

CLOSE-UP:



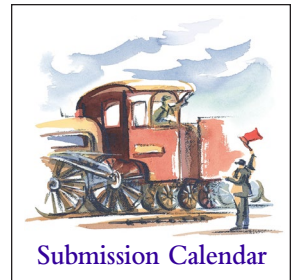
Glimmer Train Close-ups are single-topic, e-doc publications specifically for writers, from the editors of *Glimmer Train Stories* and *Writers Ask*.

BENJAMIN PERCY, interviewed by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum:

Your stories move quickly beyond their telling and into the more complex realm of literary fiction. Peter Straub put it best when he said, “Benjamin Percy moves instinctively toward the molten center of contemporary writing, the place where genre fiction, in this case horror, overflows its boundaries and becomes something dark and grand and percipient. These stories (Refresh, Refresh) contain a brutal power and are radiant with pain—only a writer of surpassing honesty and directness could lead us here.”

Yeah, that meant a lot to me, Peter’s blurb. He’s been a kind of invisible mentor—I started reading his books in middle school—so he’s been with me all along, hovering over my shoulder like a ghost, whispering in my year. And now we’re pals, which feels a little surreal. I’m definitely following his tracks in the mud, trying to write stories that some have called “literary horror,” (thinking of horror as an emotion more than a genre).

Some writers, especially in the academic circuit, turn their back on genre. That snobbishness pisses me off. If you look at the worst of genre fiction,



sure, the characters are cardboard cut-outs, the language is transparent, but if you look at the worst of literary fiction—which has become a genre of its own—there’s plenty to complain about, too: the wankiness of the purple prose, the high boredom of the material, etc. I think there’s something healthy about getting in touch with those books we loved when we were younger—whether horror or thriller or Western—and then approaching them through a literary lens. Look to Straub and *Ghost Story*. Or Atwood and *The Handmaid’s Tale*. Or McCarthy and *The Road*. Or Brockmeier and *Brief History of the Dead*. Or Chaon and *Await Your Reply*. Or anything by Lethem or Chabon or Bender. I could go on.

If you look at the stories in *Refresh, Refresh*, many of them are literary/genre hybrids. “Crash” is a ghost story. “The Killing” is a tale of revenge. “The Caves in Oregon” is a haunted house story. “Meltdown” is sorta sci-fi, sorta Western. I don’t think too many people would recognize them as such at first glance—it’s only from the corner of your eye that the tropes and devices of genre announce themselves. ■

KAREN RUSSELL, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

You’ve received a lot of attention because your sentences are highly literary, musical constructions, but the content of the stories is often genre based, pulling on fantasy and science fiction. And the emotional lives of the characters feel very real though the specifics of the dilemmas are fantastical. Where does the impulse to mash disparate elements together in your fiction come from?

The people I loved reading the best in college were total mash-up artists. Like Junot Diaz, who has this voice-driven, wisecracking, going-to-curse-at-you prose and then he has these lyrical, gorgeous descriptions. Or George Saunders—I owe him a great debt because he showed me you can have really moral, moving stories that are partly a function of how insane and absurd the setting is. That was always what got me most powerfully as a reader: these incongruous pairings.

It’s also just fun! I had a lot of fun writing *Swamplandia!* because it felt like I could juggle different kinds of worlds. And I feel like in life we’re all sort of operating in different registers all the time.

In the course of a day I think everyone shuffles a bit. And what happens in my stories is just an expanded vocabulary to talk about a way that everybody feels. To paraphrase Etgar Keret: if I have some guy levitate out of his

chair then maybe he's in love and inside feels like he's flying.

It sounds like you're very aware of the writers you admire and have learned from, but how does that work for you in concrete terms? Do you go back to any authors in particular when you're stuck, to crib technique or pointers?

You learn what a story is by reading. There are some stories and novels that leave a big stamp, that virally inhabit your consciousness.

