your characters.” We spend so much time alone when we write, but what we're interested in is what happens when we're stuck together.

Yes. One of the most memorable stories one of my students ever wrote was about three people on what was supposed to be a date, driving around recklessly in a rickety old Volkswagen bug. The story may have had flaws, but the instincts of that writer were perfect. You just know that no matter what kind of characters you throw into that circumstance, something interesting is going to boil to the surface.

So you have all of these characters bound to one house—many from intense past experiences—and their stories intertwine in the present action of the story.

The characters in my book all have powerful but different relationships to this house, and they can't quite walk away from it or, therefore, each other. There is a young couple: Kate, who believes buying this old house will help mend her failing marriage; and her husband, Stuart, who has a bad feeling about the house and knows that no house can fix what's broken between them. Then there's Walker Price, the man who committed a murder under their roof eighteen years ago, but who was raised in the home and can't bear the fact that his crime destroyed his family and cost them the home. Finally, there's another character whose life was unexpectedly altered after the night he spent cleaning up after the crime scene in the house. ■

ALEXANDER PARSONS, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

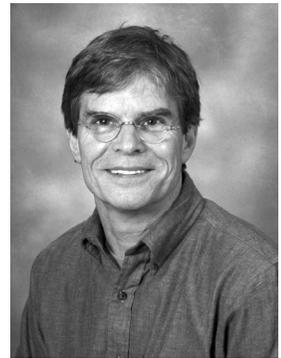
You've talked before about how important it was to set the prison in the desert, since you're from the desert, and it's a place you know well. You've also lived in Washington D.C., where another section of Leaving Disneyland is set. Your second novel, In the Shadows of the Sun, is deeply rooted in place—New Mexico's Badlands, but also parts of Asia. How well must you know a place before you can write about it?

One of the biggest difficulties I had writing *In the Shadows of the Sun* was inhabiting a landscape that was unfamiliar. I didn't have the money to visit the parts of the Philippines and Japan that the book ranged through, and to make up for this I found myself reading obsessively for the place details that would help me imagine it: first-person accounts by people who'd lived in the areas, books on flora and fauna, all the photos I could find. Generally—and there are always exceptions—I think that writing about place comes from having experienced it, and then, oddly, from being away from it. It's much easier to write about a place when you're free to imagine it. **The landscape of fiction is always the landscape of imagination. In the same way, I suppose, fiction organizes and alters the factual to serve the larger truths embodied in the work. ■**

KURT RHEINHEIMER:

Certainly “Concussions” comes from family experience, and there are at least thirty other stories from that source as well. I have long felt that the most precious vein for material is from just before I knew who I was and what was going on. I think I was far behind most people in that realm—certainly behind all the girls—because for me that period of not-quite-aware extended until I was twelve or so. I think to that time I still experienced life only as it unfolded—with minimal if any awareness of the processes of living life—both my own and those of my parents and brothers and sister. And somehow those “pure” experiences have translated themselves into fiction better than anything else I've found.

The starting point for many of those stories was some aspect of the place where I grew up. Though I did not realize it until many such stories had been written, it is clear looking back that they came into being in the same



way: I found a little piece of emotion in myself in a specific place of my childhood—the cove behind our house, the baseball field at dusk, Halloween night when I was dressed as a bum, the woods where we hid girly magazines in a tree. And being able to sort of re-experience (or in some way experience for the first time) my excitement there gave start to a story; the look and emotion of that place I loved so much as a boy has given me yet another set of gifts as a man.

Other stories from that same age-perspective have begun with a vision of one or the other of my parents standing amid some aspect of that magical place. The story “Concussions” began with an image of what became its first paragraph—my thin, girlish mother standing in light spring clothes next to a shiny black Buick under the innocent-blue sky of the fifties. I certainly saw my parents standing in those places back then, but I had no inkling of any emotion or feeling they held, until I rediscovered the visions of them from the perspective of many years later.

