

CREATING SANCTUARY, FEELING EXULTED



We sit across from each other at a plain table in a windowless room, microphones before us, bottles of water, books, notes, and pens at hand. We're about to record an edition of *Open Books*, an hour-long radio program. The writer and I have been talking, getting comfortable with each other as I describe the show and explain how we'll proceed. As always, I have the jitters. We fall silent, and suddenly it feels as though we're in a bathysphere, out of reach of the clamoring world. I look up at the control room window and wait for my producer, director, and friend, Craig Kois, to give me the signal to start. The music comes up; it's "Body and Soul." I chose the 1939 Coleman Hawkins recording as my theme song for its vibrancy and knowingness, and for its title. Written by Johnny Green in 1930, "Body and Soul" embraces the duality of existence—the union of the earthy and the spiritual, the sensuous and the ethereal, the real and the desired. For me, literature revolves on this axis.

The music fades; I lean in to the mike: "Hello, this is Donna Seaman welcoming you to *Open Books*, a show about outstanding books, remarkable writers, and the fine art of reading." *Open Books* airs on WLWU, a community radio station located on the campus of Loyola University Chicago, and operated under the auspices of WBEZ, Chicago's National Public Radio station. It's a modest operation, yet stellar writers honor us with their presence.

Most of the interviews in *Writers on the Air* took place in a small, somewhat shabby studio down a poorly lit hallway and far away from most of the radio station's operations. The studio door was usually closed and locked, the discrete sign easily missed, and very few Loyola people even knew of its existence—which could

be a problem when an author arrived in the lobby before I did and asked for directions. But the studio's inconspicuousness made it a refuge, and though Room 207 was anything but state-of-the-art in terms of technology, it was all that a writer and reader could desire as a place for exchanging ideas and enthusiasms. Many of my guests called it a sanctuary.

In a brief essay titled "My Faith as a Writer," Joyce Carol Oates writes, "I believe art is the highest expression of the human spirit." I agree, and I believe that literature, in particular, enhances our perceptions and deepens our understanding of life. I treasure the solace of literature, its capacity to illuminate what is unique about an individual and what is universally human. Stories can transcend barriers—of place, generation, class, race, faith—and create gateways to understanding humankind's endlessly inventive responses to life's challenges and conundrums. Stories preserve lost worlds, express our sense of the sacred, and trace the grand web of life on earth. Literature describes more exquisitely than any other art form what it feels like to be alive, how the mind shifts through memories, emotions, thoughts, and sensations. It can entice us into contemplating diverse traditions and divergent viewpoints. It awakens empathy and fosters a sense of connection with others.

In the hope of transformation and pleasure, I'm forever falling into the arms of books. I cherish the intimacy that the act of reading demands. You curl up in quiet solitude, or sit within your own zone of concentration among fellow coffee drinkers or commuters, running your eyes over print so that by a wondrous alchemy of mind (to borrow from Diane Ackerman) entire worlds blossom in your imagination. Readers often spend more time communing with a writer than with people of their acquaintance. Consequently they feel profoundly connected to these disembodied voices. Radio is an intimate medium, too. The first form of electronic mass communication, it remains for many a great favorite by virtue of its directness and its appeal to the imagination. The best of spoken-word radio has a stimulating effect on the brain similar to reading; it creates a sense of connection between speaker and listener the way a book does between writer and reader. Books are an essential

aspect of our collective consciousness and a key element in public discourse—contrary to routinely dire predictions of their demise—and I believe that literature and writers belong on the airwaves.

As an associate editor at *Booklist*, a review magazine published in Chicago by the American Library Association, I have the privilege of participating in the published conversation about books. This dialogue between readers and writers has been going on ever since literature began. Established in 1905, today *Booklist* continues to perform its mission to help librarians select books for their collections—albeit on a larger scale, as required by the spectacular changes a century of technological innovations has brought to publishing and librarianship. Each year we publish thousands of concise, evaluative (and, we hope, entertaining) reviews of books we consider worthy of a place on library shelves, and in the minds and hearts of readers.

