

people could argue that in writing about human beings, you are always writing about religion, about theological issues. That makes sense, I think."

In the following passage from *Raney*, Millie Shepherd, Raney's mother-in-law, persuades Raney, a Free-Will Baptist, to accompany her and her son Charles to an Episcopal church service. †

From  
*Raney*

I was just beginning to relax when Millie asks, "Is there an Episcopal church nearby?" I had forgot about her changing over to the Episcopalians.

"There's one in White Level," says Charles. "Sara—at the library—goes there."

"You're more than welcome to come to our church," I said. "And since we're going to eat at Mama's, we'll be close by."

"I really like the formality of the Episcopal service," says Millie. "I've gotten used to it. Charles, give them a call this week and if they're celebrating Eucharist Sunday morning at around ten or eleven, I could slip over for that."

I didn't know what a Eucharist was. Likely as not they'd be celebrating something.

"Or," she says, "if you two like, you could come along with me."

"I don't think I could go to an Episcopal church," I said.

"Why not?" they both said.

"They're against some of the things we believe in most."

"What do you mean by that?" said Charles.

"Well, they serve real wine at the Lord's supper. And they have priests, don't they?"

"Yes," said Millie.

"Well, I don't especially approve of the way priests drink."

"Jesus drank—if that's what you mean—as I understand it," she says.

"I don't think so."

"Well, he turned the water into wine at the wedding feast."

"Yes, but that was grape juice."

"Grape juice?"

"If Jesus turned water into wine on the spot," I said, "it had to be grape juice because it didn't have time to ferment."

There was a pause.

"If Jesus could make wine," says *Charles* (you could tell whose side he was on), "he could just as easily make it fermented as not, couldn't he? Why mess around with half a miracle?"

"I've been going to Bethel Free Will Baptist Church for twenty-four years now," I said, "and Mr. Brooks, Mr. Tolley, Mr. Honneycutt, and all these other men have been studying the Bible for all their lives and they say it's grape juice. All added together they've probably studied the Bible over a hundred years. I'm not going to sit in my own kitchen and go against that."

"But there are Buddhist monks," says Charles, "who have studied religion for an accumulation of millions of years and they say Jesus was only a holy man and not the son of God. You can find anybody who's studied something for X number of years. I'm not sure what that proves."

"These Buddhist monks were not studying the Bible," I said. "They were studying the *Koran*. We talked about that in Sunday School."

"I don't think they were studying the *Koran*," says Mrs. Shepherd. "You're talking about Islam."

"Well, the point is: I'm not talking about the Bible. If it's not in the Bible I'm not interested in it because if I have to stop believing in the Bible I might as well stop living on earth."

"Here, let's get the dishes washed up," says Mrs. Shepherd. "I appreciate your faith—I guess it's a small matter anyway. Sometimes I think we spend too much time on relatively picky religious matters."

It won't no *picky* matter to me.

While we were cleaning up I saw where Charles got his habit of taking the strainer out of the sink and leaving it out, and turning on the faucet and leaving it on. But I didn't say anything. She was nice to help.

Before we finished cleaning up, somebody knocked on the front door. That darn TEA Club meeting. I felt like I hadn't had time to get my bearings.

The meeting was something, and Millie joined in just like she knew everybody.

There was this woman dressed in rags who brought her baby in a sack on her back. Looked like she'd just walked away from a plane crash with her baby all tangled up in her clothes. What's more, she was cock-eyed. Looked like she was looking in two directions at once. Like those pictures of John Kennedy.

There were more unusual people there. But listen to what the meeting was about: they all, including Charles, and his mama, just flown in from Atlanta, are dead set against the Ferris-Jones nuclear power plant being built north of here.

That takes a lot a gall. These scientists have been working for years to get this plant built and Charles and these, well . . . a couple of them looked like hippies to me, and there was a doctor and two college teachers who looked like they don't eat right and the one with the baby—they all get together and in about fifteen minutes decide that the nuclear power plant has got to go. Has got to go, mind you.

They haven't hurt anything at the power plant. And electricity certainly has to come from somewhere.

I was in Pope's the other day and the mayor, Mr. Crenshaw, was talking to Mrs. Moss. He said the power plant was the best thing that ever happened to Listre—that it would bring new jobs and make taxes lower.

