An Interview with Lewis Nordan

Lewis Nordan
Russell Ingram
Mark Ledbetter

The Missouri Review, Volume 20, Number 1, 1997, pp. 73-90 (Article)

Published by University of Missouri
DOI: 10.1353/mis.1997.0027

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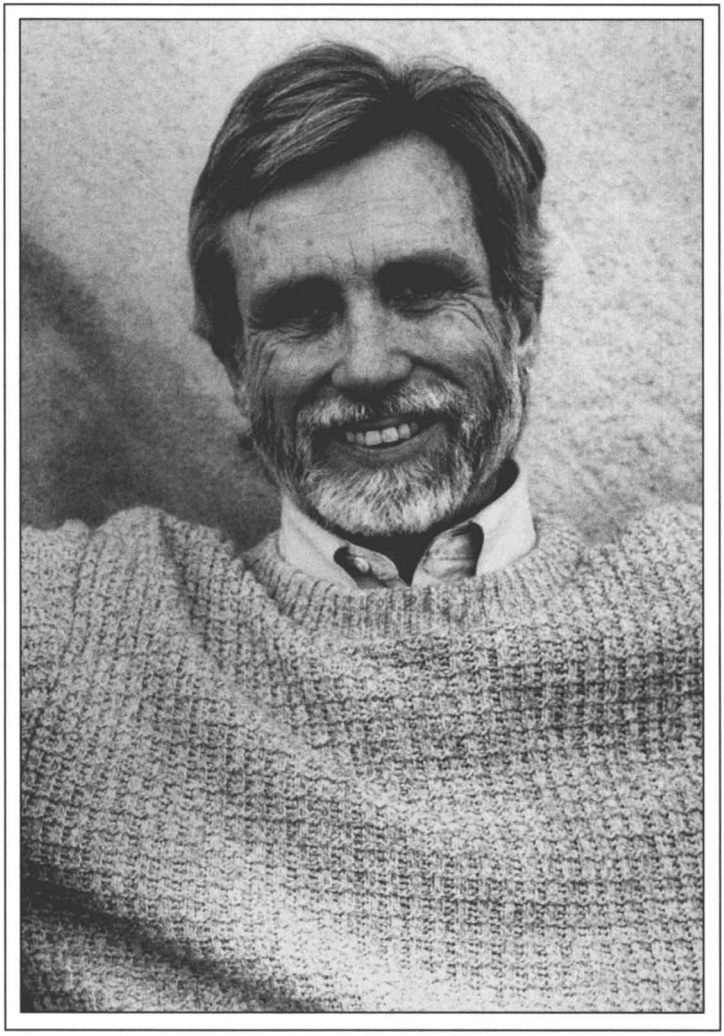

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Lewis Nordan's books include *Music of the Swamp, Wolf Whistle, The Sharpshooter Blues* and *Sugar Among the Freaks.* A native of Itta Bena, Mississippi, Nordan earned acclaim with his landmark novel, *Wolf Whistle,* which won the Southern Book Critics Circle Award and other national prizes. His last three books have all won Best Fiction Awards from the National Library Association and his novel, *The Sharpshooter Blues* won this year's Literature Award of the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

In early September of 1996, Nordan appeared as a guest of the River City Writers Series at the University of Memphis. During this visit, he participated in the following interview conducted by Mark Ledbetter and Russell Ingram. The River City Writers Series, sponsored by the Creative Writing Program of the University of Memphis, is in its twentieth year of presenting award-winning American and international authors to the people of Memphis and the Mid-South.

An Interview with Lewis Nordan/*Russell Ingram and Mark Ledbetter*

Interviewer: On a certain level, most good writers seem to be obsessed with telling the same story throughout their fiction. They keep returning to a story again and again, trying to illuminate it, make some sense of it. One of the constants in your fiction is a consuming interest in the difficult relationship between fathers and sons. At the same time there is a repetition of imagery throughout your work. For example, in *The Sharpshooter Blues*, in *Wolf Whistle*, in "The Wheelchair," and in others, the reader encounters versions of this refrain: the water is like a black mirror, colored by the tannic acid that seeps from the knees of cypress trees. What do you believe is the essence of your elemental story?