When writing *Swamplandia!* I ended up teaching *Geek Love*, this amazing novel by Katherine Dunn that I picked up in high school. It's a dark carnival tale about a family of actual freaks—it's just nightmarish, I've never read anything like it. I'm positive that if I hadn't read that book, Kelly Link's short story collection *Pretty Little Monsters*, and George Saunders, that I wouldn't feel as free as I do to write weird. **They expanded my idea that you can have a literary book, a book that's interested in sentences and the poetry of language, and it can also have Arty the Flipper Boy or a Civil War ghost.**

When writing the Kiwi sections of *Swamplandia!*, if I ever felt like the tone was off, I would read Saunders because he always makes me want to write. He reads like he's having such a good time and I love his humor so much. **I think you write better if you're reading good people.**

Swamplandia! also owes a big debt to Stephen King's *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordan*. I think that's one of the most beautiful books. For King it's pretty quiet, about this nine-year-old girl wandering around the woods in Appalachia. It's weird to me that King is as popular as he is, you know? Because of the places he goes. That's an acknowledgement of how weird we all must be, and how we love the dark. I feel like he's some organ, doing extrasensory processing for all of us! ■

SHIMON TANAKA:

What is incontrovertibly true about literature is that it gives you access to the lives and thoughts of characters who are different from you, to see beyond the costumes and the unusual sights and sounds and get straight to the what's-at-stake of a human being's existence. This is the value that I've found and continue to find in literature. ■

DAVID ALLAN CATES:

Human change, human development, is mysterious and we are often compelled to explain it, even if only to ourselves, with stories, by describing a series of events. Without these stories, we are lost and alone and confused. The stories, even if they shift and change with time, give us the little clarity we need each day.

They explain the day the heart opened, the day the heart closed. They explain how we became who we are, how we became aware of something ugly in ourselves or the world, or beautiful. How we lost faith. How we found it. And how, exactly, to the moment, to the second, we finally—albeit briefly—understood. ■

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON,
interviewed by Margo Williams:

When I first heard you speak at the ASU conference, I recall you saying that if more people wrote and read short stories, the world would be a more compassionate place; can you elaborate on that comment?

I think that reading and writing are, at their core, acts of empathy. If we were more engaged and practiced in a habit of empathizing, there's no question that we'd be in a more compassionate place. Likewise, I believe that to write is to take part in the profound act of witness, so the more people who try to write, who try to create a world out of twenty-six letters and their infinite combinations, the more likely we will be to see, for better or worse, what we're capable of in terms of empathy and compassion. I'm not trying to sound hippy-dippy here, and while I'm certainly risking that, I have to add that **I think we read and write out of an unbound curiosity about humanity. We're looking for another soul on the page, and how satisfying and significant it is when the soul you find, whether reading or writing, is your own.** ■



Photo: Nina Subin

STEPHANIE SOILEAU:

If Little Red Riding Hood is our companion and analog when we are children, so are Anna Karenina, Billy Pilgrim, Clarissa Dalloway when we read

as adults, and so are our own invented characters when we write fiction. As readers, we journey with Anna through the impossible morass of her affair, with Billy Pilgrim as he grapples with the tragedies of war. As writers, we loose our characters in the wilderness, set wolves on their heels, confound their paths, and watch, mesmerized, to see how they will go, whether they will come out on the other side. Often, we see them behave in ways that raise questions but offer no answers. In fiction, we suspend judgment. We relish ambiguities.

I believe in storytelling as a way to map and explore the ambiguities of human experience, and it is this belief that motivates me as a fiction writer. **Stories have given me a language to express the contradictions in my own experience, and because writing them has been an often challenging exercise in sympathy and compassion, I have come to see the practice of storytelling as a moral imperative. But the morality is in the practice, not in the story itself.** Fiction is no place for sermons, for conclusive answers. Whether we're reading or writing it, the best fiction gives us a woods to get lost in, and if at the end we have come to no conclusions, if we are only left with more questions, the questions themselves are something like a map, and we emerge from this woods a little better able to find our way. ■

CHARLES McCARRY, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

Your novels, while literary, are usually labeled as “espionage fiction.” How do you think of the books?

