

# BOMB

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## The Author Interviews

AMY  
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EDWIDGE  
DANTICAT

TOBIAS  
WOLFF

BEN  
MARCUS

A.M.  
HOMES

KENNETH  
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PAULA  
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HAN  
ONG

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HEIDI  
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Edited by  
Betsy Sussler

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TUTEN

LYDIA  
DAVIS

JIM  
SHEPARD

LORE  
SEGAL

NURUDDIN  
FARAH

JENNIFER  
EGAN

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# *BOMB*

The Author  
Interviews

Edited by  
Betsy Sussler

**SOHO**

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# Foreword by Betsy Sussler

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These spirited dialogues are intimate and provocative because they are created between authors—playful and probing, they draw revelations from the experience of writing. They have taken place over lunch, in bars and homes, as recorded interviews or as epistolary exchanges via email and fax. They are intellectual explorations that range over life, influence, inspiration, craftsmanship, and the ineffable mysteries that transform the act of writing into work of art. As discourse, they include you, the reader, in their making and in their interpretation of meaning. Welcome.

Betsy Sussler, Cofounder, Editor-in-Chief, *BOM*

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# Introduction by Francine Prose

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Imagine eavesdropping on a conversation in which the writer whose work you most admire speaks honestly, openly, and articulately about how a book—or a sentence—gets written. Imagine an interview that touches on everything a favorite writer has read and thought about literature, about the craft of writing, about art, music, inspiration, revision—and the temptations of procrastination. Imagine that all these subjects have been collected and distilled into a leisurely, thoughtful, intimate dialogue about the most important things in a writer's life.

That is just the kind of conversation collected in this anthology culled from the interviews that *BOMB Magazine* has published over the last decades, a collection that will come as a revelation to readers—and to writers at every stage of their career. In these pages, you will overhear authors talking to their peers, to people they respect, trying to make sense of the mystery that occurs when they sit down at their desks.

Here we can listen to Roberto Bolaño describe his enthusiasm for the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and the novels of Philip K. Dick, ponder how much of his work is autobiographical, and explain what interests him in fiction: “The form, the rhythm, the plot.” The great Somali novelist Nuruddin Farah discusses the differences between his early and late drafts. Lydia Davis considers how much she knows, from the beginning, about what's going to happen in one of her stories or novels.

Paula Fox reflects on the relation in her work between fearlessness and innocence. Jonathan Franzen speaks, with astonishing frankness, about the ways in which his family experience found its way into *The Corrections*. Maryse Condé recounts how she reimagined Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* as a Caribbean novel. Jeffrey Eugenides takes on postmodernism and describes the challenge of sustaining the original impulse that led him to write *Middlesex*.

Sapphire addresses the question of mortality: how her awareness of the fact that “one day I'll be dead” spurs her determination not to waste time. And Lore Segal shares the advice she gives her writing students: “The one thing you can rely on in any situation is that the feelings you're going to have are not the ones you think you're supposed to have. Look and see what's really going on.”

In these conversations, writers recall how they started writing a certain novel or story; they remember the various stages of the process; they willingly tell us what a character really signifies, what a plot turn represents. They explain what they were trying to do and say. They expound on the importance of the well-made sentence, on cadence and rhythm, on the challenge of creating characters and moving plots along, on the ways in which they have learned to deal in their work with the problems of time and space. And they are willing to go down to the nitty-gritty: editing, revision, dealing with an agent or publisher, literary prizes, the demands and obligations of “a writer's life.”

Of course, reading the conversations collected in this anthology might give you a strange idea about how writers talk. Asked to account for themselves, from their earliest encounters with Dick and Jane to the moment when the first copy of their first published book arrived

the mail, they respond with concise, compressed, compact replies. On the subject of the literary influences, they say provocative and original things. Ben Lerner speaks movingly about his admiration for John Ashbery, Jennifer Egan cites Cervantes, Sterne—and *The Sopranos*. Geoff Dyer reminds us of the benefits of reading history and of watching the film of Andrei Tarkovsky.

And the most amazing thing is: they never sound stupid, never repeat themselves, never stammer or mumble unintelligibly. They always seem to have a smart and readily comprehensible answer. And they have no problem saying what they mean!