Nordan: The story I'm telling can be summed up in the very image you just mentioned, the mirror-like water in that lake. When I was a boy I would look down into the water and know its depths held scary things, like those big ol' alligator gar as long as our fishing boats. The water held beautiful things as well, bluegills and crappie, but none of it was visible. When you looked into that water, all you saw was yourself and whatever was behind you, like the trees or the clouds. What I am doing in the elemental story I mean to tell is to have each character face the mirrored water, and before the end of the story be beneath its surface to confront all of its joys and all of its terrors.

Interviewer: Would that include the joys and terrors of the relationship between fathers and sons?

Nordan: That's right. A lot of what is explored under that strange water is the father-and-son relationship. I approach this difficult and beautiful relationship because of my own fathers, both a stepfather and a natural father, and because of my own sons and my relationship

with them. A compelling and I would say essential element of my story comes from the death of my father when I was eighteen months old. I didn't ever get to know him. I have only one picture of him, and in that picture he's holding me as a child, and I am not looking at him, I'm looking off somewhere else. Maybe I was looking for a movie contract. (Laughs.) From the picture of my natural father, I got the only image I have of him—a hat on his head, shading his eyes. He's a man of mystery to me. I have no memories of him, so he's a blankness in my experience.

My mother remarried when I was about eight years old to a man who I called "Daddy," and upon whom the characters of fathers in my stories are all based. He loved me and told me so every night before I went to bed. This man was also, in some ways, very unavailable to me. He had problems with alcoholism, he was a distant, shy man. My mother spent some time protecting me from all the outside world, including him. And so, all my life, I have been reaching out for my father, or reaching toward my stepfather, for something—I don't know what, love, or acceptance, or a validation of me as a person. It's normal, I think, to look back at my work and say, gosh, I've been writing about wanting a father all my life.

Interviewer: Is this related somehow to the way you return again and again to certain compelling descriptions?

Nordan: Well, yes, it is. I always go to the same place, even if I intend to write a story outside the South: Roebuck Lake, which is a real lake in the Delta. In many ways, the banks of that lake give me the geography of my fiction. It's the geography of my heart. I'm not trying to compare myself with the blind poet, Homer, but just as Homer mechanically uses phrases to describe the great black ships, the rosy-fingered dawn, I find myself describing elements of my own geography in a kind of already-established language. And so sometimes, similar phrasings appear in story after story. It's a form of punctuation for myself as much as a form of description. It's a way of saying, here I am and this is the moment from my heart that needs to be established in this story.

Interviewer: One of the qualities which intrigues me in your work is your use of elements from comic books, fairy tales, anecdotal storytelling, local legends, and the blues to construct your stories. How do these affect you?

"My father's absence in my life was poignantly revealed in Clark Kent's life."

Nordan: These are the elements of my own history. And you correctly name them. These are my literary influences, and the stories come out of them. I'll just take one example, comic books. When I read stories of how Miz Welty read to herself as a child and how other writers read to themselves, I am so envious. It seems so literary. I didn't read *Ivanhoe, Rob Roy,* all the books I might have read, but I was intrigued by comic books. I look back at the comics that interested me the most and think I see the beginnings of my own work. My favorite comic was Superman. And not because he could see through buildings and stop bullets but because he was a fatherless child, as I was. My father's absence in my life was poignantly revealed in Clark Kent's life. The fact that he was raised by a stepfather was very, very important to me. So when I saw his history there on the comic pages, I imagined my own history similarly. I imagined some kind of heroic redemption out of my lonely and humble beginnings, in the same way Clark Kent found redemption in his new world.

