

An Interview with Edward P. Jones

Edward P. Jones is a writer of the kind of fiction one might have thought was going out of style: readable, absorbing, and exquisitely literary. After a startling publishing debut with *Lost in the City*, stories drawn from his native Washington, D. C., Jones went on to win the Pulitzer Prize for *The Known World* in 2004, an unusual story about a former slave-turned-slaveowner in antebellum Virginia. He published his third book in the fall of 2006, *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, a collection of short stories about ordinary people, whom we see as only they can be. Jones pays careful attention to presenting the circumstances of their lives and the consequences of their choices. Neither blaming the victims nor forgetting that they exist, Jones is more concerned with alerting us to the characters' contradictions, i.e., what makes them human. Unlike the brooding sensibility of Faulkner's fiction or the violent rage that characterizes Wright's work, Jones's world has a sober inclusiveness. He mediates his characters' lives with elegant, understated prose that is as compelling as it is persuasive. Each page is a reminder of his artistry and the compassion he feels for each of his characters.

This interview was conducted shortly before the release of the hardcover edition of *All Aunt's Hagar's Children*, August 18, 2006, at Union Station in Washington, D. C. A trade paperback edition of the book was published in August 2007.

MEG: Let's review some of the major facts about your life. Washington, D. C. is home for you and you went to Cardozo High School, where you have returned to talk with students on at least one occasion that I heard about. After finishing Holy Cross, you came back home to a job in the 1970s. Your mother's death occurred in January 1975; you published your first story in *Essence*. In 1990 you published your short story collection and by then, a host of other stories had appeared in leading literary magazines. You were awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 for your novel. But you did not start out as a writer and did only a little writing when you were in college. How *did* you get started as a writer?

EPJ: The job I had after college was terrible. I was going nowhere. After working all day, I was simply going home and watching TV and reading. I saw a flyer for a writing seminar financed by some fellowship at George Washington University in a bookstore—and it was one day a week. I thought this would work fine. I did that in the '70s. The seminar was held at the home of the writer Susan Shreve, and this was the first writing course that I had after college.

MEG: But you also returned to the University of Virginia for the MFA. Since creative writers typically don't make a lot of money starting out, were you thinking of getting a job and living as a "starving writer" for a while?

EPJ: No, I didn't think of becoming a writer and suffering, because I had done a lot of suffering as a child. I can remember distinctly my mother putting large things in a big frying pan, which you really couldn't call flap jacks. There was just one for three people and we didn't really have syrup, but when you've eaten enough of those . . . when you haven't anything else to eat, then you know the world isn't waiting for you to just show up and give you a job.

After I'd finished Susan's seminar, I saw her someplace and said I didn't know what I was going to do next. And she looked at me and said well, you will get a job. She didn't have to say "stupid," but you can know what people's eyes say. I think this has to do a lot with class. Because she came from a certain class where the world is out there, she believed all I needed to do was open the door. I realize now what I didn't realize then. The world is a different experience for poor people. I have a friend who was raised poor in Wales and married the son of a military guy who came from different circumstances. She said she realized they were different when she expressed concern about holding on to her job as a high school teacher when they talked about moving. He told her you'll just get another one. This is not the world that poor people know; not the way the world I know either. But in Susan's world, you just get a job. My job was no good, so when I weighed the dead-end job that I had against taking a chance—although I didn't know anything about becoming a writer. I took a chance on going to grad school, regardless of what would happen to me. After I'd finished the graduate program, I was glad for the job at *Tax Notes* because it paid the rent and did everything else I needed.

MEG: Your first story is a woman's story, and it clearly has emotional power for you. I see that you have dedicated all of your books to your mother. Was your mother's death a possible motivating factor for you?

EPJ: When I wrote that first story, "Harvest," it is true I was thinking about my mother because it was a Southern story. However, the people and the events are pretty far from her own life. It was all imagination. I just wanted to create the world that looked like what she told me about the South. I wouldn't want anyone to think that my mother's death was the event that started me to writing. I was still working at *Science* magazine in the '70s when I published that first story, "Harvest," in *Essence*. I was writing longhand at home, I didn't have a typewriter and would come to the office after hours and type up what I had written. The story was about a woman who had a boyfriend whom she had bought a Christmas present for, placing it under her tree. The guy was two-timing her and never did the right thing. It was a long, long time before he came to get the present, which was a bathrobe. I had one of my co-workers read it to see if my stories made sense, and she said that that had happened to her and her boyfriend. I didn't know that. The thing is that it's in the universe of what happens to people, this, that and the other are all possible. When you write that this woman has a boyfriend, then this and that happen; you never think that I'm telling this story about this woman, and I will use this fact to illustrate who she is and who the man she cares about is. You know, it was a great surprise to hear that this had happened to her, but where it comes from, I don't know.

MEG: Would you say that your mother has a kind of psychic presence for you?

EPJ: I think when I am writing certain things, I don't have any particular lines in mind, but there are those phrases that keep coming back to me from my mother. A phrase like "A month of Sundays," or "That would be too much like right." I haven't used either of these yet, but some day down the line, I will. I have this little booklet that I started in the 1970s that has about 120 sayings and a lot of them are from my mother and her friend, Miss Lucille. There are some others like "Every good bye ain't gone," and "Every shut eye ain't sleep." I'm sure I will use them.

MEG: Both of us grew up in a generation that wanted to be different from our parents, but you obviously didn't reject what came from your mother, who was the only parent you knew, and her generation. Her moral sensibility is clearly there for you. How does one decide what is worth preserving and what isn't?

EPJ: Well, you don't really decide what is worth preserving and what isn't; who you are or who you aren't. You know, I never had any desire to own a lot of fancy clothes

and have a lot of new cars. I've always been a simple person, and when you are a simple person it's easy to live with what you have.

MEG: Given your situation when you were growing up, how is it that the system seems to have worked for you, but no longer works for our youth today? For example, you have said many times that people took an interest in you and noticed your ability and pushed you further, both in college and graduate school. What made the difference for you?

EPJ: I think because of my mother, I could know when things opened up for me, or when something became available. If I had been out on the streets—of course drugs wasn't the great problem it is now—but if I had been out on the streets until 1-2-3 o'clock in the morning, and I'd come in and my mother would want to know where I was and I just cursed her out and everything . . . then no matter how. . .

