

## CHAPTER

# 9

# BEGINNINGS



*Susan on farm,  
Dushore, Pennsylvania, 1960*

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**Amy Bloom:** I spend a lot of time looking out the window, walking around the house, watching daytime television, talking to my friends, going to the grocery store. There's probably material anywhere you look. Everybody's lives are full and mysterious and unexpected. It's just a question of whether or not you're paying attention, whether or not you want to stand around long enough to let them tell it to you, or imagine it.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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## ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Your library work is probably where you formed the idea for Peggy in *The Giant's House*. Where did you find the idea for the giant?

I remember finding the idea for the giant in my special libraries class at Drexel University in Philadelphia. I had a teacher who I adored. I didn't adore many of my teachers, but she was a real librarian, a "librarian's librarian." Nevertheless, I spent a certain amount of time daydreaming in her class. I remember thinking in the special collections class, I want to write a book about a librarian in the nineties who is the archivist at a museum housed in the house of the world's tallest man. That was the initial idea for *The Giant's House*. You can see the difference between the initial concept and the final book.

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Why a museum in the house of the world's tallest man?

I always loved the *Guinness Book of World Records*, and I'm fascinated with the Human Extremes: the oldest mother, the youngest mother, the longest fingernails, and the longest mustache with two women holding each end out. There was Mrs. Ethel Granger, who had a thirteen-inch waist. I always thought that was her natural waist. It was reduced from twenty-two inches over the course of several years, and I thought that meant dieting. Much later on, I discovered that Mr. and Mrs. Granger were famous fetishists, and she was a corseter. She'd corseted herself down to thirteen inches. If you go back to that picture you'll see this very 1950s looking housewife touching her hair, but her ear is pierced all the way around. Someday, I want to write something about Mrs. Ethel Granger. I love the idea of her. There she is, standing so innocently in the *Guinness Book of World Records*, but still, there's the danger of her ear.

I always liked house museums. The Maxfield Parrish house in New Hampshire, for instance, looked like he just stepped out of it, as if they never changed anything. It was dirty and homey and sweet. I like bad museums—well, not necessarily bad museums. I visited a museum in Niagara Falls, the Houdini Museum, this unbelievably cheesy, horrible museum. I always thought I'd write something about a museum like that, a two-bit museum where the people who came in were always disappointed by what they found. I thought if the museum housed the world's tallest man, it would be physically interesting. I wanted a house that belonged to someone you had never heard of, but was still intriguing enough to enter.

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# RON CARLSON

interviewed by Susan McInnis



For those who aren't familiar with it, Kotzebue is stark and wind-riven. It lies on a spit of Alaska's northwest coast, just across the Bering Strait from Siberia, and is home to about three thousand people. Inupiat people have lived on and around the same land for over six centuries. How did you happen to visit Kotzebue? Were you researching or writing, or both?

I was living in Utah in the eighties, working for arts councils in Idaho, Utah, and Alaska, and the work took me north twice. I went out to Aniak—which is quite a bit south and inland from Kotzebue and Nome, but still in western Alaska—and once for two weeks to Kotzebue. I was teaching in the local schools in both towns, and spent my free time just tramping about. People took care of me in both places. They took me out for plane rides and showed me their world. Both towns struck me as being very serious ventures, both having serious elements of the frontier about them. That atmosphere and the unforgiving nature of weather there marked me.

I suppose, without knowing it, I was gathering data. It certainly came back for me later. It's interesting to consider what rains back down on you from your life—the things that come get you and haunt you and bother you, things that may or may not end up in the writing.

That's where "Blazo" got its start: I actually did hear dogs barking in an airplane once. I was flying from Anchorage to Kot-

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zebue, and the flight out was terrifying. Somehow the dogs were a comfort. Later, when I was in Kotzebue, there were dogs loose around town. Two or three were rogues, and they were raising hell with the sled dogs, very valuable working dogs. The sheriff was out hunting them. From time to time I'd hear gunfire, and it lent an edge to my sense of life there. I wasn't used to any of it—the barking, the rogue dogs, the gunfire. It all stayed with me, and then it came back in “Blazo.”

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## **THE SOURCE OF STORIES**

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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How do your story ideas come to you?

They come in many different ways. Sometimes I'll overhear something. As you know, writers are great eavesdroppers. Whenever I'm at a gathering, I'm participating, but a lot of times I'm just being quiet and listening. I get ideas from things I see in newspapers and magazines, from other writers, from things that happen in my life, in the lives of other people I know. But ultimately the source of all writing is mysterious. It comes from some deep place. We call it the imagination, or we could call it the creative mind. The ability to transform these nuggets from life into art comes from the creative mind.

What is your process like for writing a short story?

A lot of times I'll start with an image. I'm a very visual person, and in some ways I have to see the character doing something before

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I start the story. It's the same way for my novels. For example, in *The Mistress of Spices* I got a series of strong visual images of an old woman in a little Indian grocery. It was a sensory experience: I could smell the spices, I could see the place, and I could *feel* it. That began the writing process. With many of my stories, it works in the same way. The image I get won't necessarily be the beginning image of the story when the story is complete. It could be the ending image. Sometimes I have to figure my way out backwards.

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## **THE WORK OF THE UNCONSCIOUS**

Siri Hustvedt

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais

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How did the ideas for your novels begin?

Ideas usually begin as a single image, feeling, or a real event. *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* began with a real suicide. There is a café in Northfield, Minnesota, where I grew up, called The Ideal Café. The real suicide did not take place there, but I used it in the novel to bring together the book's characters. That novel is written almost as a stage piece. It unfolds visually, a fact that reverberates with *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the play inside the book. The café was a convenient place for characters to enter and exit. The real Ideal Café was like that. People dropped in and out, even when they weren't eating. Two of my sisters, Liv and Astrid, and my best friend, Heather Clark, worked there, and I heard lots of stories. There were stories I thought I had invented, which turned out to have their origins in real life. For example, Boomer Wee, a minor character, is an Elvis fanatic.

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After Heather read the book, she pointed out to me that the café's owner had a bust of Elvis in the restaurant. Obviously, I knew it, but couldn't remember it. Something similar occurred in relation to *The Blindfold*. When I was in Germany, a journalist pointed out the wit of using the name Klaus as the hero of *Der Brutale Junge*, because Klaus is the name of one of Thomas Mann's sons. I thought of Mann when I wrote the story, but hadn't made that connection consciously. The unconscious does a lot of work for you in a book.

