

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH GREG JOHNSON

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for the

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Wednesday, 15 October 2008
Location: English Building, Kennesaw State University

TS: Today I'm interviewing Greg Johnson who received the Distinguished Scholarship Award in 2002. Greg, why don't we begin, as we always do in these interviews, by asking you to talk a little bit about yourself, your background, maybe where you were born, where you grew up, where you went to school and things like that?

GJ: I was born in San Francisco, California, but we lived there only a very short time because my father was in the Air Force and so he was then transferred to England and we lived in England near Liverpool for the first three years of my life. I grew up, however, in Tyler, Texas, and I went to SMU, Southern Methodist University, and majored in English, of course, and then got my master's degree in English there.

TS: Not necessarily, of course, I guess. But it stands to reason.

GJ: Actually when I started college I didn't know I was going to be majoring in English but I just evolved into that.

TS: That's what you really liked when you got there?

GJ: That's what I really liked, yes. And I was already writing when I was a kid so I always knew I had an interest in writing but I didn't know if that would translate into what I would do professionally. I thought early on about going into pre-law, for instance. In any case, I did major in English and then got my master's in English at SMU and ended up in Atlanta because I entered the Ph.D. program at Emory and finished that degree.

TS: That's a good start!

GJ: Is that too fast?

TS: We've covered a lot of ground in a hurry. That's great. Maybe one of the things that we talk about along the way with most people is a little bit about why they chose the field they did and oftentimes that has to do with mentors and sometimes it doesn't, but I just wondered in your case if there was anybody that particularly encouraged you, or said you've got really great talent here—maybe a high school teacher or college teacher or anyone else?

GJ: Right. I went to Catholic parochial school.

TS: I kind of guessed that from some of your stories!

- GJ: It's probably not hard to guess. There were teachers along the way. There was no one who really stands out but who had nice things to say about my written work and as I say, I was always writing short stories so I guess my major mentors really at that early, early period were people that I read. One early writer that meant a lot to me was Edgar Allan Poe and a lot of my first little stories when I was maybe eleven or twelve years old were desperately imitative of him—horror stories. Then as a teenager I got interested in F. Scott Fitzgerald and oh, a lot of writers: Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner a little bit, although I was a little intimidated by Faulkner until I got into college and studied him formally. But then in college I did develop an interest in the work of Joyce Carol Oates because I just happened upon a story of hers in a magazine that my mother had and I was just sort of blown away by this story, so I went to the bookstore and found that there were other books by this writer of whom I had not heard at that point—this is probably 1970 or '71 and I was nineteen or twenty years old then.
- TS: You got your bachelor's in '73 so maybe you were talking about your senior year in high school?
- GJ: Yes, or maybe freshman year in college, one of those two. I just started reading a lot of her work and at some point I wrote her sort of a fan letter I guess you would call it, and we started corresponding after that. So she's one early mentor. She and her husband—you mentioned earlier before we started taping the *Ontario Review*—they were one of the first magazines to publish one of my stories on a national level, apart from student publications in college, so that was very encouraging.
- TS: How old were you when that first magazine published your work?
- GJ: I was in graduate school so I was probably twenty-four, something like that.
- TS: At Emory?
- GJ: At Emory.
- TS: What was her husband's name, by the way?
- GJ: Raymond J. Smith. He was encouraging as well but I had this strong connection to her because of her work. I've done a lot of book reviewing over my career and one of the first book reviews I wrote was a book review about several critical studies of her work in a magazine called *Southwest Review*, which is associated with Southern Methodist University where I attended.
- TS: For your first two degrees.
- GJ: Right.

- TS: What was it about Joyce Carol Oates that would have attracted you at really a pretty young age?
- GJ: I think I was struggling to find a voice for my own fiction; I had sort of discarded the Edgar Allan Poe model and the F. Scott Fitzgerald and Truman Capote models, and her work in the early '70's was extremely varied. It was experimental, some of it, but in all her work, short stories and novels had in common a tremendous intensity, psychological intensity to them, and that carries over, I think, from Poe to O'Connor to Oates; they all have that in common. I was just amazed by the fact that she could deal with male characters as well as female characters or upper middle class people and working poor or the non-working poor. It seemed that her ambition was tremendous and the variety of her work was tremendous, so I just found her work very inspiring. I think just on a visceral level it was the intensity of her prose and the drama and to some extent the violence in her work and the way it's handled there that appealed to me a lot.
- TS: I was surprised in just looking on a website for her . . .
- GJ: Celestial Time Piece?
- TS: I can't remember what it was but I would have thought that she was older. She was born in 1938, so she's still quite young when she burst on the literary scene when you're reading her works.
- GJ: Very much so.
- TS: Maybe in her thirties.
- GJ: She was in her early thirties.
- TS: Was she as famous then, I mean, I was listening to something on NPR just the other day when they were talking about who might get the Nobel Prize, and they were saying, "Well, if anybody from America got it . . ." and they named two or three and she was one of those that they named; was she well known when you started reading her works?
- GJ: Yes, definitely. I didn't realize that she was well known because I had a kind of insular life up to that point.
- TS: Not necessarily well known in Texas.
- GJ: Not necessarily, right. But she had been on the cover of *Newsweek* magazine for instance, in a major story in 1972; that was shortly after I had gotten very interested in her and I still have that copy of *Newsweek* from when her picture was on the cover. Yes, she had won many awards: she won the National Book Award in 1970.
- TS: I guess she was well known.

GJ: Yes, even though she was very young she was famous pretty early in her career.

TS: What attracted you to Emory?

GJ: What attracted me to Emory? Well, I was torn between two graduate schools; one was Vanderbilt and one was Emory; and I actually did choose Vanderbilt at first because they offered me a teaching assistantship, sort of sight-unseen. I went there and I did not care for the department or the city, so I called up Emory and I said, “Am I still accepted to Emory? Can I start in winter quarter instead of fall quarter?” And they said, “Yes.” I guess I wanted to stay in the South and I wanted the best program I could get into. I think I applied to University of Virginia and was not accepted there. It was just one of several that did accept me but it just seemed with all the various—where it was located in a large city. I wanted to be in a big city because I had been living in Dallas for five years.

TS: I know a lot of your stories are set in Atlanta simply because that’s what you know, I guess, since you live here.

GJ: Exactly.

TS: You don’t necessarily strike me as being a “Southern writer.” Or maybe you do think in those terms?

GJ: Well, I don’t come from a rural background, and I think we tend to associate a lot of southern writers with rural settings or at least very small town settings. The city I grew up in is sort of a medium-sized city in Texas and then I lived in Dallas for five years.

TS: So it’s the urban South.

