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# "... trying to find out how to balance tragedy and comedy": an Interview with Lisa Alther

Alice Clark, Sarah Delmas, Nicole Moulinoux, Gérald Préher and Frédérique Spill

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- 1 Born in Tennessee, Lisa Alther is not a typical Southern writer. After leaving the South for her studies, she spent several years in the North and in various foreign countries like France which she used as the backdrop for her 1995 novel *Five Minutes in Heaven*. She has written six novels, a memoir and a narrative history, *Blood Feud: The Hatfields and the McCoys: The Epic Story of Murder and Vengeance* (2012). Recently, she and her long-standing friend, French artist Françoise Gilot, have brought out *About Women: Conversations between a Writer and a Painter* (2015), inspired by Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell's artistic relationship. The volume is a composite memoir that includes pictures and reminiscences, helping the readers get a sense of the importance of both Alther's and Gilot's backgrounds in the shaping of their artistry. The collection *Stormy Weather and Other Stories* published in 2012 reflects Alther's interest in place, the stories being set in the South, in the North, but also abroad. It shows her interest in human interactions and in matters of the heart. She constantly questions the stability of her characters' identities, be they sexual or national, and thus deconstructs American mythologies. The interview was conducted in Lille on June 20, 2013.

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- 2 Gérald Préher: Lisa, we are very happy to welcome you in Lille.
- 3 Lisa Alther: Thank you. I'm happy to be here.
- 4 Gérald Préher: ... and happy to say that your collection of stories, *Stormy Weather* is out—at last because we've talked about it for quite a while before it was released.
- 5 Lisa Alther: Yeah.

6 Gérald Préher: I saw the drafts of the stories long ago and I'm glad to see them in print together with a couple new ones.

Today there are a few people around the table: Alice Clark, from the Université de Nantes; Sarah Delmas, who is a student here in Lille; Frédérique Spill, who is a Faulkner specialist and has read all your stories—she teaches in Amiens; Nicole Moulinoux, who is the President of the Faulkner foundation in Rennes and a specialist of Southern literature.

I will let them start with their questions—Frédérique, maybe?

7 Frédérique Spill: I don't mind, sure, thank you Gérald. It is an honor, Lisa, to be here with you and be able to ask you questions. Except for the novella, *Birdman and the Dancer*, all the stories collected in *Stormy Weather* were previously published over more than two decades: in what respect do they reflect your evolution as a writer?

8 Lisa Alther: Good question. Actually two others weren't published. One was "God's Country" and the other was "Grassy Top"—but they very much do reflect my evolution. I decided I had these stories—I hadn't done anything with any of them—and I decided to go through them all and pick out my favorites and do a slim volume and, so, once I picked out my favorites, just by chance it turned out that, I think, five were set in the South where I grew up and lived until I was eighteen and went to college in the North; and then four were set in Vermont where I spent my young adulthood and raised my daughter; and two stories and the long novella were set in New York where I lived in the 1990s. So they reflected my trajectory and my own life but also my stylistic changes. I think the Southern stories were Southern stories in that they had a lot nature imagery and were mostly concerned with god and death—as Southern fiction tends to be (laughs). The Vermont stories were set during the seventies when it was the back to the land movement in Vermont. There were 250 communes, and those stories were about the people and politics of that time and place. In New York every man is an island (laughs). People are very much into their work. You make a date three weeks in advance and then they cancel. So you're on your own, and those stories are about looking inward to try to find meaning. So they do, I think, reflect my evolution as a person and also as a writer.

9 Gérald Préher: Some of the characters in the Southern stories actually reappear in the Northern stories—"Squeamish" and "Wedding Belles" for instance with Winston—giving the impression that *Stormy Weather* is a short story cycle though a broken one. We have the first four stories about the South and the next six set in the North. I was wondering if you had envisioned a novel that didn't really work out—you had bits and pieces but couldn't see any driving force.

10 Lisa Alther: Well, that's the other thing that surprised me when I picked my favorites. I went back and I saw that they were somewhat linked. You know, a minor character in one story would appear as a major character in another one and I realized it was probably my own attempt to bring the pieces of myself together into a coherent narrative. My mother was a Yankee from upstate New York, and my father was from Southwest Virginia. So in my household as I was growing up life was a constant Civil War (laughs). Those cultures really are so different—Northerners are much cooler emotionally than Southerners. There's so much violence in the South and in Southerners, whereas Northerners are more intellectual. And this was going on between my mother and father all the time. So I contain both cultures, but it's been a very uneasy alliance, until recently. I think I've sort of come to terms and feel more at peace with it, but I guess I was trying to work that out through those stories and through taking Southerners and putting them in the North,

having minor characters become major characters. It was a surprise to me, really, to realize there was a certain very loose coherence.

