



Transatlantica

Revue d'études américaines. American Studies Journal

1 | 2014

Exile and Expatriation

An Interview with Ron Rash

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6829>

DOI: 10.4000/transatlantica.6829

ISSN: 1765-2766

Publisher

AFEA

Electronic reference

Frédérique Spill, "An Interview with Ron Rash", *Transatlantica* [Online], 1 | 2014, Online since 22 July 2014, connection on 29 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6829> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/transatlantica.6829>

This text was automatically generated on 29 April 2021.



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An Interview with Ron Rash

Frédérique Spill

- 1 Ron Rash (born in Chester, South Carolina, in 1953) is the author of five novels, five collections of short stories and four collections of poems. He is currently completing his sixth novel, *Above the Waterfall*. He probably owes the international attention he now enjoys to the publication of *Serena* (the novel was a 2009 PEN/Faulkner Award Finalist), whose plot retraces the fate of a Lady Macbeth-like figure at the head of a timber industry in the Appalachian Mountains in North Carolina at the beginning of the 1930s. But when *Serena* was published in 2008, Rash had been writing for most of his life. He has been translated into fourteen languages: most of his novels are now available in their French translations, and so will soon be some of his short stories. Rash lives in the North Carolina Mountains. He is the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, NC.
- 2 We met in Paris, rue Delambre in the 14th arrondissement in the afternoon of June 6, 2014. A guest at the Saint-Malo *Festival des Étonnants Voyageurs*, he had flown into Paris the very same morning. Before we started the interview he showed me the old, much read yet new-looking edition of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* that he had started rereading on the plane. We had a look at the map of Yoknapatawpha County that is included at the end of that volume and I marveled at his unlikely reading choice for travelling. For about an hour, we talked about his tastes, literature, cinema, the South, the mountains and their people, but mostly about his approach to writing and the tensions that underlie his work. A spoiler alert might be necessary for those who have not read the books evoked in our conversation.

Frédérique Spill: Do you know what you'll be doing and whom you'll be meeting at the *Festival des Étonnants Voyageurs* in Saint-Malo?

Ron Rash: I will meet several writers whom I already know. Colum McCann is a friend of mine. I'm acquainted with Chris Womersley from Australia and Alan Hollinghurst, but it's mainly going to be writers I haven't met. I'm glad it's so international. I think I'm the only American this year.

FS: I would like to start this interview by submitting you to a few selected (and adapted) items from the Proust questionnaire. Would you agree to start that way?

RR: **Yes.**

FS: Your favorite color?

RR: **Blue.**

FS: Your favorite flower?

RR: **Let's see... There's a very rare flower called the Oconee Bell; it's a very beautiful white flower and the only place in the world where it's found is in the South Carolina and North Carolina Mountains.**

FS: Your favorite flavor?

RR: **Chocolate.**

FS: Your chief characteristic?

RR: **Driven.**

FS: Your idea of happiness?

RR: **... Probably when the writing's going well.**

FS: Your idea of misery?

RR: **When the writing is not going well.**

FS: Your favorite prose authors?

RR: **Dostoyevsky, Faulkner, Melville, Hardy, Giono.**

FS: Your favorite heroes in fiction?

RR: **Ishmael in *Moby-Dick*; Faulkner's Caddy¹ in *The Sound and the Fury*; Raskolnikov in *Crime and Punishment*; the Judge in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*.**

FS: What is the book you re-read most frequently?

RR: **Probably *Macbeth*. I dip into *Moby-Dick* often.**

FS: What's the best book that you have read recently?

RR: **I read a book by Giono I had never read, *Joy of Man's Desiring* (*Que ma joie demeure*). I think that's a remarkable novel.**

FS: You come to France quite regularly and obviously enjoy a much deserved visibility and success that keep increasing thanks to the excellent translations of your novels by Les Éditions du Masque and Le Seuil. How is your work received in other countries?

RR: **It's been doing very well; it's been translated in fourteen languages now. It's done particularly well in Ireland, England, Denmark, Netherlands, China, and Australia. Translations are just coming out in Italy and Brazil.**

FS: Will there be French translations of your collections of poems and short stories?

RR: **There will be a translation of my short stories in December or January—a book called *Burning Bright*².**

FS: Do you have any clue how they will translate that title? It's a beautiful title, but a tough one.

RR: **No; actually my translator was saying it was a tough title to translate in French.**

FS: What about your place in American literature in the US?

