



CLOSE-UP:

WRITER'S BLOCK



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

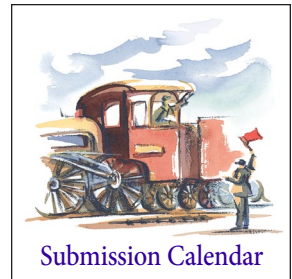
DEBRA MONROE, interviewed by Victoria Barrett:

Tell me about your writing process. You mentioned once that, before adopting your daughter Marie, you wrote at a more leisurely pace, but once she entered your life, the act of writing took on a hurried urgency, snuck in during her naps and while she was at preschool. Did those changes in your process change the outcome of your work? Certainly the life changes did.

Well, it gets you past writer's block. You think: I'm so *stuck stuck stuck*. Then you realize your babysitting is over in an hour and, lo and behold, you are unstuck.

How has your process continued to change, now that Marie is growing up?

I don't know. I've gone from being a writer who lived alone, to a writer who lived alone with a child, to (two years ago) living in a house with three other people, but the children are growing up. In some ways, I have more leisure now than I ever did, because I'm not a single parent. I'm not the household carpenter and groundskeeper either. I just haven't lived here long enough to know what that means for my writing. ■



[Submission Calendar](#)

KAREN RUSSELL, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

What is your advice for young writers?

Keep reading widely and for pleasure. And don't get discouraged! So much of it is just mule-like persistence. That's what I feel I learned this time around. There were many times when *Swamplandia!* failed, and I had to pick it up and try and write it again. And there were stories in my collection that were just duds, they would've been voted off the island, and it was only because I had this maternal commitment to getting them out the door that I was willing to keep working at them. I really do think that's the best advice—to keep at it.

Someone told me this plumbing analogy once, "The water has to run brown for a while before it's clear." And I thought, uh no, if it's running brown maybe you should move! But that is kind of true, you have to become comfortable writing suckily for long stretches. That's the hard part for me anyway, thinking that there's no way, that the project is doomed, and continuing to push through that feeling. **I've learned not to despair. Even when I'm writing pretty badly, I don't feel it's impossible that this could become something if I give it time.**

And that's good advice too: it really does take time. I felt encouraged hearing George Saunders say that he spent a year on a short story once. That it was a dance of his conscious and unconscious mind before it came together and he had the right ending. He was just willing to be patient. There are some narrative problems that you can't just come at head on, they sort themselves out over time, you can't sit there and solve them. ■

EDWARD P. JONES, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Have you been distracted at all by your apparent success? Do you think you are successful?

No, I don't see that. I mean, I don't see myself as being any different from what I would be if none of this had happened.

If you hadn't won a MacArthur fellowship, a Pulitzer Prize, and a National Book Critic Circle...

People invite me to read at colleges and universities and I think that they would still be doing that based on reviews. So it's hard for me to know how different things would be if none of this had happened.

More pressure?

I don't have any ideas right now. I am not going to push myself to do anything. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

The only difficulty I had [writing *The Feast of Love*] was getting the voices and the tone of the novel right in the first place. I thought Diana and David would be the main characters. What I assembled with those two was something dark, obsessive, erotic, and serious. But that was not the novel that I wanted to write. And so I got stuck, and I didn't get free of that until one Saturday morning when I was reading a magazine. Bradley's voice came to me in this phrase, which now serves as the opening of chapter nine of the novel: "Sometimes I feel as if my life is a murder mystery, only I haven't been murdered yet, and I don't plan on being murdered at all, of course." That's what the novel needed, something that was comic and serious at the same time. The novel was never easy—it took five years to write—but once I had that, I could write it. ■

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG:

When you are despairing, walk away from your work. Take out a blank sheet of paper, and write down three things that have already happened that day for which you are grateful. Remember how luminous you are; reflect on all the people who believe in you. Then get back to work. ■

THOMAS E. KENNEDY:

Working in Paris in the late 1950s, Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs developed the so-called "cut-up" technique to try to get deeper into the unreasonable heart of a material and to free themselves of the authoritarian demand of making sense.

For those who may not be familiar with this technique, here's how it works: You take one or more texts—either of your own or someone else's or both, even documents can be used, ad copy, newspapers, anything; you take a pair of scissors and cut the page or pages



once vertically and once horizontally so you have four rectangles of paper (or 8 or 12 or 16 or..., according to how many pages you've stacked together and cut. Now shuffle the rectangles so that scraps of different sentences come together. Don't feel compelled to be slavish about fitting the physical pieces of paper evenly together, but move them, up and down until pleasingly mad patterns of words begin to appear—or perhaps even not so mad, perhaps making some unorthodox sense, achieving the logic of illogic, the sense of nonsense. Work quickly, don't think but use your intuition to choose the combinations, follow your gut feeling, and feel free to select the best of the sentences and draw them together from here and there as you please, as you might collect shells on the beach, guided by your eye rather than your mind, guided by the irrational beauty or striking shape or glitter or whatever, by a logic other than the linear.

Out of all this, select enough material to fill a half to a full page, not more (for the purposes of this exercise)—tweak and sculpt it a bit if you like, introduce other elements if you like, a word or a phrase that has been jangling around in your head all day, or a couple of words that randomly catch your eye from a newspaper headline, from an ad on back of the *New Yorker*, a phrase from a song that happens to be playing on the radio (random selection—or at least seemingly random selection—is important to this process), whatever, squeeze them in, cut, reshape, dropping words, co-opting others, but always working with intuition, never with the conscious controlling manipulating part of your mind. The objective is liberation from the flat pseudo-sense of surface to a deeper sensibility, forged of its own ruleless insistence.

This game is one that I find useful when I am becoming so judgmental of the words I produce in trying to write that I block, when nothing I put down on the page is good enough. Sometimes this can put us back into touch with the place within where the words come from. ■

OLUFUNKE GRACE BANKOLE:

There is a time, a season for each thing: a time to act, and a time to wait. When I forget this, I struggle to make progress with work that requires not force, but patient, gradual persistence. In this waiting season, it is as if nothing at all is happening, and it can feel as if the things that are, discourage us from continuing on. **The bane of most writers' lives, this waiting time asks that we be alone with the very things we are waiting—wad-**

ing—through: doubt, stagnation, aching self-consciousness. In solitude, we are to hold vigil over our words. We turn them over on all their sides, and then tuck them away; we take them out again, and put them on the page, even when they seem unworthy of it. We trust that in their time, they will tell a whole story, beginning to end. And because it is only a season, the waiting eventually gives way to the birthing of a piece that had been incubating all along, somewhere away from our eyes. I'm learning that more important than the layout of the work before me, is the willingness to see it through, s-l-o-w-l-y, come hell or high water—and both will come; but only for a time.