An ardent reader, I found my place in the world at *Booklist*. Craig Kois, an advocate for documentary and spoken-word radio, found his at the helm of WLWU. One day I surprised myself by saying to Craig, “You need a book show.” “I thought you’d never ask,” he replied. “Now what have I done?” I asked myself.

I had no journalism background or media experience, so at first I did what I knew best: reading and writing about books. I wrote scripts and read them aloud, re-recording as necessary, and suffering from stage fright even though Craig was my only witness. Nevertheless, when publishers and authors began to ask if we were interested in having writers appear on *Open Books*, I realized that, in spite of my trepidation about conducting interviews on the air, speaking with writers was the way to go. One of the more maddening aspects of my work as a reviewer and critic is the knowledge that so very many wonderful books are published without fanfare, accorded scant critical attention, and allowed to slip out of view before readers have had the chance even to consider reading them. My heart sinks when, on telling a book-loving friend about a brilliant and prolific living writer whose work I revere, my friend says she’s never heard of him. My mission is to bring as many literary writers to the attention of as many readers as possible, so I welcome as many

guests on *Open Books* as I can. I'm grateful for the forum WLWU provides, and for the generous support of the Illinois Arts Council.

Yet in spite of my convictions, I'm assailed by self-doubt before each interview, and I half hope for a cancellation, a power outage—anything to keep me out of the studio. As the conversation gains momentum, however, an adrenaline rush inevitably replaces anxiety. A rapport is established. We're having fun. The writers I've enjoyed speaking with are compelling on the page and engaging in person. During our conversations, writers often mention how painstakingly they rewrite their work, how many drafts a novel goes through, how writing is about rewriting. Yet in person, each speaks fluently and animatedly about subtle and complex matters. Time after time, I've sat on the edge of my seat, riveted by a writer's revelations of all the hard work and out-of-the blue inspiration that goes into the writing. These conversations can be extremely moving. Writers and I have fought back tears, determined not to derail the conversation. I've laughed so hard I've lost track of what we were talking about. And I've been so stunned or chagrined by what a writer has to say, I've been left speechless.

Open Books depends on my guests' presence of mind and eloquence. I don't have the resources necessary for producing the sort of carefully edited interviews heard on NPR. My conversations with writers are broadcast in their original form. Consequently, I write out pages of notes and questions in preparation for each interview, hoping to structure a narrative arc so that each discussion has a story line and builds toward some sort of resolution. This approach makes for a focused give-and-take. I often feel as though the writer and I are walking toward each other on a tightrope. At the hour's close, we are elated.

Though radio is ephemeral, what writers have to say on *Open Books* merits more sustained attention. I've wanted to preserve these exchanges in print so that they would be available to more people than WLWU can reach, and in a more permanent form. Each conversation is, in effect, a snapshot of a writer's life. Anyone interested in how and why books are written will find these interviews intriguing. I have edited each conversation to conform to

print conventions and for ease of reading. My aim is to make each writer's spoken voice present on the page.

I'm grateful to everyone who has appeared on *Open Books*; I wish I could have included more conversations in *Writers on the Air*; but there were simply more interesting interviews than one book could contain. So in this collection I have selected interviews with prose writers, both fiction and non-fiction, that make for lively reading on the printed page.

In the conversations with fiction writers and writers of creative nonfiction that are collected here, we talk about how human beings use stories to make sense of the blur of daily life, forge a self, and shape a life. I've also included discussions about how literature not only elucidates the often-perverse ways of humankind, but also our place in nature. I like fiction rich in metaphor, fiction that grapples with the complexities of relationships, fiction that imagines the consequences of inheritance, history and social mores, fiction laced with philosophy and questions of faith, and concerned with rampant technologies and environmental necessities, morality and spirituality, war and exile, art and remembrance, prejudice and compassion. Fiction full of wonder and terror, love and humor, folly and discovery.