Reader, I have a surprise for you. Writers don't talk that way. No one, or practically no one, talks that way. Like everyone else, maybe more than everyone else, writers stutter, stumble, correct themselves, and say plenty of stupid things. They claim that they have no idea why they wrote what they did. Asked to name their favorite writers, they can't think of a one.

But this is how they sound when we read them in *BOMB Magazine*: articulate, truthful, open, funny, honest, touching, and consistently informative. Speaking for publication in *BOMB*, writers think harder than they normally do. They search their memories and the pasts, they try to come up with something that may be interesting or even helpful to the readers and to other writers. The raw material of these conversations has been distilled, compressed, edited—and the editor's job has been made easier by the fact that the material itself is better than normal conversation. Because these are *BOMB* conversations.

That is why we need *BOMB Magazine*, and why we have come to so treasure and enjoy it over the years. And why we—and you—need this book.

*BOMB* gives us conversation distilled into dream conversation, talk that transcends talk, thought that digs beneath transient impressions to get at the essence, the meaning, the purpose, the experience of the writing process. There is something to be remembered and learned from every one of the conversations gathered here. Read them for pleasure, for entertainment, for insight, and for clues to the mystery—to the hard labor and the profound satisfactions—of what writers do.



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# Chris Abani and Colm Tóibín

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CHRIS ABANI was born in Afikpo, Nigeria, in 1966. He is the author of several volumes of fiction and poetry, including the novels *GraceLand* and *The Virgin of Flames*. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Hemingway/PEN Prize, the PEN Beyond Margins Award, the Hurston Wright Award, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship, among many honors. He is currently a Board of Trustees Professor of English at Northwestern University. He lives in Chicago.

COLM TÓIBÍN was born in Enniscorthy, Ireland, in 1955. He is the author of several novels including *The Blackwater Lightship*; *The Master*, winner of the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize; *Brooklyn*, winner of the Costa Book Award; and *The Testament of Mary*, as well as two story collections. Twice shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, Tóibín lives in Dublin and New York and currently serves as Irene and Sidney B. Silverman Professor of the Humanities in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

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COLM TÓIBÍN There are very few obvious connections between Ireland and Nigeria, other than the heritage we received from Her Majesty's government over the years. In Ireland, we haven't struck oil yet. Nonetheless, there's an astonishing passage in Chinua Achebe's book *The Trouble with Nigeria* that connects the two countries. Achebe is in Dublin, and he's watching a ceremonial event that the Irish government has organized. And he notices that the president of Ireland, Patrick J. Hillery—he was the president of Ireland from 1976 to 1990—sidles into the room, just moves into a public event with no obvious security, with no obvious sense of pomp, no medals, no uniform; he just walks into the room, greets a few people and sits down. And Achebe thinks that's an astonishing idea, and it stays in his mind. Of course, for us, that is the Irish, it was an aspect of the sheer dullness of Patrick J. Hillery that nobody wanted to kill him, or mob him. If you were a novelist in the society, you had trouble because although the conflagration of Northern Ireland was happening just two hours away, it did not impinge on this world. To try to create fiction in this world created certain difficulties. But for Achebe, of course, this was to be envied. In some ways, the same difficulty arises for novelists operating in a theater of war as for novelists in a theater of dullness. The simple business of the sentence and the paragraph—the substance of fiction—war or in peace seems to me not to be a particularly different task, no matter what the society. But the task you faced, where your president did not sidle into rooms unguarded nonetheless created a different problem for you than Patrick J. Hillery did for me. Is that correct?