So, to at last get to the question of how to know which of the myriad of details, personalities, and events from real life to include: The answer is that I have never felt in control of those decisions. **If I am lucky enough to find the place and the little piece of emotion that gives me something close to a shiver, and if I can capture that pairing of place and feeling in a beginning paragraph, then the story—the fruit of the emotion and the place—seems to take over what gets told.**

Over the decades of writing about my family during the years when I was a boy, that process has operated so strongly that I am by now no longer sure what really happened to me—or to us as a family—and what has come to be “true” by virtue of its having been part of a story. The primary event of “Concussions”—the head injury to the boy—did indeed occur, and was the most traumatic event of my childhood; but nearly all of the rest of the story’s details and events are some uncertain blend of real and made-up. The happy part is that I think the other members of my family will vouch that the place is real and the emotions are the real ones from the time.

And for me at least, that’s the best a family-stories story writer can hope for. ■

MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

In “Like Beauty,” you’ve created a futuristic world for Simon, Catereen, and

Lucas. “Even if *Infinidot* didn’t check the park vids, determine that Catereneen had lied to a drone, and immediately inform the Council, she would without question lose her job for having been someone a drone wanted to speak to.” How did you go about inventing the details of this world?

I looked at the U.S. as it is today and imagined a plausible, though by no means inevitable, future. A dangerously polluted nation in economic decline, Balkanized, governed variously by fundamentalists and corporations, whose citizens have no idea what news to believe... You couldn’t call any of it unlikely, could you? ■

NAMI MUN, interviewed by Greg Schutz:

Miles from Nowhere is set in New York—mostly the Bronx—during the 1980s. What influenced your choice of milieu? Was it a challenge for you as a writer, having not only to capture in prose an iconic city about which so much has already been written, but also to capture that city as it was during a particular decade?

Generally speaking, setting is always a challenge. I try to keep it in the background and yet let it breathe and flex its muscles throughout the story. Many stories/novels do this successfully—Paul Bowles’s “How Many Midnights” comes to mind, as does Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*. Both authors treat New York as an entity that dramatically or subtly carries the weight of character wants and fears. And in this way, the setting works as a guide, communicating to the reader when the characters cannot.

For these reasons—and many more—New York was the perfect backdrop to reflect the mercurial nature of Joon’s inner and outer life. And while writing the book, I tried not to think of New York as belonging to Woody Allen, Dorothy Parker, Dawn Powell, Paul Auster, E.L. Doctorow, Hubert Selby, Jr., Richard Price—I could go on—but as the city I grew up in, took shelter in, went to the movies in, had my first kiss in. And I focused on Joon’s New York, how small and dark and cold it would feel to her, especially in the 1980s, the decade of self-serving. ■

FREDERICK REIKEN, interviewed by Eric Wasserman:

For a long time I’ve been saying that place is where everything starts for me as a writer, and I guess this is as true as it has always been, since the book came to life as a result of the desire to re-imagine certain places I

have known. The first chapter I wrote was what became chapter six, “The Ocean,” which is set on the Caribbean island of St. John. I spent a summer there in college, taking a class in marine biology. We snorkeled and scuba dived two to three times a day, learned about coral reef ecology, and did our own independent projects—mine was on the bluehead wrasse. After college I spent a year working as a wildlife biology field technician in the Negev Desert, in southern Israel, which serves as the main backdrop for the book’s last three chapters. I think I always knew the story would end up there. ■

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON, *interviewed by Margo Williams:*

You grew up in Corpus Christi, which is the title of your collection of short stories; can you tell us how the setting of Corpus Christi helped to shape your fiction?

Oddly, I never wrote about Texas *while* I was living in Texas. I suppose I’ve become an expatriate to the state. And I never thought about a linked collection until the stories piled up, and I noticed how they were thematically and geographically echoing off each other. I had no intention or interest in creating a road map of the region, but rather I wanted to map the interior lives of the folks who live there. With every story that I wrote, two or three more came to my mind. They’re still coming to my mind. I just finished a short short about a man who buys a small alligator on the side of the road. That kind of thing happens around Corpus.