I don't think of the books as spy novels. When I began to write, in my naiveté, I thought that I could write about espionage, which is an interesting world because everything is right out on the surface. In theory, at least, all personal secrets are known, at least in the Organization. I just thought, probably because it is so much like fiction, that it was a natural subject for fiction and for the novel. Human beings like to categorize, and so do publishers and bookstores. They have to know which shelf to put the books on. So, because the books were about groups of people who happen to practice espionage, they became spy novels. But I've never thought of them that way. I've always thought that they were naturalistic novels that described life in the twentieth century. Had I been a bookkeeper, I suppose I would have written about bookkeepers. ■

JAY McINERNEY, interviewed by Victoria Blake:

In Brightness Falls, Jeff was in the hospital and somebody asked him the question, “Can literature save you?”

What did he say? “No, but it can kill you, maybe”?

He didn’t answer.

Jeff was an intelligent guy. I seriously feel that our best answers to this general dilemma, the wandering around which is the human condition, are in literature. I was a philosophy major at Williams, but I find that in so far as I learn anything about the human condition, I’m likelier to learn it from novelists than I am from Hegel and Heidegger and Marx. Or even Freud. I’d rather reread *Ulysses* than *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

I don’t think literature can save you in the sense that it can save you from depression or despair. But it can help you understand depression and despair. I guess that is the reason I write novels. Literature is the greatest repository of human wisdom. A novelist can’t solve the economic problems of the world, and writers can’t end wars, but I think that at the end, the literary enterprise is best at leading to an understanding of what it means to be human. You know, I’m just an old-fashioned humanist. ■

CHRISTOPHER COAKE, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

During our AWP panel discussion regarding the American short story, you talked about the influence of the dominant storytellers of your childhood—Stephen King, George Lucas, and Steven Spielberg. It’s now almost in fashion for literary writers to openly embrace genre, but for years, it’s been a hushed appreciation, if any. Why do you think literary writers are now more comfortable discussing the influence of genre in their work?

Well, I’m not the only one with those influences. We can’t help but be children of our times, and my generation’s formative childhood years—between, say, ’75 and ’85—were towered over by genre. *Star Wars* and its sequels came out. *E.T.* came out. *Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out. *Alien* and *Aliens* came out. Comic books were in a fertile period. *Dungeons & Dragons* was exploding in popularity. The local grocery store we went to—this was in Colorado, where I lived for a lot of those years—had a cardboard display in it, selling *Dungeons & Dragons* manuals; I’d save my allowance money for them. And then Stephen King was everywhere, at his absolute peak. I worshipped him in my teens. I wanted to *be* him.

I'm sure all these statements are reductive, but largely true: a bunch of us who are establishing our writing careers now were, back then, largely middle-class, public-school-educated kids. No one was handing us *Middlemarch* in seventh grade. Instead we were trading copies of *Danse Macabre* and rolling up half-elven fighter/magic users on weekends and collecting TIE Fighter toys.

I began writing in order to write the kinds of stories I knew and admired, which meant I was trying to write genre. In high school I wrote two terrible, terrible fantasy novels. In college I wrote another one. **It was in college that an English professor of mine gave me a copy of Joyce's "The Dead" and said, "Here's the best ghost story ever told." He didn't know it, but that was exactly the sort of prompt I needed to read Joyce. And he was right—it is the best ghost story ever. The best *anything* ever.**

But literature and genre have always crossed over. From old myths and Homer to Shakespeare to Shelley to *Turn of the Screw* to Shirley Jackson to Kurt Vonnegut to Cormac McCarthy, there's a pretty clear line. And a lot of us who came up in the shadow of Spielberg and King see that, and don't see anything unusual or shameful about it. I also think a lot of us, and I hope I'm not putting words in the mouth of anyone on this list—terrific writers like Chabon and Benjamin Percy and Karen Russell and Kevin Brockmeier and Dan Chaon and Anthony Doerr and Chris Adrian and Scott Wolven, to name a few—still want to tell stories in and through that tradition.

I don't get the bias against genre. The genres are really just formal structures, after all, against which an artist can make some friction. What's the difference between me trying to write a P.I. novel, with an awareness of its history and traditions, and a formalist poet, trying to bring something new to the sonnet? Sure, there are boatloads of terrible, disposable P.I. novels out there, but a lot of crimes have been committed against the sonnet over the years, too, and it's still honorable to give one a try.