If I look at all the comics I read, they were all about fatherless children. Who is Nancy's father? She lives with Aunt Fritzy. Sluggo is an orphan. Little Orphan Annie is an orphan. Huey, Dewey and Louie live with Uncle Donald, who is not married to Daisy, by the way. This is one of my literary influences; I could say similar things about local legend and the blues.

Interviewer: You seem to be fascinated by freaks, invalids, and murderers, gimps and geeks of every stripe. Why do you think Southern writers have such an affection for freaks?

Nordan: You know, that question is always asked of me about Southern writers. I'm thrown off the mark by that connection. I think the works of John Steinbeck, for example, are interested in much the same thing, and yet no one is likely to say "Why are California writers

"When I write about these people, I'm projecting my own freakish self and loving it at the same time."

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so interested in freaks and gimps?" I don't really think it's particularly Southern. Now there *is*, however, a Southern pony that's been ridden to death. We can name the writers who ride this pony and who, I think, are doing themselves and literature a disservice by continuing to write narrowly and stereotypically about the South. But Southern literature is American literature, and American literature is interested in the freakishness you have mentioned. I think this depiction is the reflection of something inside the writer him or herself. We are not really so interested in carnival geeks, as we are in our own geekish quality in that scared little boy who fears he is different, grotesque in some way. I think we are writing out of our dream selves and projecting these images rather than reflecting them. Flannery O'Connor famously said the reason Southerners write about freaks is that we are the last people to be able to recognize one. It's a great line, I wish I'd said it myself, and if I'd thought it up first, I'd say I believed it. But the truth is I don't. I think we are defensively projecting these things, saying: love them, love the freaks, because we are really saying, in effect, love *us*.

Interviewer: In Atlanta recently we had the Olympics. I heard them called the "Bubba-lympics," which I thought was fairly funny. This country seems to have a pejorative image of the South. One could argue that white trash is a scapegoat for the rest of the nation. Do you think your fiction is a reaction to any specific stereotype?

Nordan: Let me go back to the beginning of the business about the Olympics—those "Bubba-lympics." I believe there is a bigotry that is ethnic in nature against Southern people. When the guy who either saved or tried to blow up the Olympics was arrested, the first joke you heard was "the Unabubba." Now this is a cruelty, really. It's funny, we laugh about it, but it is a form of cruelty that wouldn't ever be placed on any ethnic group other than fat white Southern guys. It's all right

to belittle good ol' boys. Elvis is an icon to millions, but he is an object easily mocked to many more millions because he's Southern. I really believe Carter and Clinton had such a hard time in their early administrations because people just wanted them, even though they were Ivy League guys, to be Bubbas. You may be disallowed to speak poorly of Jews or African-Americans or any other ethnic group, but you are *empowered* to speak badly of Southern white males. In some strange way when I write about these people, I'm encouraging the same sort of thing. I mean, I'm culpable of writing a caricature that is easily mocked. This is because, I like to say, the redneck is the world's slowest moving target. (Laughs.) There are a million jokes. Just take one out of the bag and smack that good ol' boy with it.

The truth is I'm one of them. I am Bubba. I'm almost *named* Bubba. People call me Buddy, but it was just a matter of luck that I wasn't Bubba. So when I write about these people, even the very worst of them, I do so lovingly. It's the same thing I was talking about when we discussed freaks—I'm projecting my worst self out there. I'm projecting my own freakish self and loving it at the same time. Even my very worst characters are showered with their author's love. This was a potential problem in *Wolf Whistle*, which dealt with a very sensitive subject—the murder of an African-American child. I believed the real-life murderers, Milam and Bryant of Money, Mississippi, were monsters. Still do. I was glad when they were dead. I was glad when bad things happened to them. And yet when I drew the murderer in *Wolf Whistle*, I felt a strange sympathy for him. I tried very hard not to justify him. I tried very hard not to excuse him or apologize for him, but he was a damaged and vulnerable and fragile person himself, and I wrote about him in a way I could never write or think about the actual murderer.