And yet South Texas is a region of the country that hasn’t been explored too often in literature or movies. It’s a bit mysterious, a region that doesn’t quite know what it is, which is kind of charming. On the Gulf Coast, you’re always in this state of flux and vulnerability, and that bears out in how people live their lives. It’s a place that reinvents itself almost on a daily basis, certainly when a hurricane hits. Yet five or ten miles inland there are cattle ranches, and five or ten miles north of that there’s the city, and then there’s the army depot and naval air station, and the touristy part of Corpus, and suburbia, and three hours south is Mexico. The region is itself a dynamic character—it’s certainly, I hope, one of the fullest characters within the book—and because I firmly believe that settings both form and inform characters, I began to wonder how different people would react to various kinds of trouble that are particular to the region. What would it feel like to work in a lumberyard when a hurricane is barreling toward the

coast, and the city wants more plywood than you can offer? What would it be like to walk into a house full of parrots that had been illegally smuggled in from Mexico? **What would you do if you woke up to find that all of the shells you'd collected from the beach the day before were alive with hermit crabs who've taken over your kitchen?** What if the man who owns the stables where you keep your horse accused you of not paying your rent? I knew the answers to none of those questions, so **I wrote the stories to find out.** ■

MALENA WATROUS:

I had to set a novel overseas to realize the importance of setting in fiction. I say “realize” because when I think back on the books that grabbed me as a young reader and made me want to become a writer—from *Jane Eyre*, to the stories of J.D. Salinger, to *My Ántonia*—I now recognize the extent to which the characters in these books were shaped by setting. And the settings were as vividly detailed and idiosyncratic as the characters who peopled them.



Photo: Matt Schumaker

I knew that the writing was going well on the days when it felt jarring to shut off my computer and “return” to the States. When I finally finished the novel, it was like having to say goodbye to Japan all over again. But I learned a lesson from the experience of writing this novel: I realized that I had been neglecting setting in the stories I'd written before this, set in America, lazily assuming that my readers didn't need help to see what was right in front of us.

Defamiliarization is a classic writer's trick. It's easy to pay attention to detail when you're out of your element, much harder to notice what you see all the time, let alone perceive the strangeness and beauty in the ordinary and commonplace. When I was working on the book, one of my characters with whom I had the most fun was a Japanese man who had traveled extensively to America. From his own foreign vantage point, **he saw all sorts of strange things about our culture. He noted, for instance, that while the narrator berated the Japanese for the “wasteful” use of disposable chopsticks, people in the United States thought nothing of cutting down trees at Christmastime, “only to hang some balls,” or of burying the dead in large wooden boxes.** When I got into his head and wrote in his voice, it helped me to defamiliarize the American setting that I'd been tak-

ing for granted—and to realize the extent to which setting and culture are inextricable. ■

ANDREW PORTER, *interviewed by Trevor Gore:*

What impact has teaching basic story techniques to undergraduate writers had upon your fiction?

I remember recently talking to my students about the importance of setting. At the time, I was working on a story set in Seattle, a city that I had never really spent a lot of time in, and as I was talking to my students, I remember wondering why I had set the story there. At one point, I said something about how the setting of a story should never be arbitrary. If you set a story in a specific city, or a specific geographic location, you should always know why, and as soon as I said this, I realized that there was no logical reason for me to set my story in Seattle. It had been an arbitrary decision on my part, and one that didn't make a lot of sense. The next weekend, I changed the setting to one that I was more familiar with, to Houston, and suddenly the whole story came into focus. That type of thing happens to me all the time. There are many times when a student will ask a question about some aspect of writing, and I'll realize I've never really considered that question before. ■

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

Your stories [in The Boat] are set in various places—Iowa, Colombia, Japan, Australia, Iran. What are the responsibilities of writing about such diverse places and times?