GJ: Yes. And I’ve lived in Atlanta now for thirty-something years, so it is the urban South, and I guess I’ve tried consciously not to repeat southern themes that have been done so much better by writers that are already famous.

TS: You don’t want to be Faulkner?

GJ: Well, I don’t want to try to be Faulkner; that would be foolish.

TS: So you go through Emory and you really went through remarkably fast; you were a full-time student, I guess, or were you doing any teaching while you were going through?

GJ: Yes, I had a teaching assistantship one or two years, but I believe my first two years I was just a full time student. They said at Emory that I went through relatively fast; it didn’t feel fast when I was doing it and I was writing a lot of fiction at the same time as well, but I wrote a couple of novels when I was a graduate student that never were published. Fortunately now I can see it that way.

TS: You’ll have to save them for the archive, I guess.

GJ: Oh, yes, right! [laughter]

TS: Somebody can see where you started from.

GJ: I guess so. One other mentor I wanted to mention before we leave that subject was my dissertation director and advisor at Emory, William B. Dillingham, a Melville scholar. He was always very encouraging to me and is still to this day. In fact, I'm getting ready to interview him for a project similar to this. It's not an oral history but the dean is putting together a book on sort of Emory star professors, and they asked me to do the article on him, so I'm excited about that. I'll get back a little bit.

TS: Yes. What's it about him that made him a mentor for you?

GJ: He was just a very gentlemanly, encouraging, kindly person who liked my work. I did my Ph.D. dissertation on Emily Dickinson and his field is the nineteenth century, so I took several courses from him and I just found his style of teaching, which I probably came to imitate later, very soothing and non-stressful, non-confrontational and nurturing, I guess is the word I would use. He was also a model in the scholarly sense because he was publishing book after book on Melville that were wonderful books, still are. He's probably considered the most important Melville scholar in America living. He's somebody else I wanted to mention along those lines.

TS: Melville has got all the psychological intensity that you're talking about.

GJ: Exactly, definitely.

TS: You finished in '79 and I'm sure you'd published some short stories or something by that time, hadn't you?

GJ: I had, yes, in literary magazines like the *Ontario Review* and other ones similar to that. I was starting to review regularly for the *Southwest Review*, and I was writing short stories and novels, and the first novel actually almost got published; it came within just a hair of getting published and as I say now, I guess it's a good thing that it didn't, but it enabled me to get an agent who handled my work for many, many years until she died. The years at Emory were very active, fruitful period for me.

TS: Why Emily Dickinson for your dissertation?

GJ: I had always been fascinated with Emily Dickinson ever since I was a child; she was another one of those authors whose work, although very economical and compact, just exploded with a kind of power, an emotional and psychological intensity that I found riveting, and so I wrote my master's thesis on her and my doctoral dissertation on her. My first book, which was sort of an expanded version of the dissertation, was about Emily Dickinson. I still am interested in her and occasionally review critical studies of her work and biographies and so forth.

- TS: I'm surprised you didn't write on Oates for your dissertation.
- GJ: I think at that time it was so early in her career that I'm not sure that there was anybody qualified to direct such a dissertation. I think I had asked around about that and I took a course deliberately from the fiction scholar named Jerome Beatty at Emory who was an admirer of Oates but I think Emily Dickinson was just a more traditional, safer choice.
- TS: If you wanted to work with Dillingham I guess she would be a good choice.
- GJ: I wanted to work with Dillingham, right.
- TS: Let's see, you must have been late twenties, mid-twenties when you got through your dissertation?
- GJ: I was twenty-seven.
- TS: There's still a decade before you come to Kennesaw State so what happens in those ten years?
- GJ: Well, for a couple of years I was a visiting professor at Emory; one year I taught at a university right outside of Philadelphia called Widener University; a couple of years I was just writing, I wasn't affiliated with a university at all; and then in 1988 I got a position at the University of Mississippi, and I went there.
- TS: Faulkner country for sure.
- GJ: Faulkner country. I lived about 100 yards from his house in a condominium complex that had sprung up.
- TS: I can't remember when he died but was he still around?
- GJ: Oh no, he died in the '60s, like '62, I believe, '61 or '62, I'm not exactly sure [6 July 1962]. But in any case, as you know, Oxford, Mississippi, is a very small town and I was not used to small town life and so the position came up at Kennesaw and I really missed Atlanta a lot. So it was just kind of a natural fit to come back here when I had the opportunity, so that's what I did.
- TS: Right. Maybe we could talk a little bit about how that came about. I guess an ad in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* or something of that sort?
- GJ: It was in what we call the *MLA* job list, *Modern Language Association* job list that comes out every October. I just applied like anyone else, and at first I turned down the position because, as you know, we were on the quarter system then and the teaching load was considerably heavier than it was where I was at the University of Mississippi. So I just couldn't see doing that and having any time to write whatsoever, so I worked out a deal

with Bob [Robert W.] Hill, who was very friendly to me and my work from the beginning.

TS: He was department chair at that time, wasn't he?

GJ: He was department chair. I worked out a deal with Dean [George H.] Beggs where I could teach fall and winter quarters and teach heavier loads and be off in the spring and the summer, so that gave me a six month period each year to write in. Once we worked out that deal I decided to take the job.

TS: There were a lot of advantages to the quarter system, I think, in terms of flexibility.

GJ: There is. It really suited my temperament much better; semesters to me just seem to drag on and on and on, and I'm sort of an intense person and I like to get in and I like the longer classes and the focus and the concentration of the quarter system better.

TS: I guess your dissertation was published by that time but most of your novels and your collections of short stories came out after you got here.

GJ: That's right.

TS: Of course, twenty years ago, there wasn't a whole lot of scholarship being produced on our campus compared to today and so, well, maybe I should just ask you, they obviously made arrangements so you could write, so they encouraged you to write to that degree, but what did they tell you when you came in about their expectations and so on?

GJ: Well, because I worked out this teaching arrangement I think it was expected that I would produce to some degree, scholarship and/or creative work. I mean, I was hired to teach creative writing whereas in my previous positions I had been hired to teach American Literature because that was my Ph.D. focus. By then though I had already published quite a few short stories and I had a novel in progress that I had hopes of getting published, my agent felt would get published and it did. I'm sure at the time I had high hopes that some books would be forthcoming in the reasonably near future.

TS: Right. We didn't have the MAPW [Master of Arts in Professional Writing] program yet, did we, at that time, so it's all undergraduate.

GJ: No, that's only ten or eleven years old.

TS: That's what I was thinking. So it's all undergraduate when you first came here that you would be teaching.

GJ: That's right.

