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EDITOR'S NOTE

Interviewed by Anne-Marie Girard, Corinne Dale and J.H.E. Paine, "Short Stories of the American South" Symposium, February 1, 1992, First published in *JSSE* n°18, 1992.

- 1 Elizabeth Spencer has won loyal readers and prestigious literary prizes for her many short stories, collections of short fiction, and novels. Praised by Eudora Welty for her "cool detachment," Spencer evokes the family and community relationships of the American South with certainty and compassion born of her personal knowledge as a native of Mississippi and a long-time resident of North Carolina. Drawing also on her experiences in Italy and Canada, Spencer demonstrates the range of her social commentary as well as her insight into the complexities of the human heart.

Anne-Marie GIRARD: Several of your novels have been translated into French and some of the collected stories appeared under the title *Nouvelles du Sud*. Do you know how they were received by French critics and French readers?

Elisabeth SPENCER: There was only one piece of criticism I saw, written for *La Quinzaine Littéraire* — an essay-review by Danielle Pitavy. It was very gratifying because she really wanted to see what the essence of these stories was, and comment on it fully instead of just a little bit of opinion.

John H.E. PAINE: What sort of reaction did you get in Paris?

E.S.: I couldn't tell when I did a reading, what they called a "débat-rencontre," with Danielle speaking very rapidly about the stories, very ably. I tried to reply in French also, which didn't go terribly well, but they seemed to think they could understand me. On the other hand, the audience was people who had just wandered into that huge bookstore on Boulevard St Germain; I had a few friends and supporters on the first row. They came up later and had some interesting comments.

At the *Village Voice* the night before I was most gratified at the warmth of everyone there. A good many of them were, of course, Americans who were living in Paris, but to

me they all looked pretty French. There were a lot of French people too, and either they had read me or heard of me, and this just made the nicest kind of feeling when I was reading — that I was really giving something to people who were aware of what I was trying to do.

A-M G: Who selected the stories to be translated as *Nouvelles du Sud*?

E.S.: Ida Leach, the editor. She hasn't given up the idea, I think, of bringing out a second volume of these as well.

A-M G: Why were there three translators?

E.S.: They started out with one. But it took them a long time because, I was told, they were being so careful to try to get a good translation. When what they had didn't measure up, they discarded it. I think that's commendable.

But it was a happy coincidence I was invited here to Angers at the same time the book had just come out, don't you think?

Corinne DALE: I was wondering how you felt about sitting there in the audience while people critiqued your work. Have you been in that situation before?

E.S.: Oh, sometimes; it seems to me I have. With me in the audience they probably are very complimentary, you know. They're not going to come out and say that you made a complete flop with this story or that they don't understand what it's all about. It was fine.

A-M G: Now, you have already published nine novels, if I'm not mistaken.

E.S.: Two of them were short novels, and more correctly ought to be considered as novellas, because they have been published together in a reprint. That's what I intended to happen all along.

A-M G: Were they just stories that refused to come to an end or was it deliberate, a deliberate choice of a certain length?

E.S.: No, it wasn't. There's usually a central incident in my stories. The central incident in *The Light in the Piazza* was at an annual sort of exhibition game of calcio, which was a medieval soccer game that they have once a year in Florence on their Saint's Day, St. Giovanni, in the Piazza della Signoria. I was in the stands, by a strange happening with the poet Allen Tate, who had been in Florence and asked me to go with him. At any rate, in the middle of the thing, the little medieval cannon went off, and a man fell down. Perhaps you remember that incident in the story: just when she was about to bare her soul to Sr. Naccarelli, about her daughter's being retarded and unable to mature or be a full person, the cannon went off.

Well, the only thing that really happened was the cannon, but later on in the summer — I was staying with an Italian family then, trying to master the language — I asked what happened to him. He died because they didn't give him the proper treatment. He got blood poisoning and died. I don't know if I dwelt on this incident much or not. It was certainly vivid in my mind because of this strange thing happening. I thought about the balance of life and death, how fragile. Something else that happened put me on to the fact that there's kind of an Italian mentality that really doesn't want women to be very, very bright. I exaggerate, and of course the Italians resented this, so I shouldn't make a big point of it.

C.D.: I thought that was the great joke of the story – that the perfect wife was retarded.

E.S.: Well, Ida Leach is from Torino, and I don't know if she's ever going to bring that story out again in France. She admires it and mentioned it because the original translation has long since been exhausted, and I suppose it's available again. But she might feel that I was saying that Italians are stupid. I really didn't mean that. But I'm sure there might be a way for an Italian to resent the story.

C.D.: But it's a comedy...