Interviewer: Writing about Shakespeare and Hawthorne, Herman Melville once said no deeply thinking writer worth his salt can avoid the question of original sin. In your own work, you flirt with evil, but you seem to be more interested in the tragedy and promise of innocence—both the innocence of children and of invalids, as well as the innocence within evil. How is Melville's vision operating within your fiction?

Nordan: Wow. Let me think about that. I have no interest in portraying evil as an abstraction made concrete. I have none of the interests of Hawthorne or Melville, with their Young Goodman Browns and Faiths and assorted evil characters that are so representative of types or ideas.

My characters are not approached from the outside as those are. I'm coming at characters who are mirrors of our own selves but into whom we may delve deeply, I hope, and find many things.

I didn't really know I held this view for a long time, but in my view of the world, there is a diamond pinpoint of beauty that is God's love at the heart of every single person and at the heart of every single character. That's what I am looking for as I write. I try not to close my eyes to any of the horror that is there, but I'm looking under the surface for the pinpoint of something decent and pure which is corrupted somehow. I would say it's not original sin, not evil, but original good. Corruption is of some other origin. I don't know if it is social, I don't know if it is DNA, or just what it is, but it's something else. Melville's vision is not operating in my life.

There's an anecdote I want to tell. A family with young children contacted me and told me they loved to read my things at the table. They were reading "Sugar Among The Chickens," a short story in my recent collection (*Sugar Among the Freaks*). Sugar Mecklin is fishing for chickens in the back yard, and he catches one on a rod and reel. It flies out and out away from him, but then he sees it is coming back to him. Suddenly it is coming back and coming back and he can't get away from it, and the chicken lands on his head. And the eight year old at the table said, "Mom, is this like *Moby Dick* where the whale turns on Ahab who has been searching for him?" And she says, "Yes, Honey, this is *Moby Dick* with feathers." So in that sense, I think what Sugar was doing and what he found may have been a part of Melville's vision. But only very incidentally.

Interviewer: Each of us has experienced the pain of betrayal at being told the world is one thing and then finding out it is something else entirely. This can lead to a horrible loneliness. As Mr. Raney and Uncle Runt both say: "We are all alone in this world." Your characters use invention and imagination to relieve a deep sense of loss and emptiness, but ultimately pay a price for their imagining. How has this conception of life driven you personally and as a writer?

Nordan: This question has a couple of parts that I am going to try to separate. I read a story when I was a kid, by John Steinbeck. I don't remember the name of it, but it's a story about a man who had absolutely no imagination, just a very nice life. One of the things he liked to do every year was to meet a friend of his in the city who was the executioner. He would go to an execution with him and then they would go out to dinner and then he would go home. There was absolutely

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nothing to this until one day somebody said to him how hideous it was that he could just make a friendly visit out of this, and it initiated his imagination. This was the first time his imagination ever caught any spark at all, and it ruined his life. Forever after that, he could imagine other people's pain, he could imagine other lives beyond himself, and so he was never comfortable again in his life.

I have written that story in one way or another over and over. "The Sears Roebuck Catalog Game" is about the moment when a father's imagination occurs. It drives him into alcoholism and into a kind of pain he didn't know was possible. He just couldn't stand his imagination. What I'm saying in these stories is that you pay a price for imagining in the world. Imagination is a gift and a great one, but it's not given to us without some loss.

This comes to the second part of the question, whether we are all alone in the world. The lesson imagination teaches is this terrible one: no matter how fully we imagine the beauties of our family and the safety and comfort of our lives, we can never trust it, not really. We are all alone in the world. This came to me as a revelation for the first time eleven years ago. Here I am going to be more serious perhaps than you realized the question called for. Eleven years ago, a young son of mine committed suicide. It was the most horrifying thing that can happen to a person. I won't even try to describe how terrible this was. My world crashed down around me. Everything I had ever believed about doing the right thing in life, about being hopeful and optimistic and counting on things to work out for the best, about having hopeful visions for life, seemed absolutely ridiculous. And this voice came to me that sounded very much like a voice I had been hearing all my life and didn't want to believe. It said: you are all alone in the world. Nobody, not your loving wife, not your loving mother, not your living children, not all the support groups and therapists in the world, no one can ever understand the pain you are experiencing now. You are all alone with

"You make a mythology of the surroundings from which you write."

this and you are going to deal with it, whether you like it or not, or else you will be dead too. It was a refrain I think I had known but had blocked out in favor of "If you do the right thing, the world will somehow fall into line and go your way."