I think that's the killer question, honestly. On the one hand, you want to say to yourself that writers should be able to write about anything, should be able to write freely and perhaps irreverently about anything. But then you also come across what is, to me, that equally compelling other view, which is that there needs to be some regard paid to the singularity of people's experiences and cultures' experiences—not in a possessive way, not in a way that suggests any sort of proprietary relationship between experience and the articulation of experience—but in a way that renders acknowledgement. I don't know what that acknowledgement should be. It could be according a certain type of dignity. It could be approaching something in good faith. ■

CHRISTOPHER COAKE, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

“That First Time,” your story in the Granta issue [featuring Best of Young American Novelists], takes place in Indianapolis. You’re from Indiana, but your stories are set in many locales spanning the country. What is it about a particular place that makes you want to write about it?

A lot of things, but primary among them is if I feel I have a comfort level, an understanding, of a particular place. Which I suppose is stating the obvious, so let me expand. I know Indiana—I’m a Hoosier by birth. I know that place emotionally, culturally, thematically, metaphorically. I know Indy and I know the small farm towns. And I spent almost ten years in Ohio, in Oxford and Columbus, so I think I’ve got an idea about how Ohio is similar to Indiana, and yet different. I lived six years in Colorado as a kid, so I know some things about Colorado—primarily how it’s different from the Midwest, but also about the way people there view the world, in subtle but distinctly Coloradan ways.

Here’s another obvious statement: characters are inseparable from their relationship to place. Midwesterners are different, fundamentally, from New Yorkers, from Westerners. The better and more experienced I get at crafting fiction, the more important this simple fact has become to me, the more time I spend thinking about it as I’m doing the crafting.

The *Granta* story is really, truly an Indiana story. It’s about a lot of things, I hope, but at its heart, it’s about a guy who, in many ways, has to be reminded that he left the country for the city. Maybe you’d have to be from Indiana to see that. But I see it as a story, at least in part, about a guy having to relearn Hoosier hospitality—what it means, what it costs, what it earns you to give of yourself to a stranger. Thanks to Indiana, I’ve been thinking about that thematic for a lifetime. ■

FREDERICK REIKEN, interviewed by Eric Wasserman:

Place is where everything seems to start for me as a novelist. Before I can even begin to think about my characters, they usually have to be attached to a specific place, which is the first step in activating my imagination. In fact, a strong sense of place is crucial to my writing process, precisely because it gives me something to attach imaginatively to long before I know all the quirks and habits of my characters. ■

ALICE MATTISON, interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

New Haven seems to have given you plenty of material.

New Haven is a small city, but not too small. All sorts of connections occur here. The city gave me a place to write about that I could wrap my brain around, but it didn't occur to me to say stories were set in New Haven when I started writing them, although I imagined them here.

The first story of mine that was accepted by the *New Yorker* was called "The Knitting," about a young woman from New York who visits her sister's family. Roger Angell, who accepted the story and became my editor, suggested that I make clear where the story takes place, because it makes a difference whether she's come ten miles or two hundred miles or two thousand miles. He suggested we say it was New Haven. I said I didn't think it was a good idea to set a story in New Haven, because people just associate New Haven with Yale. He said, "I have a friend who lives in New Haven who has nothing to do with Yale." Which was illogical but wonderful. So we set it in New Haven, with the names of real New Haven streets. That was an incredibly important moment for me. I'd been convinced in an instant. I immediately wrote a story called "New Haven" and I've written about it on and off ever since. ■

KENT HARUF, interviewed by Jim Nashold:

Will you ever exhaust writing about Colorado?