Now he's the mayor. He's somebody I can listen to. Somebody with a respectable position in the community who *has* to know what he's talking about, else he wouldn't be mayor.

Sometimes I believe these hippies and college professors sit around and frown and complain about what's helping a community most.

Look at the war. These hippies and such were telling the people who knew the most about it how to run it. So we lost. Now they're doing the same thing with this power plant. Do you see the people from the power plant telling the hippies how to be hippies? No, because they don't know anything about it. So they keep their mouths shut.

Charles told me I could come up front to the meeting but I stayed back in the kitchen. After about thirty minutes, Millie did come back and talk to me about how nice Charles and me had fixed up the house. She had a glass of wine, but that's the only one she drunk as far as I know. I never thought I'd see wine under a roof I lived under. Live and learn. I won't be a prude; but I do have principles and I will certainly keep close guard on what goes on. We're not going to have any alcohol under this roof for more than twelve hours, and otherwise only on some special occasions of Charles's. And when we have a child we'll have to discuss the whole thing very seriously. I never saw a drop of alcohol at home except in a bottle Uncle Nate brought in.

I told Millie about Charles painting the living room and she thought it was funny about not being able to find any drapes to go with the old paint. She said Charles just had a good "role model" for fixing up around the house because Bill, Dr. Shepherd, had always helped her. I thought about Daddy. He's never done anything, as far as I can remember inside the house. He works outside, but not inside. I don't think Mama wants him working in the house. She certainly never lets anybody do anything in the kitchen.

Charles won't do a thing outside but pull up crabgrass out of the sidewalk cracks once in a while. I don't know why he gets such a kick out of that. I think it's connected somehow to his strange ideas about germs. He buys these big jars of alcohol to clean the bathroom sink with. I've seen him through the bathroom door—through the crack. He'll scrub around the hole in the bottom of the sink with a ball of cotton soaked in alcohol. Lord knows where else he scrubs. I'll bet he goes through a bottle of alcohol every two weeks. I go in there some mornings and it smells like County Hospital. I started to ask Millie about that but I didn't. Maybe he got it from her. (It's funny what all you find out about your husband after you get married.)

When they finished the meeting, Charles came back to the kitchen and showed me this letter they wrote with Charles's name signed. Charles asked me what I thought. I said if they all wrote it, why didn't they all sign it? This is the letter. Millie told him a couple of words to change.

DEAR EDITOR:

A state geologist has recently claimed that an area near the proposed Ferris-Jones nuclear power plant is ideal for a hazardous waste disposal site. One of the reasons given is the low population of the area. I suppose the reasoning is that if there are problems, then fewer people will suffer.

It occurs to me that any reason to NOT put something in a highly populated area should also be a good reason NOT to put it in an area of low population.

The sad fact is that problems of nuclear waste disposal are not solved. This generation should not be making decisions that will cause future generations to suffer horrible consequences.

*Charles Shepherd*

Charles took off work Tuesday afternoon; we took his mama to the airport; and when we got back home we had a little talk which turned into an argument.

I merely asked Charles why he has to be friends with these college professors and such—why he can't be friends with my friends. He went with me *once* to see Madora and her husband, Larry. And Sandra and Billy Ferrell have asked us over for supper twice and he wouldn't go either time. I know they won't ask us again.

"These people think," he says.

"Think?" I said. "Who *don't* think? Everybody thinks."

"I mean think about something important, something beyond the confines of their own lives."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means getting beyond Listre and Bethel. That's what it means. Raney, the way it works is this: small people talk about themselves; mediocre people talk about other people; and thinking people talk about ideas."

"What does that have to do with anything?" I said. See, what happens is: Charles spouts out this stuff he's read in the library and expects the words to be formed in gold in my head. But I'm sorry.

"It has to do with who I want to be friends with," says Charles. "Madora and—what's his name?—Larry are not interested in anything outside their kitchen, living room, and bedroom."

"I'll have you know," I said, "that Madora and Larry go to Bethel

Free Will Baptist Church. Don't tell me that Jesus Christ is only in their kitchen, living room, and bedroom."

"The problem," says Charles, "the whole problem is just that: Jesus wouldn't have a kitchen, living room, and bedroom."

"He would if he lived in Bethel." I tried to let that sink in. "No matter what your mama thinks."

