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"It's better if you let it sit and wait a while": An Interview with Elizabeth Spencer

Marcel Arbeit

1 The interview took place in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in January 2009. An excerpt from it was previously published in Czech translation in *A2*, no. 17 (2011): 8.

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2 Marcel Arbeit: Your novella *The Light in the Piazza* was recently adapted into a Broadway musical, and it was a huge success. How did the project start, and what share did you have in it? Did they allow you to influence its shape?

3 Elizabeth Spencer: Oh, they were very very open and friendly towards me from the very first moment. It started about 1998; my agent called me when I was just coming to New York, and he said that there was a young man interested in doing a musical version of *The Light in the Piazza*. "Could you see him in New York?" Well, the only time I had on the short visit was breakfast, so he came to the hotel and we went out to breakfast and talked. He is a very attractive young man, who looks a lot younger than he actually is; his name is Adam Guettel; he's the grandson of the famous composer Richard Rodgers of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Even though he looked like a young boy, he had already done a well-received musical about Floyd Collins. Floyd Collins was a famous guy who got trapped in a mountain cave in Kentucky, in 1925, and died, but not before he had two weeks of conversation with the rescue team, which was broadcast on radio to everybody. The story has attracted a good many people; even Robert Penn Warren wrote a novel called *The Cave*, vaguely based on it, and Adam made a musical version. He had also done a lot of occasional pieces that were collected on a CD and when I heard those when I got home, I really liked them. Adam always took me to lunch when I was in New York. But he told me once that he could do the lyrics and he could do the music but he couldn't do the book, I mean, take my book to the stage, write a dialog,

but then he met this young man, Craig Lucas, who's a pretty well-known playwright. And Craig loved the story, loved the idea, and loved Adam's music, so he undertook to write the script. When they got together, it just soared after that. They gave an opening performance, I think in 2003, in Seattle. When I went out there to see it, it obviously needed a lot of work, but I saw that they were on the right track because the music was lovely.

4 MA: How did reviewers and viewers accept it?

5 ES: When it went to Chicago, all the critics flew out there to hear it but we still didn't think it would ever open in New York. It's a rather sweet story in many respects; it's romantic and the brassy nature of most things that succeeded as musicals on Broadway is completely out of character with what they had developed. Finally they got the stage Adam wanted, because of the acoustic properties, at the Vivian Beaumont Theater in Lincoln Center, and it opened there, I think it was 2005 by then. They were supposed to run it for about two months, and it ran for over a year! Everybody went crazy about it; some of the reviewers were kind of hesitant but, on the whole, people liked it a lot. John Lahr reviewed it for the *New Yorker* when it was still in Chicago, and he was crazy about it. He's a very fine reviewer for the theater. There was another man, Frank Rich; now he writes political columns but he used to be a theater reviewer and he's a friend of Adam's mother and I think he helped them a good deal with the staging, when it got to New York. Then it went on a national tour. I was just simply amazed how this old story, written in about 1959 and published in the *New Yorker* in 1960, suddenly came to life again! I think it's remarkable.

6 MA: Were there any performances in the South?

7 ES: They had it in Winston-Salem recently; they sent a car over here for me. And it's playing now in isolated production companies; they did a few weeks in Houston and they're going to have it in Memphis and in Jackson, Mississippi.

8 MA: Have they planned to go abroad?

9 ES: Yes, it's going to be in England this year.

10 MA: But even before that, the novella had a cinematic life of its own; there is Guy Green's film from 1962.

11 ES: Yeah, it was made into a movie that I thought was rather appealing. It had a very good cast. Olivia de Havilland played the *mamma*. It was rather charming but that was long ago and I'm sure most people had forgotten it. Besides, the boys that created this musical didn't want to do anything with the movie. They wanted just my text. They said: "Just your story." And so that was the way they proceeded, which was very flattering. They used a lot of my lines and they didn't change the plot too much.

