



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*.

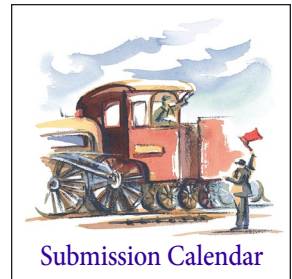
MAILE MELOY, interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:

When fantasizing about an “ideal reader” in his 1968 interview with the Paris Review, John Updike said, “When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little to the east of Kansas. I think of the books on library shelves, without their jackets, years old, and a country-ish teenaged boy finding them, and having them speak to him.” Do you have any sort of “ideal reader” or audience in mind when you write?

That’s a lovely quotation, but I don’t really have an imaginary reader like that. I write sometimes for people I know, putting in things that might please or entertain them, but I don’t think about them all the time. When it’s going well, I just feel like I’m inside the story, figuring out what the people in it do next. ■

DEBRA MONROE,
interviewed by Victoria Barrett:

Do readers of memoir respond differently than readers of fiction?



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I notice at readings and events that readers of memoir are very different. At my very first bookstore event I had to switch chapters in the middle of the reading because I realized the audience was so different. I quit reading the funniest, most dramatic scene and moved to an intensely private scene full of doubts and questions. The audience wasn't laughing very hard at the funny moments—and I'd read the same selection at MFA programs and writers' conferences, and I used to have to pause for the laughing to stop. Yet when people came out to this first bookstore signing, they knew the funny moments were real, not drummed up for entertainment, that the comedy had been my way of coping with hardship. It wasn't a literary crowd, ready to critique the level of wit. It was a bunch of people sincerely interested in experiences I'd had because they'd had similar experiences. Many readers of memoir are primarily interested in the content. They are affected by the skill of execution only insofar as it makes that content accessible.

Does the experience of meeting your readers, and understanding this about them, affect your understanding of the book? Of the details you selected, omitted, or emphasized? I don't mean, what would you do differently, but what have your readers, insofar as you can tell, taught you about your own book?

It's confirmed what I know. **Every life is worthy of a book. What I've experienced and write about isn't different from what everyone experiences—the details are different, but not the level of pressure and confusion that attend life and its happy and harrowing moments.** It's just that I've spent thirty years learning how to write. The average reader hasn't. They come to my book not to know me but to better understand themselves. ■

IAN MCEWAN, interviewed by David Lynn:

Do you, as you're writing, ever think about your audience, whom you're writing for? Do you have an ideal reader in mind or are you at the point of your career where you just don't much care, that you're writing what you need to write?

I have a kind of being, not really a reader, a kind of entity whose dominant disposition is utter skepticism. And this being wears a constant snarl, and is always muttering, "come off it, you're never going to get away with that," or "this is feeble." It's all the hostile reviews or reviewers that I've ever had

in my life. And it's quite a useful being. But as for readers, readers are too diverse, and the thing that we all learn about contemporary literature is that there are no standards; there are no common standards of taste. **You can get two perfectly intelligent, widely read people in the room who've read the same book, and one thinks it's a disgrace from one end to the other, and the other thinks it's a masterpiece.** How is it that we don't have a common view of what even constitutes a good sentence? There's nothing, our feet can't touch the ground on this, and it's no good to try and sort it out by voting—these sorts of lists that you get in newspapers.

Oh, but they are popular, those lists.

Maybe the lists are our desperate plea for some certainty, given that we just don't know what a good book is or we can't agree on what a good book is. It decimates me every time the Booker Prize comes around, what's on it, what's off it, you know, outrage, delight, someone says it's a masterpiece, someone says it's a piece of crap. How is it we have not taught ourselves in university courses the elements of a good book? It's fine about the past, we can say in a letter, a few hundred funerals go by, and we can begin to build a consensus. But what follows from that is, it is impossible to constitute a reader in your head, except a strange, skeptical, critical, unimpressed one that I have who makes me take things out, generally. It's not about putting things in; it really makes me take things out.

You touch on an interesting quandary. Updike, for example, for all his high acclaim, has never made a lot of money with his novels. His sales have always been fairly modest. You're incredibly well thought of—no, that's not the right word—you have sold many, many books on both sides of the Atlantic. Do you have any ambivalence about that or are you just thoroughly pleased?

No, I have no ambivalence about it. I think I represent the standard author in that, you know—I would like more readers. It's a sort of colonizing instinct. For a long time I have thought that the novel, not in its modernist form, but in its nineteenth-century form, is a popular art form, it's a demotic one. It should reach large numbers of people and there's nothing shameful about it...

