Close-up: The Writing Life

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

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

So your life is filled with study, reading, and writing.

Unfortunately, yes. Often people say to me, "Do you do anything else?" I'm thinking, "Why should I do anything else?"

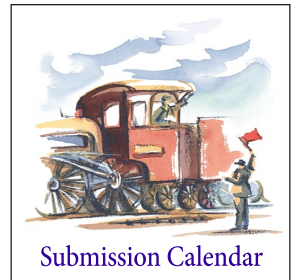
Then why do you say "unfortunately?"

I say it tongue-in-cheek. I do sometimes wish, for example, I had a massive interest in music. That I played the guitar. And that I was interested in skiing and going kayaking and I wish sometimes—it sounds like something that would be good for one to be interested in. But unfortunately, I am just interested in books. [*Laughs.*] ■

CHRISTOPHER COAKE, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

What do you like least about being a writer?

The writing, oddly enough. The better I get, the harder it is. Which is as it should be. If my writing's any good, if it reaches people, then that means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I've conveyed emotional states well. And given the emotional states I tend to explore, that's not easy to do, really. I'm generally a happy guy. I like to joke around, hang out with people, play video games, and be a doofus. So parking myself in a chair and trying to figure out what, say, Brad in "Abandon" is going to do with his dead love's body…that's about as much fun as it sounds. But those are the stories that come to me, and I have to work them out. I tell people that **I write what I do in order to be able to live as happily as I do. I have to vent out the disastrous stuff, and I know how to do it. It's amateur psychology 101: I try to force the stuff I'm afraid of into a shape. By making it fiction I get to control it.**

But I don't want to be too negative about this. It's all relative, and there are benefits as well. That line of Dorothy Parker's is true for me too: "I hate writing, but I love having written." The love and satisfaction I get on the other side—having just written—so far exceeds the dislike of the task itself that it's still a dream job.

I always try to be aware, too, that I'm exceptionally fortunate to have a job that plays exactly to my strengths. I teach and write, and I'm not really suited for anything else. I could be digging ditches. I could be in jail. I've not met anyone I'd trade with. So even answering this question feels like a horrible act of hubris. The worst part of writing is better for me than the best part of anything else I could be doing. I'm a lucky, lucky guy. ■

DEBRA SPARK, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

Photo: Garry Mitchell

How do you mark accomplishment in the writing world? Your success as the editor of Twenty Under Thirty: Best Stories by America's New Young Writers *(1986) came at a very young age. Are you the writer you once imagined yourself becoming?*

Oh, what a terrible question for someone like me! I always joke that I'm the downwardly mobile writer, because I had my most high profile short story publication in *Esquire* when I was twenty-three, and then that anthology, which did far better than any of my novels. As for the writer I once imagined myself becoming, I don't think I had an idea really, though I'm always wishing I had the talents of the writer whose book I've most recently read and loved.

And who are some of those writers?

Ask me in a different week and I'll answer differently, depending on what I've just read and loved. This week, it is E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* and Katherine Anne Porter's "Pale Horse, Pale Rider," "Old Mortality" and "Noon Wine."

What do you like least about being a writer?

Self-doubt, feeling unhappy with my efforts.

Is self-doubt just the condition of the fiction writer? Or the condition of the literary fiction writer? So many writers echo those feelings.

I'm married to a painter, so I think it's fair to say it is just the condition of the artist. I know if I lived my life over that I'd still want to be a writer, but I also know I'd be better at some other things. I think, for instance, I'm a really good editor, and I sometimes wonder why I didn't go into a line of work that would bring me real satisfaction, some reliable sense of accomplishment. I'm pretty organized and hard-working. I type really fast. There are a lot of jobs where those skills would serve me well! But then it may be self-doubt is just part of the human condition. **I seem to be at the age—middle age—when all my friends are talking about their failures. We seem to have gotten past the point of being promising, and now we are supposed to have revealed our promise.** Only we haven't, or haven't in the way we hoped. I'm not talking about writers now. It's everybody I know. This might be the fallout of going to the college I did. I went to Yale, land of the overachiever. Everyone expected too much of themselves. They didn't think enough—or maybe I just mean I didn't think enough—about what those expectations meant. How they'd turn into a pretty meaningless way to punish ourselves. ■

T.C. BOYLE*, interviewed by Diana Bishop:*

I have to say that I'm a real control freak, like some of these figures that I write about. And I only play a couple of games in my life. One is to make art, and the other is to teach, which is a pleasure for me. I'm totally committed to it even though I came to it accidentally when I was twenty-one, newly—and barely—graduated from college and wondering what to do with my life. I also like to communicate with an audience. I could be doing many things. I could be serving on boards, I could be going to meetings at the university, I could be doing lectures in the schools, I could be writing screenplays, I could be writing theater. But I don't want to do that. I only want to do these few things because I think I can devote myself to them

fully and maybe excel at them. I don't play music anymore. Don't play tennis. I like to joke that the most competitive thing I do nowadays is walk in the woods by myself.

So you're very focused.

Yes. And because of that focus on fiction, I'm not in any sense a man of letters. My PhD is in 19th-century British literature, but I've never taught it and I suppose I never will. At Iowa I was both a scholar (in the English department) and an artist (in the Workshop), and I was able to play both groups off one another in the interest of going off and doing my own thing. I studied for the PhD because I had been a real screw-up as an undergrad (and a high school student too, for that matter) and felt that I'd like to learn something about the history of the literature in the language I'm writing in. But I soon realized that scholarship was just a tool to improve my fiction and perhaps invoke inspiration as well. I have great admiration for people like John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates, whose interests roam so wide, but for me the thrill of producing fiction, of pursuing and discovering something ineffable, is enough. More than enough. At least for this lifetime. But Updike, good god. He's one of my all-time heroes. He's a true man of letters. He's writing poetry. He writes regular book reviews for the *New Yorker*. He's writing short stories and novels of so many different types, from the realism of the Rabbit tetralogy to the comic absurdity of the Bech books. The man is just astonishing. I love that. I admire it. But **I only want to write fiction. That's it. That's all I want to do. Because it's such a rush for me to explore something and see where it will go. I never get tired of that.** Maybe I will, but I hope not. ■

CAROL ROH-SPAULDING, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

How has having your own child affected your writing?

Well, I was a single mom on the tenure track and his life depended on my keeping my job. I couldn't stop and write a novel. I continued to write and publish, but I had to really focus on getting tenure. And you have this short period of time to do everything you can for your child—you know, the first four or five years are so important. I'm not saying that I did that brilliantly; I'm sure he's been compromised by the fact that I was a stressed-out parent. I did my best and he's still very young. It's just a non-negotiable area, you know; I made the choice to have him. My career is not as highpowered as it would be had I not had him. There's still time.

What are your goals now as a writer?

To write book after book after book. Well, story after story, sentence after sentence. Let's put it this way: I've had plans for two, three books out in as many years, and I get very impatient wanting to get to them, but I dreamed that I was going to live to a hundred and two, so I may have some time. ■

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

How do you make a living?

Well, I've had crazy years. They're getting less crazy. But for two years, I wrote a lot of book reviews and made a good amount of money—not enough to support an apartment in New York, but a good amount. Then I stopped book reviews and I went to Israel, and I didn't do anything but write for a while. I had saved a little bit of money and my grandmother gave me a little money, and I just sat and wrote. For the last six months or so I've been back in the States, living in Boston with my wonderful fiance, Aleister, a scientist, a post doc at Harvard. And I recently got a job teaching English as a second language, and that's what I do in the morning from 9:00 to 12:30, and then I write. I've also taught Hebrew school. Every season is different. I never make a ton of money, but the past month I made as much as my scientist sweetheart teaching various things.

I think this English-as-a-second-language thing is going to be good for me. I enjoy the teaching, and schedule-wise it's terrific. I can tell them month by month if I want to work, because the courses are a month long and they pay pretty decently. I wouldn't be able to have kids and support a family on what I make right now, but we're doing okay. We're not saving anything, but we're doing okay. ■

MAILE MELOY, *interviewed by Joshua Bodwell:*

Your stories are set all over the country and all over the world, but where is your ideal workspace?

I have a chair that tilts back like an astronaut chair, and a desk that comes over on an arm, with a laptop on it. I started using that setup because it was easier on my shoulders to be in the tilted-back position, but now I can't compose anything beyond an email if I'm sitting up straight. Sideways on a couch with a lap desk works in a pinch. ■

RUSSELL BANKS, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Why do people want to be writers today?

There are people who want to be writers because they think writers are celebrated people in society. And they want the perks that go with all that. And there are people who want to be writers because they love to write. And they care. A much smaller number [*laughs*] than the other. But they are the ones that really do become writers. Because they love the process and they'll participate in that process, without rewards for a decade or more before they begin to publish, because they love the process. **Through writing, through that process, they realize that they become more intelligent, and more honest and more imaginative than they can be in any other part of their life.**

Are we talking about the notion of living an authentic life? That seems to be what is offered when you take up writing. Our natural language is something we all—

—have access to. That's what I mean about they love writing, love the process because it makes one smarter. It does. If you dedicate your attention to discipline in your life you become smarter while you are writing than while you are hanging out with your pals or in any other line of work. And you do become more honest because you are forced to, and it takes you places that you can't go otherwise. **So it's like any other kind of rigorous discipline sequence with a tradition behind it—whether it's Zen Buddhism or psychotherapy or whatever. You do it long enough, it orders your life and does give you a kind of authenticity that you can't obtain otherwise**. Especially in this society where there is less and less opportunity for that. It's so commodified a world we live in that you end up a huckster, no matter what you do.

It's not even a matter of discussion except in some rare instances, maybe as an undergraduate somebody may stumble across a small pocket of people thinking about how you live an authentic life. It's not a common topic as far as I can tell.