- TS: Well, something we've asked everybody is of their impressions when they came here of the intellectual climate at that time at Kennesaw, students and faculty and community, whatever. Could you talk a little bit about that?
- GJ: Yes. It was very different, as far as student body if I start there, it was very different from what I was accustomed to at Emory where the students came from very well-to-do backgrounds, many of them from the northeast, and the University of Mississippi where they were all from the state of Mississippi and not very far out. Kennesaw at that time, I'm sure you remember, had a very large component of what we call non-traditional students, older students, and I really enjoyed that. I've come to miss that in recent years, although in the graduate program which is what I'm teaching in now, we have a number of older students, but the undergraduates, maybe up to a third of them were older students then in my classes. I found they brought maturity and seriousness to their work that eighteen and nineteen year olds didn't necessarily, so I really enjoyed that. As far as the intellectual climate of the university I found everyone encouraging and I was aware there weren't that many creative writers, per se, at that time; Tony and others came later.
- TS: Tony [M.] Grooms?
- GJ: Tony Grooms, right. I felt at the same time that I was welcome and that my colleagues appreciated what I was doing, and some of them, like Dede Yow did critical essays, and Laura [S.] Dabundo.
- TS: Was Don [Donald D.] Russ doing any poetry writing then?
- GJ: Don Russ was publishing a lot of poetry, that's right; and I believe Bob Hill was publishing poetry and maybe some fiction. So it wasn't as if there was a moribund department by any means, it was quite lively and what I especially appreciated after—I don't know if I should really talk about this—but the University of Mississippi English department was somewhat fragmented, and there was a lot of tension and division and dislike, personality conflicts and so forth, and when I got here I didn't find much of that at all. I think that was a very good environment for me to be in.
- TS: Right. I think the English department developed those frictions later on.
- GJ: That's right.
- TS: My impression was that as long as Dean Beggs maybe administered a strong influence it kept politics out of the department affairs.
- GJ: That may well be the case.
- TS: You came here in '89 and started teaching those heavy loads two quarters, we were quarters, and they were five hour classes so was that like four classes a quarter that you were doing?

GJ: I think maybe four a quarter, maybe that's what I did; I can't really remember exactly. I think occasionally I got a course release for scholarship, but it was at least three, and some quarters, probably four.

TS: Three was standard at that time.

GJ: Right so it must have been four then, I'm sure it was.

TS: That's what I was thinking; the average person would do nine classes over the nine-month school term, so four and four would be about the equivalent, I guess.

GJ: I think that's what I did.

TS: I think that [Akanmu G.] Adebayo did that some too, when he wanted to go to Nigeria or somewhere in the winter. He would overload in the fall and the spring. Maybe you set the model for that when you came in.

GJ: I don't know, maybe.

TS: But it didn't take you long to start publishing; *Distant Friends* must have been about done before you got here probably.

GJ: Correct.

TS: Of course, a lot of those stories you had probably already published anyway by that time.

GJ: That's right.

TS: You might talk about that a little bit; I guess that's your first collection of short stories that came out, wasn't it?

GJ: *Distant Friends*, that's right, it was. That came out of my relationship with Oates and her husband because Ontario Review Press published that first book; then after that I went to Johns Hopkins University Press.

TS: You did *A Friendly Deceit*.

GJ: *A Friendly Deceit* and two others, I believe. Dutton in New York published my novel, *Pagan Babies*, in 1993, and then I also did a collection of poetry about the same time with the University Press of Florida.

TS: Which one was that?

GJ: It's called *Aid and Comfort*.

TS: Yes.

- GJ: I was writing a fair amount of poetry.
- TS: That was 1993 that that came out?
- GJ: Correct, about the same time as the novel. In fact, it was almost just about a month apart that it came out. So I was writing a fair amount of poetry, but not nearly as much as I wrote fiction. I really don't even write poetry any more at all.
- TS: Have you lost interest in poetry or feel your talents are somewhere else?
- GJ: No, no.
- TS: It looked like you had some pretty good reviews on *Aid and Comfort* when it came out.
- GJ: Well, I had some success with the poetry that I wrote, but somehow the period of poetry writing just came to an end. I don't know why, but that is the case and I've always thought of myself as a fiction writer, a fiction writer who also writes poetry or criticism or book reviews or whatever.
- TS: That's basically what you were teaching I guess along with American Literature, wasn't it—fiction writing from the time that you came here?
- GJ: Right. I did teach some poetry writing courses too, but, yes, primarily fiction writing and American Lit were my concentrations.
- TS: I know as your novels start coming out, *Pagan Babies* and then I guess *Sticky Kisses* in 2001, that it seems like a subject of a lot of your writing has to do with relationships within families and maybe dysfunctional relationships in some cases, or at least tension; there wouldn't be anything to write about if there weren't any tension there, I guess, within families. Maybe you could talk a little bit about why you do that kind of writing or why that kind of writing interests you?
- GJ: As you say, without conflict, there wouldn't be much drama, so I think as a fiction writer, like most fiction writers, I suppose, I think in terms of conflict and sometimes it's within families and sometimes it's not. The central relationship in *Pagan Babies* was between a boy and a girl who had gone to Catholic school together, and she develops this unrequited passion for him as they get older, and then they're adults and they go their own way and they come back and they go their own way again. In *Sticky Kisses* it was between a brother and a sister; you're right, it was primarily a family issue. A lot of my stories deal with families in crises of various kinds. I don't know exactly why I've been drawn to that; I come from a family that's very sort of quiet and peaceful and frankly boring, I guess you would say, but as I say. . .
- TS: No huge conflicts within your family?