12 MA: I think some other works of yours have also been optioned by filmmakers.

13 ES: There was an option, not only an option but a contract for *The Voice at the Back Door*. But something happened in Hollywood at the last minute and it was never used.

14 MA: When was it?

15 ES: Oh, the book was published in 1956 and the movie contract was, I think, 1956, too, something like that.

16 MA: What about *The Night Travellers*? That novel would make a good film.

17 ES: No, that one never was. But *The Salt Line* was. A man wrote a script in Montreal but he never could get Canadians interested in producing a movie about the Mississippi

Gulf Coast, so he gave up. But somebody in Mississippi now has that script and is interested in doing the movie. Then there was the story of mine called "The Cousins." That was optioned for a movie for three years but they couldn't raise the money. You see, these things come and go, so I always downplay them. I see it probably won't happen and, you know, most of the time it doesn't. You have to do a great many things, you have to get backing from the right people, the money it takes is frightening. (*laughs*) Right now money is rather hard to come by. So that's all, except that I got a great deal of joy out of seeing the production of *The Light in the Piazza*. And you asked me what input I had. Not much, except sometimes I would tell them they were getting something about Italy wrong because I did live in Italy for five years and so I do know enough about Italian ways that I could correct that, and, just very occasionally, I had some things to tell them I thought were wrong. But they were very receptive to all that. I enjoyed it very much because when I sold that thing to the movies, they went off and made the movie without asking me anything. It seems like movies operate differently from drama because it was as if I didn't exist. But maybe other writers have different experiences.

18 MA: Now they are making a documentary about you, which is the other side.

19 ES: Yeah, that's right. You should talk to Sharon Swanson, the producer, about that. I didn't have anything to do with that, except tell them that I would do whatever they wanted. They took me down to Mississippi; they've been here in Chapel Hill several times. The director is coming back in March, and they want to go to *The Light in the Piazza* when it comes off in Mississippi. They're supposed to show some of the documentary at the next meeting of the Fellowship of Southern Writers in Chattanooga; that's in April. If they want to go through that much time and trouble, I hope it turns out well. They wanted the whole background of my upbringing and all... They're going to call it *Landscapes of the Heart: The Elizabeth Spencer Story*. You know... [Note: The documentary, directed by Rebecca Cerese, had its world premiere on September 7, 2013, at the Rome International Film Festival.]

20 MA: Yes, of course, and this brings me to your autobiography. Once you said that a person belongs where he or she lived before the age of six. Is this why, even though you lived in Canada for twenty-eight years, you have never considered yourself a Canadian writer? Or at least part southern and part Canadian?

21 ES: No, as I never became a Canadian citizen. But I must say for the Canadians that they were very hospitable to me and it's been a record of a lot of people who came there from elsewhere, that the Canadians welcome your talent and I do think that's good. They took me in as a writer, but not as a Canadian writer, because they all knew that I was southern. In the United States, we tend to pressure people not just to learn English, but become American, which is something you didn't have to do in Canada.

22 MA: But some of your stories appeared in *Best Canadian Stories*.

23 ES: The stories that appeared there were published in different Canadian magazines and I had lived there long enough to feel some confidence in writing about a Canadian person or subject. By the way, one of my Canadian stories, "I, Maureen," was also made into a movie but it never did anything; people who saw it said it was a terrible movie.

24 MA: I think "I, Maureen" is a very cinematic story and there are many Canadian filmmakers who might be able both to get the rich plot to the viewers and at the same time to capture its beautiful existentialist mood.

25 ES: Lots of people like that story. I can't tell when something I've written is going to touch people and be popular or not. It seems to me that nobody ever thinks of making a movie of my best stories, and then something else will turn up that will be appealing for them in that way. There must be a crossing point that I myself don't understand. That a movie person reading one thing would not see it as a movie, whereas when they read other things, they do see them as movies. That's a gift I lack.