This is another place where the father-and-son connection is working. I felt in some ways if I had done the right thing, my father wouldn't have died, wouldn't have been absent. If I had done the right thing, as I tried to do, my son wouldn't have died. Wouldn't have wanted to die. But somehow doing the right thing had nothing to do with anything. You are all alone in the world. Existentialism is for real, and there is no escape from it. That is the underlying darkness behind the comedy of my work. I'm a comedian. I like to laugh. I feel hopeful about things almost all the time. I tell funny stories. The saddest stories on earth I think we laugh at, yet beneath every line is the heartfelt knowledge that we are all alone in the world.

Interviewer: Your work deals with, in part, the vivid images of childhood in the South in the middle 1950s. Do you think young people now have a less vivid sense of their own past and of the world which surrounds them than Sugar Mecklin has?

Nordan: No. This is the style of question I would just love to get into, the old fart's "You young people just don't know how to live your lives" version of things. But that's not what I believe. I find everybody takes what they have and invents a history from it. I have people come up to me and say, "I could've been a writer too if I had lived in the shit hole you lived in." You make a mythology of the surroundings from which you write. I envy the people who know all the Brady Bunch stories because that's the mythology they are going to be writing from. I envy the people who can write significantly about the information superhighway. Although I'm on it, I've just got a little hand cart on it,

pumping away furiously. I'm being run down by the rest of the population rolling over my head. The world is the place where we have to live, and the mythologies we create from it will be just as rich no matter what the generation. Mine is beginning to sound a little antique and a little out of touch. I hope it won't ever be completely out of touch, but frankly, there are other very interesting things that are being talked about now that I wish I were a part of.

Interviewer: When you were a child in Itta Bena, I have read, you were profoundly affected by the protests of one of your friends over the murder of Emmett Till. This shows up as a seminal moment for Roy Dale in *Wolf Whistle*. Was this a moment of awakening for you?

Nordan: That was an important moment for me. I was in my football locker room with a bunch of kids on the day Emmett Till's body was found. Terrible jokes were being made about him. And I was just sitting there. I have no memory of whether I was laughing at the jokes, but I was a part of the conversation. I was at *least* sitting there smiling and in no way protesting this. Then a country boy just like myself said, "You know, that ain't right, the way you're talking. This was a child, just like every one of us, who was killed by a bad man. You have no right to be laughing at him, I don't care what color he was." And I have to tell you, up to that moment I had been completely oblivious of White Only signs. I had been completely oblivious to the problems of class in America and, in that second, I became fully aware of it. This is one of those real life experiences that imitates art, in which scales seemed to fall from my eyes. I thought, "Oh, my God. I am in some way culpable. I am at fault here." My life really was never the same again.

After *Wolf Whistle* came out, a lot of people were contacting me. For example, Emmett Till's mother called me—I've had all kinds of wonderful experiences from people's responses to that book. Anyway, people kept asking me, whatever happened to the guy from the locker room? I had been carrying him in my heart as a hero all this time, so I called him. I hadn't seen him in forty years. I brought up the whole business of the locker room and asked him did he remember. "Oh yeah," he told me. He remembered it. I said, do you remember a terrible joke that was being told? He recalled enough of it to let me know he knew exactly which joke I was talking about. Then I asked, do you remember your response to that? He said, "No, I don't think I said anything." I told him what it was, and he said, "Well, huh, I don't remember it. I have no memory of saying that." I told him, you

know, you've been my hero all these forty years. And he replied, "Well, I'd love to get together and talk with you, but I've got cotton to gin."