MEG: What you are saying then is that she made sure those things were available to you.

EPJ: No, no, they might have been available, but I wouldn't have known it if I hadn't been sensitive enough to act upon them, to exploit them. So you have to have your heart and mind open. If it is not, then nothing can get to you. My mother did not have the opportunity, but she was an example for me.

MEG: Are you conscious of transferring some of her qualities to your characters?

EPJ: I guess we do things to get us from one thing to the next. Some people are good people, like my mother, but no, I never think that it would be fair to take someone's life and impose it on a character.

MEG: Do any of your characters remind you and the reader of your mother?

EPJ: The only time she "appears" is when she takes that little girl to school in "The First Day," the story from "Lost in the City" and nothing else. Even that speech at the end is not my mother, when she tells her the little girl to wait for her to pick her up and to do what the teacher said—my mother would never say that.

MEG: You mean she wasn't that hard? This experience does not resonate with your own first day of school?

EPJ: No, she never said anything like the mother did in the story when leaving the girl with the kindergarten teacher. As far as my own experience is concerned, yes, my mother and I set off on the first day of school, and we went to Seaton, where they told us that was not where I was supposed to be. Then we went to Walker-Jones, but I really don't recall what happened. The story is all made up after that. I took from something that began with me, but what happens before that—all that stuff about the girl and her dress and her socks and her shoes—that's all made up. Two lines happened to me and the story has hundreds of lines; it doesn't remind me of my own experiences.

MEG: This is very helpful for teachers, since we always want to know the relationship between an author's work and his experience, and how an author's individual works connect to each other and other traditions. In this sense, are you conscious about either creating or being part of a particular literary tradition or legacy?

EPJ: When I lived in Arlington I used to get the *Washington Post* and every Sunday it had a TV Guide in it. Now I don't get the paper. I'm only thinking as far as what I can get from the computer, when I go to MSN, and whether or not I have seen those shows or not. That's it. *Legacy*, I don't really think about. My job is clear; I just have to write the stories. I mean that my sense has always been that anything I write

should speak for itself, and if I need to come along afterwards, except to clarify something or to say something was misspelled, if I have to come along and say something beyond that, then it's too bad.

MEG: When you were growing up, you did have an ambition to be something beyond what mainstream society was allowing you to be, though did you not? No one really wants to be poor.

EPJ: I have always said it would have been nice to have heat in the winter and air conditioning in the summer and that didn't take a great deal. I felt satisfied when I latched onto a job after graduate school that did all of that. If you are the kind of person that doesn't feel a need for a cell phone then that says something about who you are.

MEG: Do you think that you are transmitting this vision to your reader?

EPJ: I don't really think in terms of what I am transmitting to the reader. The only person that I'm trying to satisfy as I write is me. You know you are trying to tell a story: this happened and then this happened, and the result of all that happening is this. You try to make it credible so that you know some guy, let's say he is named Edward P. Jones, and he walks into a bookstore seeing a multitude of volumes to choose from. He picks up a book by the guy named Jones, turns to the first page, and only he will decide whether or not he wants to read on.

MEG: Speaking again as a teacher, I am curious about who you regard as important influences for your work. You read Richard Wright when you were young and have commented on your first encounter with his work. What was his impact?

EPJ: I am who I am and one thing I never enjoyed is going down the path that someone else may have taken. What struck me about Richard Wright is essentially that his was one of the first books that I read that had people in it I felt I knew.

You see, I didn't have a television until I was about twelve. At that time, when you would see black people on TV, you would have to call everybody for five blocks around to see that rare black person on TV. The fact is there'd be white people who were the major folks on the program and the black people going from left to right on the screen. You had to get there quickly or they'd be gone, and you wouldn't see another black face for another month. You never really expected to see and certainly not read about black people.

MEG: What about the James Joyce connection? Wyatt Mason in his review calls you the American James Joyce. How do you respond to that?

EPJ: Joyce was a great inspiration to me when I was thinking about writing *Lost in the City*, but I had no intention of taking all of those stories in *Dubliners* and then just putting them in black situations.

MEG: What appeared to be the stronger connection for me is your creation of the human life cycle through your stories. There's Joyce's *Dubliners*, yes, but this is also true for Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children*, which begins with an adolescent boy in the story "Big Boy Leaves Home," and ends with the story of an older woman, in "Bright and Morning Star." So maybe Wyatt Mason's reading of your connection to the life cycle in Joyce's *Dubliners* is similar to my reading of your connection to the cycle of stories in Richard Wright's first volume.

EPJ: I didn't realize that this is what was going on in both Joyce or Wright, but that's what I set out to do in *Lost in the City*, go from the young to the old. God, I never would have seen that. I can still remember in *Uncle Tom's Children* in the very last story this old woman is dying and the last paragraph, it was just wrenching. . . .

I remember when I was a kid I would read them over and over again for the beauty of the language but also the personal pain in it. I love both of those collections, by Joyce and Wright.

MEG: Joyce and Wright are also driven by an autobiographical impulse. I know you don't like to use the autobiographical medium, but there are lots of references in your work that connect to your life, correct? You not only mention your elementary school but also Cardozo, and Holy Cross, where you completed college, for example.

EPJ: I never had any desire to write about my own life. There are two different entities here. There is my life and there are the stories that I write. If I were using my own life to write fiction, I would have to come up with a whole different spiel about who I am. That's not the case. Besides, I don't have an exciting life, so you are always surprised when people want to know what it is.

I am the only person who went to college in my family. It's because of all the things that Wright and people like him did that made it possible for me and others to do what we can today. I remember an incident in the 1980s and it was the twenty-fifth anniversary of the passage of the Civil Rights Bill. I heard an interview with the first black woman who was a mayor of a small Mississippi town.

MEG: Unita Blackwell of Mayersville, Mississippi?

EPJ: That is her. Unita Blackwell! She was talking about the deaths of Cheney, Goodman, and Schwerner. This was an observance of the twenty-fifth anniversary of their murders, I believe, and she happened to be talking about voting. She said, "Every time I pulled that lever I think of them." But every time Tiger Woods swings that club he never thinks about the black people who made it so that he could get there or who made it possible for him to go to Stanford. He thinks he could have got there based on his ability thirty years ago, but that's not the case. I had her words on this little piece of paper that I hung on the kitchen cabinet for years. Those are such magnificent words: "Every time I pull that lever, I think of them."