Most vocabularies that subscribe to it or explored [it], starting really in the late forties but running up until the later seventies, whether it was with existentialism or Freudianism or Marxism—there are all those different ideologies, systems, or philosophies that had a similar goal in some

way: authenticity. They have all been savaged, really, in the last twenty-five years. And devalidated—invalidated, I guess. There hasn't been anything to replace them, to come forward. ■

NAMI MUN, *interviewed by Greg Schutz:*

I remember that, while you were studying here at Michigan, your work ethic was near-legendary. You were willing (or so the legend goes) to sit at your desk for eight hours straight, working on a single sentence—getting the words right, the voice, the rhythm. Any truth to these rumors? What does your day-to-day writing process look like?

Well, I'm not sure if this is something I'm proud of, but I do often write for eight to ten hours a day when I'm working on a piece. But that only proves that I don't exercise, and that I don't have much of a social life. I don't know about working on single sentence that entire time—that really does sound apocryphal—but yes, I sometimes have only a paragraph to show for my hours of work. Again, it's not something I'm necessarily proud of because it only proves how slow my brain works.

Would you say that this kind of tenacity is necessary for a writer of literary fiction?

Many folks tend to romanticize the life of the writer. I think that's because they see us after we've written the book or the story. They don't see us sitting at our desk for weeks, months, years on end—losing weight, losing muscle mass, feeling depressed, not showering. (This is why they have reality TV shows about dancers, chefs, and models, and never about writers.) Yes, tenacity is a requirement, for all writers and not just writers of literary fiction. **Tenacity, thick skin, the ability to sit still and focus—these are more than necessary.**

Any other advice for young writers, or for anyone coming to the craft of fiction?

Write about things that actually matter to you. If your story is founded on some "clever" premise or "quirky" characters who experience "idiosyncratic" situations, write until you find in your story something that matters to you. Aimee Bender, George Saunders, and Donald Barthelme (just to name a few) are masters at combining ingenuity with empathy, cleverness with compassion. **If you don't feel anything for your story, no one else will.** ■

DEBRA MONROE, *interviewed by Victoria Barrett:*

So many writers and readers hold the long-cherished notion that misery makes good writing. Certainly Outskirts *presents some periods in your past that most people would consider pretty unhappy—these seem to have also been productive times in your writing life. Is there a relationship between happiness and productivity?*

I can't write *while* I'm unhappy. But dissonance is always the subject. So I think we can refer to Wordsworth here. Emotion recollected in tranquility. ■

BARB JOHNSON:

At the University of New Orleans, I was not the oldest person in the MFA program. Nor the most or least talented person. Nor the only person with a sense of being a late bloomer. Writing is a great equalizer. Writing classes are not easier because you're younger or older. We all make the same beginner's mistakes. One day, over beers at our neighborhood bar, a couple of classmates and I talked about how we felt like late bloomers. They were in their early thirties at the time, and I was almost fifty. Thirty-three seemed young to me, but I could remember being that age and thinking I was on the downward slope. **Then others—some in their twenties and some in their sixties—told me they had this late-blooming feeling, and I came to realize that the feeling isn't about age so much as it is about finally paying attention to what it is you really want in life.** And that realization requires us to set aside our assumptions about how life works and what we should be doing, and to consider what our strongest preoccupations are. If we're lucky, we do this sort of reassessment over and over as time goes on. We fine tune. We just go ahead and reach for the seemingly unreachable. And we get there when we get there.

I have always searched for the others out there, late bloomers blooming. I think we see what we believe, and we can change what we see by changing our beliefs. And those late bloomers changed my belief about what was available to me in life. Both those in the public eye—Julia Child, Harriet Doerr, the blues guitarist, T-Model Ford—and those in my own community—the seventy-year-old freshman, for instance, a woman I tutored while working on my MFA. She had always wanted to go to college and finally found her way there.

I'm at the very beginning of a writing career that I assumed would be impossible. A first book at age fifty-two. Irrespective of what publication I might enjoy, there is a deep satisfaction for me in the act of writing. And in whistling through my teeth. And, most especially, in the knowledge that it ain't over till it's over. Bam! One day you know for sure what you want. After that, there's just the long stretch of practicing until it's as much a part of you as any other thing. ■

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

In the past few years you've managed to produce two collections of short stories, a graphic novel, countless book reviews and articles on craft, and, of course, your forthcoming novel The Wilding. *What's probably most impressive about this body of work is the wide-reaching praise it has received. How have you managed to produce so much high quality work in such a brief period of time?*

I'm a workhorse. I put in time at the keyboard every day, with few exceptions. Sometimes I go an hour—sometimes I go eight hours—whatever is available to me. Used to be, back in grad school, I'd wake up at 4:30 and hammer into the early afternoon. These days, between my teaching duties and daddy duties, I have a tough time carving out big chunks of my day, so I write whenever and wherever I can. I might work in my office at school with the door closed or I might work at my kitchen table while something is baking in the oven or I might work in my backyard while my kids are playing. This discipline has helped me go the distance. I'm a strenuous reader (my books have so many notes in them they appear corralled in barbed wire) and I'm a hardcore writer (treating the keyboard as a tool, and writing as a job, not as some mystic, transcendent, artsy fartsy experience) and my doggedness, my singleminded pursuit to do better, has helped me more than talent. ■

MICHAEL PARKER, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

What do you like least about being a writer?

I can't complain about squat. I've already admitted that the business end of it isn't something I devote much time to thinking about, but that's a failing, I suppose, not a complaint. I have to say that I am much less anxious now about the things I used to worry about when I first started writing fiction,

and I think it's because I have other passions—endurance sports—that allow me to obsess about something else. Of course it takes up a lot of time, but it's really helped me focus, and maybe it's helped me slow down and pay attention. I don't know—it's a strange thing to be talking about in an interview about my work, I realize, but I was so focused on my work for so many years, and then I realized that, though there are people who seem to like my work, and I'm hugely grateful to them and for them, the world isn't sitting around waiting for another Michael Parker novel. And it's better, really, to wait until you have a story to tell before you burden the world with another book. And, hey, it's okay to have a mistress other than literature. In fact, it actually helps me to cheat a little on my first love. ■

JENNIFER TOMSCHA:

I have known for years of a seed sprouting in my belly. It is either a watermelon or a wordy thing waiting to be written out, and for a long time I have been acting in all kinds of bizarre ways (frightening the neighbors and worrying my parents) to try to make it grow: drinking gallons and gallons of water, swallowing clods of dirt, walking around with my head thrown back and my mouth open to let in the sun.

I took lower-paying jobs with fewer hours so I could spend those free hours writing. I dallied in positions that weren't meant to be careers, merely placeholders (cat-sitter, grammar teacher to ballerinas). I stayed in on weekend nights to sit in front of my computer, and ended relationships with partners who weren't supportive of my art—and I did call my writing art, even though I felt crazy for doing so. I defended my decisions against all the skeptics, including myself. After my acceptance letter came from Michigan, I walked around for weeks with a pressure in my throat, as though the vine inching its way up my esophagus was now growing furiously and was finally ready to appear.

That was almost two years ago now. In May [2011] I'll graduate with my MFA in fiction writing. "What will you do when you're finished here?" my composition students ask. "What will you do after this?" They are bright, practical pursuers of biochemistry and nursing and business.

I tell them honestly that I'm not sure, although I don't admit I'm worried. With my MFA, I am technically qualified to teach writing at college; in this

job market, the odds are I won't be doing that. As invaluable as these two years of study have been, the MFA degree itself feels like little more than a label. "Writer," it says. But that doesn't mean there's a writer inside, any more than a tattoo on my belly—*watermelon*—means that I've been cultivating a rind fruit in there. And it doesn't change the fact that the world is not a friendly place for writers, MFA'd or not.

Of course, figuring out how to live in this world is not only a writer's affliction. Each person has to wake up every morning and determine how she is going to survive, how to manage the economies of life, how to create room within these economies for what she loves. But for the writer, this task is particularly difficult, in part because the choice to create a life of letters is a choice that has to be made every day, even on the days that don't seem fruitful.

The writer's work is often unpaid or underappreciated or unwanted or simply unread. She writes alone, and this act requires such continued energy and such concentration that it might consume her, inside out, like vines curling around the intestines. When I get up from an especially good writing day, I have been so long in my mind that I sometimes find it hard to speak in the other world. Other times, when another rejection letter arrives or the right sentence evades me—yet again—or the wintery slush leaks in through my old boots, I'll put my head down on my desk and wish that I had been born some other, some more practical me, a me who had gone to law school, a me who cared about the state of her boots as much as the state of her stories.

How, then, will I sustain both a writing life and a life that supports my writing? We talk a lot in my cohort about building our own homemade "fellowships," patching together odd jobs (cat-sitting, teaching grammar to ballerinas) that might leave us enough time to continue our obsessions with words.

I don't know what I'll be doing next year. But the only option seems to be this: When you know you have a seed in your belly—when you hear that seed rattling around in your gut, when you feel the roots burrowing inside, taking hold—you have to keep going. You must keep on. Open-mouthed and facing the sun. Dirt under your fingernails. And you write and you write and you write and you hope for a good harvest. ■

JOAN WICKERSHAM, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

What do you say when you meet someone and they inevitably ask—

—what do I do? What do I say? Um, I say I am a writer. For a long time I was afraid to say that. But I do say that, but I feel, then, the next question is—

—have I read anything by you?

Yeah. People don't know what to say to writers. I don't know how I feel about Oprah not being on the air, but I have this secret pleasure that with this book no one is going to say to me, "When are you going to be on Oprah?" That was a bad question and then the other question is, "Are you on a book tour?" "How's it selling?" All these things—people just making small talk. I guess they don't know what to say to a writer. But on the other hand, I don't know what to say to a lawyer or a dentist. ■

LEE SMITH, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

This takes us to quite a different sort of question, but do you chuckle as you write?