And that's the irony, that someone like Dickens could aspire to the highest literary qualities as well as try and reach as broad an audience as possible. But in the twentieth century that was thought of as somehow soiling.

It was modernism that promoted the notion of the artist as a sort of severe high priest who belonged to a small elite and was not going to ever have

his pages dirtied and grubbied by the hoi polloi. I think it was a nonsensical view. Writers like Virginia Woolf saying, “Character is now dead,” helped push the novel down some very fruitless impasses. And although I think in the United States, literature, fiction, largely bypassed all the problems posed for it by modernism, in continental Europe there was a long fading off through the fifties, sixties, and seventies of authors still writing novels that never really engaged the world in the way that, say, Saul Bellow could.

So if you're not an heir to the modern novel or the modernist novel of the twentieth century, whom do you look back to as a literary mentor in the sense of someone that you would like to be seen as following in the steps of?

I'd have to qualify what you say, because *Atonement* could not have been written without all the experiments in fiction and reflections on point of view. And tricks with those and that sense drawn from modernism and postmodernism of having other writing, other texts, the spirits of other writers moving through your pages as if they, too, were as much a part of the real world as forests and cities and oceans. I feel myself to be absolutely not someone, as it were, trying to write Mozart symphonies in the time of Stockhausen. But, I do think that the nineteenth century invented for us some extraordinary things and we'd be crazy to turn our backs on them. And one is, the notion of character. We run narratives about other people in our real lives, we make characters of them, necessarily, because it helps us to guess what they might do next. **Intention is very much bound up with the notion of character, the sort of person who might do this or that. It's all part of the way in which we instinctively judge other people's behavior and see ourselves reflected back in their own view of us.** So I think the nineteenth century formalized this for us, and the creation of character and the mapping out of other minds and the invitation to the reader to step into those other minds seems to me very much the central project of exploring our condition. So it is connected with what was achieved by Jane Austen or Balzac or Flaubert or Dickens. But now it's become much more complicated. We can't simply take a point of view and omniscience for granted and there's a kind of innocence that's lost there. But still, I think people do hunger for the complete immersion in a fictional world that seems real. We still have that. ■

SHAWN WONG, interviewed by
Anne de Marcken:

Reading American Knees, I am particularly aware that I am one of two possible readers: i.e., Asian American or non-Asian American. How did this insider/outsider reader quotient influence your handling of scenes?



I essentially write for myself, and not for a specific reader—at least in the first draft. For example, both my novels, *Homebase* and *American Knees*, were poems—quite long poems—but they were poems. That kind of very personal statement became the core of both novels. In later versions and revisions, I think I tend to develop a sense of who the reader is, and that I might have an actual audience out there I'm writing to other than me.

I am also sometimes made aware that I am a woman reading American Knees—and in those instances, gender perspective seems to trump ethnic point of view. For example, in the scene when Raymond is flirting with Aurora's best friend, Brenda—I read that scene more as a woman than as a non-Asian... at least consciously.

It makes me happy to hear you read the story in this way. In my mind, the audience for my novel is women readers, whether they are Asian American or not. Much of the point of view in the novel is from a woman's perspective—or at least I tried.

I had noticed in a lot of Asian American novels, male and female characters did not actually talk about their relationship, or, if they did talk about it, the problems in their relationship seemed tied to cultural issues. In *American Knees*, I didn't want Asian culture to take the blame for what was wrong with a relationship or what was right about a relationship. **When Raymond breaks up with Aurora, they break up because he's a jerk, not because Chinese or Japanese culture got in the way. ■**

LYNNE TILLMAN, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

Do you think about how a reader is going to experience your work while you're writing it?

When I'm writing I think: "How much can I put in? What do I decide to

leave out?” That has something to do with the experience of the reader, but first you the writer experience it. I’m thinking, “How does it read to me?” as I’m writing it.

After that, it’s completely out of my hands. That’s the magical and destructive thing a writer has to face: control is much more of an illusion than you imagine. ■

BENJAMIN PERCY, *interviewed by Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum:*

I distrust partisan fiction. Something that reads like an editorial, an after-school special, with a clear message, the author’s politics obvious and pushy. I try to occupy a kind of gray territory, to toe a line, so that hopefully my audience doesn’t know where I stand. With a story like “Refresh, Refresh,” the boys feel pride for their fathers even as they resent the military for dragging them away—and they are attracted to the violence and heroism of the war even as they’re horrified by the possibility of losing those they love. I’ve had vets and war protestors alike love the story, hate the story, for very different reasons. **Some have called me a liberal pantywaist and others have called me a conservative nutjob. That’s what makes me feel like the story is successful.** ■

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

As fiction editor of the Harvard Review, what do you hope to see in the stories that arrive on your desk?