CHRIS ABANI I like that. I would agree. It creates the problem of how to write an interior, somewhat quiet yet still important novel about people in that culture when the external theater seems so much more alluring, urgent even. But there is the problem, the obvious becomes the trap, and precisely because it is obvious it is considered important, so the rendering of the culture, of life in that culture, as art, is often not the measure. But to go back to the connections between Nigeria and Ireland, for me, on a personal level, a familial level almost, but also at the level of being Igbo, these connections go deep because much of the education of Igbos in Nigeria was from Irish priests and missionaries, directly in Catholic schools and through the Church, but also in the form of scholarships to Irish universities. In fact my father was at the University of Cork in the early 1950s and is still known around Cork as that bloody black idiot speeding down the middle of the road, causing pedestrians to flee either way. The Irish missionaries were different in Nigeria from, say, the Scottish or the Protestants. There was a quietness, almost an apology, in the way they were supposed to be “civilizing” us, partly because culturally there was so much in common that they would often want to defend the indigenous culture. They were the only ones who stayed during the Biafran Civil War—these incredible nuns and priests put themselves between the soldiers and the guns. They made a strong impression on people like my father. That quiet elegance continues even to today in Ireland, not just in the area of government, but also in the way that the literature is produced. I remember doing a reading in Dublin with Seamus Heaney. This guy shuffles into the room in a shabby jacket, sits down next to me. He's drinking Guinness. I had just come offstage and he's like, “That was rather nice.” I was like, “Who's this strange man?” Not out loud, of course. Then they announce, “Nobel prize winner Seamus

Heaney.” I’m looking for Seamus, and this guy says, “Hold my Guinness.” It was him! We went to his house afterward, all these young poets sitting around on the floor. This notion that art is available to everyone and there is no hierarchy has a quiet elegance too. I see that in your writing, and I wonder if that is more your tradition?

CT There are two traditions in Ireland. One is that you want to write a book that will change books forever, that will have its reader contained within the book. Those books have made a difference all over the world—for example, *Ulysses*, the work of Beckett, Flann O’Brien’s *Swim-Two-Birds*—in that they take on the entire business of language itself, consciousness itself, and create a new way of working with them. But as the Republic of Ireland settled down, there was an older tradition that could be worked on, which came from song fundamentally, and also from prayer. It tended toward melancholy, which often worked better in the short story; it tended to use unadorned sentences, and be very respectful to rhythm and to the idea of a book itself. The master of this, who died last month, was the Irish writer John McGahern. What we don’t have in Ireland is a novel that describes the disintegration of Gaelic society and its replacement with English-speaking society. We don’t have a *Things Fall Apart*. We don’t have a novel from which everything must take its bearings, that seems to catch history at a certain point and deal with it using a sense of fable, but also making it almost like a song, almost simple, immensely moving, as well as complex, but that could be read by everyone all over the world. Is Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* as important a book for Nigeria as it has been for people outside Nigeria?

CA Well, yes and no. I was going to ask you about *Ulysses* and Dublin. We both seem drawn to re-render cities that other writers have inhabited, but we can talk about that later. *Things Fall Apart* has more import, I think, as a political moment and has caused me to question whether there is a Nigerian novel and what shape it should take. As beautiful as Achebe’s book is, it seems to me that it didn’t come from an aesthetic engagement, but rather a political one, written in response to Joyce Cary’s *Mister Johnson*. It is a response to colonialism. Whereas Amos Tutuola, who comes before him, and even Cyprian Ekwensi, seem to be engaged with their own imagination, their own aesthetic. There are two schools of writing in Nigeria: Tutuola, Fagunwa, Okara, Soyinka, Okri and Oyeyemi and then Achebe, Aluko, Okpewho, Iyayi, Atta and Adichie. Habila and myself, I think, occupy a form somewhere between the two.

CT Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is written getting everything there is in the oral culture and playing with it.

CA Playing with it in this new form, which is the written form.

CT And it is totally alert to the possibilities of bringing a modernist aesthetic into a society that has had an oral culture.

CA Completely, and at the same time being aware of the political moment. It is very subversive. Achebe has set up a difficult thing to follow, the representational approach to Nigerian literature; we have to perform the culture to other people. I would much prefer to be like Joyce and Tutuola.

CT Yes, but Joyce comes in two guises: the author of *Dubliners*, which for anyone working to create a simple moment, seen and understood, offers a poetic zeal and beauty. To the author surrounding, say, defeat or poverty—*Dubliners* does that. Whereas *Ulysses* breaks the possibility of anyone doing that again. But then you can never contain those two traditions. For example, in—what’s the name of the later Achebe novel that has a wonderful woman character that Nadine Gordimer called “the best female character yet created by an African writer”?

CA *Arrow of God*?

CT No, the later one.

CA *A Man of the People*?

CT No, the later one.

CA *Anthills of the Savanna*!