I do. It's a paradox though. I am often seen as a "comic writer," and do write from a comic perspective, but I also have a sort of dire view of life. People like me really have just two choices: Either you lock yourself in a closet and weep, or you make a joke. The joke enables you to go on. There's something very corrective and affirmative about the comic view. It doesn't mean you're a dingbat. It just means that's what you can do to bear the whole thing.

You've said most writers are "death-haunted." How is that so?

Because most of the writers I know are that way. But also, most people don't have the desire to sit down and write. You only have it if you're worried about serious things. In a sense it's a way to escape death, to fight it off. Like Yeats's sonnet says, "Take down this book and read these words when I am gone." Most writers I have known are much more aware of death, aware of the fragility of relationships, the fragile nature of lives. They scramble to set something down, to get something straight.

The impulse to write is an impulse to order events. You write from the events of real life, which means you write from chaos. But when you write a story, you can take a character from here and something that happened

from there, and something from Aunt Eula, and put it all together. You can order it in a way that you can't order what happens in your life. Just for that minute it's very rewarding. ■

ANDREW PORTER, *interviewed by Trevor Gore:*

I just enjoy watching the students discover the thrill of writing. It reminds me of how I used to feel at their age—in college writing my first stories. And, perhaps more importantly, it reminds me of what all writers need to be reminded of from time to time: that this thing we do, this thing we've devoted our lives to, is supposed to be fun. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN,
interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

The worst part of writing for me is the hour before I start to write, when I pace around my chair and say, "I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it." ■

GEORGE SAUNDERS, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

I studied with Tobias Wolff and Douglas Unger, and at that time it was only a two-year program and there was a lot of teaching, what I consider teaching beneath the teaching. For example, for me, I had a very Kerouackian view of writing: you had to be a fucking nut.

You had to write on rolls of toilet paper?

[*Chuckles.*] You had to be crazy. Drunk or something. Messed up. And I didn't really feel like I was that messed up in an overt way. I was worried. To see Toby working, with a family that he dearly loved, working industriously, beyond industriously, beautifully every day, turning out these masterpieces, and he was a nice person. A loving and loved person. That was a big thing to say that was okay. We are working at a higher level than personal quirkiness—we are talking about the work itself. What you do in your life…doesn't matter—

I was reading Peter Kramer's Against Depression *and he is very much against the notion that an illness is viewed as integral to creativity. Remove the burden of depression; can artists still be creative?*

If you cure them, can they still be creative?

Right. If Van Gogh had been happy person, would he have painted or painted with his [same] genius? Kramer argues this is bullshit.

I think Van Gogh would have painted.

I bring this up because we have these stereotypes of artists and their personas. Wallace Stevens or Charles Ives or David Ignatow leading outwardly lived normal lives is not the image we have.

It makes it scarier when you don't have the crutch of flamboyance. We don't care what kind of person they are. What do the words say? That's scary in a way. It's easier to wear the cravat and—

And be a poseur. ■

JAMES LASDUN, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

How much is it the satisfaction of the doing of it? As opposed to at the end of some period of time being able to hold up something that a book or a screen-play, that's something? Is it hard to even distinguish that?

The book that you hold up is the physical book but it's also a part of who you are. It becomes a part of—you accumulate all that inside yourself and that's really important.

Are you glad you are a writer?

I'm very glad. Although I don't find it easy. It's not an easy life and it's not an easy thing to do.

C'mon, you don't have to lift heavy parcels or run a drill press.

I know. I know. But it's—well, everything is hard. You are very exposed in an incredibly intimate way as a writer of fiction and poetry. You are really putting your ego, your soul, everything on the line every time you publish anything. And you develop all kinds of ways of handling the reactions whether they are positive or negative. But the truth of the matter is, it's a very strange thing to do. And it has a huge impact. ■

T.C. BOYLE, *interviewed by Diana Bishop:*

Entertainment Weekly *quoted you as saying that you get depressed reading the newspaper every day and then feel like you want to kill yourself.*

I'm sure you do, too.

And yet some of those same things you read fuel your stories?

Sure, of course. I need to know what's happening in our society; it's how I make my living, it's how I respond and express myself. But there are times when it's very good to be alone and disconnected. I will never have a cell phone. Technology has been good for me. I mean, I run my business on email. But I resent a ringing phone. I resent having to be at the beck and call of anybody, even if it's somebody I really want to talk to. I'm very gregarious. I love to perform; I love to be on stage. I used to have my own band. I love to meet people; I would never turn my back on anybody. On the other hand, there are periods where I won't see anyone at all, even my family. I'm writing a book; I'm being deep inside myself when I'm up on the mountain, in the Sierras, a place I've been going to ever since I came to California after graduating from Iowa. And I have many friends there. I know everybody intimately, and I need them. But my days are very different. Up there, I'm only living in a dream and reading and being in nature and mostly by myself. Yes, the family will come and I'll come down here. A week or two of that and I want to come down here and live an urban life for a while. **But a lot of the time I am withdrawn from everything. I don't want to be connected all the time. I think it's wrong. I think it's not animal.** It's technological, it's a crutch; it's something that we don't even need.

As a writer you have to isolate yourself anyway. But you feel a compulsion to do so beyond the writing?

Well, you have to write every day and that's an isolating thing. And I work fanatically wherever I am. But up there, I work even more. And maybe boredom is a factor. I am nonstop; nonstop all day, every day, all my life. I think of my recent trip to Columbia, Missouri. We went to the old part of town and it was like, 11:50 in the morning and we wanted to have a bite to eat. We went into a place called Booch's, a famous old place apparently, and it's a bar that's been rubbed over by the million hands of generations, and it's just what a bar should be: a big cavernous place with a high ceiling. And it's a pool hall. And I was so refreshed to see that sitting at the bar were

current students drinking beer at 11:50 in the morning, parallel to the old fat-belly guys who are no longer doing anything—retired, shooting pool—and drinking beer at 11:50 in the morning. And I thought, "Wow, what a life. Why am I not doing this? Why am I chasing the tail of the tiger?" And I realized, because I'd be dead in a month if I did that.

Because you'd drink yourself into oblivion?

Of course! Out of boredom. You have to do something. You have to build, make. That's why we're here. That's why we big apes have made all this shit, because we have to do it. And I do it, too. I have to do it. It's a compulsion. ■

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

I read that you used to do your writing between midnight and four a.m.

Yeah, yeah. Things change from year to year but I still do that sometimes, writing in the middle of the night!

But how did you live, not sleeping? How long have you done that?

Just probably for four years. I used to sleep two hours before midnight, and probably two hours after, four or five hours altogether. I stopped doing that when I was pregnant the next time, because I'm aging too fast, I think, because of not sleeping. I just feel my body can't handle this. Sometimes when I was driving, I would be really tired, and I thought, you know, this is not smart. And my mother really hated me doing that. So I stopped.

I can't believe you lived that way for so long, but I guess that gives me an idea of how much you love to write.

I wasn't happy when I was not writing. I'm still like that. If I'm not writing, I'm not happy. ■

JOHN McNALLY, *interviewed by Stephanie Kuehnert:*

What is your writing routine? Do you write in the morning, afternoon, night? Do you have a regular schedule for your writing? How do you get started writing when you sit down or do you only sit down if you are ready to write?

When I'm writing regularly, which is most of the time, I try to write seven days a week, and I start writing shortly after I wake up. I wake up around

six a.m., feed and walk the dogs, drink a frappuccino, and start writing. I set goals for myself. If I'm writing a short story, I'll be happy with a page or two a day; if I'm working on a novel, between two and four pages per day. If I write it in an hour, then I'm done for the day; if it takes me eight hours, well, then I sit there for eight hours—or I pace around a lot but try not to quit until I'm done. **I should say that I when I was younger I would write from midnight until six in the morning, but having a job has made me shift my schedule around in a way that I never thought I'd be able to do. ■**

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Andrew Scott:*

What do you like least about being a writer?

What do I like least? I guess when I'm not writing, and it still matters to me to write. I don't like feeling…not writer's block, just the absence of story. I'm happiest when I'm in the middle of working on something, when I'm excited about a story, something that's really thrilling to consider. When I feel like I'm really on to a story, I'm pretty pleased. **When I'm not in the middle of working on a story, that makes me unhappy.**

It's often just a matter of being inspired to write something. Something has to catch your eye and make you want to write, and I'm not in charge of that. I'm not in control of something like a lightning strike hitting me and making me go to the computer and be excited about what I'm working on. I'm a person who values controlling her life, and I'm involved in an art form, for me anyway, that requires some sort of abstract spark to get it going. I have to respond to that spark. It has to attach itself to something in me. ■

JAY McINERNEY, *interviewed by Victoria Blake:*

What's your writing routine? Do you always do the same thing before you start writing? Do you drink, or eat, or smoke?

I drink coffee. Definitely coffee.

Late at night or early in the morning?

Even though I'm kind of a nocturnal person, I've had to domesticate my habits. I eventually decided that I had to start writing in the morning in order to keep writing throughout the day. There's a funny way in which,

if I haven't gotten going before noon, then I don't, somehow. I like to wake up at the crack of eight or nine, try to be at my desk by ten, and then work through the day. I take a break for lunch. It's banker's hours, really.

That has to do with getting over some of these romantic notions of the writing life. I think there's a tendency to think writers stay up late at night smoking cigarettes and drinking and doing their best writing at three in the morning. Often, if things are going well, I will go back to my work late at night, but I think the basic stuff gets done during the day.

"Go back" as in editing?

Yes. Editing. Rewriting. Reading. I think that since writing fiction is my vocation and my career, it behooves me to treat it like a job and give it the respect that I would a regular job.

You don't drink when you write, except coffee?

No. There's been a lot of talk about drinking and writing, particularly in the American literary tradition, but I find drinking to be fairly inimical to the pure creative state—let alone other kinds of stimulants or depressants. Whatever sort of recreational drug use or drinking I've indulged in, I've never confused it with my vocation. I've never mixed it up with my writing life.

