



# CLOSE-UP:



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

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**NAMI MUN**, interviewed by Greg Schutz:

*Why and when did you begin writing, and what did your early efforts look like?*

My early efforts looked like a clown—a cheap, drunk, whorish clown with smeared makeup, who drove around the country in his banged-up clown car. The emotions relayed were garish and obvious, the writing was strained, and my story ideas meandered all over the place: one day I was writing detective noir, another day a Korean-gothic tale about a girl being tortured by everyone in her hometown—think *Blair Witch* meets “The Lottery.” And still another day, a magical-realism story about a woman suffering from Sjögren’s syndrome, also known as dried-up tear ducts. But with every single horrific page, I was learning something new—the most important being how to detect an ill-fated story. ■



**TOBIAS WOLFF**, interviewed by Travis Holland:

*In your short story collection Our Story Begins, in the introduction, you speak of the “actual, now vanished writer that you were,” when talking about whether or not you were going to revise these early stories. And it made me think of the writer that you were, that “vanished writer” you speak of, when you wrote a story like “In the Garden of the North American Martyrs” and the writer you see yourself as now. I wonder if you can speak about going back and looking at those early stories.*

Well, I like that story a lot still. And I’m in sympathy with it and what it says. I don’t know that I could actually write that story now. I don’t know why. None of us are the same after thirty years, and I wrote this thirty years ago. I’m not good at saying how I’ve changed, though. I’m not good at seeing what the difference is. I think the readers of these stories probably have a better grasp of the difference between my early stories and the later ones, because I’m always inside myself—it’s hard to step out. I guess reading these stories from a distance of years is one way to do it. But it’s hard for me to put a name to what kind of change has occurred in those years.

*You’re simply writing from a different place now.*

Yeah. I had a certain black humor in those days that flashes a little less often now in my work, or so momentarily that it isn’t so much a feature of the work. Some of my earlier stories—“Hunters in the Snow” or “Next Door”—when I read them, people laugh, and then they’ll come up and say, “Ah, I didn’t realize it was so funny, until you started reading it.” I don’t know what to attribute that to. Some shift in my angle of vision. I’m not sure exactly where it is—it isn’t that I don’t have a black sense of humor. But it does show up a little less often, I think. As I look back on these stories, I do begin to see an obsessive attention to questions of identity, and confusions of identity. Questions of authenticity—how do human beings become authentic? What does it mean to be true to yourself, as Polonius famously tells his son? I see those sorts of questions recurring in the work more and more as time goes on. ■

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

*Before you published The Boat, you wrote a novel—seven hundred pages of what you’ve called a “spectacular, multi-dimensional failure.”*

That was the slim version. There were probably two hundred or three hun-

dred pages that were sliced off to leave those svelte seven hundred pages.

*Would readers of *The Boat* recognize you as the author of those “svelte seven hundred pages”?*

I haven't read it for a couple of years now, but the last time I did read back over it, there were bits and pieces that made me think, Oh, there's something here. But I never actually pondered resurrecting it. I never went back and made my way through that massive corpse. I did recognize in it a lot of my own weaknesses and proclivities, but I think on paper the two books would seem very different. ■

**DAVID GATES**, interviewed by Brian Gresko:

Most great writers didn't start out great—it took them a while to find their voices, even their subjects. Read some very early Beckett, or some very early Cheever. Some very early Shakespeare, for that matter. Certainly there are exceptions. And there are also instances, a lot of them, in which writers have done their best work relatively early in their careers—but that isn't to say it didn't take them time and effort to get to that good early work. You could argue, for instance, that my own first novel is the best I ever wrote, but I was learning how to write for eleven years before it came out. ■

**PETER HO DAVIES:**

When you publish your first story, it becomes a touchstone, a place of confidence, something you go back to in grim moments and you think, “At least I could do that.” But then everything you write afterwards, for a little while, you compare to that thing. The first draft of the new story always sucks compared to the last draft of the old story. That sense of competing with yourself can be kind of crushing, even overwhelming. **I published my first story when I was twenty-one and I didn't publish my next story until I was twenty-six. This was for a variety of reasons, but one of them at least was that I was trying to write the same story again.** Yet every effort to that end would seem to fall short. What I eventually learned was to stop trying to do the same thing. It helped me deal with that sense of competi-



Photo credit: Bering Photography

tion with myself. So if the last story was very serious, why shouldn't the next one be comic? By changing the framework, changing the terms of comparison, the stories become incommensurable. You can thereby freeze that internal critic, that internal voice of judgment. ■

**CHRISTOPHER COAKE**, interviewed by Andrew Scott:

I spent the six years between my MA and MFA degrees reading a lot of the big postmodern books. Pynchon, DeLillo, Rushdie, David Foster Wallace. My ambitions during that period were all about writing a big experimental book, to explode literature, etc., etc.