26 MA: But you definitely have an enormous gift for writing short stories. You were good at it from the very beginning.

27 ES: You think so?

28 MA: In fact, people usually go through several phases. You had different periods; in one you were a bit darker than usual, but one can always recognize a story of yours at any time; you don't even have to put your name there.

29 ES: Really? That's wonderful. It's pleasing to hear.

30 MA: I suppose it is not a rational decision; writing stories seems to me to be simply your way of life.

31 ES: I don't know. I was trying to clean out some things the other day and I found a whole leather thing stuffed tight with stories that I wrote when I was in grammar school. You know, I just started out writing. I think the reason is—it's all in my memoir —my mother. When I was little, before I could read, she read me a whole lot of things and I loved having her read to me. And I loved the stories that she read. Greek myths, the Bible, King Arthur, I just ate it up. So later, when I was trying to write myself, I naturally started writing fairy stories and stuff like that.

32 MA: Was there anything from popular culture that particularly influenced you in the early years or later? In one of your stories fantasy comics play an important role, and in another one you mention *Nancy Drew*.

33 ES: Just things you pick up in... You don't set out as a writer to gather material, at least I never have, but some things appeal and stick in your mind and so they come out in your writing. There is a recent story of mine called "Sightings." It came out in *Hudson Review* in spring 2008 and it's already in an anthology. There is a man who accidentally got nearly blinded because of his little daughter. He was fixing a CD player for her, and she accidentally plugged it into a socket, it blazed in his eyes, and he had to wear very thick glasses from that time on. But the thing that started me out was a friend of mine, from an Italian group I go to, in order to read, who showed up with one of those big magnifying glasses, and I asked her: "What on earth is that?" She said that after she found out that her eyes were bad, it became very helpful in reading printed poems and other texts. That started me thinking about people with damaged vision. This is how it works for me. I don't know where other writers get their ideas. You talk to other writers; you might know.

34 MA: There is an opinion that every southern author writes under the influence of oral tradition; that is why they can use local dialects efficiently. Do you think it is true?

35 ES: I don't know, I guess there is a sort of tradition in a way; you must have an ear for the local speech. Flannery O'Connor had a wonderful ear, don't you think?

36 MA: Yes, and Eudora Welty had it, too.

37 ES: We have a different way of speaking, especially in the Deep South where I was brought up, but I think it has been eroded now, I'll tell you why. It's television.

Everybody looks at television and there's one language. Don't you think so? It's changed a lot, I believe. Except maybe if you go off in the country, in Mississippi. I was talking to the governor some years ago; a cousin of mine was in the legislature. She got me to come into the governor's office and just talk to him once. He was a charming man and he said: "To tell you the truth, Mississippi has a lot of writers. But you go twenty-five miles outside of Jackson in the country and they won't even have heard anything about you. They might have heard of William Faulkner once." You know, the country's still the country; I just don't live in it anymore but I remember home voices; they come out a lot when I work.

38 MA: For example, in the Marilee stories.

39 ES: Oh yeah! I'm very fond of those. Some people ask me if I was trying to portray myself, and I said no, but maybe if I'd stayed in Mississippi I might have been like that.

40 MA: The question whether you are Marilee appears in almost every interview; that's why I didn't want to ask that. (*both laugh*)

41 ES: Everybody asks me that.

42 MA: When you were selecting the stories for *The Southern Woman*, did editors choose what they wanted from those already published?

43 ES: Yeah, there was a very nice young man down there named David Ebershoff; he was head of the Modern Library then. He and I huddled over that considerably because, looking at all those stories years later, I realized some of them were weaker than others and some just didn't seem to carry on very well, so we omitted a good many. Sometimes I felt a little regretful but other times I thought it was right to select the best ones, which we did, I think.