"Why are you bringing her into this?" (I wasn't sure.) "Raney. Jesus Christ was a radical. If the people at Bethel Free Will Baptist Church met Jesus they'd laugh at him . . . or lynch him."

"A radical? Charles, I had a personal experience with Jesus Christ when I was twelve years old. He wasn't a radical then. And I did not laugh. As a matter of fact, I cried."

"Were you saved, Raney? Is that it? Were you saved and now you're going to heaven and nothing else matters?"

"Charles," I said, and I was mad, "you can run down whoever and whatever you want to, but when you run down my experience with Jesus Christ you are putting yourself below the belly of a hog." I was tore up. I had to cry. I walked out of the kitchen, into the bedroom and slammed the door with both hands as hard as I could; and Charles goes out the front door and drives off. And didn't come back for thirty minutes.

We didn't speak Wednesday or Thursday, but had started warming up some on Friday. Then Friday night we went to see a movie—some awful thing Charles wanted to see—and then Saturday morning the Sneeds business was all over *The Hansen County Pilot*. As I said, Sneeds runs Daddy's store. Sneeds Perry. I don't know him except from when I go in the store. He's always seemed nice.

What he did was get arrested in Raleigh at two A.M. Friday night for trying to pick up this woman he *thought* was a you-know-what but instead was a policewoman. They caught him red-handed. And then the whole subject had to come up at Sunday dinner with Mrs. —, with Millie, there visiting.

She came back Saturday night on the airplane, which was late, and I could of sworn I smelled liquor on her breath. Then we had to wait for all those suitcases, which we loaded into the trunk and carted home and into the guest room again.



Charles had found out that the Episcopal service started at 10:30 A.M. Sunday and that they were having that Eucharist, so they decided they'd go for sure and Millie wanted to know if I was going with them. They seemed like they wanted me to, so I said yes. I wanted to see what the service was like, if nothing else.

The service was the most unusual church service you've ever seen. First of all, I didn't know any of the hymns, and *neither did the regular people there*. You'd expect the regular people there to know their own hymns. They wandered all around on notes that didn't have anything to do with the melody and, all in all, didn't sing with any spunk. And they kept kneeling on these teenie-tiny benches. It was up and down, up and down. I got right nervous looking out the corner of my eye to see when it was up and when it was down.

The priest had a yellow robe with a butterfly on the back. Now that is plum sacrilegious if you ask me. A house of worship is no place to play Halloween.

One of the most surprising things of all was that the very thing you come to church to hear wasn't there. A sermon. There was no sermon. The priest talked about three minutes on hope and people in the ghettos, which may have been a sermon to him, but not to me.

They had the Lord's supper, but they didn't pass it around. You had to go up front, kneel down (of course), and get it.

I was a little nervous about drinking real wine in church. But when I thought about it I ended up figuring maybe that was the best place to do it and God would forgive me. It was red wine and about knocked my socks off. It was stronger somehow than Madora's white wine and that expensive stuff that I tried in the kitchen at Charles's TEA party. (That bottle had the price tag on it. Six dollars and something. It seemed like to me it should have cost less because it kind of disappeared once you got it in your mouth.) I want you to know the priest gulped down every bit that was left over at the end. That was an education to me.

All in all, it just wasn't *set up* like a church service. I must admit, several people were nice after the service, but most of them had Yankee accents. They were probably people who've come down to work at the new G.E. plant outside White Level.

Charles said he liked it—that it was “formal.” I didn't see anything formal about it. It was confusing to me. †

## Interview

Often when he is being interviewed, Clyde Edgerton will describe himself as having been raised by twenty-two aunts and uncles (who all lived in the same community where he was born) and three “mothers”—Truma, his actual mother, who at eighty-nine still lives in Bethesda; her younger sister, Lila, who lives in nearby Durham; and her older sister, Oma Crutchfield, who died two years ago at the age of ninety-one. The only child among the three families, Clyde received a rich store of family stories, jokes, and legends, along with “more than enough attention” and an unshakable sense of belonging and identity. When he was asked to speak about his heroes, Edgerton read an essay about his beloved Uncle Bob (brother to the three “mothers”), a carnival worker, truck driver/moonshine hauler, general store and trailer park owner, husband of four wives, hunter/poacher, inveterate storyteller, and family man who wrote his nephew, Clyde, shortly before his death: “Of all the nephews, you was my favorite.”