I always prefer stories strong, albeit raw, rather than those that are competent and slightly less alive. I’m looking for stories that knock me out. I’m looking for stories that make me want to keep reading. A lot of fiction can be dismissive of this transaction with the reader, or solipsistic in certain ways. I’m looking for stuff that’s aware there’s a currency involved and a courtesy being extended to the reader. **I’m looking for stories that contain charge. When you read certain writers, you can feel that charge coming through the prose.** You read other writers and the charge isn’t there. You can put the sentences side by side and find no real academic or marked difference between them, but a reader can just feel the difference. What I’m looking for can be described along the same lines as what Justice Potter Stewart said about pornography: I don’t know what it is, but I know it when I see it. I’m looking for authority. I want to trust the mind that’s behind the work. ■

CHARLES McCARRY, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

I think that the writer's responsibility is to tell the truth, no matter what world he writes about. The satisfactions of writing, such as they are—and they can be very great—are to discover the truth and to express it in a way that remains somehow in the mind of the reader. I've always looked on my books as a strip of exposed film that has to be developed in the mind of the reader. I don't think that a novel is complete until that process has taken place, and taken place many times over. The whole point of writing is to convey a story to the reader, a story that the reader will find plausible, readable, and, if you're very lucky, memorable. When you talk about the origins of my books, **I've been a voracious reader since the age of four. In that sense, my books have many authors, that is, the authors whom I have read in the course of my lifetime.** And there are a lot of them. I'm seventy-eight years old. I think I owe something to them. Literature, to me, is a living creature. I think that every writer owes it a debt that can never be paid in full. ■

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

Do you write what you would want to read?

If I thought about that, I would never finish anything. I suffer from such huge doubts about the intelligence of any project I've ever embarked on. If I try to imagine myself as a reader of the thing, I'll wash my hands of it entirely. ■



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

In an interview, Walker Percy said the most he could hope to do as a writer was to point out certain truths. What do you feel is your responsibility as a novelist?

I think in writing you try to not answer things, but to perk the interest or the intellect of the reader and let him ask questions. Once the reader begins to ask these questions, he will get some answers that will lead him to other things so he can discuss it with other people. I don't know how to

give answers. I try to create characters who develop through the course of the novel, characters who learn and grow before they die and from whom the reader can learn and grow.

I receive many letters from people all over the country and different parts of the world, and most of them come from white males. I think they're middle-aged. Bill Gates said *A Lesson Before Dying* was one of his favorite books, along with *The Catcher in the Rye*, so that's good to hear, but he never sent me any computer stuff. I've always received many letters from students, but *A Lesson Before Dying* seems to have touched a lot of people. ■

SHAWN WONG, interviewed by Anne de Marcken:

I don't think I can define the role of the reader in the story, but I can tell you what readers have told me after reading *American Knees*. Women readers like the novel far more than male readers. Several Asian-American women told me they dumped their white boyfriends after reading the book, which is not something I would encourage! They say the book woke them up to the racism within their relationship. I imagine this vigilante club of white ex-boyfriends coming after me.

Other women readers tell me the book is the most erotic novel they've ever read, Asian-American or otherwise. I never know what to say after that. African-American women book clubs love the book because, in spite of the different cultural perspective, it takes on familiar issues of race and identity.

People tell me they've read the book in one day. Asian-American literature professors tell me that when they assign *American Knees* to their students, they know it's the only book on the course reading list the students will read all the way through. Some students will email me and ask me to help them with their homework. ■

CARMIEL BANASKY:

This is about swooning. Swooning for a text, that is, and not only swooning: feeling a connection to a story or character or even a sentence equivalent to that of familial, unconditional love. The idea of being scalded by a work of art, of physically burning.

We are taught to read like writers, and that to be a great writer, one needs to be a great reader. And though it does count for something, this does not

mean only the size of your library. We must close-read everything to the extent that what we note about the meticulous craft of a sentence is married both to the effect it has on the reader, and to the inner editor who teaches us how to reach that effect. **To write something that moves my readers, I know I must be open to being moved by a text myself.** To be an active reader there must be allowance for attachment, to fall in love, to trust a stranger.