E.S.: I thought it was a comedy, too. It's a comedy; but a lot of people took it seriously. I wasn't trying to write a study of retardation or male attitudes. I was writing comedy.

But the thing of it was, I wanted a thirty-page story about the balance between the death that occurred so accidentally and the coming back to life of this girl under special circumstances, also. And then once I started the story it just seemed to take off. It zoomed past me, you know, and a great deal of detail came alive because I had lived in Florence for a time and in Italy for five years. I had just left and was starting again in Canada, but all those memories seemed to come forth into that story; so before I knew it, I had over a hundred pages.

Knights and Dragons started out to be a short story, too. It was going to take place with this woman meeting these people as a cultural representative and taking them to Venice where something very personal and tragic about her life came up to her in the form of this young man, suggesting that he knew what her secrets were. And that I never resolved, because as a short story it just wouldn't resolve itself there; so I left the ending rather vague. I think maybe I sent it to one editor who said it wasn't ready to be published, and so I put it aside. Then I tried finishing it and got them back to Rome and decided to make a short novel of it. I'm of two minds about that story. Some people like it a lot and think it's very successful, and others think it's too submerged in the psyche of the woman to be satisfying as a piece of fiction. So I don't know. I generally follow what my readers say.

A-M G: Do you intend to write other novellas? Is it a length that suits you and that you like?

E.S.: I like it, yes. I would like to get a good idea for doing another one. Maybe next summer when I start working again I'll come up with something. I don't have any ideas right now... well, I do, I have a piece of manuscript I might complete.

A-M G: How much planning do you do before starting to write a short story? Do you collect material beforehand or fill in notebooks or does it just...?

E.S.: I just sail into short stories. If I run into things that I need more information about, I go find it somewhere. But a novel, now, you've got to plan a novel pretty carefully, else you'll go wandering off in all directions at a certain point, and I do think novels require a sort of containment: theme, place, conflict. It's got to cohere, that long piece of work, because you can't go leading the reader off this way and say I want to go that way.

A-M G: Could you tell us how you choose your titles?

E.S.: I enjoy doing titles. The title for the last novel, *The Night Travellers*, was to be *The Lost Children*, and I never liked it very much because it seemed to me it would be too downbeat for the reader, do you think so? Corinne, would you go out and buy a book called *The Lost Children*? It sounds so weepy.

C.D.: Well, I might, but I think that there's something positive in what they say about travelling at night; not all bad, you know.

E.S.: **It's got a dynamic to it, a movement.**

C.D.: And maybe for some people that's the way you have to go. So I think that *The Night Travellers* is richer, more suggestive.

E.S.: **It came late in the book because I had just about finished all of the first draft of the manuscript and was revising. I always do a good deal of revision on a novel. But that business in Isaiah about "Watchman, what of the night?" — I thought, something in this idea is what I want. And I realized they had to get around a lot at night because of their uneasiness about their place in society.**

C.D.: There's a question that I've wanted to ask you for a long time: it seems to me that in much of your work you deal with a light side and a dark side. It's the dark side I'm interested in. There seems to be, to varying degrees in different pieces of fiction, a seductive but dangerous side that sometimes your characters choose because they are uneasy with the superficial, mannered society that they've grown up in, or they feel some way outside it. I see that in several of the works we've touched on. To go back to "Ship Island" and *The Snare*, for instance, those two pieces have something in common.

E.S.: **Oh, yes; definitely.**

C.D.: Going into the underworld of New Orleans and the girl choosing that in your story.

E.S.: **A lot of my characters do that. They like to walk a tightrope over the dangerous in preference to staying with the safe and superficial. It's when the safe world becomes superficial, or materialistic, that's when they can't stand it. So they plunge off into other directions.**

I don't know if I'm through with that aspect of my writing or not. It seems to me I've got as much as I wanted to out of it. But you're right, "Ship Island" started a whole new cycle in what I was trying to do. Both "First Dark" and *The Light in the Piazza* were unlikely situations working out in a normal way. And then normal comes up to question. A friend of mine who follows my work very well says, "You're always approaching life in a different way." So maybe I am. I don't think about it too consciously when I'm doing it; it just seems to me there's some kind of urgency to enter experience in a certain way. But *The Snare*, "Ship Island," and "I, Maureen": I look at those three as sort of a triptych.

C.D.: In those stories do you think it's the individual who doesn't fit, or something that happened in the past that doesn't allow them to fit, or is it something about society itself? Are the people who are content in society somehow not as perceptive as the discontented individual?

