




CLOSE-UP:



FAMILY SUPPORT

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

CHRIS OFFUTT, interviewed by Rob Trucks:

What was your family's reaction to the memoir [The Same River Twice]?

They all loved it, as far as I know. My family is very supportive of my writing, always have been, and I think they are pleased and surprised by the degree of success I'm having. They're glad. Hey, I was the fuckup, you know? I had a juvenile record and an adult record and dropped out of high school to join the army. When I turned thirty, my father said to me, "I'm glad, son. I never thought you'd make it." They thought I was headed for the prison or the grave, and now I have a career, a wife, and two children.

Has any one person had a particular influence on your work as a writer?

My wife. Any success I achieve as a writer is due to her. She provides me with time, space, and support. She and I talk about everything all the time, all the people, all the stories. She's my first reader. If somebody sat and overheard us discussing *The Good*



Brother, they would think we led the most unusual lives and knew the most interesting people. We talk about everything as if it's real, because in my imagination it is real. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

*Do you have a person who acts as a sounding board for your writing? In “Lady Max,” in the memoir-like element of the story, you read chapters from a book that resembles *The Mosquito Coast* aloud to your wife, Anne. Is that usual with you?*

At that time, from *Girls at Play* to a little beyond *The Mosquito Coast*, so from the mid-sixties to the early eighties, I used to read to my wife—my then-wife. And it was a sounding board; it was something to do in the evening. It was a pleasant experience of just sitting down, having a drink, with something I'd done during the day. Or I'd do it maybe every few days, when I'd finished a chapter.

And whenever I finished, she'd say, “Go on—then what?”

And I'd say, “No, that's as far as I've got.”

She'd say, “Oh...I like that. But I'm not too sure about your description of this.” Or: “Should he have said this or done that?”

It was a lovely experience. To me, it was one of the most pleasant experiences of my life, reading to her. And I was reading to her because I hadn't seen her all day—she was at work—because I needed encouragement, and because I needed her critical gift. That was very important to me, all of that. ■

LOUIS BEGLEY, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

What makes your wife your best reader?

She is so intelligent and honest and has excellent taste, and she is a writer herself. She writes biography, so there isn't a shade of competition between us. What she does is so totally different—not that there would be, even if she were to write fiction. There would not be competition between us, but there could be a divergence in what we thought was the way to go about writing. I know she writes differently and she knows that I write differently. Besides, she writes in French and I write in English. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I have had two sets of family my whole life. When I was two, my father left Haiti to move to the United States, and my mother when I was four, and I didn't join them until I was twelve. I had an uncle and aunt who raised me, and I had to go through the what-do-you-want-to-do-when-you-grow-up with my aunt and uncle first when I lived in Haiti. When I told them that I wanted to be a writer, we were still living under a dictatorship, and a lot of our writers were exiled or killed under that dictatorship. That's what it meant to them to be a writer, to put your life in danger.



Photo: Nancy Crampton

When I told my parents later in the United States when they asked me the same questions, they didn't see how I could be a writer because there were no examples of other people who'd come to the United States from Haiti and become writers. They thought it was the strangest idea, and they were very concerned about how I would make a living. That concern is valid. Most writers I know do something else in addition to their writing, whether it's teaching or something else.

It's not an unreasonable concern, but also with my family there was this idea that by becoming a writer I would be this rebel outcast that no one would understand or know what to do with. When people have sacrificed so much and left their country, they want their children to conform and lead what they think of as a good, stable life. If you're not doing that, there's fear that not only will you fail, but the whole family, the whole enterprise will fail. I don't think any group of immigrants is alone in that. Especially the newer immigrants who are coming from poorer and poorer situations or fleeing extreme circumstances—stability is a strong goal for us. ■

JAMAICA KINCAID, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

When you compare the person that you were born—Elaine Potter Richardson—and Jamaica Kincaid now, in what ways are you different from and in what ways the same as Elaine?

Well, I'm sure it's the same person. I changed my name ostensibly because I did not want my family to know that I'd done this foolish thing, becom-

ing a writer—this foolish, unprofitable thing, at the time, instead of being responsible and having a job as a servant or a nanny. I changed my name. I'd taken this risk and I was afraid that I would fail and they would laugh at me and know who I was.