Creative nonfiction reports on the same universe using the same literary devices as fiction, but without inventing characters, place, or predicaments. It, too, brims with metaphor, is spiked with irony and taut with drama, but in creative nonfiction the writer is unmasked and free to overtly express his or her opinion over the course of telling a true-life story. A versatile genre at once journalistic and lyrical, creative nonfiction covers a wealth of intriguing subjects. It includes works of natural history and meditations on the state of the environment, thus constituting, in my view, one of the most dynamic and important literary forms being practiced in our global times. Hence my conversations with creative nonfiction writers who write with concern about the earth as well as about the human condition.

In both nature and culture, diversity is the key to survival and vitality. Today's readers enjoy access to a spectacular number and

variety of books, yet because so few of them are discussed in mainstream media, many readers don't know where to begin in choosing books to read for pleasure. Many readers read only one genre, limiting themselves to mysteries, for example, because that's what they're used to, and missing out on the clarity and intensity of creative nonfiction. Other readers never immerse themselves in fiction and have no concept of the vast spectrum of styles and themes found in short stories and novels. I hope this collection will pique your curiosity, and inspire you to experiment by reading a writer or genre new to you. To encourage further exploration, I've put together a Related Readings section in which I present a set of unapologetically idiosyncratic lists of books that I believe will continue the conversations begun in works by the writers featured here. Some of the lists are impressionistic, others are thematic or based on something as straightforward as a writer's own list of favorite books. Each list recommends books that possess the qualities I look for in literature: beautiful writing, lucid thinking, close observation, flights of imagination, risk-taking, moral inquiry, compassion, catharsis, wit, and wonder. I read to learn and to be moved. In *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* the critic Harold Bloom writes, "The mind always returns to its needs for beauty, truth, and insight." Bloom also lists the essential elements he looks for in literature, criteria to guide us all: "aesthetic splendor, intellectual power, wisdom."

Recently Loyola University launched an ambitious renovation project, and Room 207 is no more. We now record *Open Books* in a small, cluttered room in view (and earshot) of the bustle of the radio station. Though we are sorry to have lost our hidden haven, we've discovered that the feeling of sanctuary our writers experience does not require a particular room. Our guests sense the shelter created when minds meet and imaginations are kindled, the symbiotic relationship between writer and reader that brings books to life. These encounters are exhilarating for me, and I hope that you, too, find refuge in these conversations, as well as pleasure and enlightenment.

Edward P. Jones



Edward P. Jones, born in 1950, attended the College of the Holy Cross, holds an M.F.A. from the University of Virginia, and lives in Arlington, Virginia. Jones worked for Tax Analysts, a business publisher, for many years, writing fiction whenever possible. His first book was an incandescent short story collection titled *Lost in the City*, and its fourteen perceptive and forthright tales illuminate hidden facets of African American inner city life in Washington, D.C., during the 1960s and 1970s. *Lost in the City* received resounding praise and support: it was short-listed for the National Book Award, and Jones received the PEN/Hemingway Award and a Lannan Foundation Grant.

In his first novel, *The Known World*, Jones goes back in time and considers a little-known episode of American history, the existence of black slave-owners. Set in Virginia, this haunting book revolves around Henry Townsend, a former slave, a bootmaker, and now a slave-owning farmer. His parents worked hard to purchase the family's freedom, but rather than join them in leaving slavery behind, Henry chooses his former owner as a mentor. This puts William Robbins, who is white, in a quandary, given the vicious racism of his world. Not only is he sincerely fond and proud of his black protégé, he is also secretly in love with a black woman. Jones constructs a cloverleaf-like narrative that circles from the present to the past to the future and back again. Within this elaborate structure, he renders the inner lives of his characters with great subtlety, contrasting their longings and intentions with the brutality and paradoxes of their world.

The Known World electrified the reading community, winning *Booklist's* Top of the List award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Pulitzer Prize. Jones's next book is a collection of short stories titled *All Aunt Hagar's Children*. Jones has taught at

the University of Virginia, Princeton University, George Mason University, and the University of Maryland, and he is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship. I spoke with Edward P. Jones in early 2004.



DONNA SEAMAN: Were you concerned about the impact of your portrayal of black slave-owners?