CT Yes! As an aesthetic achievement, that woman’s presence in the book—I know that she has a role in politics, but for example, when she talks about the taste of sperm in her mouth and how she feels about that, that’s got nothing to do with Nigerian politics, but it’s a wonderful moment.

CA It depends on whose sperm it is.

CT Irrespective of whose sperm it is, you feel that the way it’s described—sorry, I picked a good example—that could be in any country, anywhere. That novel is full of extremely interesting perceptions about people, about men and women, her voice especially. Am I right about that?

CA You’re absolutely right, but that’s part of the beauty, the tragedy of political insurgency. It’s not until his fourth novel that Achebe continues the experiment with form and voice, begun in *Arrow of God*. But Gabriel Okara had done this already in *The Voice*. That’s why

happens in political contexts where literature takes on this role. I wouldn't be able to write Achebe hadn't written. So it's not a criticism. His generation's privileging of the political moment has created a space for the Nigerian novel that allows my generation to enter and start to talk about the aesthetic moment.

CT You've written recently about [Wole] Soyinka. How important has he been?

CA You can't talk about Nigeria in any context without Soyinka. The country comes to birth in Soyinka's imagination. There's no political moment, no nationalistic moment that he doesn't have some involvement in. Purely as a voice of conscience, he's been the one constant. In Nigeria we have 250 ethnicities that are engaged in the often violent moments of self-determination. Soyinka is one of a few people able to occupy that duality that's required if Nigeria is to find itself. And you see that in his plays and novels as well. His work begins to achieve a universalism that has often led to criticisms over authenticity because he doesn't privilege folklore. For him myth and mythology exist only in terms of what they can do for the aesthetic moment, the way it did for the Greeks and the Romans. For me as a writer he's the most influential, both as a voice of conscience, but also in terms of aesthetic rigor and framework.

CT Compared to *Things Fall Apart*, I never liked *The Interpreters*. It seems to me very distant indeed. Is that just an outsider's view? Maybe Soyinka's theater is his best work.

CA Theater is his best work, but I do think it is an outsider's view. In many ways *Things Fall Apart* performs a certain reassuring expectation of Africa. This means that most writers with me in my generation are resisting that performance. I am in fact lucky to get any kind of exposure because all my work is about resisting that performance. This new storytelling is a difficult balance.

CT Yes, but it seems to me that you've taken both. In *GraceLand* you're certainly alert to what Tutuola has done, in terms of your repetitions and style. But also there are pure pieces of nineteenth-century Russian realism, which both Achebe and Soyinka have worked with. So you're actually bringing the two forms together in order to dramatize what is quite a difficult public life for quite a fragile consciousness, your protagonist, Elvis. You're conscious of using both?

CA Very, but more conscious of actually taking directly from the Russians. There are references in the book—the books that Elvis is reading—that talk about the way the book was made. I read Dostoyevsky very early—ten, twelve years old—and became sucked into the ridiculous existential melancholy that thirteen-year-old boys feel, but haven't earned. Dickens, too. It's a colonial education, and so I had those references. Soyinka and Tutuola

have been much more influential than Achebe in terms of my actual writing style. But in terms of how you build a worldview, Achebe has been more important, how you integrate what is essentially an Igbo cosmology into a very modern, contemporary, twenty-first-century novel. There are all of those things, but James Baldwin also plays into this.

CT As does Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. I think that with every novel, there's this shadow novel: the novel that should have been and that was in my head at first, that was set in a much more public place. For example, I was in Spain when Franco died. I was at all the demonstrations. There was always a novel to be written. But when I went to write the novel it was about those earlier years when there was nothing much happening. The Henry James book really should have been a novel about Oscar Wilde, which would have been much more exciting, funnier, more glamorous and sadder in the end. I was also conscious in *GraceLand* that there are things you are leaving out; the war is mentioned only in passing. It must have been tempting to have done a very big war novel, written the novel of the Biafran war.

CA Do you get that?