I still have a lot of fragmentary writing from that time. Bits of a failed novel, about a movie theater and the people who work there, where the movies all come to life as part of the narrative... it was all intellectually interesting to me, but I just didn't feel like I was *connecting* with any of these stories and ideas. I was writing all of this in scraps while living with Joellen. And for five years she was fighting bone cancer, had numerous ups and downs—two years of chemo, twelve major surgeries. So when she was doing well I was focused on enjoying our time. When she wasn't doing well, I was devastated, too.

I met her when I was a young man, both physically and emotionally. Loving her, marrying her, experiencing her sickness next to her—these things all pretty much remade me, completely. So when I look back on my writing from that time, what there is of it, it's obvious to me that I was trying and failing to find any way of dealing with all these monumental changes. I was retreating, writing-wise, into intellectual gamesmanship. Trying to think my way out of the sadness and the uncertainty and the fear.

This is all necessary backstory to answer your question. When I went to OSU and began writing the stories that became *We're in Trouble*, I had a revelation: I'd changed too much to write the big, playful postmodern book. At least not right then, and probably not ever. It was a painful revelation—essentially what I had to come to grips with was the fact that my strength in writing was not in being blindingly brilliant, like some of my heroes, but rather in conveying powerful emotion, in working with characters and emotional logic. That the stuff I'd been trying for six years—this heavily stylized, maximalist, metafictional approach—was all wrong for the stories I had to tell.

**So I tried my best to compromise. My ideal story, now—the one I like to read, the one I try to write—is both emotionally complex and intellectually interesting, all at the same time. My feeling is that the vast majority of readers, like me, want to *care* first and foremost, and wrangle with envelope-pushing second. ■**

**PATRICIA HENLEY:**

I probably submitted my work too soon. You can waste plenty of time and emotional energy around submitting your work before it's ready. The part of my own process that led to publication was tapping into the vein of material that was mine and mine alone. When I first began writing fiction I was just messing around, with story lines that had nothing to do with me, with sentences, just to learn how to write sentences. When I started writing about what mattered to me, then I heard my fictional voice and my stories take on power they had not had before. I've seen this happen over and over with young writers. They claim their true subject matter and everything falls into place. ■

**CHARLES JOHNSON,**

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*When you were twelve years old, your mother gave you a journal and told you to write. Did she have any idea what she started?*

She started lots of things, most of which didn't succeed: clarinet lessons, piano lessons, dancing lessons. None of that stuck with me because I wanted to be a cartoonist. My mother had many artistic interests, and she shared those with me. I found the journal attractive because it gave me a place to write my thoughts. You're absolutely free, in a journal, to say whatever you want.

And that's why she gave it to me; she wanted to read it. But I couldn't get away from it after I began. It evolved into a kind of writer's journal. I put them aside once I'm done. By then, it has served its purpose of helping me clarify some of my thoughts. I think it's an extraordinarily good tool for beginning writers because it helps them get accustomed to thinking about experience in language.

**I tell my students that it's difficult to write sometimes, just to get to the writing, to sit down and finish a story. But if you write each day, even**

**just a paragraph in your journal, you're never outside the creative process.** When I write fiction, I hardly touch my journal. ■

**KENT HARUF**, *interviewed by Jim Nashold:*

*What were some of the books you remember reading?*

As a kid I read books that weren't great literature, but I read all the time. I read a lot of Western stories about horses and cowboys, all the Black Stallion series, *Green Grass of Wyoming*, *Thunderhead*, and *My Friend Flicka*. I was very much interested in Western stories at that time.

*Were your parents readers or storytellers?*

My parents read a good deal every day. My dad read mostly biographies and history and newspapers. My mom read fiction, and also read us parts of novels when we traveled to my grandparents' place in South Dakota. My father was a great storyteller, and told stories after dinner. The stories I enjoyed the most were about his own background growing up on a homestead in North Dakota, and about ranch life. As a family, when we were on vacation, we took turns telling stories. Somebody would start, then somebody else would pick it up and move it on. So that was part of our entertainment. ■

**ANTONYA NELSON**,

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*You've said that your parents weren't prohibitive with your reading material when you were growing up. Was this from an early age?*

Our house was open. My parents taught literature at Wichita State University. They were connected to their graduate students and to the politics of the times. They marched in peace protests. Lots of people, including writers, passed through our house. My father was friends with Allen Ginsberg, who wrote a series of poems set in Wichita. There's one poem, "Wichita Vortex Sutra," in which Ginsberg claimed that I am the little girl. Our house was always full not just with books but with the notion of writing—not just writing but cutting-edge writing. My parents always allowed me to read anything. I read *Valley of the Dolls* and then *Emma*. I can remember reading *The Naked and the Dead*, and I can also remember finding my father's pornography library. **That kind of freedom, that kind of trust,**

is rare. They permitted their kids to be exposed. Ironically, they didn't have that trust with food. They were a lot more restrictive with that than with my reading diet. My eating habit, I should point out, is horrible, while my reading habit is terrific.