EDWARD P. JONES: No, I wasn't. I learned that there were black slave-owners when I was in college. Although I had no intention at that time of writing a novel, I do feel that the fact that those people existed gave me a license to do the novel. If there had been no black slave-owners in America ever, then I don't think I would have written a novel about that era. But it's a fact and there's nothing you can do about it.

DS: It's so very human. Your novel shows us that in spite of our desire to make things simple, or black and white, if you will, they aren't. There's nothing clear-cut in the world you revisit and re-imagine, and many of your characters defy categorization because they're of mixed heritage, or involved in relationships with people of other races or other backgrounds.

JONES: I'm trying to remember if I had all those people in my mind. I guess I did. Because I sat down and started writing after thinking the novel through for about ten years. The only writing I did over those years was about twelve pages, everything else was in my head. I wrote six pages of the first chapter, and six pages of the final chapter. Once I sat down to write the book, it took me only about two and a half months for the first draft.

DS: Where did these characters come from? Did you do a great deal of reading and research?

JONES: No. As a matter of fact, I had a lot of books I planned on reading but I never got around to them. Over those ten years, I

just kept putting it off, and in the meantime, of course, I was creating the novel in my head. So finally I decided, well, I know enough about how that world looked back then, so I'm just going to go on that. I'm just going to use my imagination. Forget the research.

DS: At the beginning of the novel, one feels as though one might be reading a traditional historical novel because it seems as though there's lots of research backing it up and that you're giving us facts.

JONES: Yes, like the census. But all that is made up. I mention three people in the book who wrote histories of Manchester County. Of course, they couldn't write histories of a fictional place. And the names of those three people are names of friends of mine.

DS: Your narrative is densely layered and complex. Your omniscient point-of-view takes us back and forth in time within a single sentence. I wonder how you came to use that voice and that perspective.

JONES: The shifting around in time happened perhaps because I was writing more than 150 years after everything happened. I felt that as I looked back over all that time, and as I'm writing about a person, I should give the reader some idea of what happened to that person down the line. If I was writing about 1855 Virginia in, say, 1861, I wouldn't have been able to do that.

DS: You create a palpable tension between the novel's richly textured language and its incredible emotional restraint. That is to say, the narrative is remarkably understated given the acts of horrific brutality and the profound grief you describe. Was this a conscious choice?

JONES: Yes, it was because I didn't want to inject any more emotion into the situation. The events are particularly horrendous, so I wanted simply to report. The reader will bring his or her own feelings to it.

DS: Do you think it's important for us to try to understand how people felt in the past, to get a sense of the emotional dimension of their times, rather than to simply chronicle the circumstances of their lives?

JONES: I think the feelings were important to me, to put those forth. My sense has always been that people do things for a reason, and I need to explain why people do the things they do and how they got into those situations.

DS: Is this part of what inspires you to write fiction, the ability to reveal people's minds?

JONES: I think so, but actually it's a real messy business. For instance, one of the reasons I have a lot of people carving stuff in the novel is because I would rather have been some sort of woodcarver than a writer. If you have a piece of wood in your hand and you're carving a horse, for example, you can tell if the legs are too long or too short, or whatever; you can tell everything just by having it in your hand. But in a novel, you have all these pages and you can't see it all at one time. You can only hope that what you're building makes sense.

DS: Do you see a connection between the moral dilemmas that you create in your short stories, which are more contemporary, and the situations you've depicted in this novel of the mid nineteenth century?

JONES: No. I think they are separate. I don't know what happened to my mind that I decided to write a novel about 1855 Virginia rather than something about 1950 or 1960 Washington. Maybe I'll get around to that.

DS: *The Known World* has been exceptionally well received. It's been critically acclaimed, and it's increasingly popular with readers. Has this affected you as a writer?

JONES: No, I'm still the same person. I do feel as if I've gotten some recognition. I noticed on the *New Yorker* issue on the newsstands, in which I have a short story, there's a sticker that gives my name, as if people will know who I am. So it was really something to see that. I have a name now.