Despite your subjects? In reading your books, one tends to get the impression that you probably have done quite a few drugs, and that you do in fact go home and write about it, if not under the influence of it.

Again, it's a question of myth and reality. I don't ever mix the two things. Like all writers, I experimented, partly because there are a bunch of myths out there. Anybody who has experimented with substances and with writing has experimented with mixing them. I quickly discovered that they don't mix. I remember when I was starting out, Truman Capote was blathering away about how coke really helped his writing. It's absurd. Coke is utterly antithetical to the creation of coherent prose fiction. I don't write under the influence of anything except caffeine and nicotine. Which is not to say that once in a while after dinner, say, under the influence of a few glasses of wine, I don't go back and look at my work to see what it's doing. Sometimes I revise in that manner. That's as close as I get to mixing the two. ■

GEORGE SAUNDERS, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

Probably lots of people have said, "If I ever made the perfect photo or painted the best picture I could or wrote the best story or whatever one does—I would stop there. Never do another." Is that what you feel?

It's the opposite, I think I would say—only because it would be so sad to quit. I'd love to keep going. For some reason I'm thinking of a python eating a mouse. You go, "There's a mouse! I'm going to eat it. Oh, I ate it! Where's the next mouse?" Just kind of keep going like that. And the creative enterprise becomes a source of pleasure that doesn't have to be the end, the mother of all pleasures. It's just one more thing that you do.

At this point in your life, would you do something else?

I'd rather not. I really love it. ■

COLUM McCANN, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

After having written *Songdogs*, I imagined going to literary parties and wearing my big black overcoat and telling everyone to fuck off. You know, that arrogant young writer strut. It's something you eventually lose. I don't believe in the notion of writers who live in their ivory tower and talk about how tough it is. I distrust this whole notion that you have to go away with a blindfold on to block out the world. I think it's just as tough to be a plumber in the Bronx or a carpenter in Killarney as it is to be a writer in New York, but there is a certain amount of difficulty that comes with taking on any project. There's also a good deal of stamina that you have to have. If you're in it for the long haul, it's a lot of work, researching and becoming involved. I'd love to be able to turn out a six-week wonder. I'd love to be able to write like Kerouac and suddenly have it there. But for whatever reason, I can't seem to do that. ■

FRANCES YA-CHU COWHIG:

Make your writing life a sustainable component of a broader living practice. Know what activities complement your writing work, and do them regularly. In my life this has manifested as a commitment to spending recreational time cooking, dancing, vegetable farming, receiving acupuncture treatments, and befriending people more engaged in the physical world than me. ■

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK, *interviewed by William Pierce:*

Maybe I'm complicating the obvious. I don't think any person has the right to do their work at someone else's expense. The claims some studied bohemians made about their need to be ruthless and selfish to pursue their art were, as often as not, the hash and the absinthe talking.

On the other hand, we as writers need to be a little not to say ruthless but self-protective. Life is rich and endlessly fascinating, and we could let ourselves get yanked into its dance and never stop until it was too late to write the little volumes that were our only real mission here. **Horace had it right: art is long and life is short. If you can arrange it and have the discipline and the temperament for it, you can devote yourself 24/7 to the study of your art and expect to be rewarded by a lifetime of exhilaration and discovery.** This may make it hard to be attentive to a spouse or a child—very often this dawns on artists a little after the fact, and they suffer the rest of their lives trying to reconcile the conflicting demands on their time. ■

TOBIAS WOLFF, *interviewed by Travis Holland:*

In your novel Old School *we get a portrait of the artist as a young man—a very young man. Earnest, idealistic, silly even. And principally idealizing the "greats," writers like Hemingway, Ayn Rand, Frost. In fact, the young writers in your novel seem to not only idealize them but they want to be them. They want to write like them, they want to be famous. They seem to see that this is the path of the writer. This is what a writer is: the public Hemingway, the public persona of an Ayn Rand or Frost. And I wonder if most writers start out like this, with this idealization of writers and writing.*

It seems to me that literary writers aren't the celebrities they were in those days. Obviously, there are a lot of writers who are celebrities to the young, but I would say by and large they aren't the kinds of writers that Frost and Hemingway were. In those days the culture was definitely more literary, and Hemingway was an international celebrity, often in newspapers and weekly news magazines—showing him on his boat or in the hills with a rifle. And Frost was famous enough that President Kennedy wanted him to read a poem at his inauguration.

It's almost as if these young writers, these boys, in your novel were in a way writing in order to be *Hemingway, rather than writing to be a writer.*

Yes, because the personalities of these writers, their personae, figured so largely in the publicity around them that there was some confusion that this is what it meant to be a writer—to be famous and cut a figure. And maybe the idea of actually doing the work got lost a little bit. **When you did see those pictures of Hemingway—fishing, hunting, at war—you forgot that this was just what he was doing when he wasn't writing. And that, in fact, this was a guy who spent hours every day at his stand-up desk—you know he wrote standing up because his back was so bad.** Frost was an absolute workhorse.

So, absolutely, the whole idea of the writing life tended to eclipse the actual understanding of what it meant to produce work. That was the discovery you had to make. And I think it was discouraging to many of those who thought that they would be writers. I imagine that once they got into the process of doing it, they realized, "Oh, in order to be a writer I have to actually write. And be obscure for many, many years, and be grateful if I get contributors' copies from some little magazine." And this is actually what the writer's life is like for most of us, for many years. The actualities of that life caught up with a lot of us who were mainly ambitious for the gifts that a successful writer's life could bring. ■

JAVIER MARÍAS, *interviewed by Eli S. Evans:*

Do you think that Your Face Tomorrow *will be your last novel?*

Maybe. There are some writers who talk about needing to write, but I think things like that are rather pompous. You don't need to write anything at all, at least I don't. I can live perfectly well without writing. At the same time, recently, for the first time, between volumes of *Your Face Tomorrow*, I found myself missing fiction, perhaps because of a certain dissatisfaction with life in general. You rest in fiction. **To be in contact with fiction, living with fiction, for a period or for a long period, is a way of resting, for me.** You rest there. It's not hard work. It can be, now and then, when you have to cross that desert or confront those terrible cliffs, but in other senses it's like resting from real life. In the past, I've never felt the need for it, although it was pleasant to rest in that way from real life or daily life. But in the last couple of years, I've been feeling it more as a refuge. ■

AMY BLOOM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What is your process like when you're writing? Do you have a set time to work each day?

No. not really. I tend to get really going later in the afternoon. But I can do a lot of puttering. I'm an expert putterer. Plus I have three children, so I can interfere in their lives. I have aging parents. I have plenty to do if I don't want to write. I can keep myself busy for a couple of days without going anywhere near my computer. But basically, when I have work to do, I usually buckle down in the afternoon. Sometimes I'll get a whole day in, but it'll be toward the end of the day. I'll work an eight-hour day, but never more than a couple hours at a time at the desk. I have to walk around, check the mail, make a cup of tea. So it's an eight-hour day that unfortunately starts around four in the afternoon. ■

ALLEN MORRIS JONES, *interviewed by David Abrams:*

I write mostly because I can't stop. It's the hinge of my life and I don't know who I would be without it. It's my identity. I love the potential of it, the possibilities of it. You choose your palette, your subject, your canvas. You can write about anything in the world, or out of it. Fiction is limited only by your own imagination, your abilities. And this is precisely what I hate about it, too. It scares the shit out of me. Any success I'm able to find—and perforce, any failure—is entirely my own. ■

ANDREA BARRETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What would you say to new writers working on their first stories or novel?

Try to be patient. It's so hard for people to be patient. It was really hard for me. It took me a very long time to get better, and a very, very long time to begin to publish. I wasn't very patient. It's painful. I think people now have even more motivation to be impatient than I did when I was starting out, because the culture is more impatient. Everything moves so fast. First novelists are pushed so hard to produce a second novel, and young people are pushed so hard right out of school to get the first novel done. It takes time to write well. You have to sit with it. You have to be patient with it. You have to trust in your intuition and in your own material, and stay with it for as long as it takes. ■

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

I like always to be working. I like to be doing something, and so if I feel creative and the writing's going well, then I'm just going to put as much as I want on the page. I usually can't get more than a couple hours of that a day, and so then I'll spend time editing or researching. It's nice to balance it out that way. And then when I get tired of researching in the library I'll try something creative again. ■

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ, *interviewed by Nancy Middleton:*

I've always had the need to put things into words. If something happens to me, it's not quite real until I've recreated it in words. I think in words. Reality, life itself, is not quite real to me without the words. ■

AMY HEMPEL, *interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:*

I mention the period of time in my twenties in San Francisco when I moved something like twenty-four times in six years or twenty-six times in four years—the punch line being: without ever leaving San Francisco. I described that behavior as a confusion of activity without action, of activity that wasn't getting anywhere. In New York, you can't just up and move quite as easily. I was forced to stand still. And it's not surprising that that's when I started getting some work done, instead of just packing boxes and taking them to the next Victorian house and the next Victorian house…

Do you remember the exact time when you said, Okay, this is it, this is what I'm going to do, I'm going to write fiction?

I came to New York from California—that was a big part of it. I worked in publishing, which I thought was about writing, which it really isn't. And then I went to Bread Loaf, as an auditor. That was an acknowledgment and a step ahead. I was reading widely. That was in my late twenties. And then there was a general push, acceleration. And really, I was painting myself into a corner; I was never good at saying, "Why, this is what I'm going to do, by golly!" You know, with great gumption. I was painting myself into a corner, leaving no other options. Nothing to fall back on. So it had better work. By the time I took Gordon's [Lish] class at Columbia, I was about thirty or so, and I really believed there was nothing else I could do. I think that signing on for his class really was it. I was saying, I will try to do it. I won't punish myself if I'm unable to do it, but I will try to do it. ■

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

There's something very magical that happens when you use your body. I get a lot of ideas when I'm bike riding. Not only is my mind off the task of writing, but I'm doing something very physical with my body in a very different way. There's nothing like exhaustion, the joy of exhaustion, after a very physical day of work. I don't really do any adult athletic pursuits besides hiking and bike riding. I do lift weights, because I think I like the feeling of pushing against something heavy.

