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Interview with Chris Offutt

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INTERVIEW WITH CHRIS OFFUTT

Chris Offutt grew up in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Kentucky. He left at age 19 and has held over 50 jobs, all part time, in every region of America. At age 30, he attended the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. His writing includes the short-story collection *Kentucky Straight*, the memoir *The Same River Twice*, and the novel *The Good Brother*. His newest collection, *Out of the Woods*, was published in February by Simon & Schuster. He currently lives in Missoula, Montana with his wife and two children.

Let's start with what you're working on now.

It's a collection that will be a follow up to *Kentucky Straight*. All of them are set in a different part of the country: Butte, El Paso, Idaho, Missouri, New Mexico. The protagonist of each is from eastern Kentucky. Everything I write comes from the town of Blizzard, which is by Clay Creek in Eldridge County, which is a little community in the hills, a former mining community. Each protagonist has a job that I've had, and all these stories are about somebody who's from Kentucky and leaves—one joins the army and winds up going to Korea, some leave and go back to Kentucky, and some leave and stay out. They are all extremely changed by having grown up essentially in the 18th century and then leaving and entering the 20th.

Are any of them characters from Kentucky Straight?

No. I have a limited pool of individuals that I write about, but they're not the same. My wife Rita thinks that some of them are extrapolations or extensions of some of those characters in *Kentucky Straight*.

These characters in the new book all have jobs that you've had. They've also all lived in places you've lived. What are your ideas about the line between fiction and non-fiction?

I don't draw much of a line. I get mixed up as to what's what a bunch of times, but that doesn't really matter to me. All those stories are more *emotionally* autobiographical. When I write, I tend to insert what I am feeling at that moment. I'm pretty much walking around in a supercharged emotional state. I'm not doing it on purpose, but it's the case, and the writing becomes an expression of it more than anything else. So stories change from draft to draft because my state of mind changes as I work on them.

So how do you know when they're done?

Well, they're never done, really. I just give up on them. Usually I let it sit for a long time, and then I'll look at it again and I'll get intensely obsessed with the stories for a while. When I get to the point where I'm changing commas to conjunctions and conjunctions back to commas, I'm done, I'm sick of it, I hate it. This sonofabitch needs out of my house. My emotional state is pretty much one of disgust.

While writing your novel you went through an interesting process; you practically became your main character, Virgil. Could you talk a little about that?

I do that with all of them. It's just that with a short story I can become a character for a week to two weeks and then boom, it's over, nobody seeps into my life. With Virgil, I arranged airline tickets for Rita and the kids to Montana, and I drove to Kentucky and then drove from there to Montana following his route, taking notes all the way and trying to imagine leaving Kentucky for the first time as Virgil, not really knowing where he's going. I knew, of course, that he was going to wind up in Montana, but he didn't know. I rented a cabin up Rock Creek where I could go write, which Virgil goes and lives in. I grew my hair to my shoulders and grew a big beard and dressed the way he dressed and became him in many ways. In Rock Creek I kept a journal—a Virgil journal—that I used in the book. I had reconstructive knee surgery, so Virgil gets terribly wounded in the knee and has to go through the same process I had to go through—learning to walk

again. And he meets a woman who is similar to Rita, who has two children modeled after my two kids.

I guess it all was supposed to make it easier to write. I was intimidated and scared by it and had failed in three prior attempts, so I was utterly determined to complete a novel at all costs, and it was a high cost. We went broke during the writing of it. We sold our couch here in Missoula for 60 smackeroos. I told my editor, "You all have to give me some more money than this. We're running out of money." Their idea of solving financial problems means eating out less. When I told them that I had sold my couch, they realized the situation.

What emotional state were you in when you became Virgil?

Well, Virgil is a guy who is utterly withdrawn and hides himself, he concocts a new identity. But you see, that's where the idea came from—*my* identity had changed drastically. In about a two-year period I went from a guy who couldn't hold a job or a girlfriend to having a wife and children and books in print. How I saw myself, my place in the world, my responsibility, the worlds that were evidently open to me, it all changed. And I had a hard time with it, I really had a very hard time. I wanted to write about it but I thought it would be pretty boring: a guy who has a baby and is a father and gets a book in print. What the hell? It's not very dramatic, so I made Virgil be someone who changed his identity. He became Joe Tiller, moved to Montana, got a false identification and recreated his life. And, of course, the past catches up with him. I think the past always has a tremendous impact on the present.

Another thing I wanted to do with Virgil was explore the whole cliché Kentucky feud mentality. *Kentucky Straight* was just about the cliché of the simple or the ignorant—that all these people are ignorant but happy, which is all bullshit, because I've never known any ignorant and happy people. These "simple" folks are incredibly complicated, like people everywhere.