He was just absolutely a wonderful man who had not stayed in the old place and carried on the evil segregationist, apartheid tradition, but who had grown in spirit and love in the way I might have imagined he would. We had an hour-long conversation. He is a wonderful man and is still my hero. He may even be a greater hero to me now because he doesn't remember the moment in his life which was so important to me. My life was absolutely changed forever by that event.

Interviewer: I understand Elvis is a personal hero of yours. Often Elvis was criticized for preempting black music. As a white writer who has written about the Emmett Till murder, a famous cause célèbre of the Civil Rights Movement, do you feel any particular kinship to Elvis in this regard?

Nordan: I was unable to write the Emmett Till story for all those years in part because I didn't feel it was my story to write. I felt an outsider to the story because I knew the murderers. My father was a friend of one of the guys who killed Emmett Till. We knew their family, and yet when it happened, we withdrew into a cocoon of silence, even at the dinner table. We never spoke of the murder. I never said, did Mr. Milam really do this? I never said anything, and nobody else said anything about it either. We were horrified by it. We were so shocked we couldn't deal with it at all, couldn't even talk about it, let alone take responsibility for it. So, yes, I felt I had no rights in the matter. I was happy when African-American writers wrote about it. I've met Bebe Moore Campbell, and was glad when she was able to write about the event.

Finally it came to me that I had a story—the white trash version of the Emmett Till murder. I had the story of the people who were on the periphery of this terrible thing, who didn't know what was going on, didn't quite understand their own culpability in the situation. That was the story I had to write, the murderers' story, the family of the murderers, the friends and drinking buddies of the murderers. That's when I knew I could write the story, and *Wolf Whistle* poured out of me. The first draft was 365 pages long, and I wrote it in six weeks. I did nothing else; I compulsively poured it out and then I revised it over some several months after that. The story came out fast because I suddenly knew whose story it was and where the story came from. It was the poor white version. So in one sense I had every right to write it.

"I was angry for most of my life at Mississippi."

Interviewer: You said you had communicated with Emmett Till's mother. I'm interested in knowing her reaction to your book.

Nordan: I was on a radio talk show in D.C. It was a call-in show and one of the callers identified herself as Emmett Till's first cousin. She said she was in the military, working at the Pentagon. She had been born the year Emmett Till died. We immediately liked each other and became friendly, and began talking on the phone regularly. Eventually she said she had told her family about me and I might expect a call from Mamie Liz, which was Emmett's mother's name—she's remarried now and is Mrs. Mobley. Sure enough, eventually she and I started to have long telephone conversations. In fact, she won't get off the phone. She's a big talker, a wonderful person, funny and everything. She knew about my son's death. We talked about what it means to lose a child. This has been a real comfort to me in some ways.

All of these things have been important to me. I sent copies of *Wolf Whistle* to her and to Emmett's cousin when they asked. Eventually, they said they read the book, loved it and appreciated my work. I said I was sorry to have to put them through it, I knew that wasn't the way the murder happened, I knew it wasn't their son on the page, but it was just my vision that had to come out as reflected in my own pain and anguish about the story. They were completely understanding and treated me respectfully and decently. I can't say enough good things about this relationship.

Interviewer: In "Welcome to the Arrow-Catcher Fair" you have a character, the Lieutenant Governor, who's had a little too much to drink. He gets up on the bandstand and starts raving about Mississippi. Does the Lieutenant Governor express your own anger at Mississippi?

Nordan: I wouldn't want to be identified with that alcoholic blow-hard,

"I heard a rhythm and a song long before I had the words, and I've just been waiting all these years to fill in the words."