E.S.: **I think society has this broad streak of venality in it, especially American society, the idea of power and money. I don't feel it so much now. I think we've been through a great chastening period during the sixties. That was a turning point, not altogether to the bad. Well, I guess publicly it was to the bad because I don't think anybody can trust their government after all those things that happened. In the Eisenhower period, for instance everybody was so concerned with materialism. It was always: what do you do? How much is he making? That sort of thing was so common. It just seemed to me this idea of phony success was all over the place, and I began to just hate this kind of thing in American life. I suppose without really wanting to, I turned into a social critic. I'm probably giving myself too much weight on that side.**

C.D.: But then these characters who are perceptive, who are different from the ordinary person, at least in those earlier works, what they go into turns out to be a real crime scene. It's not at that point a positive alternative so much as it is a psychological dark side and externally, too, a sinister aspect of life.

E.S.: Well, Julia... you're talking about Julia in *The Snare*. Yes, she was kind of a fool, in a way. She kept on and on, tempting things until really, she got the worst in the end. She lost the man that she loved. She did get the child. I guess the satisfaction she felt was having touched bottom. I think at the end she's become an entity and has arrived at a fixed point. But I just don't know if, even then, you could predict any kind of security because there's still that danger element in the society she's chosen. What I liked about her, though, was her way: no matter what results, this is what feels right. She finds her balance in very unlikely ways. Like that business of doing these mosaics out of bits of the city. I just stumbled on that. Her whole life had been pieces and bits of New Orleans.

C.D.: And then the girl in "Ship Island," who returns at the end...

E.S.: She knows her own nature now. She was sort of a myth creature, I thought. She half realizes things, more at the end.

C.D.: But she'll never be able to go into the superficial world again.

E.S.: That's right. Is that bad or good?

C.D.: I don't know. It causes a dilemma for me as a reader. But as I said earlier, one of the reasons I like *Night Travellers*, looking at it in the whole of your work, is that it seems to me that this dark side begins to look more positive, maybe because I grew up in the sixties, so I tend to see political activism as something very positive. But do you see that dark side, that underground world, as being connected to the underground world in these earlier works?

E.S.: Jeff was an idealist who found that once you start ripping your society, there's no end to where it can ravel out. And he blundered into doing something that was really criminal; he got thrown with those people who were just simply awful, who killed that boy he was with — that Black Panther business. I got a whole lot of that from a man at UNC who had been an activist. He started out doing lectures and rallies. I got a lot of that description of rallies and stuff from him. And then those violent people took over, and began doing things that none of the original ones had any idea would eventuate. What they were promoting was more of an idealistic thing. And my friend said that he wound up seeming like a real conservative.

But the story really to me was centered on Mary rather than Jeff, and I think that she found an ambience for herself at the end so that I felt alright about her. She found a place through her dancing, she could relate to people who were quite fond of her, and she had a little community, at the last. Just being isolated would be terrible.

C.D.: She's quite passive in the book, and I know that the book has been criticized...

E.S.: It's been criticized for her being passive.

C.D.: The central character, and yet very passive. But you see the dancing as being strong.

E.S.: Yes, she clings to that. I didn't think she was all that passive because it seems to me she acts positively in many ways, but a lot of people felt that she was.

A-M G: In one of your interviews you said that when you felt too close to your characters, it prevented you from writing in an objective way. You give the example of *Knights and Dragons*. Did it happen in that book?

E.S.: Yes, yes, it did. I don't know why that was. It seemed to have a mysterious hold on me in a psychic way. The character in it was rather paranoid and disturbed. If I got into

her psyche, I felt myself getting paranoid and disturbed, so I couldn't keep a distance. In *The Light in the Piazza* I managed to keep a distance from the characters and observe. I was comfortable with everyone in there.

A-M G: Is it especially difficult to keep a distance when your narrator is a first-person woman?

E.S.: I've done a lot of first-person stories with women talking because I'll just hear a voice somehow. That happened a lot in Montreal when I used to be nostalgic for the South. Just to hear a woman's southern voice talking would lead to my wondering just what stories she had to tell, and listening. Southern women are good story tellers. So that's how a lot of those stories came about.

A-M G: You lived a long time in Canada, so you probably know a number of female Canadian short story writers?

E.S.: Danielle Pitavy was saying in Paris that the women in the South and the women in Canada were far ahead of the men at this point. I just think that it happens that sometimes you have more women writers and sometimes more men writers. I don't think of it as a competition.

J.P.: In Canada, critics say that men are on the brutal side of life, with more incidents, more adventure, whereas women are rather on the domestic side. I wonder if the short story is a domestic genre?