I think of that northeast corner of Colorado as being my material. I feel like I own that in some literary sense. There's so much to write about there that I don't think I'll exhaust it. But I don't think of these stories as separate from the rest of the United States. What I do think is that I'm trying to tell stories that are pared down enough that the skeleton of human behavior can be seen where the distractions of the city are gone. ■

AMY HEMPEL, interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:

People's vulnerabilities are interesting, but I didn't set out to look at that. I started with the place. Place has always been the most—well, maybe the most—crucial thing in my work. ■

DAVID LONG:

Something that Wallace Stegner said: “We manage to breed saints, brutes, and mudheads in all sorts of topographies and climates.” In other words, he’s saying that place does not determine character, but we do respond to certain types of geography. I like living in the mountains. I didn’t like living in the Midwest. I like the North. Somehow, in my genetic heritage I’m a northerner. I’m English all the way. Rocky coastlines, mountains, pine trees, hardwoods—that seems very natural to me. Italy seems like an awful lot of fun to visit, but it wouldn’t be home for me. We’re wired, I think, for some kind of experience of place. As a fiction writer, it’s been very important for me to make the stories be specific. ■

ERNEST GAINES, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

Have you ever been tempted to write outside the “Bayonne” area?

That’s a good point, because I have lived in California almost forty-six years and everybody asks me, “Well, when are you going to write about California?” And I’ve tried! I tried to write bohemian stories. I tried to eat the bread and drink the wine, and I got sick on that. Got real sick on the wine. And I tried to write a story about my army experience—something like Mister Roberts, during peacetime, when I was in the service. I was in the service after Korea—between Korea and Vietnam.

I’ve tried to write those stories about San Francisco and the fog and all that sort of thing, but nothing’s really come of it. So I tell people that maybe I’ll write about some other place after I’ve written all that Louisiana stuff out of me. But Louisiana is an interesting place: I don’t know that I ever will write it all out. ■

ELIZABETH COX, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

My heart is in the South. Eudora Welty says, “Place is where the heart is.” I’m beginning to develop a heart in Massachusetts, but when I go back to North Carolina or Tennessee, the air, the sounds, the smells, everything is familiar—it’s what I write about. I’ve tried to write about New England, and maybe one day I can, but I will need to live in the North longer in order to write about it. One aspect of New England that I am beginning to write about is the quality of light. New England light is sharper, it has an edge. In the South, the air is thicker and the light has a milkiness to it, has a softness

that isn't in the Northern air. At first, I thought I couldn't stand it; now I love it. ■

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

I like the physical aspect of Western landscapes. The paradox of having land that is so rugged and yet so fragile, fragile as a china cup. There's an internal tension working that I love. I also like the timelessness about the landscape, and—perhaps because I come from the East Coast I can appreciate this—work stops during the winter in Trinity County. The snows get to be so high that, well, how many places are there except for rural America where the weather is almost a character in your life? I find that very intriguing. My writer friends are always asking about my stories, What year did it occur in? I ask, Well, what year did you think it is? And they say it can be any year from 1950 to 1980. Or perhaps even today. I try to work in a sense of timelessness, and it seems like telling a small story against a big landscape gives the story an automatic mythical quality. If I had not gone West, I probably wouldn't be a writer, a fiction writer. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, *interviewed by Rob Trucks*:

Kentucky was the western frontier through the 1700s. At that point, all the land was settled and occupied, primarily by Scots and Irishmen. The rest of the country, in its westward expansion, went around Kentucky due to geography, so it stayed with the eighteenth-century mentality, in many ways, for almost two hundred years now, maintaining a frontier attitude about life, selfpreservation, relationship with the land, relationship with animals, and relationship with people.

I didn't like most depictions of eastern Kentucky. I especially didn't like the popular-culture depictions: Barney Google, Snuffy Smith, the Beverly Hillbillies, *Dukes of Hazzard*, *Deliverance*, all that kind of crap. I wanted to present a version of Kentucky that was mine, that I grew up with. It was a post-Vietnam, post-VISTA world of Appalachia. I've met incredibly complicated, intelligent people in the hills. ■

RICHARD BAUSCH,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

The thing I don't do that other Southern writers do is spend a lot of time writing about place. My landscape is interior. I find terrain less interesting than psychology. There are writers who can do the terrain and the psychology. I'm not short-changing those writers. For me, it's just not all that interesting. I've traveled all over, and it's just land, just rocks and mountains.

