

“A VOICE FROM ‘THE NORTHERN CAPITAL OF THE CARIBBEAN’: AN INTERVIEW WITH MOIRA CRONE”¹

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Born in 1952 in Goldsboro, North Carolina, Moira Crone was educated at Smith College, where she coincided with one of her mentors, V.S. Pritchett, and at Johns Hopkins University. From that moment on, until today, Crone’s literary production has primarily focused on short fiction. Some of her stories have been published in anthologies such as *New Stories From the South: The Year’s Best in 2001, 2005, 2007, Smith Voices*, or *Various Gifts: Brooklyn Fiction of the Eighties* while many stories came out in renowned magazines such as *The New Yorker, Ploughshares, The Southern Review, Ohio Review*, just to name a few.

Her literary production has also been widely acclaimed and Ms. Crone has been the recipient of prestigious awards including the Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction from the Southern Fellowship of Writers in April 2009, or the 2004 Faulkner/Wisdom Prize for Novella for “The Ice Garden,” the opening story in her latest volume of short stories, *What Gets Into Us*.

Her first collection of short stories, *The Winnebago Mysteries and Other Stories*, was published in 1982. In 1997 Ms. Crone acknowledged that she “didn’t really begin to grasp the form until the last ten years or so. I mean consciously, so that I understand what short stories are doing” (Rohrberger 1997: 76). Four years later, she published *A Period of Confinement*, a novel that tells the story of a young woman who abandons her baby and her husband in a depressed post-partum ‘period of confinement’, as a way to explore her own identity. This novel was followed by another volume of short fiction, *Dream State* (1995), a collection of local-color stories centered in Louisiana, a land envisioned not as the rural setting or social entity understood as the South in the fiction of Faulkner, McCullers or Welty, but as a multicultural society, represented by New Orleans, a city that for Ms Crone becomes “the northern capital of the Caribbean” and an epitome of what “America might have been” if the French, Spanish or African influences had prevailed (1997: 82).

Her next volume of stories, *What Gets Into Us*, published in 2006, comprises stories across four decades of intertwined lives in the small fictional village of Fayton, North Carolina. Crone explores the fortunes and misfortunes of a group of white middle class neighbouring families during the pre- and post-Civil Rights America. In April 2012, her latest work, a science fiction novel, *The Not Yet*, was launched and it has recently been nominated for the Philip K. Dick Award for the best original science fiction novel published in 1912.

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In this interview, Ms Crone explores the authors and cultural elements which shaped her fiction. She also reveals an intimate view of Southern storytelling in which she acknowledges the importance of Cajun tradition in Louisiana, the region where she lives, the concept of regional literature as well as historical aspects such as racial discrimination and the ensuing Civil Rights Movement which shook the social foundations of the Southern states of the Union during the 1950s and 60s.

You are a writer born in North Carolina. However, you have spent a great deal of your lifetime in Louisiana. Do you consider yourself in the tradition of Southern writers such as William Faulkner; Flannery O’Connor; Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Walker Percy or, more recently, Andre Dubus, Richard Ford or Tim Gautreaux?

Yes, I guess so. I’d say I feel myself very much in that tradition – I mean, I am a Southern writer. I feel a lot of affinity for Carson McCullers and I adore Capote’s early works – I also admire the works of every other writer you mentioned, immensely. Concerning the contemporary writers of the region, Richard Ford has lived in a lot of places – he was raised in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, but he has not always confined himself to writing about Southern subjects and in fact he has published several books about characters who live in New Jersey. He’s also written about people who live in the West, in the fine collection, *Rock Springs*. I think he did not particularly want to be a Southern writer, he wanted to be an American writer.

Tim Gautreaux is very much of his region, he’s always written about Cajun people, around where I live in New Orleans, but actually not the urban types, instead, people who live in the countryside. For long time he edited a magazine called *Louisiana Literature*. He’s remained in his region and is very much a native son. Eudora Welty always stayed where she was born, Jackson, Mississippi. I’m sort of a hybrid of those types because I was raised in Eastern North Carolina, a place I’ve never returned to for any long period. I’ve never lived there more than a few weeks, since I was eighteen. So, I have sort of two regions I’ve been writing about, where I was raised, which is Eastern North Carolina and I’ve written a lot about Louisiana. As a region with a history of immigration, a port, New Orleans has a place for the foreigner. I am not as rooted in region as some in Louisiana, but I am definitely a Southern writer – perhaps you could say I write about American experience within a Southern locale.