E.S.: It used to be a very violent genre, didn't it? I mean, you think about Hemingway's stories, like "The Killers" and his bullfighting stories. Everything depended on shock tactics.

J.P.: You've had your share of interesting incidents in some of your stories as well. "A Southern Landscape" is one that comes to mind.

E.S.: That's how I stumbled on Marilee. I meant someday to write some more Marilee stories, but I just never have gotten around to it.

J.P.: There is a fine, fine vein of comedy that you mine.

E.S.: Right.

J.P.: I found myself reading through the collected stories, and I don't hit it every time, but I realize at some point, I'm being toyed with here; I need to look at this in a different way. That happens in "A Southern Landscape," I think. You were criticized for saying some people just have to be left as alcoholics; it's okay. Did you get blasted for that?

E.S.: No. Don't go criticizing me for that!

J.P.: But you leave him with a wonderful ending to that story, "A Southern Landscape."

E.S.: She hopes he'll go right on drinking.

J.P.: Right, yes.

E.S.: Well, she's kind of bitter toward him, you know.

J.P.: "...go right on drinking. There have got to be some things you can count on..." would be an ordinary way to put it. I'd rather say that I feel the need of a land, of a sure terrain, of a sort of "permanent landscape of the heart." Of course, you've described the ruins of the old southern mansion...

E.S.: That's really there, you know. There are a whole lot of things in my stories that are really there, or that have really happened. But then the story seems to work around all those in an imaginary creation. That Presbyterian church hand—that's reality. Didn't you ever see it?

J.P.: There is a toughness, though. We speak so often of southern writers who use their past, like when we speak of Faulkner as a historian. "A Southern Landscape" is an interesting example. The house that you describe, the remains of that house are not really looked at nostalgically. It's as though the southern underbrush, the stuff that remains, has importance, but there's also life to be lived. This is part of us, but we'll go on.

E.S.: That was Marilee, and that was her attitude.

J.P.: This is Marilee.

E.S.: Well, that's true of other literature, you know. It's quite beautiful, a ruin like that. They preserved it, but I think in preserving it now, they've sort of ruined it because they tried to do something artificial to make it still stand, and it looks kind of awful. It used to just stand there out in the old grounds.

J.P.: They're not going to make a theme park out of it?

E.S.: All kinds of things are possible. You have the purists, though, who would object to its being exploited in some way.

A-M G: All the same, in "A Southern Landscape," when you describe Windsor, you write, "What nature does to Windsor it does to everything, including you and me — there's the horror," and I was struck by this word "horror."

E.S.: Change and decay.

A-M G: Yes. Very often people say that Southerners have a strong sense of time, a fascination for time, but in your case doesn't it go even further, that is, a fascination with destruction and death? I was struck by the story "Prelude to a Parking Lot." The house symbolizes life, and then suddenly at the end it's turned into a parking lot, which is a kind of tombstone made of concrete.

E.S.: Yes, that's terrible. There's a kind of terror in all that, seems like. Things gone and being wiped out; what to do, nothing.

A-M G: Do you see the short story as an appropriate genre to express metaphysical fears?

E.S.: Is that a metaphysical fear?

A-M G: I reckon so.

E.S.: Well, there's your answer. If it works, it must be possible. I wrote a lot of those stories during the seventies because I had put a good deal of hope in that novel *The Snare*, and it was published at the wrong time. It came out just before Christmas and didn't get much notice as a result. A lot of people seemed to like it, but I had thought that it was a notable book. I got very discouraged about writing novels, and that's when I started just pouring a lot of material I had into short stories.

I didn't have any idea of collecting them, but some editor wrote me about one of my stories, "Indian Summer," I think, and asked if I wanted to bring out another volume of stories. I thought, I might as well see her. So when I was in New York I went over to Doubleday to say thank you for your attention, and when I came back I had a contract. She was already on the phone to my agent, and I'd already been to see the top editor, and they said they were quite enthusiastic.

So that was the turn I took in the road toward short stories. It was very odd: all the stories were out there, and I'd published one small volume called *Ship Island*, but I hadn't thought to do another one. One thing she did, though, that I didn't like: she put *Knights and Dragons* in that collection, and I don't think that was a good idea at all. I tried to oppose it.

About metaphysics, I would say I admired Walker Percy's approach to life and literature, which is so firmly based in his religion. I feel I do have a base in religion, but I don't know how quite to explore that through the lives of my characters yet. Maybe someday I will. I don't altogether swing with the way Walker does it a lot of times, but sometimes when it succeeds I admire him very much.

C.D.: Would you say that you feel more hopeful or more positive than many of your characters do?