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with whom I have absolutely nothing in common. But he is *angry* at Mississippi, and yet, as he expresses his anger, he speaks almost lovingly and in a lyrical voice at times of what he is cursing out. He's saying, goddamn these Mississippi blue skies. He can't help but describe them beautifully as he goddamns them. So, in that sense yes, I am attracted to him, at least. I was angry for most of my life at Mississippi for the racial violence and for the racial suspicions I was instilled with and for the narrowness of vision I felt was there: "Mississippi is great and to hell with everybody else." All the parochialism and small-mindedness. I was very angry about that, and sometimes I still am. And yet, there is a lot of love too. All that appreciation for who I am and what I became. There was a long time when I actually believed those people I knew who went to Harvard or to Michigan State somehow had it better than me because I was nailed to the South. Yet none of *them* are writers. None of them have the life I love and that I long to have. So my love for Mississippi is as strong as my anger. In that way, I am connected to the Lieutenant Governor.

Interviewer: Like *Wolf Whistle*, your novel *The Sharpshooter Blues* is a story about a killing and about death, but it is at bottom a profound story about love and healing. This is perhaps a stronger assertion of theme than we find in your earlier fiction. Do you feel your work is taking on a new dimension in *The Sharpshooter Blues?*

Nordan: I do think my work took on a stronger dimension and statement of theme in the book. I love that book. I had thought when *Wolf Whistle* came out that it was the book I was meant to write and I would never write another. It looked as though this was going to be the case for a while. I talked about the book all over the country, I went on a thirty-five city book tour, I was on television and radio in almost all of those states. I was on NPR a couple of times talking about the book, I

was on international phone hook-ups talking with reporters on the fortieth anniversary of the death of Emmett Till. It's all I talked about for a long, long time. And then people began to ask if I would write articles about *writing* the book. *Wolf Whistle* was becoming an industry, and I was just the guy who wrote it. I was content with that. I thought it was the book of my heart, the book I was meant to write.

But when the time came, when I had a month to myself and I was sitting in the place in Virginia where I go to write, looking into the place in my heart where I find material, I went back to that same swampy place expecting to find some characters left over from *Wolf Whistle.* I was going to allow myself another book about the same characters. But when I looked in there I saw a store, a country store, and I saw a sugar cane field around the store, and as I focused my attention I looked more carefully and saw there were some men hanging out in the back yard of the store. I thought, "What are they doing?" And I got close enough in my imagination to see what they were doing, and they were trying to shoot cantaloupes off one another's heads. Well, don't ask me. I'm not sure where that came from, but it's what they were doing. So I decided to follow those images. I wrote eighty pages about those people that never appeared in the book, just getting to know them. Then I wrote the book. What I didn't know until about halfway through it was that Hydro, a central figure, was going to die. And what I sure didn't know until the moment it was reported on the page was that Hydro had committed suicide. Then I realized all these elaborate goings on and setup and so forth was a way of writing about my own child's death. I had no idea I was writing out a redemption of myself, salvation from all the pain and suffering I went through. I didn't even know it until the end of the book. I was very surprised to find out that's what it was. Those of you who have read *The Sharpshooter Blues* know it's a book with a sad theme, but it's got a lot of comedy in it. There's a funeral scene at the end I hope you will read some time. I'm writing a lot of Hydro's father's pain directly from memory. There is not a made-up word in how he feels as he's breathing his son's old laundry, trying to find the last traces of the child's little life left in the room. All that is for real. When I say, "we are all alone in the world" in this book, the character of the father is able to learn there is laughter after that knowledge, there is still hope. That's the new dimension in my work.

Interviewer: I see that dimension on several levels in your work. For example, if you simply look at the titles of your books: *The Sharpshooter Blues, Music of the Swamp, Wolf Whistle,* a reader could come to the

conclusion that the blues plays a vital role in your work. The blues is about surviving, isn't it? Even as it mourns the sadness of life and the pain of loss, the blues manages to maintain a quality of laughter and hope that makes the most difficult life at least bearable. This could be a description of *Sharpshooter Blues*, and indeed of all your fiction, couldn't it?