So I'm not saying I got here based on my own ability. That's only part of it, for I know these people gave their lives. You always think of that.

Today, you see these black people on TV who live for name brands. They are on the daytime shows, talking about the wonderful things they give to their children. They talk about Ralph Lauren, but they never talk about the importance of education. My mother couldn't read or write, and it wasn't anything that she said everyday, but you got this sense that for her being educated was important.

MEG: So where do Edward P. Jones's characters come from? You don't drive, and you take the subway and bus. Do you see people who make you want to talk or write about them? I am asking what the criteria are for making it into an Edward P. Jones's story and how you see your characters.

EPJ: I am not sure I can answer that. I don't get on the bus or subway and have a note pad. I don't think like that. There's a person there and you have to build a story around him or her. We're not talking about real people. But when I grew up even when I didn't have a TV, I was fascinated by televisions that other people had. Then there were movies. Movies helped me to see everything because if you can't really see your characters doing things, if you can't hear them saying things, then chances are maybe the reader will not be able to experience that as well. They don't have to be doing anything spectacular. They can just sit there on the park bench.

MEG: You have some characters from *Lost in the City* that reappear in your latest book *All Aunt Hagar's Children*. You also seem to be giving us endings in that first collection that let us to think about what we might want to see happen beyond the

story. Is this deliberate so that you can return again to a particular character? Does a period really end the story?

EPJ: A period is always a period. There is a beginning, middle, and end. When I finished *Lost in the City*, that was supposed to be the end of it. I had no intention of going back to that. But you don't always know what your mind wants to do. I didn't see life beyond Caesar Matthews running off in the rain in that first story where he appears.

MEG: That would be "Young Lions," from *Lost*, right? You introduce us to a young black teenager going nowhere who experiences first the death of his mother and almost immediately his father kicks him out. This story jumps out at me as the mother of two young black men. The only option once he is kicked out is to go live with the friend he has, a seasoned young criminal who eagerly takes him under his wing and introduces him to the life of the streets. Caesar becomes a parasite preying on other people. I think I can see why you might have wanted to explore Caesar as an older adult.

EPJ: That original story was it for me, but you mature, life does things to people, and it does things to writers as well. If you are open to it, then it comes through the air and it hits you. There you are, in a place you didn't think you would ever be.

MEG: One of the things I notice about your style is that you alternate between back story and front story—to create your narrative. I see it in all of your work so far. This is especially true when you want to show us the characters who are bad and also good. Do you tell a story the way it comes to you?

EPJ: We live in a universe where the bad people are at the center. Somewhere along the way, what you are saying about the good people is going to be informed by what there is to know about the bad. With my mother being born in the South and growing up that way, perhaps this is also something that comes in the blood.

MEG: Let's talk a bit more about how your novel *The Known World* came about.

EPJ: In 1992, after I had published *Lost in the City*, I began thinking of what I would do next and I remember this one-line fact from college that there were black people who owned slaves. I had had a job since 1983 that was rather comfortable. I had all these books about American slavery that I really didn't have the heart to read, and I kept putting it off. In the meantime, I was creating a novel in my head. Then, finally after ten years, I began thinking that maybe I should get down to writing a novel. The job let me go, when I was on vacation. Even if I had kept the job, I think I had written enough in those first two weeks of the five-week vacation that I would have gone on. The world should not think, "Oh, he lost his job and that spurred him on to write a novel."

MEG: In other words, not having a job created near perfect conditions for writing.

EPJ: I was well enough along with the novel, and knew that I had it pretty easy working at home. I knew that it wouldn't be very likely that I'd find an opportunity like that again. So I was desperate to get the book finished and hoped that someone would buy it. I've known what it means to be hungry and without a home and it's not a pretty thing.

MEG: How were you able to make the shift from the contemporary stories in *Lost in the City* to the subject of slavery for *The Known World*? What is the balance there between history and imagination?

EPJ: Somebody said that *The Known World* originated in a story I had come across about a little slave girl who had been battered against the wall. That was after the

fact. That interviewer had misunderstood what I said. What I said was that I was glad I did not see it before the novel because I might have done that.

I don't know what my mindset would have been if I had read all those books about slavery before I started the novel. Maybe I would have toned it down just because even across 200 years, this little girl is still suffering out there somewhere in the universe. I know how I feel about it and I would not have wanted to subject someone else who has the same kind of heart to that kind of thing. Maybe you can get across to people with the hearts that are of the same set by saying it was not the head-banging against the wall day after day that did it, but the whipping on one particular day. And the pain is still there; it doesn't echo for ever and ever.

MEG: Were you concerned about how much pain and brutality could be tolerated in a text? The characters that you talk about in *The Known World* reflect the evil nature of slavery. How are you able to express what some critics are calling such "narrative compassion"?

EPJ: I think it's the sense that for every character you create you have to give them their due. There is a character in *The Known World* who is crippled, for instance, who is the most angelic person in the whole book. You don't have to spend a lot of time on her. Good people come with their own stories because they are not a lot of good people in the world. There are a ton of bad people and you have to explain how they got to the bad part of their lives. That becomes the challenge. Now when I sit down to start writing, I don't think about this.

MEG: Are you saying that people are born bad? What about the view that people are born good and bad comes to them?

EPJ: I do think people are born good and something happens to turn them off the good road. I was just in the Bureau of Records in D. C., and they have a board with about fifteen different languages for which people can get help with translating. Now suppose there's a list of all the people who come to this country and spend time. At the bottom of the list that everyone thinks are the unimportant folk would be black people. That's been the case forever. If those people in New Orleans had been from India or someplace else, that would have been a very different story, we know. Black people have always been dispensable. Suppose a person arrives tomorrow from Pluto, doesn't know anything about our country and looks up at Tiger Woods and says, "This is a black man." But when Tiger talks about who he is, the long list of things that he says that he is, at the very end of that list is his being black. For those of us who don't think that way, there is something that you are probably born with—it's in the blood—because of all of those people who went for hundreds of years in this country as slaves.

MEG: Is there something about contemporary life that motivated your interest in returning to slavery as a subject? What is it you wanted us to see that the short stories could not tell us?