You've said this novel is part of a trilogy. What comes next?

The next book will be a precursor to the first. It will be about the

brother, Boyd, who was shot prior to the opening of *The Good Brother*. It's about identity again, a common theme for me. This one will be about issues I'm having right now. I'm thirty-nine years old and Boyd will be about that age, and the world has changed drastically since I was a young man—in politics, attitudes about sex, manhood—and I wanted to address my concerns with someone who is a wildman outlaw, who hasn't been incarcerated or found religion or gotten married. His youth is pretty much over but there's not a clear path for him, unless he makes one of these big moves, which he's reluctant to do. This will reflect to a certain extent on my life. I mean, for the past two years I've been teaching college—which for me is like becoming a *citizen*. Before this my jobs were dishwasher and truck driver, so I'm no longer on the fringe of society. But the difference is I love it, I enjoy this place, but Boyd will never have that opportunity to find out; he's going to get himself in a lot of trouble.

The other reason I write about identity is because the world I grew up in is no longer there. It was a community that had flourished in the '20s and '30s and declined in the '50s and just remained there. I don't have a home place. I'm essentially an educated hillbilly, and there really is no such thing in this world.

I've seen a lot of writers explore issues of identity, but not to the extreme of becoming their own characters.

Yeah. Part of it was I studied theater in college. I wanted to be an actor; I thought it would be a great way to meet girls. It wasn't. I think it's an easy thing for me to do—becoming a character. I always wanted to be something else. But like I said, it takes a toll. It took a toll on my wife; she just didn't like old Virgil. When I finished the book she was glad. She said I had been grumpy for three years. In fact, she's really behind writing about Boyd, he's a lot more fun.

Your characters are usually pretty ready to escape their surroundings—those of Kentucky. Do you ever think about returning there to work?

I'd like to. That's the third book in the trilogy—Virgil has survived what he gets involved in and will return. It will be interest-

ing. I'm already planning for it, assuming I'm still teaching college. I'll go back home for the summer. I'll go there as Virgil going home and take a lot of notes and then leave and begin writing that novel.

Did you always know Kentucky was your source?

Oh yeah. It took me a long time to get the courage to write about it, and to figure out how to write about it. I knew that I didn't want to squander my material by learning how to write through it—I didn't want to just use that up. I wrote science fiction, mysteries, plays, stuff that had nothing to do with me. I knew that if I had the courage I would do it, and I did.

Courage to not screw up your presentation of these people?

No, courage to face that stuff on my own, emotional courage to address the place I came from, what it was, what the world was, how it made me, and how it made me different. I didn't fit in growing up in eastern Kentucky, at all. I was the odd man out, like many writers. However, I'm the odder man out anywhere else. I fit in less in the rest of America than I fit in at home. The place I fit in the most is Missoula, really.

Why is that?

Out-of-work, lower-class working people, pretty much. Railroad workers, miners, loggers. I understand that mentality, that culture. That's mine, but it's a little different. It's like 100 years later. Kentucky's still 100 years back. Plus there's bookstores here. There're no bookstores in the hills.

Did The Same River Twice start as a novel or did you launch into a memoir?

That didn't start as a novel or a memoir, that started as me sitting in a rooming house in Boston in 1984, thinking, *How the hell did I end up in a rooming house?* This was not what I thought would happen when I left home, hitchhiked to New York City to be an

actor. I wasn't going to be alone in a rooming house, in a strange town, with no friends, no girlfriend, certainly no acting career. And what I had was piles and piles of loose-leaf spiral-bound notebooks in which I'd written incredibly extensive diaries. I would sit down three or four times a day and write in longhand as fast as I could. I don't know why. It was the only thing I could do, really, that made sense of the world. I was always trying to do something else.

One time I took up photography because I had read that Hemingway had a hobby and that he wrote about fishing and hunting, so I thought, *I don't really have any hobbies. I should have a hobby so I can write about it.* I decided to write about why photography was a great art form and why it was a better art form than writing, which is, of course, stupid. Essentially I was using language to talk myself out of using language. I got rid of the camera. I said, *I've got to see what I'm doing here,* and suddenly light bulbs went off—it was like, *Hell, I'm writing. That's what I'm doing.* And I always wanted to be something else. So I took all these notebooks and said, *I'll make sense of my life with this.*

I wrote the first draft—essentially about the subjects that hurt me the most, or the most colossal error I had ever made, and I wound up with 600 pages of painful mistakes. Then I cut out all the old girlfriends, because it wasn't fair to them that they were stuck with me, and I cut out a lot of self-pity and whiny stuff and my grand theories on the world, and then I put it away and went to Iowa and wrote *Kentucky Straight*, and then after that I didn't know what to do. I was sick of writing Kentucky stuff, so I went back to that against everybody's advice. They said, *Man, you can't go back,* so I went back. I was working on it one day, on the computer. (My aunt had given me this computer. I didn't really know how to use it; in fact, I still don't know how to use it very well.) I found 60 pages of notes I had taken during Rita's pregnancy, sort of coming up from the bowels of the computer, and I realized, *My god, this...* I knew that *The Same River Twice* lacked a context. It was anecdotal. What's that called?