- GJ: No, not at all. When I told you about the writers that appealed to me I think I was, you know, I suppose writers of all stripes are objectifying internal conflicts when they write about fictional relationships or families or so forth. I know after I published *Pagan Babies* I felt that Janice and Clifford, the two major protagonists, were both parts of myself. They were sort of warring with each other and cared for one another but at the same time came apart and were in constant turmoil, so I'm sure I tend to view literature in general from a sort of psychoanalytical or psychological prism interpretively. I guess I would apply the same methodology to my own work if I were inclined to criticize or to analyze it. The story that you have taught in your history class, "Scene of the Crime," is about a family conflict between mother and daughter, and other stories of mine deal with fathers and sons and mothers and sons and teachers and students, but I don't think I'm that unusual in that respect; I think most fiction comes out of some sort of, or deals with some sort of turbulence that the story hopes to work out or delve into or interpret in some way.
- TS: The Catholic issue too that we talked about is in a number of your stories, I guess; I was looking at the one on Flannery O'Connor, the eleven year old who goes to visit her, for instance, and *Pagan Babies*, the two main characters are products of parochial schools. To what degree do you think religion is a major source of maybe what you're interested in writing about or influenced you in what you're writing or at least the Catholic upbringing?
- GJ: Well, it probably influenced me in ways that I can't articulate, but I think it's not accidental that I've been drawn to writers who like O'Connor and like Oates who grew up Catholic—James Joyce—because they have a certain sense of structure in their work that appeals to me a lot, and I think maybe that comes from some deep-seated identification with liturgy and ritual early on in their lives—I'm really speculating on that but that's a possibility. I'm a former Catholic, I was a Catholic up until I guess the age of reason, I'll put it that way, and then . . .
- TS: After you went to college?
- GJ: Yes, or even before that, but as soon as I was able to drive, I was no longer driving to church, so it didn't appeal to me personally, Catholicism, but I find it very appealing to write about. For instance, several of my stories have nuns in them and *Pagan Babies* obviously has nuns and priests and so forth, so I drew part of it, as you said earlier, writing about what you know, so I was writing about the kinds of characters that I knew as a kid.
- TS: To what degree do people that you know in Atlanta appear in your stories?
- GJ: Not that much. They're usually sort of composite. There's a character in *Sticky Kisses* who's pretty closely based on a real friend of mine, but for the most part I don't model characters after real people. I'm not that interested in writing autobiography, per se, except in this sort of coded psychological way that I'm not aware of it when I'm doing it. I might use a character trait from one friend and a character trait from another or a family

member or what-have-you and then make up a different character out of those different composite traits.

TS: Nobody's going to come after you saying you slandered me? Or, that wasn't me in your last book?

GJ: It hasn't happened yet; I hope it doesn't happen.

TS: That's good. I forget who it was, somebody was being criticized or maybe it was Joyce Carol Oates for having very negative depictions of characters that were very similar to her friends.

GJ: Oh really? I'm not too aware of that.

TS: It could have been somebody else entirely.

GJ: Maybe. I would probably know about that because I did write a biography of her.

TS: I wanted to get to that next and talk about that. In the 1990s you were extremely prolific while you were teaching heavy loads here at Kennesaw in putting out just a number of things. I guess for the 1990s alone you had *Distant Friends*, *A Friendly Deceit*, *Pagan Babies*, *Aid and Comfort*, and *I Am Dangerous* that I know of. You've got a couple of Georgia Author of the Year awards in the '90s and then did that biography as well. Even if you weren't teaching in spring quarter and took the summers off from teaching, I mean, that's an incredibly prolific accomplishment to get those things out while you were teaching at Kennesaw. Nobody else is doing that much work in the '90s, I don't think.

GJ: I've just always been attracted to work, first of all, and writing. I guess I don't see it so much as work the way that some people might. I just enjoyed each project. For instance, another book I did in that period was a book on Oates' short stories. I remember, because her short stories have been what first interested me, I felt that that was a kind of fulfillment of about a twenty year period when I had been reading and re-reading endlessly these several hundred short stories that she had published by then. When you use the word prolific I think of someone like her rather than someone like myself.

TS: I know she did about fifty novels or has up to this point, I guess. She's been unbelievable.

GJ: Unbelievably prolific. Two to three books each year.

TS: And that's while she was teaching too.

GJ: And she's been teaching all along, that's right. I'm sorry, I sort of lost my train of thought.

TS: My question is really how did you do it? You said you enjoyed doing it. I guess the fact that you're not teaching at all from March to September you were basically able to put Kennesaw behind you and commit—were you free from committee assignments in the spring too?

GJ: Yes.

TS: So you could basically put Kennesaw behind you when you're really concentrating on writing.

GJ: That's right. And I attentively, maybe this is something else that's "former Catholic" about me, but I tend to be fairly disciplined in my working habits, so if I have even just a week off like at Christmas or Spring Break or whatever it is, I can sort of switch gears and go into my writing mode and I work a full day and I'm fairly good at juggling projects, so I can work on more than one thing at a time. Gradually each project gets done.

TS: How long did it take to do the biography of Joyce Carol Oates?

GJ: I think I signed the contract in '93 and I spent two to three years researching; I had to do a lot of traveling and had to go to Detroit and upstate New York, several trips to Syracuse which is where her archive is, to Princeton, New Jersey.

TS: I saw that she was from Lockport originally.

GJ: Outside Lockport.

TS: Yes, I know where Lockport is; my wife was from Buffalo so I've got a pretty good idea where that is.

GJ: Yes, Buffalo and Lockport both appear in sort of transmogrified forms in her fiction quite a lot. She's actually from the countryside outside of Lockport about seven or eight miles, a little hamlet called Millersport, and it's very rural.

TS: Was that another stop on the Erie Canal?

GJ: Yes. It's very rural. They had a non-working farm, they did have chickens and things, but I went there. Her parents were alive then and they showed me around the property and still lived in the house that she grew up in so that was invaluable. That's one reason that I wanted to do the biography as early—a couple of publishers my agents approached felt she was too young for a full-scale biography.

TS: By '98 she would have been fifty.

GJ: Right. I can understand that point of view.

TS: Is that right, fifty? She would have been sixty in '98.

GJ: Right, sixty. Math isn't my best subject. So yes, she was approaching sixty, she was in her mid-fifties when I started, let's put it that way, and by the time I finished she was sixty.

TS: Right. But they're thinking that's too young?

GJ: Because she's such a vital force on the scene they felt why write about her mid-career when she's in her mid-fifties? But one reason I wanted to do it was her former professors were still alive, very elderly but still alive, her parents were elderly but still alive and now all those people are gone, so if I had waited I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet them and interview them and get their words down.

TS: I don't see anything wrong with a mid-career biography.

GJ: No, and I plan to do a revised version eventually. In fact, we even talked about a tenth anniversary edition for 2008 but we decided to do her journals instead and I edited those which came out last year.

TS: And you said the archive is up in New York.

GJ: It's in Syracuse.

TS: Other than Buffalo that'd be the next big town?

GJ: Yes.

TS: Is that at the university there?

GJ: Syracuse University, yes. That was her alma mater, that's where she went.

TS: Okay. That's a logical place then.

GJ: Yes. I had secured access to her archive early on, so fortunately it's still there and she continues to send stuff there. She considered going to, I think it was the University of Texas, they probably offered her a lot more money because they have so much money there.

TS: Her archives?

GJ: Yes.

TS: Why on earth would she do it at the University of Texas?

GJ: I don't know.

TS: I guess she didn't.

GJ: She didn't.

TS: They wanted her anyway?

GJ: I think at one point she was a little dissatisfied with Syracuse and the way they were—I'm not sure what it was exactly.