You’ve mentioned Carson McCullers would be the person you associate yourself with, the one you share a particular vision of literature...

She has a spectacular child’s point of view, this is true both in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and in *The Member of the Wedding*. She writes from the perspective of a girl before she has the part of her life where she is going to marry or actually have relationships – she explores the terror girls feel at that age, ten or eleven. The writers that I really feel the greatest kinship for, I think, are the small-town Southerners who moved around when they were young. Capote or McCullers. Though Southern, are sort of like cosmopolitans. They lived in New Orleans, that was their first metropolis, but eventually they moved to New

York. Tennessee Williams is another writer who took this trajectory – his plays have also been an influence upon me, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which I went to see while I was writing the long story, *Dream State*, about a character who has been to California, been a star, and is coming home in semi-disgrace.

How do you deal with the Cajun presence in Southern literature? In your opinion, does this presence go further beyond the writings of Tim Gautreaux?

Andre Dubus's cousin, James Lee Burke, a mystery writer, lived in Cajun country, in New Iberia. He is of Cajun roots and always writes of those characters. He is a mystery writer right now but in the early days he wrote "mainstream" novels and, at a certain point, he became extremely popular, taking the world of Cajuns and law enforcement as his Subjects. Sometimes he ventures to New Orleans but mostly his characters' lives take place on the bayous, in the watery places. They are French speakers, or they know French.

Tim Gautreaux, as you said, writes about Cajuns. One of the next generation of Cajun writers is Brent Benoit, who is not yet forty. He wrote a novel in stories, called *All Saints' Day*. He was my student at LSU, and he did this thesis, which became a book, with me. Also the novelist Hardy Jones, my former student in his thirties now, author of *Every Bitter Thing*, is a Cajun author. As far as how I deal with it, as a professor at LSU I often had students of Cajun origin. During the time that I worked there, the Cajun subject matter, moved from being considered marginal or out of the mainstream to being central and essential. I have rarely had Cajun characters in my work, with the exception of the seductive young musician in the story "Fever."

In my history, my ancestry, there are French Catholics – my great grandmother was named Marguerite Genois, from Alsace-Lorraine. Her form of belief came down to me through my grandmother. I understand, in this personal way, French Catholicism, its iconography, its roots. A very old-country kind of Catholicism is one of the strongest elements of the Cajun experience. When I see it, I recognize it.

When you first moved to Johns Hopkins University, you found a mentor in John Barth, one of the finest postmodern representatives in American literature. In his famous essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", he depicted literary realism as a "used up" tradition, therefore claiming that narrative conventions such as authorial omniscience or conventional endings, among other aspects, should be reassessed. It seems that Barth's postmodern view of fiction influenced very little in your realist conception of literature. If I am right in my appreciation, to what extent did Barth affect/influence the way you understand fiction?

It's funny, but I think he tried to show us how to look at literature formally, that is, from the point of view of structure. At the time that he admitted me to the program, he saw me as a "naive realist." And I certainly was. I was writing out of my autobiographical experiences and off of sheer feeling, or rather, truthfully, I wrote to discover what I felt, and then, only then, after I had written something out of pure unconsciousness, could I even begin to shape the work. But my stories, though sometimes extreme and not realistic, per say, are certainly not formally experimental in the assertive way that Barth's works were. This is so except

perhaps for some of the pieces in my first book, *The Winnebago Mysteries*. What Barth did influence me about was to realize how important form is in fiction, and what form is. He got me started down that track.

How does globalization affect literature? Is regional awareness as important as it was in the days Bret Harte, Harriet Beecher Stowe or Mark Twain produced their fiction? Is the local color tradition slowly fading away in the America literary landscape?