RR: **Well, that's hard to know. Sometimes there is a sensibility in the United States that Southern writers are apart from the rest of the country's literature, which I find**

absurd. But I've done fairly well. I've published in *The New Yorker* and won or have been a finalist for some major awards and prizes.

FS: Is the label "Southern literature" still much in use?

RR: It's still used a lot. I'm very proud of this tradition. I think an inordinate number of the best American writers have come out of the South; the best music too, for that matter. But sometimes I fear that the term is used in a limiting sense: he's *just* a Southern writer. But I think *Serena* is as American a novel as any. She's an American character, not even a Southerner at that.

FS: You live in the Appalachian Mountains, the territory that feeds your writing. Could you imagine living anywhere else?

RR: I've thought about it and I may some time. The way things are going in the United States politically, I sometimes want to leave because I'm so frustrated. But to get back where I live it's pretty isolated so I'm pretty much left alone. I don't know. Some of my region's writers have had the feeling that they had to leave the South: Carson McCullers felt she had to leave, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams. But Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Faulkner—they felt they had to stay and I think I'm one of those that feel they have to stay in touch with their landscape.

FS: It seems that your titles' inscription in the topography of Appalachia is more and more obvious (I'm thinking of *The Cove*³ and of the novel that we're looking forward to reading—*Above the Waterfall*). Is this deliberate?

RR: Yes, it is. One thing I want to do is for landscape and my characters to be inextricably bound together. I believe the landscape people live in has to affect their psychology.

FS: Likewise, I have the feeling that the tone of your writing is becoming graver and graver, or somberer and somberer (it seems to me that the constant darkness of *The Cove* is emblematic of this evolution)—is this just a personal impression or does it make sense to you?

RR: I think it's true. Part of it is, especially with *Serena* and *The Cove*, caused by the political situation in the United States. Often the best way to talk about the present is through the past. This is not a good time for my country. But actually this new novel⁴ is a book more about wonder, about how nature might sustain us. I wanted to look at the world a little more hopefully.

FS: I was actually amazed to discover that the list of your published books starts with an instance of comedy with *The Night The New Jesus Fell to Earth* (1994). Some of the situations you created in that collection are just hilarious. Could you imagine returning to comedy?

RR: I may; I like comic writing. The writers I admire most are able to be both tragic and comic: Shakespeare, Melville, Faulkner—Faulkner can be hilarious—, O'Connor. To see both the tragic and the comic is to hold a mirror up to life. Usually in my short story collections I have at least one story that is comic. *Burning Bright* has one about the guitar player⁵ that is supposed to be funny. It's sad in a way, but it's funny too.

FS: How do you come up with the titles of your books?

RR: They usually emerge when I'm deep into the book, sometimes toward the end. I had a really tough time with *The Cove*, I just could not find a title that gave me what I wanted. I wanted to call it *Shadowland* but that title had been used for a couple of books. But I think *The Cove* works.

FS: You often evoked how the idea for a plot first came to you in the form of an image. Would it be correct to assume that it first comes to you in the form of a poem, likely to develop into a short story that, if the initial image is haunting enough, may transform into a novel?

RR: **That's pretty much it. It's a scary way to work because I don't outline. I just have faith that the image is enough. When I wrote *Serena* all I had was an image of her on horseback.**

FS: You are fulltime poet, short story writer and novelist. Or shall I formulate things in a different order?

RR: **No, I hope I've done worthwhile work in all three. When I started writing I first wrote a few short stories and a few poems, then I pretty much just wrote poetry for six or seven years. Then I wrote short stories for a couple of years. Yes, it is kind of a movement toward the novel.**

FS: What happened to your creative mind between the short story entitled "Pemberton's Bride" (published in *Chemistry and Other Stories* in 2007) and *Serena* (2008)? The genitive form in the title of the short story somehow presents *Serena* as her husband's better half (but only a half), while in the novel she obviously takes precedence over him. How come?

RR: **I think *Serena* simply became more and more interesting to me, particularly because in American fiction I don't think we have women quite like her. We have female characters who have power within a family, but to have a woman, particularly in 1928-1929, that has that kind of will to go out and have control over hundreds of men goes beyond that. She was so strong she somehow pushed me aside as well and put herself at the center of this world. That was a strange experience writing that book. I went into a deep, dark place and I've never been that consumed by a book before or since. People said they could tell a difference after I finished it, even physically.**

FS: Why did you decide to alleviate the denouement of Rachel's story in the novel's version of it (in the short story, she is sacrificed; in the novel, she manages to escape)?