I'm actually working on a ghost story now—a novel, set in Columbus, Ohio, which I hope will be done in a few months. It's fun to play with the old traditions, to try and bring a contemporary spin to them. What's fun, too, is that I'm a very psychological-realist kind of guy. I'm not religious; I'm not a man who believes in ghosts. But fiction allows us to make these kinds of stories possible, and I love sitting right in the middle of that tension. My novel's *about* that tension, actually—believing/not-believing. I'm having a blast with it. ■

CARRIE BROWN:

The best story delivers the complexity of experience, happiness and sadness woven together so inextricably that they cannot be separated from each other. ■

JAY MCINERNEY, interviewed by Victoria Blake:

Could you address the criticism that your books are a kind of pop fiction, that you write for the mass audience?

It was always my intention to write for as many people as I could. I never wanted to write for the priestly elite...the two thousand serious readers of fiction. It is possible to write your dissertation on *The Great Gatsby*. It's also possible to read it over the course of an evening and to enjoy the story. I was interested in the idea of reaching more than a few thousand readers. I embraced that notion. Well, I don't have a mass audience. I might have had one once, with *Bright Lights*, but not anymore. And, you know, I'd rather not have one. Not now. I certainly don't feel I could communicate with that size of audience. The common denominator is so low there. But, I mean, just because my first book sold a few million copies, I don't think this remotely implicates me in some sort of pop-fiction world. Let me tell you. I was stuck on a boat once and I read *The Firm*. If you're a writer and your ear is tuned to a certain degree, you just can't read that stuff without retching after a while. He's genuinely clumsy with the language. His language exists solely in the service of a plot, and the plot is none too gracefully rendered, in my opinion. And the machinery seems very clunky to me. It's formula writing of a kind that doesn't have anything to bring me except the sort of very crude pleasures of watching big pieces of lumber fall into place. That's what I mean by the common denominator with that size of audience.

The fact is, my book was written as a literary coming-of-age novel. It deals with language. Myself and everybody involved with the book thought that it would have no appeal outside the circle of people who read *The Paris Review*, and that's about it. Its success was very anomalous, but then, eventually, when its success became an established fact, people tried to explain away its literary credentials. It was written as a literary novel, and I still don't understand how it came to have such a big audience. But I haven't had that big an audience since.

Do you think Bright Lights, Big City will be read in a couple years?

Honestly, I think so. Yes. At the worst it would be read as a kind of social document. It was a book that in the minds of many people captured an aspect of the zeitgeist...and that becomes self-fulfilling. I would like it if it were read for the same reasons that *The Great Gatsby* or *Catcher in the Rye* are still read, because it's really a good book. But I couldn't possibly predict.

What about your other books?

Well, it's quite possible that one of my other books is eventually going to be discovered by some enterprising critic out to make his reputation. A graduate student or a biographer will say, "*Story of My Life* is the great unacknowledged masterpiece," but again, I don't know. Fitzgerald's great success in his lifetime was *This Side of Paradise*. It's a book that is not much read now. It's not nearly as good as his other books, but that was the big popular success. *Gatsby* sold very few copies. It sold 22,000 copies when it first came out.

I don't know. It could be that *Bright Lights* is the one that remains, but I think I'll have ten or twelve books more before I disappear. I have a lot of books left to write. ■

GEORGE SAUNDERS,

interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

You did those pieces for Slate on Iraq. What was the response to them?

I did one called "Exit Strategy" and one called "Manifesto," and some political things for the *New Yorker*. It was good but frustrating...my experience has been that you publish a political piece in the *New Yorker* and basically you are going to hear from the people who agree with you. And *Slate*, which is a different audience, I had a couple people saying, "You idiot, that's not viable." [*Laughter.*]

You know that's a misunderstanding. I felt basically, like, I suppose, everybody, ineffective—you say what you think and the wheel continues to roll. It made me feel better. After 9/11, when there was that strange period when everyone was being accused of disloyalty and all that, there was one week when Gore and Tom Daschle simultaneously said, "Enough is enough," and it was, even as member of the choir, satisfying to hear that. So that's a reason to write those kinds of pieces.