CT Of course, of course I do: "Where is the novel of Northern Ireland? Where is the novel of the civil rights movement? Where is the novel of the IRA?" Well, why don't you write it! (laughter)

CA It's funny, because when I was reading *The Master*—the beautiful opening scene with James's play, when Wilde is mentioned—I can see that temptation. Yes, it is tempting, but *GraceLand* was doing the very reverse of that; it was trying to be both minute and epic, which is a contradiction in terms. Here's a book that's dealing with a whole generation—my generation—of Nigerians, and our coming of age and our notion of the country's coming of age. So it sprawls all over the place, but it had to follow this single consciousness if it was going to bear through with any degree of resonance. Otherwise it would veer too easily into the polemic. *GraceLand* is like a manifesto: I wanted to talk about gender, sexuality, the performance of masculinity, and how that is always associated with violence, the terrain of which is the female body within Nigeria; all of those spaces of silence that exist in Nigerian literature and are not privileged in the way that the easily political is privileged. *Abigayle* comes out of that, as does a book I wrote about a boy soldier. They're both novellas. They're small and minute because I'm afraid of that easy political grandstanding. I'm looking for a more effective way of discussing both the political and human. I've returned more and more to Baldwin, because Baldwin is always about the quiet human moment. He never shied away from race, from the civil rights movement. He never shied away from dealing with issues of sexuality. Being ten and reading *Another Country*, in a very homophobic culture, I realized that for James the only aberration in the world is the absence of love. And what's even more perverse is the giving up on the search for love, which is that melancholic voice that carries us in the quiet moments. That's what I want to return to. You too have this quietness at the heart of your work. Your writing is elegant, it's sparse—*Blackwater Lightship*, for example—

and where the hell do you get these beautiful titles from? For you, is the more distilled voice the better voice? Do you like it more in this sense?

CT There's a lot of fear involved, that you're going to mess up the sentence, so you leave short. It arises from having to struggle enormously just to get the thing down. I have no natural ability, I don't think. I have colleagues in Ireland who have a real natural ability—almost like having a natural singing voice—where you can write anything. I don't have that at all. So it always comes from fear, I think.

CA It's funny you should say that. Do you know Dermot Healy's work?

CT He has a natural ability to just do anything with words.

CA But he says the same thing! He says that he's terrified. *A Goat's Song* took him ten years and it's a beautiful book. Do you think that it's just that Irish writers are better writers precisely because they feel that they're not?

CT I think that in societies like yours and mine, mothers realize: if my son can read and write, it'll be a way out of poverty. Reading and writing have a special sacred aura around them. You do not take them for granted. Because of the broken traditions and loose connections in our countries, what we write about also has its own rules and regulations. If you read your two books together, *GraceLand* and *Abigail*, there's always dislocation, the dead father or the dead mother. You could say that *Ulysses* is about a man whose father committed suicide, whose son died, and whose wife is having an affair with somebody else, walking in the city to meet someone whose mother has died. And you'll say, "Ah, this must be an Irish novel!" I don't know how I would write a novel—this might sound like a joke but I mean it—with two parents who would be alive at the end of the book. Your two most recent novels are about someone whose mother has died and who's a ghostly presence in both of the books.

CA Yes. But everything in Nigeria is about haunting. It's about ghosts. The dead are everywhere, and just won't stay dead. In my Igbo culture, dead parents used to be buried in the middle of the living room and not in cemeteries. So in this way the dead are always there, to guide us, to teach us. I grew up around domestic graves and you couldn't have a drink without offering them libation. So the dead informed everything that the living did. They are in many ways our way of mediating self and history, partly because there's a real existential loss at the heart of what it means to be Nigerian, because three or four hundred years ago much of the culture was interrupted when the Portuguese arrived and began to descend in enslavement. What happens is that from that time on, Nigerian culture begins to cede itself to the invader, to this invasion of otherness. So even now in Nigeria, when we talk about "our culture," there's a certain Victorianness about what we think our culture is, which

actually comes from Victorian England's colonial presence. It's that way in which all of our "selves" are built around ghosts, and sadly, mostly violent ghosts, malevolent ghosts. In *GraceLand* and *Becoming Abigail*, the mothers are dead and in a new book, *The Virgin Flames*, the father's dead. So the body of becoming is often an absence made more present by its haunting, by the ectoplasmic residue. In my books, the dead return as text, as skin (diaries and maps), as inscriptions that act as the medium, the way to visit the ghostly places of self and yet return safely. So much of the ectoplasm of these ghosts is patriarchy and masculinity. My work asks if it is possible, if this absence, this malevolent place, can enfold and nurture and be reclaimed through prose and poetry, to turn into possibility. For me it's alchemy.

