

Georgia Afton

AN INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM GAY

William Gay's first novel, *The Long Home*, published in 1999, won the James A. Michener Memorial Prize. A second novel, *Provinces of Night* (2000), confirmed his emergence as a major Southern voice reminiscent of William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy. His 2001 short story collection, *I Hate To See That Evening Sun Go Down*, includes "The Paperhanger," which was anthologized in *New Stories from the South 2001* and *Best Mystery Stories 2001* and received an O'Henry Award. A third novel, *The Lost Country*, is due out in spring 2005. Gay has won a Guggenheim Fellowship and the 1999 William Peden Award. His work in other genres includes music criticism, record reviews, and musician profiles, reflecting his passion for the Blues.

In a review of *The Long Home* in the *New York Times Book Review*, Tony Earley compared Gay to other great Southern writers like Larry Brown and Cormac McCarthy, saying, "At his best, Gay writes with the wisdom and patience of a man who has witnessed hard times and learned that panic or hedging won't make better times come any sooner; he looks upon beauty and violence with equal measure and makes an accurate accounting of how much of each the human heart contains."

A native Tennessean, Gay lives with his two sons and a pitbull in a creek-side log cabin surrounded by limestone bluffs, fields, woods, and wildflowers. Two daughters and grandchildren live nearby. For years, Gay worked in construction and carpentry, not publishing his first story until he was fifty-five years of age. His gruff exterior and remote air dissolve easily in conversation. This interview took place over several days in Gay's home in Tennessee.

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Afton: Tell me something of your journey to becoming a writer.

Gay: I always wanted to write fiction and have on and off ever since seventh grade. I read so much it seemed a natural progression to go from reading books to writing them. A teacher noticed I was reading pretty indiscriminately and gave me *Look Homeward, Angel* by Thomas Wolfe. It's like a prose poem in places, and I just couldn't quit on that book. We lived in a place with no electricity, with kerosene lamps, and I remember my mother yelling at me to blow out the lamp, so I had to wait until daylight to

finish. But I knew then I wanted to be a novelist. To me, as a kid, it was an exalted calling, the noblest thing you could do.

Afton: What made it noble?

Gay: It was just the way I thought, and guess I still do. It's a great thing to be a writer. When I have a mental picture of what I want and when the picture and the words come close to matching, I get high off the writing. It's like being a heroine junkie, I imagine.

Afton: So, nailing a piece feels like getting high?

Gay: Actually, it's better than drugs and better than sex when you get that one sentence, that one paragraph you're satisfied with.

Afton: Is it a spiritual high?

Gay: Not in a religious sense. It's more visceral for me. Like when you're doing a job, laying brick or sheet-rocking and it turns out right, except to the tenth power. Maybe it's spiritual on some level. Whether I'm good or bad doesn't enter into to it. I'm a serious writer because I believe in what I do. I never wrote with a paycheck in mind.

Afton: You went straight for the novel, and the short story came later?

Gay: Yes, in eighth grade, I started on this Western, *East of the Moon, West of the Sun*. I worked on it a long time. It just wasn't any good. Funny, even then some of my idiosyncratic punctuation was showing up.

Afton: You're not too keen on commas, are you?

Gay: No, I'm not real fond of using commas except when you can't get by without them. I think writers should get maybe three semi-colons, and zero exclamation

points per life. I hate quotation marks, too. Dialogue isn't separate. It's narrative form and oughtn't be messed with. Quotes take you out of the fictional world.

Afton: Your punctuation is about all that remains from your Westerns?

Gay: By the time I went in the Navy, I was writing about exotic people in exotic settings. I was taken with Fitzgerald and Hemingway and expatriates living in Paris. It's only when I began to write about my own geography and my own kind of people that the writing was suddenly better, more confident. My failed expressionists living on the Riviera were tentative. Readers can always tell if the writer knows what he's talking about, and I didn't until I tapped into my own roots.

Afton: What led you to tap your own roots?

Gay: Reading Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*. It was a revelation that I could write about my own people and landscape, which seems weird because I'd read so much Faulkner. He was amazed to discover he could use Oxford, Mississippi, his little postage stamp of earth, to root universal characters. Faulkner primed the pump, and McCarthy opened the floodgates. Maybe it was Cormac's being from Tennessee, and the power of his language. He's an alchemist with words. He's the best writer working, and he's better than a bunch of dead ones, too.

Afton: A strong sense of place is evident in your work. Is that a fair statement, and do you think the ability to write authentic characters is bound to place?

Gay: Yes to both. McCarthy taught me landscape has to be tactile; you have to smell it, feel it, inhabit it. He does successfully what I try to do. He's dualistic. Often he doesn't differentiate between the natural world and his characters, particularly in *Blood Meridian*. Sometimes landscape seems more important than the characters playing out

their sordid little story in front of it. They create conflict with the natural world, and when it gets out of sync things go awry. I try for something similar. You've really got to have place down before that can work.