ERNEST GAINES, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

My grandmother would always dish up the food herself. She would never let you dish your own food up. She would put a pile of it on there, and you had to eat it. And then you got the cake later. If you didn't eat it, you didn't get the cake, so you'd force yourself to eat the food to get a little piece of cake. And she was a great cook.

She had been the cook in this big house where I grew up on this plantation, just like Miss Emma, Miss Jane, and so many of my older people— Aunt Charlotte. And my paternal grandfather was the yard man. He did all the sharpening of the tools and all that kind of stuff there, fixed the steps and boards that were loose on porches, whether it was at the big house or whether it was at the plantation houses down in the quarter. He would be the one who did that.

When I'm writing, I always have that same house in mind. It's different books—with the same house. ■

MARY GORDON, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

I'm interested in writing about place. It gives us a lot of information about ourselves that we can't always get to directly. Memory releases information. A lot of the writing that I love very much has a very strong sense of place, however you define place—as landscape, terrain, house, room. You have to inhabit a space. That relationship between the inhabiter and what is inhabited can be a very fruitful one. And the kind of fiction that I don't like doesn't have much sense of place. It all seems to take place in someone's head. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

There's a line you wrote about American books that make you love America. Can you give some examples?

That's a very tough question, but Faulkner is certainly one of them. It's hard to read Faulkner and not think that the South is a living, breathing history and that Faulkner has brought it to life. You can smell the flowers. "The Odor of Verbena" is one of his stories—the air, the trees, the honeysuckle, the way the people talk. I think Faulkner has the South. But there are lots of other stories. All the Chicago novels of Saul Bellow, and *The Man with the Golden Arm*.

Nelson Algren—mainly his writing about Chicago. When I think of Los Angeles, I think of Nathanael West or Raymond Chandler. It makes you love a place for its smell, the sound of it, for the sight of it.

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

The amazing man in The Piano Tuner named Twet Nga Lu—the guy with the talismans embedded all over his body. The image of his being killed, having the talismans removed, being decapitated and boiled down to a syrup medicine...

Which was then sold.

Yes, which was then sold.

That true story made me want to write about the Shan States. When I was thinking about where I could set this story, I thought maybe I could set it in Western Burma or Eastern Burma. Or maybe it could be about the French in China. Then I read the story of this man who was boiled down in his death into a potion that was then sold, and I thought this is better than any fictional story I could ever make.

It could leave your mouth hanging open for a week.

Right. It's an extraordinary story. And he's still famous in the Shan States. I met a Shan reader who came to me and said that when she was a little girl, long after he had died, if she was making mischief her mother would come to her and say, Be quiet or Twet Nga Lu is going to come and get you. He's still sort of the boogeyman in the Shan States. I thought it was amazing. ■

TOBIAS WOLFF, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

Several stories take place in the Northwest, especially in Seattle. Why haven't you written any fiction about your time at Oxford or Syracuse? The Northwest is still the most fertile ground for you.

Yes, it is. Those haunts of our childhood make an enduring impression on us. I know that's true of a lot of writers. I've written about Northern California, where I lived for years. I started writing about it after I left, though. There's something about leaving a place that suddenly opens it up in a clear way. I have no doubt that someday I will write about Syracuse, which I just left after seventeen years. One thing that's just dying to be written about is the way winter comes there. Any true book about Syracuse would have to have winter as its main character. It's the bully outside everyone's house. That would be something I don't think has really been done yet, and it could be very interesting to have a season as your main character. As for writing about Oxford, there's an immense shelf of literature already. I would want to feel that I was doing something pretty fresh with the whole enterprise. But I'm confident that someday I will write about it. There were a lot of quirky things that happened to me there. I had a lot of very strange friends. ■

MARY YUKARI WATERS,
interviewed by Sherry Ellis:

I've really enjoyed writing about Japan, and I'm not sure if I've exhausted it yet. When I first started writing, I naturally turned to Japan because it was the place of my childhood, which is usually the root of self-discovery. Also, I really enjoy the process of translating the sensibility of one culture into that of another. But there's a whole American side of me that I may want to tap into. For now, I'm comfortable not knowing. All I know is, whatever I find myself most fascinated with is what I'm going to follow. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

ABBOTT, Lee K. Seven story collections, most recently *All Things, All at Once: New & Selected Stories*. Work in *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's*, *Georgia Review*, *Best American Short Stories*, O. Henry Awards, Pushcart Prize. Ohio State University.

ADLER, Peggy. Interviewer. Teaches writing at University of Michigan.

BANKS, Russell. Recent novels: *The Reserve*, *The Darling*, *Trailerpark*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Cloud-splitter*. Story collections include *The Angel on the Roof*. Nonfiction: *Dreaming Up America*.

BAUSCH, Richard. Novels include *Hello to the Cannibals*; *Good Evening Mr. & Mrs. America*, and *All the Ships at Sea*; *Rebel Powers*; *Violence*; and *The Last Good Time*. Story collection: *The Selected Stories of Richard Bausch*. richardbausch.com

BAXTER, Charles. Novels: *The Soul Thief*, *Saul and Patsy*, *Shadow Play*, *The Feast of Love*, *First Light*. Story collections: *Gryphon*, *A Relative Stranger*, *Through the Safety Net*, *Believers*, *Harmony of the World*. Books on writing: *Burning Down the House: Essays on Fiction*, *The Art of Subtext: Beyond Plot*. charlesbaxter.com

BLAKE, Victoria. Interviewer. Underland Press.

BROOKS, Barbara. Interviewer. Fiction and interviews in *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Writer's Digest*, the *Writer's Chronicle*, *Inkwell*, *The Ledge*, *Jabberwock Review*, and elsewhere.

COAKE, Christopher. Novel: *You Came Back*. Story collection: *We're in Trouble*. Work in *Best American Mystery Stories*, *Best American Noir of the Century*. University of Nevada.

COX, Elizabeth. Novels: *The Slow Moon*, *Night Talk*, *The Ragged Way People Fall Out of Love*, *Familiar Ground*. Story collection: *Bargains in the Real World*. Wofford College. elizabethcox.net

CUNNINGHAM, Michael. Novels: *By Nightfall*, *Specimen Days*, *The Hours*, *Flesh and Blood*, *A Home at the End of the World*. Nonfiction: *Land's End*. michaelcunninghamwriter.com

ELLIS, Sherry. Interviewer. Editor of the anthology *Write Now!* Interviews in *AGNI Online*, *Post Road*, *Writer's Chronicle*.

GAINES, Ernest. Books of fiction include *A Lesson Before Dying*, *Catherine Carmier*, *Bloodline*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *In My Father's House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. Essays: *Mozart and Leadbelly*.

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GORE, Trevor. Interviewed Andrew Porter. Work in *Missouri Review*, *The Pinch*.

HARUF, Kent. Novels: *Eventide*, *Plainsong*, *Where You Once Belonged*, *The Tie That Binds*. Published in *Puerto del Sol*, *Grand Street*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Gettysburg Review*, *Best American Short Stories*.

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

JIN, Ha. Novels: *War Trash*, *Waiting*, *The Crazed*, *In the Pond*. Story collections: *Under the Red Flag*, *Ocean of Words*, *The Bridegroom*. Three books of poetry. Boston University.