Which is why you're a writer. ■

ELIZABETH COX, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What would you say to new writers? What advice would you give?

To pay attention! To look at the world around you as though every moment matters, because it does. To forget the wish to publish and just write. Are you going to write the next book whether or not it will be published? The pleasure of writing is so different from the pleasure of publishing—which can't hold a candle to it. And another thing—read, read, read. Read everything—all the sciences, philosophy, history, poetry, folktales, plays. Read and study the thing that strikes your curiosity. Pay attention and be willing to be amazed with the day. God, what a way to live! ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, *interviewed by John McNally:*

Your birthday is September 11th. Where were you and what were you 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. ■

ALICE MATTISON, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

Photo: Ben Mattison

Almost ten years passed between Animals *and* Great Wits*, your first short-story collection, which came out in 1988, and then you published three novels and two story collections in the next eleven years. It seems as though your writing life suddenly opened up.*

Oh, yes. It took me a while to write stories and revise them until they were worth printing, but that wasn't the only reason for the delay. Having young kids probably enabled me to write because it gave me an excuse not to have a full-time job, but it also interrupted me. I had three kids, and by the 1990s they were teenagers or out of the house, and that made a big difference.

When did you begin writing seriously?

My oldest son was born in 1970, and when he was a year old I was pretty unhappy. We were living in the woods in California, it was dark—our house was under redwood trees—and I was depressed a lot of the time. My hus-

band had a time-consuming job, and I had quit teaching to have the baby. I didn't know anything about babysitters or anything like that, so I just took care of him. It wasn't easy for either me or the baby. And then it suddenly dawned on me that I could get a sitter. I could call up the local junior college and hire somebody—and I did. **A young woman would come two afternoons a week and I would go down into the basement while she took care of Jacob. We were miles from anyplace, so there wasn't anywhere else to go. I thought I'd read a book, or do laundry, or I'd write.** I'd been writing all my life, but not seriously since college. I started writing, and all I did was write. I was absolutely newly excited about writing and being a writer. That was when I became serious about it. It was 1972. There's a poem about this in my first book, *Animals*. It's called "The Facts." ■

RICHARD RUSSO, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

I can write on the road, but I can't draft a novel on the road. I could revise a novel on the road. I can write screen work, essays, I can write introductions. Nonfiction is easy to write on the road, on rare occasions when I do that. I can do all those kinds of things, but there is something different about drafting a novel that requires me to work at the same time each day. I need to work in the morning, every morning, six or seven days a week. I need that kind of routine to slip back into. I need to pick up right where I left off. I hate to miss a day. I need reliable blocks of time. ■

MARGOT LIVESEY, *interviewed by Ellen Kanner:*

I'm a morning person. As I've got older, I've tried to learn to be more flexible. I used to have so many things in place. Up to a certain point it became prohibitive. If it was quiet and if the phone didn't ring, then maybe I could write a sentence. I try to be less rigid as I get older. ■

MARK WINEGARDNER, *interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:*

The difference with writing is that it is the only one of the arts where people don't appreciate the apprenticeship. They know they can't just become a ballerina. That it takes incredible years of study, or they can't just become a classical composer or be a great jazz musician. Everyone has this idea that maybe on the weekends you could write a novel. As completely insulting as this is to writers, it's also flattering, and it's given a certain kind of credence

because every four years someone writes a novel that way. Unlikely, but it happens. ■

ANTONYA NELSON, *interviewed by Susan McInnis:*

You and Robert Boswell are both writers, raising two children and carrying teaching responsibilities. How does that work out for you?

We've worked things out pretty well. I think the most important thing we did was to hire a housekeeper so the house will be as clean as I require, and Robert doesn't have to worry about my being angry. We never argue about anything, really, except housekeeping, so once it's been identified and dealt with, it ceases to be a problem, thankfully.

Do you find there's time enough to write and teach and nurture a household and be nurtured by all of it?

It works out as long as I have a good idea for a story. Everything's fine then, because I can make time to write. If I'm not inspired to write—if I'm not in the middle of something—I think everybody's pretty unhappy. For that reason I tend to make myself work. And somehow it works out. Once there's a good idea it's almost as if nothing can get in the way of it. The presence or absence of good ideas really makes or breaks my mood.

So the engine is well oiled when there's work, but when there's not, the gears grind you?

In a way. I start assigning blame. You know, "I can't come up with a good idea because I have too many papers to grade." It's not true, of course. It's absolutely not true. It's merely a matter of having to be inspired.

Is there a "best of both worlds" situation for you?

If there is, it's probably being inspired and being on a deadline, knowing that a publisher wants what I'm writing. There's a comfort in it because I have something to write and someone wants to publish it, and because someone wants it there's pressure to get it done. ■

DANIEL WALLACE:

You can do so much, you can be so revolutionary in your art in ways that you can't really be in your life because you have so many important things that would be upset. You've got to be careful. You've got a family. You've got

a business. I mean, goodness, you know, you can't be too wild. ■

LYNN FREED, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

When you're in the throes of a novel, what is your writing schedule like?

I'm the last one who should be talking of writing habits. I'm haphazard. I write, but I also teach. I have friends I love to see. And I have a passion for travel. All of which is to say that I write in furious surges, and then I take a month or months off. When I'm in the middle of a novel, however, I write all the time. When I'm inching in, starting up, I'm best in the afternoons. Mornings, I pretend to write. I write letters and email, I fiddle with what I've written the day before. But the real time for writing, for me, is the late afternoon and evening. This is not the best way to run one's life if there's anyone else in it. But there it is. I have nothing but envy for those who wake up, don't even clean their teeth, and settle into the writing. Not me, not at all. I'm hopeless. ■

LORRIE MOORE, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

You've written that many writers feel like disenfranchised guests in the world. Do you feel this remove yourself?

I don't know. To some extent a writer is not in the midst of things, not belonging to the world with every fiber of his or her body, but that helps one observe. It also helps you see and take a certain interest in life as well. What writers are doing is observing the world and finding in it what can be put together in combination with their own imagination to make something that's different, that's not already *in* the world. Writers are busy with the process of creating new worlds that refer to the existing one in some way. And that's a kind of scary and mad project, and for writers to go through their lives like that day to day creates some kind of distance or guesthood. ■

AMY BLOOM, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I know that your original career was in psychotherapy. How did you go from psychotherapy to writing?

It doesn't seem to me that I went from one to the other. I was on my way

to becoming a psychoanalyst, and having talked to the guy who was going to be my training analyst, a very nice guy named Sam Ritvoe, I came home and started making notes for a mystery. By the time I got home I had about fifteen pages sketched out in my head, and I started writing. I wrote the mystery over the course of the next two years, and while I was writing the mystery, short stories started showing up.

Whatever happened to that mystery novel?

I sold it to Harper Collins and then I bought it back. I didn't think it was good enough.

Are there aspects of your experience as a psychotherapist that contribute to your writing?

Being a good listener certainly helps if what you want to do is write about people. Learning how to pay attention to how people think and feel and talk. I think I could've done that in another profession as well, but it helps to have that experience and training. I have a very good memory, which helps also. I was really trained as an old-fashioned social worker. I used to have to do what was called process recording, which was to write the entire verbal and nonverbal parts of an interview from beginning to end without a tape recorder. And I had to turn in dozens of those on a weekly basis. So that was good practice. Probably just being exposed to peoples' lives in that intimate way gives you the opportunity to see things that it might be difficult to see otherwise. Not that you couldn't see them if you were willing, but it's easier when you're invited into peoples' lives. So I'm grateful to those parts. ■

LYNN FREED, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

I was in the "no future" hell and felt I should secure a means of income so that I could live and write. So I took the LSAT and got into law school. And then I panicked and withdrew. Sometimes one needs to drive oneself into a situation so horrible that one is forced to make a bold choice. I chose to write, and, more or less, to struggle. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

Some people work best late nights, others early mornings, some work crazy hours and then take several days off, while others respond best to a more

balanced approach. I doubt any two writers maintain identical routines, and many writers I know don't have a reliable routine, as in one that never changes. After ten years of college teaching I am currently on a year-long sabbatical from my job. My goal is to finish a book manuscript this year. Initially, I was frightened by how much time I had before me. A couple of days into the actual writing, I managed to let that fear silence me. There is always something else to do, some distraction to keep you from the misery that surrounds some of us when it comes to our craft. It took me a couple of months of floundering around with a new scheme every week before I found what really works best for me. And I would not go so far as to say I'm now wedded to this system. It could very well change, but it's working for now. Instead of rolling over and going back to sleep, I try to get up the first time I wake, often four or five a.m., always pre-six.

I make a cup of coffee, feed the cats, and go into the room where I work. I find this such a rich time of day. With the blinds open I get to watch the sky go from dark to pinkish blue. No one else in the house is awake and the silence has a different quality to it. Dawn is, symbolically, a beginning, a good time for creative energy. I find two hours of this early morning time to be more valuable to me than four hours of time later in the day. Later, I'm already distracted by other things, and have already expended much of my daily quota of energy on miscellaneous tasks. At that point, it sometimes feels impossible to get the jumpstart I require. But in the early morning, pre-dawn time, I'm just *right there*. No having to travel or arrive. Straight from a dream state to the paper and pen, by way of a strong cup of coffee.