TS: I'm surprised Princeton didn't go for her.

GJ: They may well have. I'm sure she's had many offers through the years but she's still at Syracuse. When I was doing the biography I had—her journal is in a restricted part of the archive, it's not available to anybody until twenty-five years after her death.

TS: How extensive is her journal? Did she write every day?

GJ: It's 4000 single-spaced typed pages, and she made it available to me for the biography so I basically had the whole thing photocopied over about a two-year period. Two or three years ago, when I decided to edit her journals, I still had the copy, so I didn't have to go back to Syracuse umpteen times.

TS: How far did you edit it down?

GJ: A lot. The journal is pretty thick but it only goes from 1973 to 1982; it's the first ten years. Conceivably there will be another volume whenever she or I get ready to do it. It's really up to her.

TS: In other words, what you published is '73 to '82?

GJ: Right but there's a lot more. What I have is up to '95 and then of course, there's . . .

TS: Is she still adding to it?

GJ: She's still adding to it, so I don't have the journal for '95 to the present but I could get it, I guess, if I wanted to.

TS: What does she write about in her journal?

GJ: Everything. She writes about literature, she writes about her friendships, her family, her writing, what she's working on, and the problems she's having with this story or that novel. I don't know if you're familiar with Virginia Woolf's diaries, but it's not unlike Virginia Woolf in that she writes about serious topics. It's not a diary per se where she writes about, I did this today, I did that yesterday, but she might write about a dinner

party that was particularly interesting or a quarrel she had with one of her colleagues or academic gossip.

TS: I wonder if any of them are nervous about what's in the journal?

GJ: Well, there were some issues when I was writing the biography as far as revealing things about friends of hers as well as herself. That was by far the hardest book I've ever written because when you're writing a novel it's just you and the page, you're not beholden to anyone.

TS: You don't have to worry about the authenticity of what you say.

GJ: Right. But when you're interviewing, I think I interviewed about 150 people and some of them claim not to have said what they said to me.

TS: Did you tape?

GJ: Well, there was one interview with a colleague of hers at Princeton, and when I went into his office I set up my recorder just like you've done, and he said something like, "Well, if you have that off I can be a lot more open and informal." I said, "Okay, I'll turn it off." I turned it off and he said some things that, basically I went back to my hotel and furiously wrote for a couple of hours remembering everything he said, or trying to, and he claimed not to have said some things that I wrote down.

TS: That's probably why he didn't want you to have the recorder on.

GJ: Yes, but it caused a kaffuffle between him and Oates. But I was happy to take things out of people who had second thoughts about what they said. A couple of people said, "I will say this but I don't want it attributed to me." In the footnotes I would say anonymous interview on this date. It just involved a lot of conflict that I could have lived without; it was stressful in a way that no other book I've written has been.

TS: Did she approach you or did you approach her about doing the biography?

GJ: I approached her.

TS: You said, "I want to write a biography but I want your cooperation."

GJ: Right. I wanted it to be authorized; I wasn't going to do it if she were actively going to block my every move.

TS: Oh sure, you couldn't have done it.

GJ: I couldn't have done it. She gave me access to all of her closest friends and her family members and, as I said, the journal, and her papers and she knew I was an admirer of her work, so she knew it would be a sympathetic biography.

- TS: That's a tremendous compliment to you that she would have wanted you to do it.
- GJ: Well, it was, I was complimented by that. I had already done two books on her up to that point: one called *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* and then *Joyce Carol Oates: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Those books, I guess she approved of, once I had written them, so I guess I was the natural choice to write the biography if someone was going to.
- TS: When did those books come out?
- GJ: *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates* came out in '87 and the study of her short fiction came out in '94.
- TS: One before you came to Kennesaw and one right in the middle when you're putting out everything else in the world, it seems.
- GJ: More or less.
- TS: The latter would have come out actually after you had started the biography; I believe you said '93, didn't you?
- GJ: That's right. I think as soon as I finished that book I went straight to the biography. Even though it came out in '94, I had finished with it. You know how it is; there's a year lag time between the time you finish something and the time it comes out.
- TS: Right. At least you could go up to Syracuse in the spring and summer instead of having to go up there in the wintertime.
- GJ: That's right.
- TS: That was good thinking in terms of the weather up there.
- GJ: Yes. I didn't go in the dead of winter, that's for sure.
- TS: The book came out and she obviously was happy with it, I gather.
- GJ: More or less. She sent me a list of things that could have been different but I was very intent on not writing a—I'm not sure how to pronounce the word—hagiography; I didn't want to do that. If somebody said something critical and I felt it was part of a pattern, I put it in. There was a whole issue that people were very reluctant to talk about that several of them did.
- TS: Right. Are you sensitive about reviews when people review your works?
- GJ: Not really, no. Not any more than anyone else anyway.

TS: Okay. By the way, the biography is entitled *Invisible Writer*. Why that title?

GJ: Well, she had a book of poems called *Invisible Woman* and so I sort of stole it from there. All the way through her journals is this motif where she talks about, “I feel invisible, I feel like I don’t have a personality, I am just this blur of consciousness that goes around in the world and soaks up other people’s lives and writes about them.”

TS: The fly on the wall.

GJ: Sort of.

TS: Not the Ralph Ellison *Invisible Man* type.

GJ: No.

TS: Not that people don’t see her when she’s there.

GJ: Right.

TS: Okay. This is I guess internally she feels this way.

GJ: Internally.

TS: I was just going to say that it seemed like some people thought that you were just too soft on her altogether and others were saying, well, this is really fantastic.

GJ: Yes, you can never account for what people are going to say.

TS: But at any rate, I’m sure it was a huge relief when you did the last page and sent it off.

GJ: That’s exactly right.

TS: And did the last revision and so on. I forgot who the publisher was on that.

GJ: That was also Dutton, the same as *Pagan Babies*.

TS: Do they, like academic presses do, send it off to a couple of anonymous reviewers and that sort of stuff?

GJ: Outsourcing it.

TS: You’ve signed a contract and you just work with an editor.

GJ: I sign a contract, right and I worked with, the president of the company was actually the one who I met with after I—it was kind of funny because after *Pagan Babies* was accepted for publication I went to New York to meet my editor in person and she said,

“Well, I want you to meet the president of Dutton.” I went in there and met her. I had already asked my agent about writing this Joyce Carol Oates biography, and my agent said, “Well, all she does is write and teach; how are you going to make an interesting biography out of that?” She was very negative about it. I sort of dropped the whole idea, and in this meeting with the president of Dutton I mentioned this, and she said, “We’d be very interested in it.”

TS: All she did was write and teach.