*Your parents were both teachers in the same department, and now you're married and you teach in the same department as your husband. Does it surprise you that your life echoes your parents' this way?*

Sometimes people say, "Of course you're a writer. Your parents were English professors." But I have four siblings who don't write. I think I've channeled in this direction because I had a desire to please my parents and because **I have an inclination to read and write. I have a brother and sister who are both psychologists, and this comes from the same background and the same type of interest: to sit around and hear stories all day, to be invested in human stories at a high level.** ■

**ANN PATCHETT**, *interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

I would read what my mother and stepfather read. People say that it's not whether your parents read to you but whether you see your parents reading serious literature that makes the difference. I have no memory of anyone reading anything to me as a child, but I have many memories of my parents engaged in serious reading. ■



Photo credit: Melissa Ann Penney

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

*Beginning as a teenager, you worked at libraries for many years. How has your relationship with books developed through this kind of work?*

A lot of writers say that when they first went into a library they were awestruck around all the books and developed a great respect for books. For me, the experience was the exact opposite. I shelved fiction from the time I was fifteen until I was eighteen, and the main thing I learned was that books are objects. Like all teenage shelvees, the part of the job I hated was the work.

You need to be a fairly obsessive-compulsive person to enjoy alphabetizing books. But I loved being in the library. I spent a huge amount of time reading books while on the job—classics, classics that had fallen out of favor, and young adult books, which my mother didn't approve of because she feels that teenagers should be reading *The Human Comedy* or Dickens. I lost a lot of respect for books in a healthy way because I looked at the jacket photos and thought, "Practically anybody can write a book." Many people treat their books as sacred objects and put acetate covers on them. I get lipstick on them. I read in the bathtub and while I eat. I don't fold down corners, and I never write in books—there's nothing worse than somebody who writes in books—but I use cocktail napkins or whatever comes in handy to mark my place. **Library work gave me the sense that books are non-sacred objects that people can use.**

*What made you seek a library job when you were that young?*

It was either that or waiting tables. No, that's not exactly it. I was not perfect at getting books back to the library on time. There were times when I was in debt to the public library and wasn't allowed to go back. A huge benefit of working in libraries was not having to pay the fines.

I was a clumsy, socially backward teenager. I didn't want to waitress or work in a coffee shop or sell cookies. On my fifteenth birthday, I went into the library in Newton, Massachusetts, asked for a job, and got one. I worked at that same library until just before my twenty-second birthday, which is when I went to Iowa. That library building doesn't exist any more, but it heavily inspired the library in *The Giant's House*. Much more than any person or thing that I've ever written about, there is a direct correlation between that building and the fictional building in the novel.

*Did you write during those early years?*

I was a kid who always wrote. I didn't write much fiction, but I wrote rhyming verse. Actually, I probably wrote plenty of fiction, but I was better at metered verse, so I've chosen to remember that as what I wrote. ■

**HA JIN**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*You served in China's People's Liberation Army for five and a half years. You hadn't had much formal education, nor had you been widely exposed to literature. Is it true that when you were on the front you found a Chinese translation of War and Peace?*



Someone made that up. I was a regular soldier on the front, where it was very difficult to get any books. They just weren't available. Later, when I transferred inland to headquarters one hundred miles from the front, I began to have access to literary books, but nothing like *War and Peace*. *Don Quixote* was passed on to me, but I had it for only one day. I couldn't read all of it before I had to pass it on to someone else.

*Since Mao had closed the schools in China at the start of the Cultural Revolution, was that your first experience with literature?*

I don't know if it was a genuine experience because I didn't have time to read it carefully. My first real experience was with two textbooks my parents sent to me that contained ancient Chinese poems. I read many of those poems and memorized some of them.

*When did you decide you wanted to study literature?*

In the early days, when my parents sent those textbooks, I was interested in good poems and literary works. This didn't mean that I wanted to study literature. When I decided that I wanted to go to college, I planned to study science. I wanted to be an engineer. **We were living in peace, and I realized that I needed some kind of education. When I took the exams, I couldn't compete with the science majors because I didn't go to middle school or high school. You can't teach yourself chemistry; you need a lab.** So I was a rather weak applicant. Then, I became more interested in the humanities, but not in writing. Philosophy was my first choice, then classics, then library science or history. English was my last choice. ■

**LEE SMITH**, interviewed by Susan McInnis:

I have always wanted to be a writer. I have always written. Even as a child, I wrote all these dumb little things, and I just didn't think of a reader for a long time. I mean, I was writing seriously all the way through college. I wrote my first novel when I was in college. I didn't have the notion of a reader then, so it never bothered me whether somebody would even read it, much less like it.