- 11 Gérald Préher: It's not that loose! It's nice to see the evolution from "Squeamish" to "Wedding Belles"—it takes another story to get the story, another story to find the key that unlocks the first one. So there is a structure, the collection is a kind of echo chamber.
- 12 Lisa Alther: Well, thank you. It was actually more an intuitive than a conscious structuring. I mean I don't think I even realized until I put them all together that I had taken Winston, who had been a child in the South, and made him a character in the North during the back to the land movement. I was looking at it thinking, "Oh my god, it's the same character."
- 13 Gérald Préher: Initially he was not named in "Squeamish"—in the drafts you sent me his name never appears, he is just referred to as "Son" by his father—working from those earlier versions I was surprised to see he was Winston in the book.
- 14 Lisa Alther: Surprise!  
In terms of your question about whether the stories were a novel that didn't quite work, different people have asked me, "Why don't you write a novel using those characters—particularly that Jessie character?" I think basically I'm not really a short story writer. I have more of a novelist's temperament in that once I write a short story, I want to know more about the characters and who their ancestors were and what makes them behave as they do in the present—what happened to them in the past. Short stories, it seems to me, are closer to poems in a way. Every word has to count. You are trying to establish a mood and a sort of single crystalline moment, whereas with a novel you can just ramble on and on. All six of my novels started as short stories that I just couldn't stop writing. So in a sense, I guess these short stories were short stories that didn't become novels, but that, taken together, almost are a novel, which is really odd to me.
- 15 Gérald Préher: Going through your books I realized there was a slight change in the presentation of your novels. The early ones include titles for chapters and sections while *Other Women* does not. *Five Minutes in Heaven* is divided into titled parts but the chapters only have numbers. I was wondering if this can be seen as an illustration of what you are saying—the novels started as short stories. I feel that some chapters in *Kinflicks*, *Original Sins* and *Bedrock* could be read as short stories. Like the *Stormy Weather* stories, it is once they have been put/are read together that the overall design is made clear. But they do have individual strength...
- 16 Lisa Alther: I wasn't aware of the point you make about chapter titles vs. numbers. Very interesting observation. It wasn't deliberate on my part, but I think I could very well support the explanation you propose. Thanks for opening my eyes to my own work!
- 17 Gérald Préher: Well, you're welcome! Why were some of your stories left out of *Stormy Weather*—"Silver Moon Bay" for instance? How did you select the stories and decided on a title for the collection?
- 18 Lisa Alther: "Silver Moon Bay" just didn't make the cut for me. I was never entirely happy with that story because I originally wrote it as a script for a graphic novel that never got published. I always preferred the unpublished script to the story I adapted from it. As I say, I selected the stories I liked best. I picked "Stormy Weather" as the title because I liked that story and I liked the title song that appears in it, and because many of the stories embody a kind of psychic turmoil.