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## ANDREA BARRETT

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



How does your research kindle your imagination and get you writing?

Oh, in all sorts of ways. Sometimes things really do grow from the reading and the research, but it's always in such odd ways. Often it's a picture, a visual image; sometimes it's an image in words, a sense of somebody on a dock or in a room holding a bandage. Sometimes a whole area of subject matter will seem interesting to me. That's what happened with "The Cure" in *Servants of the Map*. I used to drive through Saranac Lake a lot on my way to someplace else. I never stopped to look around, but it imprinted itself on me. I got curious about the porches, and then curious about the people who would've been on the porches, and then curious about the state of society that would've led everybody to be clumped in one place on the porches.

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## DORIS LESSING

interviewed by Michael Upchurch



I'd been wanting to write a version of the changeling story for a long time. You know: The fairy people put one of their babies in a human cradle. I had it on my agenda to write for some time. And then I read some casual remarks by a scientist saying that it was impossible that the Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons did not mate, and that meant that their genes must be in us. So I thought, if Neanderthals and Cro-Magnons, why not one of the little people?

Because every culture has the myth of the little people, and I personally think it's quite possible there *were* little people that vanished. There *are* little people! They're the Pygmies and they're a good yard shorter than those extremely tall people on the East Coast, the ones who are doormen in New York. So I thought, Okay, we'll have a dwarf fall into a human cradle—or a goblin or something—and see what would happen.

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**Roy Parvin:** Usually the impulse to write the story is a very tiny thing. In the story "In the Snow Forest," I had bought a throwing knife, an antique throwing knife. I was walking around and I thought, Well, wouldn't this be wonderful to put in a story? It's really a minor part of the story, but it was one of the keys that opened the door that got me started.

as interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

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## STARTING WITH CHARACTER

Pam Durban, interviewed by Cheryl Reid



How does a story start for you?

Sometimes it's an image. Sometimes it's a thought. It's been a while since I've written stories. I've been working on this book.

So you don't write novels and stories at the same time?

It depends. When I was writing *The Laughing Place*, I would get so tired of what seemed like the endless process of writing it. I would take a break and write a story, just to be able to finish something.


What about the story "Soon"?

I have a friend in town who's a collector of folk art and Southern memorabilia. He bought this huge collection of family possessions from a woman who was a descendent of a major plantation owner. People have said it is one of the most important collections of Southern artifacts. It's got everything: diaries, plantation ledgers, slave-sewn shirts. He made me a copy of the diary and gave it to me and also told me about the old woman whom he'd bought this stuff from. He basically courted her for a year in the nursing home. She was a mean woman who had disowned her children. I started looking at her diary and her diary literally opens with that scene of being blinded by the doctor. And that started "Soon," along with that woman's character. I think all of my stories start from character. Something about a character will catch my attention or my imagination.

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## WHAT IS PRAYER?

Patricia Hampl, interviewed by Susan McInnis



In preparing for *Virgin Time* there was another catalyst, a book called *An Interrupted Life*, by Etty Hillesum. Like Anne Frank, Etty Hillesum lived in Amsterdam during the war. She was also Jewish, also kept a diary, and met the same fate. She was older than Anne Frank, in her twenties, having love affairs and being a graduate student. A worldly, secular, sexy young woman. She experienced a spiritual awakening during the years of the war, just before she was carted away, and became fascinated by and immersed in prayer. In her diary, she wrote about the instinct to bend the knee and to bow the head.

When I read that passage, it lifted right off the page. I have always believed in the experience of awe, in that instinct to bend the knee. At that moment, prayer was redeemed for me, from habit, from a lot of words you just say, to a life force. One doesn't need to ask, Is there prayer? Once it is pointed out, as Hillesum did for me, it is clear that prayer is an instinct. This was an eye opener. And at that moment, I realized that the scriptural line, "The kingdom of God is within you," means that instinct for prayer, for crying out.

The revelation also related to my understanding of poetry, which says speech has to do not so much with communication as with utterance, what we cry out to the universe. It was a significant moment of personal discovery, and it gave impulse and trajectory to *Virgin Time*. It gave the text its questions, and

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the context for its retrospective pieces. It focused my thoughts on the nature of prayer: Why do people pray? Why do I pray? What is prayer?

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## **MORE IMPULSE THAN IDEA**

Maria Flook, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



I never use the word *idea* to describe my first attraction to a possible story. My first impulse is less an intellectual germ than a psychological or even an emotional tempest or affliction. No, I don't begin with an idea, but I guess I'm more comfortable calling it an impulse, or even a compulsion. I write about issues in human relationships, usually male-female. Sometimes it's a family dynamic that explodes into something sinister, or someone becomes vulnerable at a dangerous emotional price. There might be sexual tension, a romantic tether that becomes a monkey on their backs. They're troubled by one another. They *come* from trouble.

My fiction is hitched to real experiences and real persons. I've met, worked with, or even loved—people whose situations marked me somehow. Willis, in *Open Water*, was very like someone I once actually knew in Newport, Rhode Island. His mother, in fact, really was Miss Cuba, and his broken arm, that he breaks more than once in subsequent brawls, was a real detail. He was in a cast the whole time I knew him. Of course, fictional characters are transformed from their first origin or catalyst, and become a wholly new alchemy. I write about people in peril. I'm interested in seeing how people scramble to get out of a hole.

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**Ha Jin:** I usually begin with a kind of feeling triggered by an event or something that will bother me. That's the best situation. If something bothers me, I have to write about it in order to let the feeling out. That usually produces the best outcome. But stories don't always come that way, especially with a novel. It may start with an event or a feeling, but down the road there will be a lot of labor and research depending on how much energy I have and how stubborn I am.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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## **ALICE MATTISON**

interviewed by Barbara Brooks



The very first poem in that collection [*Animals*], called "Secret Animals," has a set of twins who are joined at the spine, and who bear a child. That means the image of conjoined twins was with you some thirty years before you wrote your latest novel, *The Wedding of the Two-Headed Woman*, in which the image literally takes center stage, when some of the characters put on a play of that name.