RR: **I believe *Serena* changes some during the novel, more so than most readers seem to recognize. But I thought I needed a character who made a larger transformation. And I also felt I had to be true to the world. There are always Serenas out there, but there are always people who will fight them and people who will find their power from love instead of the desire for power.**

FS: So, paradoxically, you somehow became more hopeful with the novel and your decision to save Rachel, showing she could fight?

RR: **Yes. One thing I did very deliberately: in the opening scene of *Serena*, I wanted the novel to open more like a play than a novel. All the main characters are on the train station's wooden platform. And Rachel does not move; in that whole scene, she doesn't move. Then, from being completely immobile, she evolves into a woman who is strong enough to triumph over Galloway and *Serena*.**

FS: Now comes a fishy question: what about the overwhelming presence of trout in Southern writing? Trout have a strong symbolical dimension in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (in Quentin's monologue); the same can be said of the finale of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, where the appearance of trout in the river seems to suggest the plausible return of life. In your work, trout reoccur whatever form of writing you pick up as, it seems to me, a metaphor of resilience.

RR: **Trout have to live in a pure environment unlike human beings; they can't live in filth! And so I think there is a kind of wonder; to me, they're incredibly beautiful**

creatures. I can remember being only four or five and staring for long periods at them, just watching them swimming in the water. But also, like Faulkner in “The Bear,” the idea that when such creatures disappear, we have lost something that cannot be brought back. And I think this is what McCarthy is getting at, at the end of *The Road*. They mean many things: beauty, wonder, and fragility, in the sense that they can be easily destroyed. In *The World Made Straight*⁶ I felt that Travis’s response to the trout showed his maturity: first he’s just catching them without even caring about killing them, but then he has that moment when he is in the field and sees the beauty of them and he never has before. To me, that’s a sign of maturation and wisdom on his part.

FS: I believe you are an amazing choreographer of scenes of drowning. Would it be too personal to ask you where your fascination with drowning comes from?

RR: No, it wouldn’t be. I have always been fascinated by water, that’s one thing. And I think part of that was probably my religious upbringing. I was brought up in the Baptist Church and in the Baptist Church they totally immerse you. That is an experience that you don’t forget because it’s somewhat terrifying. I have always been attracted to water. Concerning drowning, I guess it is that whole idea of water being able to destroy and to give life—that paradox. Part of my ancestry is Welsh and in Welsh folklore water is seen as a conduit between the living and the dead. In *Saints at the River*⁷ I hoped to evoke that idea. But it’s a strange obsession and not something I tend to do consciously. People started pointing it out in my work and, yes, it is there, it is all over the place.

FS: Your admirers have been impatiently looking forward to the release of the film adaptation of *Serena* next fall? What’s your perception of Susan Bier’s adaptation? Of the cast? Is Jennifer Lawrence’s acting the part of *Serena* somehow faithful to your first idea of your character?

RR: Well, I don’t know. I haven’t seen the movie or read the script; I have deliberately stayed out of the process. So I don’t know much about the film except that I do like Susanne Bier’s movies. Have you seen any?

FS: I saw *Brothers*⁸ and I liked it a lot.

RR: I think she is a serious director and Jennifer Lawrence is a very good actress. Her performance in *Winter’s Bone*⁹ was extraordinary.

FS: What about the coming release of the movie adaptation of *The World Made Straight* (2006)? The film is David Burris’s first film as a director. The attention you get from the movies is quite remarkable, isn’t it?

RR: It’s been surprising. It’s something I never expected.

FS: What happens in the mind of a writer whose most successful novels are adapted into movies?

RR: It’s a bit unsettling, but it brings people to the books who might normally not read them. There’s some money that comes into it, which is nice.

FS: I know it took time, but it seems you’re getting a great deal of attention all of a sudden.

RR: Yes, but I believe it was good that I had to wait a long time. If the recognition had happened earlier, it might not have been a good thing for me. I’ve been able to concentrate solely on the writing most of my career. Being ignored can be a blessing for a young writer.

FS: Are you still teaching?

RR: Yes, I am.

FS: Most of your writings are characterized by a rather sharp contrast between the restriction, distance and suggestiveness (I'm still looking for the word that may encompass such impressions—maybe: delicacy?...) of your writing style and the extreme violence of some of the scenes you describe. Could this be considered one of the main tenets of your aesthetics as a writer?