Photo: Beowulf Sheehan

I guess Howard Dean is loading up the testosterone quotient for the Dems, but the condition and the role of political opposition in this country are astounding to me, as astounding as what has been accepted as the objective reality and legitimate information.

It's got to go a different way because the level of—if it's a word—rabidity, it's too high—

Toxicity.

Yeah, yeah, it's not—

I was watching The News Hour with Jim Lehrer and the issue was PBS funding, and on one side was a conservative attack—I knew this because no matter what was brought up he would revert to his main talking point about Bill Moyers and his dangerous liberalism. On the other side was a PBS station manager from Denver, who pointed out that Moyers represented a miniscule iota of the programming, and also pointed out that no one, especially liberals, objected to the many years of Bill Buckley's Firing Line.

That's scary. They have talking points, but it's true on both sides. If you want to be “effective,” you have three talking points, and no matter what is said, you just repeat them, which makes for a very Kafkaesque thing. The trick is to recognize that in every rabid, fill-in-the-blank Republican, there is a little Democrat, and the reason the Republican's so loud is because he's afraid of the Democrat, and the inverse is true, and that's why I think fiction can help. If you see someone sympathetically portrayed from the inside, it's a little less scary. But these are odd times—very odd times.

I share your view that fiction might mitigate some of this stuff. Want to take a shot at the status of fiction in the culture today?

Ah ha, the other thing is that you are absolutely right—that's a kind of demographic thinking that we all engage in, and really, for me—and maybe this is just a survival mechanism—I try to think of the one reader and the transformative effects. Even if that reader is already convinced and it [just] assures her. But I know what you mean.

I'm with you. I don't buy this declinist, Chicken Little, sky-is-falling view. There is much more reason to hope, and I can't substantiate it except to say that the mass culture is just mega-decibels noisier, and so it drowns out everything. Literature is not going anyplace. Gail Caldwell wrote a real swell affirmative piece in the Boston Globe recently, starting off with praise of Alice Munro and disdaining the decline or retreat of readers.

If you make a scale and on one side you put 7,000 people who are watching a sitcom or a reality show, and [on the other side] you put one person who is reading Alice Munro, I think there is more energy in the one person. And when you talk about the way things actually change and the way life actually ebbs, are very ephemeral, the 7,000 people watching *Honey, I Killed the Cat*.

They have the weight of a goose-down pillow.

Right, but they could be transformed. I don't think you ever want to saddle literature with purposefulness. It can be purposeful, but if it tries to be it gets a little crazed. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, interviewed by Nancy Middleton:

I don't like the notion that writers are special people. There's been a democratization of the arts, and yet you do need some talent; on the other hand, I don't believe writers have deeper feelings, more profound thoughts, or that their experiences are somehow more meaningful. What writers have is a particular talent, like a musician, say, of using words. I don't believe in exalting the artist. You can exalt the work—there are books I could worship—but never people. It's almost as if the people were the medium. Once the book exists, they're the medium through which we've received this book, this experience. ■

DEBRA SPARK, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

What kind of writing do you most value?

Emotionally honest writing, I guess I would say.

Do you wonder if, in our effort to avoid sentimentality, literary writers sometimes go too far, that we are too cool to even risk sentimentality now? One of the essays in Curious Attractions—"Cry, Cry, Cry: Handling Emotion in Fiction"—wrestles with several well-known quotes about sentiment and sentimentality. Does too much of the fiction now being published avoid emotional honesty?

Well, that's the danger, isn't it? One of the quotes in that essay that I like is about that. William Kittredge says, "If you're not risking sentimentality, you're not close to your inner self." And there's an Edna O'Brien quote, too, in which she worries about feeling being in hiding—and there she's talking, I think, about the danger of the ironic, the overly cool. ■

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK, interviewed by William Pierce:

What is the broader relationship, for you, between literature and religion?

I think religion has a very different goal from literature, uses very different means, and yet the two overlap in many ways. Like religious writing, literature helps us to adjust to the predicament of knowing we are going to die but not knowing in what chapter. ■

EHUD HAVAZELET, interviewed by Eric Wasserman:

As an audience, American Jews tend to gravitate toward film and literature on Jewish themes that perpetuate an old-world nostalgia we were just discussing, and in many ways tell us what we already know. Cinema seems to especially shy away from tackling contemporary Jewish themes on a sophisticated level. Why do you feel this continues and is accepted? Do you see this artistic trend changing anytime soon?