We know also that no text stands alone. All texts are informed by other texts, be it literary predecessors or the neon sign blinking, blinking, blinking across the street, bouncing off your window and reflecting in your computer screen, the corner of your reading glasses. Likewise, no text is isolated from our previous experiences with words, with people, with the subject at hand or a private association to a set of signs. It is a wonderful thing to read with such intensity that, when you must put a book down to meet a social obligation, you exist in both worlds, that of the characters you have grown to love and live with, and your everyday adventures. In the same vein, it is a wonderful thing, too, to be always in the midst of writing, no matter where you are.

In college, when I was discovering music and art, and conjuring a mixture of self-righteousness and guilt concerning my creative endeavors, I read John Fowles's *The Collector*. Never before had I encountered a character like Miranda, so like myself. She is, in part, who I wanted to be, and in part who I was ashamed of being. I loved her flaws and saw them in myself: how pitifully impressionable she is, the way she falls in love with and allows herself to be seduced by art, music, and unavailable men. She, too, listens to the Goldberg Variations. Though it may sound cliché, this book made me do what literature *should* make one do, and that is to say, out loud: I am not alone.

With something similar to sympathy pains, I read J.D. Salinger's "Franny." Interestingly enough, it is her pain and physical reaction to a text, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, that in turn plagued me. I remember feeling ill to my stomach. Perhaps the act of reading, of connecting to a text, is like the prayer Franny obsesses over. She says, "The prayer becomes self-active. Something happens after a while. I don't know what, but something happens, and the words get synchronized with the person's heartbeats...which has a really tremendous, mystical effect on your whole outlook." Just like a great text.

The Left Hand of Darkness by Ursula K. LeGuin changed me invaluablely. I know this because I dreamt of the characters later, during which I felt, both

subconsciously and consciously, a deep, icy pain in my chest, the same pain I imagined her characters felt. I cried as if a friend had died, the story itself being like a friend, taking me on some wild journey.

Once I took the wrong subway because of a short story by Gabriel García Márquez. I felt trapped by it; I could not look up, as oppressed by his words as the protagonist is by her circumstances. Sometimes, perhaps I should distance myself from what I read just enough so that I don't get lost in Queens.

Most recently I read Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky*. In the end, the Sahara is left unchanged, no footprint to take responsibility for, but it leaves its footprints on the characters, more changed than not, unable to go back, or leave at all. At times a prison of words, in other moments a completely liberating experience, Bowles's sentences and ideas had that desert's effect on me, leaving its lasting footprints. I was left devastated, shaken, punched in the gut, and at once frightened of and in love with life. Though that all sounds awful, that's it: to be able to say, *I am changed*.

This is how I want to read, and therefore write—I want to have a physical impact on the reader, to intertwine a reader's limbs with those of the characters. When we read, and mean it, we are in exile and in exile again when we put a book down, in and out of the new countries of our favorite stories. Yet the connection we forge with a text makes the acts of reading and writing tolerably less isolating. That connection is at once a burden and a gift we carry with us like our own past. And then we start a new novel, which will inevitably be informed by all previous encounters, but only after the proper reflection that must follow any story of vast proportions. As if to pay respect for a lost friend who left impressions in our hearts and, quite possibly, in our writing. ■

WILL ALLISON, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

Alzheimer's, family dysfunction, even NASCAR—were you concerned about throwing these ideas together?

No. In my mind, they're all integral to the story. I hope they're all working toward the same end, rather than pulling the book in different directions.

But were you worried that readers might perceive the various illnesses faced by these characters as a "heavy" reading experience, especially in combination?

In terms of a reader's experience, I think "heaviness" is more a matter of tone than subject matter. For instance, I recently reread *Slaughterhouse-Five*, which I love. The subject matter—war, death, etc.—couldn't be much heavier, but Vonnegut's deadpan, offhand delivery somehow keeps the book from feeling like a downer, despite its overriding pessimism and bleak moral judgments.

Anyhow, I was concerned mainly with portraying the illnesses in a way that rings true. ■

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

What kind of questions have you been asked as you've been interviewed?

There's the question people always ask at readings: Do you think your work will be read in China? I don't know. I don't want to think about it. For instance, a successful Chinese writer, Ha Jin, who wrote *Waiting*, and many other books, was heavily criticized in China, just ripped apart by people who did not read the original work.



Why?

Well, because Ha Jin is an easy target for everybody there. He's successful, and he writes in English. He gets big American awards. I'm not ready to deal with the Chinese people even more than I'm not ready to deal with the government. People say, "She's writing just to make the Chinese look very bad in American eyes so they can laugh at us." It's like airing the dirty laundry.