Edgerton and his family are expected at five different family reunions a year and at the annual grave-cleaning held every Saturday before Mother's Day in the old family graveyard. Located in what is now Umstead State Park, near Bethesda, this little graveyard, the wisteria vine that now covers an acre around it, and the tall pine trees are all that is left of what was once a small farming community and millsite on Crabtree Creek. It was here that Clyde's grandparents and great-grandparents lived and were buried. Since the 1940s family and friends have gathered on Mother's Day Saturday each year to tend the graves and have a picnic. This is when the oldest, funniest, most apocryphal stories are told. Clyde points out the almost-obscured landmarks to the young cousins and his

daughter—the old abandoned well where his Uncle Bob's chicken, named "Piddle Diddle," fell and was rescued, the millstones that are now partially buried in the ground near the creek, the barest ruins of the homeplace where Aunt "Sarah" (whose chickens were said to have roosted on her bed) used to live. It's out of this rich heritage that Edgerton lives and writes his fiction, producing stories that are alive with richly drawn characters, humor, and an intermingling of comedy and tragedy that is as true and timeless as the place he comes from.

For me it is in some ways difficult and in others easy to write about Clyde Edgerton. We met twenty years ago in a graduate class in education when we both were schoolteachers; two years later we were married. Soon we will move to a place in the country outside Chapel Hill, but for this interview, we sat in the living room of our home in downtown Durham. The spacious room is shaped in a hexagon, with tall windows set in three sides, and high, coffered ceilings.

Though it was early May, the day was surprisingly warm and humid. We'd sent a gaggle of young children—our daughter (then eight) and her friends—to play outside on the wide porch that spanned the entire front and one side of the house. Shrieks and thumps from the wooden glider glancing off a stone pillar supporting the porch came through the front window from time to time. Inside, we pushed stacks of books, manuscripts, toys, magazines, and newspapers aside on the glass coffee table to make room for the tape recorder, and settled down with tall glasses of iced tea.

*What do you see as the relationship between your own religious beliefs and those of your characters? I'm thinking now in particular of those in the novel Raney.*

My personal religious beliefs are perhaps more slippery, less certain than those of some of the characters in *Raney*. I'd be uneasy in making any theological position statements. However, I have spent many hours in organized religious activities. I guess you'd say I've got a plenitude of experience and a paucity of religious "positions," beyond those which have to do with behavior among and between people. I have convictions about how to treat people. These intersect, or overlap, with the positions of most major religions, I suppose. Fundamentalists of most sects and religions are quite clear as to the moral consequences of certain physical behaviors—drinking,

and so on, but now I'm not so clear about these. For example, rather than saying to the world, "God said this to Adam and Eve and God said this to Moses," now I'm less sure than I was about the facts of the matter and the importance to my life of these facts. I guess more than ever, though, I'm clear about the stories in the Bible—for example the made-up stories that Jesus kept telling. Stories live on, don't they? Stories and death are always racing neck and neck to the finish line.

*And the characters in Raney?*

Oh, yes. Well, I was raised in the Southern Baptist church. It was in a small, rural community. Later, I went away to college in Chapel Hill and then served in the air force in Southeast Asia. The combination of a liberal arts education and fighting in a war had a great impact on me. Conflicts arose between what I'd been taught at home and what I came to see and believe. In my fiction, I try to present some of these conflicts as occurring between my characters acted out in dramatic scenes.

Because my bent is fiction rather than history, philosophy, or theology, I choose to play out conflicts on a stage with made-up characters. The effect of all this on the reader depends a lot on what the reader believes about the subject. For example, I like to think that some dramatic scenes I portray are played out in a funny way, with a humorous tone. But to some, the conflicts I portray are not humorous at all.

In religion, since there is such a diversity, a divergence of views about what happened, what's "true," you can find yourself popular or unpopular because you've been perceived as turning fiction into some kind of statement of belief, which it's *not*. I enjoy putting two positions in conflict in front of the reader.

*In general, how closely, do you think, do your characters' conflicts resemble your own?*

My general topic is relationships among human beings, especially in families. Sometimes religion is a fertile area in which to examine these relationships. Of course, some people could argue that in writing about human beings, you are always writing about religion, about theological issues. That makes sense, I think.