A picaresque.

Yeah, a picaresque. Essentially it was a bad *On the Road*. I needed

a context and I realized this pregnancy would work. Rita was pregnant with the second baby, so it was utter delirium. It was the happiest two years of my life, really. We were living in the three-room cabin heated by wood on the river and I was working anywhere from 12 to 15 hours a day on the manuscript, trying all sorts of different techniques for structure. Then I hit upon the stages of pregnancy. Rita's a very tranquil pregnant lady, she's just gloriously happy pregnant, and I was a blithering idiot. So that's how *The Same River Twice* came about. None of that was ever supposed to be in print. It was all me trying to make sense out of pregnancy and me trying to make sense out of this past—how I wound up in this rooming house.

Did someone come along and say "This needs to be in print"?

Actually, this woman came and took it out of my house. She worked for a publishing agency in New York and came to town to visit some old high-school friend, and I said *Hey, New York agent, cool*, and I just drove her around for a couple of days and told her all these stories. She said, *What are you working on*, and I said, *I've got a manuscript based on all these stories I'm telling you*, and she said, *Can I have it*, and I said, *No*. And so I went and told Rita and she said, *You know, Chris, if you don't give it when you've got somebody asking for it you're never gonna get rid of it*. And I said, *I don't want to get rid of it, it's not for the world*. But the agent finally came and took it, and I didn't even give her the last couple of pages because I wanted to see if she was going to read it.

These days non-fiction is becoming incredibly popular, particularly memoirs. Do you think this trend is affecting fiction? Where do you think fiction is going?

I struggle with these things all the time. Certainly right now non-fiction is the fad, but I think like all fads it'll fade. Part of it is our culture. Look at TV, those true cop shows. I think American culture has gotten to the point where our reality is more intense than our fiction, because our country is experiencing a lot of turmoil right now, we're really having a hard time living here, and the intensity of existence in the cities is reflecting this. Sports are

enjoying enormous popularity right now because they're the great escape. And cable, MTV, they're all having huge influences on our country—negative influences.

The thing is, most people lead pretty simple lives. For me, I get up, I work, I play with my children, I eat, I do errands, I talk to my wife, I try to spend a little time alone, I go to bed, and I think our culture is telling people that's wrong. We always want to revere people other than our neighbor, our mom or our children or our teachers or the postman. It's always the sports hero or some fogey on TV. And the publishing industry picks up on that. You go to a bookstore and there're tons of books by non-writers—TV celebrities, sports stars.

I think this new non-fiction is a response to that. I think this is like, *Hey, I'm me, remember? I am an individual, I have a unique story.* There's also some attempt at busting up what's happening in literature. This century saw Hemingway and Joyce and not much in between these two; most writers follow one or the other, some mix it, and a few writers are really trying to attack it. But look at me—I'm at the point where I say, where am I now, in the 20th century? I feel like my stuff is firmly entrenched in the grand tradition of American narrative realism, and of poor white people in the south, and there's a huge precedent for that. I don't just want to find myself in 30 years writing Chris Offutt stories. I see other writers in the latter parts of their careers—they became good doing something in their 20's and 30's and they began essentially copying themselves, and I'm terrified of that. Do I want to build on this tradition, or do I want to try to bust out of it? I don't know. The only way I know how to look at it is Bob Dylan. In '64 Dylan was a troubadour, a great folk hero of the people, and then he went to the Newport jazz festival.

He plugged in.

He plugged in and blew everybody out of the water. He changed music. Now, I don't know if I could change literature (laughs). But I'd like to make a move forward for myself and my own writing as bold as Bob Dylan's electrified guitar.

Could you tell us about that move?

No. I really don't know what to do with it. I have one idea and I'm not even sure I'm doing it. Denis Johnson did it with *Jesus' Son*; there's a woman named Joanna Scott who writes really really terrific short stories. David Foster Wallace is pushing things around a bit, but he's sort of coming out of that Joycean/*Gravity's Rainbow*/T. S. Eliot kind of movement. I don't see him as innovative as his predecessors were.

Kentucky Straight had a strong kind of folk magic presence. It seemed like something you were pushing. Not in the extreme of magical realism, but there's definitely a strong sense of natural power at work, a mystic power. Do you see this move as pushing that further?