- 19 Alice Clark: Lisa, thank you. I'd like to go back to a point you've just elucidated, an interesting biographical point, which also has implications on your writing, which is your "uneasy alliance" with the South and the North. And coming from the South myself, I can identify with that, with many of your short stories from "Squeamish," with the horseback riding, the foxhunt, these sort of rituals. My question goes to your "uneasy alliance"—does it translate somehow in the uneasy alliance between nature, animals and humankind? I'll give you a couple of examples: in "Squeamish," the horse dies in a deplorable way; in "The Fox Hunt," Julius, the hunting dog is sacrificed, in "The Eye of the Lord," Curious the cat dies with the bird—he gets attacked and then they both die.
- 20 Gérald Préher: Curiosity killed the cat! (laughs)
- 21 Alice Clark: exactly... but curiosity brought him back... and lastly in *Birdman and the Dancer*, which is a larger much developed story or novella, we have the reference to the gull smashing into a New York window. So that's just something that crystallizes as a leitmotiv in my mind. I don't know what meaning is there but there seems to be an uneasy alliance between mankind, civilization and nature.
- 22 Lisa Alther: That's an interesting point but unconscious. I never realized that until you pointed it out right now. And I really don't know what to make of it. Well, the South was primarily rural, and then after the Civil War, the North brought industry to the South, and our town was an industrial base for Northern industry. So in that sense capitalism collided with a somewhat primitive rural community, and I think that's always in the back of my mind. Industry brought prosperity, but it also damaged the environment and destroyed local traditions. East Tennessee is very rural, our biggest city is probably Knoxville, and the reason I love Vermont so much is that it is really very similar to East Tennessee. It's rural and the lay of the land is the same. The mountains aren't as high as in Tennessee, and they're covered with snow half the year. But when my Tennessee friends come up there, they say, "Oh my God! It's East Tennessee!" The local people are very similar. They're not as rambunctious as Southerners but they have this wry comic sense of humor, and they're tied to the land, and they're spiritual. They ask questions about the meaning of life, and they find the answers sometimes in nature, the way East Tennessee people do. So I felt right at home, right away. But then I moved to New York City—and during that time I was also living a lot in Paris—so that was my immersion in urban life, and I think that's probably what I was struggling with in *Birdman and the Dancer*. So your point about the gull's crashing into the glass and steel building makes sense, Alice—the animal world colliding with the urban world. That's what I was doing at that time.
- 23 Alice Clark: And these expressions linked to bonding, bonds and bondage. It is sort of ironic that the protagonists are seeking a bond, to bond with someone. And this duality of bondage that I thought was interesting.
- 24 Lisa Alther: Trying to bond without having it turn into bondage.
- 25 Alice Clark: Seems to be a leitmotiv in your writing. That was my question. A second question.
- 26 Lisa Alther: This is like a therapy session! (laughs)
- 27 Alice Clark: Alright, I'll stop there then! (laughs)
- 28 Lisa Alther: No, I like it. It's very nice. As long as I don't get charged at the end! (laughs)
- 29 Alice Clark: No, no. It's only intuitive, I don't know...

- 30 Lisa Alther: I had a very domineering father who, I felt, really made my mother's life a misery. So I think in my own life I've always been trying to find a way to be with someone without having it turn me into a slave.
- 31 Alice Clark: It is a problem for a lot of people, I think, especially in the South which is very conservative.
- 32 Nicole Moulinoux: Quite a challenge.
- 33 Lisa Alther: It's weird because on the surface, Southern culture is a very male dominated culture. Men are coddled and taken care of. But behind the scenes there are these women of steel, you know, like my grandmother, and you realize that they are running things, but they're giving men the illusion that the men are in charge. It seems to be what happens in a lot of cultures that have been crushed, in which the men had been disempowered, in a sense—like in Jewish culture the women are so strong, and in Native American cultures also, and in the African American culture. The men have been cut off at the knees by historical events so the women have had to take on strong roles.
- 34 Alice Clark: And your characters, do they reflect that in your writing?
- 35 Lisa Alther: I don't know.
- 36 Gérald Préher: They do, they do. You have strong women, don't you?
- 37 Lisa Alther: Do I, I don't know?
- 38 Gérald Préher: The women make decisions in the stories, men hardly ever do. Frédérique could also talk about that—the endings, when we feel that the woman has won the game.
- 39 Frédérique Spill: Yes, it's no quite clear though. I mean, the endings are quite inconclusive or elusive: some stories stop very abruptly, almost in midsentence. So I wouldn't be that sure. (laughs)
- 40 Gérald Préher: In some of them, I felt it was all about the power of women.
- 41 Lisa Alther: In *Birdman and the Dancer*, she is sinking in the well, and he is going off in the desert; it appears she's lost. But then this rope reaches down and she is starting to be pulled up—but you don't actually know what will happen when she hits the surface. (laughs)
- 42 Gérald Préher: Well at the end of "The Architect of Utopia," Camilla tells Aaron that she does not need him anymore.
- 43 Frédérique Spill: Yeah, that's right.
- 44 Gérald Préher: And if I remember correctly in "Encounter," the woman ends up not sleeping with the man so there too a decision is made...
- 45 Lisa Alther: Yeah.
- 46 Gérald Préher: So...
- 47 Alice Clark: In *Birdman and the Dancer*, starting out with Penny, she seems to be ironically related to all the mercantilism her husband is trying to escape. I thought it funny that you named her Penny—I don't know if you did that intentionally to associate her with everything he is trying to get away from and thence did. He ends up with the dancer who seems to be a figure of fantasy more than carnal reality. And the dancer, at the end of the story, is contemplating all the bad decisions of her recent past: "*finally she shrugged off the sodden robe that was dragging her under. Reaching up, she seized the rope, and felt the slack disappear.*" So this seems to be a woman who is empowered. On the other hand, what

happens with Kostas who doesn't seem to have had that fate although he was seeking it very adamantly....