GJ: That’s what she said. Obviously there is more to anybody’s life than what appears on the surface.

TS: Obviously. Especially with the fifty novels that she did.

GJ: Yes.

TS: That’s interesting, how that worked. How does your agent fit into all of this? I guess when you first start out it’s really going publisher to publisher until you find somebody, but at a certain point I guess it becomes easier doesn’t it, or does it?

GJ: I think so. My agent that I had for many years, I had her in graduate school is where I met her.

TS: What’s her name?

GJ: Her name was Diane Cleaver; she’s deceased now. She was a fairly well known agent and there was a publisher, my very first novel when I was a graduate student at Emory, who was very interested in publishing my novel; he was with a publisher called, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it, J.B. Lippincott.

TS: Yes, sure.

GJ: They’re no longer in business but they were at that time and he wanted to take the novel and a collection of short stories, earlier stories than *Distant Friends*, and publish them as a two-book contract, and then J.B. Lippincott merged with what was then Harper and Row, it’s now HarperCollins. So he was forbidden from taking on any new writers while this merger was going forward. So he said, “But you need to publish this novel and let me put you in touch with an agent I know, Diane Cleaver.” That’s how I met her. She was British and very energetic and enthusiastic and she liked my first and second novel; I finished the second novel by then too. She never was able to place either of those first two books.

TS: Which are the ones you’re glad that she didn’t place?

GJ: I am now. I mean, it’s not that I would have been horribly ashamed of them but I think *Pagan Babies* is more polished because I wrote those. Now I see them as practice or

apprentice novels. But anyway, she was my agent for the rest of these books as they were coming out in the '90s. Then she passed away, I guess it was '97, before the biography came out, and then another agent at her agency took me on and I was with her for several years, and we never got along as well as I had with Diane. Until I have a new novel I'm not really actively seeking a new agent.

TS: You don't have an agent right now?

GJ: Not really, no.

TS: Are you working on a novel?

GJ: I do theoretically have an agent in that I had an agent who placed *Sticky Kisses*, who is theoretically still my agent, but we've been out of touch for two or three years now.

TS: Are you working on a novel now?

GJ: I've started a novel. You never know when you're in the first one hundred pages whether something is going to gel or not; I mean, in the last twenty years I have written several unpublished novels as well as several parts of novels that are just in my storage room off my garage, so you never know if what you're working on is actually going to become a book eventually or not, but I am working on one, yes, to give a short answer.

TS: Do you keep a journal like Joyce Carol Oates?

GJ: No, I don't. I did when I was young. In my twenties, I kept a journal, but I didn't keep it faithfully. I went in phases; I would keep it for a year or two and I then I would not.

TS: Right. It's hard to keep it up, isn't it?

GJ: It is. I didn't force myself to do it if I wasn't in the mood to do it and sometimes I enjoyed writing in journals. I know when I was reading Virginia Woolf's diaries, that sort of inspired me in my twenties to keep a journal, but I haven't in probably twenty years.

TS: When you're teaching it's kind of hard sometimes. You have a set of papers to grade or something.

GJ: And I just don't have that impulse. If I had the impulse I would find the time, but I just don't have the impulse to do it for whatever reason. The same with poetry, it just sort of left me.

TS: Do you keep each draft of stories that you're working on?

GJ: I have a folder, like that, just a loose-leaf folder that I do keep drafts in and most of my stories I still have the folders.

- TS: So if anybody wanted to do a dissertation on Greg Johnson sometime they could go through and see maybe how you write from draft to draft to draft.
- GJ: I suppose so. What I use them for, more than anything, is I use them in my fiction- writing seminars in graduate courses that I teach because sometimes it's very interesting. I'll just go back in my files, and I'll get a story that I wrote twenty years ago; I have no memory of what led to it or of even writing it, and I'll go through the notes and it seems like I'm looking at somebody else's notes; I don't remember writing any of it. Sometimes I'll make photocopies of original jottings, notes that I made, and then maybe the first couple of pages of the first draft to show how it evolved into the published short story, and students claim to find that very useful. It makes them feel better about their fledgling attempts. They see how everybody struggles.
- TS: Once you have finished something, is it like your baby that you're going to be possessive of forever and ever, or is it like the story that you can detach yourself from and it's almost like somebody else wrote it?
- GJ: The latter, definitely. I don't feel possessive.
- TS: Do you like to talk about stories afterwards? I know some people, for instance, they just won't talk about anything after they've published it.
- GJ: I don't have objections to talking about it, but I guess it doesn't interest me as much as somebody else's stories because I've already been through that mill, so it's just like re-covering old ground, sort of like teaching a story that you've already taught ten times; you'd rather teach something new.
- TS: So you don't mind talking about it, but prefer to talk about something else or somebody else's.
- GJ: Somebody else's stories. One thing I really like about teaching fiction writing, especially graduate level fiction writing, is, like my class tonight, the whole class is turning in a new story, and I enjoy reading their new stories. I never know what they're going to come up with.
- TS: Let's talk a little bit about the kind of students that you're teaching in those courses and now that we've got a graduate program for the last decade or so, are these students that are here because they want to publish fiction?
- GJ: Professionally?
- TS: The program is called Master of Arts in Professional Writing, which encompasses everything from PR to creative fiction work, I suppose. What kind of students are they and have any of them gone on to acclaim?

GJ: They have. We had a student about three or four years ago named Man Martin, and he published a novel a couple of years ago, I can't recall the title, but it was reviewed fairly widely and got good reviews. I have a student in my seminar that meets tonight who has already published his first novel and what he's doing in the class I'm not sure, to be honest with you. He's probably a few years older than I am, but he found a sort of medium-sized publisher, I believe in North Carolina, and I was in Barnes & Noble one day and I saw it there. So I just bought it and brought it home with me. Our students really range widely; we have, as you probably know, a three-pronged program where students can major or "concentrate" is the word we use, in applied writing or rhetoric and composition or creative writing. Obviously I teach only in the creative writing track, so most of the students that I get tend to be creative writing majors, but I also get some applied writing students who just want to take one creative course and just sort of see what it's like. I get some dilettantes, frankly, who are just taking it as they might take any course just once, just for the experience of doing it, to people who are just bound and determined they're going to be professional fiction writers.

TS: How hard is it to support yourself by fiction writing?

GJ: Oh, it's almost impossible.

TS: That's what I was thinking if you don't have a teaching job.

GJ: If you don't have a teaching job, or unless you write really sort of best-seller fodder which is just sort of junk disposable fiction which is mostly what appears on the best-seller lists, people like Danielle Steel and, I can't even think, Dean Koontz I guess.