*Did you grow up in a family of storytellers?*

Oh, yeah. I grew up in Grundy, Virginia, which is not at all what you think of as Virginia. You think of houses with columns and wealthy people and a certain elegance and grace, but Grundy is the roughest place you've ever seen. That southwest corner of Virginia is much more like West Virginia.

It's coal-mining country where the Appalachian Mountains are straight up and down. There's nothing scenic there. It's not at all like the Blue Ridge.

*No rolling hills.*

No. It's not pretty. It's hard, hard country where I grew up.

*And did people tell stories?*

My whole family—well, they won't shut up! And in a way I was particularly receptive because I was an only child. I grew up surrounded by relatives. On my father's side—the Grundy half—there's still a houseful of cousins living on one side and the other half across the road—just tons of people. But because I was an only child, I also had time to read a lot and reflect a little bit more. My own children have not turned out to be readers, exactly. I think it's because they were born so close together and they all amused each other so much. But that wasn't my childhood. I was very receptive to all this storytelling that went on in my family, by women as well as men. ■

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

*Was writing always something you thought you would do?*

I did not know I wanted to be a writer when I was a child in Louisiana. It wasn't until I went to California and ended up in the library and began reading a lot that I knew it. I began to read many great novels and stories, and I did not see myself or my people in any of them. It was then that I tried to write.

There were few people on the plantation who had any education at all, especially the old people my aunt's age and my grandmother's age. **They had never gone to school, and they didn't have any books. I used to write letters for them. I had to listen carefully to what they had to say and how they said it, the words they tried to use. I put their stories down on paper, and they would give me tea cakes. If I wanted to play ball or shoot marbles, I had to finish writing fast. It was then that I began to create.** I would write about their gardens, the weather, cooking, preserving. I would talk about anything. I've been asked many times when I started writing. I used to say I started writing in the small Andrew Carnegie Library in Vallejo, California, but I realize now that I started writing on the plantation. ■

ANN PATCHETT, *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Let's talk about your development as a writer. How did you get started writing fiction?*

I don't have any other skills. I was one of those kids. When somebody said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" when I was five, I said that I wanted to be a writer. I don't know where that came from, but it came very young and it never seemed to stop.

*What did you do to develop your craft?*

It depends on what point in time you're speaking of. I came home from school and wrote a lot of stories. **I read copiously. I spent an enormous amount of time alone. I've always been a real loner. I have the exact disposition for the job.** I have no attention deficit disorder. I can sit in a straight-backed chair for eight hours and read Proust. I might have a hard time sitting in a straight-backed chair for eight hours when I'm trying to write, but even then, when I'm on a roll, when I'm really into a project, I can do it. ■

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

*Did you keep a journal when you were a kid? When did you start writing?*

I always wrote.

*Oh did you?*

Yeah, crazy things like being eight years old and deciding, Okay, today I'm going to write the next Bobbsey Twins mystery. My mother was a reader. She was a grade-school teacher. It's interesting that her maiden name was Read. Before I started grade school, I would stay with my grandmother Read while my mom was teaching and my dad was working on the farm. I remember my grandmother would shut off half of the house in the winter so she didn't have to heat it. She had a bedroom that was right off the kitchen, so she just spent her time in that half of the house. In the shut-off front bedroom there were built-in bookshelves that had all of my grandfather's books. My grandfather was dead, so I never knew him, but in the afternoons, when my grandmother and I were supposed to take our naps, I would always wait till my grandmother was asleep and then I would sneak into the cold front bedroom. I would sit on the cold linoleum floor and just hold books in my hands and turn the pages. I couldn't read them.

I'd just turn the pages, and I loved the way they felt. I loved the way they smelled. I was in love with books. So this love affair with the written word started before I could actually read the written word. Also, I was really fascinated by Mom as a teacher. She would come home in the afternoons and she would have these books with her, and lesson plans and papers that she would sit at the kitchen table and grade that night. I remember being in love with the rose shade of the grading pencil. At one point I said, Okay, Mom, I'm going to make a test for your students. I had all these odd questions on there like how many stars are in the sky, how many cigars can one man smoke in a day. And my mom, bless her heart, she said, Okay. Yes, I'll take these to school. I doubt she actually gave it to her students. But a combination of those things—my grandmother, my grandfather's books, and then my mother being a teacher.

*So when she was doing her books and her schoolwork, she must have been able to extend her focus enough to let you in, so that it was a friendly time for you.*

It was a beautiful time. Some of my fondest memories are sitting around the kitchen table and doing my school lessons while she was doing hers. As I got older, and could actually help her, I would grade things.