Nordan: There *is* a certain amount of laughter and joy in the blues that derives from "my baby left me and I'm feeling so bad." But those themes are only coincidentally related to my themes. I have a different connection to the blues. I'll put it this way: if I could have had my choice of occupations from all the things in the world, including writing, I would have been a rock-and-roll singer. The closest I can get to singing is writing the prose I write. That's the connection with the blues: it's the music. I hear music in the language. Actually, I heard a rhythm and a song long before I had the words, and I've just been waiting all these years to fill in the words. The rhythm and song in my work exists separately from the words. I am just now finding what to say, once upon a time this happened or that happened.

My connection with the blues is I was a kid who hung out in blues bars long before I was able to order a drink or even tall enough to stand at the bar. I hung out in places where I was often the only white face, just so I could listen to the music. That was considered a thing you shouldn't do, not because it was dangerous but because of the class distinctions between white and black. But I longed to hear the music. I longed to know those musicians. In that way, it's a visceral and early literary influence of mine. The truth is, it was the rhythms and sounds I was responding to rather than the themes. I found the same rhythms and sounds in jump rope chants by the girls. I didn't want to be a girl as a child, but I wanted to be near them to hear those chants. The boys just did not have the same kind of rhythmical and musical history the girls did, so I listened to the girls. I listened to the cheerleaders on the football teams. This was easy for me since I was always sitting on the bench (laughs) and so was very near them. The rhythms of preachers' voices, anything that was rhythmical, was what I was listening for and, in that way, all of these related to the music of the swamp.

Interviewer: Is there anything particular about the South in the nineties that has your interest?

Nordan: Well, I'm interested in the increasing international reputation of Elvis. (Laughs). I'm interested in the Mayor of Washington, D.C.,

"I like to think of myself, in some ways, as an ethnic writer."

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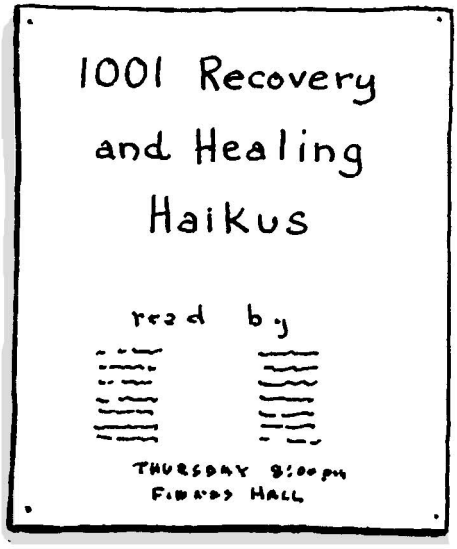
who happens to be from Itta Bena. Marion Barry and I went to different schools, he in the black school system and me in the white school system. We've never met but I find some of his faults have been the same as my own.

What really interests me is the writing that's coming out of the South. I'm interested in the way it's becoming more of an American literature, being acknowledged as American literature. Richard Ford has done a great deal to make this possible. His work does not ride the Southern pony, he's got Southern characters living in New Jersey, Montana, so I am glad to see he's honored with the Pulitzer Prize and other prizes. This helps put the South on the national map rather than on the regional map. Southern writing is coming into the world of American letters in a way even Faulkner didn't quite pull off. Sometimes it's put to me that regionalism is a bad word, that a writer should feel bad for being thought of only as a Southern writer. These phrases keep coming up. But regionalism is often not a matter of how you write, but is instead a matter of how you're perceived. I like to think of myself, in some ways, as an ethnic writer. The same way Jewish writing has certain caricatures and Italian literature does—so, in fact, does Southern literature. But it's all American literature and I am glad to see it's being treated that way. The best readers want to read about universal themes—it's the whole heart that's being talked about in the best writing, and that's what begins the transformation from regionalism to something else. I am not sad to see the South changing in ways that leave some of the old things behind. I'm excited by what I see in the world. I am excited to hear Southern accents everywhere. This is the world I want to live in. Not the past.

POETRY READING FROM HELL.



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