E.S.: I don't know. I haven't thought about my characters in terms of hopefulness. I think *The Salt Line* is a very hopeful book. To me, that ends on a very positive note. And if you give Jeff the slightest possibility of coming back from Vietnam, then *The Night Travellers* is a hopeful book. They've lived through all that, you know. I think one of my big preoccupations is that you can't say you've arrived anywhere unless you've lived through something to get there.

C.D.: What I think I'm hearing you say is that maybe some of these characters, like Julia Garrett and these earlier people, when they go through the dark side of things, when they touch bottom, that's hopeful because you have to do that, in a sense. You can't be these characters who are just living on the surface of things and never understanding or recognizing the reality.

E.S.: And that's all testing and experience, too. It's a testing of the mind.

C.D.: That's an important distinction.

E.S.: I don't think that Mary in *The Night Travellers* — maybe she's passive in this — I don't think she ever intended her life to be so tried by the whole political era. She had no such intention, and yet, I can't look on her as negative because it was her love for people that made her seem that way. I mean, she kept on and on trying to love her mother. Maybe another girl would have said to hell with that, you know. It was impossible to love that woman. She was too schizo. It was finally realizing that made Mary split with her.

C.D.: Maybe we have a prejudice; we assume that a hero is active, but perhaps you can be heroic without fitting that paradigm of activity.

E.S.: Some of the critics did see that, I think, and some didn't. I didn't mean to stumble into such a long book. I had wanted to write a short novel about this girl in Canada who had been somewhat abandoned because of the political passion of her husband or boyfriend — I wasn't quite sure — but to have a child there, and then having to get it back from her mother. It seemed me there's something rather touching about having to kidnap your child from your own mother, and then I know all that countryside. I know how it is crossing the border and how you have to do this and that if you've got anything you don't want them to find and then the encounter in Vermont and all that. I thought it might make a good short novel. But the questions it raised were more profound than I had realized: why is the young man absent? what is he doing? and why all this straightened circumstance? So I began to explore, and it began to stretch out.

C.D.: I see a connection between *The Night Travellers* and that story, "Jean Pierre."

E.S.: Yes, they go down into New England.

C.D.: And again it's this separation and they don't know...

E.S.: That's true. I hadn't thought of that.

C.D.: ... She doesn't know where he is, and then they have that little picnic in the countryside.

E.S.: Well, poor old Jean Pierre. That story took place in the sixties, and he felt goaded and fearful of the judgement of the English-speaking community. You know, the French-Canadians had this feeling that they were looked down on as inferiors. If he was in business trouble he didn't want her family to get hold of the details of it. You had to read between the lines to get that, but it was a part of the Montreal scene and the Quebec scene as I saw it at that time.

C.D.: That's the question I wanted to ask you: if sometimes you find an idea in a short story and then come back to it in a long work. But your answer suggested to me that you didn't see a connection.

E.S.: Not too much; I didn't see it like that. In a way they're the same type of women. They have this sense of devotion and fragility, but, you know, there's a strong center of holding on and being devoted to their own feelings.

C.D.: Like Mary.

E.S.: Yes.

C.D.: Have you ever dealt with an idea, and then later felt, well, I have something more to say about that, and then developed it in another place?

E.S.: Yes, I do try that sometimes. Marilee is the only one, I think, that worked out. There was a character in my first novel, *Fire in the Morning*, who was from the Delta and married to a man who was unsatisfactory, and ran away, went away from him at the end of it. She was from the Delta and her father was a Delta planter, and I thought their story might be interesting to tell, but I got involved in telling it, and she turned out to be just a minor character in the story. So it's a very slippery thing, because every work is its own powerful self and then it takes away what you intended to do with something. Faulkner was very successful in all that. He could take splinter characters from one work and make them central to another work, or continue — Quentin Compson is continued — through a number of stories and novels. Maybe I don't have that kind of grasp.

I did a play that was produced in Chapel Hill a few years ago. The young man in the play had come back from Mexico where he had run away to get over his failed marriage. There were a lot of lines in it when I wrote it first about his experience in Mexico. John and I have been down to Mexico a couple of times, and certain aspects of life there did make a strong impression on me; so I've thought about maybe reinstating him in some fiction and filling in with some kind of thing that might have happened there. He to me was not an altogether sympathetic character, but certainly a very interesting one. I thought I might follow up on some of that, but I'm not quite sure yet how to do it.

A-M G: The character of the uncle comes back quite often in your stories: Uncle Jess, Uncle Rex...

E.S.: Right, right, right.

A-M G: I wondered, isn't the uncle a substitute for the father who doesn't appear much?