What I was really doing was giving myself a way of assuming an authority that could never have been given to me by my family: the authority to be the person that I am, that I wanted to be—a writer. Whether I failed or succeeded was not on my mind, just to be that. And that would not have been allowed me by my family, no matter how profitable it was. It still isn't given to me by them. They have no interest in it because it's not connected to them, and that's fine. That's all very honest and fine, but ultimately, psychologically, the change of names was a claim of my own. ■

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

As to someone finally getting what I was trying to do? It wasn't so much that as it was hearing my older brother Jim laughing in the next room in Washington, D.C., when he came down for a visit and I was working there. I'd given him a story of mine to read, one of the first I'd written. I was twenty-three, and he was a fiction writer, and I felt if I could get him to laugh at my story— though I didn't try to get him to laugh; he just laughed—then perhaps I was doing something all right with my budding fiction, since he was a guy whose opinions and reactions I respected.

That's all. I didn't need much. One brother laughing at one of my early works kept me writing for a few more years. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, *interviewed by John McNally:*

Writing seems to be in your blood. You're also related to James Lee Burke [author of the Dave Robicheaux detective series], aren't you?

James Lee Burke is my father's first cousin, which makes him my first cousin once removed. His kids and my kids are second cousins; I just recently figured out what all those kin terms really mean! I'm a huge fan of his work and have been since I was sixteen or seventeen and first read his second novel, *To the Bright and Shining Sun*.

Did you have much contact with him when you were younger?

I didn't see much of him as I was growing up, mainly because all of my

relatives from both sides are from Louisiana, and my mother and father had settled up in New England. I'm pretty sure Cousin Jimmy (as my family calls him) was living in Kansas for a while, then Florida. Raising his four kids with his lovely wife, Pearl, teaching, writing. I do remember him visiting once when I was about eleven or twelve.

When I published my first short story ["Forky," in *Playboy* magazine in February 1984], Jim sent me a handwritten and very generous letter calling me a writer and welcoming me as one more into the family. I didn't believe I was one, but it sure felt good hearing that from him, one of my literary heroes! Over the years, he's been very generous with me, calling now and then to see how we're doing, offering to help out in any way he can. I'm thrilled at all the hard-earned success he's had, and am proud to be of the same family tree. ■

VIKRAM CHANDRA,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

What was your family's reaction when you decided to leave India and study filmmaking and writing?

They were always encouraging, especially my father. My mother was somewhat more skeptical, having herself been a writer. She knew exactly how hard it would be to make a living from writing. My earliest memories are of her sitting at the kitchen table, writing. She wrote and acted for Indian television during its infancy in Delhi in the sixties. She also wrote for radio and, later, for film in the seventies. She understood my urgent desire to write, but was afraid of how hard it would be.

In India, during the sixties and seventies, it made no sense to think you were going to be a writer. In the eighties, after the success enjoyed by Salman Rushdie and others, everyone began to see it as a possibility, as a viable job or vocation that people could have. Before that, if you said you were going to be a writer, the immediate response was, "That's nice. What else are you going to do?" ■

MARY GORDON, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

There are things I am extremely grateful to my father for. Growing up as a girl in the fifties, there were things you weren't supposed to do. Well, I never heard that. I never heard you are not supposed to be smart; you're

not supposed to say what you think. You're not supposed to write. You're not supposed to spend your time reading.

You never heard it from him.

He was the most important person in my world. What the rest of the world said came into my one ear, but I felt like the real story was, "Of course you can do this." Anybody who didn't think so was not quite up to scratch, and I didn't have to pay any attention to them.

The thing about my father was whatever I did he felt was fantastic. I think that's what every writer needs—some angel saying, "You're great, you're great, you're great!" twenty-four hours a day. Because there's also the devil on your shoulder telling you that you are completely worthless and your enterprise is delusional. ■

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

My siblings and I are very, very different. My older brother is a successful businessman. My younger brother is a scientist at Harvard Medical School. And the three boys, all born within five years, I think we scattered. I said, Okay, in some subconscious way. I will do writing. You'll take business, Andy, and, Jeff, you'll take care of science. That way we won't compete so much with each other.

We are geographically thrown all over the map, all over the United States. Well, we're all over the map in terms of our interests, and I think my parents did a lot of things right about that, but I think they were scared about the fact that I wanted to be a writer. You know, wondering if I could survive doing that; but they also knew that it was in my blood somehow. It's always been in my blood, and it was something that I had to do.