That doesn't answer your question. The answer is they—the characters—are made up, and some I probably resemble and some

I'm sure I don't. Rather, my beliefs may resemble the beliefs of some of my characters.

*You mentioned that some people do not find your portrayal of these conflicts as humorous. What role do you see your humor playing in your fiction?*

When I think of a person having religious beliefs, I think of those beliefs as being "carved in stone." It's a touchy topic. Questioning someone's beliefs, even—or especially—in fiction, can cause much ill feeling, much stopping of listening. What I'd like is for my fiction to bring pleasure to readers. That pleasure might include thinking beyond the immediate surface of the story. If I have disarmed a reader with humor, then the chances of the reader thinking more deeply about his or her life or behavior may increase. May decrease, come to think of it. Anyway, that's kind of a technical reason. Another important reason is my own natural inclination—humor helps keep me from being depressed about my doubts when they're strongest. It can be a distancing technique and an endearing technique at the same time. I must continually warn myself, or remind myself, that I'm writing about relationships between characters. In doing so, it's not necessary for me to state or even understand "theological" positions technically.

*Along these lines, how do you see being raised a Southern Baptist has influenced you as an artist? How has it shaped or hindered your "bent" to write?*

It's a paradox—something like a paradox pushes me to write fiction. In my church, the same older people who loved me like aunts and uncles also refused to consider letting black human beings, created in the image of God, have entry into our place of worship. While I can clearly understand the cultural conditioning which would lead to this paradox—I experienced it myself—my sense of, my beliefs about, what the historical Jesus would do in the church I was raised in at the time I was growing up creates a kind of excitement, drama, conflict, tension. There is a need to write it out, to understand it, and in the process, to entertain myself and my reader.

*Do you think this kind of paradox might be more indigenous to, or more pronounced, in the South than in the rest of the country?*

The paradox is just easier to spot in the South. Sometimes it can be seen as a "reverse" hypocrisy. Instead of saying one thing and

doing another, they, the members of the church, did exactly as they said they would. You ask yourself, under what conditions would people who voted out blacks be willing to sacrifice for those same black people, out of love, like Good Samaritans? I know some of these folks would sacrifice a lot. It's like, they're speaking bad things, but doing good.

In other regions of the country, class prejudice, ageism, sexism may be less apparent. The Protestant religion is a prominent feature throughout all of our southern culture. There is a lot of talk, many statements of belief, and there are behaviors that support these statements, and behaviors that negate them—it's all part of the picture. At the heart of everything are the big questions of good and evil. What is good? What is evil? Why? How?

In the South religion is a serious matter. Questions of good and evil, eternity, and hell fire, are on every street corner, everywhere. In a funny way, religion goes beyond life and death, beyond everyday commerce, architecture, living. The southern artist *must* come to terms with it. It—southern Protestantism—stamps a lasting imprint on those who witness it. It seems to evoke extreme behaviors, extreme people—like televangelists and writers.

If your job is to write about relationships between people, religion in the South is a fruitful topic, regardless of your personal beliefs.

*Doris Betts traces some of the origins of this southern seriousness about religion to the Civil War. She says with the South's defeat in the war, and with Reconstruction, southerners experienced both personally and culturally what it meant to be broken and disgraced, to be cast out of mainstream society, to be "standing in the need of prayer." A southerner was likely to feel an irreconcilable sense of both pride and guilt in having fought for the cause of family and states rights, yet at the same time for the right to own slaves. This sense of humiliation and ambivalence would not be felt by the rest of the country until the Vietnam War, a century later.*

But as a young person, I had little awareness of guilt about slavery. What my elders felt and taught me—though not directly—was a kind of pride in being a southerner, a distrust of Yankees, Catholics, and blacks. This is a form of, a reaction to, guilt, I suppose.



What most influences my writing that I'm aware of are probably my childhood experiences. The guilt I felt was related to the inevitability of heaven and hell. If I masturbated, I'd go to hell. If I lied, or stole, I'd go to hell—unless I repented. Then I'd go to heaven. All of this was not always taught directly to me in words, but this is what I absorbed somehow—some of what I absorbed. This awareness came at an early age, too. I accepted Jesus as my personal saviour when I was seven. It was a norm as early as I could stand up, to think very seriously about good and evil and my soul's destination.