I know. I keep returning to the image of conjoined twins. They are in my first novel, *Field of Stars*, too. In the poem and that novel, someone fears giving birth to conjoined twins. When I was pregnant with my third child I had that fear, and wrote the poem. Years later at a reading a woman in the audience asked if the conjoined twins could be an image of the connection of the pregnant mother

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and child, if my fear was that the child wouldn't ever be separate from me. I thought, Wow, I bet that's right. I had no idea what I was doing when I wrote that poem, but I do think the fear of conjoined twins is a fear of infringement on solitude. Of never being alone. As a writer, you have these images in your head and sometimes you have to go with them, or otherwise they'll go against you.

Does that mean that your material—your subject matter—has been with you, even if only subconsciously, from the beginning?

You don't know all your material, but you are who you are. Whatever your obsessions, or neuroses or fears, they probably are ones that you will continue to have. There is something about that image that is very powerful for me, and mysterious, and rather dreadful. I don't mean to use it again. I vow that I won't and then I do.

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## **REVISITING CHILDHOOD FASCINATIONS**

**Andrea Barrett, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson**

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How did you get interested in the disappearance of British explorer Sir John Franklin and all of his crew on their voyage to discover the Northwest Passage?

I was a little girl when I first got interested in the Arctic. I don't know what it was that caught me then, but I gobbled up all these Arctic history books. I was really mad for this. I loved it. Then it all sank away in the emergency of puberty. When you're a teenager you're just thinking about being a teenager. The material surfaced again when I was writing *Ship Fever*. When I was doing the reading for the novella, I learned about one ship that came from Ireland

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with a load of immigrants and hit an iceberg off the coast of Newfoundland. Everybody drowned. I wasn't able to use that terrible story in the novella, but it made me think about the coincidence in time between the immigrations from Ireland and the height of exploration in the Arctic, going on at exactly the same time. I thought I'd write a companion novella about someone exploring in the Arctic, but I turned out to be wrong about the size of it.

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## **WALKING THE WALK**

**Barbara Scot, interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies**

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When I was researching the Scotch Grove Presbyterian Church, I encountered a one-line reference to a communion cup. The early Scots, who'd been evicted from the Highlands, had, over twenty-three years, come to the Red River colony that became Winnipeg, and ultimately came down this ox-cart trail to eastern Iowa—a thousand miles—and they brought a communion cup with them the whole way. I didn't follow that up at that time, but I didn't forget that line, and all of a sudden one night, after I sold *Prairie Reunion*, I woke in the middle of the night, thinking about that cup: Where did I see that? Did I really see a line that said that? Is there really a cup? Is it still there?

So I went back to Scotch Grove, Iowa, and found the cup, and got permission to take it, and I am now recreating the journey of these Scots. And I feel like I am just a vehicle for finding this story which is so representative of migration of peoples, of exiles, of community. These were Highland Scots way, way up north, Southerlandshire, in this little parish of Kildonan. I've gone over

there, and I went to the very church, which is now in a sheep pasture, and took the cup back to the very pulpit where the eviction notices were read. I found the exact people in a memoir. It's amazing. Now what I'm doing is that I'm carrying the cup on the whole journey. I'm starting in April. And at the end of this, I'm going to incorporate the people from that church and community with the elders that I still know.

### WRITING ADVICE from Mary Gordon



One of the things that I do with my fiction students is to get them to try to consider that every family has a way of doing things. Then you bring your friend home from college and they say, "Why do you put the Kleenex in the piano bench?" You say, "Everybody puts the Kleenex in the piano bench." Your friend says, "No, they don't." So I think all families have odd ways of doing things that are considered very normal in the family or else are just puzzles that you can imagine have the inexplicability of the holy trinity. But I think that's an interesting way of looking at the family. You know how they inhabit oddly without realizing that it is odd. For example, in my grandmother's house, why did my uncle sleep on the porch? There were two spare bedrooms upstairs.

as interviewed by Charlotte Templin

**Andrea Barrett:** Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night with an idea, but that doesn't happen often. Often they come to me through my reading. I see some little picture or some phrase that captures my fancy.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

## THE SEED OF THE NOVEL

Allen Morris Jones, interviewed by David Abrams



What was the inspiration behind *Last Year's River*?

The roots of the novel go deep. In the summer of 1996, I had an interview with a woman by the name of Dorothy who started the wheels turning. I didn't start writing seriously for another year or two after that, and I didn't start seriously working on the novel until after I'd quit my job at *Big Sky Journal*, in the summer of 2000. From the time I began writing full-time, it took me about nine months to finish writing the book. At that point, I had an outline sketched out and had taken lots of notes.

Going back to that interview with the woman, was she the inspiration for the character of Virginia? The novel is framed with reminiscences of an older Virginia, and I get the sense that your interview might have spilled over onto the page.

Here's the story. In the acknowledgment, I thank Dorothy. I would not have started writing about Wyoming at all had I not started to imagine, after a brief luncheon with this remarkable woman, what it was like to be her. She'd lived this incredible life—she'd owned a dude ranch, she'd hunted tigers from the backs of elephants

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in India, she and her husband had had the first fishing camp on Great Slave Lake. She was enjoying life to its fullest extent, even into her late eighties. I became very intrigued by her, and I went to interview her. She was a very small woman, petite, and very sensual in a non-sexual way. I became less interested in the details of her life, and I became more interested in her personality. This is a woman who, in her late eighties, was still managing to live such a vibrant life. She was an extraordinarily sophisticated, complicated woman. This, in a world, a culture, that tends to dismiss its elderly as irrelevant. So I began wondering what it would have been like to know this woman sixty years earlier, when she was just starting her life. That was the seed for the novel.

Were there any particular events in her life which led you to start thinking about what eventually became *Last Year's River*?

The only similarity was that Dorothy was a wealthy, privileged young woman who ended up traveling West. But that's about where the parallels between her and Virginia end.

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## **SUSAN RICHARDS SHREVE**

interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris

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I was in Massachusetts, a little discouraged with my own work, as happens off and on in a long career, and one of my children had just dropped out of college. So I was feeling blue, thinking about this child, wondering what might be going on with her.

I started [*Glimmer*] with a sentence and an image of a girl, an unreliable narrator with a skewed sense of reality—locked in her dorm room believing a man just outside her door is trying to

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come in. Is he there? Is anything she tells us true? That the girl has a black father, which is true, and a dead mother who she describes as living came to me from nowhere, or perhaps somewhere. That's always the wonder and mystery of writing. I know the book had something to do with sadness for my own child who needed to come home, with alienation and otherness.