And still, we must accept that sometimes this thing of beauty is not touchable, or measurable, even. There may not be publication or any sort of acknowledgment for a work; but sometimes there's both, and that's a joy. More often, though, the beauty is the peace that comes when we see the past in the light of where we are now. The things that have come and gone, and even the ones that never arrived, suddenly join with meaning, and just like that, we understand that time has done its good work. And then: on to the next season. ■

JAMES LASDUN, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Would you say you were in mid-career?

I am such a slow producer I think I am nearer the beginning. I hope so. To me mid-career suggests two things—either crisis or you have really hit your stride. You have a big body of work behind you. You feel confident in your powers. I don't feel that.

No confidence in your powers.

I feel as at sea, pretty much, as I did when I first wrote a story.

Even having written and published to good reception a number of things doesn't provide a modicum of relief from that?

A little bit, yeah. It does. All it does is sort of build up some evidence that you can get to the end of things that you have started. I am often stricken with the thought I am never going to get to the end of something. ■

PATRICIA HENLEY:

Grace Paley came to Purdue in 1988 and when a student asked her what she did when she couldn't write, as if this would be a painful situation, Grace Paley said, "I visit my sister." No big deal. ■



BENJAMIN PERCY,

interviewed by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum:

I'm working on a book of personal essays. And a book of craft essays. Another novel. A book of illustrated fables. I've also put together a comic book proposal. And I'm juggling several screenplay ideas. **I've never had writer's block, because whenever I feel worn down, I jump genres and the writing becomes electric and exciting again. ■**

MARY GAITSKILL,

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

*You've said that you wrote the first draft of *Veronica* in 1992, and then didn't write for a while. What happened during that time, and how did you get re-energized to work on the manuscript?*

I was writing during that time. I wrote the stories for *Because They Wanted To*; I wrote most of them after I put *Veronica* aside. I wrote a screenplay that didn't go anywhere, I wrote other short stories, and I started this other novel, so I was doing quite a bit of writing between 1992 and 2001. Though I did go through a period of time when I wasn't writing very much. The years right after *Because They Wanted To* came out, between late 1996 and 2000, I wrote very little. I wrote journalism, but there was a year when I didn't write any fiction at all. I felt a kind of revulsion against fiction.

Did it freak you out?

Yes it did. I thought, God, I have to write, otherwise what else am I going to do, yet I hated it. I didn't want anything to do with it. There was a period of two years where I wrote only one story, and I didn't enthusiastically get into it again until four years later. I didn't want to write, not even journalism. Part of it was that I was changing and the way that I had written and the place I was coming from was changing. I was also going through physical

changes, what they euphemistically call the “change of life.” It was like the ground was shifting under my feet, so it was hard for me to write from a solid place. It’s like I was used to looking out a certain window for inspiration, and I was trying to look out that same window and it was closed. It took me awhile to find a different window to look out of.

When you started working on Veronica, did you feel a new kind of energy? The writing feels heightened, as if you’ve experienced a breakthrough.

It felt different even in 1992. I rewrote the original, but the actual images and the things I was trying to describe were the same. Even at that time it felt different, but it was very crude. What was different about it was that the emotions were much more raw, and so was the writing. That’s part of why I found it hard to go back into. At that time in my life, when I did a draft I worked meticulously and slowly so that when I went back to revise it, it was all there. **With this book, I wanted to get the emotions on the page in a more powerful way. I didn’t want meticulousness. I forced myself to write it really fast. I wrote about 125 pages in a year, which for me is very quick.** The problem was that it was so crude that I didn’t know what to do with it. I didn’t have the tools to deal with the material yet. When I tried to revise it in 1994, I was using the voice and the style of *Because They Wanted To*, which is very different from that of *Veronica*, and it just didn’t work. At least I had the sense to know that in the first thirty pages. The original draft was the seed of something that wasn’t ready to flower until later, but I’m glad I wrote it down. I wound up using almost all of the material. I even used a lot of the material I did for the revision in 1994, because the ideas were there, but I just hadn’t found the right language. ■

CHARLES BAXTER, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Before any of your novels were published, you wrote three “apprentice” novels. Since then, have you had to abandon a project?

I haven’t had to ditch anything since then because it didn’t work. I thought for a while that I would have to abandon *The Feast of Love*. That was as close as I’ve come. I wrote four chapters of that book, and it wasn’t going well. Every time I start a book, there is always the possibility that it won’t work, that it’s not going to please anyone. There are no guarantees in writing, and I’m not particularly a confident writer. **It’s not in my makeup to write a book and then send it out if I’m not absolutely sure that it’s okay. I’d rather pulp it than have it published.** ■

EDWARD P. JONES, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

When we last spoke, you had a sense that this [All Aunt Hagar's Children] story collection would be coming out in the following year.

Yeah, I have been traveling, and so knowing that you have to get up in three days and be someplace else isn't quite conducive to letting your mind roam and figure things out for stories. So I think I had to get two or maybe three extensions. Luckily, I knew what the stories should be because I had worked everything out in my head. It's just the way I do it. But especially there toward the end with two of the stories, "Bad Neighbors" and "Root Worker," even though I knew where they should go, it was a difficult time of just getting through.

So writing hasn't gotten any easier.

No, it never gets easier. ■

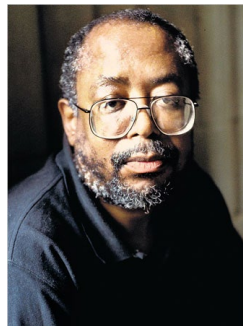


Photo: Jerry Bauer

PETER HO DAVIES, interviewed by Jeremiah Chamberlin:

You have a wonderful range as a short-fiction writer. Not only are your stories told from myriad points of view in different periods of history, but the topical material also stretches from bank robbing to Chinese funeral rituals to Welsh labor strikes to siblings dying of AIDS. Are you purposeful in your range? That is to say, do you push yourself to write beyond your own boundaries and experience?