So this has something to do with your humility as well. Because you have people ready to beat on you.

Right. I don't want to deal with that, and I don't want my parents to have to deal with that. And people think they know me, but they don't really know me. They just created someone they think is me, and that's really bothering me.

Which is why you're saying you want people to be curious about each other.

Right. ■

DAVID MALOUF, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

What do you hope readers see when they read your body of work?

I want to provide a recognition of the inner life and inner dialogue that goes on in people's heads. The level of this dialogue has nothing to do with the way people are educated or how sophisticated they are. Even if an entire world of apprehensions is not necessarily capable of being articulated, there is, nevertheless, a glimmering at the edge of people's consciousness. I'm interested in what it's like to have those apprehensions, what they're about. That's largely what the fabric of my books is made of. **Readers are liberated by seeing their own experiences written objectively on the page. Too often, however, no writer gives that to them.**

That's also something that recurs throughout your work. Only when something is consigned to paper does it become real.

I think people are moved by recognizing their own involvement with the world. They may recognize this as being their own, but they have never been able to show it to anybody and, therefore, wouldn't know how to prove it. The writer can validate this for them. ■

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

In Breath, Eyes, Memory you depict a mother-daughter relationship in which the mother tries to guard her daughter's sexuality. How did you arrive at this theme, and is it something that is primarily true of Haitian women?

I had a lot of trouble when that book came out. Many Haitian women were angry because they felt I was branding them all with this experience when that practice of testing a girl's virginity happens only in some families, in some milieus, and happened much more in the past than it does now. This is something you encounter when you write from within a specific group, from inside the veil. People feel like you're telling tales out of school or telling stories about them. One of the issues that I learned with this book is that **when you write you have a responsibility to the characters, but when you write from within a community, you also have the responsibility of representation.** People feel that everything you write is a kind of anthropology. But to answer your question, I decided to write about this because I knew someone it happened to and it was something I wanted to explore and I thought it was something a lot of women could identify with, whether or not their sexuality is monitored in that specific way.

How do you deal with that pressure? How does it impact what you decide to write?

I'm completely uncensored when I'm writing. But I worry to death when a piece is about to come out. I really try not to censor myself and not worry during the writing process, though. In the moment of writing, I let it be. The voices of dissent are always more vocal than the voices of agreement. At the same time that people were very angry about this, there were people who identified with the narrative, but these voices don't shout, they whisper. When you're writing, you have to trust on some level that your soul knows certain truths. Writing is such a mysterious thing. Language and ideas come to you from the air, and you have to allow for that to happen. You have to let yourself be free to receive them.

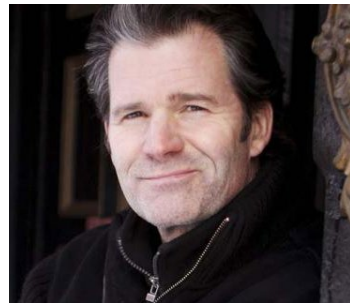
How did you decide to include the epilogue at the end of the novel?

After having so many fights with so many people, I was getting frustrated. I did a reading with an older woman writer and someone got up and cursed her out about a book she wrote in 1969, the year I was born. I sat there while she tried to defend herself and the choices she made in that story, and I thought, I don't want to be responding to these questions on *Breath, Eyes, Memory* when I'm seventy-five. I was frightened by that exchange. I decided to put the epilogue as a kind of response to the questions I was getting. There was an opportunity when the book was going into another printing. I wrote something in the voice of the book rather than an essay, so that when people read the book there will be a response to those questions. At the same time, you can't control everything. There are things in a story that you and I aren't aware of but someone can read it and respond to something you didn't know was there. This issue was such a public debate for me, though, that I chose to address it where it began, in the book itself. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, interviewed by
John McNally:

Your birthday is September 11th. Do you want to say where you were and what you were doing when you first learned of the attacks?

On that terrible day, I had just made my morning coffee and was heading up to my attic



office when I overheard my wife on the phone with her sister, who'd just told her to turn on the news, that a plane had crashed into the World Trade Center. We turned it on, and like so many people, saw the second plane crash into the second tower. I ended up staying in front of the TV for most of that day, interrupted by my calling friends and colleagues in New York to make sure they were safe. They all were, thank God. A few people called me as well because I'd been flying quite a bit in and out of Logan Airport all year. In fact, I'd flown in on United the night before and was scheduled to fly out again on United a couple days later. I didn't write that day, and when my family came over to celebrate my birthday it was, as it should've been, a very low-key and quiet gathering, and if I could, I would've skipped it altogether.