TS: I read something where Anne Rivers Siddons had some very complimentary things to say about one of your works.

GJ: My first novel. Yes, I still remember the day. .

TS: But she's one of those that I guess writes for a popular audience.

GJ: That's right. Her editor—remember the editor I said that had wanted to publish my first novel?—he was her editor at that time, so I got to know her through him a little bit, just socially slightly, and I was actually house-sitting for Joyce and Ray Smith when they were in Europe, and I was there interviewing her Princeton colleagues, and when my agent called and said we got a blurb from Anne Rivers Siddons, I still remember that phone call. That was kind of exciting.

TS: I guess so. Some people that do the writing for popular audiences can appreciate at least the other types.

GJ: Yes. She's more of a writer I would say is a little bit on the cusp in the fact that her writing—I've reviewed her books before for the [Atlanta] *Journal-Constitution* and she writes a very literate, almost what you would call literary kind of prose. She doesn't

write the trashy kind of bestseller that's just cynically trying to make a buck; she writes very Southern stories, primarily for women readers but she's not at all, I mean, I admire her writing.

TS: Who do you like among Georgia writers today?

GJ: I like most of them; I like Mary Hood quite a bit . . .

TS: We've had Mary Hood come to our class before.

GJ: Have you?

TS: When she was living closer to campus.

GJ: She's quite interesting in a classroom situation, isn't she?

TS: Oh, yes.

GJ: She's visited a couple of mine as well; she's just a sort of free association type, and she'll just talk for an hour and you'll wonder, what did she just say after the hour was over.

TS: She's done a lot of short stories, but hasn't ever quite finished that novel.

GJ: No. Her novel, I don't know what to say about her novel. It was beautifully written but I think she's just a natural short story writer, sort of like Flannery O'Connor who, getting back to your question, is by far my favorite Georgia writer. I like Carson McCullers whom O'Connor loathed, but I like them both.

TS: I do too. We've used both in the Georgia history/ Georgia Literature.

GJ: Have you?

TS: We used for Carson McCullers, I guess it was *Member of the Wedding* and with Flannery O'Connor, I like "Revelation." That's one I always want to use.

GJ: That's a great story.

TS: I think it is too. "A Good Man is Hard to Find."

GJ: Those are surefire in the classroom.

TS: Once you use a few of her stories they all seem to have the same theme: they all seem to have a highly judgmental character that needs his comeuppance and has a revelation somewhere along the line.

GJ: Exactly.

- TS: But yes, I like her stories too. What about those that are contemporaries today?
- GJ: Well, aside from Mary Hood I guess I've read some Pat Conroy; he's Georgian, isn't he?
- TS: He's got some claim. I guess *Prince of Tides* has an Atlanta part to it.
- GJ: No others really spring to mind as specifically Georgia writers, other than some colleagues whom I admire.
- TS: Talk about the Georgia Author of the Year awards that you won in '91 and '97; who gives those awards, first of all?
- GJ: Well, it's an organization called Georgia Writers, Inc., and it's a group of writers who get together. They have conferences, they have workshops, they sponsor readings. I think Ralph [T.] Wilson in our department works with them quite intensively. I know I gave a reading last year at one of their events that he arranged. They're just sort of the organization in Georgia that is involved in writing and getting writers together and organizing them.
- TS: What is the PEN Syndicated Fiction Project?
- GJ: That was a project—PEN is an international writers' group, of course, that sponsors awards like the PEN Hemingway Award and the PEN Faulkner Award, and they for a number of years had a syndicated fiction project where there was a competition and certain stories would be selected to be read on NPR and to appear in syndication in various newspapers and magazines throughout the country. I had one short story that was—they had to be very short and I don't tend to write very short stories—but this one that I had written I submitted for that competition and it was accepted.
- TS: Do you remember what year that was?
- GJ: I believe it was '91.
- TS: That was, I guess, when you were just beginning to crank out a whole bunch of things: the Georgia Author of the Year Awards; 1991 must have been for *Distant Friends* and '97 was for *I Am Dangerous*. Then in 2002 you got the Distinguished Scholarship Award on our campus. Would you talk a little bit about how that came about? That's really collective for everything that you've done, I assume.
- GJ: That's right. How it came about—I believe I was urged by the department chair to submit materials, and it just sort of goes on from there; it goes through all these committees. You probably know more about it than I do after interviewing all these people. I remember going to a couple of events. I think I didn't win on the college level, but then I won on the university level, if I'm remembering correctly.

- TS: It was different in 2002. Right now, the way it is, each college chooses a college recipient and then the university committee chooses among them, but also I think the graduate school is one of the colleges, so some people who are in Humanities and Social Sciences may actually be a candidate because they got nominated by the Graduate College. I wasn't sure which way it was when you went through, but in your case I guess it started in the department—and back then we didn't do it that way so you could have several people from the same college. In fact, let me think, well, by 2002 we had colleges.
- GJ: To be honest with you I don't remember a lot of the details about the various stages. I just remember being asked to submit a CV and maybe writing samples.
- TS: A portfolio of sorts that you put together.
- GJ: Exactly.
- TS: That happens in 2002. Why don't you talk a little bit about it? I don't know how much we ought to get into it, but you went through promotion and tenure and became full professor, but the last couple of years you had some leaves of absence, so were you teaching somewhere else or writing full time?
- GJ: Writing full time, yes. I now have a position where I only teach in the fall and it's just different—I resigned my professorship, and I don't even know what they call me now to be honest with you. I basically do the same thing I was doing when I was a full professor.
- TS: You just do it in the fall?
- GJ: I just do it in the fall.
- TS: Which is half the academic year nowadays with the semester system. You take spring off so you can have the time to write?
- GJ: Yes.
- TS: I guess that means that you've got some royalty checks coming from somewhere or other on these writings.
- GJ: My primary source of income is through the textbooks that I write.
- TS: That's what I wanted to get into; why don't you talk about that a little bit?
- GJ: Well, about seven or eight years ago, I guess it's been—I guess it was '01, a former professor of mine from SMU contacted me. Well, actually the publisher contacted me and said that he was interested in having a co-author for the very famous Perrine textbooks which have been around since the 1950s; for awhile they were the only game in town in terms of English literature textbooks. Laurence Perrine, I guess he's another

mentor of mine at SMU. He was my master's thesis director and he taught a course in Emily Dickinson that I took and sort of got me on that road. I agreed to consider it, and I looked at the books and I talk to Tom [Thomas R.] Arp and met him in Dallas and finally decided that it would be something I would be interested in doing. I started the first go-around—we have three books that we do. We do a poetry textbook, a fiction textbook, and an omnibus fiction, poetry and drama textbook. And he does the drama because that's his area of interest, I do the fiction, and we do the poetry together. The workload is evenly divided, the royalties are evenly divided; we share them also with the Perrine estate—Laurence Perrine died in 1995. It's been very interesting; it's something that's very time consuming. It has turned out to be more time consuming than I had expected at first it would be. The first two or three years were kind of rough on me because I was juggling so many things, and Tom and I are in almost constant daily contact by e-mail, fax, Fed Ex, you name it, telephone of course, and there's just a lot to publishing a new edition of a textbook that is sort of hidden under the surface that you wouldn't necessarily expect, so it's a lot of work, but it is very lucrative, I have to be honest about that.