EPJ: It is as if slavery were legal now. Something happened to black people in the '80s. We see it all the time. You can pick out some of the worst rap stars and you know what they would do. . . . You can see it now. It would be one of those BET or MTV music awards. There is a runway outside, red carpet, and since slavery is legal, some guy would show up and there would be a strap, and chains would be connected to black people. He would have a turban on, dressed with all his fine clothes, and gold everywhere, the bling-bling; the gold chains are connected to his ten slaves. Then somebody says, "Silver P," you are looking good tonight."

Then Silver replies, "I got all my niggers here. See Sam here, he cost \$25,000, but he's worth it. He shines shoes like I don't know what."

MEG: Are you saying that we have not been attentive or diligent enough to resist the culture of oppression?

EPJ: What I am saying is that you absorb and become part what is in the culture. Today, the moral make-up is not strong enough. Gus Townsend, the slave father of the character in *The Known World*, had a strong moral makeup. Unfortunately, he wasn't there all the time to give that to his son, Henry, who was raised by someone else.

MEG: Let me push this a little bit further. Something that critics have said about you is especially true in *The Known World*: that your writing is simple but presents very complex characters. It is this tension between a simple story and a complex character that makes your work so powerful.

EPJ: I can't talk about that because the critics do what they do and I have to do what I do. I'm never been one for any fancy words anyway. I read people's work and they get rather complicated, and I don't finish reading them. I mean I tried reading . . . the Chicago writer . . . you know him?

MEG: Leon Forrest?

EPJ: Forrest's one of them. I wanted to like his book, *There Is a Tree More Ancient than Eden*. You don't get better than a title like that. You get to the book, and ask where is the story, where are these people, and what is he doing? Everything in me rebels against that. If these are real human beings imagination-wise, then you can use plain language to tell what they are doing and saying. Isaac Bashevis Singer said, "There is no art to confusing the reader." How plain and simple can you get to the fact that Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water? It's simple and you can see them doing that. One of them has a pail.

MEG: But Edward P. Jones wants to know who Jack is. What is the back story for Jack, Jill?

EPJ: But you can tell about who the people are, and they become complex without ever using complex language. You shouldn't have to use a machete to get there. It's not anything that I ever think about because my sense is always that every single human being is important. Here we are in Union Station, and I've come and gone through this place many times catching trains. The bathrooms, the men's bathroom is a filthy, filthy hole, and I always think about the human beings—most of them Hispanic—who have to clean this. You try to go in there and you try not to have any kids crawl on the floor. Luckily I've never had to use any of the stalls, with all the piss on the floor. You want to be as accurate as possible, pull the lever to have the flush go down and you try not to wet up the floor when you're washing your hands. Luckily they've done away with paper towels so you don't have to worry about tossing them on the floor. . . . I mean, I've never thought about writing a story about someone who had been cleaning a toilet in Union Station . . . but if I did, it would begin with that image. For me the story would probably be set thirty or forty years ago and tells about how this man may have gotten to this point where he is cleaning this toilet out. And, it's never that you think, "Okay, I want to add this and I want to add that," because there's some old lady in Paducah, and if I don't say that she won't be interested. It's always Edward Jones is over there and I have to tell a story so that Edward Jones might want to read the story that I am telling.

MEG: The characters you write about represent such a broad spectrum of people, especially in *The Known World*. Were you conscious of conceiving of the characters there in racial terms? Were you trying to create a balance between the good and the bad people?

EPJ: I was trying to write the story about this one particular person, Henry Townsend, who ended up owning slaves, and I was trying to make it as real as possible. I have this sense of slavery; you have to sort of call it to mind, call it to your heart. But again, I have to emphasize that we're not talking about real people. I've never been attracted to the easy thing—the easy story.

MEG: And it can't be easy to write or read about slavery. How did you manage it?

EPJ: I didn't read a lot of things about slavery *after* I thought of the idea of the book. Everything had come *before* the idea of the novel. All those books on slavery would only have substantiated what you already knew was bad, that black people suffered and that now we have to get on with rest of our lives. So there must have been something else when I sat down and started writing about those people, Henry Townsend and the people of Manchester Country, Virginia.

MEG: Do you a sense of how the public has responded to the book?

EPJ: On tour, I always read one scene from *The Known World*, with the slave Jebediah Dickinson who is owned by a black woman, Cora Nelson. It is short enough and has a beginning, a middle and an end, so that people, for the most part, are taken with it. Then when I take questions, I say, if you *are* taken with it, it's not because it's about a slave and his master, even if they are both black, it's about this sort of interaction between this man and this woman that could have taken place two thousand years ago. It's not a lot that I say there about slavery, but it's about this combative atmosphere between these two people that could occur at any point.

MEG: When you describe your process of writing, you seem to spend a lot more time imagining and creating the story than you do actually writing the story. When you have taught teach creative writing, is this process something you try to translate to your students? How do you teach someone how to imagine, then how to share that in written form?

EPJ: I don't think you can't really do that. It's like teaching a class how to bake a cake. You have a certain idea of a cake that is fine for you with certain ingredients and the major flavor of it, but someone else comes in lacking enough butter or something else, and you have to talk about that. You can't talk about your philosophy of how much butter is enough because even if the amount of butter that you use might be the same amount that they are using it might not be enough for their cake. You have students of every single strength and weakness, and for each one it is different. You don't really teach writing; you just edit it.

MEG: *The Known World* has its share of critics, especially those who say you have let white people off the hook by writing a book about blacks owning slaves.

EPJ: Well, if that had been the case, then I would have gotten all these letters from white people saying thank God, niggers can finally shut up. But in terms of black people, and I've met and heard from a lot of them, not necessarily letter-wise, there are three that I remember. Once when I was on Pacifica Radio here, a guy called in and said whenever you write anything about slaves you must remember to say that most black people who owned slaves bought their own relatives. But he admitted that he hadn't read the book. If he had, he would have found that in the first few pages. About a year later, I was at a book club where he was a member. He had read the book then and apologized.

I was on another radio station in Philadelphia for an hour with commercials. There were two black men who called in. One wondered if they had given me the Pulitzer Prize because they knew I was making it easier on white people. This is how ignorance cuts to the bone. My response was to say that I didn't know anything about why they gave me the prize, but I suggest you ask people in the community,

and he said he thought he would do that. The second guy said something along the same lines, trying to air his laundry out that he shouldn't be letting people see. It was quite obvious from the very beginning neither had read the book. And the second half hour, two black women called in, and they were very complimentary, but they had not read the book either.