These writers have been viewed by American publishing and the American media establishment as regional in the past. So, they were put in a certain category. And this is because the American publishing has been concentrated in the Northeast since the Civil War. So, Tim Gautreaux, for example, a extremely gifted short story writer, a great artist who has been given prizes in California and other places – by mainstream publishing in New York, he has not been given the notice he deserved, I don’t think. It is as if they thought “Oh, he writes about the Cajuns. It’s not significant.” I’ve made this point before: “If he were writing about people in Connecticut, like Cheever did, then he wouldn’t be considered ‘regional.’ But because he writes about Cajuns he is considered this way.” At least that has been the situation in the past, probably all the way through from the late 1860s to the 1990’s, when reviewing and distribution of fiction in America was more centralized in New York. There was a control over the dissemination and selection of literature in the Northeast – this was true for a hundred and forty years. But now, maybe that is over, because of the internet and because of the instantaneousness, an aspect of globalization, and the fact that anybody, anywhere who wants to access any author can read and understand this author from his own point of view without some kind of a filter, that kind of “the world’s flat” situation is creating more reception for works. Probably this designation as “regional,” if you have a thousand perspectives, is not “regional” anymore. Or rather, every single place becomes a region – not one dominating all. The fact that, with the internet, books don’t go out of print in the same way they used to – they are accessible as used volumes from many sellers, or they can be downloaded as electronic books – also means that all kind of voices get some attention: “attention,” can not be controlled so much as it once was. And I think it is a good thing. For example, if Poe had been publishing post-Civil War, people in New York might have said “this is a regional writer,” and in some way he wouldn’t have been appreciated for the genius he was. And Faulkner was treated as a regional writer, and many Southerners complained about that. He was ignored by New York, to a large degree. In 1946, he was almost totally out of print, and then an editor put together *The Portable Faulkner* and this allowed a new generation to appreciate his works, which were about to be forgotten. But then the whole world realized that he was the best writer in the entire United States and possibly in the entire hemisphere. Most people in South America think that he was the best writer of that period and they feel their modern work descends from Faulkner’s – that the stories set in Mississippi have more in common with tales set in Mexico or Colombia than with those set in New England. So, Faulkner transcended his “region.” Finally.

Now, because of the internet, and because of the thousands of perspectives that are out there, about fiction, perhaps certain fine writers wouldn’t be “almost lost,” the way Faulkner once was. I guess that means there is a flattening of the world – of letters – certainly

a democratization, and a “disintermediation,” – loss of the middle man. Others complain, of course, there is too much out there and nothing “stands out,” because the old reviewing media and outlets don’t do their job anymore, of sorting. Or, it is done by volunteers, not by paid reviewers, by non-professionals.

What role do you think literature plays in this globalized and changeable society?

I think that literature is a way that people communicate, express their point of view in its totality, or as totally as one can. The lives of people in Africa and in China and in India and in England and in the Czech Republic, and in contemporary American South – are all available to readers, more now than ever. This international accessibility of literature, written in English or in translation, is helping everybody understand everybody else.

This label of regionalism was an aspect that Flannery O’Connor complained about many times, especially when people from the North Eastern part of the U.S. regarded her fiction as belonging to the so-called “School of Southern Degeneracy,” due to its grotesque realism. Are there still any current representatives of Southern fiction or this Southern Gothic fiction?

Some people would say that my work has some aspects of that, the “School of Southern Degeneracy.” In *What Gets Into Us*, I certainly did write about some awful people. William Gay is a very Gothic contemporary writer and I’d say that Cormac McCarthy is also – a directly concerned with morality and evil and the meaning behind religion, what is meant by the word “god,” in a way that Flannery O’Connor was. Doris Betts is another writer who analyzes characters from the point of view of their conventional, or unconventional morality. Cormac McCarthy has moved into slightly more extreme scenarios, such as he did in *The Road*, but he has a Gothic quality, also *Blood Meridian* which has very strange, stark environments. Dorothy Allison’s work is very Gothic. Her novel *A Bastard Out of Carolina* is a real classic about a very stark child abuse situation. Jim Grimsley is another writer whose works explore “Southern Degeneracy” – in *My Drowning*, and other books. All of these writers, I would say, have created scenarios where evil is the subject or the problem, where there is no easy redemption. Where evil is evil and you have to deal with it.