Yeah. I guess there are two reasons for that. One is a good aesthetic reason and the other is a slightly more embarrassing, pragmatic reason. Because I've been a short-story writer for the majority of my career, I feel that one of the advantages, one of the pleasures of the form, is to be able to write a different story every time you sit down to work on a new piece of fiction. And one of the attractions of the form of a collection is that you can range rather wildly story by story across its length. You are not limited in voice, in time, in place, in style, in effect, or tone. So there's an aesthetic pleasure. In *Flaubert's Parrot*, Barnes talks about his character's admiration for Flaubert and the fact that Flaubert was a writer who never wrote the same book twice. I like that. Who has the time to write the same story twice? I'm not taking a long career for granted, necessarily. So once you've done the best you can with something, why would you replicate it?

That, I suppose, takes me from the aesthetic pleasure in variation to the very practical one. When you publish your first story, it becomes a touchstone, a place of confidence, something you go back to in grim moments and you think, “At least I could do *that*.” But then everything you write afterwards, for a little while, you compare to that thing. **The first draft of the new story always sucks compared to the last draft of the old story. That sense of competing with yourself can be kind of crushing, even overwhelming.** I published my first story when I was twenty-one, and I didn’t publish my next story until I was twenty-six. This was for a variety of reasons, but one of them at least was that I was trying to write the same story again. Yet every effort to that end would seem to fall short. What I eventually learned was to stop trying to do the same thing. It helped me deal with that sense of competition with myself. So if the last story was very serious, why shouldn’t the next one be comic? By changing the framework, changing the terms of comparison, the stories become incommensurable. You can thereby freeze that internal critic, that internal voice of judgment. This method helped me through various writing blocks as well. So that’s the pragmatic reason for pushing stories in different directions. ■

CARRIE BROWN, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Have you abandoned any novels or stories that never seemed to work?

I’ve tried three times now to write a novel based on the life of Caroline Herschel, the eighteenth-century astronomer and sister to Sir William Herschel, the astronomer who discovered Uranus, among other things. I’ve been stalled each time, a hundred or so pages in, by my failure to sufficiently understand the science behind the Herschels’ work. I’ve concluded that I’m just too stupid for the subject. If I can’t understand what they do, I don’t understand them as human beings, and then, of course, I can’t do the work of making the characters feel fully alive. Absent that necessary vitality, I’ve got nothing. Qué será. ■

JAY McINERNEY, interviewed by Victoria Blake:

Having kids made me self-conscious. That changed my whole perception of time, for one thing. Suddenly my own past was more vivid to me because I was looking back to my own childhood and my own relationship to my parents. The future was something other than an abstract concept to me, because my children were going to be living in it. It became more dif-

difficult for me to do another variation on *Tom Jones*—the picaresque adventures of a young rebel. *Model Behavior* was the end of it. There was just no more room for that. I had to learn everything all over again. Now that I think of it, it's what the protagonist in *Bright Lights, Big City* said!

Are you actively trying to re-invent yourself as a writer?

Well, I'm doing it now through the agency of this new novel. I'm doing on-the-job retraining, trying to write a different kind of novel. **I think all writers live with the fear that you'll wake up one day and you won't have it in you again, and, man, I came up against that hard. For a long time I just didn't think I could do it.** It's rotten. It's a rotten thing.

Are you now sure that you will be able to?

I'm not, but I have to be. I have to act as if I am.

Is it acting? There seems to be a lot of it going on. You fool yourself into thinking that you could be a writer, and then you fool yourself into writing.

Yes, essentially. You have to pour yourself into it. If you fool yourself for long enough, you can fool yourself into authenticity. You have to understand, it's pretty daunting to sit down and say, "I'm going to do what Tolstoy and James Joyce did." It's sometimes even hard to sit with a short story, to say, "I'm going to do what Carver did." ■

EDWARD P. JONES, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

If you are not currently pecking away at something, what are you doing?

My mind is always working. And like that morning when this woman [character] came back to me, and there she was a couple of decades younger, and she was on Ridge Street and was with this boyfriend that was abusive and the community was seeing all this—that became a story. So tomorrow morning I might wake up with some idea for something. But if I don't, I don't. I don't want to feel that I have to slit my wrists—I wouldn't do that. I would find a milder way of killing myself, I guess. Writing is important and I am glad I am able to do it—they talk about the Mona Lisa and everything but if someone burned the Mona Lisa up tomorrow the world shouldn't end because of that: the world should end because some child in India doesn't have enough to eat. So if I don't write, if nothing comes to me—then the world shouldn't end. My world certainly shouldn't end. But I hope I do continue to write. I have things that I still have to say. ■

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

Writer's block doesn't have to be an agonizing experience. Think of it instead as your unconscious telling you to slow down and evaluate where your writing is going. Better to take a breather than become a prolific hack, churning out volumes upon volumes of twaddle.



You might think you're lying in a hammock, idly scratching your pet beagle behind her ear, when actually your unconscious is busy prewriting your next piece. Or maybe it's helping you gain a fresh perspective on a problem story. Start kicking your own backside because you haven't met some arbitrary work quota for the day, then you'll know true paralysis.

When you find you've written yourself into a corner, or you just can't seem to get excited about starting a new project, relax—your unconscious has got it all under control. ■

JOYCE THOMPSON:

For those times you seem to hit a dead end, take a nap, a long shower, a long walk, cook something complicated, or draw a picture. Pull your brain off active duty and trust that, subliminally, the band plays on. ■

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

When I'm in the middle of a story, publishing is one of the last things I'm thinking about. I'm trying to survive the story. Someone said to Ron Carlson something about Ron being in the middle of a story right now, and he said, "No, I'm not in the middle; I'm hanging off the edge of it." I think that's such a wise way to put it. I used to think, Once I get past this one point, the rest of the story will be easy. But there's no coasting in stories. Every single day, it's very, very difficult. Every single day, you're throwing yourself against this object that seemingly will not move, and then one day suddenly budges, and you don't know quite why it is budging, but it is. So you jump on and you go along for the ride. It feels like you're creating something that is bigger and smarter than yourself. It's wonderful to see this on paper. I'm surprised by what happens at times. And the connec-

tions that you see that you...that they are authoring in one way, but you're authoring in a controlling way.

It comes out of this funny area of our heads that I don't think we understand our connections to. I don't know if you want to know. I mean you could—

Could screw it up.

Yeah. ■

LOUIS BEGLEY, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

Perhaps I should have asked before: Are you still lawyering?

I am glad to announce that this is coming to an end. On January 1, I will be a free man. Until now, I only worked as a writer on weekends and holidays. I am unable to write in the evening of a workday, not because I am tired—I am actually quite resilient—but because my head is full of the wrong words.