RR: I think very often that's what makes particularly tragic writing bearable to us. That's why we can respond to Shakespeare. If the language were not so beautiful and sublime, particularly in a play such as *King Lear*, the experience would be unbearable. What I'm trying for in my work—it's up to the reader to decide if I do—is the sublime. I want my work to take the reader to that place. And I think you can do that with that juxtaposition of language and violence. Violence allows revelation of character; that's what O'Connor believed and I think she's right. You don't use it to titillate; you use it to get to the essence of who a character is.

FS: In the writing process is the plausible cathartic dimension of your work foremost in your mind?

RR: I'm very conscious that I'm often taking the reader into a deep place, sometimes a very dark place. By entering that place, I hope the reader might find something cathartic.

FS: I'm probably not the first person that tells you that: the denouement of *The World Made Straight* is particularly heart-rending. Did Leonard really have to die?

RR: I hated for him to die; I really did. Writing that scene was hard emotionally for me, particularly as he was thinking of his child as he was dying. But I think that he had to die because there was this historical balance with the Civil War killings. For his sacrifice to matter in an ultimate way, Leonard had to offer up his life. Interestingly, I actually wrote a short story where Travis was going to be killed; I felt so bad about killing a teenager that I revived him; but then I ended up killing Leonard. But I have had a lot of complaints about his death from readers, which I take as a compliment. It means that I succeeded in creating a character that they cared deeply about.

FS: Another common feature of your writing is the reappearance of maimed or mutilated characters, either literally (for instance Galloway, his mother, Dr. Cheney in *Serena*; Hank in *The Cove*) or symbolically (Laurel or Walter in *The Cove*, but it seems to me there are many more). Aren't they somehow all avatars or variations of the figure of Tiresias, the blind seer whose very blindness qualifies him as a seer?

RR: Yes, I'm very fond of mythology, as is obvious in *The Cove* where I evoke the Orpheus myth, and in *Serena* Galloway's mother is definitely a seer in the sense you describe. I think I tend to use maimed characters with the idea that the world they inhabit is wounded. In *One Foot in Eden*, I wanted Billy to evoke the Fisher King in Grail mythology; he is wounded and the land is dying. Yes, I love to integrate those aspects into my work; I don't want it to be heavy-handed, but I want it to be there.

FS: Would it make sense to say that the characters I mentioned are somehow part of the gallery of grotesques started by O'Connor?

RR: Yes, you could certainly date it back to Poe. I don't know, there's something about the South: maybe it's partly our heritage, partly the region's Christian sensibility: Original sin argues we are flawed/grotesque from birth. O'Connor, a devout

Christian, certainly believed that. Her character's physical flaws are indicative of spiritual flaws.

FS: Would it be exaggerated to consider the return of figures of loss in your work as rewritings of the South's failure?

RR: I think there is something to that. The South has always been the part of the United States that's the poorest, the least educated. The part of the upper South I focus on has certainly had its share of hardship, of a failure to achieve the prosperity of the rest of America, though that failure is in large part due to the fact that more has been taken from the region, from coal and timber to soldiers for our wars, than given back. But this hardship has also produced an incredible outpouring of art—jazz, bluegrass, country music, blues, rock and roll, as well as a huge number of exceptional writers. There's a great quote in Carol Reed's movie *The Third Man*—a character says the Swiss have had four hundred years of peace and prosperity and all they've giving us is the cuckoo clock. Art seems so often to come out of turmoil.

FS: I believe that one of the main forces of your short story collections is the undecidability of their timeframe as, from one story to the next, you take your readers back and forth in time. In that way, in your last three collections—*Chemistry*, *Burning Bright*, *Nothing Gold Can Stay* (2013)—, the Civil War is likely to cohabit with the Great Depression or with Modern America, while it is for your readers to pick up clues in order to determine when events are occurring. My impression is that there are at least two very divergent ways in which this changelessness can be interpreted: while such seclusion from the wider world is likely to appear as frightening, at the same time it is very reassuring to observe that some things, in keeping with the land you describe, may resist change and remain true to themselves.

RR: I believe so. I think there is something reassuring in that belief and also that other people have also endured challenges, because there never was an edenic time. In a sense, I'm writing a current that runs through time in those stories. And, also, paradoxically time is a kind of geography as well: it is also a way of showing people in much different cultural mindsets, even within a specific culture, and thus another way to probe for the universal within a specific cultural landscape. Faulkner does this obviously, as does Seamus Heaney in his poetry. In the story collections, I want the reader to be, at times, uncertain of the era. That uncertainty creates an effect that I want.