44 MA: But there are new stories appearing in various magazines.

45 ES: I just sold one to an Atlanta magazine called *Five Points*. It's another one of my Edward stories. You know, there's this character Edward that just wanders through different settings. Some day I'll have a whole collection on Edward, like I had on Marilee. I also tried doing a novel that I didn't like and have never submitted it. In fact, I may rework it and try it again but life is short.

46 MA: Does it mean that you recognize when there is something not worth editing?

47 ES: Oh, I do. I don't want to push things off on people that I don't have a strong, essential feeling about.

48 MA: Do you need time distance? Like maybe two months, or three months, and then to reread what you wrote?

49 ES: Sometimes that works, sometimes you feel you struck it off right away, but it's better if you let it sit and wait a while. Sometimes I send things too early and I realize they haven't accumulated that sort of lasting thing that you look for. Sometimes I get too eager and these things happen.

50 MA: Do you have time to read the works of your southern colleagues?

51 ES: I recently read Lee Smith's last book, *On Agate Hill*. The previous one, *The Last Girls*, was also good but this last one is excellent. She'd read a lot of history for that. It takes place after the Civil War, you know; there were terrible disturbances in the South after the war.

52 MA: You were a long-time friend of Eudora Welty, and they are celebrating her 100th birthday this year. Are you participating in any of the commemorative events and festivities?

53 ES: The celebrations started last fall in New York; they gave a show of her photographs. She did a lot of photographs of New York in the 1930s, the depression years, you know, and all that, so they mounted those and showed them at the Museum of the City of New York, last November. I'm on the advisory board of the Eudora Welty Foundation, so I went there—another arm of the exhibit was her Mississippi photographs. To me they were superior because she had more feeling for the people. This was the starting point of the whole year of celebration and I'm going to Jackson in April, to be part of what they're doing down there to remember her. I'll be on a discussion group with Richard Ford and a woman novelist called Ann Patchett. Richard Ford was also in New York, on a panel with Reynolds Price, Robert MacNeil, a broadcaster, who was a good friend of Eudora's, and Suzanne Marrs, who's written a biography of Eudora. That was a very interesting encounter and I enjoyed it a lot.

54 MA: We wanted to translate *Golden Apples* into Czech but the publisher is afraid that it will not sell. Also, it is very difficult to translate. [Note: The translation, by Martina Knápková and with a preface by Marcel Arbeit, finally appeared, to unanimous critical acclaim but with poor sales, in 2016.]

55 ES: My dear friend Father Patrick Samway, the Jesuit who wrote a biography of Walker Percy, had a friend who was trying to translate one of Eudora's books, I believe it was *Golden Apples*, too, into French, but soon he said, "If I knew what I was getting into..." You know, there is something very individual and rich about the structure of her sentences. They look simple but if you're going to get all that nuance into another language, it just drives you crazy. I had an argument with somebody once. He said it didn't make any difference whether you were southern or not when you read Welty or Faulkner. I made the mistake of saying that I thought if you were southern, you get a lot more out of it, and he was so incensed. He said it was false judgment, that what on earth did I think, that I was privileged? But I still think that I was right. Of course you draw more out of it if you know all the *sfumatura*, as Italians say, the nuance, everything that's built about to be rendered in the terms of what you know and have been brought up with. I think that's absolutely true but when I read "Sir Rabbit" from *Golden Apples*, I don't really know what's going on.

56 MA: Let's return to your writing. When you wrote the autobiography *Landscapes of the Heart*, did you plan to write it as a memoir of literary life? I ask because it's less about you than about life with literature in the southern environment.

