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Interview with William Kittredge

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INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM KITTRIDGE

*William Kittredge was born in Oregon in 1932 and grew up on his family's rural ranch. After attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1968-1969, Kittredge joined the faculty at the University of Montana, where he founded CutBank and taught for 27 years. Bill had taught his last class the day before I spoke with him. He had a golf game at ten, so we met at eight a.m. and had coffee next door to the copy shop where he had just dropped off his latest manuscript, *Reimagining Desire*, to be photocopied before sending it to his editor. We sat at an outdoor table. It was the first spring day in Missoula.*

You've just finished your last class. How are you feeling about retirement?

Well, I'm feeling real good about retirement. I may get morose later on, but so far I'm handling it. Probably that's because there are lots of things to do coming up. I'm going to France tomorrow for a writers' conference, then to Hungary where Annick [Smith] is doing a piece for *Islands Magazine*, then I'll have thousands of hours of revisions on the manuscript I just dropped off. In October, I'm going down to Oregon to write about the Klamath River, which is like a microcosm for all the ails of the Northwest, and also it's where I went to high school. It's a great story. Also in October, I've got to fly back and drive the hundredth meridian from Canada to Texas, which sounded like more fun at the time than it does as it actually gets closer. I looked at the map, and there's *nothing* at the hundredth meridian. The biggest town is about three hundred people, you know, so it's very rural. I asked Annick if she wanted to go and she said, "Well..." She's hemming and hawing, and if I don't get her to go I'm going to be all alone at the hundredth meridian. So that carries me through almost a year, until mid-March, and then God knows.

How has Missoula, and the West, changed since you founded CutBank when you first began to teach, in 1969?

Missoula's very different—it's become more upscale. I mean, we're sitting here drinking espresso in a nice little shop on Higgins Avenue. I had never had a cup of espresso before I founded *CutBank*, and nor had anybody else in Missoula that I knew! Missoula was a little logging town with a university connected to it when I came here. And yet it's getting to be a lot better town in ways. I think it's a lot more diverse. You can still go down to the blue-collar bars, like the Trail's End—places I used to go when I went to bars a lot—and they haven't changed any. More amenities, and that's nice. I wish they'd figure out how to have a really good restaurant some way or another!

What is it about Missoula that attracts writers?

Historical accident, mostly. There's a whole history, of course. H.G. Merriam came here in 1920 and started the first Creative Writing program in the West, the second in the country (after Harvard). He started the first literary magazine in the West, called *Frontier and Midland*. He published Stegner and Guthrie, and he really worked for fifty or sixty years encouraging writers in Montana. In 1946, there was Leslie Fiedler. Then Dick Hugo came in 1964. Hugo's first class had Rick DeMarinis, Jim Welch, and a bunch of other people in it, and James Crumley came in 1966. I came in 1969, and slowly there's just more and more writers here. It's a good town! It's fun, it's pleasant, lot of variety. On the same day you can go to a dance recital and the Trail's End bar. They're ten blocks apart and it's like changing worlds. That's one of the things that I've always like about Missoula, that you're not stuck.

I've heard you say that fiction isn't connecting to readers anymore. You point out a problem of technique—the relationship of the writer to the reader. Is nonfiction more reader-friendly, do you think?

Nonfiction right now is much closer to poetry. It works like

poetry. It's like you're having a conversation with somebody about *maybe this is possible*. It's conjectural. Fiction is basically not conjectural. For instance, a Raymond Carver story just says, "This is what happened." Good nonfiction says, "This is sort of what happened, though maybe it got fucked up in the storytelling, blah, blah, blah."

Do you think that says something about our society, that we're not willing to make that leap anymore?

Yes. This is a very ironic, postmodern society. Every time I read fiction, in some way or another I think, *Oh horseshit*, you know? And a lot of nonfiction I read—like Jon Krakauer writing about the expedition to Everest—I don't think, *Oh horseshit* very often. I think if Jon Krakauer were writing a *novel* about an expedition to Everest, I would be thinking, *Oh horseshit*.

But I don't think it necessarily has to be that way at all. I think Milan Kundera transcends all that perfectly. Garcia Marquez is writing about another culture, and we're willing to say, *yeah, OK*. But what about our own culture? You'd have a lot of trouble trying to do magical realism in Missoula. As soon as any American starts seeing ghosts, we kind of check out. We say, "Oh, sure, ghosts." I think it's about the relationship of belief in the reader. We just have a very hard time believing when somebody presents us with a fiction that says, "This is true, this is the real thing," or it's supposed to be--not *true*, but an object you're supposed to believe in without horseshit. Because a nonfiction writer (a good one) says, "No, you should question this all the time. I'm full of shit, watch me." And the poets are saying the same thing. Again and again, the best nonfiction writers don't come out of fiction or nonfiction programs, they come out of poetry programs. It's the same forum—a kind of conjecturing about the world. Pulling down the wall.