How old were you when your father died?

I was in my late thirties. I was thirty-eight, and I started writing seriously at thirty-six. It was a nice period; it was an interesting period of time where a lot of things were happening. I have to say that unless someone has a parent who's died, it's really hard to describe that. It was very, very sad; Lou Gehrig's disease is a horrible disease. No way is a good way of dying, but—

Some beat the hell out of others.

Yeah. The experience was intensely sad. But also intensely beautiful. It was

extraordinarily beautiful. I felt very alive. I felt all the things that had to have been said were said already, so I could just concentrate on loving my father.

Had he gotten to read any of your work?

He'd only seen one of my stories. I was nervous about showing my stories to my family. I've always written, but also thought it was seen as something less than manly. We three boys were athletes. I'm six-two, and I'm the shortest one in my family. We were big, strapping, young men.

Those are heavy words.

Yeah. Exactly. I was very nervous about it, but I did show him one of the stories that was in my book, and he had an excellent criticism about it. I think that he knew I was writing. He was very proud of the fact that I was doing what I wanted to do in life. It had taken me a while to get to that point in life. It's an eternal sadness that he didn't get a chance to see the end product of the book. See what happened, how it was received in the world. But I also think that the last of the stories in the book have his shadow hanging over them, and that those stories wouldn't have been as good if I hadn't gone through the experience.

So I feel his loss all the time, and yet I feel his presence there all the time. It's very hard. It's a strange thing to explain to people. But you know, I felt lucky. I didn't feel lucky that he had Lou Gehrig's disease, but I felt lucky in who he was and how that formed my life and my work.

And you had the good fortune to have the relationship that you did toward the end. So often, people don't have that opportunity.

I was going through a rebirth, at least career-wise, and he was able to see me go through that. He was able to see me, probably much like seeing a child take his first steps. So that was terrific. I think that I feel his example all the time in my work.

Oh, do you? How?

He knew I was bored, that I wasn't being challenged by life. I was doing a lot of physically challenging things. I've always done physically challenging things, but this writing thing was something that I always warned my friends and family that I was going to do, but somehow I hadn't done it. I finally decided that it was now or never. And his death really hit that home harder.

MARIA FLOOK, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

Your rendering of your sister Karen's voice in My Sister Life is striking and passionate, delivered in the first person. It's a vivid and truthful depiction of a young girl with street smarts, innocence, and an unusual wisdom. In these chapters, one feels the writer's efforts to reclaim her sister and pull her up from those lost years.

When I wrote in Karen's voice, I was trying to let her speak for herself because she'd never had the chance to speak up and explain her torment. She had gone missing. Later, when I talked

to her about writing the book, she gave me full license to evoke her grim experiences, her pain, and her eventual triumph over so many obstacles. She was very pleased by the story I wrote. I gave her money from my advance because she needed the money; she's still so disenfranchised. I wanted her to have it, but she didn't ask for it. I had to push it on her. She seemed amazed that what had happened to her had mattered so much to me that I would write a book. The book was a document of that bond that she had never recognized fully, how her experience was embedded in me. Her disappearance had changed my life and had actually precipitated my transformation from silent witness to writer. My remedy was to write, hers was to escape. Of course, Sister Life means parallel life. ■

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

Why did you go from Pennsylvania to the islands?

I was born in Pennsylvania, but my parents moved to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., when I was fourteen months old. I grew up in the suburbs of Washington, in McLean, Virginia, home of the CIA and the Kennedys—but in the white-trash neighborhood of McLean.

What made you leave?

It's a very banal answer in some ways. It depends on what you mean by leave. Of course, I had to go away to college, so that was one act of leaving. But I had already left before that, to surf. I had brothers who were ten and eight years older than me, so they were always going to the beach. This was the early sixties and the Beach Boys were singing their songs, and I was a kid with a skateboard and a subscription to *Surfer* magazine, and took the beach culture to heart. By the time I was sixteen and had my driver's

license, I was at the beach all the time surfing, and by the time I was seventeen and still a senior in high school, I got on a plane and went to the Caribbean, which for an East Coast surfer is our Hawaii.

So you went to surf?