A close writer friend of mine could not conceive of the routine that works for me. He likes to write late nights, after the rest of the world has gone to bed. He might read or watch some television after dinner, and then begin writing at eleven or midnight and go to three or four a.m. This is his most productive time. Everyone is different. Find what works for you and don't be rushed about it, and know that your own routine may change, just to keep things interesting. ■

SIRI HUSTVEDT, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

Your poem "Squares" begins, "He was making a paragraph on a yellow page." You seem to have a strong interest in the physical act of creating written language.

I think that it's because I find written language strange. It is odd that we can look down at those little signs and understand them. Reading and writing are peculiar activities, and yet when I write, there is an odd confluence of the physical and mental. I often need the physical act of typing to bring something out. It is not enough to just think. The words seem to come through my fingers. I prefer typing to writing by hand because I need the distance of print. My husband, Paul Auster, likes the words to leak out of his body mediated only by a pen. He needs to write by hand first. It seems to me that my handwriting obfuscates the text. These are differences of work and style, but I think they are deep and related to style itself.

Do you keep yourself on a certain schedule?

I work five days a week from about 9 a.m. to 2:30 or 3 p.m. I find, unless I'm revising or near the end of a book, I can't work many more hours because my head dries up.

The narrator of Graham Greene's The End of the Affair, *who is a novelist, talks about unconsciously writing whatever book he is working on at all times of the day.*

You are always writing a book, even when you're not at your desk. I write at night in my head, which is very pleasant. I begin to compose the next paragraph before I fall asleep, or I hear the characters having conversations with each other. Sleep is good for books. Movement is also good. Sometimes when I'm stuck, I go to the bathroom, and the act of getting up and walking loosens the thought, and the words come to me when I'm away from the computer. ■

CHRIS OFFUTT, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

"Aunt Granny Lith," "Old of the Moon," and "Leaving One" are sort of stylistically different, and those were written when my wife was pregnant. It was like a magical, mystical time. I had this pregnant wife and I couldn't believe it. It was wonderful. I was going in the woods all the time. She and I would go into the woods together and I was existing in this zone of magic

and joy and terror. Those stories came out of that experience, particularly "Old of the Moon."

I wrote "Old of the Moon" during the time when she was due, and two weeks later when she had the baby. I wrote that story and revised it probably twelve to fifteen times. I revised it every single day of that two-week period waiting for her to go to the hospital. I mean, a drastic revision. Not just commas. Huge revisions. I have no idea what I threw away from that story. And that story is about my worst fear, the death of a baby. I wouldn't let Rita read it.

There's a lot of mysticism there. Those three stories all have that otherworldly quality.

Well, I think it's related to when Rita was pregnant; we were existing in another world. We really were. I was reading mythology. I was reading legends and lore and folk stories and borrowing from them, because I grew up hearing that sort of thing, and I was trying, in many ways, to create my own stories. But what you're talking about is really related to that time. I just can't describe the intensity of my feelings of being a part of an otherworldly experience, and it was really, you know, that my wife was pregnant, and it was amazing.

Did the process of the second child match the intensity of the first?

Oh yeah. When she was pregnant with the second child we were living in a three-room cabin on the Iowa River, and I was completing the final draft of *The Same River Twice*, so I was writing about the first child while living the second child; and it was unbelievable, this little zone that I was in, of unreality, of otherworldliness. This three-room cabin had a porch on the back. Just poles to hold up the plastic, corrugated roof. I boxed it in and threw down a floor, and my landlord gave me a window, and I did all the work, built it in three days, and wrote in there. So I would write in there, go out, and there would be my wife who was pregnant, my little boy who was learning to walk, and the woods. It was just unbelievable. And I would go out and wander around these woods and go back into the house, and it was the happiest two years of my life. ■

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

When it comes to Mr. Drake and Dr. Carroll in The Piano Tuner*—because they were both such vivid characters—I imagine that you would identify with*

both of them in different ways, and I wondered what ways those might be.

Anthony Carroll's the kind of person I would love to be. I would love to have that kind of energy. I'd love to be so far away from home for such a long time. I'd love to be able to disappear into the jungle and try to learn everything possible. Edgar is more of who I am. He's easily distracted and he tends to be shy. He likes to just watch, mostly. I think that a writer just watches, and it's something that's frustrating about being a writer, because it gets in the way of actually doing things. You write about a dancer rather than actually dancing. That's been his whole life: he observes things rather than actually doing them.

In one of the interviews I read, you said you admired that Dr. Carroll was such a polymath. It seems to me that you're very much like that, that you have interests in many different areas, and I wonder if you would be willing to draw a little sketch of the areas of life that are really interesting or important to you.

Like a pie?

Like a pie, or just circles with the things that matter to you.

I don't even know how I could do that. I don't even know where I'd start, honestly.

How do you think of your life?

Since the book came out, there's been very little space for making my own decisions. School demands most of my time, and then I have responsibilities for the book. I've been writing since *The Piano Tuner*, but very little because of all the time that I've taken out of school traveling for the book. This is the last trip that I'm going to do now, so I will be able to write again. When I'm not in school, it's split between writing and family and friends.

Your plan is to continue with medicine and with writing and probably continue to travel throughout your life?

Right.

You've known that forever.

I think so. I mean it's strange in a way because I can't see a date when I'm going to settle down, but at a certain point, I'm going to sit down in one spot and stop, but I just don't know exactly when that's going to be.

I haven't been in one place for more than a month in the last—almost two years, I think. I rent apartments month to month. I can't even sign a year lease because I'm not in a spot for a year at a time. There's something unsettling about that. Fortunately, my parents live close to San Francisco so I sort of have a base there where I keep all my books. I mean, it's mainly my books—where I put my books.

Home is where you put your books.

Where I put my books. My room is entirely books. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, *interviewed by John McNally:*

Is there anything about the training or the mindset of a boxer that's applicable to the fiction writer?

Let me first clarify that I never fought any sanctioned amateur bouts, though I did have an AAU number for the Golden Glove tournament down in Lowell, Massachusetts, and boxed off and on for years in gyms and boys' clubs. I had a good jab and a lot of stamina, but I hated getting punched in the face, and so would "stick and move" too much and not plant my feet and try and throw a more damaging combination.

I know other writers far better than I'll ever be—Hemingway, Mailer, etc.—have talked about boxing and writing. For me, the only real parallel has to do with stamina and precision. Most of my life, I've run long distances to clear my head and feel good, anywhere from eight to twelve miles. As all those who do endurance workouts know, it can hurt! So if you haven't boxed before, imagine running up the tenth long hill in the tenth mile of your even longer run, sweat burning your eyes, panting for air, all while somebody's hitting you in the head and trying to knock you down and out.

Writing fiction never approaches this degree of physical suffering, of course, though it can have its spiritual equivalent: the truth is it is hard to work at something for years that nobody ever seems to take an interest in, all while stealing the time to do it, enduring most people's belief that it's just a hobby and nothing substantial will ever come of it, and never mind how difficult it is to do that thing in the first place. Yet you still have to keep finding the right word—the truest word—in that sentence and in that paragraph and in that page—and even if you do that, you may have to cut it all anyway because it doesn't work for other, sometimes mysterious reasons.

What I'm trying to say, I think, is that it helps a boxer if he or she simply enjoys the inherent pain of boxing the same way it helps the writer if she likes, or can cheerfully tolerate, the inherent difficulty of trying to write well and alone, all while trying to be a normal person making a living and raising a family, too. ■

DAVID MALOUF, *interviewed by Kevin Rabalais:*

Does one book grow organically out of the one before it? While working on one book, are you already thinking about the next?

I'll often have what seems to me like a good idea and write a few scenes or sketch some dialogue, but somewhere along the way, interesting as the idea may be, I will see that there's not enough there to take me through a book. It's not going to be a novel. Or it may start developing a kind of tightness of plot that I recognize as being a good idea for a book, and even a good book, but for someone else. It's not one of *my* books. I wait then until an idea comes along that does seem to have enough blank spaces, enough complexity, to keep me curious.

You seem to be as interested in the arc of your body of work as in the arc of an individual book.

It's really about knowing what it is that you do. You must be able to recognize that there are other things that you could do but basically they're not *you*. You could write those books, but it would be like producing imitations rather than real creations. ■

PHILIP LEVINE, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

You've known a number of poets who have committed suicide. How have you weathered your own spiritual crises?

Well, not too well, but well enough that I'm still here at seventy. I have never really been powerfully tempted to kill myself. I guess partly because I didn't put myself on the planet. I have that sense that since I didn't put myself on the planet, I don't really have a right to take myself off. I have a terrific wife and I've got terrific kids who pull me through and I've got wonderful friends. We've all had down times and difficult times. Certainly my poetry reflects it. We have an expression in Yiddish, *Keine hora*. It means, "May the evil eye not be watching."

It's like knocking on wood. I shouldn't brag, I don't know what's down the line, I don't know next year. I may want to do a number with the oven, but I don't know. I recently read a biography of Randall Jarrell; it seems he was such an upbeat guy up until a point, and then he fell into a heavy depression. He may or may not have killed himself. His wife says he didn't, but there's evidence that he stepped in front of a moving car, a speeding car, and died that way. So who knows what kind of chemical imbalance suddenly seized him and drove him to that? I don't know. I think one of the things that makes it risky to be a poet is you can't close off your emotions. They've got to constantly be there. You've got to be with them or you've got no source for your writing. So a good deal of what's wounded you in your life remains vital and alive because, in a curious way, you need it for your writing. Berryman once said that the best thing that could happen to a poet is that he suffers some trauma that will almost kill him, but not quite. Well, I think that's a romanticized version. When I look at our greatest poet, Whitman, I don't sense that he suffered a trauma that almost killed him. There's great joy in his writing. There's a vision of men and women at peace in this country and the great richness that we share. I know there's a Sylvia Plath in my generation, but there's also a W. S. Merwin and Galway Kinnell and an Adrienne Rich. You can see here's a woman who's determined to fight for what she thinks is justice. She couldn't be more different than Plath, and they're both terrific poets. ■

MELANIE BISHOP:

I have written as many as sixteen hours a day, several days in succession, when I've been up against a deadline and had no choice. During other periods I considered myself to be writing "full-time." I have had days where I wrote not at all, or one hour or two. Two is actually quite common for me. Two is, I believe, the number of hours Flannery O'Connor says (in *The Habit of Being*) was her daily limit.