Hell, I didn't even know it was there till guys like you came along and told me that. I'm serious! It was just... What I was expressing in some of those stories were... Many of them were written when Rita was pregnant and the world was a very powerful place for me. It was mystical time—this creation of life—a potent and genuine period. Rita calls the stuff I did “mythistical.” I don't think I have written that way since.

You don't see it coming back?

Not now. I don't really foresee too much. I don't really know what's going to happen. I have big plans for a third book of short stories where I was going to electrify my acoustic guitar, but I've got a little more work to do and I can't talk about that.

I was talking with someone once about why experimental writing got popular in the '60s and early '70s... It didn't really fizzle out, but people lost interest. This person was saying it was because fiction is such a critical art form. We use stories to define our lives. And if you fuck around with it, people are going to get irritated.

When I write, I'm going to fail three out of four stories, that's my average. I love stories, and that's what I am, essentially, a storyteller. But once you start messing around with conventional narrative and start experimenting... instead of three out of four, you're seven out of eight. That's why it was short-lived. It is

possible to be innovative without messing with conventional narrative form. Denis Johnson does it so well with his stories that I want to just take an ax to my computer. What am I doing writing short stories?

The thing that gets me is if you look at the history of music or history of art, the thing about each generation of artists is they do two things at once. They're building on what preceded them and they utterly attack it, and we can't really do that with writing. We can't because the book itself is an ancient art, it has not changed. We're trapped by narrative in a way; it's got to have a beginning, middle, and end. The act of reading is linear: you sit down and progress through time, you evolve with the text and at the end of things you have progressed, interacting with language.

What I'm doing is looking at the disenfranchised and marginalized. I read a lot of Indian writers, Chicano writers. I tried reading magical realism and I didn't go for it too much. I'm sure it's hard to write, but it's easy to have shit happen with no basis in reality. Like, when in doubt, have a giant chicken walk through the door. There's a Cuban-American that's interesting, Junot Diaz. I was really thrilled to read his stuff because it's not so much an attack, but it's coming at such a different angle that's so fresh. I'm also reading myth like crazy. If you look at Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, she took one of the great Shakespearean plays and added alcoholism and child abuse, two of the current bugaboos, and made it into a pretty good book.

So what are you reading right now?

I tell you, I hate that question. I've probably had 25 interviews where people ask me that and I feel like I've got to say something really profound and cutting edge. I can't tell them I'm rereading Sherwood Anderson and *Rock Springs* concurrently because I went to see a reading by Richard Ford up at Great Falls, and I asked him if he ever came to Missoula, and he said no, that he liked Great Falls, and I asked how come, and he said, *Well, it's my Winesburg*, and he said Anderson is one of his masters. So I went home and started rereading those two together and it was amazing. You can see the influences. So that's what I'm reading.

I feel embarrassed that I'm rereading, but it's interesting to me. I'll be done in a week.

Why do you feel embarrassed?

Because I'm rereading and I feel like I don't have much time. There is so much to read and there're so many books I haven't read, and there're so many poets I want to read. I hate to admit that I'm rereading rather than pushing forward, that's all.

I hear that's common practice for writers.

Rereading? Really?

Yeah.

I didn't know that. I need to join a Writers Anonymous group so I can know it's okay.

What about Montana writers?

Well, Kentucky was a frontier state. It remained isolated by geography for almost 200 years until they built an interstate when I was a child and connected east Kentucky to the rest of the world. And even with that, even though there were slight inroads, the foothills maintained a frontier mentality, more so than the rest of the country, except maybe Montana. The writers from here have the closest mentality to how I grew up and the culture I'm from—the story I'm a part of. *The Big Sky* is a great, great book, it's one of my faves. The protagonist's name is Caudill—Boone Caudill—same last name as Virgil and Boyd. And he goes from Kentucky to Montana and gets himself in a lot of trouble.

Did you have ideas about Montana when you were a kid?

I had ideas about everything when I was kid. I mean, I had a... I don't remember. It was a big blur of the woods, really. I had an unusual childhood. There were eight of us boys on the hill and the only rule we had was be home for supper at six. Before we

could come in to eat my mother would make us take our clothes off in the backyard and hose us down. It was a phenomenal kind of childhood. In fact, that's what Rita has suggested—that's what my characters struggle with and what I struggle with: freedom. I was so free as a child in such a very safe, pure world, and the rest of my life has had less and less freedom. There's no way to have as much freedom. And that's where Boyd's at—how does a man who's had more freedom than anybody ever achieve that joy again?

The only place I can find it is writing. Writing is what offers me more freedom and joy and flights of fancy and pure ecstasy than any other activity.