It really is a question of words. Words on subjects that are not connected with what I am doing. I don't even like to write in the afternoon. I like to start in the morning—when I haven't had contact with people or had real concerns and words crowding in on me. When I get stuck as I write, I find that the best solution is either to go for a walk, or even better is to lie down and sleep for twenty, thirty minutes, and then when I get up I have a whole new view.

I've never been able to catnap.

I'm a specialist.

Any trick to it?

Just lie on your back, close your eyes. Don't make a big deal. Don't pull down blinds. Don't open the bed. Don't make it so that if you don't fall asleep you have failed in some humiliating way. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

Writer's block doesn't really exist. All writers experience periods of being more prolific than during some other period of time. And most writers

have a story about a time when a story was so easy that it essentially “wrote itself.” More often, though, it isn’t easy for most writers I know. I think people have different definitions of “writer’s block.” If you’re talking about a day when you’d sooner scrub the inside of the toilet with a toothbrush than face the blank computer screen, well, welcome to the club. Very few writers I know face a new manuscript or an unfinished one without trepidation. Some days it’s worse than others, when you’re struggling with a problem a story has presented you with, a brick wall, a “block.” It’s harder, no doubt about it, to write on a day like that, but my point is that it’s still possible. It’s also not a bad idea to take time off from troublesome work; and that doesn’t have to mean you’re “blocked.” Think of it as gestation.

As a teacher, I go through long periods of time where I don’t produce any new work. I would not classify this as a time when I’m blocked. At any moment, I can (and sometimes do) sit down, start a new story, revise an old one, or work on something I started and never finished. For me, it’s a matter of reserving and respecting the time for my own work. Once I’ve carved that out, there are good times and bad times at the computer, but never would I say I experience writer’s block. I have periods where I’m quite unproductive, but it’s not for lack of something to say. It’s about being busy, or managing my time poorly; it’s not about feeling mute or abandoned by the muse. To the contrary, after a long hiatus, I often gush the next thing out, like all that waiting just made me more fluent once I parked myself at the computer. I encourage my students to not believe in “writer’s block.” Writing always takes on a rhythmic pattern, and lows are as necessary as the highs. Refuse to believe in such a thing as writer’s block. Allow yourself time off without feeling guilty about being unproductive. Reinterpret the experience of a day when you sit in front of a blank screen for hours and no words come. To me, that’s a day when mental work took place, and any writer will tell you that much of a story or novel’s development takes place in the writer’s head, before it becomes words on a page. ■

DOUG LAWSON:

I’m learning to pay very close attention to what I have written of the story already, even if it seems weird. Often, I’ll find clues to where the story might go by figuring out where the characters would rather not go. We all like to be comfortable, after all, and fiction characters are no different from the rest of us. But a good story is made from drama, and drama arises from change, and change is not usually comfortable.

There's a secret to this, and that's simply this: Give it time. Be patient with your story. When you leave a piece sit for some time and come back to it, you'll likely see all sorts of things in there you can build on. Certain verbs will seem out of place, until you realize what that verb is really telling you—that you'd meant to talk about something else in that spot. Frank Black, Secret Agent, didn't tap dance his way out the door of the bar. But, you realize later, he might have tap danced while growing up, and the memory of that dance might have been in his head in the bar, and that of course is why he shuffled his feet on the way down the street to the dancing school on the corner, where he discovers Imelda, his mother, whom he'd thought dead, working at the counter... Patience, though, is the hardest thing for a new writer to learn. It's likely one of the most important skills you can teach yourself. ■

MARY MCGARRY MORRIS, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I suppose I've had writer's block in one form or another. But I just kept on going, even if it was lousy.

Often when the writing is most difficult, when a passage or chapter demands attention and rewriting, I've found that these will be the passages and chapters I'm most pleased with in the end. And there have been many, many times when a particular problem with a character's motivation or development was solved because I wasn't just writing smoothly along, but was forced to stop and dig deeper, rework, refashion, strip away, and hold things up to the light in order to find the deeper, clearer, truer meaning. ■

WILLIAM STYRON, *interviewed by Melissa Lowver:*

How do you feel today, when you sit down in front of that blank piece of paper? Is it ever a friend, or is it usually an adversary?

Well, it's an adversary that becomes a friend, put it that way. I mean, it starts out adversarial, and as you deal with it—of course, I'm speaking only for myself, not for any other writer—as I deal with it, all of a sudden there's a kind of embrace that takes place, and usually after the struggle to get into something, I find that it gets easier, and, in fact, even enjoyable at times. It's kind of unusual. ■

JAMAICA KINCAID,

interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

For me, that thing that writers call writer's block, that's part of writing; I don't think one ought to be writing all the time. You have a dry spot and that's very productive, as productive as the actual writing itself. It's like sowing seeds or something, and it's a while before things sprout, and the ground is bare.

It's all barren. I think you need a bare time when you just read and think and walk around, and are even depressed and insane about it, but I consider all that time of not writing a part of writing.

What I don't write is as important as what I write. I often will create large things in my head, and they don't get to the paper because I determine that they're not right for the paper, they are good only for my head. I work through them. It's part of the process. For instance, an explanation for the title *The Autobiography of My Mother*: I wrote a whole chapter about it and then decided not to include it; but I know what the title means, I understand it. I had the title of it before I actually wrote the book, so I knew what it would be; it was just a question of downloading. I downloaded some things and put them in the trashbin, so to speak. ■



Photo: Jeff Wheeler

DAVID LONG,

interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

The writing was very difficult, but I couldn't give up on it. There were things I wrote in "Perro Semihundido," just passages of description that I was so fond of, that I couldn't give up on the story.

There's a passage early on where Faith is driving and she passes various towns, and passes a truck with round bales on it and then drives alongside a train. And then there's a passage where she's describing her brother's apartment on Queen Anne Hill, and looking out at the container yards and the mouth of the Duwamish. I can't explain why, but it was a little run of sentences that just pleased me, so I had a "faith" in the story for that reason.