- 48 Lisa Alther: He was unable to give up control enough. He saw bonding as bondage...
- 49 Frédérique Spill: Penny is a wonderful name for this character because she is an old American woman and at the same time she is Penelope, isn't she? She is waiting for Odysseus.
- 50 Lisa Alther: Yeah.
- 51 Frédérique Spill: The strength of that name is really compelling.
- 52 Lisa Alther: I did plan that—Penelope. Thanks for noticing!
- 53 Gérald Préher: So what would you say about myth in your stories? I felt that you were deconstructing myth rather than writing about myth—questioning myth and myth related to masculinity by putting the emphasis on gender issues most of the time. It is probably more about American mythology than about Southern mythology. You seem to be questioning American identity more than you are dealing with Penelope and Ulysses but—
- 54 Alice Clark: That's my feeling as well.
- 55 Lisa Alther: As I said, so much of it is intuitive for me that it's hard for me to say what I'm doing exactly. I guess if I could have said it in words then I wouldn't have needed to write the story. So in other words I was writing this story to try and figure out what I wanted to say or what I actually thought. And so I'm not writing stories just to write stories but rather because I'm trying to figure out my own identity, which means figuring out what it means to be American, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be gay. All of those things I keep struggling with.
- 56 Alice Clark: Is exploring myth a process which allows you to go into that personal quest because myth is a quest...?
- 57 Lisa Alther: Well, yeah. It seems to me that myths, the ones that have survived down to our time, are ones that have helped other people answer those kinds of questions. I've tried looking at a bunch of them to see if any of them will fit. Will they fit contemporary American women? Or do we have to create a new myth?
- 58 Alice Clark: It's not an easy one if we start with Penelope who's waiting for... (laughs). But who would those women be in myth, if any of them come to your mind that you would identify with?
- 59 Lisa Alther: There are certainly some fierce women in myths. I can think of one but it's not really a positive role model I guess. I'm good friends with the painter Françoise Gilot,<sup>1</sup> and she did a painting that I now own of Daphne. It's this magnificent painting, it's huge. I have it in my apartment in New York. Apollo was pursuing her to rape her, and so she rooted herself and turned into a tree. So the painting is somewhere between figurative and abstract, as her arms are shooting up and turning into branches. It's an immensely powerful image of a woman able to evade rape and domination—but at what price, you know? That of being rooted and going back to nature, but then she's rooted, so what happens next?
- 60 Alice Clark: So in many ways it's a complex question. There are too many female figures to turn to in mythology. The stories but maybe not the female stereotypes or whatever you want to call them that would feed into your personal quest. How do you use

mythology? Does it surface in your writing? It certainly does with Kostas in *Birdman and the Dancer* and it is mainly through male figures, it seems—they're Greek, the Greek males. And the female who comes in is, she seems more like a fantasy than anything, she is not rooted in any specific historical period or mythological period.

61 Lisa Alther: I think about those years in the 1990s when I was living in France and what I learned about French women. I may be wrong about this, and it may be just a myth that I've totally made up, but French women seem to me more powerful than American women. They didn't get the right to vote until 1946, but in personal relations, it seems to me as though they sort of run the show. Though this may be just another myth.

It does seem to me an awfully heavy role to bear. You have to be able to be beautiful and well-dressed, and cook well and be a fantastic lover. That's the myth we have in America! (laughs)

62 Alice Clark: Keep it! (laughs)

63 Lisa Alther: In *Birdman and the Dancer*, I was quite intrigued by that idea that it's lack that breeds desire. You know, as long as Kostas can't have this woman, he wants her. And she knows it and holds him off, so he keeps coming around until finally he gets fed up and tries to kill her.

64 Alice Clark: And this was inspired by your observation of French women, indirectly?

65 Lisa Alther: Yeah and I was reading a lot, too—Lacan and Derrida and...

66 Frédérique Spill: More generally, *Stormy Weather* shows a plurality of approaches or genres, ranging from comedy to magic realism through (melo)drama. It also seems that the South takes a plural rather than a singular form in the stories, reaching as far as Homer's Ancient Greece. Your *Birdman* also contains beautiful echoes to Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Is that pluralization of the South a notion that is deliberate?