MEG: I must ask you the obvious question: how much has your life changed since *The Known World* won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004? What's different for you now?

EPJ: That's the kind of thing that I'm not affected by. There was never any great thing in life that I wanted to begin with. So, you know, I could be sitting there, and it seems like I'm poor because my place doesn't have any furniture, and I could be watching a DVD, and feeling like I'm on top of the world. The picture's quite clear, the sound is coming through, I'm not cold, I'm not overheated; it's a comfortable room, and I'm not hungry. There are billions of people in this world who would kill for that kind of life and I have it. You sort of zone out everything else and say, "This isn't bad." I'm not driving down the street in a Maserati on the California highway.

MEG: I think that is probably part of what is appealing to readers, because you haven't become a "male diva."

EPJ: When Terrence Howard was up for the Academy Award for *Hustle and Flow*, he was asked by *Nightline* if he thought winning the Academy Award would change his life. Howard said that he didn't think so, but then went on to talk about how celebrityhood affects people. His point was that fame and all that comes with it doesn't change a person; it simply unmask them. And it's true.

MEG: Does this mean that the real person comes out?

EPJ: You're a pauper . . . you were that way to begin with and you were an asshole as a pauper, and now you are a bigger asshole!

MEG: William Morrow originally published your first book, but you changed to Amistad for the novel. Why is that?

EPJ: There is the one big company, Harper Collins. They own all of them, including William Morrow. I didn't know this until I had done *The Known World*. Harper Collins is the granddaddy of everybody. If you sent it to the daddy, you essentially sent it to anybody beneath them, Morrow or Amistad.

I thought I would be working with the first editor at William Morrow, but she was someplace else. When that didn't happen, my agent asked me about Amistad, which I had never heard of. He didn't know a whole lot about me at the time and thought I might be reluctant to go with a company that publishes black books for the most part. I told him I was only concerned with getting a number of readers. And so, that is how that happened.

MEG: And they've done very well by you and you by them.

EPJ: Yes, yes, Dawn Davis and her staff have been very, very good to me. This is not always the case. A friend of mine picked a company for her one and only book based upon the fact that the editor she was working with was black. And she has horror stories about that.

I was going on the fact that my agent, Eric Simonoff, knew his business even if he didn't know me; he knew what Dawn Davis was. My friend didn't know what she was dealing with. I would have gone with his decision, whatever he said. My experience in part comes from living in a city with a black mayor, who seems to want to kowtow to every white voter in the city, whose whole thing is to get all the niggers out as quickly as he can. I am perhaps a little more suspicious. I always remember

what the Chinese premier Chou En-Lai in the '70s said, "It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches mice." Why should I go to a black person just because he is black? We've seen in the last thirty to forty years, you can sometimes catch more hell if the person is black. It makes us wonder hearing about Carol Schwartz, a Republican, who has been running for major three or four times. I think to myself, we could not have been in a worse shape if she had been elected mayor! You want to support good black people.

MEG: Do you feel then that you have got the readers that you wanted and along the way maybe some fame and fortune? Surely the Pulitzer Prize made many more audiences aware of you than would have been ordinarily.

EPJ: It's not like Stephen King or John Grisham or whatever. I don't get a lot of money for those prizes. The country is made up of people who don't make these kinds of distinctions. A friend of mine teaches high school English and was in the teacher's lounge in the high school. She spoke to one of the science teachers there who had no idea what the Pulitzer Prize was, after she told him she had a friend who had won it. To be a science teacher you at least have to have a bachelor's degree. If you are talking about people beneath that, there is probably even less of this kind of knowledge that goes with it.

I remember when I was at a black bookstore in the Pentagon signing books. There weren't many people who came, but there was this white guy who came in workmen's clothes—construction clothes—and he had me sign his book. Then when I was at Holy Cross to get that honorary degree there was a white guy who put up the chairs and he had me sign his book. He said it was because he liked it where I mentioned Holy Cross in *Lost in the City*. Now that didn't come on the first page. You can only get that after you more than halfway through the book.

MEG: Were you surprised by this?

EPJ: No, what this tells you, especially if you are a minority or something, you try to be as sensitive as you can. Somewhere along the way you learn important lessons. There are those situations like this that come along and remind you all over again that when you come from a people who are misjudged every step of the way, you can't forget what happens in this world. You don't want to misjudge people based on what they look like. I would have expected the science teacher to know something about the Pulitzer Prize, but he did not. I'm glad that the people who read my books do come from someplace else.

MEG: Your most recent book is *Aunt Hagar's Children*, and you're now on your second round of book tours. The title of the first collection clearly points to the setting of your native Washington, D. C. Where did the title for this second collection come from, *All Aunt Hagar's Children*?

EPJ: Ninety-nine point-nine percent of the people in the book are black people, and they are all Aunt Hagar's children. It isn't derogatory, just another name for black people. It was one of my mother's phrases she got from someplace. One of the things I have been saying for more than twenty years that I got from her is "that's too much like right." She would use it to refer to the way, for example, the city government is too stupid to put a street light in a location that makes it easier for people to cross, especially children, even after people have got killed. She would say they didn't do it because "it's too much like right." The other day I was listening to Shirley Grossman comment on an interview on the "Tavis Smiley Show" and Grossman repeated Tavis Smiley's words, "As my grandmother would say, it's too much like right," which I hadn't heard anyone say in a long time. One can go on for years and years living in one part of the universe and then someone living on the

other part of the universe says or does something that connects you because you have this history. The book is a connection to this kind of history for me.

MEG: I do think that the volume is different from your first collection of stories. There is so much of it that is familiar, the sayings that carry over from generation to generation. These expressions made their way to Washington and other points North and are well preserved. You grew up in the city. Why do you feel so connected to this other kind of history?

EPJ: I have spent less than a month in North Carolina and all my life in D. C. Ninety percent of what I remember and use in this work has to do with my mother and the other ten percent comes from the people I knew when I was growing up who were adults born and raised in the South. They brought all that they knew and what they did and what they learned in the South to Washington. That first generation coming up from the South lived in a different world. When Hillary Clinton writes a book entitled *It Takes a Village*, she has just come to this very late. Black people were already doing that for their kids. All the adults in the neighborhood felt a responsibility for all the children. All of that is dead now.