Many stories don't get finished. It's like some of those zucchinis, you know. They look like they're going to grow, and then they end up rotting at the end. But when I get a full draft, I'm pretty confident that I can make it work. ■

AMY HEMPEL, interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:

The whole book [*Tumble Home*], I probably started six years ago. I do remember more than a two-year block, or, as my former editor, Gordon Lish, calls it, a “writer’s search,” which is a much more hopeful term, I think. I had too much material to comfortably toss, but I was stalled for a long time. It was a very difficult time. And what was missing, it turned out, was the shape of it—that it was a letter. And a seduction. To my mind, that’s equally as important as the fact that it’s a letter. It is an attempt at seduction, albeit a clumsy one that can only fail. There’s no way in the world that the woman writing this letter is going to capture the interest of this painter. Should he even read the entire letter, he would flee. ■

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

While writing Lying Awake, you used your working area—moving it to more and more physically restrictive locations—in order to make yourself write. How did you do that, and did it work well for you?

Well, for the time that I needed it, it did.

And what did it accomplish—what did it do? And maybe describe what you did.

First of all, I found that I was just having so much trouble writing. I felt so lost in the material and was so unsatisfied with what I was producing that it made it hard to sit down and work. You know, I’d sit down and turn on the computer and see what I’d done before, and it all looked bad. Every sentence looked false. Everything looked stale. It made me ask, If everything I’ve done before is bad, why?

Why write at all?

Remember in the Road Runner and Coyote cartoons, where the Coyote’s building a bridge over a cliff with a piece of wood? And then he takes the wood behind him and he puts it out in front of him and all of a sudden he realizes there’s nothing holding onto the cliff? That’s what I felt like.

I said I was pushing on in the story, but there was nothing at the beginning. It was all so weak. I had trouble concentrating. I would sit down. I’d look at it. I’d feel sick to my stomach and I just had to get up, walk around, make coffee. I had to change the cat litter, anything. Eventually, the only place I found that I simply could not get up from was the passenger seat of my

car. So I worked for a year just in the passenger seat of the car with a little notebook, and my poor wife would wave at me every once in a while from the house.

Did she think you were nuts?

No, she's great. She's a much wiser person, I would say, than I am. She always had a bedrock conviction that I was going to pull this through, much more than I did. I was so plagued with doubt throughout this, to the point of feeling almost in tears every day. Thinking that, on the one hand, you don't want to be a quitter, but on the other hand, you don't want to be stupid. You don't want to be one of those people who's unable to acknowledge that you simply made a bad choice, that you've hit a dead end. Time to back up, start over.

That was the most painful thing of all, thinking, Years are going by, I'm not producing. Am I really ruining my career? Am I ruining my love of writing?

All of that was awful. But I think all of us go through that. If not with writing, we go through it with parenthood, or we go through it with whatever—it's certainly not a unique experience. But every time we go through it, we feel as if we're the stupidest person on earth. ■

A. J. VERDELLE, interviewed by Nancy Middleton:

I love that James Baldwin quote you cited during your talk: "You don't get the book you want. You get the book you get." You spoke about finding the passionate anchor of a piece.

Yes. Where's the juice? What's happening here? What's good? What is my favorite thing? Having looked this over again and knowing that this is now some sort of story, in whatever shape it's in, what part of it would I not relinquish in any way? This is why my story kept changing, I think.

So I wrote the whole thing about Margarete [*The Good Negress*], and it was not good. It was not what I wanted. And I didn't know what I was going to do. I had wasted, in my mind, a lot of time. So that was tough. But I kept going. This is another thing that I try to talk to people about: understanding the line of observation. Just because you observe something doesn't make it deep. Just because I knew it was wrong doesn't make that the deep thing. The deep thing is the story that is still waiting for my attention. So

until I figured out what to do, I had to keep working.

I started to have the idea that Denise was the more appropriate soul, the more appropriate vehicle from which to tell the story. I also went back looking for the passion in the work and found the passion was really around the Denise/Miss Pearson/ How-am-I-going-to-adjust-to-Detroit? scenario. So I started expanding that first. I expanded Neesey's educational experience as a way of expanding her. I could have made some other choices about how to expand her, but I didn't, because Miss Pearson was so vibrant and created so much tension. And then it clearly became what people usually refer to as a "thread"— which drives me nuts because it sounds so very thin!—but basically it's a narrative line.

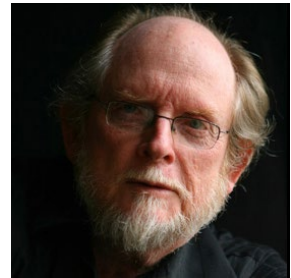
You know, the Miss Pearson story line was so thin when I first noticed it. But it was a surprise and it was something I wouldn't relinquish. So therefore it qualified as something with tension and something that startled me. I built on it. ■

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

I love William Stafford's advice. Someone asked, "What do you do about writer's block?" Stafford said, "Lower my standards and keep on going."

That's such beautiful advice. What you get done really doesn't have only to do with how gifted you are, or how much ability you have; it has to do with your own attitude toward it. If your attitude toward it is, "This is my work; this is what I do every day, and I don't have any expectations except that I will have worked today," then you will get a tremendous amount done. Some of it will be really good. Some of it won't be so good. But you are doing it. You're showing up for work, putting in the hours.

And anyway, perfection is an illusion. It's just the way you have to be about it. I don't really teach writing. I teach patience and toughness, stubbornness and willingness to make the mistakes and go on. And the willingness to look like an idiot sometimes. That's the only way any good thing ever gets done, it seems to me. ■



PATRICK TIERNEY, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Sometimes you can sit down and the words just drip off the pen. Other times, well, it's more difficult. I have a poem called "Santry Woods" I've been trying to write for many months. I'm having great difficulty because I think it's going to be a very good poem. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ,

interviewed by Nancy Middleton:

When I began, I knew the beginning and I could foresee the end. What troubled me was the middle. But after a couple of difficult years, it found its shape.

Writing doesn't get easier, because each challenge is new. But I write with a little more confidence. I'm more aware of what I can do. There's a little more relaxation. I know that when I get to those moments, as everybody does, of "My God, I'll never get past this snag," one way or another, a month or two, I'll get past it. I have that confidence. ■

ALICE MATTISON,

interviewed by Barbara Brooks:

It's true that no matter how much instruction you receive, sooner or later you're home alone with the page. Maybe being a mother home alone with kids did teach me the patience to slog through that. ■

WRITING AS THERAPY

SHAWN WONG, *interviewed by Anne de Marcken:*

The “search for identity” for a writer of color is not always just about race, culture, and history. I might still be searching for my identity in many ways. Both my parents died when each was forty years old—my father died when I was seven, and my mother died when I was fifteen. As a result, I didn’t have the same traditional role models as most of my friends and classmates. In the sixties and seventies, when many of my friends were mildly rebelling against their parents or the established past, I was free to define myself any way I wanted. You might say that I became a writer out of a need for some kind of creative self-expression and a need to define myself. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

What I like about the students’ work, what keeps me sort of inspired and interested in reading student fiction, is the notion of the malleability of the text. **I like that when we’re discussing somebody’s story, what I’m usually aiming myself at is, Where did this come from? Why were you interested in writing it, and what could it become?** That sense of the malleability of the text. I never really question anymore whether something is worth writing about, but how is it that you haven’t communicated the urgency of this yet, and what would make this worth my time? I never assume that it wasn’t worth the student’s time. That’s kind of interesting to me, and it remains interesting to me. What is the structure of this story? What path might this novel want to take? What’s going to make it more organic in marrying its form and its content? What’s at the heart of it?