I know what other writers mean when they say they felt as if their own "tinkering with a short story" was trivial in the light of all that, but I was spared that feeling by an editor at the *Toronto Globe and Mail* who wanted me to write a piece about the attack for that weekend's paper. Man, that was a tough one to write! I was still so full of rage and hurt and shock and grief, like everybody else. How in the world would I write anything with any clarity or insight at all? That's what I think Truman Capote was onto when he said, "A writer must write as cool and detached as a surgeon." Somehow I wrote and submitted the essay, then got back to work on the novel I've been wrestling with for years. While I hated most of what I was seeing on the desk in front of me—a normal feeling—it didn't feel trivial to be working on it. **If the attacks of 9/11 have taught us anything at all, it's that life is horrifically short and precarious, sacred and fragile**, and we should live as fully, deeply, and richly as we possibly can. Other than trying to be as good a father and husband as I can be, I can't think of a better way to live than to try and create something worth reading for someone you'll probably never even meet. ■

DAVID MALOUF, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

What still intrigues you about writing?

Several things remain peculiar for the writer. We don't always recognize our own habits, thoughts, and obsessions. It often takes a reader to recognize them and tell us what they are. We also don't know why the reader returns to us. Writers don't always recognize the deeper patterns in their books. Because we're so close to a book, we sometimes know less about it

than an attentive reader because so many of the connections are unconscious. These things will remain unconscious even when the writer reads the book, whereas a great reader coming from outside will see clearly all the book's patterns. Different readers see different things. Presumably, if the work is rich enough, if it is complex and varied and contradictory enough, then it's not only that different readers will like different books, but they'll recognize you as one kind of writer rather than another kind of writer. That's good. It takes proper account of what you're presenting in the writing, all the things you've felt but which you are not necessarily aware of and often not fully responsible for. ■

NOMI EVE, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Writing is like a game of catch for me. I throw my words out and I want somebody to catch them. If I just throw them out and they go on forever, they're not doing their job. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

The best fiction doesn't judge so much as it presents as many sides of a story as it can, and then lets the reader loose with the question. By leaving the story "open" in that way, the writer lets the judgment carry over into the reader's life. I feel that fiction—all art, really, any art form, but reading fiction and poetry, especially—ought to have the potential to change your life. It ought to make you a better human in the world. It ought to help you understand other people.

With that in mind, what do you want from your readers?

Ideally, the reader thinks about things—the issues, the predicaments and possibilities—identifies with a whole smorgasbord of characters, and in the process finds that an issue that might have seemed simple on the surface becomes a whole lot more complicated.... That little disruption in the psyche is what I'm after. ■

CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI,
interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

You render the embarrassing moments in this story—Mrs. Dutta hanging her laundry outside and wrongly imagining the neighbor lady's thoughts,

overhearing her daughter-in-law complain about her to Sagar—with excruciating detail and a clear-eyed detachment that makes readers cringe. How do you create such empathy in your readers?

Thank you for saying that. It is, of course, my constant aspiration. I think it happens when I'm really trying to see the story from two points of view, Mrs. Dutta's and her daughter-in-law's. That's one of the biggest challenges for me in writing. It's easy for me to focus on and get into one character, but to present conflicting points of view without creating stereotypes or making characters predictable is much more difficult. Also, it's so important not to be judgmental, that is, to present the details of the situation and allow the reader to draw their own conclusions. I won't feel for the reader. The reader has to feel for herself. ■

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

I do care passionately about what I write and I do feel that it's an intense process and I put everything into it. I guess that comes across. It's overwhelming for me to write, to get things down. I'm aware of wanting to reach the reader. ■

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

There's a wonderful paradox that writers embody. They spend their lives in solitude, basically, but what they're doing is an act of community. I can't stand writers who say, "I'm doing this for myself." I think that's a lie—or, not a lie, because that sounds too deliberate—but a self-delusion. The act of writing is the act of expression, and it's an act of community. ■

PATRICIA HAMPL, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

In Virgin Time you write that we are looking for our roots, "but our roots are buried. They're supposed to be. And the past isn't alive, only our urgency is."

There are certain stories a culture can't get enough of. For our culture one such fascination is the immigrant story, maybe because so many of us have a "somewhere else" in our background. As readers, we believe that if you tell me your family's immigrant story, I will be able to meditate upon my own. And that's true. When I do a reading from *A Romantic Education*, inevitably someone will come up afterwards to tell me how much he loved

a particular passage about my grandmother's garden. I've come to know that's the last moment I will hear anything about my grandmother. From then on the story belongs to the speaker's grandmother.