The definition of evil being characters whose worldview is thoroughly selfish. In that sense, they walk down Flannery O’Connor’s path. As far as calling this “Southern” degeneracy, all I can say is there is degeneracy everywhere, but in the South in America there has been a tradition for a long time of speaking up about it. Why that is so – why depictions of evil and the contemplation of evil has been such a strong theme in Southern letters, is a very interesting question. I might even go so far as to say, since the Civil War, the most serious American writing has been Southern, the works that take on the big questions – that offer a real critique of the American enterprise. Perhaps if such intense works had been set in Connecticut, or Manhattan, the New York editors would have expected a little less scathing critiques of society. So the regional thing works both ways.

In The Lonely Voice, the Irish writer Frank O'Connor contended that the “short story has never had a hero” but it is instead “a submerged group of population” (2004: 17). These characters change from generation to generation and from writer to writer. Thus, in Gogol's stories, the submerged group of population would be ‘officials’, in Turgenev's, ‘serfs’ in Maupassant ‘prostitutes’ or in Sherwood Anderson ‘provincials’ or; in modern times, Ernest Gaines's African-American population. Do you agree with O'Connor's view, or do you consider his understanding or his scope cannot be applied to the current short fiction?

There are a lot of people who say that, as we were taught in English class, “people read novels to find out how to live” – it is a theory about the rise of the novel in eighteenth century. In other words, that the novel arose in a time when people wanted to read about real-life heroes who were negotiating a world that was new, and complicated, and had a middle class, for the first time. And the novel was in part an entertainment, and in part, a form of instruction. For example, if you read *Jane Eyre* or *Pride and Prejudice*, you could learn a lot about how to make choices in life that are beneficial, and moral even though you are very constricted by the rules of property and the expectations or roles in society. Reading a novel, from the beginning, had something to do with following along with a hero or heroine who was emblematic, exceptional, had good sense, had something to teach you. Or one who made terrible mistakes but was still admirable, and thereby had something to teach you. In short fiction there is no expectation that the reader is going to identify with the central character in the same way, and sustain a relationship with the character over a long period. In short fiction, because the reader doesn't identify to that degree, we can have characters which are much more unpleasant. Or you can have characters you do not want to identify with, whose lives you don't want to live. This is obviously a strategy that Flannery O'Connor used with many characters. She can have stories in which none of the characters are good. They are all bad, in some way. And you can't do that in a novel or, if you do, you are going to take a big risk. In America people do like to have some kind of grace or redemption in novels and if they don't love the main character in some sense or another. If there is no redemption, they may feel they have been cheated. Short stories allow you to work with people who are at the margins, that nobody wants to be “like,” or even to “like.”

Regarding Frank O'Connor's idea of the short story from another angle, that it concerns a “submerged group or population,” there have been several story cycles in this past century which depicted communities and not individuals. These communities that were depicted were not necessarily in the “middle range of experience.” An early example is Joyce's *Dubliners* – very few “heroes” in that collection, if anything, ostracized and isolated people are the focus. Dublin was a very poor city in Europe at that time and its concerns were not central at all to English readers anywhere. *Dubliners* are outcasts in an outcast city. Many times, writers chose to write about “marginal” communities using the short story form, or the short story cycle form. An American example is Louise Erdrich's, *Love Medicine*, about the American Indian population in South Dakota. And it's not about one person you can pick out as the protagonist, but there are many characters and many situations, a constellation of situations. So it is sort of a portrait or a chronicle of a community, and a

submerged population these people are at the edges of their society, or the empire they are attached to.

In the three volumes of short fiction you have published to date, you have always included a 'novella' accompanying your short stories. How do you feel more at ease, at long distances or short distances? Are there any reasons for including novellas in your short story collections?