MEG: If you didn't spend a lot of time in North Carolina and you'd never been to Alabama or anyplace else in the South, how did you know what you could trust when you need to visualize a setting, for example, in a place like Choctaw, Alabama, one of your fictional towns? What was your intention with this second collection of short stories?

EPJ: It's precisely because I haven't seen those places that I can't offer a whole lot, so it has to come from the imagination. Really, my intention in every single story in *All Aunt Hagar's Children* was to have a black writer I admired somehow represented. I took the name Anne in "Tapestry" from Ann Petry's story "The Darkness of Confusion." In one of the very last lines there are words that go something like . . . whispered into the darkness." In "Spanish in the Morning," I mention that the girl says her father shined those stairs, those steps like a crystal stair.

MEG: . . . an obvious reference to the Hughes's poem "Mother to Son," with the refrain "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. . . ."

EPJ: I was going to do that for all fourteen stories. But even when you devote yourself to that sometimes more than anything else, the character can become more important. So you have to go with the character and sometimes find you can't really shoot for the goal you started with. So I didn't get very far.

MEG: Would it be correct to say that what you do in the new volume, *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, is to separate the people who have had moral fiber or sensibility from people who may have lost it? You make a clear distinction in those stories. *Lost in the City* doesn't give us this same range.

EPJ: The new stories are a lot longer; they cover a wider range of history, 1901, 1930s, and the 1950s, including the Korean War. I try to give the details so that the reader knows something about the lives of people during these years. At the same time I think you must assume that your reader is pretty intelligent. For example, there was no need for me to say it was 1952 in the Korean War story. It was important enough for me to say it was the Korean War going on. Or in the story set in the 1930s, you see women wearing white gloves and you know it's a far earlier time in our history.

MEG: How do you decide when you are going to use first person or third person? "First Day" and "Spanish in the Morning" stand out as first person stories, because they are so few of them.

EPJ: When I wrote *Lost in the City*, the people in the story determined that. I don't often write in first person, but sometimes the staged scene seems to be a first person story, like "The First Day" and "The Store," the second and the fifth stories in that book. Those are the only ones. As I put together *All Aunt Hagar's Children*, I followed the same model. The second story and fifth stories in *Hagar* are both first person.

MEG: And here you continue to use your strategy that we referred to as "back story." The stories represent a kind of retrospective narrative; you look at things that happen before some of the things that happened in *Lost*. In a sense, you are filling in what those lives came to, because we have already been told the result of their lives. Now we are learning how they came to be. You didn't do that for everybody, which means there are many more people that we met that we continue to have questions about. How did this life—how did that one—happen?

EPJ: I had wanted to have characters wandering in and out of every single story, but you run out of inspiration. You run out of creativity. Then you look at Caesar Matthews and you think what is there good about a guy like that? So I try to show how there is something meaningful to his existence, no matter who he is.

MEG: Perhaps something else Terrence Howard says makes a lot of sense. When he responds to people who criticize him for all the pimp roles that he plays, he tells them that it may be a dirty job and somebody's got to do it. But more importantly he suggests that you can't see these pimp roles as throwaway roles. You can bring a certain amount of dignity for these are people too. You seem to share this view.

EPJ: I've always felt you have to show the fullness of people. One of stories in my first book, "The Sunday Following Mother's Day," is about a man, Samuel, who in the very first line kills his wife and reduces his two kids to being orphans. He's an awful man because of what he's done. At the very end of it, Madeleine, his daughter, who was not quite four when her father committed the murder, has become a not-so-nice person. He, on the other hand, is seen as being almost being good because once released from prison he only wants to reestablish a relationship with his daughter. In the final scene in the story, he is trying to get his car started while Madeleine is up in her apartment trying to avoid him—trying to will him away.

MEG: So it was important for Caesar to make his reappearance in the story "Old Boys, Old Girls." When we left him in the first story, he has committed an awful crime, where he has proven himself as a successful criminal. He kills people and has done terrible things. Yet at the end of the story, he treats Yvonne with such tenderness; all we know about him that's bad has been transformed.

EPJ: From the very first line in "Old Boys, Old Girls," you know Caesar Matthews has committed two murders and he is not a nice person. You are who you are and then of course you write these things as a storyteller, so you just can't throw in anything helter-skelter. You have to be creative and for me that means that I can't just have this man going on the same path forever. I have to find a way that's logical—a real way, a creative way—to bring him to be something else. It wouldn't appeal to me whatsoever to write a story where it begins: he's killed two people, he's killed four people total, and now he's thinking about number five. When you look at Caesar, you think, despite the depravity of every human being, there is something, some kernel or something there can be saved. It's not that I thought that with every word, but the logic of the story comes to me. I could not just have him go out and kill more people and leave it at that. I wanted to do something that would say something different.

When I was teaching I told students, you begin with a line across the page which is the line of normality, and if the character has fallen far, far below that, you don't necessarily have to get the character back to the line of normality. You can put him on the path where, at the end of it he sees the light, and the light *is* the line of normality.

What Caesar Mathews does at the end of the story doesn't negate all that stuff that he has done before that. But he is certainly a far, far different human being. He has been estranged from his father for more than twenty years. It's not creative for me to have him fall in the arms of his father. You have to see the movement of the story. Along the way, things have been going on that lead him to the point of throwing a coin up into the air. His decision is whether or not he will walk away from the road leading to his father or walk towards it. If you've been reading the story well enough, when you get to the part about the dead woman Yvonne, then you know how the coin will fall. You shouldn't have to wait around and say well, the story ended; he should have told me how the coin ended up on this man's hand. If you don't know by then, then it's all lost. You know there are tons of things that have begun to happen that have never happened to him before. There is the line in there that I'm always very proud of, at the end of the night of cleaning up this filthy room, when he opens up the window and the wind comes in. It reads, "and one thing came to him: he was not a young man anymore." These kinds of transformations don't happen with all the characters, but it is with this one.

MEG: Is this an epiphany for him?

EPJ: No, I think the epiphany comes at the very first moment when he discovers the dead woman laying there in a bed, hours before, and he has done a tiny bit of the straightening up. Walking out he turns and thinks that it was not enough. He suddenly realizes that people would come in the morning, they would see her lying there dead, and they would not know all the nice things that he knew about her.