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## **NOT A SIMPLE BEGINNING**

Matthew Sharpe, interviewed by Sherry Ellis

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Your first novel, *Nothing Is Terrible*, begins, "That girl is not normal, and neither is the boy," I overheard my uncle say to my aunt late one summer night a month after my parents had been killed in a car accident on the way home from a wedding. My twin brother Paul and I were ten years old at the time and were the children my childless uncle was talking about." With this beginning you juxtapose words and phrases that give the reader a preliminary sense of the uniqueness of Mary, a seeming hermaphrodite, who at age eleven runs off to New York with her thirty-seven-year-old teacher. At what point during your writing of this novel did you write and/or choose these sentences as the beginning?

I think I had the sentences pretty early on. In that case I was very consciously trying to write a late-twentieth-century version of the *bildungsroman*, the coming-of-age novel that had its beginning in the eighteenth century. It was a symbolic form, a way of dealing with a new class of person, the bourgeois subject, who is unheroic and in that sense normal. In my update of the form I wanted to deal with somebody who would be both normal

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and un-normal, depending on who is looking at her/him and defining her/him. In fact I wanted to deal with someone who is different from herself, and who will always be two contrary things at once, someone who is both normal and not normal, someone who is a girl and a boy, a criminal and a victim, a nice person and a not nice person. I wanted to at least signal some of that in the opening sentence.

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## AMY BLOOM

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



What inspired you to write the title story in *A Blind Man Can See How Much I Love You*?

I had done all this research for a nonfiction piece on female-to-male transsexuals. It just stayed with me, particularly because I found myself thinking about how hard it would be for me if one of my daughters said to me that God made a mistake, and that she was supposed to be a man and she wanted to have the surgery. As devoted as I am to each one of them, and as fond as I am of them, I would support them in doing what they needed to do, but it would break my heart to lose my girls. And that's what I was thinking, and started developing this character Jane, the mother who wishes to do right in her own way. Her story is completely different for her than it is for the daughter/son. For him it's a story of liberation, and for Jane it's a story of loss.

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## RICHARD BAUSCH

interviewed by Jennifer Levasseur and Kevin Rabalais



Your stories "Aren't You Happy for Me?" and "Letter to the Lady of the House" both primarily involve dialogue. What is the preparation for writing these stories, the first written as a conversation between a father and daughter, the second, a long letter?

"Letter to the Lady of the House" was a song. I wrote it when I was twenty-three. It was called "Marie, I'd Do It Again." [Laughs.] I was twenty-three, and I didn't have any idea what that really sounds like. It was an old guy talking to his wife. The last verse is, "If it has come to this kind of thing/the silence shocked by the telephone's ring/then something's died within/but I know I loved you then/and, Marie, I'd do it again." I sang the song for years. One day I thought, I wonder if I can make a story out of that song. Since the song was in the form of an address to someone who wasn't answering, I just made it a letter. I never thought about having it as a conversation. When I finished it, I thought, "No. This doesn't work. He's straining; nothing really happens." So I left it off the end of *Spirits*. But it got resurrected later, essentially as it was, and *The New Yorker* published it, and I still get letters about it.

How do you find subjects for your work?

Well, most of the time, they find me. They occur to me in the flow of experience. "Aren't You Happy for Me?" came about when I was watching the movie *Father of the Bride* with my daughter and some folks—you know, the Steve Martin remake of that flick.

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He's talking about a quarter of a million dollars for his daughter's wedding, and I said to my daughter Emily, "Did you do the math on this?" She said, "It's a lot of money." I said, "\$250,000. That's \$249,000 more than I'm going to spend on your wedding." We were joking around about it. I went upstairs, and I thought, What if there was something really hard? You know, in the movie, the kid is going to be a world-class geophysicist or something. He comes from a wonderful family. He's supposed to be a wonderful kid. But what if there is something really, really hard? What if she was calling her father to tell him she is marrying someone who is old enough to be his father? And then she's pregnant—the whole thing of adding trouble. What if the father's splitting up with her mother and he has news for her? It sort of wrote itself. One version ended with the wife saying, "Maybe they will be happy for a time. Weren't we? Weren't we?" I thought that's too Salingeresque. I decided to go on and say some more stuff. That took about three days to write from beginning to end.

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## **ALL THAT WAS LEFT OF HIM**

**Annie Proulx, interviewed by Michael Upchurch**

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As I was finishing up *Postcards*, the idea for *The Shipping News* came to me; all of it hung on a guy that I'd seen on the ferry. There was a man on the ferry who was coming back from the mainland, and he was drunk and he stayed up all night. Skinny guy with red hair and violet-colored plastic sandals: women's sandals. And he sang all night long while everyone around him was trying to go to sleep. He sang about not being able to find a job, and coming back, and what was the use, and so forth, in this very low voice.

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I was seated right behind him. I could hear it fairly well, found it fascinating, wrote some of it down. So he was in mind to work into this story about shipping news. I wanted to write about the fact that there were no jobs and that the fishery was collapsing and unfolding and falling down. And, actually, he evaporated from the story. Only his plastic sandals stayed in, with the guy who sells Quoyle the boat. That was all that was left of him. But he more or less set the story going.

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## **DAVID MALOUF**

**interviewed by Kevin Rabalais**



How much do you know about the structure of a book when you begin writing?

I certainly have a sense of the book's dimensions when I begin. I know if it's long or short. That may mean only that I already know how the subject will unfold and that it will reveal further facets and depths of itself. When I start, I sometimes have nothing but the end. I'll begin somewhere inside the story and work to discover where the book should start. The book is something you walk around inside. As you go, you discover bits and pieces of it. Then you try to find a structure which works in terms of what the book reveals itself to be. In *An Imaginary Life*, for instance, I began with the poppy section, which is about four thousand words into the finished novel, and it was quite late that I went back and wrote the section that leads up to that point.

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Frequently, I'll begin with a scene, sometimes involving one or two characters and their surroundings. I will then say to myself, Who are these people; what's this all about? Or I will say, What kind of world are these characters in; what's going to happen to them? I often have a feeling about something and will write the first paragraph in order to get it going. The first task is to strike the right tone. I often don't have much idea about what's going to happen as far as plot goes. I may have a strong sense of a life or of a person. Often, that comes from something I've heard. This could be as simple as somebody telling you a story and you think, Oh, what an interesting idea that is. And then you make up characters. But often I begin and don't have a clear idea of the character at all. Somebody, then, will suddenly pop into a paragraph, and she may even turn out to be the main character.