That sounds, in some ways, like therapy, but that is why it’s interesting to me. What makes a character tick, or what makes an author so interested in this particular story? That still seems exciting and worth my time. I still have a lot of energy for that, again and again and again, regardless of the quality of the prose. ■

WILL BLYTHE, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

Does the process of writing the book [To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy For-

ever: A Thoroughly Obsessive, Intermittently Uplifting, and Occasionally Unbiased Account of the Duke-North Carolina Basketball Rivalry] *propel you further along in coping with the loss of youth, marriage, or your father's death?*

Yeah, it does.

All of them?

Yeah.

So it's kind of a statement of, This is where I am and I'm still okay?

Yes, and also, you know, it was the fulfillment of a pledge I made to myself, and whenever you complete a promise you made to yourself, it helps close a chapter, I think. And also because I tried to write about some of those things, the feeling of loss and all. Definitely. It's a mysterious alchemy. I don't know exactly how it works, but definitely. It eased greatly feelings of loss and pain.

What was the promise you made to yourself?

Just that I would write this book, a book, and then this book, and it allowed me to write about things that meant a lot to me. I don't even particularly mean basketball by that. What seems probably sideways in the book, or kind of peripheral, actually I think for me are some of the more central moments and passions of the book.

How satisfying is it to be done? How satisfying is it to have finished a book that feels, felt meant to be?

It's immensely satisfying. It just feels like I can breathe. ■

THOM JONES, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

If I didn't have a sense of humor...it's the only thing that saves me. I do have a sense of the absurd, but I can get very serious about things. I can't speak for others because life is...there is no such thing as a normal life; there's just life, and this is my life, and so I don't worry about a normal life. And I think it's true for everyone: there's just life. There's nothing to go running around to find. I tried, and it's right there, right in your own backyard. It's in you. Know thyself—if you can actually do that, pull that off, you begin to have a measure of peace. ■

SIGRID NUNEZ, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Writing is talk therapy, too. It really is. Virginia Woolf, whose mother died when she was thirteen or fourteen, wrote in one of her autobiographical pieces that, before she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, she was obsessed by her mother, couldn't get her out of her head. After she wrote *To the Lighthouse* and created Mrs. Ramsey, who was based on her mother, she stopped being obsessed by her mother. She goes on to say in the next paragraph that she supposed what she did was something similar to what psychoanalysis, which was just being invented at that time, tries to do. She saw exactly what it was. ■

MARY MCGARRY MORRIS,
interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

Writing is often as difficult for me as it is exhilarating. I come to the desk at the same time day after day, and sometimes I'm discouraged by what I've done, and sometimes the work, the moment, the message are all so right, that I am transported and never want it to end. While I'm not sure exactly what effect my writing has on me, I do know what happens when I don't write. I feel uneasy and out of synch with all that's going on around me. ■



TIM O'BRIEN, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

I came back from Vietnam thinking I was pretty well adjusted. A smooth glide: one day you're in combat; next day you're sitting in tweed seats, listening to Muzak, and stewardesses are handing out your little dinners. You land in Seattle, say the Pledge of Allegiance, get a haircut, and you're out of the army. Fly to Minnesota and back into the civilian world almost instantly. And it felt for many years in my life that I had come back to America, to this world that I'm living in now, without many problems. I've learned, both through my life and through my reading, that it just wasn't and isn't that simple.

If you suffer, for example, from cancer—my sister had a mastectomy not too long ago—as much as we can heal on the surface, there's going to be underlying terror and sorrow that's going to find its way like fluid into the remainder of our lives, as it has to. And you can't back the fluid up through

deceit or through keeping things bottled up. If you try that, the fluid's going to break out of your skin, it's going to make you do some pretty terrible things. I've learned to be more open about it, to be open about my dreams, to be able to talk about them. When I wake up in the middle of the night screaming ugly, desperate, obscene words, I'm willing now to talk about what the dream was, whereas before, I just couldn't do it. I was afraid of my own dreams, afraid of my own past. I think the only way to break through the terror was partly through talking, and partly through writing this novel [*In the Lake of the Woods*] that focuses on the debilitating effects of silence and secrecy and deceit. ■

WILLIAM STYRON, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

You wrote your novella The Long March [the story of a brutal, forced march of Marine reservists just recalled for the Korean War, and of death by friendly fire] in Paris in 1952 during a six-week period. Why do you think this time was so productive for you?

Well, it was a fresh experience. The event I wrote about had happened very recently, only a year or so before. It just had a kind of desire of its own to get written. The savage barbarism of that march, the kind of sadistic quality, was something that was very hard for me to put out of my system. I don't mean to say it was sadistic or savage in the truly grueling way that some military experiences are. There were no deaths or anything like that. But nonetheless, it was a horrible experience. I wanted to get it out of my system. It cried out to be written in a novella form, twenty-five to thirty thousand words. I just sat down and wrote it. ■

KENT HARUF, interviewed by Jim Nashold:

I do think you write out of your unhappiness, and out of pain and anguish. I don't think that fixes it or heals anything, but I feel very strongly that that's what a writer does. ■

LEE MARTIN, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:

At what point were you able to see that your dad's anger was not caused by you, and at what point do you think your father figured out that it wasn't caused by you?

I'll take the second one first. I don't think I can speak for my father on that issue. All I can say is that we eventually came to a time when there wasn't that anger between us, and even though I'm not affiliated with a church, you know, in my adult life, there was that time in our lives when church was very important to us, and I think it had a lot to do with the lessening of the anger. I can't really say whether there was a particular moment when my father knew that I hadn't caused the anger. Maybe he knew that all along.

Maybe he did or maybe he never did.