57 ES: No, I just got tired of reading memoirs where people thought they had to tell everything about their sexual life and betray horrible things that would seem to me embarrassing and too intimate to put out to the public, things you might tell your best friend, or your husband—maybe, or maybe not. I just didn't want to do anything like that. I'll tell you how that book came about. It was a series of articles, criticism, and reminiscences, which I was doing from time to time because people asked me to do them. Louis Rubin Jr. asked me for a reminiscence of some teacher when I was in grammar school. I wrote it, and he published it in a book called *An Apple for My Teacher*. That was one of them. Others, it seemed to me, just came naturally, when I had to make a speech somewhere at some event. Finally, I had a collection of articles and I was going to give it to the University of Missouri Press. They had even sent a contract but I

changed agents about that time. This new agent said: "Elizabeth, these are too good to go. Let's try it on New York." He interested Sam Vaughan, who was an excellent editor at Random House, and he was immediately interested, but they took me to lunch in New York once and said, "What you got to do is bind all these together in one narrative." I thought that ought to be easy, I'll work about a month and have it done. Well, about three months later I realized I threw out a lot of those and I wrote some more and then I made it into one stream. What I was trying to do each time was to show how the story of the things I felt floated into my work. I think that's what the book tries to do. Personal things? No. Some people praised me for that! They said this is how a memoir ought to be written. Other people said: "Why didn't you tell us enough personal things?" So I couldn't do both and I did what I felt like. So that was how I wanted to do it, so that's how I did it.

58 MA: I think it has great historical value because how else could people like me find out what it was like at Ole Miss in the 1950s and 1960s, what the professors felt like?

59 ES: There's also a lot about Vanderbilt.

60 MA: I realized that almost everyone took an interest in William Butler Yeats. You can find Yeats in your work, in Eudora's work, but also in the works of Cormac McCarthy, Lewis Nordan, and many others. You wrote a master's thesis on Yeats, didn't you?

61 ES: You know, I loved Yeats from the time I first read him when I was an undergraduate at Belhaven but when I went to Vanderbilt, the interest there was in the Agrarian movement and all that. Donald Davidson, who was the leading professor there at that time, emphasized all the time that the South was very much in the same position toward the industrial civilization of the North as Ireland was toward England. You have a dominant power that you're somehow pushing away from you, and that was one of the reasons he gave for the development of southern virtue. Finally, I did my master's thesis on Yeats. It's not here now; I lent it to the movie man. (*laughs*)

62 MA: As a writer, you must consider it strange to analyze the literary works of other people.

63 ES: You start out that way when you're getting a degree in college; what else are you going to do?

64 MA: Well, Flannery O'Connor wrote a short story collection, Geranium, as her thesis.

65 ES: Flannery O'Connor is a strange, unique talent to me for one thing: she was devoutly and totally Roman Catholic, which is a little unusual in the South; it's mainly a Protestant country, don't you think?

66 MA: Yes, but what about Walker Percy, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, and Walter Sullivan?

67 ES: Well, they were converts; they weren't born Catholic. Flannery was totally committed from birth, I guess. And she had this terrible curse of that disease, lupus. Doris Betts always said that she was working against the thread of time. Some of the concentrated efforts in her stories don't resonate with me very well but I realize the different obstacles she faced. Still, having a compelling Roman Catholic vision in a Protestant country seems to me rather odd to start with. But I don't know, I can't quarrel with people who rate her as highly as they do, and she did make a big impact.

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Marcel Arbeit is Professor in the Department of English and American Studies at Palacký University Olomouc in the Czech Republic. He is the author of a monograph on the novels of Fred Chappell and Cormac McCarthy published in 2006 (in Czech) and the main editor of the three-volume *Bibliography of American Literature in Czech Translation* (2000). He co-edited the *Mississippi Quarterly* special issue on Lewis Nordan (2007, with Thomas Ærvold Bjerre), *The (Un)Popular South* (2011, with M. Thomas Inge), and *Where Is History Today? New Ways of Representing the Past* (2015, with Ian Christie), and edited *The South from Elsewhere* (2014). His recent publications focus on Doris Betts, Fred Chappell, Harry Crews, Richard Ford, Lewis Nordan, and Chris Offutt. Between 2005 and 2013 he was the President of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies. He is the editor-in-chief of the *Moravian Journal of Literature and Film*.