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## **BASED ON A TRUE STORY**

**Beverly Lowry, interviewed by Stephanie Gordon**

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Your works are set in numerous locales, such as Mississippi, New York City, Houston, and the hill country of Texas, and are concerned with many different issues, such as sexuality, divorce, disruptions, losses, the passage of time, death, and the need to "only connect." Where do you get your ideas?

I get them from my life. Not as autobiography, but what I learn as I go: what I see or hear about, what I read about in the paper. *The Perfect Sonya* and eventually *The Track of Real Desires*, for example, started out with knowing women who had been single and raising sons, although I eventually discarded that idea for *The Perfect*

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*Sonya*. Now I have a daughter-in-law who did just that. She and Brandon came into my life about ten or twelve years ago, and this enhanced my interest in the single mother raising a son. All of these things, and many others, feed into my writing. You read, you think, you stare out the window, things happen.

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# **HA JIN**

**interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson**



Mr. Yang [in *The Crazyd*], hospitalized after having a stroke, raves about events that could be from his life or not. His crazy behavior sets Jian Wan to trying to sort out what is real and what is not, both in what Mr. Yang is saying and in his own life. What drew you to the idea of juxtaposing an old man who's losing his mind with a young man at the beginning of his life, who up until now has behaved quite rationally?

I did nurse a professor two afternoons. He wasn't my professor, so I didn't look after him for long. He had a stroke, and he began speaking nonsense and truth at the same time. I was shocked and haunted by that. His own students who looked after him talked a lot about this with me. This is a kind of universal case in which a man has lost the lock on his heart. He can't keep his secrets anymore. What would happen if he didn't have any restraint? Then the truth could be disastrous to his family and others. That's how I was really bothered by this memory. I wanted to write a story that was both an old man's and a young man's.

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**Barbara Scot:** I had returned after a long, long absence, and found a trunk of things that my mother had left for me, and in there was a box of letters—the letters were relatives’ letters to her and first drafts of her letters, and they detailed the story of her brief, unhappy marriage—and this very mysterious note with three puzzling lines: “What do you think? You don’t understand. You’ll never know how much.” They were all wrapped in her wedding dress. I waited ten years before I tackled it.

as interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

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## **BEGINNING WITH AN IMAGE**

Dan Chaon, interviewed by Misha Angrist

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Let’s talk about beginnings. In a couple of stories, you start by dropping the reader right into the scene by literally presenting him with an object or situation, almost as though you are holding them in your hands: “Here is a snake with a girl in his mouth.” “This is a braid of human hair.” It’s very effective. Are those beginnings critical to how the stories subsequently unfold?

Most of the time they are. I began those two stories [“Passengers, Remain Calm,” “Falling Backwards”] with those specific images in mind—they were the driving forces that got me to sit down and write the stories. Other times I start with a premise; for example, in the title story [“Among the Missing”] I began with the family drowning in the lake near the mother’s cabin. But in the two stories you mentioned, I was beginning with an image and then trying to discover the story.

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## **THE FINAL MINUTE AND A HALF**

Robert Olen Butler

interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

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You started writing *Severance* before the horrible beheadings began in Iraq. Is it weird for you, that you were writing them as they began?

Beheadings have always been with us, though they’ve become much more central recently. Yeah, it is odd how that has come forward. The book began when Elizabeth and I were in Saigon in early 1995, and we went to the war-crimes museum in Saigon and saw an old French guillotine. Standing in the presence of a guillotine, I began to meditate on that object and then did some reading about it and discovered quickly that there was a lot of thought, a lot of suspicion that, far from being a quick and painless and humane form of execution, that there was something going on inside those heads after the blade fell, and what more dramatic moment could there be than the last thoughts after beheading and before death. As a fiction writer I was intrigued by them.

I discovered a very strict form that made it even more interesting to me. There was honestly a lot of speculation, if this does happen, about how long the time period is. Some people think only a few seconds. There were some doctors who thought in terms of the way sugars are turned into proteins and so forth, that it could be six minutes. So the doctor quote is a kind of composite; a minute and a half seemed in a nice sort of moderate, in-between. A believable thing. And of course it is true that we speak at about 160 words per minute in a heightened state of emotion. It seemed to me an interesting notion. It’s almost I guess a poetic impulse, isn’t it? It’s such chaos, the thought of those last

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wild musings after such an event, that I liked imposing this kind of strict form on it. Each story is exactly 240 words long. Some of the pieces are more or less full lives that are flashing, but in others there are seemingly trivial moments which were not, apparently, so trivial.

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## THE GOLDEN HOUR

George Makana Clark

interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies



Remember that guy who had a rail spike driven through his head? I think this was at the turn of the century—it's in all the beginning psychology books—I think they were blasting a tunnel or something, and this spike went right through his head, and after that he turned mean. He could no longer complete a task without swearing at someone: His wife divorced him, his friends left him. For a while he traveled in a freak show. But if it were his soul—it's funny, I hear things like that and I wonder, Could I write a story about that? What if your soul was in between there and it was driven out and you were a soulless man? Last night there was a television show we were watching while we were getting the baby into bed, and it was a documentary on emergency medical technicians, and they spoke about a “golden hour,” when a person would live or wouldn't live as they're trying to get them through the emergency. I thought that would be a wonderful time for a story to take place.

## THE SINGLE IMAGE

Alberto Ríos, interviewed by Susan McInnis



I can start writing a story anywhere and as long as I write long enough, I will eventually tell a story. I don't think I necessarily have to impose plot, but plot I think is an organic thing much like getting on a boat and just going with it.

You've been doing this as writer and professor in a class you laughingly call Obsessions. But it's serious, yes?

It's very serious. I think it has transformed students. It has changed their way of thinking and of writing. It's an exciting notion. Each student comes up with one image. One student chose most recently “Two people drinking from the same glass.” Very simple. Just a short phrase. Each student begins with a piece of writing based on their chosen image. A poem, perhaps. They stay with the image for the rest of the semester. That's all they write about. It would seem impossible to write for three or four months about a single image. But if you can do it, the result is magical: If you can draw the rabbit out of this top hat, you will be amazed by what's possible in the world, in all those things around you.

So, we begin with the image. We extend it first backward, rather than forward, because I don't think you should always go forward. So we go a little bit backward, to a sentence that is that image, and then to a word that is that image—not that describes the image, but is the thing. We are trying to get at what language represents. What is that image? And then we go to a letter, just as I was talking about earlier. We find a letter that is the image

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of two people drinking out of the same glass. It may be visual. It may have some meaning. It may be any number of things, but we find the letter that is it.