Yeah, I say that maybe he did, because I'm pretty convinced that people do horrible things all of the time knowing inside that they're culpable and that it comes from them, but not able to articulate that or admit that or—

Or change.

Or change it, yeah. So I'm not really sure what to say about that, as far as my dad. As far as me coming to terms and understanding that it really wasn't me, it was just what life had given us. I don't think it happened in any sort of enduring way until I finished *From Our House*.

When you put it all down and looked at it.

I can remember the day that I wrote the last sentence in the first draft of the book and just sitting there weeping. And my wife will tell you that I'm a much more pleasant person to be around after I wrote this book because, in all honesty, this combination of my mother and father—I had carried a lot of my father's inclination toward anger, and as the years went on, that started to mellow out a little bit, but it wasn't until *From Our House* that I really felt like I had walked through a door to the other side of that whole thing. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

In much of my life, I think of myself as pretty much in control. But I'm still confused about things, and writing is what I do to try to take away control within the confines of a form. In short fiction, the form controls length, so I'm not making an extravagant commitment to the unknown. I commit myself to twenty pages or so, and try to think through what's bothering me, or what's mysterious. In general, what makes me sit down to write a story is something about which I feel conflicted. If I don't know how I feel about

something, it stands out in my mind as being somehow extraordinary. I want to pursue it, to explore what about it bothers me. ■

ROBERT STONE, *interviewed by Jim Schumock*:

What was it that was going on in your life then that sustained such an incredible introspection?

I think I had really spent a lot of my life at that point making things tough for myself. In some ways, I got lucky, but I spent years taking a lot of drugs, doing a lot of partying. Probably no more intensely than a great many people in those years. I saw, I think, this alternative life that I was heading for. So the book [*A Hall of Mirrors*] took on a strange form for me. The very writing of it was a kind of denial, a refusal to go on the road that the characters were going. It became a way of perversely taking myself out of the direction that I was sending my characters toward. The more recognition I got for the parts of the book, the better my life became, the more motivation I had to drink less, to drug less. Although it was coming out of all my troubles, it was the thing that was saving me. That is what art is for, I guess. ■

STEPHEN DIXON, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies*:

What would I do if I didn't write, was unable to, in other words? Well, that's too hypothetical a question. What would prevent me? An accident to my hands so I couldn't type? Then I'd memorize stories, line by line, work over them in my head daily, 'til I was able to write them orally into a cassette player. No, I missed the question. Maybe because it seems impossible that any life circumstances might prevent me from writing. The worse the circumstances, the more I'm motivated to write. I don't look for horrible circumstances, but I've lived through many horrible circumstances by writing. I've come through them, in other words. There isn't a horrible circumstance I couldn't write about, for through writing about it, I'd come to understand that circumstance more clearly.

Writing's finding yourself; that's what I've found. I learn about things, myself, other things, things I go through, things other people go through, through writing. There could be other ways, but to me, this is the best way. Better than painting, better than acting. Many times, I discover not only what I know but, more importantly, what I'm feeling through my writing. ■

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

There were a number of really brutal moments in the book [The Piano Tuner]. And for the most part, they weren't intentional instances of cruelty, but rather accidents, or cases of coarse disregard that had terrible outcomes. You wrote them with great respect, a lot of tenderness; it was reflected in Edgar's response. His response was pain and horror. Something that kind of surprised me was that he also seemed to be responding with fear. I was wondering what it was like writing those parts.



Photo: Joanne Chen

Some of those parts were very difficult to write. The shooting of the boy, for instance—not the shooting, but the reaction to the shooting of the boy. The rush of the woman afterward. I used a lot of my own journal. It's the only place in the book, really, where I borrowed so heavily from my journal, from a funeral that I'd seen when a friend of mine there died in a plane crash, which was terrible. It was maybe the most terrible thing that I've seen in my life to this point. His body was brought in and his family fell about him and people were holding them back, and I just remember thinking of the geometry of their bodies. I'd never seen human beings in this geometry before. This, this sort of leaning forward against weight and being drawn backward. You don't see people in that position ever. And yet in a way I recognized it, I think from Greek urns, from classical pictures of grief. Where have you seen grief before? Maybe television images of funerals. But this came from something much deeper than that. Like, This is how a human being grieves, in the rawest sense. So that scene...that scene came from a very real experience.

I'd written it on a night when I'd received a letter from someone in Burma that had reminded me of that funeral, and I had gotten upset. Writing that let me deal with this experience I've been wanting to deal with for a long time. ■

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

I truly believe stories repose deep within our flesh, and it's crucial for us to find ways to release them. If we don't let our stories speak, they can create physical and emotional disturbances within us. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

www.glimmertrain.org

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BARRETT, Andrea. Story collections: *Ship Fever*, *The Voyage of the Narwhal*, *Servants of the Map*. Novels: *The Air We Breathe*, *Lucid Stars*, *Middle Kingdom*, *The Forms of Water*, *Secret Harmonies*.

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

BEGLEY, Louis. Eight novels, including *Shipwreck*, *Wartime Lies*, *About Schmidt*, *Matters of Honor*. louisbegley.com

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

BISHOP, Melanie. Published in *Georgetown Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Florida Review*, *Puerto del Sol*. Prescott College.

BLAKE, Victoria. Interviewer. Underland Press.

BLOOM, Amy. Story collections: *Where the God of Love Hangs Out*, *Come to Me*, *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You*. Novels: *Away*, *Blind Invents Us*. Nonfiction: *Normal*. amybloom.com

BLYTHE, Will. Nonfiction: *To Hate Like This Is to Be Happy Forever*. Work in *New Yorker*, *Best American Short Stories*, *Rolling Stone*, *Sports Illustrated*.

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

BROWN, Carrie. Novels: *The Rope Walk*, *Rose's Garden*, *Confinement*, *The Hatbox Baby*, *Lamb in Love*. Story collection: *The House on Belle Isle*. Sweet Briar College. authorcarriebrown.com

CHAMBERLIN, Jeremiah. Interviewer. Work in *New York Times Book Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Fiction Writers Review*.

CLARK, George. Story collection: *The Small Bees' Honey*. Novel: *Raw Man*, *Harmony Church*. Numerous anthologies. University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. [George Clark](http://GeorgeClark.com)

COWHIG, Frances Ya-Chu. Plays include *The World of Extreme Happiness*.

DAVIES, Peter Ho. Novel: *The Welsh Girl*. Story collections: *Equal Love*, *The Ugliest House in the World*. peterhodavies.com

DE MARCKEN, Anne. Interviewed Shawn Wong. Writing in *Best New American Voices*, *The Way We Knew It*, *Hunger Mountain*.