E.S.: Well, there was a parallel in my own life. My father was a very hard-working, harried kind of person who thought a great deal about — had to think a great deal, I guess — about making a living and all that and thought life is shaping around what you could do in the way of money. My mother's brother really raised us in a spiritual sense. We were often down there at the plantation.

I wrote a little piece about that, non-fiction, in a book called *Family Portraits*. It's a collection: it's got a piece of mine, and Clyde Edgerton has a piece in that, and Gloria Steinem, and Alfred Kazin. There's a woman, one of the editors of the Book of the Month Club, started writing everyone to do these. So I just sat down and wrote about my uncle. But I thought it was very revealing as to why the uncle figure shows up so often in my work because my brother and I — we were influenced by him.

A-M G.: Were all these different uncles in your stories inspired by the same uncle, or by various persons?

E.S.: Oh, I don't know if there were any that I drew from life, but maybe the idea of the uncle. You're right. I think he becomes the friend and confidant very often. But poor old Uncle Jess in "Prelude to a Parking Lot," he was a pathetic figure, kind of ridiculous.

J.P.: There's a different direction I'd like to go. Some Baudelairean echoes have been attributed to you, in *The Snare*, for example.

E.S.: Well, I agree. I was trying to explore. Somebody said that was a Manichean book, to discover the positive nature of evil and find that you can live in its terms, that it doesn't extinguish life, that there's a way of finding life within it. I don't know if I'm really a philosopher or if I really believe that, but I think in the terms that Julia felt she had to follow, the idea was being tried out and developed.

There's a significant passage at the end of the book about a piece of sculpture with a figure of an animal as saint. To me that was a very significant passage. The other one was putting the mosaics together, the art together with fragments. Those two gave meaning in a kind of abstract way to everything she'd been through, and I thought they were just modestly placed there. If anybody wanted to find them, they could.

C.D.: That suggests to me that these characters who, again, are not happy with the society that most people are happy with, are kind of outsiders, and it has occurred to me that they're artists, in a way.

E.S.: Yes, they are, they're artists of their lives.

C.D.: So these two artworks that you've mentioned bring the idea that the writer or artist has to be somehow able to see everything in a way that other people perhaps...

E.S.: Don't. And there's a scene at the end of "I, Maureen" where they make that photograph. It's a cheap piece of art, but it seems to make a statement.

C.D.: It's a vision, yes.

E.S.: She burns her hand.

C.D.: When you were growing up, did you sense yourself as having some distance, as being outside in some way, from what was going on around you?

E.S.: Well, I thought it was useful, at times. I was what they call an imaginative child. I must have been a pain in the neck, but I used to make up stories all the time and try to draw things, and tell stories to people about things that never happened. My mother was always reading to me: this fueled my imaginative ideas. My father discouraged all this because he thought it was useless and extravagant, but I wrote a piece about that, too.

It was funny: Louis Rubin wrote me in Canada. He said, stop what you're doing right now and write me a piece for a book called *An Apple for My Teacher*. It was supposed to be about a teacher that had made an impression on my life, and that very day I got a letter forwarded to me from this woman I hadn't heard from in, oh, fifty years, I guess. I

thought, well, this coincidence is too much to pass up; so I wrote about her. She had come to our little town when I was in third grade. She loved to read poetry to everybody. She got us to write little things. She's ninety-seven now and blind, but still going strong.

A-M G: Michelle Gadpaille in 1988 in *The Canadian Short Story*, characterized you as a lyrical writer. Would you object to the adjective?

E.S.: No, I think I have lyrical capacity in my work. It depends on what she read. I think some of my work inclines more toward the lyrical than others, don't you or do you?

C.D.: When you were reading from "The Cousins" yesterday – after they get together, finally, when the other cousins have gone – I thought those passages were very lyrical, the long sentences and descriptions.

E.S.: Well, it was an interesting story stylistically to do because as they moved and changed, the prose could respond to all that. I enjoyed doing that story.

A-M G: According to you, is it possible to associate lyricism and comedy successfully? In "The Cousins," both elements seem to be present.

E.S.: Yes. I think in "A Southern Landscape," the elements get together very well. It's in my nature to be serio-comic. I got that maybe naturally, but maybe too from Europeans: Europeans have a lovely way when they're semi-funny and semiphilosophic. C'est la vie!

C.D.: Yesterday, during the Colloquium, there was a little argument about "The Girl Who Loved Horses" and whether she had "courted rape," whether she'd asked to be raped. I was, of course, dying to say, "Well, why don't we ask Elizabeth?"

E.S.: I know. I was afraid somebody was...