DS: When you teach, do you encourage your writing students to think big, to grapple with serious questions, or do you let them find their own way?

JONES: I don't have any kind of agenda. I just deal with the work that they produce. I comment on their characters and plot and everything else. I figure writers should come to their material on their own.

DS: The way you describe the writing of your novel makes me think your approach to writing is intuitive.

JONES: Yes, it should seem like that. I remember something Toni Morrison said, "The prose should not sweat." In *The Known World* that's the result of thinking about it for ten years. Because I lived with it so long, it feels as if it's been worked and worked and worked. And actually it has been, because after the first draft, I went over it many, many times.

DS: What writers would you recommend to your readers?

JONES: Gabriel García Márquez. I like Faulkner. James Joyce's *Dubliners* was my inspiration when I sat down to write *Lost in the City*. Chekhov. But the problem with naming people is that I'll inevitably forget someone.

DS: Do you feel that you're part of a community of writers?

JONES: I'm not a social person. I do know some writers, but it's not like I hang out with them.

DS: How do you feel about being identified as an African American writer? And what do you think when you enter a bookstore and see books by African American writers in their own separate place?

JONES: I don't mind too much. I guess I haven't been doing it long enough to feel offended by that. For me, it's just nice to be in a bookstore at all. There are a lot of people out there who can't get their work published.

DS: I know some writers feel a sense of responsibility toward their community, whether it's defined by religion, race, or ethnicity. Do you feel that you have any form of connection, or mission, or obligation?

JONES: No, I don't. I feel that the only thing I have an obligation to do is tell the truth. And if some people come out looking not so nice, there's nothing I can do about that. If that's where the truth leads me, that's what I put down.

DS: I often feel the truth told in fiction is of a deeper caliber than the facts related in nonfiction.

JONES: Yes, I think that's true. I think that in stories and novels you can get to a certain truth that you can't get in any other way.

DS: One truth I think you've captured so beautifully and authentically in your novel is what I've taken to calling the "in the blink of an eye" phenomenon.

JONES: Ah, the first story in my new collection will be called "In the Blink of God's Eye."

DS: I believe that this is an aspect of life, its precariousness, its persistent and unexpected changeability, that literature gets at better than any other art form. On the subject of art, are you influenced by other art forms? Music, perhaps?

JONES: I would say about 90 percent of the book was written while I was listening to a tape I made of Judy Collins singing “That’s No Way to Say Goodbye.” I taped it ten times. And then I taped the opening credits for a Paul Newman movie, *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*. I taped it over and over again, too, on the same tape. Both of these pieces of music are sort of melancholy, and I find that I write best with that kind of music playing.

DS: This must be a way for you to enter that other realm, the realm of the imagination.

JONES: Yes, it is. It puts me in a certain mood. You know, when you’re writing, you’re essentially doing what God did in those six days, you’re creating a world. Writing is hard. I came up with dozens of characters, and you have to put them forth fully and as realistically as you possible can.

DS: What were you doing during those ten years while you were working this novel out in your mind?

JONES: I was working for Tax Analysts. They put out several magazines on taxes and insurance. I collected articles, op-eds, and editorials on those issues and summarized them. I’d been doing that since 1983. I had five weeks of vacation in 2001 around Christmas time, and I said, “Well, it’s time for me to start writing.” I made that decision after I decided not to do any research. Two weeks into that vacation, they called me and said my job of nineteen years was gone. It hurt.

DS: It’s interesting that your “front” mind was dealing with something that wasn’t emotional or too consuming. This left your deeper mind free to conjure up an alternative world. I admire writers who work in the real world. I know the academy is terrific, and that teaching in M.F.A. writing programs is rewarding, but I think that that life becomes insular and that it can limit someone’s range.

JONES: You're right.

DS: Do you believe that fiction helps us become more compassionate?

JONES: I do. It may depend on the person, but I do think that I have a better sense of the world and I feel better about people because of books that I've read. And I don't think I would have gotten that without having read fiction and literature.

This interview previously appeared in a slightly altered form in Booklist.