Then we go forward again. At this point it's like pulling a slingshot backward. When you let go of it, then you can go forward like crazy, and you've got so much farther to go if you've gone backward first. Suddenly that image has all sorts of potential. We then write it as a short story, as a prose scene, as epistolary writing, characters writing to each other. And after you've explored it, obviously you must add things, and that's what's fun. You start adding characters and setting, and it's just to accommodate the image. But in fact, you're doing all the right things you ought to do as a writer. By the end of the semester, we come back to the original form. If you wrote a poem at the beginning of the semester, then you write a poem again at the end. But the difference between those two poems, after millions of miles of exploration, is extraordinary, and it's what my students learn to call craft. That there's that much even in the single image.

### **WRITING ADVICE** from Joyce Thompson



After you have the kernel of a book in mind, hold off starting to write it as long as you can, until you absolutely can't wait any longer. All the time you're not writing, your subconscious is writing anyway, so when you actually do start, you know a good deal more of the story than you imagined.

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# **ANN PATCHETT**

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Your novels all have brilliant openings, my favorite being the opening sentence for *Taft*: "A girl walked into the bar."

I plagiarized that from Elizabeth McCracken. She has a line "a dog ran into a bar" and I loved that. Usually the first line comes to me a long time before I start the novel. This is true of *The Magician's Assistant*. I had the first line for a year before I started writing it. I think this is true of each novel, that I had the first line before I had anything else.

What do you think makes a great opening?

It's one of those things, you know it when you see it.

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## **RECEIVING THE FIRST LINE**

Patricia Henley, interviewed by Andrew Scott



*In the River Sweet* began as a short story about a family in which the father and husband had been a POW in Vietnam. It was about the life the mother led while the father was a POW. I love doing the research for writing fiction, so I found myself lugging home library books about POWs. This was during the summer of 1998. *Hummingbird House* was accepted for publication in August of that year. Once it was accepted, my mind turned to another novel. I thought, I'm doing an awful lot of research for a short story and I began to build the idea for *In the River Sweet*. I did the library

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research and planned a trip to Vietnam. I was writing scenes, but I knew something was missing.

The strand of the story about the hate crime came late in the conceptualizing. I abandoned 150 pages and started over because the presence of the hate crime provided me with the first line and the stripped-down, close to the consciousness of the character's voice. Once I received that first line—"Jesus would not say fag, she knew that much"—I wrote the manuscript in ten months.

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## **DRAWN INTO THE STORY**

by Judith McClain

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The birth of a story or novel always begins with an image for me, sometimes accompanied by the first several lines or, if I'm lucky, a whole paragraph. If the image sticks, I write the story. If it flees, I don't.

In his preface to *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*, William Gass says, "From the outset, however, I was far too concerned with theme. I hadn't discovered yet what I would later find was an iron law of composition for me: the exasperatingly slow search among the words I had already written for the words which were to come...so that each work would seem simply the first paragraph rewritten, swollen with sometimes years of scrutiny around that initial verbal wound..."

It's true for me too: I begin—and end—with that initial verbal wound. I seem to forget this each time I enter a new story. I am ever hopeful that a story will take me someplace else, that the first paragraph is merely a launch into dark space, new territory.

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Time and time again, however, the process proves to me that the entire story exists in the initial paragraph; that rather than moving away from that first image, my process is to enter inside of it somehow, by swelling each fragment and making a descent. I am not launched from the beginning so much as sucked inside a bunch of words with incredible force.

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## **KRIK? KRAK!**

Edwidge Danticat, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



*Krik? Krak!* is named from a term that refers to the Haitian storytelling tradition. When an elder begins to tell a story, he calls out, "Krik?" and the audience responds, "Krak," before the storytelling begins. What can you say about how the tradition of storytelling in your life played into your desire to become a writer?

I don't think I would have been a writer if not for storytelling. It taught me to love stories and gave me a very strong introduction to stories. It put me in touch with that very special moment in Haitian culture when adults and children were together to exchange stories. The immediacy of it was wonderful, and I saw that a story told today is told one way and the same story told tomorrow is told a different way. It was a very vibrant moment of interchange, and each story was a gift. It's like listening to a person telling a joke, and another person learns it and passes it along. That's why I decided to call the story collection *Krik? Krak!* as a tribute to my first influences as a writer.

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The story “A Wall of Fire Rising” starts with the line: “‘Listen to what happened today,’ Guy said, rattling through the door of his tiny shack.” In that one line, by having the character say that, you invite the reader in to listen as well. You’ve also characterized Guy as living in an impoverished situation. All of this from one brief line. What do you try to accomplish with an opening?

Openings are the hardest part for me, because I subscribe to that school of opening in the middle, in media res. As a reader, I’m very impatient. Something has to grab me out of my life and pull me in. That’s something you get from the storytelling tradition, because the audience is often restless kids. A good opening stops you in your tracks and makes you want to stop what you’re doing and listen. There’s a thread that takes you from the opening into the story. Sometimes it’s just beautiful language, something that makes you want to trade your life for a minute for this other thing. I try to open in a way that creates curiosity or interest in the reader. A good opening makes whatever is going on around you seem irrelevant. That phrase *Krik? Krak!* is a call and response that takes you from this world into the world of the story. The opening is like the trap door that pulls you in, and every sentence, every step, is hopefully a better promise so that you don’t regret that you were invited in.

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**Nomi Eve:** I have had this picture in my head for three years now, this picture of Chasia just sitting in that carriage. This one image. That’s what I write from. I write from these single images that get stuck in my head.

as interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

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## CHANG-RAE LEE

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Each novel opens with a memorable line, and a line that characterizes the narrator and the tone of the narrative to come. For example, Doc Hata, in *A Gesture Life*, finds security in his position in his town of Bedley Run. The book begins, “People know me here.” What do you look for in an opening, and how do you arrive at your opening line?

I look for a line that institutes many things—such as a kind of metaphorical condition, voice, which is literally the sound and tone—then institutes a moment of story. Without that it’s hard to start the story.

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## ELIZABETH MCCRACKEN

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Did you always have the opening line, “I do not love mankind”?