C.D.: I didn't want to put you on the spot.

E.S.: ... because I have to disagree with the critics on that. I think she did, you know. She courted danger in the same way she loved. She did love horses, and that's what got her into a lot of trouble in her marriage. She thought this kind of sweeping sexual feeling was connected in some way to his liking horses, too. But he actually wasn't measuring up, and then I think she may have been a bit suicidal.

That story came to me from a real story Evans Harrington told. He's at Ole Miss, a writer. He told me that story. It took place in Oxford, Mississippi. Well, I couldn't use Oxford very well because that means William Faulkner. I did know LaGrange well enough to have it happen up there. He said this young man worried this woman once, and she had kicked him out. He was working in the stables, and she and her husband were training horses on a farm and keeping stables there. He got in the car with her. It turned into a contest. She scared him to death; she wouldn't stop speeding, and he finally gave up. Evans said, "I thought it was such a courageous thing to do, and I'm trying to write a story about it, but I can't see how to get hold of it." So I said, "Well, Evans, don't you see, she broke him like a horse." And he suggested, "You take the story; you write it."

So I wrote it and sent it to him. I said, "Did you really mean I could have this story?" And he said, "I'm not an Indian giver, Elizabeth; it's a wonderful story." So I sent it to *The New Yorker* and they replied it was too Gothic and returned it. I sent it to *McCall's* and they wanted it. They were going to pay me, I think, five, six thousand dollars for that story. This woman wrote an ecstatic letter about it. However, she finally had to refuse it, because their editor said there was the suggestion in the story that this girl

really wanted to be raped, and that he couldn't get by with the feminists over a story like that; they'd be all over him, so...

The girl did have a weakness toward rape because she asks herself that, but then she doesn't consent. She refuses it.

She got hooked up on her husband. I think that was the delaying. She felt rather brutally toward herself in that she felt her marriage was not what she anticipated, and there was this feeling of despair mixed in that. But then at a certain point, she did assert herself and that's what it was meant to show. She almost ordered him: she wanted her children, she said. But another reader told me he interpreted that as she lost her struggle and she would just turn into being like her mother. So there must be an ambivalence in it.

Henry James' ending for the novel was that you brought people to a certain point, and then that was it. I feel it's more lifelike to say that you can't finally find the answer to everything in life. So you make it as clear as possible, the way it seems to you it happened. That is one interesting thing to me about literature: it becomes so lifelike, but you circle it in a way. I tell my students that a good story is one you can go off and meditate on, that you think back on, having read it. You look at it almost like an object.

A-M G: Please, tell me, are you a feminist?

E.S.: I don't think I'm a feminist in the sense of being very doctrinaire about it. Absolute equality is impossible because men and women are very different. I don't believe in anybody dominating another person. A lot of trouble starts with that.

J.P.: Elizabeth, can you enlighten us on what sorts of games you're playing in *The Salt Line*?

E.S.: Oh, I enjoyed writing that book. Somebody told me he couldn't read it without thinking of *The Tempest*, Prospero's idea of himself. I think that Arnie, out of personal tragedy and loss and love of other people, becomes almost a myth-figure. I guess that's what Peggy [Prenshaw] was getting at when she said he was both mothering and fathering the people around him. It's kind of mythic in that a lot of mysterious things happen. To me, the most interesting woman in it was the wife who's died and reappears. He's aware of her presence, and then he sees her once or twice. Well now, I know these things happen. I know people who have told me about things like that happening, and so I do believe that we do have these visions, the return of a person and conversations with them.

The Buddha really existed: it was in a beautiful garden that this terribly rich old lady had on the Gulf coast. She had travelled a lot, and she had a collection of oriental things: some of them were outdoor statues. She had Oriental bridges over little streams and little tea houses. And she had a Buddha, really huge and impressive, sitting on a pedestal. During storms, before that huge hurricane, the black people in the area used to come and gather in her garden and sit around the Buddha for protection, which was something I didn't put in the book. I felt sure the garden had been ruined by the hurricane, the house blown down, and the Buddha probably swept out to sea and lost. But someone came up to me after a reading and said, "That Buddha's in the backyard of the house next door." So he wasn't lost at all.

I went down there a lot, and I collected stories from everybody under the sun, and was reading in the library. Oh, they have sheaf after sheaf of clippings of real life events before, and during, and after that hurricane; so I got a lot of material that way. And

then I had friends there I talked to. So most of those incidents, like snakes in the tree, really happened.