Yeah. That's the first time, why I went. I went back because I felt absolutely spellbound by it—different world, black nations—to see how different reality could be. It was tremendous. I understood, like anybody would who's interested in an education, that that was probably going to be the best education I ever got anywhere. So I was seventeen and went to the Caribbean for three months and surfed, and then came back and went to the University of Missouri journalism school.

Was that a jolt to your system?

Oh, the Midwest, sure. I cried.

But you chose it.

I know—sort of—my parents saw the life they wanted for me and were very good at brainwashing me, making me feel that I was obligated to pursue something more traditional like that.

I'm surprised that they had that hold when you had already left.

What they were able to do was instill in me a value system and a sense of guilt that took years and years to overcome. I was always battling against it, but I won, eventually. They didn't want me to become a writer. Journalist, okay. Professor, even better. But fiction writer? What was that? There was no apparent shape or function to such a life, and the gamble, from a parent's point of view, was absurd.

It's a good thing you were so stubborn about it.

Anybody who ends up doing something like this has to be one of the most stubborn people in the world, because all you get forever is the message: Back away. Don't do this. This is a foolish gamble. You're deluded.

And all of the people who I thought were the most talented people around me when I was in writing schools—one by one, they started compromising on their dream. One by one, they started thinking that the gamble was foolish, and, one by one, they just stopped doing it. ■

FREDERICK REIKEN,
interviewed by Eric Wasserman:

Parents are not exactly known for being enthusiastic about their children pursuing careers in the arts.

Actually, my father's opposition to my choice of becoming a writer was something I grappled with for a long time. And it was not as if he was a tyrant about it, nor did he do anything to stop me. But he has always been a very persuasive man, and he simply could not fathom why—when I announced at the age of twenty-two that instead of applying to medical school I was going to pursue becoming a fiction writer—I would choose something that would not guarantee me a predictable income. In all earnestness, he would say things to me like, “Most doctors play golf on Wednesdays. You could write on Wednesdays.”

The day I graduated from my MFA program, we were talking on the phone, and he asked me what I was going to do now. I said I had applied for several teaching positions and was also considering a work-exchange position at an artist's colony in western Massachusetts. He said, “Why don't you think about getting an MBA?” and I said, “Hello, Dad. It's me on the phone—Rick, your son.” ■

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK, *interviewed by William Pierce:*

You've talked about the émigré community's distance from literature. How did your parents handle your decision to write?

My father had very little use for the fine arts, and was initially freaked and frustrated that both his children pursued them—my sister painting and me writing. He simply did not get fiction or poetry, and was very frank about it. But he has—at first grudgingly, and now, in his serious and enlightened old age, enthusiastically—embraced the practices, and takes an avid interest in them, and reads reviews and reads a lot of fiction.

My mother aspired to be a poet. She published poems in some magazines when she was fifteen or sixteen, and was later invited to submit a book for publication by a press in western Ukraine. She'd sent the book off for



Photo: Barbara Brady Conn

publication in Kiev, but had it rejected because it seemed too bourgeois for the communist editors there. Western Ukraine was itself still bourgeois and was willing to go with it, but then the war broke out and the publishing house collapsed. I have the book on my desk, and I'm translating a couple of the poems. My mother has a profound respect for fiction and poetry, and called my father a barbarian for not appreciating it. I had great support and backing from her. It bound us together in opposition to my father's tyranny of reality, of a kind of two-dimensional or three-dimensional reality that was not enough for either of us.

I remember talking about this once with Derek Walcott when I was in my early twenties and had published very little. I said that my father was advising a career shift, and Derek said, "Say to him, 'Did you really have the nerve to do what you wanted?' Maybe he wanted to be a ballet dancer and just didn't have the balls." ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

It's interesting to note that you are married to the cartoonist Jason Little. How does living with another artist influence your creative life?

Being with a creative person, you feed each other. His brain feeds my brain, and my brain feeds his brain. I feel lucky that he's a visual artist. When you're working in different forms, it's the best of both worlds, because you get to be close to another artist, but they're doing such different work you don't have to do the comparison contest. I love comics. Being able to be in touch with that world is great. I've always been an intensely visual person, which is reflected in the fact that I'm a film fanatic. My visual thinking is expressed in the way that I write, in the scenes that I build up. Being married to a visual artist helps me keep in tune with that, too. ■





CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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