FS: You obviously do quite a lot of research before you write. Was the idea of Doctor Candler's ledgers in *The World Made Straight* directly inspired by your research on the Shelton Laurel Massacre?

RR: It was. I actually had a relative at that time who was a doctor in the area. I didn't have access to his ledgers. But my family had very deep roots in that region and from what I've been able to find out I'm pretty sure I had relatives on both sides of that massacre. So I just thought it would be interesting to have this man who had saved this boy's life to be there at the massacre. What would this mean to Leonard? What is our responsibility to the past? I did a lot of research on nineteenth-century medicine; so everything in the journal is what a doctor would have done. I enjoy research.

FS: I am forever trying to put words on the forcefulness of your writing and I would like to suggest that, though they could not be more different, *Saints at the River* and *Serena* are very representative of what you are doing when you write: my assumption is that a great part of the force of your writing essentially rests on its subtlety. You manage to picture characters and situations that are often extreme because they are either particularly polemical (as when you expose the conflict opposing the mourners in search of the lost corpse of their daughter and the environmentalists in *Saints*) or tragically violent (indeed,

nothing can stop Serena's ambition) without passing judgment. Yet I do not want to suggest that you are stuck in the grey zone of "either...or" or "neither... nor..." because this is absolutely not true. You locate your narrative stance right in the middle of the crisis and I think you are particularly good at exposing the complexities of a situation.

RR: That's my hope.

FS: The effect this has on your readers is that they're encouraged to think before they flare up. Does this make sense to you?

RR: Exactly, that's what I want. Black and white is for politicians; they give the easy answers, the simplifications. For me, this is a matter of respecting the reader—that the reader doesn't have to be preached to or told how to feel. To me, that's insulting the reader's intelligence. I believe that a novel is an act of communion between the author and the reader; it's a shared consciousness, very intimate. The reader is taking these blotches of ink I've written and bringing them to life.

FS: Most of your works are suggestive of a dramatic contrast between the extreme violence of human exchanges and the almost imperturbable serenity and beauty of nature. The mountains' rock-hard permanence almost indirectly reads as a commentary on the triviality of men, while constantly highlighting their finitude.

RR: Yes, I would agree. I think the psychological makeup of mountain people is very interesting. A person has to be influenced at seeing these things that have been there for millions of years, blocking any long gaze, reminding oneself of one's small life, perhaps its insignificance? Yet sometimes the mountains can also be like a womb, protective from the outside world. That duality is very interesting to me.

FS: How is the writing of *Above the Waterfall* progressing?

RR: It's going; I'm doing something really different. I've got a narrator who is attempting to create her own language. It has been a difficult book and I've have come close to giving up on it several times.

FS: Is there a specific timeframe?

RR: Yes, the present.

FS: May I ask you whether one of your own books is your "heart's darling"?

RR: Yes; two of them. But if I had to pick one it would be *Serena*. I feel that's the one that is the most ambitious. But I also love *One Foot in Eden*; maybe that's because it's the first novel I published, but also for what I did in that book with the vernacular.

FS: Thank you, very much.

NOTES

1. Caddy is the only sister in the Compson family in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929).
2. A collection of twelve short stories, *Burning Bright* was first published in 2010.
3. Ron Rash's fifth novel, *The Cove* was first published in 2012. It was translated by Le Seuil as *Une terre d'ombre* (2014).
4. Rash is evoking his novel in progress, *Above the Waterfall*, which will probably come out in 2015.

5. That story, entitled “Waiting for the End of the World,” is a first-person narrative told by an ex-teacher become guitar player who makes ends meet by playing all night long in a seedy joint. At the patrons’ request, he keeps playing Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” and obviously is sick and tired of having to do so.
 6. *The World Made Straight* was first published in 2006; it was translated in French as *Le Monde à l’endroit* (Seuil, 2012).
 7. *Saints at the River* is Rash’s second novel, published in 2004. It relates the aftermath of a twelve-year-old girl’s drowning in the Tamasee River in South Carolina, as decisions have to be made in order to rescue her body. The novel has not yet been translated into French.
 8. *Brothers* is a 2004 Danish film written and directed by Susanne Bier.
 9. *Winter’s Bone* is a 2011 film directed by Debra Granik; it was adapted from Daniel Woodrell’s 2006 novel of the same title.
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