CT Who is Percival Everett? He gets acknowledged in both of your books.

CA He's an amazing African American writer who has been a huge presence for me. I started out as a genre writer, writing thrillers, and couldn't find a way to blend all that with the literary. He really brought things together for me. He has helped me solve one of the core challenges for contemporary African writers: how to occupy the spaces of imagination when the political moment is either inadequate or has exhausted itself. This is an interesting moment for Nigerian writers. We now have a more global moment, diasporas where even when you're in Nigeria you're on your BlackBerry all the time. There are none of the usual places of engagement anymore. We have to find new topographies for our imagination.

CT One of the ways that you have tried to solve this, by its very implication in *GraceLand*—even by the title—and this is something that Ireland and Nigeria have in common, that both societies were ready to let America wash over them in every way. For example, there is no such thing as Irish capital. If Irish people have money, they put it in a bank or they buy more houses, but they wouldn't ever invest in something that might make or lose money. There's no tradition of that. Irish people adore American country music. If you're a writer, you love Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald. We see ourselves in certain ways as an aspect of America, and we are happy for that to continue, despite the fact that there was very little support for the current American regime in Ireland. There are images throughout *GraceLand*—it isn't overplayed. There's the relationship between Nigeria and Portugal, Nigeria and Britain, Nigeria and its own internal disputes, and all that almost pales in comparison with this new one, which is Nigeria and America.

CA In many ways it's always been a concern of Nigerian literature, the engagement with the Western voice. But it has always been seen as the bogeyman coming in to erase the existing culture. But I was more interested in *GraceLand* in the moments of possibility. Rather than it being a limitation, its being subversion too as well as possibility. Here's a Nigerian kid named Elvis, putting on whiteface to imitate a white guy who imitated black people, ridiculing the notions of race and ownership of art. I think my argument, or my belief, is that ultimately art in any form—literature, music, even cinema—offers dialogue. Once dialogue is introduced, the subversive element comes in. And so it can be transmuted into something else. American



exports itself to Nigeria in this way, and Nigeria digests it and then exports itself back to America in a completely different way. A lot of things come from that conversation: possibility rather than limitation; something beautiful.

CT *GraceLand* is one of those books—I would love to have seen you writing it. To have known if it was day or night, the room, how many words per day. There are books like that where you would love to see the thing being created. Could you give us some idea?

CA It was written in America, on a laptop, mostly in Starbucks, which seems appropriate. It was written very frenetically in nine months. I got obsessed with it. I was writing 16-hour days. The real difficulty was writing the fractured language. My tendency is to make everything beautiful. But I wanted to capture that cityscape. You were in the Lannan House, right?

CT No, I was never in Lannan. I was in Yaddo.

CA I thought you were in Marfa, Texas?

CT No, no. If you know them, do tell them I'd like to come.

CA A train went by Marfa at three o'clock in the morning, and it had the most melancholy whistle. But this is a town where the cemetery is segregated, still. So, to be there working on my new novel, *The Virgin of Flames*, in a place where the sky blends with the landscape and it looks like you're caught in a glass bubble with all that contradiction was quite the gift. That was where I wrote *Becoming Abigail*—in three weeks. I wanted to ask you how you write, how you make the work you make. I'm very intrigued, because each of your books is very different. But at the core of everything—like this Henry James book, *The Master*, is the notion of exile: this separation, this displacement, this melancholy and loss. How do you infuse all of that into the sparsest sentences? How do you write?

CT I wonder—and to ask you if this is true about you—if the first five or six books you read at a certain age matter to you more than any number of experiences? Or tend to merge with those experiences? And that they become your style, those books. Or a DNA in you, a magnet in you hits a magnet in them. Certainly, reading *The Sun Also Rises* in Tramore on the beach when I was sixteen or seventeen, I was amazed. The hero being in Paris and going to Spain, having a whale of a time in Spain. But he was always separate from the others. I did all that I did all that that happens in that book, after reading it. I didn't like the bullfighting thing; that wasn't my scene. Instead, I went to Catalonia. I was always there, watching the others, like the guy in book. And at the same age—I'm talking 1971 or '72—Penguin had published Sartre's trilogy, and it was being read by serious people. It's not read now. And *Guernica* was