DIXON, Stephen. Dozens of story collections and novels, including *Meyer*, *The End of I*, *The Stories of Stephen Dixon*, *Old Friends*, *30: Pieces of a Novel*, *Phone Rings*, *Moon*. Johns Hopkins University.

GAITSKILL, Mary. Novels: *Veronica*; *Because They Wanted To*; *Two Girls*, *Fat and Thin*. Story collections: *Don't Cry*, *Bad Behavior*. Syracuse University. marygaitskill.com

GRESKO, Brian. Interviewer. Work in *Huffington Post*, *The Millions*, *Atlantic*. briangresko.com

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*.

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HENLEY, Patricia. Novels: *In the River Sweet*, *Hummingbird House*. Story collections: *Worship of the Common Heart: New and Selected Stories*, *Friday Night at the Silver Star*, *The Secret of Cartwheels*. Purdue University. patriciahenley.org

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

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KENNEDY, Thomas E. Advisory Editor, *Literary Review*. Novels include *A Passion in the Desert*, *A Weather of the Eye*, *Kerrigan's Copenhagen*, *A Love Story*; *Bluett's Blue Hours*, *Greene's Summer*, *Danish Fall*. Story collections: *Cast Upon the Day*, *Drive*, *Dive*, *Dance & Fight*. Nonfiction: *Realism & Other Illusions: Essays on the Craft of Fiction*. Fairleigh Dickinson University. thomasekennedy.com

KINCAID, Jamaica. Story collection: *At the Bottom of the River*. Novels: *Mr. Potter*, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, *Annie John*, *Lucy*. Essays and memoirs: *Among Flowers*, *A Small Place*, *My Brother*, *Talk Stories*. Work in: *New Yorker*.

LASDUN, James. Memoir: *Give Me Everything You Have*. Novels: *Seven Lies*, *The Horned Man*. Story collections: *It's Beginning to Hurt*, *The Siege*, *Three Evenings*, *Delirium Eclipse*, *The Silver Age*. Four books of poetry.

LAWSON, Doug. Story collection: *A Patrimony of Fishes*.

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

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

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

LOWVER, Melissa. Interviewer. Works as marketing director for Ascent Media.

MARTIN, Lee. Novels: *The Bright Forever, Quakertown*. Story collection: *The Least You Need to Know*. Memoirs: *From Our House, Turning Bones*. Ohio State University.

MASON, Daniel. Novels: *A Far Country, The Piano Tuner*. Also published in *Harper's*.

MATTISON, Alice. Novels: *Nothing Is Quite Forgotten in Brooklyn, In Case We're Separated, The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman, Hilda and Pearl, The Book Borrower, Field of Stars*. Story collections: *Men Giving Money, Women Yelling; Great Wits; The Flight of Andy Burns*. Poetry: *Animals*. Bennington College. alicemattison.com

McFADYEN-KETCHUM, Andrew. Interviewer. Work in *Missouri Review, Hayden's Ferry Review, Sou'wester*. Editor of *PoemoftheWeek.org*.

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

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

MIDDLETON, Nancy. Interviewer. Work in *South Carolina Review, Glimmer Train Stories, Belles Lettres*, and others.

MONROE, Debra. Novels: *Shambles, Newfangled*. Story collections: *The Source of Trouble; Wild, Cold State*. Memoir: *On the Outskirts of Normal*. debramonroe.net

MORRIS, Mary McGarry. Novels: *The Last Secret, The Lost Mother, A Hole in the Universe, Vanished, A Dangerous Woman, Songs in Ordinary Time, Fiona Range*. marymcgarrymorris.com

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

NELSON, Antonya. Novels: *Bound, Talking in Bed, Nobody's Girl, Living to Tell*. Story collections: *Nothing Right, Some Fun, Female Trouble, The Expendables, In the Land of Men, Family Terrorists*. University of Houston.

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

O'BRIEN, Tim. Novels: *July, July, Tomcat in Love, If I Die in a Combat Zone, Northern Lights, The Nuclear Age, Going After Cacciato, In the Lake of the Woods*. Short-story collection: *The Things They Carried*. authortimobrien.com

PARVIN, Roy. Story collections: *The Loneliest Road in America, In the Snow Forest*. Nonfiction in *Northern Lights*.

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

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

RUSSELL, Karen. Novel: *Swamplandia!* Story collection: *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*. Work in *New Yorker, Granta*.

SALZMAN, Mark. Novels: *Lying Awake, The Laughing Sutra, The Soloist*. Memoirs: *Iron & Silk, Lost in Place*. Nonfiction: *True Notebooks*.

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

SCHWARTZ, Lynne Sharon. Story collection: *Referred Pain*. Novels: *Disturbances in the Field, Leaving Brooklyn, Rough Strife, In the Family Way*. Nonfiction: *Ruined by Reading, Face to Face*. lynnesharonschwartz.com

SCOTT, Andrew. Interviewer. Fiction: *Modern Love*. Work in *Writers Chronicle, Tipton Poetry Journal*. Ball State University. AndrewScott website

STONE, Robert. Seven novels, including *Bay of Souls, Damascus Gate, Outerbridge Reach, Dog Soldiers*. Story collection: *Bear and His Daughter*. Memoir: *Prime Green*.

STYRON, William. (1925–2006) Novels: *Lie Down in Darkness, The Long March, Set This House on Fire, The Confessions of Nat Turner, Sophie's Choice*. Play: *In the Clap Shack*. Essay collection: *This Quiet Dust*. Memoir: *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*.

THOMPSON, Joyce. Novels: *How to Greet Strangers, Bones, Merry-Go-Round, Conscience Place*. Story collection: *East Is West of Here*.

TIERNEY, Patrick. (1957–1996) Memoir: *The Moon on My Back*.

TRUCKS, Rob. Interviewer. Nonfiction: *The Pleasure of Influence: Conversations with American Male Fiction Writers, Cup of Coffee: The Very Short Careers of Eighteen Major League Pitchers*.

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*.

VERDELLE, A.J. Novel: *The Good Negress, This Rain Coming*.

WONG, Shawn. Novels: *American Knees, Homebase*. Editor of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* and other anthologies. University of Washington.

WOOTTEN, Leslie A. Interviewer. Published in *Tin House, World Literature Today, Bloomsbury Review, Greyhound Review*.

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