TS: Is that something that you enjoy doing?

GJ: I do enjoy it, yes.

TS: When you say a lot of things under the surface that you wouldn't think about . . . ?

GJ: Well, for instance we write instructor's manuals, and so for every time we have a new edition of the poetry book there are, say, four hundred poems in the book, so we have to replace between 25 and 33 percent of those poems. Every new poem that we put in, which might well be over a hundred, we have to write a little essay on each poem for this instructor's manual.

TS: All that experience writing reviews comes into play then.

GJ: That's right. So it's just a lot of work. We have to constantly update the text itself; we have to constantly be researching; I go to Emory library to try to find new poems for the poetry book. But fiction is a little easier because the number of stories is very limited that you replace; maybe you replace ten stories.

TS: Okay, that puts you in touch with what's going on in the world of literature, though.

GJ: It does. It helps me keep up, just like my reviewing. You know, for many years I reviewed for the [Atlanta] *Journal-Constitution*, from '84 to last year and I enjoyed doing that because I felt that it kept me abreast of everything that was being published in fiction, and this textbook series does the same thing for me with drama and poetry.

TS: Do you have a philosophy of teaching or approach to teaching that is uniquely your own?

GJ: I doubt it. I teach using the standard tried and true lecture and discussion method, if I'm teaching American literature, that is. Now I teach exclusively fiction workshops so the

workshops—even though I have a very structured syllabus—the workshops themselves are very loosely organized and they don't take, frankly, much preparation because I expect a lot from the students and I'm interested in what they have to say about their own writing. Most of the time our class is spent evaluating student manuscripts, so it's just story by story by story. I try to foster a very informal—and yet structured at the same time—atmosphere so that it doesn't devolve into just a bull session but at the same time isn't so structured that the students feel tense or uncomfortable. I mean, there's already a great deal of tension involved in having to read your story aloud and then having fifteen people critique it while you're sitting there silently not able to say anything.

TS: Do you spend a lot of time having to read students' work?

GJ: Yes. In addition to the classes we teach, we serve on Capstone committees—thesis committees—so I'm on two committees now that are almost finished. They're both going to graduate this fall.

TS: Do you find the Internet or Vista or those kinds of things helpful in terms of communicating with students these days?

GJ: Absolutely. I communicate by e-mail a lot of the time. When I decide a certain student is going to read his or her work I'll e-mail that student to give them time to get the copies made.

TS: When you're grading student work, do you just write all over their papers or do you send them a long message?

GJ: I send them an e-mail.

TS: As kind of a concluding type of question, let me just ask you, where do you see Kennesaw State now, in 2008? You talked earlier about the intellectual climate twenty years ago when you came here, almost twenty years ago now, and I think you've had two decades to reflect on the changes in Kennesaw over that time. Do you see Kennesaw as a place that is supportive of your kinds of work in 2008, or not there yet, or how would you describe us?

GJ: I think it's been very supportive all along. I've felt that from the president down to the academic affairs office to the dean, all my department chairs—and I've had several and I've been through several deans—they've all been enormously supportive and aware of me and my work. I haven't felt that I was ignored or that I was singled out as somehow odd either. I've felt that the university has made a place, I think this university allows people—I don't have much of a panoramic view of the kind you're asking for—to be honest, I'm not that aware of what other departments are doing—but my impression, limited though it is, is that people are encouraged to be themselves and to have their own careers flower within the university structure and not hew to some sort of prescribed career path. I'm sure it was very different when it was a junior college before I was here. How long have you been here?

TS: I started in '68.

GJ: Did you really? So are you about to retire?

TS: I remember the junior college days very well. No, not quite yet. Not till they kick me out probably.

GJ: I guess you could if you wanted to, though.

TS: I could. I've got forty years in, but I still enjoy doing what I do, and I kind of feel the same way that you do in that they've been flexible enough to let people pursue their own interests.

GJ: I've felt that way all the way through. I just thought of what they call me now, by the way; they use the word "lecturer" in English. That just popped into my head because I just signed the contract not too long ago.

TS: That's right. It's a lecturer position now.

GJ: It's just a word anyway; it doesn't really mean that much. But yes, I've always felt comfortable here, and welcome, and the university has bent, as I've already detailed, has bent over backwards to try to accommodate my writing.

TS: Everybody here ought to be extremely proud of all that you've accomplished and all the books that say on the back cover, Professor at Kennesaw State University.

GJ: I hope they feel that way. As far as I know they do.

TS: And you've already really talked about changes in students somewhat over time, I think.

GJ: Yes, the students. Now, I did teach an undergraduate course last year in gender studies and they were all young kids and it's just so different than when you have ten or twelve people in their thirties and forties who have full time jobs, and I must admit that I preferred that.

TS: I think both English and history are together on that; oftentimes our best students are those that have been out a few years and then come back. People in math think differently.

GJ: Do they really?

TS: Yes.

GJ: I guess experience doesn't matter as much for math; you either have the brain for math or you don't.

- TS: That may be, I'm not sure. Of course, these students that we absolutely think are fantastic are oftentimes not particularly strong in math or have problems, maybe psychological problems taking those math classes, so they seem to have a little bit different perspective. I've always thought exactly like you do, I think, that it's nice to have those students.
- GJ: Yes, I've enjoyed them and we do get quite a few in the graduate program, so that's pretty much stayed the same.
- TS: We're going to hopefully have an American Studies master's degree before long so maybe you can teach a little bit in that program too.
- GJ: I'd be open to that, definitely. I told Jim [James M.] Elledge, who's our program director, that I'd like to do a course in the American short story before long. We have a course called Readings for Writers in the MAPW program and so that would be a way to teach a literature course in the writing program.
- TS: Well, we've covered a lot of things.
- GJ: You must be thoroughly sick of me by now.
- TS: No, no, no, we could go along and somebody more knowledgeable than I probably could ask better questions.
- GJ: I'm impressed by how much you prepared.
- TS: I thoroughly enjoyed talking to you today.
- GJ: Same here.

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