on the cover of the Penguin edition. It was everywhere you went. I didn't know anything about his philosophy—I still have no interest in his philosophy—but reading the first two books of his trilogy made an enormous difference to me. And then coming through those two books to Camus, to *The Outsider*. I ended up living like that. I didn't murder anybody, but nonetheless, those books didn't just affect the way I wrote, but they affected the way I lived. Notice that I'm not mentioning any Irish books, because in those years, the censors had been lifted and every book was coming in from the outside and the last thing you wanted to read was about Ireland. I read them later, but at that age those American and French books really hit me. Those books were what mattered, nothing else since of either reading or experience has mattered in any way like that.

CA I want to ask you about being Catholic or growing up in a Catholic household. I grew up very Catholic. I grew up going to a seminary and being kicked out, several times actually, for heresy. There's something about being Catholic that seems that you existentially displace a part of the time—it's almost like joy is a foreign country, and when you travel to it, you take all the pain and flagellation. I'm talking about me here. I wanted to ask you if that informs any of the work you do?

CT Catholicism didn't affect me very much, other than that the rituals were both interesting and boring. I was an altar boy. I find it very hard to create a Catholic character. Maybe if they banned it I would start wanting it. But I suppose there is an elephant in the room, which is the matter of being gay. That did make a very big difference. At the moment I'm in the Castro in San Francisco, where every single person is gay. Which is most disconcerting because where I am in my head, there's no one gay guy for a hundred miles on all sides. Obviously, the business of holding a secret like that, which I did for years, affects you. It happens in Henry James. The best James books are where there's a secret and if told, it would be explosive. That is what interested me so much about James at the beginning, both personally and as a writer.

CA To answer the question that I actually asked you about influence: for me it's a lot of Marvel and DC comics. Silver Surfer: all of my melancholy comes from the Silver Surfer. As a child, there were these books that they shouldn't have allowed children to read, these little comic books from England called the *Commando* series, about the Second World War. There was a particular one called *Darkie's Mob* that sort of stayed with me. It is all of the ways in which the English, completely unaware, celebrate their own racism. I play with sexuality in all my books. There's an ambiguity to all my characters. In *The Virgin of Flames*, the protagonist wants to be a woman. I write my characters from the inside out. There's no spectacle to it, so of course the first question is, Where is your body in relationship to the text? That always fascinates me. Before I wrote this book about this guy who wants to be a woman—I had always prided myself on, while being straight, being not homophobic at all. Until I wrote a scene where the character is finally about to make love to a transsexual stripper but realizes that that's not what he wants. In fact, he wants to occupy the stripper's

position. And you have that whole *Crying Game* moment, but instead of the penis revelation being the thing, it's the penis disappearance. So this transsexual stripper is teaching this guy how to disappear his penis, so that he could wear a G-string were he to perform as a stripper. I researched it on the Internet. My girlfriend at the time read what I had written and said, "This reads like a manual." The rest of the book was beautiful but then it's, "Okay, over here we have the penis." I really had to go there, so I hired someone who performs as a woman. I said, "Okay, show me how to do this."

CT Do you have his number? (*laughter*)

CA I wanted to ask you, did coming out change your interaction with the text or with your readership or with editorship or all of this?

CT Yeah. For me, writing down the opening section of *The Story of the Night* and publishing it was a very big moment. It was like what you were describing, except I realized I was going to go on being it, even if I stopped writing about it. It was like writing down the truth, which is something we should all be very suspicious of. And the question then is that of putting the truth genie back in the bottle. I would like a rest from either being gay, gay, gay or being Irish, Irish, Irish. Some other thing you could be—French, maybe, or very old, or clean-living—I might try. Obviously, being a woman would be terrific. I did it in my first novel so I suppose I cannot do it again. I wish there were more categories. I suppose there will be some time.

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# Kathy Acker and Mark Magill

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KATHY ACKER (1947–1997) was born in New York City. She was a novelist, performance artist, playwright and essayist. Her books include *Blood and Guts in High School*, *Great Expectations*, *Empire of the Senseless*, *Don Quixote*, and numerous other works. She taught among other places, at the San Francisco Art Institute; the University of California, San Diego; and the California Institute of Arts.