*You could not help but be a teacher.*

I guess so. I mean, I always wanted to be. You know how lucky we both are to be doing the things that we love.

*I know. It's really true.*

**It is. I think of all the jobs I had before, all the factory work I did, and the farm work. My wife and I got married really young. I was nineteen and Deb was a week away from her eighteenth birthday.** I was between my sophomore and junior year in college, and about the only classes I passed were lit classes that I was really interested in, because the other times I was just in love. I didn't want to go to class, so at the end of the year, the grade-point average wasn't particularly good. Mom and Dad had agreed that Deb and I would pay the rent and the food and all those things, but Dad would pay tuition. Well, at the end of that year, Dad said, I don't think I'm going to pay the tuition for those kind of grades. So I dropped out and we left.

*Oh, wow.*

There's a section in *Turning Bones* where I write about the first time I had

to confront my father after literally flunking out of school. He was sowing a field of soybeans that day, and I filled up two buckets with soybeans and walked down to the field. When he got to the end of a row, the planter being empty at that point, I went out and filled up the planter buckets for him. He just looked at me and said something like, Make sure you fill them even. And that was all he said to me. We spent the rest of the afternoon, my father going from one end of the field to the next, and me coming out to fill the planter. The two of us together sowed that field, and that was the day that I fully understood what it was to be a man. To take responsibility for your life, and, no matter what your life had given you, to keep going to that end of the field and back to this end of the field, and to have this sense of duty and responsibility. ■

**MELANIE RAE THON,**

*interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:*

*You said that reading wasn't a large part of your life when you were young. Did it surprise your family when you began to write?*

They were surprised. I wrote dreadful poetry and a few short stories when I was in high school. My mother thought I was going to be a lawyer or maybe a judge or even an artist like my older sister, but she was the one who helped me find *Wuthering Heights* and *Anna Karenina*. It's not a bad beginning, really—Tolstoy and Emily Brontë and *The Ghost of Dibble Hollow*, which is a book I want to recommend to everybody. **As soon as I started college, I told people I was a writer. I was incredibly naïve. I had no idea what it would mean to live as a writer or what it would cost me.** ■

**MICHAEL CUNNINGHAM,** *interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*Many writers are born from their early interest in reading. How did you know you wanted to write?*

I wrote *The Hours* in part because *Mrs. Dalloway* had such a profound early impact on me as a writer. I read it when I was in high school, and although it wasn't of course the first book I'd read, it was the first one that showed me what could be achieved using only ink and paper. I'd never seen such complex, rhythmic, graceful sentences before. I remember thinking—remember, I was fifteen at the time—Wow, she was doing with language something like what Jimi Hendrix did with his guitar. There aren't many of

us who insist on the connection between Virginia Woolf and Jimi Hendrix, and I'm proud to be one of the few. Reading *Mrs. Dalloway* didn't turn me instantly into a writer—that happened years later—but it did turn me into a reader.

I didn't start writing until I was in college. I'd wanted to be a painter, and labored at painting for years before I began to realize that I wasn't really gifted enough. I kept getting discouraged, starting over, getting discouraged again, and finally just sort of packing it in for the day and going back to my dorm to get stoned. I started writing fiction as a consolation of sorts, without expecting it to lead anywhere, and quickly found that the attempt to convey life on the printed page was endlessly consuming to me in a way painting had never been. I've come to suspect that what we call "talent" is inextricably linked to a bottomless fascination with the process itself; that an artist of any kind possesses, among other qualities, the desire to do it and do it and do it until it comes out right. Over the years my convictions about my abilities have waxed and waned, but I've never once lost my interest in writing itself. ■

## LOOKING BACK

by Andrew Porter

I think most writers have a tendency to discount their early work, especially those pieces that were written when they were first starting out, when they were just figuring out how to write a short story in the first place.

In some cases, we're probably right to discount those early efforts. I know, for me, there's a certain cringe factor involved. Sometimes simply remembering the basic premise of one of those early stories is enough to make me shake my head and vow never to look back. Still, I've recently begun to wonder whether my own tendency to always look forward—to always believe that my best work lies before me, that the fiction I wrote five years ago isn't nearly as good as the fiction I'm writing today—doesn't prevent me from recognizing the potential value in some of those old unpublished stories that are just sitting there on my hard drive or collecting dust in a folder.

I'll give you an example.