Until I experienced it as a writer, I didn't understand that service of literature. I'd felt it as a reader a million times, but didn't fully understand how wonderful the economy of literature is: that as a writer you really do hand over your material, your little hoard, so the reader can make it into his or her gold.

You don't always know what your own gold is. I remember writing about my grandmother's garden as a separate little piece, simply out of love for the memory. I also remember thinking, "Nobody will be interested in this." But when I was done writing, I knew the piece was alive. I didn't know if it was good, bad, or indifferent, but I knew it was alive. Later, when it became a part of *A Romantic Education*, I suppose it was rather like sending a shuttlecock over the net. A reader sent it back to me with a return message saying, "Yes! I got it! Here's what it means to me—" ■

LORRIE MOORE, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

You've said that you write to confide inventively and likewise, console.

I think I said that in conjunction with my first book. I don't know that I would say that now. At the time, that was my sense of how fiction worked, that it created intimacy, even if it was the intimacy of art. It's not literal intimacy. But the intimacy of art has its comforts and consolation. It's company in the world, and that certainly was how I thought of many of the stories that I wrote. ■



Photo: Zane Williams

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

I first recognized that I wanted to be a writer when I was seventeen years old. I had been reading a lot from the time I was fifteen: Dostoevsky, Steinbeck, Joyce, Camus. One evening I read Katherine Mansfield's story, "Miss Brill," and was savaged by it—it was so heartbreakingly sad. I literally flung the book across the room. You know when you're a teenager, you have a lot of emotion in you. I went back and retrieved the book, and I thought,

I'm going to write a letter to the person who's written this story and express how angry I am. I sort of misread the story, thinking the author was mistreating this character rather than recognizing the poignancy of her situation. It was a natural misunderstanding of someone who has not really thought about what fiction is. Then I saw that Mansfield had been dead for forty or so years. That fascinated me—the thought that a person who is dead could reach out across the grave and touch me in my isolation in my room that evening. That really got me started thinking about what a power of communication it has. That was when I started to want to write. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

You describe reading as a “yonder place, neither here nor there.”

If the definition of yonder is between here and there, then reading fits. The reader situates himself somewhere between the immediate *here* of the world in which he reads and the *there* of the book. He enters into a state which is between himself and the voice of the book. Reading is also entering a dialogue of sorts because a book is nothing until it lives inside the reader, who makes the book come to life. ■

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

I don't think I would be writing books or stories if I didn't have some interest in communicating with other people. Because I could do the same thing for myself. Just for me. I do keep a diary, and that's for me, not for other people to read. But these other stories that I give to *Glimmer Train* and to *Algonquin* are for you, and for you to give to other people. I can't say that I understand why I want to do that. I don't think I've got a message. I don't think that I know more than anybody else. I guess I just really enjoy writing. I think it's selfish. You know, you think that it's somehow altruistic that you want to touch all these people, but it's really not. It's really something that I love to do. It gives me great pleasure. ■

SANDRA CISNEROS, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

You have been on a book tour [for Caramelo] recently. How has your presentation been received?

If you are Mexican, they feel like crying, because they feel no one has

written about this and they are emotionally overwhelmed. I get a lot of weepers. If you are of another culture, say Persian or Chinese or African-American, you will come up surprised and say, Well, I'm Persian but this could have been my family. People from very different cultures than mine see themselves in this book. Even the most gringo *gringo*, when I see them in the audience, will be laughing at the appropriate moment. I think there is a place for them even though it is specifically about a culture that is unlike my listeners. There is a place for them to identify with. You know, you make it so specific that it does that little paradox of becoming universal. ■

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

Someone had given a book of Elizabeth Bishop's poems to us as a Christmas present—at the time we celebrated Christmas, now we celebrate Hanukkah—and after the holidays, I read the entire book, *Geography III*. “In the Waiting Room” is a poem in *Geography III*. It's a wonderful poem. I've actually been afraid to reread it. It just had everything waiting for me, so to speak; it was really like a friend, some kind stranger on a train platform whom you meet and they say to you, “You look as if you need this,” and it was the thing that saved your life. That's what it was. She was a kind stranger for me. ■

DAN CHAON, interviewed by Misha Angrist:

Rick Moody says with complete earnestness that he wants his stories to “save lives.” Do you aspire to that or something similar for your work?