MEG: Let me take a line from one of your interviews where you say that you think by telling these little lies—stories are in fact lies—you want people to get a bigger sense of the truth. Do you find yourself really stretching the truth to get your point across? You do it this in "The Devil Swims across the Anacostia." This is a very different kind of story for you, one where you explore supernatural phenomena.

EPJ: It's a story about a woman who is not satisfied with the good life that she has, she's always thinking that grass is greener and all that. She's attracted to surface things.

MEG: This would be the character LaVerne, who moved to Anacostia, so that people could say glorious things about her. She's ostentatious; one of her concerns is that because she is pregnant again, the old maternity clothes are now out of style. Her shallowness comes through clearly. It is the devil who shows himself to her as real.

EPJ: Yes. I couldn't do this if I didn't know, for example, that black people believe the devil walks about like that. When I grew up, a friend of my mother's, Miss Lucille, was pretty old and isn't alive anymore, but she never believed that men walked on the moon. She would say God wouldn't allow them to do that. I'm sure when that happened a lot of people believed that. If you are writing about a people who believe that kind of thing, then you have to tell it like some of those people who believe. That if some of those people believe that you could be walking in the supermarket and the devil could walk up to you, then that's it. You can't write it as if this was some weird happening.

MEG: Are you saying that you have extended your notion of the real for people whose reality is that broad?

EPJ: When the devil walks up to her, it's not that the lights get bright and the music goes up, along with the sound and everything else. That's just her life.

MEG: . . . because people believe the devil has that kind of power, as in "the devil made you do it," even though it became a joke phrase? But when people blame something you have done on the devil, they are quite serious.

EPJ: The phrase had to have a beginning somewhere. In that story about the only things that one might consider odd is why all of all those things were happening to her, like the walking on water. There are people in life that feel as if they don't know it, and all of a sudden something happens to make them realize they are a part of this sorority of people. You must learn what it is these people teach you who have passed on. It always happens that way, and the only thing you can do is to remember the people who went away. That's the only way they can continue to live.

MEG: What about the other stories that are not about D. C.? They all seem to give us a perspective on the world. For example, there's the story set during the Korean War.

EPJ: The main character's in Korea the entire time, even though his people come to see him from D. C.

MEG: And in "A Poor Guatemalan Dreams of a Downtown in Peru," you bring an entirely different perspective in a whole other part of the world. Is this D. C. extended to the world?

EPJ: In that story, you remember the first experience is with the little girl in a church in D. C. The woman with the paintings and everything has already come to realize certain things at eight that Arlene didn't realize until she was in her fifties. The little girl will in turn realize them perhaps before she is fifteen.

MEG: She is the fulfillment, the carrying on of a tradition, because Arlene mentors her.

EPJ: Although they are essentially two different characters, there is something that connects them from Guatemala to D. C.

MEG: What about the way you portray your male characters. You seem to be especially sensitive to some of the male characters, especially in the "In the Blink of God's Eye," where Aubry and his father have a special bond. Here you reverse the common perception; it is the mother who is a bad person, and the father who is the good character.

EPJ: You try to create the totality of the universe. If all the fathers are bad, you know, how would that look? Even though you yourself have never experienced that, you just imagine somebody else.

MEG: The ability to look at the other side of things, to extend what you know—is this what you are aiming for? This seems to defy the notion that people write what they know best.

EPJ: I don't believe—that's a lot of crap—that people write what they know. I never was a slave.

MEG: A more important task here seems to be to demystify the notion of the South that many people have. We begin with the idyllic and pastoral South, but the mother in the story just leaves the farm and says she's going down the road a spell never to return. What some people *think* the South is like is challenged here. You don't romanticize it, which some contemporary writers do when they champion and speak for the South.

I'd like to ask you if you revise your stories after they have appeared in print. Does this come from a desire to continue to improve what you've already written and published? "Adam Robinson Acquires Grandparents and a Little Sister" appeared earlier at simply "Adam Robinson." Does the name change signal a change in the story itself?

EPJ: "First Day" I cut after it had appeared in *Callaloo* in a different form. When I published "Adam Robinson" in the *New Yorker*, the title was originally "Adam

Robinson Acquires Some Grandparents and a Little Sister.” I think they were trying to be kind, without stepping on my toes when they told me they couldn’t really fit that title in. So I suggested simply “Adam Robinson.” But when I came out with the book, I realized that “some” looked rather foolish in the title, so it became “acquires grandparents and a little sister” and that was it.

MEG: Of all the stories, I think, that one probably resonates with a lot of people. So many elderly people are having to take care of their grandchildren now. They’re losing their daughters and their sons to drugs and death and whatever, requiring grandparents to become parents again.

EPJ: The idea came to me about ten years or so ago, before a lot of this starting coming out in the papers. After the story had already taken form in my head, there was an article around 1999 on the front page of the *New York Times*. Then about two years ago, there was a story in the Metro section in the *Washington Post* about a grandmother who had to take her grandkids and find a new place to live. Trying to do one new story for every story event in *Lost*, I had to ask myself what to do about the story “His Mother’s House.” I looked at all the characters and finally the little boy showed up and I said well, he was such a sad being there. What worse thing can you have than your mother taking you to a stranger’s house then leaving you altogether. I wanted to somehow help the kids, knowing I had to come up with something credible, something that was feasible. You look around the universe of people in that person’s life and Joyce, the children’s mother, couldn’t come back. That wouldn’t be possible. The only logical thing was to have the grandparents step in.

MEG: But you have been able to maintain your focus on the D. C. area, as your geographical center, not unlike what Faulkner did for his fictional Yoknapatawpha, and John Wideman for Philadelphia.

EPJ: I don’t know why they have to put something on it, I mean everybody’s regional in the end.

MEG: Do you see any of these people in your short stories as novel material? Are you partial to a particular form?

EPJ: I haven’t written enough to say what my favorite form is. However, you do come to the end of a short story much quicker. There is a bigger world in a novel you can develop. You can’t really let yourself go too much in a short story. You have certain confines, particularly number of pages and sometimes the number of characters. While I don’t think I see my stories as novels, I’d say that I write novelistically to give the reader the feeling that you have the fullness of a novel rather than a short story.