Photo credit: Chris Krajcar

A few years ago, I was putting together a packet of stories to show my girlfriend. This was a little ritual we had. I'd show her a bunch of the stories I'd been working on, she'd read them, and then tell me which ones she felt were ready to "send out," and which ones still needed more work. On this occasion, I decided to throw in an additional story, a story called "Departure," which I had written when I was twenty-three, over ten years before. For reasons that are probably too complicated to explain, "Departure" was actually one of the few stories I still possessed from my early twenties, and it was a story I had held on to more out of a sense of nostalgia than any type of conviction about its literary merits. To be honest, I can't even remember what possessed me to give it to her in the first place. I probably thought it would be interesting, or amusing, to see what she thought. After all, I hadn't looked at that story myself in over ten years.

When she got back to me a few days later with her comments, however, I was surprised to learn that she had not only liked "Departure" the best, but that she felt it was definitely better than any of the other stories I had sent her. In other words, the stories I had been working on that past year. I must have laughed. I can't really remember. All I know is that I didn't believe her, and so I sent out the same packet to another reader, a friend from graduate school, who got back to me a few days later with exactly the same reaction. He liked all of the stories, he said, but "Departure" was definitely his favorite.

Though still skeptical, I eventually did an extensive revision of "Departure" and sent it out to a few magazines, and was surprised, a few weeks later, when a magazine I had admired for years decided to accept it. A few months after its publication, I learned that "Departure" had won a Pushcart Prize and, a few months after that, that it had been selected for NPR's *Selected Shorts*. In short, it soon became my most successful story to date, and yet the more good things that seemed to happen, the more perplexed I was. All I could think about was how long it had sat there in a dusty folder at the bottom of my desk, how long I had ignored it.

Sometimes it's a dismissive comment from a friend or editor, sometimes it's the sheer quantity of rejection slips piling up in your drawer, or sometimes it's simply your own conviction that a story you had written years before couldn't possibly be as good as the story you're writing now. There are any number of reasons for why stories get orphaned and forgotten, why they get sent to the darkest corners of our hard drives. Sometimes they may belong there, but other times I think they remain there simply because

we've chosen to forget them, or worse, because we've given up on them.

At the end of each semester, when I'm talking about revision in my classes, I always tell my students that they should never give up on a story out of frustration. If they lose interest in a story, that's one thing. If their initial impulse to tell the story is gone, that's fine. Those are both legitimate reasons to put a story to rest. But if they're giving up on a story simply because it's not working the way they want it to work, or because it's taking too long to revise, or because they're confused by what they want to do with it, they shouldn't close the door completely. Maybe they just need to put it away for a while. Give themselves a few months, or maybe even a year, away from it. But if there's something at the heart of the story that still interests them, that keeps pulling them back, that still haunts them years later, then that's probably a sign that there's something worth struggling for there, that somewhere, in the midst of all that mess, they might even find some of their very best work. ■

**ALLEN MORRIS JONES**, *interviewed by David Abrams:*

*How old were you when you first started writing?*

I published my first short story at the age of fourteen, mostly due to my eighth-grade English teacher, a woman by the name of Billie Flemming, who has really been the only significant academic encourager of my writing. She arranged to have one of my short stories published in a children's magazine. I think it was called *The Children's Album*.

*Do you remember what prompted you to start writing in the first place, back when you were a teenager?*

Impossible to say, really. I've always been a voracious reader. I can barely remember not being able to read. By the time I was in second grade, I was hiding Louis L'Amour and Hardy Boys novels inside my math textbooks, seeing what the Sacketts were up to when I should have been memorizing multiplication tables—a math handicap that exists to this day. I can barely balance my checkbook. For a certain personality type, it seems that writing is a natural extension of reading. ■

**PERRI KLASS**, *interviewed by Charlotte Templin:*

I am very, very attached to many of the classic girls' books of the nine-



teenth and early twentieth centuries. Many years ago I wrote an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* called “Stories for Girls about Girls Who Write Stories,” and I think one of the reasons I feel so strongly connected to those books—including *Little Women*—is that they tend to be stories about growing up writing—and reaching for some level of writing professionalism. ■

**CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE**, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum:

*Have you always aspired to be a writer?*

I thought I was a writer when I was a child. I grew up in a place where being a writer wasn't particularly venerated. When people ask when I began, I thought I was a writer when I was four. [*Laughs.*] And it was a university town, but it was also a place where the people who were respected and venerated were the physicists and the mathematicians and the doctors and the lawyers. So a writer, hmmm...

*The literary tradition in Nigeria, is it nascent? Burgeoning?*

No, no, it's not necessarily nascent. It's been there and was there—my family lives in Achebe's house. I grew up in that house, where Achebe has actually lived, and there were a number of other writers in Nsukka. There is a wonderful tradition of writing coming from that university town. But again, the books were loved and people respected it, but it wasn't—parents didn't say to their children, “You are to be a writer.”

*They don't say that anywhere. Where do they say that?*

There is some respect with the idea of being a writer.