Poverty had a strong influence, too. Although we were not poor, we knew we could not waste anything. That was a sin. The experiences of previous generations taught us to live frugally.

*Poverty and religion are at once both vexing and fertile areas for fiction, aren't they?*

There seem to be connections between racial hatred, southern religion, and poverty. A child can come up with some fairly odd beliefs. I've had to cast off some of these early beliefs firmly. We seemed to believe we had the one true answer to any theological question. An outcome of this was a kind of self-righteousness that in my view now as an adult is sinful. The danger for the artist is to let his ethical stances change his fiction from being about relationships between people to being statements of what you believe. Sometimes I come close to the edge.

It's another paradox. The more you believe in certain positions, the more you're tempted to state them outright. And the more exciting it is to write with religion as a backdrop to relationships among characters.

*Robert Penn Warren has said that all fiction writing has to do with the saving or loss of the immortal soul to good or evil. With such a strong sense of the absolute, and of the high stakes involved, how could such a writer as Warren avoid the pitfalls of didacticism, of making theological statements about what one believes thinly disguised as fiction?*

Robert Penn Warren also said, "Verisimilitude is all." By that I think he meant the artist's characters and situations must above all remain true to experience. No forced manipulations. The outcome must seem to grow naturally out of the situation.

I choose not to wrestle with those ultimate issues in absolute terms—whether or not the soul is going toward salvation or an evil end. I think most writers set up, are engaged in, a process of coming to terms all their lives with the paradoxes in religion. Grappling with the questions is what excites the artist, if he or she is to be successful as an artist. Being a Protestant, straight-down-the-line conservative believer requires a diminishing of curiosity about the physical and metaphysical world, the world of the soul. And in art those curiosities are required. The kind of religious teaching I grew up with was based on certainty, a lack of curiosity. No examination.

*It reminds me of a bumper sticker I once saw: "The Bible says it, I believe it, and that's the end of it."*

Yes, that's it. End of discussion. At the extreme it ends in something like religious-government fusion. All Americans should read our Constitution while thinking about our reluctance to talk back to dictatorial religious bullies.

*In light of all this, if you do not choose to wrestle with ultimate issues in absolute terms, what would you say does compel you to write?*

A continuous awe of how people—how people live together. That something like a person, a human being, can talk to another one is just an amazing fact, not to speak of *doing* something with another one of these human being creatures. Also, I suppose that through writing I get a sense of control in a chaotic, open-ended universe of the imagination. I'm sure there are some unconscious reasons, too. The need to put contradictions, conflicts, in front of myself, to make them be played out in dramatic situations. Other people have the desire, the predisposition, I guess, to play out such conflicts in sociology, philosophy, math, or even, say, computer science.

I was hungry to put questions that weren't asked before myself in fiction as a movement toward resolution. If all were resolved, there would be no fun in life—that's why some religious know-it-alls, conservative or liberal, are so dull. Sometimes I'm re-creating the paradox of very loving people who may have "anti-Christian" ideas. I created them in fiction, so if fiction works, then maybe readers will see and like the humanness of a character such as Raney, for example, while disagreeing with some of her positions. If the story works, the paradox remains. If the story doesn't work, the reader

says, "I hate her positions, so I hate her. I love her positions, therefore I love her." This, anyway, is a plausible conjecture, a good guess about some of what compels me to write.

*How do you see your religion, your southern heritage, and your art are all tied up together?*

Well. First, you have the distinction between religion as pronounced to me by an organized church and then you have the religion that was practiced by church members—bringing food to the sick, etc. Because in the South, Protestant religion is such a powerful factor, it's likely that someone would be exposed to it. Once exposed to and then going on to an intellectual kind of life, a sort of pondering, you have a growing garden of paradoxes and conflicts. My being influenced by the transcendentalists in high school and college added to the conflict early on. Emerson said that there is too much emphasis on the personality of Jesus—that the soul knows no persons. I remember being struck by that way back yonder. I remember wondering how much Jesus would want us to be worrying about him, and how much he'd want us to worry about what we were doing in the world. That's kind of fun to think about. Maybe they have to go together. That's the kind of thing that would be interesting to have a couple of characters talk about. See what they said.