67 Lisa Alther: That's a very interesting point. No, it wasn't deliberate. But over the course of my writing career, I've come to realize that the qualities I used to think of as uniquely Southern are in some cases shared by other countries in Southern latitudes. I've had to do some thinking about the extent to which climate and its exigencies determine the psychic make-ups of populations.

68 Frédérique Spill: Most of your stories reveal a rather critical, let alone rebellious, attitude toward the institution of marriage. The conventions, traditions, obligations and inescapable deteriorations characterizing marital relationships are thoroughly anatomized in your book; their essential hypocrisy is thus revealed, while it seems that your characters are much more likely to be happy when emancipated from that bond. Could you comment on / react to this?

69 Lisa Alther: Many of the marriages I witnessed growing up seemed to me to stifle the women involved, including that of my own parents. So I was always a bit wary of that institution. My own marriage ended in divorce but was fairly successful in that we produced a wonderful daughter and had a lot of fun. Now I'm in a long-term relationship with a woman, but we don't feel much interest in marriage since we've both already done that with men.

70 Gérald Préher: How much of you, then, is there in the stories? I was a bit intrigued at times to find a similar situation in a story and in an essay that you had written about yourself...

71 Lisa Alther: Oh...



72 Alice Clark: That's devilish.

73 Lisa Alther: Yeah—it is...

74 Gérald Préher: It's the Sunshine rooms that are mentioned in "Encounter," the Montreal story. But is there something of yourself in that story—maybe I shouldn't be asking... I think there is something of you in all the stories but not necessarily as the authorial voice. Maybe you were also staging yourself—"altherizing" your characters—but it probably has to do with what you were saying earlier about figuring out where you are and who you are.

75 Lisa Alther: Well, "the Sunshine rooms" is autobiographical. Early in my career, I was having trouble finding time to write. I had a baby at home, and it was hard for me to have a sustained thought. So finally when she was about two, I persuaded her father that every now and then I could go away for a week or so to Montreal to write. So he agreed to this. He worked at home too. He was a painter and did advertising but worked at home. So I would go up and stay in the Sunshine rooms in Montreal and do nothing but write and eat and sleep and go out to bookstores and walk through the aisles and see all the books and think, well you know, all these turkeys can write books surely I can. (laughs). So Montreal was my escape place. I was very much immersed in French culture up there too. You know, a third of Vermonters have French Canadian ancestry, so it's got a French flavor to it. And in fact I did have an abortion, and I guess that story was my way of trying to sort out what it meant to me.

76 Gérald Préher: I felt it might be you when I read the story but I wasn't completely sure. I shouldn't have asked a question about that...

77 Lisa Alther: Well, I had one child and was very happy with her. But I thought if I have a second child, I'm never going to write another word. So it was a very cold-hearted decision. I thought I could manage one child, but not two.

78 Gérald Préher: ... and you decided not to sleep with Max...

79 Lisa Alther: That part was fiction.

80 Gérald Préher: And it's your first professional story, isn't it?

81 Lisa Alther: Yes, right. I wanted to go back and sort out why I had done what I did, and what it meant.

82 Alice Clark: So that was the Sunshine rooms, which goes back to your Montreal period. So you moved around quite a lot.

83 Lisa Alther: I have.

84 Alice Clark: And that colors your writing, I mean, indirectly, it seems.

85 Lisa Alther: I also lived in Cincinnati for a while, and I went to school in Boston. I've been very unsettled and nomadic in my life. But if you look at East Tennessee and the mountains, it seems so settled and isolated, but if you really look at the history, people were coming and going all the time. I mean, my ancestors moved every couple of years. So I think it's in my genes.

And also for Americans, you know, most of us are a mix of eight or ten things. What does it mean to be part English, part French, part German, part Dutch, part Irish, part African, part Native American? So some of us are driven to explore all those different branches, to try and find out that you're not really any of them.