*Sure, but no parent will tell his child to be a writer. Especially immigrant parents.*

Yeah, I was just going to say that. Yes, immigrant parents, no way. ■

**MYLA GOLDBERG**, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:

I've been writing for as long as I can remember. Writing is all I ever wanted to do. I remember sitting at my grandmother's table using crayons to illustrate this story I'd just written about Edgar Allan Poe arising from the grave. I've always been morbid and I've always wanted to write. **When other kids were playing house or playing school, I'd sit at an electronic**

**typewriter and pretend I was writing a novel. I developed by writing. It's all I've ever done.**

I was an English major at Oberlin College and took creative-writing classes there. I went to summer nerd camps where you can take creative-writing classes and I've been part of informal workshops. ■

**TIM GAUTREAU**, interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais:

*How far back in your memory does storytelling go in your family?*

Before television and air conditioning and before people were mobile, family members would gather more often. Families were closer in the old days because once a family would generate in a community, it tended to stay in that community. We're talking about the forties and fifties. People would sit on the front porch because the house was too hot to stay inside until 4:30 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon.

My uncle had a large camp south of New Orleans in Hopedale, and the family would go down there about every weekend. The men would drink beer, and the women would gossip. There was always dancing because there was a jukebox, and the kids would just do whatever kids did—buy fire-crackers and mooch money for the slot machines or to buy a Coke. When the kids ran out of things to do, they went over to sit with the adults. The big people were always telling stories. The men would almost always tell the stories, although the women would sometimes tell them too, but they liked to tell elaborate stories about their medical operations.

The men would tell stories about work. To me, they were ancient, but they were in their sixties and seventies. They were retired riverboat men, tugboat pilots, or railroad men. My father was a tugboat captain. Their tales had a certain structure and were spontaneous; one man would begin, "Yeah, one time I jumped off the back fantail of the *Johnny Brown* when she got her hawser wrapped around a propeller, and I had to chop it out with a hatchet under water." The other old guy would say, "Well, that ain't nothing. I was on the Third District Ferry the time the *Sipse*y came between the hulls and cut the pilot house in half with a smokestack." Another one would say, "Wait a minute. That tugboat wasn't named *Sipse*y."

There would be this fantastic interweaving of stories because one man would make up facts, and the others would catch him, and their "facts" would throw the story off on a tangent. These sessions taught me about

the spontaneity, the organic structure, and the emotion that is involved in storytelling. Today, I see the short story not primarily as an intellectual endeavor but as a cultural artifact tightly bound with a necessary narrative structure.

*Were you drawn to storytelling from an early age?*

Somebody bought me a portable typewriter for Christmas, and in the mid-fifties I got a pen pal from Canada. One of my childhood pastimes was typing two- and three-page letters to this guy in Canada every other day. **He would tell me about what things were like in Canada, and I would tell him about things here. After a while, I ran out of things to talk about, so I started making up stuff.**

*Was that your first experience in fiction writing?*

Probably so. Lying to pen pals. ■

**CHRIS OFFUTT**, *interviewed by Rob Trucks:*

I went to the librarian and I said, “Look, I want a book on baseball.” There are a lot of baseball books aimed at children that are sort of like, There’s a new kid in town. He’s great at baseball. Everybody likes him. That’s all I wanted to be. Everybody would like me because I was good at something. So I said, “I want a book on baseball.” And she goes to the card catalog and she says, “Is there anything you like?” And I said, “I like Johnny Bench.” And she doesn’t know who that is so I say, “He’s a catcher.” So she looks up “catcher” and says, “Oh, come here. I have a book for you.” She takes me to a part of the library I’d never been in. She pulls out this book and hands it to me and I say, “Oh, great.” I check it out. I go home. I start reading it. It’s *Catcher in the Rye*. I stayed up all night and read that book when I was twelve years old. I could not believe it. I’m getting a funny feeling right now just remembering it. It tore me up. It just made my hair stand on end. I could not believe that you could write that way. That book probably had more influence than any single book I ever read. I never read another juvenile again. I couldn’t believe you could write like that. I went from Hardy Boys to *Catcher in the Rye*. ■

**LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ**, *interviewed by Nancy Middleton:*

I didn’t grow up among writers. I didn’t have mentors. I was really not in a

milieu that had anything to do with writing, although my parents respected books. I never knew a writer. I just knew I wanted to do this. It was as if that life was somewhere and I had to find it and enter it. I had to break into it.

*How did you break into it?*

Well, I had always written. Since I was about seven, I had planned to be a writer. But it was an imaginary thing, you know? I would do this. It would happen to me. And I wrote. But I rarely did anything practical about it like sending my work to editors. I was brought up at a time when women were very passive. The idea was that your life would happen to you, that a girl didn't have to do anything. You would get married, you would have children. And these things do tend to happen—well, not so much anymore, but they did then. We lived in the passive mode. We didn't go out and make our lives.