MARK MAGILL was born in New York City in 1952. He is the author of *Meditation and the Art of Beekeeping* and *Why Is the Buddha Smiling?* He has served on the board of advisors of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. He is also a filmmaker whose work is part of the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art. He lives in New York City.

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**1. When were you born?**

1947.

**2. Age?**

35.

**3. Where were you born?**

NYC.

**4. Name of parents:**

Something Lehmann and Claire Weill.

**5. Why were you born? a.) Plan b.) Accident c.) Neither**

My mother was scared to have an abortion.

**6. Any brothers or sisters?**

One half-sister.

**7. Parents' professions:**

Mother—none. I never knew my father. His family owned Wildroot Cream Oil among other properties (no sobriety here).

**8. Last employment:**

Full or partial? Partial (and ended), oh, *Artforum* (*laughter*) (just to make trouble). Full

selling cookies in a now defunct bakery off St. Mark's Place.

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**9. Last book read:**

Oh, *Story of Irene*. [A French pornographic novel]

**10. Last film seen:**

*King of Comedy*.

**11. Favorite book:**

Too schizzy and changeable to have anything permanent.

**12. Favorite film:**

The film that Jap guy did of *Story of O* and *Return to the Chateau*—something like *The Fruits of Passion*.

**13. Political party:**

I belong to some party; I forgot what. Oh, the Writer's Union, 'cause Jeffrey Weinstein's my friend. I belong to friendship and destruction (sentimental shit).

**14. Favorite recording artist:**

That Egyptian woman who just died about a year ago.

**15. Favorite artist:**

Jackson Pollock.

**16. Occupation:**

Writer or not ... not occupied.

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**17. Position desired:**

At times dead. I've been fighting against that one. Otherwise, enough money to buy clothes.

**18. World outlook:** (circle one) a.) Pessimistic b.) Optimistic c.) Zen-like detachment d.) Manic confusion

Enough money to buy clothes.

~~19. Do you regularly abstain from any of the following: a.) Red meat b.) Sugar c.) Boiled vegetables d.) Pizza e.) Hard liquor f.) Coffee g.) Herbal tea h.) Black bean sauce i.) Shellfish j.) Potatoes k.) Chef salad l.) Hot sauce~~

**20. How often do you bathe?** (circle one) Daily 5 4 3 2 1 times per week.

No one's allowed in my house.

**21. Do you brush your teeth after every meal?**

Fuck you.

**22. Do you have any large outstanding debts?**

I don't owe no one nothing.

**23. Does free will exist?**

What else is this about? I'm no superstar shit and never will be. If anything, I'm what happens after death, which is writing.

**24. If you were forced to take sides in a dinner table discussion, which of the following world views would you support?** a.) Freudian psychology b.) Marxist

economics c.) Mechanistic determinism d.) Probability and chance e.) Judeo-Christian dogma f.) Buddhist duality g.) Structuralism h.) Situationalism i.) Positionalism j.) Ayn Rand individualism k.) Trotskyism l.) Anarchism m.) Socialism n.) Liberalism o.) Nihilism p.) Existentialism q.) Educated skepticism r.) Other (please explain)

Oh yeah—honey it's all there. Yuck, yuck. I'll do what I have to for the particular moment. Being an intellectual, I uphold guerrilla warfare.

**25. You are sharing a piece of pie after dinner. There is only one bite left. Do you: a.) Take it b.) Wait for the other person to take it c.) Offer it to the other person d.) Offer to split it e.) Split it and take half no matter how small**

I don't eat sugar.

**26. Are you basically: a.) Shy b.) Outgoing c.) Indifferent**

A human is a reflection of and reflects all phenomena. That is, a human who has made her or himself active (what pretentious bullshit).

**27. Are you subject to deep and inexplicable depression?**

Absolutely.

**28. Do you talk to yourself?**

I live alone, dummy. It's hard to get pleasure these days.

**29. Is your memory: a.) Exceptional b.) Good c.) Normal d.) Bad e.) Senile**

Let's compare a pencil to a vagina.

**30. Where would you most like to be right now?**

With you-know-who's cock in me.



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