- 86 Alice Clark: That's why you came to France and lived in Montmartre as well. Have you written anything in Montmartre?
- 87 Lisa Alther: My fifth novel, *Five Minutes in Heaven*, was about France. I wrote it in Montmartre, yes.
- 88 Alice Clark: So it's, it's got the local color of Paris.
- 89 Lisa Alther: I tried. You see, I think you can't live in a place for a few months or a few years and think that you really have any sense of it. I've always had the feeling that my French novel was my least successful because I just began to scratch the surface.
- 90 Gérald Préher: That's my favorite!
- 91 Lisa Alther: Oh, is it? Thank you for that! I think I'm just looking for an excuse to come back to France. I need to, for my development.
- 92 Gérald Préher: It is really good and it has qualities that Frédérique noted in the stories—especially the cinematic quality.
- 93 Frédérique Spill: Yes, I was about to ask something about that, if I may? I was struck by the fact that some of your stories—especially "Encounter", "Wedding Belles," maybe "Stormy Weather" as well—have a highly cinematic quality. Your talent for writing dialogues, creating an atmosphere and dramatic tension is very compelling. So would you say that you are inspired by the cinema?
- 94 Lisa Alther: Yes. Very much so. When I first started writing, I thought I needed to write each scene so that the reader could picture what I was talking about. I don't know why I thought that, but I decided that that was the kind of fiction that I wanted to write. That may be Southern, that business of setting a scene and putting in a lot of physical details—it tends to occur in most Southern fiction. I also paint, so I have a pretty visual way of perceiving the world. I didn't study writing at school. I just had one course in college, but mainly I learned how to write by reading. When I was growing up in East Tennessee, in school we always studied British literature things like *Julius Caesar*, *Silas Marner* and the Brontës and George Eliot... I managed to convince myself that the red clay hills on my family's farm were moors (laughs); I used to run around them with the son of the local farmer that I was convinced was very much like Heathcliff. One day in the town library, I discovered some Eudora Welty short stories and when I read "Why I Live at the P.O.," it was like this incredible shock of recognition and I thought "I know this town and I know these characters." And that opened the floodgates so I read everything I could find especially McCullers, Welty, O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Faulkner—and that's what I mean when I say they taught me to write. I tried to copy them and tried to learn what I could by the act of reading them. I especially was thrilled to find the women writers of the South because they showed me that women could write and write very well. I soon realized that all these writers were not just writing to tell a story and to entertain themselves or to entertain us. They were using fiction as a way to try to make sense of the world around them and since there was so much in the world around me I didn't understand I thought I would give it a try.
- 95 Frédérique Spill: Have you ever envisaged writing scripts?
- 96 Lisa Alther: People bought the rights to make movies of *Kinflicks* and also *Other Women*. I worked pretty closely on the *Other Women* script. But neither was ever filmed. I enjoyed

that because I love to write dialogue. I've often thought of writing plays, but I haven't done it.

97 Alice Clark: A lot of the writers you've told us about—many of them being Southern women writers—do you find they have a more cinematic, theatrical, visual, sensorial quality?

98 Lisa Alther: Yes, that's my impression. When you're first writing, or first painting, or first doing anything, you try to copy the people you admire, so I decided that what I responded to most were things that appealed to my senses, all the senses, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, seeing. So I tried to flood my own writing with sensual details, to try and make the scene come alive for the readers. I guess that's basically what I still do.

As a writer, you don't want to impose your view on people, so it always seemed to me you needed to give enough details so that the image started to form, and then the readers could complete it the way they wanted to. In that way, if it works, the reader participates in the formation of the story. And that's why sometimes when you're talking to readers they have such different reactions, because they've completed it in their own way, in their own heads. I think it's wonderful that the same story can provoke very different reactions. And I've always had the feeling with reviews that the review was really saying a lot more about the reviewer than it was about what they were reviewing. In some ways it makes it very interesting because you get an insight into that reviewer, you know. Of course if they hate you, it's kind of painful... but then you can blame it on them and say, "Oh, they were just having a bad day that day."

99 Alice Clark: Do you have any Faulkner influences?

100 Lisa Alther: Oh yes, I've read all of Faulkner. And didn't understand half of it, I'm sure (laughs). I studied Faulkner in college. I think I had about a year on him—*Absalom, Absalom!*, *The Sound and the Fury*. Just dazzling. Faulkner blows everybody else out of the water, what can you say? (laughs).