Where do you see fiction headed?

Probably in that same direction, towards nonfiction. When I was in graduate school, I worked with Bob Coover. And Coover

said directly to the class, "We're reinventing the narrative. We're reinventing the whole thing." And it turned out that the people who rejuvenated narrative were people like Tom Wolfe and all the new journalists. They started telling narratives that counted. And now you can pick up any copy of *Harper's* and there's seven articles and maybe one story, maybe none. Or *The Atlantic*, or *The New Yorker*. Fiction will have a huge resurgence, I'm sure, in ten or fifteen years; somebody will figure out fictional storytelling.

Another reason why fiction is on bad times is that it doesn't address most of the problems that really concern us. What fiction traditionally addresses is love affairs. And at my age, really, I couldn't give a shit. I'm tired of busted affair stories! I worry about money and firewood and all those things that novels by Dickens used to attack. Somebody pointed out once that Faulkner and Dickens were the same writer. They're both generally complaining about being turned away from the big house, from the mansion on the hill, not allowed to get in, and they spend the rest of their lives seeking justice, trying to get even with the rich people.

What about the need to escape, though, by picking up a novel? Picking up a statement about our environment is not going to serve that need.

That's true. The hardest books to sell right now in New York are environmental books and books about Vietnam. Someone once said, "It's like having bumper tattooed on your forehead!" People want to escape, people want to go off in another world, another time, and the trouble with a lot of serious fiction is that it's almost by definition difficult.

You've made the comment that writers early in their careers work in a social storytelling mode, and later in their careers work in a religious storytelling mode. How does your work relate to that paradigm?

I'm trying to tell myself a story about why I should enjoy being alive and not be afraid of dying. I mean, I'm 64, and it becomes

a little more apparent on the horizon. I'm saying it's a hell of a deal we've got here, and in some way that's religious. That's what I'm trying to do with this manuscript I'm getting photocopied next door. What we mustn't do is to allow all this other stuff to descend on us like a great miasmatic fog. For Christ's sake, look at this, how bad is this? In one of those books, I think *Hole in the Sky*, I have a quote which is, "paradise is all around you, can you not see it?" Of course that ignores endless political injustice, unhappiness, sadness, sure, despair...on and on. But it is, in a sense, all around us.

One of the problems with society is that there are specialized roles like stockbrokers, for instance, which give you permission, when you go to work, to be as selfish as possible all day long. And that's not very good for society.

But doesn't the writers' role also give license to be selfish? To be drunk all the time, for example, and to screw up relationships?

When I first came here we always used to sit around and say, "God Bless Dylan Thomas, he paved the ground for all of us." He was a terrible drunk, we were all drunk all the time. The graduate students are very conservative now. Christ almighty, when I first came here it was an endless bacchanal—it's a miracle anybody got anything done.

But being drunk is something to hide in. The guy who really broke the ground was Coleridge, "disassociation of the sensibilities is a sacred thing," you know? Take drugs, get drunk, and see. It's a political role: writers want to see freshly, and they don't think they can see freshly through the same old eyes that everybody sees through, so they want new eyes. Which is the same as saying, "Let's get drunk all the time." The only problem with that is a lot of the time, the only thing you see is spooks and ghosts. You can see freshly without that. You can disassociate your sensibilities in all sorts of other ways. Mostly what you do when you're drinking all the time is just sit around with a hangover. Believe me, I've tried that mode, a lot. It's a great place to go hide, to go play.

I love games. I play golf now, all the time, and the thing I

like about it best is that I go out there and I never have a literary thought! I'm playing with guys who are mostly retired, and one guy who's a professional gambler. They're sweet guys, really nice guys, and once in a while one of them will say, "Well, Bill, still writing those books?" and I'll say, "Yup," and they'll say, "Isn't that something."

Do you think melodramatic people are drawn to writing, or do writers become melodramatic?

I think writers get away with murder. Like, hey, we're supposed to be this way, so we can do whatever we want. And probably writers do, in fact (if they're any good) see freshly, and do see through all the pretense that goes on. I don't know many writers who partake in the Missoula high society, for example, because they think that's dumb. It's a lot of pretense, a lot of status stuff, all this class stuff, writers just won't take part in most of that. They say that's bullshit and walk away. But writers encourage each other too.