I did editorial work. I worked in Boston at *The Writer* magazine. I worked in Harlem at a fair-housing program. I did public-relations writing. I did proofreading. I taught freshman comp at Hunter College. And I did some translations. I did lots of things. But none of it was writing. And then I went to graduate school. My almost-doctorate was in comparative literature.

When the women's movement began I was in my late twenties, early thirties. And I watched the way my husband pursued a career. It came over me that if I was going to be a writer, I would have to do something about it. Go out there and do it. So I dropped out of graduate school. I decided now or never. I knew that I was not a scholar; I was getting ill at the thought of writing a thesis. I thought I'd drop out for a year or so and write a novel. And I did, and I liked it so much I never went back to school. ■

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

When you hear people talk about talent, I have no idea what that is. All I know is that at a certain age, some kids fall in love with language.

*What age do you think it is?*

Well, I think it's quite early. I'm not sure, but certainly by the time you're six or seven things are cooking and you're suddenly one of those kids who needs a book in hand. Eventually, that develops into wanting—at least for

people who are destined to be writers—to contribute to what you’ve been taking, taking, taking, and you think, Well, I’d like to give back.

*Almost altruistic.*

Well, I would hate for it to sound that altruistic because, by that time, it’s become a passion of yours. ■

## NOMI EVE:

Writers were always my heroes. They were always the most magical thing that one could be, and I read voraciously as a child, like a lot of writers do. I have memories of stacks of library books. ■



## JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS,

*interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson:*

*How did you get started writing?*

I was always a reader, the kind of kid who read constantly. Very early on, it seemed to me a way to be bigger than I was, know more than I should know, travel more than anyone I knew had traveled.

I came from a small town in West Virginia, and people there were very stationary, much less mobile than the rest of the country. Most of the people I knew—and I think it’s still true of that place—tend to move in and out for jobs much less. They tend to be really connected to the land and the region, and they tend to have had several generations of their families there. It was a very isolated, intense type of world. Early on, I saw reading as a way of both escaping that, and deepening it. Reading seemed to be very subversive, and writing later became the same. Reading led to writing for me. I started out writing poetry in high school, and by the time I was nineteen or twenty, I’d started writing short prose pieces. Those developed into the one-page fictions in my first book, *Sweethearts*, which was published by a small press. I taught myself to write fiction by writing those very compact, spiral-shaped pieces. ■

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

*You said that your mother was a storyteller.*

I remember going to the Jersey Shore as a kid, and, after a meal, when we couldn't go into the water—that magic hour and a half?—she would tell stories about her family. Her family is a very large family. I would always ask her about the stories, ask her to tell it again. She would tell them over and over—she had a lot of good stories. I would ask her about the stories from very weird angles. Like about a person who's only tangentially involved in the story. And she would answer me, and I think that she knew that I was asking about point of view. Things like that, and she enjoyed it as an intellectual exercise. She could, of course, also have said, "Roy, I've told you this story fifty times. Go in the water, the hour and a half is up." But she enjoyed it. She loves stories. I grew up in a household where the *New Yorker* was read.

For a long time, all I really wanted to do was write one successful short story. I mean, that was my life goal. I think that it takes a certain kind of reader—perhaps a more sophisticated reader—to understand short stories. You don't have three hundred pages to get to know the character. A lot of times, you're left with feelings, sometimes unsettled feelings. And the reader is just getting warmed up after thirty pages. Anyway, my mother, I think—from reading short stories, from always loving stories—understood what I was doing. I would ask her, "Well, what would happen, what would have happened if that story happened in Florida instead of New Jersey?" I was finding out writer tricks about how to tell stories. She went with me on all that stuff.

I remember my first year in college, in 1975, a book came out called *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* by Larry Woiwode. It was a very influential book in my personal history. I thought, This is wonderful. This is what I want to do. I remember going home, and my mother had read him in the *New Yorker*, and it was a sort of shared thing. We didn't each have the vocabulary to talk about the material, but what we could talk about was how moving it was. Which is sometimes more important than being able to talk about craft issues. And we had that. It was sort of being understood in the world by somebody else. It's really very, very nice to have it happen with somebody within your family.

So even though my brothers were perhaps making fun of me for writing

from time to time, I did feel rooted in the idea that writing was a good endeavor to pursue.

*What good fortune.*

Yeah. It really was. We did that even in high school because we went to the beach every summer. By then I was surfing and everything, but I'd come in and I would make her tell stories. And she would tell them slightly differently, you know, things she would remember, perhaps some embellishments. It was really a lesson in storytelling. ■





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