More important than number of hours is the quality of the time spent. I've forced myself to sit and stare at the page for as many as six hours at a time, not allowing myself breaks other than to go to the bathroom or get something to eat. No matter how long I sat there that particular day, nothing was going to come of it. Not one word appeared on that page, and I was miserable. Described it to another writer friend of mine as "feeling like a kid in detention." I doodled, I made lists, I brushed my cat, I did everything *but*. Much more productive than this, I've found, is a less

stringent interpretation of "writing full-time." While I got nothing out of those six forced hours, on a different day, I actually got six fresh pages out of one painless hour, after which I felt like stopping, and did.

I know of writers who put in the nine-to-five work day, five days a week, treating it like any other job. And I know of writers who are parents who have no choice but to work when their kids are in daycare or with the nanny, however many hours that adds up to. It's a situation each writer needs to work out individually. I recommend trying different approaches and seeing what feels right. I also recommend starting out with modest goals, timewise. If you say, "I'm just going to write for the next hour," it's completely unintimidating, so you're likely to have no trouble reaching that reasonable goal. And if that hour goes well, you will likely write on into the next hour or the next, without even planning to. Always remember that writing, as a pursuit, involves much more than just the time spent at the computer or with pen in hand. There's all the thinking and gestation. Be lenient with yourself. There will always be those crunch days when you've pushed some deadline to the limit and have to punch in for a full day or an all-nighter. Allow yourself a more relaxed and accommodating routine the rest of the time. While some are fine with eight hours a day of actual writing, others swear by one hour or two. By experimenting, you'll find what's right for you. ■

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

I often think that the most spiritual thing that I do is write. You know, when I sit down every morning to try to do this work, I think it really does require many of the same things that are required of a more traditional religious faith.

Right, because there is faith involved.

Very much so; there is faith involved. There's compassion for other human beings, there's the commitment to trying to accept and—

And see that something good will happen.

Right, right. So I think there are a lot of things that are very spiritual about writing. ■

THOM JONES, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

I've been told that an interview you saw with fellow Iowa Writers' Workshop attendee Tracy Kidder stimulated you to begin publishing your work. Is that true?

Well, yes. I had arranged my life so I could work out—swimming, boxing, lifting weights, running marathons—and I remember I was working as a janitor. I had just won a trip around the world by writing a little ad jingle—I had been an ad writer. I got back, and I remember we were in a transition house—it was really sort of a dump—waiting to buy a house. And I came home from the graveyard shift and cracked a six pack of Rainier Ale, and I remember drinking a few. I was sitting there, in my janitor's shirt, which was sort of like a bowling shirt (it shone in the dark), and there was Tracy, an old friend from Iowa, talking to Tom Brokaw. And I thought, "*Ooh, what have I been doing? I have sort of let my life get out of control here. I'd like to write again.*" But I didn't at that time; I got drunk and continued to work and just think about it, and finally, when I bought a computer just after my daughter was born, I started writing.

Most first novelists are about forty years old. It takes a long time to figure things out and produce. Hemingway wrote The Sun Also Rises, *I think, when he was twenty-six, and Carson McCullers wrote the* The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter *when she was twenty-five, but that kind of thing is pretty rare. Swiss writer Robert Walser, one of Kafka's literary fathers, ultimately committed himself to an asylum and didn't write for the last thirty years of his life, saying, "I have not come here to write; I have come here to be mad." Do you ever feel like throwing in the towel and just going mad?*

I think that a lot of times a writer will be in a frame of mind … I mean, to have this exquisite perceptual sensitivity, you pay a very big price. And most fiction writers I know have seen the dark night of the soul, so that when you come back from that you may be able to tell your tale, or you may be too shaken to do it. You may be able to hang on and tell your stories for a year or two or three, or for the rest of your life, or you just might go over the edge into the abyss. I think there are a lot of gifted artists out there who experience this and can never really get it down, because it's happening so fast, and they might be just a shade over the edge—or not a shade in terms of degrees and velocity of it and the pressure of it.

Sometimes it would be nice, I think, just to be a normal person—optimistic, easy going, and trusting, and not too obsessed with this business that

I'm obsessed with—life and people, the world, and God, and so forth. ■

ELIZABETH McCRACKEN, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

What's your schedule like when you're writing?

I'm so bad. When I write, I write hard, frequently in Provincetown. It's a point of superstition that a huge percentage of all three of my books have been written in 6 Fishbourne Upper at the Work Center. That's the apartment I had both years when I was a fellow, and I've rented that apartment for a total of five months over the last few years. I've written much of this book in that apartment. I certainly do plenty of work away from Provincetown. It's not like I write two months out of the year, but I don't write every day. I don't write even close to every day. When I do, I write awful stuff. I know it's important for some people, but for me it's not a useful exercise at all. Which isn't to say that I don't have to make myself write. I really do. I vow I'm going to be good, then I turn on the TV and waste time, and I hate doing that. If I'm reading a book, I'm much more likely to write. I write the best at night. My concentration is better then. I sometimes write in the afternoon. The only time I write in the mornings is when I'm in Provincetown and I'm really in writing mode. I go to sleep and I wake up in the morning and go right to work. ■

ALICE MATTISON, *interviewed by Barbara Brooks:*

A writer engaged in a novel is a happy person, because once you figure out what you are doing—once you have characters and they start taking on flesh and saying things you don't expect them to say—it is a lovely thing to go on and write the book. In part I think I wrote *The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman* because in my own life I was dealing with my parents' extreme old age, which has been depressing and difficult. One thing that is not in the book is the extreme old age of anybody. I kept being interrupted by my parents' needs, and I felt that I was not honoring the work. One day I made up my mind that I was going to work every day on that book no matter what happened. From then on it kind of became addictive. I couldn't stop. I wrote when my father was in the hospital, and when he died. I felt a little brutal doing that, but I also felt it was my survival. It was making me happy. ■

JONATHAN RABAN, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

So much of the time, you can feel like you're not really working at all. You spend whole days reading, making notes, cogitating, taking a bath. Days and days and days can go by, and you try to persuade yourself feebly that you're working. Sometimes it works and sometimes you get very neurotic indeed. Sometimes you feel like you're the only human being in the whole world whose existence is totally unjustified—you ought to be going out and teaching school, doing something arduous and useful.

I think this feeling of being a sponger and a wastrel—which is the natural affliction of the professional writer—is far more easy to feel in places where other people are continuously on holiday, like the West Indies or Florida, than it is in good, solid nine-to-five-ish sort of places like Seattle, where, on the whole, the example of the people around you who have proper jobs to do is reassuring. I never understand how those people do it who move out to the West Indies or the south of France. They must feel so odd. I feel odd enough as it is. To be just surrounded by tourists drinking daiquiris—crazy! ■

ELIZABETH COX, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

When did you know you were a writer?

I don't think that I've ever thought of myself as a "Writer." I had done so many other things before writing fiction. I was married, I had two children, and I taught special education for six years, so it just hadn't occurred to me to write until I was in my early thirties. By that time I was already somebody in the world: a teacher, a mother, a wife. My brothers published books of poetry and I thought to myself, "I can do that." I wrote poetry first, published some poems, and returned to school to get my MFA in poetry. While there, I tried my hand at some short stories. Writing stories felt more natural to me. I felt as though I had moved into a slot. I didn't think of myself as a "Writer," I was just writing. ■

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

When I got to MacDowell, which was a wonderful place for me, I told people—and this was only a year and a half ago—I told people that I needed ten more years to write this book, and I'd already been writing for four years. A few months ago, I spoke to a painter from MacDowell,

Mark Wethli, a wonderful painter, and he said, So, Nomi, how's the writing going? And I said, Two, three more years, and he said, Nomi, you've made great strides! At MacDowell, you said a decade. But the time doesn't matter. Whatever it takes. ■

MARGARET ATWOOD, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

In an earlier interview you'd said that each person has a story, a personal narrative that is constantly replayed and revised. Would you be willing to name a couple of significant aspects of your own personal narrative at this time?

The thing about novelists is that they more or less duck the issue of their personal narratives while constructing narratives for other people. In a way, the personal narrative of the writer is not really a personal narrative; it is connected with all of the narratives of these other people. In other words: What was I doing in 1992? Was I living my personal narrative or was I living the personal narratives of the three characters I was involved in? You can't really separate them. When I think about what I was doing at the time, well, some of the time I was having lunch and going for walks, but at the same time, all of the time, I was engaged with these other people. **The writer lives multiple narratives, and that's what makes the writer different** from the person who is not a writer, who is usually just working on one story—namely, their own. ■

AMY HEMPEL, *interviewed by Debra Levy and Carol Turner:*

Do you think a writer should be in New York?

I don't see how it could hurt anybody, certainly early on. You know, put your face in front of people and go to a million readings. As to whether it's essential, certainly not. For a lot of people I know, almost everyone I know, it's easier to write somewhere other than New York, because New York is about publishing, not writing. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

Elizabeth McCracken told me that you often conceive of a novel, turn it around in your head and consider your idea from all angles for months and months, then sit down and simply write the book. Is that true?

Yes, except, take the word "simply" out of that sentence. I just wrote one of those Writer on Writing columns for the *New York Times,* and I'm writing about the fact that I have this beautiful book in my head for such a long time, and I'm so happy dreaming about it, and I get all settled and it's so lovely. Then comes the moment when I have to take it out of the air and put it onto paper, which is the process of killing it, beating all of the life and the beauty out of it. It's incredibly depressing for me to start writing a novel, because it's going from this fantastic realm of imagination to the reality of words. It's as if you had a pen pal that you were in love with, and then one day you had to get married and start living together. From everything being your perfect and beautiful dream, to having to go through the physical aspects of the day with somebody. It's very hard. Not as hard as having a real job, of course. ■

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

Photo: Marion Ettlinger

[Regarding old age] I guess I feel that most of the changes would be physical. In other words, I would feel weaker, slower, but I don't think I would really be all that different.