MEG: There are three women who really stand out in the three books: Alice in *The Known World*, Marie in the title story “Lost in the City,” and Anne Perry in “Tapestry,” the final story in the new collection. Why are these women so strategically placed? Equally important is what they are doing as women. They all seem to be some kind of artist; at least there are two artists and one storyteller. Is that deliberate on your part?

EPJ: There are things I do deliberately, but that wasn’t one of them. There’s only two ways to go for a character, a man or a woman! It’s not like a thousand choices, you know. Marie’s not any sort of artist, really, I mean she tells her own stories in the tapes. I never thought that Marie was taking over the storytelling function in that story; I was not conscious of this. I shoot for what ever it is that will help the readers see the story.

When I was thinking about “Tapestry,” I wanted to have a way of leading the reader. The first line reads, “Were it not for the sleeping car porter she might well

have grown old there.” That tells you there are only two things that could have happened. He would have killed her and they would have gone on to their life together. There are things all the way through that tell you that she ended up in Washington. So while it may come as a bit of a surprise at the end when I write about all the years she spent in Washington, it is not a surprise to anyone who had been reading closely all the way through.

In the story in *Lost* called “Who Killed Rhonda Ferguson,” Rhonda figures in briefly in the beginning and then at the very end. I deliberately added a title like that because I didn’t want her murder to come as a surprise at the end. The story is not essentially about her, it is about those girls. I’m not above telling you the most dramatic things because sometimes the portrait you have is of the family right there in the center. Sometimes the real story is in the minor characters to the side and in the back.

MEG: One of the things that Ralph Ellison had said, and I paraphrase him here is that you can’t choose your ancestors, but you can choose your relatives. Is this an important distinction for you?

EPJ: Well, I don’t know who would have been the E. Lynn Harris of fifty years ago. I’ve never read anything by them, so I don’t know if he would be a *relative* or an *ancestor*. And there’s Terry McMillan, who has made a lot of money. If I knew how to write a book that would make me a lot of money like that, I certainly would be her *relative*, but I don’t.

MEG: Do you feel under any pressure to produce? You published your second short story collection last August, three years after *The Known World*. There were ten years between your first and second books. Are you on schedule with your plans for more writing?

EPJ: The short story collection was delayed and delayed . . . a year and a half. . . . I have completed that contract for two books and don’t have any other ideas for anything right now. The book tour takes a lot out of a person. You really can’t start writing until you sit down and have a long span of time where you don’t have to worry about the plane to catch in two days. I also agreed to edit a collection of new writing and completed that. The paperback for *Hagar* has just come out well.

MEG: But even while you are not writing, there must be stories jelling in your mind. Do you think that you will continue to focus your writing on the “way we were” and the “way we are”? With two stories now on Caesar Matthews, there must be another one waiting to be written.

EPJ: I have thought about it, and the only thing I’ve come up with is his sitting on the steps waiting for his father to come home. Beyond that I’m not sure. I know there wouldn’t be any sort of drag-down-fight and everything because they’re both older and they don’t want to do that. But I think when his brother or sisters say that, more than anything, you know, their father, who put him out, regrets not having him around, they’re being honest with Caesar.

MEG: Are you going for a trilogy? The Caesar character is not the only thing that connects the two volumes. In terms of historical setting, you have gone from the contemporary period back to slavery. This means we are all waiting to see which of your characters will make another appearance in a third volume.

EPJ: The first story in *Lost*, “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons,” tells about a guy who started out life hanging from the tree. He is the barber who gives the girl Betsy Ann two pigeons. The story says he’s living in a house with his mother and father. His mother would be Ruth, and the tension for me was whether it would be Aubry, whom Ruth married in the first story in *Hagar’s Children*, “In the Blink of God’s Eye.” Everything is already there.

I'm a very negative person, and I don't believe things ever really improve very much. In "His Mother's House" from *Lost*, Santiago is selling drugs. I never really come out and say that because the problem wasn't necessarily the fact that this young man was selling drugs. It was the abdication by his mother, Joyce, from her responsibility as a parent. And so, 500 years ago, a young man like that would have gone down the wrong path but it would not have been drugs. One thousand years from now, it might be the same case, but it probably won't be drugs.

MEG: Do you have any particular advice for students considering becoming a writer? Given the proliferation of MFA programs, we are expanding the market for writers. An article in the *New York Times Review of Books* (30 July 2006) by Madison Marvell said pointedly that "There's more of them (meaning writers) that the economy can afford. . . ." So is the problem here one of over-production of writers, and not enough people reading and publishers publishing?

EPJ: From my perspective, it doesn't appear that the number of publishers has increased along with the number of MFA students coming out of these schools. Nobody is telling these students this fact. It doesn't seem to be like the nursing field . . . you hear all the time they need nurses, and we aren't out there creating nursing schools. *That would be too much like right. . . .*

MEG: Is it the star status associated with writing that lies behind the growing movement to develop more writers professionally?

EPJ: I don't know. That doesn't appeal to me. Perhaps people think it is easy to do, but people have always thought that. When I went to the University of Virginia, it never once crossed my mind that "I'm in this program and automatically something good will happen."

MEG: You just thought you would get a better job, right?

EPJ: Yes, rather than, you know, going back to being a janitor, and having to sweep those four floors of the public school, I could be able to just sweep one floor . . . and maybe do some writing. That was my thing, you know.

MEG: Sort of like it was for people during the WPA? Today's MFA is a good way to get a job that pays you a little bit of a good decent income while allowing you to have most of your time to do something else you want to do. Not many jobs allowed you to do that, which is why everybody wanted a WPA job. Today, many people turn to the MFA as that option.

EPJ: Yes, that was a good deal, but there was a method behind that.

MEG: Would you care to discuss your current project?

EPJ: Now that the paperback is out, I have been on another round of book tours. I am also the guest editor for the annual anthology, *New Stories from the South: 2007* (Algonquin Books). One of the stories I remember is by a black woman who was once a Jehovah's Witness. She tells a simple story, quite powerful, it's all about character.

That's the central thing of literature for me. I suppose that's why the creative part of my poor old brain keeps telling me I don't need to read all the books and do all the research if the characters are front and center. You can read and have all the wonderful trappings of research there, but you know, you can put a nice dress on the pig but it's still gonna be a pig.