101 Gérald Préher: When did you first start writing?

102 Lisa Alther: Well, my first short story was written when I was sixteen and I'd been reading Faulkner after school. In the fourth grade I had acted in a play in which I was Miss Verb, who was being married by the preacher to Mr. Noun... I had thought that to have a complete sentence you had to have a noun and a verb. But here was this famous writer who sometimes would just put one word and then a period. I thought this was really cool. So I decided I was going to write a story in stream of consciousness. I was an editor on the newspaper and it was the anniversary of Nathan Hale's death—a patriot who was hanged by the British for spying during the American Revolution. And so I wrote my story in stream of consciousness about Nathan Hale in jail looking through the bars of his cell as the British soldiers arrive to take him to the gallows. The leaves were falling and their boots were crushing the leaves, and he was reflecting on the meaning and the brevity of his life: "Leaves falling. Gold and red and green." (laughs). So I turned it in to be published in the paper. When it came out, it was completely rewritten. I marched into the office of the advisor, who was the wife of the local sheriff, and I said: "What's happened to my story? It's been ruined." And she said: "Well, I bet you thought that was pretty good!" And I said: "Well, I didn't think it was so bad that it needed to be rewritten." And she said: "Well let me tell you something, little lady—that story wasn't even written in complete sentences." So she had rewritten it in complete sentences. I said, "Well, I think if you're going to rewrite my story, you should put your name on it, not mine." And she said:

“Well, I think if you’re going to talk to me in that tone of voice, you need to go visit the guidance counselor.” So I was expelled for the afternoon. I was sixteen, and that was my first experience with editors. It was a good lesson to learn, that you have to stand up for your work.

After that I didn’t try to copy Faulkner... because he is too good, I couldn’t begin to copy Faulkner. I think he was just always there in the background. And the other thing I started realizing was that my South, the mountain South, was really very different from Mississippi. The writers that I loved so much, they were writing about the Deep South, and I had a different job. Appalachia is very different. We have 7 % African-Americans in my hometown, versus 50 or 60% in the Deep South.

103 Nicole Moulinoux: It’s a different culture. Do you know of Mary Lee Settle?

104 Lisa Alther: I didn’t know her. She died, didn’t she?

105 Nicole Moulinoux: She died in 2005.

106 Lisa Alther: I didn’t know her, but I read her, and I wrote a review of one of her books, I think. I believe she wrote me to thank me for it. I didn’t discover Mary Lee Settle until well after I was writing, so she wasn’t a big influence on me, although I liked what she wrote a lot. But I don’t know her work well enough to say anything much about it.

107 Nicole Moulinoux: She did a wonderful job, I think. Beautiful literature. Still, I think you might have been more influenced by the Southern Renaissance, the 50s. The names you mention: O’Connor, McCullers, female voices. Writers that had been silenced before.

108 Lisa Alther: That’s what was available in our library at the time. I don’t know if Mary Lee Settle was or not. When I was trying to teach myself to write, those were the books that were available, and I didn’t keep up very well with the more nearly contemporary writers to me because I don’t read very much when I’m writing. It confuses me. It’s kind of like getting static on the radio.

109 Nicole Moulinoux: How do you relate to the voices from the mountains? Have you got link with other contemporary women writers?

110 Lisa Alther: I attend conferences with other women writers from the Appalachians such as Lee Smith. I like her books a lot, but as I say, they weren’t formative for me because they weren’t written at the time I was teaching myself to write. As for non-Southern women writers, I was very close to Doris Lessing, who was a mentor for me.

111 Frédérique Spill: I’d like to return to the South as a region. You seem to derive great pleasure in making fun of the stereotypes traditionally associated with the South. Some of the most comical moments in *Stormy Weather* are related to the characters’ Southern backgrounds or to the sudden emergence of a trueborn Southerner in “Yankeedom.” At the same time, it is true that some of the most tragic moments are also set in the South—for example, Jesse’s recollection of her father’s suicide in the title story. My impression as a reader is that there is no grey zone between those two extremes, in your imagination the weather seems permanently stormy... Does this reveal a conception of the South as a land of excesses and extremities, generating either dramatic or highly comical vignettes?

112 Lisa Alther: Well, I think one of my big memories from my childhood is the weather in the summer. In the mountains, it would be very oppressively hot all day and then right at the end of the day, and in my memory it was almost every day, the clouds would roll in and there’d be these huge dramatic thunderstorms, lightning.

113 Nicole Moulinoux: Impending disaster.

114 Lisa Alther: Yeah, and to me that was emblematic of how people were too. You know, they'd go along and they were very polite, very sweet, very calm and helpful and kind. Then all of the sudden, they'd yell and curse. In fact, the South, statistically, does have a much higher violence rate, murder rate. I tried to address this in *Kinflicks*—tried to find out how to balance tragedy and comedy, because they seem to be present in life in about equal proportions. Throughout my whole career, I've been trying to figure out this question of violence—why does the South have so much violence?