If I'm a writer and life is going to go on like this, unlike other people's, my life is not going to change that much. I'm not going to have children or grandchildren. So basically the way my life is now is the way I see my life in the future. I hope I'll be writing and producing books and so on. I'll always be reading and listening to music. I'll never live in a very large space; it's just not something I would do. I'll always be in a similar room—I can see that. It is who I am. I'm doing what I should be doing …

It's hard to imagine what I would be if I weren't a writer. It's a little bit like that section in the book [*A Feather on the Breath of God*] about how difficult it would be to imagine Christa not being German. It was so much a part of her, how she saw herself and presented herself to the world, that if you tried to separate her from that and think of her without her Germanness, you couldn't see her anymore. There's no Christa there. I feel that way about myself as a writer. If you take away that part of my identity, I don't really know what's there. ■

ASKOLD MELNYCZUK, *interviewed by William Pierce:*

I don't think any person has the right to do their work at someone else's expense. The claims some studied bohemians made about their need to be ruthless and selfish to pursue their art were, as often as not, the hash and the absinthe talking.

On the other hand, we as writers need to be a little, not to say ruthless, but self-protective. Life is rich and endlessly fascinating, and we could let ourselves get yanked into its dance and never stop until it was too late to write the little volumes that were our only real mission here. Horace had it right: art is long and life is short. If you can arrange it and have the discipline and the temperament for it, you can devote yourself 24/7 to the study of your art and expect to be rewarded by a lifetime of exhilaration and discovery. This may make it hard to be attentive to a spouse or a child—very often this dawns on artists a little after the fact, and they suffer the rest of their lives trying to reconcile the conflicting demands on their time. ■

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

Now I'm at a point where I've been writing a little amount of time a day, from half an hour to two or three hours, and producing tons of stuff, good stuff. Other times, I need a month to write a hundred pages no one will ever see. Of sitting there every hour of the day, doing it. And then the next month, I can write easily again. It just demands different time from me. Sometimes I'm incredibly productive in half an hour. Other times, I really need all day to get a paragraph.

Do you think that's related to the material?

Very related to the material. Very related to the material. ■

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

When the children were young, I could never go into a room and shut the door to write. I wrote with them in the room, or nearby—or outside in the yard, but that never lasted for too long, because I'd just keep running to the window to check on them. There really wasn't any "hiding away" so that I could write. I mostly wrote when they were asleep, but of course by that time I was usually too tired to write for very long.

I can remember sitting at the kitchen table writing, with one leg crossed

to cradle the baby, and its bottle would be propped, and the whole thing would work as long as my right hand was free to hold the pen. A lot of what I wrote in those years was about my frustration at not being able to write. Raising children is a messy, intensely passionate affair that can be distracting and very draining for a writer. I used to wish I had more time, two more hands, more energy and patience, a room of my own, an office, an island far, far away from the runny noses and diapers, the arguments, and the sticky floors, but I never, ever wished that I didn't have children. I needed them the way I needed to write. It was a convoluted and prolific dilemma. ■

KEVIN CANTY, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

Instead of saying, "I want to be a writer," and then sitting around wishing I were a writer, I've been really trying to throw myself into it, giving it as much energy as I could. It's meant that I don't get to spend as much time with my family as I'd like to; it's meant that the hours in the week are sometimes very constrained. Right now, I'm teaching, and trying to write a novel, and doing this traveling around on business, and trying to have a family life. It ends up being more hours than there really are in the week.

It's really taken me a long time to get around to writing. I'm forty-one years old and this is my first collection of short stories [*A Stranger in This World*]. I don't think I could have gotten to it much earlier, but I'm really looking forward to having the time to write. I've made my life in the expectation I'm going to have the time to write a novel. To me it's a challenge and a wonderful project. I feel like there's a lot left undone.

I'm sitting here as a writer with a book out. I have a job. If I hadn't been in Portland with a dream of doing that eight or nine years ago, I wouldn't be where I am now. ■

ANDRE DUBUS III, *interviewed by John McNally:*

When you first began writing, you were a single guy. Now you're married and have three kids. In what ways has having a family impacted your writing?

Yes, now I'm blessed with a family. And I do see it as just that—a blessing. I had no idea all those sweet old ladies were right all along, that when you meet the one you're going to marry, you just know it, and if you're fortunate enough to have kids, you'll feel more love in you than you ever

thought possible. To answer your question, when I was single, my sole enduring thought from day to day was my writing. Now it is, and will forever be, my children. How to nurture them, keep them safe and healthy, send them out into the world as strong, loving, responsible people. This is not to say I no longer think of my writing daily. I do! In fact, because of the deep spiritual changes parenthood opens up in you—a greater capacity for love, vulnerability, fear of loss, acceptance of your place in the mortal coil, etc.—it has got to ultimately deepen the writing, too. And yes, the truth is there are more demands on my time than there were when I was still single, which makes time at the desk a bit lean sometimes, but so what! In no time at all, I'll be sitting on the couch in an empty house wondering why my children aren't calling me from their adult lives I'm no longer really part of; if I miss an occasional writing session to be with them, that's good! ■

ROBERT OLEN BUTLER, *interviewed by Heather Iarusso:*

Do you tell your students to write every day?

Having to go to the depth of your own unconscious to create a work of art is very scary and demanding, and it has an interesting characteristic to it. That is that if you have not been writing, it's a terrible and excruciating process to force your way down as deep as you must go to write well. But once you get there and you go back the next day and the next day and the next, it is still challenging and daunting, but it's not nearly as difficult. The channel stays open for a while.

But if you tell yourself you're going to write on the weekends or this week but not the next or during the summer, it's literally impossible. I think you cannot be an artist in fiction doing that. For me, if I stop writing for three or four days, when I go back to the work, it is as if I have never written before in my life. The way in to that very difficult place seals itself up and erases all traces of itself. ■

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

I know what should be at the top of a to-do list; it's always the same: take care of my family, write, work, keep going, try to stay healthy so you can do the other things. There isn't much else that means anything. I read a lot, but that's not a must-do or a to-do, it's simply a do-do. ■

THOM JONES, *interviewed by Jim Schumock:*

When I write, I go into a manic state. When I write in the first voice, I become the character, like a method actor. And I get so excited when I'm working on something that I can't wait to get back to the computer and polish it. I'll rewrite maybe thirty times, and I know pretty much when a piece is done, and then I'll have to go through a new incubation. I sort of crash, and about three weeks later I'm charged up enough again to write another one; so I was doing one a month or a chapter a month. That seems to be my rhythm now, and it's working out nicely. ■

KEVIN CANTY, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

I've always thought that writing was something I could do and something that I wanted to do. But on the other hand, from the time that I took that workshop with Joyce Thompson to the time that this book was published was eight or nine years of pretty steady, flogging work. I tried to get up in the morning and put in three or four hours a day, Monday through Friday. James Joyce wrote *Dubliners* in about a year when he was twenty-six or twenty-seven, but he was a genius.

I usually do it sometime after the first cup of coffee in the morning. That's because I lock myself in a room and sit there and try to write, and restlessness just goes with the territory. I have to have a swivel chair. I talk to myself when I write. I tried to write at my office at the University of Florida, and it was awful because I'd get all coffeed up and get into a writing frenzy, and I'd roam the hallways, cornering people and yelling at them. I'd get off into my own world and it took a while to switch back. Restlessness is a habit of mine. ■

PAUL THEROUX, *interviewed by Michael Upchurch:*

The monotony of staying in one place is the best thing for writing a novel. Having regular habits, a kind of security, but especially no big surprises, no shocks—for me, I'm talking about. Just to be in a room plugging away. That's the best thing for you. Personal appearances, prizes—those are all disruptions. You need encouragement; you need good things to happen to you, cheerful people around you. But I have never been able to work well except in a very monotonous, predictable atmosphere, with placid, even-tempered people. I can't be around excitable people.

I always loved writing in the winter when it was dark. "Writing weather," I used to think. "Writing light." It was dark, with just a pool of artificial light. Everyone indoors. I was indoors, working on something good. And there was a completeness to it and a monotony to it that I needed.

Every good thing that has happened to me has been a surprise. It's never been something I expected or demanded. It was always a bonus of writing. Publishing books early on and getting advances for only one or two thousand dollars—it didn't matter to me. Of course I would have wanted more. But that didn't discourage me. It didn't make me say, as it does some people, "I'm not going to sweat my guts out for a pittance."

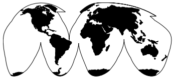
I was perfectly willing to sweat my guts out for a pittance because I had the book. I always felt that the book was the thing, that if a book was any good, it had a long and fruitful life. So I wasn't looking for a killing early on. I honestly don't think it would have changed anything.

I wouldn't have had as interesting a life, though. That's for sure. ■

THISBE NISSEN, *interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies:*

In another twenty years, what ability or quality, either professional or personal, do you hope you will have discovered, acquired, or refined?

Whether it's the answer to that question or not, the first word that comes to my mind, and maybe it's because of the state of things right now, is—okay, two—two words—peace and sustainability. I am trying to live sustainably, and writing is a sustainable life for me. It's tied in with teaching and listening to people, and hearing and sharing stories. A writing life is also a life that makes sense to me, because it can involve vegetable gardening, and it can involve a community of people who are engaged in projects and processes together. Then I start to sound like the flaky hippy I really am. I want to keep going and I want to keep going well, and I want to keep going in a way that I'm proud of, and that I can look on and say, I have tried to live my life well. ■



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