When Peggy was going to narrate the book [*The Giant’s House*], that was always the first line. The only immortality I ask is that fifty years from now, in the back of literary magazines when they have quizzes where you match the first line of the book up with the book title—I want to be in those quizzes. I don’t understand books that begin, “It was June.” I don’t understand why you would start your book that way. I don’t object to the sentence when I am further into the book, but when I read

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books, I want to know something about the writer and the book from the first sentence.

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## **THE IMPORTANCE OF WAITING**

**Melissa Pritchard, interviewed by Leslie A. Wootten**



With “Revelations of Child Love for the Soul of Dame Mi Mah,” a story in *The Instinct for Bliss*, I didn’t initially wait long. Instead, I jumped into writing the story. After about five pages, I realized I wanted to be anywhere else—even grocery shopping, which I hate. Those pages got balled up and thrown away, and I did what I should have done to start with: I waited.

Describe the waiting process.

With “Revelations of Child Love,” I waited in a state of tension for about two weeks, listening for the right voice. When I say voice, I mean point of view, but also narrative design—the story’s architecture and organic form. The answer I needed came when I was at Mass. Good ideas have come to me when I’ve been in church. Instead of concentrating on the service, I was leafing through a hymnal. Suddenly, I knew the story would be in scriptural form. What evolved includes sixteen confessions—or revelations. It’s about my mother. I wanted something that was sacred, but also funny. As with so many mothers and daughters, our relationship has been a mix of admiration and frustration, anger and joy, dislike and love. I wanted to strike a certain nerve on the page, but when I tried to write a conventional story, I couldn’t get to the emotionally dangerous point I needed to get to. I had to wait for the right voice—the right form—that could carry the charge and danger this story needed.

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Do you always know ahead of time what dangerous point you are aiming for?

No. Sometimes I have to write a draft or two to find it. I go by the same advice I give my students: If you aren’t sure what the danger point is after finishing a draft, ask what secret you are keeping from yourself. My secret with “Revelations of Child Love” was I didn’t want my mother to die—ever. She’s still alive—eighty-four and practicing yoga—but I was full of anger and sorrow at the prospect of her eventual death. Once I understood what the story was about, I was able to anchor in and write fairly quickly.

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## **ROY PARVIN**

**interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies**



I was wondering about what starts a story for you.

A lot of them are images and very vague feelings. And hopefully the images remain but the vagueness goes away and it becomes specific. I find that the journey that the writer goes through is that the vague becomes specific. I thought it’d be really interesting to write a book about snow, to have a metaphor that changes, the way metaphors should, and to have that over the course of three very long stories. And from there I kept thinking, you know, I wanted to write about people in their forties because that interests me because I’m in my forties. When you’re in your forties, the idea of precociousness goes away. You can’t really be precocious unless you *die*

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early, I suppose. Where we are is probably different from what we imagined when we were younger. And where we thought we were going is probably also different. There's a certain fork in the road that happens. It might be a slight fork, but nonetheless it's a fork.

Doesn't mean there aren't more forks waiting, but still.

Right. But it's sort of like the midterm exam. And I found it really very valuable. I found that things that had interested me in my twenties and thirties didn't anymore. I had written to a friend from college that I imagined my life being like a booster rocket. There's a booster rocket that went from twenty to forty, and that fell away. And there's another booster that takes you from forty to I don't know when. Maybe twenty-year increments are appropriate. Maybe it's ten years. And so I thought, Well, this would be a very interesting thing to write about.

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## **WAITING FOR THE RIGHT TIME**

Louis Begley, interviewed by Robert Birnbaum

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I started working on a novel very seriously in late June, and I did quite well until the beginning of August. Then all of my children and all of my grandchildren came to visit in waves, and [since] the book that I was writing is a very unhappy book, somehow going on with it in this house full of happiness became really impossible. So I did some more or less journalistic things that I had to do. The birth of a book is extremely time consuming. September has been given over to various things, and half of October will be, and then much of November, as *Shipwreck* has also come out in Germany, and I have an extensive German book tour. So I get back to it in December.

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**Edwidge Danticat:** The stories sometimes come in one line or one scene or, rarely, but it happens, fully formed. I've had many stories where I had ten pages and nothing was happening, and I put those away and pick them up much later. There's a deepening that comes with time that adds richness to a story. That's why some of the ideas stay story ideas and others become something else, novels, plays, even nonfiction.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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## **MATTHEW SHARPE**

interviewed by Sherry Ellis



*The Sleeping Father* begins with a description of circumstance. "Chris Schwartz's father's Prozac dosage must have been incorrect, because he awoke one morning to discover that the right side of his face had gone numb. This was the second discovery on a journey Chris's father sensed would carry him miles from the makeshift heaven of health." Do you believe that circumstance is a particularly effective means of enticing readers?

I don't think I have one particular way of beginning a book that I use repeatedly, or at least I hope I don't. I borrowed that opening from Kafka. *The Trial* and "Metamorphosis" have similar openings. I wanted that Kafkaesque sense that one's life is about to go out of control, in a terrifying and unknowable and absurd way. That's why I began in this particular story with circumstance. It is after all a kind of accident that causes the mechanics of the plot; that is, the accident of switching the pills.

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# DANIEL WALLACE

interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies



You mentioned that you had this great technique that releases stories for you.

Self-deception.

Yes! That, I thought, was marvelous. What were the words again? “It happened...”

“It happened like this, it happens like this.” This gives me the impression that I know what was happening.

So that you could know.

So that I could know eventually what was gonna happen. It’s like taking something up on a dare. Kind of, Oh, sure, I can do that. You don’t know if you can or can’t do it until you attempt it, but you have to give yourself the illusion that you have some sort of power, some sort of control when you really don’t have that much. I don’t feel like I do. People can’t really tell you how they do what they do. This is just one of the many tricks that keep you going. Or as they say in that movie that my son likes to watch, that *Toy Story*: I’m not flying, I’m falling with style. I just know if I couldn’t have lied to myself and believed—that’s the real interesting thing, believing your own lies. It’s kind of like believing that you’re good looking. If you believe it, you can get away with it. Other people start to believe it, too.

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**Sue Miller:** Usually they come as a vague notion, an idea of what I want to be talking about. Then I begin to imagine situations which would convey that idea or contain it, and then I begin to people the situations with characters. It starts abstractly for me, but it happens closely together. I’m not pondering an abstraction for a long time. One comes on the heels of another, but it’s the idea that interests me first.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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## WRITING BEYOND CONCEIT

Ron Carlson, interviewed by Susan McInnis



There’s a story in *Plan B for the Middle Class* called “Sunny Billy Day.” When I started writing, it was premise heavy. I said to myself, What if there was a baseball player with so much charisma that he could change an umpire’s mind? I’d never seen it happen. I’ve seen it in hockey. I’ve seen it in football. But a baseball umpire, even when he’s wrong, doesn’t change his call. So that was the premise.