In general, I like the form of the novella. Some of my best works have been in that length. The novella can be sort of very deep short story – a short story that is taken as far as it can go. The reader will still sit and read it all at once. It is a structure I understand – about ninety or a hundred pages. Actually, I think a lot of writers whose best work is of that length. You could say that Joyce's most comprehensive work of art, from the point of view of its absolute unity would be "The Dead", or "The Metamorphosis" by Kafka. It is a length that an artist can have a complete unity of impression and yet be deep, be thorough. Novellas tend to be quite serious, often about death, tragedies. "Death in Venice," "The Turn of the Screw," "The Death of Ivan Ilyich." Maybe it's just me, but these are in all these cases, some of the best work these writers ever produced. I am in sync with the novella form.

Along these lines, do you feel comfortable writing novels? Do you feel that writing novels can be a weary task because they are often longer and they need an extra effort in developing characters, plot, events or situations?

Yes, I've written a novel and I've written other novels that I have not published. I do find it (writing novels) very taxing and I have not had what I would consider to be the kind of artistic unity that I have in my short stories. Recently I have published a science fiction novel which has the form of the picaresque, or hero tale. It is being well received. This is a departure for me. It's called *The Not Yet*.

The 'Dream State' you refer to in your volume of short stories, is it a real scenery or fictional setting?

It is a reference to, in the early eighties, how they were trying to mark Louisiana and they made the state "motto," the slogan was, "Louisiana: A Dream State". And then, the State Legislature got very upset because they thought it would be seen as something negative, like "everybody here in Louisiana is asleep, an impractical dreamer." What "Dream State" was supposed to mean was that Louisiana was charming, a delight, like something in a dream. There is a famous lyric to a song, "Way down yonder in New Orleans/ In the land of dreamy dreams." But the legislators killed it as a motto for the state. So I used that quote because that was on the license plates at one time, before they changed the motto to a "Sportsman's Paradise."

I chose that phrase for several reasons. One, at the time that I lived in Baton Rouge, I'd say is less now in general in the deep South, but then, in the eighties, there was a certain refusal to admit the realities of a recent past, Civil Rights, of the oppression of

African Americans, even of the existence of African Americans in history – in some sense. There were great gaps between rich and poor, common in Louisiana at that time, more so than in other states. Now, the whole country has that great gap between rich and poor, but Louisiana was still a post-plantation society in some ways in the eighties. People –white people– wanted to act as if that plantation period was great time, or there was something marvelous in it, they wanted to have an amnesia about the suffering that history really implies. And so, people said to themselves: “We are going to live this grand life,” “We are going to have these houses of plantation design,” “We are going to revive the French colonial structures,” “We are going in some kitschy way reproduce that old plantation style because that’s our grand heritage.” In so doing, there was a kind of willed forgetfulness – a dream state, that is, a lot of people who were in denial about what plantation life really meant. I would say this denial it is less so now. But still, even though Louisiana has more blacks proportionally than almost any other state in the south, the preservation of African American heritage in the historical interpretation is not as common as you might expect. This is not all white people’s fault, though, I would say. Slavery history is so bitter that African Americans do not necessarily want to remember those things, either. What is much more prominent in Louisiana now than when I first moved there, is the appreciation of the extremely complex society that it is, with many immigrant and ethnic groups. When I first moved to Baton Rouge, the focus was more on the cultural perspective of the white Southerner. Certainly the heritage of the English Department at Louisiana State University and at the Southern Review was one that was concentrated on the legacy of the white Southerner. Now there is a multicultural appreciation, and perspective, in Louisiana.

In a previous interview, you contended that “if you give some of those characters [of a short story] full stories, literally of their own, and you start to multiply the issues that are at stake then you enter novel territory” (Rohrberger 1996: 78). Don’t you consider you do that in What Gets into Us, and it many not be called a novel but, more precisely, a ‘short story cycle’?

If it had been a novel, I think that difference would have been that there was one central character – Lily Stark – but since there are two girls with different fates, it tends to be more spread out and it is diffused. For a certain kind of reader it has a satisfaction, of a portrait of the town, but I do think it is a collection of stories, or a cycle, it is not a novel. What would have been the difference if Lily Stark and Claire McKenzie were somehow the same character and their experiences were somehow conflated or represented all in the same person? I don’t think that would have been quite possible. I have been encouraged by several people to turn “The Ice Garden” into a novel, and I have a version of it which is over three hundred and forty pages, but I’m still thinking about how to organize it at that length and how much adult Claire there should be, I think may be more than I have right now.