No. I think most people read to be consoled; they want what's familiar. That's why we like TV—you know the characters, the plot. Even the surprises are predictable. People read to be entertained, which is why romance novels and thrillers are so popular, because the form is already understood and the trajectory is mapped out. I think like any other group, people who read Jewish fiction are looking for the consolation that says, "Look, my history matters, my way of life—whether I've held onto it or turned my back on it—has interest, has meaning." The consolation of the familiar.

Most serious writing, while it certainly explores the familiar, is about moving beyond it. Art doesn't aim to entertain, it aims to disturb. I'd much rather have somebody read my book and not be able to get it out of his head and be concerned about it than love it and say, "Oh, this makes me feel all warm inside." In that sense, popular Jewish fiction just mirrors what's true about all fiction. I haven't read Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*. Assuming it's a wonderful book, I think it's safe to say the books that follow it will be tapping into this nostalgic, sepia-toned version of Irish history, because people respond to it.

That's not necessarily something to scorn. I'm glad I can tap into a place, some people; it makes the work authentic. On the other hand, it's not what I'm mainly concerned with. The Jewish writers I admire are the ones who have the weight to move beyond their antecedents.

There's going to be a core of people who come to fiction because of its

familiarity. And while I would love those people to buy my books and enjoy them, I can't say I'm writing for them.

Many readers read to have their values affirmed, not to have them challenged. That's why Philip Roth has pissed off so many people from the start. I think all great writing has to challenge. Great writers can affirm beliefs at the same time that they challenge aspects or consequences of those beliefs, as when belief gets turned into edict. Malamud did that, Singer did that.

Saul Bellow comes to mind as well.

Right. It's what you do with the material. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Learn the theory and practice of our finest literary predecessors, in the West and East, white and black, if your goal is to contribute significantly to, as Matthew Arnold put it, "the best that has been known and said in the world." ■

MYLA GOLDBERG, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Reviewers have consistently commented on your ability to avoid sentimentalism. Are you conscious of this as you write?

That's another manifestation of my personality. I hate sentimentality. It never occurred to me to avoid it. I never read those reviews. It was never a conscious thing. I just write what I like.

Sentimentality has to do with manipulation, with letting people know how they're supposed to be feeling, really playing something up. Spielberg is sentimentality. I don't like Spielberg, and the reason that I don't is that for art to be able to work, for art to be able to rise to its full potential, there needs to be an active collaboration between the artist and the person enjoying the art. **You need to allow your reader to have things happen as they're reading. They need to do a little bit of work. If you're telling them how to feel, you're not collaborating with your reader,** and it's not going to be an effective piece of writing because they're not in it. They're being dictated to. If you're able to give them a set of events and they do the alchemy inside themselves and experience the emotions for themselves, it becomes a more effective piece of art. ■

BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON, interviewed by Margo Williams:

You were a professional skateboarder before you ever became the director of creative writing at Harvard. Can you comment on the symbiosis of these seemingly disparate parts of your life?

I think it comes down to independence and discipline, and not a little masochism. None of the stories in *Corpus Christi* were done in less than fifteen or twenty drafts. I can't leave stories until they're as sound and as polished as I can make them. It's the same with, and perhaps because of, skateboarding; I think nothing, literally nothing, of spending an entire day trying the same trick over and over. It's the idea of process rather than product. When I feel I'm on the verge of discovering something significant about a character or a plot, I completely lose track of time, just as I do when I'm close to doing a trick I've never done. It's impossible for me to write at night because once I close up shop, I won't be able to sleep. Likewise, it's hard for me to skate at night because I won't want to stop until I've literally worn myself out or gotten hurt.

And skating, like writing, is an entirely singular art form. Other skaters can give you tips, the way other writers or professors can, but at the end of the day it all comes down to the work you've done, alone. Skating taught me dedication, and I think dedication goes a lot further than talent. ■

RAWI HAGE, interviewed by Jeremiah Chamberlin:

You started your career as a photographer. So how did you come to writing? Was that something you'd always done?