At the top, though—when you’re just sitting down to write—most stories are a little more clever than is good for them. But if you stay close and careful, the people emerge with their human feet to carry the premise forward. It’s like starting with an insupportable thesis, and then creating the evidence to support it. You do it carefully. If you don’t do it carefully, you end up with an anecdote or a joke. The premise is a player in the story, but the story transcends that first good idea and grows beyond it.

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# AMY BLOOM

interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Do you find that when you write your early drafts, the beginning you start with is what ends up on the page? For instance, in “Silver Water” we see Rose singing, so that we’re introduced to her gift before we’re introduced to her illness. Is that how you originally began, or did the beginning grow out of the story once it was written?

“Silver Water” had been in my head for about a year. Each scene was pretty clear to me. Some of the middle was muddled, as it often is, but I knew that it would begin with her singing, and end with her killing herself.

Do you typically get the beginning and ending like that?

Well, more than I get the beginning, ending, and middle. Sometimes you just get the beginning, and sometimes you just get the ending, and sometimes you get two lines of dialogue that you carry around for a year wondering, Who’s going to say that?

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF ENVIRONMENT

Beverly Lowry, interviewed by Stephanie Gordon



I started writing letters and keeping a journal that dealt with the things I saw and heard on the street or in the grocery store, which is a way of compiling information for future use. So you could

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say that by the time I moved to Houston in 1966, I had begun to write. And to think like a writer. To reflect on paper, make notes, jot down observations, not knowing why.

And Houston was very good to me. Houston was so wide open and classless; people didn’t try to hold you back from accomplishing whatever you wanted. And that provided me with a lot of confidence, a sense that I would do whatever I wanted. It just didn’t matter who my father or great-grandfather was, the way it had in the Delta. Whereas New York had been inhibiting, because New Yorkers seemed to know everything, Houston made me feel as if I could do anything.

While in Houston, I started writing *Lolly Ray*, which actually began as a short story. I was writing about this baton twirler, and then all these different characters started showing up in the narrative. I actually wrote those first two books as one, *Come Back, Lolly Ray* and *Emma Blue*. That’s why they came out so close together.

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## A MAD DESIRE TO LAUGH

Lynn Freed, interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson



Do you start with a voice, a situation, an image?

I start precisely with those. Where do they come from? I suppose the desire, the need to create the life on the page, the world. And I always have a mad desire to be surprised, and, of course, to laugh. Not that one can intend these things; just that the expectation is there.

When you begin a novel do you have any idea of the shape or where it’s going?

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I may have an idea of where I think it will go, but usually in the writing it does not go there. Or it goes beyond. Intention can kill fiction, certainly for me. As soon as I find myself saying, I want this character to accomplish this, to go here, to go there, I know I've lost the piece. I should just shut down and go for a walk.

How about short stories?

They do indeed start from a character in a situation. How to find the way into that situation, how to begin the story—that is the labor. Some emerge from failed beginnings of novels. Some are just written. There are myriad paths to Buddha.

### **WRITING ADVICE** from Kathleen Tyau



I try to write my stories from start to finish in one sitting. I call these my “beginnings.” For the book I’m working on now, I’ve written many of these beginnings in longhand. I don’t revise until I’ve found the heart of the story. And that’s when I flesh a piece out and rework the language. Of course, it doesn’t always happen this neatly because the stories come to me in different ways. Sometimes I have a character, sometimes just a phrase or title. There’s no real logic to it. I freewrite until something gels and worry about the details later. Probably the images come to me first, because of freewriting.

as interviewed by Linda B. Swanson-Davies

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**Jayne Anne Phillips:** Stories and novels often occur to me in their first lines or their first paragraphs. I’ve had the experience of writing a first paragraph that’s very language oriented, but very cryptic in terms of the story or a narrative act. I’ll hold on to that in a notebook for years before I find my way into the book that the paragraph describes.

as interviewed by Sarah Anne Johnson

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## **MARY YUKARI WATERS**

interviewed by Sherry Ellis



When you are writing a story, which usually comes first—plot or character?

There’s no rule. Each story develops in a different way. Sometimes I’ll just start with a feeling. Once I was talking with a poet, and I told her that one of my stories had started with a complex emotion that I had a real need to capture on paper. And then I created an entire story building up to that fleeting moment, so that the reader could experience the exact feeling I had. And the poet said, “Oh, that’s exactly the way I write my poetry.” That was a really nice bonding moment. Or sometimes a story might begin with a dilemma, and I keep writing to see how it’s going to play out. For example, “Egg-Face” is a story that starts with the dilemma of a thirty-year-old woman who’s never had a date or a job. I was interested in her predicament, and I wanted to see where it would take me. Or sometimes a story will start with an interesting little detail, one that often ends up being completely insignificant to the story.

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But you have to start somewhere, and a curious fact or detail can get you into a story. For example, in “Since My House Burned Down,” there’s a brief section about a girl practicing her silverware skills so she can go to an omelet parlor. This detail came from a story my grandmother told me about her own youth. When she was growing up, the popular girls would be invited by their dates to eat at this tiny store that was open only for lunch. They sold a plain American omelet, served with ketchup from a bottle. It was such a status symbol to go there. I loved that story, because it was so funny and odd. I thought I’d start out with it and see what came of it. The story ended up taking off in a completely different direction, and the omelet never became a significant part. But at least it got me started. There are endless ways you can begin a story. Every time I start a new piece, I feel like I’m reinventing the wheel. And I always have this sense of panic, because I feel just as clueless as I did when I wrote my first story. I’ve never developed a pat system for these things. And I don’t ever want to, because then it’ll become like a factory, where I’m just cranking out stories from the same basic mold. I like it that each story poses challenges, that you can never rest on your laurels. That keeps it interesting, and rather scary.

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**Susan Richards Shreve:** What I tend to do is imagine a story or a character or both and live with them in my head for a long time, as much as a year or two. Sometime in the course of imagining, I’ll write a couple of sentences. Sort of like yeast. Eventually, I’ll start to write.

as interviewed by Katherine Perry Harris