Are the characters included in "The Ice Garden" basically fictional? Are there any traits in them which may be based on people you've met or known before?

Well, no, there are no characters who existed in life exactly the way they are portrayed in the story. In the novel version, I've developed more the father. In that length, he vacillates because he has been told by the doctor that he has to control his wife and he wants to take on that role. So there is vacillation in the father, and also more concern with his elder sister, Aunt C's situation. There are more conversations that you don't see with the father. I made all of this up, of course. Some of the incidents that appear in "The Ice Garden" did happen in my life, but not in the order that they happened in the novel, and of course they happened to me, not to these people I made up.

So the novella is based on facts taken from your own life, right?

As I said, there were several women I knew as a child who were very borderline hysterics, or had what might be called now, "depression with psychotic features." This is not uncommon but this has to do with the way women were shut up in their lives then, and they were not allowed to do anything – or at least we can posit that was the reason. It was a fifties thing, which was bad everywhere. People were like cartoons of themselves in America in the fifties. Women everywhere had an oppressive role but on top of that, where I lived, the Southern thing is very oppressive. So, for example, for a woman to want to work was a big deal, a woman to want to be an artist, to play piano was a huge deal, it shouldn't be done. It was too much, attention getting, flamboyant, in and of itself a sign of mental disease, from the point of view of society. There was a lot of condemnation. For example, when I was a child, my mother worked with my father. They had a business. My father was a CPA [Certified Public Accountant], and she worked with him. She was a secretary and she ran his office. I've lived at home and was raised by an African American woman, that was common – that you had an African American maid. But the custom in my hometown was that the mother would also stay home and do nothing. White middle class women did not generally go to work. Or do anything. The fact that I had a mother who went to work was a huge deal. I had friends whose mothers would not allow me to play with them because my mother wasn't at home; and not because of lack of supervision but because I did not have the proper structure at home. The thought was that it would have been better if I had a mother who sat around all day and smoked cigarettes, and ordered her maid to take care of everything: that was considered the proper structure for the household, an idle woman in nice clothes. Because I didn't have that situation at home, I was somehow not getting the right transmission of Southern womanhood and so, the girls wouldn't even be allowed to play with me. Even people who were in the lower-middle class had maids. People who did not have a maid were very odd. We knew everybody's maid, we called them "your maid", we called "who's your maid?". Everybody had their maid. This situation has now been explored in the film, *The Help*.

So, like Sydney in “The Ice Garden”, maids were always African American, weren’t they?

Yes, always African American. In the book you see the switch, because after the Civil Rights, African American society was fed up with the way they had to cater to white people and how they didn’t have the same basic economic opportunities and treatment, such as banking, getting loans, getting homes, getting mortgages, being regular citizens with credit, etc. Such access was often denied to African Americans. It was a big part of the Civil Rights movement that people were able to establish themselves financially, not be dependent upon white people for co-signing loans, etc. Equal treatment economically meant that black people did not have to be dependent upon white families, which is how it often was in the first part of the twentieth century, where some forms of slavery-like dependence were re-instituted, through people being servants, or working other people’s land, as share-croppers. These obstacles to access to the economic life of the city might not have been an issue for the wealthiest class of African Americans, of which they were some, but they would have been obstacles for the lady who raised me. And they were. Her name was Lily Mae Hall.

To what extent does What Gets Into Us divert from your previous short story production?