I came to writing late. I never intended to be a writer; it's a happy coincidence.

How did it happen?

I was participating in an art show and the curator asked me to write something for the catalogue. What I created was fiction—something in the shape of a short story. She liked it and she said to me, "You have talent, you should be writing."

When was this?

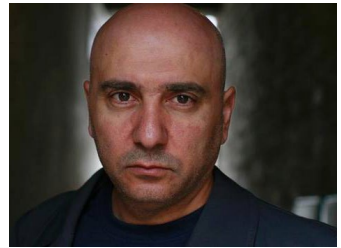


Photo: Randy Queen

2001. After September 11 they tried to cancel the show [*“Ces pays qui m’habitent/ The Lands Within Me,”* at the Museum of Civilization, in Hull], which was an exhibition of Arab-Canadian artists. At the time there was some big controversy. So I also wrote a kind of manifesto against the canceling of the show and it became something of a national controversy.

So writing was never something you studied formally?

No, I never studied writing. I studied photography. I did a BFA in photography. But I think I always had some kind of story to tell, and photography became limited as a medium.

In what way?

Not much space for long narrative, and I think I had more story in me that needed to come out. ■

LEE SMITH, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

Are you working on issues of craft as you write? Are you setting technical goals or purposefully trying something new?

A lot of the time I am. **I think there’s a great danger for all of us, in any of the arts: Once we’ve found that we can do something, our tendency is to keep doing it**, or doing variations. If you write well from the point of view of a young protagonist, you keep having a young protagonist, or writing initiation novels over and over.

In *Fair and Tender Ladies*, I wanted to capture a strong character, a whole life, and to use the research to portray accurately Ivy’s times. I think each book presents a different kind of problem, and it interests me to do new things. Of course you will see the same themes resurfacing and recurring, but I really do try to set a new goal in the writing. ■

CHARLES JOHNSON,

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

Life is about learning and growing, and if you stop doing that—and I put these words in King’s mouth in *Dreamer*—you might as well be dead. **You sometimes have to fight to find those spaces that will allow you to grow and develop, but that’s what life is about.** It’s like when a person learns a language. The second new language seems easier than the first. And the

third is easier than the second. It's the same way with the arts. Many writers, like Ralph Ellison, begin as musicians, and then they suddenly realize the commonality between music and poetry or music and fiction. The arts become easier as you move from one to the other. If you write fiction, you should be able to write nonfiction. If you write a novel, you should be able to write short stories. These are all part of the same universe, so to speak. It's about crossing boundaries, which isn't that difficult. There are certain things that I will never be able to do because they involve different concepts, like the hard sciences. But on the continent of art, there are similarities in the ways the creative imagination works. Most artists can cross boundaries quite easily. ■

STUART DYBEK, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

What are some of the things you don't want a student to leave your class without understanding about the craft of writing?

I want the student to realize there's magic in craft. Craft makes us better than we are, smarter, wiser, sharpens observation into vision, quickens reflexes, allowing an intellectual activity to be more blessedly instinctive. The practice of the craft of any art is so allied with not simply the expression of imagination but the very experience of imagination, as to become indistinguishable from imagination.

As a reader, what do you expect from a short story?

As a reader, I hope for a short story to surprise me into a more intense vision of life. But then that's as much a response to what I expect from art in general. But why be so reductive? Poe demanded an effect from a story. Stories can console, enlighten, seduce, mystify, broaden one's sympathies, enlarge one's experience. I don't insist that a story deeply move me; there are, after all, other kinds of more intellectual pleasures, especially in a medium like language. But by temperament, I do favor stories that communicate strong emotion and strong imagination. And in this age in which agendas and attitude take the place of individual thought, imagination and strong emotion are, unfortunately, not especially typical of either literature or some of the other arts, such as painting. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, *interviewed by Nancy Middleton:*

Of course you can endlessly analyze a work of art. But the core of art has to be mysterious. That's why it matters to us: because it's something that is new and unresolved every time. It's something you've never experienced before, no matter how many books you've read. And the wonder of it is that you don't know what it is or why it is. It just happens. It's a wonderful thing that happens. ■





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