Religion too has something to do with this—not the Episcopalians, but the Baptists, the fundamentalists. Very repressed and extreme. My last book was about the Hatfield—McCoy feud and I was using that book as an excuse to meditate on violence in the South. It's hard to say which came first, whether there was repression because of the code of manners, and then the violence erupts from underneath that polite veneer, or whether the polite veneer is a way to try to keep the violence at bay, because if you didn't have good manners then hell would be going on all the time. It can be a real hornet's nest down there. I think one thing that's bothered me about a lot of the Southern writing tradition is its tendency to make violence a source of comedy. But it's not funny.

My father and grandfather and three of my siblings are physicians. Whenever we thought we had problems as kids, my father would take us to the emergency room to show us what *real* problems look like. (laughs) So we learned that violence is not funny. We saw people who had been shot and knifed and there's nothing funny about it. But it is a source for a lot of Southern humor. So my whole career I've been trying to understand how to deal with violence and what it means and where it comes from.

115 Gérald Préher: You talk about names at some point—people who call their children after hurricanes or various catastrophes... In "The Architect of Utopia," I think.

116 Lisa Alther: Like Thor—the God of thunder... yeah. It's very Southern to try to pick weird names. I have a friend who was a school principal and she told me some of the names at her high school: one was Formica Dinette. Another was Beaupeep Seahorse. (laughs)

117 Gérald Préher: How do you choose your characters' names?

118 Lisa Alther: I paste different names on them as I write different drafts. Eventually one sticks.

119 Sarah Delmas: I was reading a thesis that was written about the relationship in Appalachia literature between animals and humans. Since animals are so pervasive in *Stormy Weather* and in your other works, I was wondering if you feel that animals have a different place in Southern culture than in Northern culture?

120 Lisa Alther: I think it's present in a lot of Southern writers' works because those of us in rural cultures did grow up with and live with animals. But as I said, Vermont is also very rural, and there's a lot of animal symbolism in Vermont writing. So I think it's a question of rural versus urban. In my stories set outside the South, in cities, animals tend to be replaced by people and the interactions among people.

Another influence, at least in my part of the South, is Native American—there's a large Cherokee reservation in the mountains in North Carolina right over the gap from East Tennessee. And a lot of the people in our area, including my family, have Native American ancestry. And in Cherokee culture animals have an almost totemic power.

121 Gérald Préher: This somewhat extends your ideas on labeling to all kinds...

122 Lisa Alther: I try to look at what's actually underneath labels and why labels come to exist and what function they serve for the people who apply them. I was just thinking about

the animal question. You know, in the Native American tradition, the goal is to stay in balance with the animals, whereas in our contemporary American tradition, the idea is to dominate them and contain them and even to destroy them... I guess that's another way in which East Tennessee, having become a colony of the North, an industrial base, finds itself in collision with Native American values and their idea of balance and stasis.

123 Nicole Moulinoux: I'm really impressed by your intercultural perspectives and dynamics... You started out telling us "I write to be at peace with myself." I am wondering what makes you want to write now and what it means to "be at peace" with yourself today?

124 Lisa Alther: The odd thing now that I am almost 70 is that I feel very peaceful. I think it's because I've explored all these different labels to put on myself and none of them have fit. I've realized that we're all just who we are. We cling to groups to define ourselves, but ultimately you have to let it all go. It's kind of terrifying. We try to create our identities, and in the end you realize your identity is already there and you just have to accept it. I did three books in 2012 and I was exhausted, so I decided if professors get to have sabbaticals, I do too. So I'm on sabbatical right now. But of course, I always feel this after I've finished a book. I don't really see that I have anything else I want to write. I probably will, you know, something will emerge, but I don't have anything driving me the way it used to—I have to write this about being gay, or I have to write that about being Southern, or whatever.

The main thing that I learned from all my experiences in France and Britain and everywhere I've lived—North and South—is that when you talk to anybody in enough depth, we really are very similar—we all want to love and to be loved, and we all feel pain when people whom we love are harmed. That we sometimes end up at war with each other is just absurd.

125 Gérald Préher: Thanks Lisa, for these words of wisdom, for being with us and sharing your ideas and inspirations.

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## NOTES

1. *Birdman and the Dancer* was published as a stand-alone novella in Denmark, Germany, and Holland, including reproductions of some monotypes by Françoise Gilot that inspired the story.

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