*In talking of the relationship of his art to his life and his beliefs, Reynolds Price has expressed what he is about in terms of a conscious search for and a fascination with the mysteries of life and of faith. Can you describe your writing as a kind of search? A delving into the mysteries?*

An artist, most artists, I suppose, are consciously trying to create that which has never existed before. It's a gift from God, or Nature, or wherever—being able to create something good which will last a while. To my way of thinking, religion is a set of assumptions and beliefs. A spiritual quest is a search for meaning, for truths, for the mysterious. I realize I am more concerned with behaviors, how ethical precepts are lived out in everyday life—but that is a direct reflection of the religious spirit, it seems to me. I try not to intellectualize or make abstractions, which seems to be what I'm doing now.

*How do you see the relationship of Flannery O'Connor's theology to her art, her fiction?*

My response to her fiction may not be what she intended. My reaction is less along theological lines than perhaps she would hope for. But on the other hand I suppose she would like my response, since my response takes me back to her fiction with new rewards each time. I like what Louis Rubin had to say about her work in his essay in *A Gallery of Southerners* called "Flannery O'Connor's Company of Southerners Or, 'The Artificial Nigger' Read as Fiction Rather Than Theology." There he regards her as a fiction writer more than as a theologian. I don't pull from her writing straight theological meanings as some people do. I see delightful, funny, sad, elegantly written stories about relationships between people.

*What do you think ultimately compelled Flannery O'Connor to write?*

I think a delight in the habit of writing fiction. If I had written the first two-thirds of "Good Country People," I'd be ecstatic about what was going to happen, regardless of the presence or absence of Grace in the lives of the characters. I think great fun impelled her to write. However, I think that Flannery O'Connor was more deeply aware of why she was writing fiction than I am aware of why she did—or why I do. We could be writing for the same reasons, but she had a better hold on her reasons. Her sense of story and character was so powerful that it made some of her "messages" less obvious than she might have thought. For me—as a reader—that's a good outcome.

*Some theologians have made a useful distinction between religion and theology, saying that religion can be thought of as regulative function, telling the tribe what to do, how to survive, in a hostile world. Theology, on the other hand, is a speculative function, answering questions like what is the meaning of life? What is our relationship to God? What's going wrong? All religions contain a theology and most theologies imply religions, but they are different in function. Both religion and art give us a world of order to inhabit. How do you see your fiction in light of this notion, this suggestion of an analogous relationship between religion and art?*

Well, your distinction between religion and theology is interesting. I'd never thought about it that way. But I don't think about these matters very much. Maybe I should, but I don't. I think some other people should. It's all I can do to write made-up stories about



made-up characters. To do this job well, with clarity and simplicity and depth, takes more time than I often have. And I do believe that all the while that I'm trying to do it right, I'm working toward meaning and order, toward making something out of chaos, something that makes sense, something that helps me understand human beings, behavior, good, and evil. I guess that sounds like I'm engaged in a religious enterprise, doesn't it? †

## ALLAN GURGANUS

### When I'm Fog on a Coffin Lid

Allan Gurganus was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in 1947, the eldest of four sons. His first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, was published in 1989. A *New York Times* bestseller for eight months, it was awarded the Sue Kaufman Prize for the Best First Work of Fiction and has been translated into Italian, Spanish, French, and German.

Since 1974, Gurganus's short fiction has appeared in *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, *GRANTA*, *Antaeus*, *The Paris Review*, and *The New Yorker*. He has won two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Danforth Fellowship, an Ingram Merrill Grant, and many other awards. *White People*, a collection of novellas and stories, was published in 1990. A finalist for the PEN-Faulkner Prize, it was given the Southern Book Award and the 1991 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for the Best Work of American Fiction published that year. Gurganus has taught fiction writing at Stanford, Duke and the Iowa Writers' Workshop; he is permanently affiliated with Sarah Lawrence College. His award-winning paintings are represented in many private and public collections, and he has illustrated two chapbooks of his own fiction.

Gurganus's political and artistic lives are inseparable. He writes for the *New York Times* op-ed page and cofounded Writers for Harvey Gantt, which sponsors a series of nationwide readings in an effort to defeat Senator Jesse Helms. He has raised tens of thousands of dollars for AIDS research and was recently honored for his work by Episcopal Caring Response to AIDS.