Richard Ford's wife: she's pretty melodramatic, but she's down to earth too. She won't put up with his antics. She's really practical and she's really smart. Richard will start in in the morning, and Christina will be cooking something and he'll be going on and on and she will look over her shoulder and say, "Oh, Richard, for Christ's sake, pull up your socks!"

You're considered a gifted and inspiring teacher. What makes a good teacher, do you think?

Well, the thing I learned after a while is you don't try to fake it. If you don't know, just say so. And try to treat the writers' intentions as if they were sacred. In other words, don't try to teach people to write stories like you write, or to think like you think, or to be like you. Try to encourage them to figure out who they are. I don't think anybody can teach anybody how to write; I think all you can do is help people teach themselves. I always say it's a whole discipline made up of tips, you know? And you can save people time, you can say try this, or revise this, or think about this while you're doing it, but they've got

to go do it themselves. If they're ever going to be any good, they're not going to write like you or like anybody else, and what you've got to do is encourage them to get their ducks in a row. When you find your subject matter—your real obsession, your way of telling—then you're set.

I do think that in America, there's this theater that we act out, over and over and over again—the drama of masculine sadness, masculine loss—and we're so used to it that we buy it automatically. Meanwhile, we're used to women writing sentimental romances or something, and we interpret it differently. We're putting a different spin on each one of them. That's probably true in this society; it's unfair but it's true. I think you follow your nose and find the stuff that's yours.

Ray Carver always wrote great stories; he'd send them to me—Xerox copies—and I couldn't believe it when Ray got famous. I thought, *For God's sake, what's going on? Why Ray?* He's a wonderful writer and a wonderful friend, but I could not account for why Americans, particularly young Americans, were so bewitched by the voice. And people were, everywhere. Annick's kids, when they were 12 and 13, would read Ray Carver stories and be knocked dead by them.

Raymond Carver was a lucky person. Early on he found a way of telling the story he was good at telling. It's like, *bingo!* He could do that when he was 20, 21, 22, and he worked hard, but for a lot of people, that takes a long time. It sure did for me. Christ, I was in my forties before I figured out that I could write these essays, and I've had better luck with them than fiction, probably because I was always didactic in fiction. I was talking to David James Duncan last night and telling him I was going to go back to writing fiction—like Kundera essayistic novels. And he said, "That interests me too—that's a form I really can work with."

I can't write stories like Richard Ford, like *Rock Springs*. You have to recognize what it is that you can do. With students, you have to encourage them to go their direction, whatever weird thing it is—where their writing comes alive. Encourage them to look at those moments and say, "Why does this come alive?" I think Ray found a way to do that all the time. Basically,

what worked for him was writing about himself and Maryann, his first wife. His first published story was "The Student's Wife," and it's about he and Maryann in Chico, and it was published when he was a junior at Chico State. It's a perfect Ray Carver story. Of course, his teacher was John Gardener at the time, so...

You often talk about the need for each writer to find his or her own story. What's your story?

Oh, I guess it's the story about growing up in eastern Oregon, my childhood there. It was a place that was like paradise familiar. We owned a huge acreage, and we didn't have any idea there was anybody else in the world. The nearest town was roughly the size of Hamilton, Montana—smaller than Hamilton—and it was 40 miles away over a range of mountains. There's no law out there, no nothing, literally. The deputy sheriff might come out once every six months and drive around, killing time. People took care of themselves. The way in was the way out. There was no way to go on through, at that time. That turned into agribusiness, that kind of thing, commodified commercial enterprise that was finally hard on people, hard on the land, hard on the animals, hard on everything and it was very exploited, finally. And you get disenchanted. When I first started writing, I always wanted to celebrate the people I had known, but eventually I turned from writing celebrations to kind of lamentations (that kind of masculine story we were talking about), and then to writing essays which are really cautionary tales: *watch out for this*. But now I'm going back the other way.

Why do you think you're "going back the other way"?

I want to make something that isn't an argument, that isn't a complaint. I want to do something that celebrates the world. I'm having a good time—I'm having a *great* time—and I want to say, "Well, this is great. If we can treat each other nicely and decently and fairly, justly, we could all have a hell of a good time." You know? It's just that everybody trashes each other.

Do you have any advice for the next generation of writers?

Find your obsessions and follow them. Be outraged about the things you're outraged about.

Lastly, what is your favorite book?

Oh, Christ, I don't know. I have hundreds.

Later, in the English office, Bill hailed me:

Amanda! Amanda! You know that book question? Whitman. Whitman, that's good stuff.