Well, I think *What Gets Into Us* is more based on my childhood experiences and it’s probably the most serious work I’ve ever done. It’s a little darker, quite dark. It’s funny because it seems that I’m still working in two different veins: I’m working on some stories right now that are about Katrina, about post-Katrina in New Orleans, and it seems like it probably will be a short story cycle, which is much more dark than anything I’ve ever written about Louisiana before. It’s not done with kind of ironic stance. I published a couple of them, a new one is coming out this year, in maybe a month. After the storm I created an application for Guggenheim Fellowship – I made up a cycle that I did not know I would really be able to write, but you have to propose what you are going to do. I said I would write a collection that I would call “Reconstruction,” a term which is applied to the period after the Civil War, which was a very turbulent, hopeful and also difficult time in the South. I think I might do those stories that I propose. It takes a while after a trauma like that to actually do the literature. On the other hand, I wrote a novel length version of “The Ice Garden”, for about the last eighteen months. Right now, its title is “Beauty’s Daughters”. To do that book, what I did it was, I kept reading McCullers. Also, on the advice of Edward P. Jones, an African American writer of my generation had chosen “Ice Garden” for a prize. He thought my story reminded him of early Capote, which caused me to reread *Other Voices, Other Rooms* about ten times.

In Rohrberger’s interview, you mentioned you had sent off for publication a novel which would be tentatively called “Finding Alberta”. What happened to that novel?

It’s never been published. Maybe I’ll sell it someday. I was thinking of going back to it. I probably understand it better. Writers write a lot of books that they don’t sell.

Fine, I understand. What was the story behind “Finding Alberta”?

It’s about two women who inherit together a painting because it’s hidden in a building they’ve inherited, they both have rights to. And there is a mystery, why is this painting? What is it? Because it was supposedly (done) by a prominent artist, who has some characteristics just like Georgia O’Keefe, but not her, a woman of that stature in early twentieth century painting in America, of that kind of biography, but not exactly the same. The painting is reported to have been burnt, have been destroyed in fire in an art gallery in Houston in the 1950s. So the mystery of that begins this sort of quest story where they go across to the West, to New Mexico.

“Gauguin” is a sort of premonitory story of the disaster caused by the Katrina to New Orleans and surrounding areas. Were the inhabitants of New Orleans conscious of the magnitude of the beckoning disaster?

I think people were aware that there could be a serious flood following a hurricane. There were even TV shows about it. But most felt that the chances were very slim, and the enormous amount of money that it would take to be absolutely sure that it wouldn’t happen, people weren’t going to put up that kind of money for something they considered “unlikely.” Mostly the funds would have to have come from the Federal government, not the state, as the dams and levees in the región are the responsibility of the Federal government. Louisiana wanted better flood protection, but they couldn’t convince the Congress. Also, regarding evacuation preparation, there were some quick fixes following previous floods and so forth the year before – once the problem was observed, there were funds immediately. But there were not the funds nor the planning for the huge job of evacuating all the very poor people in the city who did not have cars. Or for housing them beyond a few days. The plan of the city government was something like, “Pray it doesn’t happen.” Because they couldn’t, in advance, have gotten the funds they would have needed. Nobody had that kind of money for a disaster that was seen as, well, an “unthinkable” event. But, sort of like it is, probably, with global warming. That is, people cannot be convinced in advance about a disaster of the magnitude that is predicted if world temperatures really rise, and food production is decimated, and all the other terrible consequences ensue. They just say – we can’t commit the resources in advance for something that maybe isn’t going to happen. Up until the day the devastation has really started, people are going to be reluctant to make the preparations and the sacrifices. Now, in New Orleans, post-Katrina, there are preparations for a hurricane, and the levees have all been repaired and there is a fine perimeter flood protection system. It’s been done. Just nobody could be convinced that it was absolutely essential to do it beforehand.

What are you writing now?

Well, it’s funny, it follows the question above to some degree – I have a novel coming out in 2012 called *The Not Yet*. It is set in a future in New Orleans (2121) – where the city is islands because of global warming. It is a departure for me – speculative, dystopian,

Dickensian. It’s about life extension, that is, the very wealthy live to be hundreds of years old, others have the lives of serfs or slaves. It is the book I had a grant to write when Katrina hit. It is a new genre for me.

I have also been writing realistic stories set in post-Katrina New Orleans that will form a collection. Several long stories in that group have been published. They are “Do Over,” and “The Black Carpet,” and forthcoming in *Shenandoah* in the Fall, called “Small Silver Horse.”

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