Oh, sure, at some level anyway. I think about the writers that have made a difference in my own life. Mostly, they've been short-story writers: Alice Munro and Carver and John Cheever. Their influence has certainly been, if not life-saving, life-changing, even if it's only been in a small way. In general, great short-story writers are not setting out to capture the zeitgeist the way a Great American Novelist tries to, but I think they enter into people's lives reader by reader. That's the kind of writer I aspire to be. I aspire to write a story that somebody remembers, that makes him want to read more. To ask a story to save lives is asking an awful lot, but maybe somewhere, on some dark night, somebody reads a story that makes a difference. ■

VALERIE MARTIN, interviewed by Janet Benton:

Obviously I write because I want to change people's minds, change the way people think, make them see things they don't want to look at, and whenever you make people see things they don't want to look at, they're not grateful. So to some extent you're trying to shake up your readers, but in another sense you would like to have a lot of readers. It's a real double bind. ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

*I remember how strange it felt to me when I was interviewing Tim O'Brien for *The Things They Carried*. He was speaking about the Tim O'Brien character in the novel. There was a remove to that that I had difficulty understanding.*



I could probably describe the Paul Theroux character in *My Other Life* in the same way—with a kind of detachment. It's my face, it's my name, but it's not me. I wasn't there. But, in writing it, I felt that I was there. I still can speak with a lot of detachment about the character.

Many readers tell me that they can sense who the author is by reading between the lines. I think we have to hold out for the possibility that a writer might just as likely be like his least admirable characters as like his most altruistic. Do you agree?

I totally agree. V. S. Pritchett once said, "If I have an unpleasant opinion I don't want to own myself, I give it to one of my characters, usually to an unpleasant character, and let them take the rap for it." He said, "I try not to be identified with that opinion." Actually, though, writing is a very revealing thing. It doesn't matter whether we're talking about fiction or non-fiction. If we're trying to get into the mind of the writer, who he or she is, what the writer thinks, the texture of that person's opinions becomes obvious in the writing. The best way to know a writer is by reading everything that they've written. In that way, you can know the person very, very well. Better than anything, better than any kind of interview, better than going on a camping trip with them. ■

THOM JONES, interviewed by Jim Schumock:

I used Ad Magic in “A White Horse” originally and got lots of mail asking me to please bring him back. People want to see the baboon again, too. I was out with my dog one day and some guy pulled up to me, and he said, “What happens to the monkey?” And I wondered what the hell he was talking about, and I looked at him and he said, “What happens to the baboon? Does the leopard get him or not?” I said, “Well, uh, I don’t know,” and that I hadn’t thought about it, but a leopard probably would, and he said, “Don’t do that! Don’t do that! Keep him alive.” So I said, “Okay, I’ll keep him alive, you know, if it makes you happy and if I ever go back to it.” ■

PAUL THEROUX, interviewed by Michael Upchurch:

I can’t be my own reader. It’s one of the unfortunate things. You can’t sit down and enjoy the meal that you just cooked. You serve it to someone else who often has quite a different reaction because they’re reading in a day or two what it took you a year or two to write. ■

PATRICIA HAMPL, interviewed by Susan McClinnis:

Virgin Time is most effective for me because your exploration becomes my exploration. As I read it, I thought about the nature of spirituality in my own life and in my culture, because spirituality is complex and fraught in our culture. As I followed you through Italy, scrabbling up the hills and following your thoughts and those of your companions, I was brought repeatedly back into myself, to where your questions worked in me.

That’s the way it’s supposed to work. Reading is not a spectator sport. It is participatory by its nature. If you were able to scrabble up and down hills and dales, then I have done my job—not the work I give myself as I write, interestingly enough, but the job I take on as I publish. Otherwise, why publish? Why not just talk to a pal, or think your thoughts?

It’s a great mystery at the heart of writing, why writing works on both writer and reader. It is why I can hardly wait to get back to my hotel room when I leave here today, so I can keep reading that novel I started on the plane. It is a novel that has nothing to do with my life. I mean, it takes place in the fens of England! Why should I care? I don’t know anything about the place, or the time, but I am nonetheless engaged in that life. I need to

know, not simply what's going to happen next, but what's going to happen next in me as I'm reading. It is a magical relationship.

I'm interested that you say it's a mystery.

Oh, I think so! It's very definitely mysterious. I mean, there are relationships for which there are no other paradigms: Mother and child. Lover and beloved. And I think another one of those paradigmatic relationships is writer and reader. It's like nothing else. It has always been my wish—to be a writer and to be a reader. And here I am! ■





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