But the whole thing of drug smuggling now, I know some of that goes on in Pascagoula, which is right down the road from the setting of the book. Those islands off the Gulf coast are said to be just like sieves, but I don't know if out from Biloxi that goes on or not. The prototype of Frank was a guy I saw in a restaurant that a friend's daughter was working for, as a way to pick up money. She knew an awful lot about him. Many of these things were just bits and pieces of lore that had a certain reality around them. I didn't invent a great deal of that book at all.

J.P.: I don't know whether you did or not. I see an awful lot of *Waste Land* imagery in here, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*.

E.S.: Scavenging and shoring up fragments.

J.P.: Also Lex reads to me like the wounded Fisher-King—the law and other ramifications, — or Arthur...

E.S.: I hadn't ever thought of that.

J.P.: Arnie is a kind of comic Lancelot, a Ferdinand, and a Percival at the same time. He's ironic with both the would-be libido and the weaknesses to go with it. He's the comic rescuer, certainly.

E.S.: I ran into a real roadblock because I don't know how it feels to be a man who's impotent. I had it built in there and I couldn't escape because with “resurrection” you immediately run into “erection.” How can you avoid it? I saw it coming, so I asked all the men I could conveniently ask, which wasn't very many. I got a whole cross-section of answers, but my husband was the funniest one. I said, how does it feel when you...? He said, it's indescribable. I thought this was great.

C.D.: But you described it.

E.S.: I guess I did my best. But I wrote that over an awful lot because I didn't feel like I was very authoritative!

J.P.: It seems to me what's even harder in the situation that you set up is that what you really have is a sex war between two men.

E.S.: Poor old Lex, he almost had a homosexual attraction to Arnie. It comes out on the island when they're together. He put his hand out to him once. Arnie didn't notice; he was not on that wavelength.

J.P.: There's this uncontrollable sexual passion, random randiness, about Arnie, even when he's impotent, even when he can't follow through. He has that kind of sexual persona and yet he's a figure of salvation. It is very effective in *The Salt Line*. Really striking.

E.S.: Yes, a salvation figure, that's true. That's what Peggy [Prenshaw] gets out of it. I suppose she's right.

There was a strange thing about those ducks in the novel. I was writing a lot of it in Montreal and going back to the Gulf coast and staying during Christmas holidays. Another place I used to wander around in the summer in Montreal was La Fontaine Park, where they have a lake and ducks. It was the day after I wrote that scene about the ducks being killed that these very ducks that had wandered into my story — I was sort of scavenging up my book like Arnie was scavenging up all kinds of things — those ducks had their throats cut.

C.D.: 'After' you wrote about it?

E.S.: Yes, and were found sprawled out by the lake. It made all the papers; they thought vandal boys had taken broken Coca-Cola bottles and cut the throats. Isn't that awful? So I felt responsible.

A-M G: I have just one more question which puzzles me. You are married to an Englishman, and you've been to England quite a lot, but Great Britain and the British don't much appear in your works.

E.S.: Oh, let's see, I haven't written any stories about England. I was thinking the other day, maybe I could. I admire many of the British writers an awful lot. But at the moment I have no audience in England. They haven't picked up my last couple of titles, so I'm not very well known there at all, but I used to be. I had good publishers, who brought out my early books up through *Ship Island*.

I admire Elizabeth Bowen a lot. Her Irish streak is very pronounced in her works. She has some wonderful supernatural touches. She's a very keen social observer, and I think her style is elegant. I met her once. Eudora and she were very good friends, and they came to see me once in Mississippi. Then other writers I admire in England are numerous, really, some of the old ones.

A-M G: You spoke about Thomas Hardy.

E.S.: Thomas Hardy was a great shaping force in my approach toward novels when I was much younger. The architecture of those novels is just beautiful. Conrad is my perennial, long time favorite, and I made a recent discovery, well in the last ten or fifteen years. I once couldn't stand Virginia Woolf. I thought she was oversensitive, and vibrated over every little thing. Then I began to read and got very fascinated and taught, in Montreal, *Mrs Dalloway*, and I thought, this is a great book. And then I like Muriel Spark a lot.

C.D.: Elizabeth, you mentioned earlier that you have a new manuscript, and that you hope to work on it this summer. Will you tell us some more?

E.S.: Just being through with my teaching years at UNC and ready to get back into work is very exciting. The two or three longish stories I've got in mind concern Southern settings, one on the Gulf coast, another in an inland town. But so far they're very much in sketchy manuscript, or altogether in my head, turning over and over, wondering how to get out. I don't at present have a novel in mind.

Each day now, I find myself like a lonely traveller at a crossroads, standing and asking, Which way? Which way? Finally you just have to choose one and keep moving. I hope that will happen soon.