JOHNSON, Sarah Anne. Interviewer. Editor of *Conversations with American Women Writers* and *The Art of the Author Interview*. sarahannejohnson.com

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

KLASS, Perri. Novels: *The Mercy Rule*, *The Mystery of Breathing*, *Recombinations*, *Other Women's Children*. Story collections: *Love and Modern Medicine*, *I Am Having an Adventure*. Nonfiction includes *Treatment Kind and Fair*, *Every Mother Is a Daughter* (co-author). perriklass.com

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LAKEN, Valerie. Novel: *Dream House*. Stories in *Ploughshares*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Antioch Review*. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. valerielaken.com

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

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

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

LI, Yiyun. Novel: *The Vagrants*. Story collection: *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*. Work in *New Yorker*, *Best American Short Stories*, O. Henry Prize Stories. University of California, Davis. yiyunli.com

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

MALOUF, David. Novels: *Ransom*, *Untold Tales*, *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Remembering Babylon*, *Fly Away Peter*, *Johnno*. Story collections: *The Complete Stories*, *Dream Stuff*, *Child's Play*, *Antipodes*.

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MCINERNEY, Jay. Novels: *The Good Life; Model Behavior; The Last of the Savages; Brightness Falls; Story of My Life; Ransom; Bright Lights, Big City.* Story collection: *How It Ended.* Two books on wine. jaymcinerney.com

MCNALLY, John. Novels: *America's Report Card, The Book of Ralph.* Story collection: *Troublemakers.* Editor of four fiction anthologies. Wake Forest University.

NASHOLD, Jim. Interviewer. Co-author of biography: *The Death of Dylan Thomas.*

OFFUTT, Chris. Story collections: *Kentucky Straight, Out of the Woods.* Memoirs: *The Same River Twice, No Heroes.* Novel: *The Good Brother.* Morehead State University, Morehead, Kentucky.

PARSONS, Alexander. Novels: *Leaving Disneyland, In the Shadows of the Sun.* University of Houston.

PATCHETT, Ann. Novels: *State of Wonder, Run, Bel Canto, Taft, The Magician's Assistant, The Patron Saint of Liars.* Memoir: *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship.* annpatchett.com

PORTER, Andrew. Novel: *In Between Days.* Story collection: *The Theory of Light and Matter.* Work in *One Story, Epoch, Story, Antioch Review, Story Quarterly.* Pushcart anthology. Trinity University, San Antonio. andrewporterwriter.com

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

REIKEN, Frederick. Novels: *Day for Night, The Odd Sea, The Lost Legends of New Jersey.* Stories in *New Yorker*, others. Emerson College. frederickreiken.com

RHEINHEIMER, Kurt. Story collection: *Little Criminals.* Stories in four volumes of *New Stories from the South.* kurrheinheimer.com

SCHUMOCK, Jim. Interviewer. Author of *Story Story Story: Conversations with American Authors.*

SCOTT, Andrew. Interviewer. Fiction: *Modern Love.* Work in *Writers Chronicle, Tipton Poetry Journal.* Ball State University. [Andrew Scott website](http://AndrewScottwebsite)

SPARK, Debra. Novels: *Coconuts for the Saints, The Ghost of Bridgetown.* Nonfiction: *Curious Attractions.* Editor, *Twenty Under Thirty.* Colby College. debraspark.com

TEMPLIN, Charlotte. Interviewer. Nonfiction: *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation.* Interviews in *American Studies, Missouri Review, Boston Review.*

THEROUX, Paul. Travel-writing books: *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star, Dark Star Safari, The Great Railway Bazaar, The Happy Isles of Oceania, The Pillars of Hercules.* Fiction: *Elephant Suite, Jungle Lovers, Saint Jack, The Family Arsenal, The Mosquito Coast, Millroy the Magician, My Other Life, Kowloon Tong, Picture Palace.*

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TURNER, Carol. Interviewer. Work in *Byline, Cottonwood Review, First Intensity, Flyway, Love's Shadow: Writings by Women* (anthology), *Many Mountains Moving, Owen Wister, Portland Review, Primavera, Rag Mag, Strictly Fiction, Sulphur River Literary Review.*

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

WALKER, John S. Stories in *Carve Magazine, Glimmer Train Stories.*

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

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