Afton: It's clear that landscape is an entry point for you into your characters.

Gay: That's true. I have to have that character-landscape interaction before I can get people to act. Books that rely on dialogue and plot without deference to place and time and weather never seem real to me. The people I write about live closer to the ground than characters in urban settings where it's warm in the winter and cool in the summer. I'm not knocking the urban novel, but the only thing a writer has to work out of is his own sensibility.

Afton: And your sensibility manifests itself in a magnetic attraction to the land. It feels like the energy source that drives you.

Gay: It is. Maybe everything comes out of childhood. As a kid I lived in a house in the middle of the woods. The trees came right up to the door. We had no air-conditioning, no electricity. I'd go to sleep in the summertime heat with all the windows open, hearing the sounds of night birds, the whippoorwills and owls calling. Nature soaked in. It's my talisman. It carries a sort of magic that I can take out and draw on to ground myself and my characters. It's how I connect with them, how I feel what they're feeling, how I know what they'll do. Sometimes they want to be elsewhere, and then horizons and roads become indicative of being gone, of being out of the moment and into something else. It's how I get gone. Often, after a long day working construction, I'd go down to the creek. Getting back into the woods and into the trees was like going off

stage and having the curtain come down, an unspooling. There's something calmative for me about landscape. It's metaphysical.

Afton: But there's also disharmony and tension in your characters' interaction with nature.

Gay: Nature is threatening a lot of the time. It's dispassionate. One size fits all. Maybe it has whims and does what it wants to do, but your plans don't factor. It's larger than anything.

Afton: Does landscape, sense of place, come before scene or scene sequence in your writing process?

Gay: Definitely – writing's a continual act of faith. Like walking out on a wire and having the confidence to just put one foot in front of the other. I don't always know what's going to happen. I know a bunch of scenes, but can't just jump in and write whichever I want. The one I know best is always connected to place, but may belong in the last third of the book. When I finish, it's like putting together a jig-saw puzzle. I have to go through the whole manuscript and decide for sure what goes where. Sometimes it's clear-cut because of the plot, but if there's a scene that's incidental or that has to do with character development, it might work in two or three places and I have to figure out where it fits best. During the writing, you just have to believe another scene will present itself when you're done with the one in hand. You've got to keep that faith.

Afton: Flannery O'Connor's writing was an act of faith in a sense, and she's a big influence of yours. How did reading her build your faith in writing?

Gay: The inevitability of her plots gives me faith. The way she used titles, their quality of irony – *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* and *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. That irony comments on the story. And her endings are the only possible endings. She had a disregard for the rules. *A Good Man is Hard to Find* breaks several. For instance, it's too much of a coincidence that the cat jumped out of the basket and fastened on the guy's neck and the first car that comes by is the Misfit's. She breaks the point of view rule, too, which is, keep it consistent. Toward the end of the story, the point of view shifts from the Grandmother to the Misfit. Flannery knew she had a great story, so she wasn't that concerned with the rules.

Afton: Unlike O'Connor, you didn't attend college or a graduate from writing program. Instead, you're a self-made writer who developed your craft in isolation?

Gay: That's right. I guess I am self made. I think if you read enough you get a feel of how things should go, a sense of what a plot is. It just takes a lot longer the way I did it. I think with instruction I might have abandoned things that eventually wound up working for me, such as writing some of my characters over the top. Writing in a vacuum, I just went with what worked for me without worrying about it. Also, I couldn't bring myself to act on rejection letter advice to cull my "quasi poetic" language. To me it was about language first and story second. Had I made the language ordinary, writing would've felt pointless. If you've got a good voice, you act to maintain it and build its individuality. It's perplexing.

Afton: Do you think most writers are perplexed by why they write?

Gay: Yes, I do. Toleration of the perplexity is key to making it as a writer. I spent years not making any sense, writing volumes of notebooks no one will ever see. It

was like I was in a closet. You know how gay people come out of the closet. Eventually, I came out of the closet when I got published. Before that, I was working construction, and you know you don't go out on Monday morning and say, "Hey boys, listen to this sonnet I wrote over the weekend." When the guys are talking about deer hunting and football, you kind of keep your sonnet to yourself.

Afton: You mentioned rejection letters. They made you more determined?

Gay: I'm not sure about that, but I had a truck load of them. A lot of it was my own fault, not following suggestions to prune the language, write shorter sentences, and use conventional punctuation. But I just kept doing it my way. I must be the most stubborn guy in the world because in all those years of trying to sell stuff and selling nothing there was little to inspire confidence. I just always thought I knew what I was doing even when the editors obviously thought otherwise.

Afton: But they finally saw that you knew what you were doing?

Gay: Well, a couple of things happened to help my career. In 1992 McCarthy published *All the Pretty Horses*. It won the National Book Award and made the *New York Times* bestseller list. Then Charles Frazier did *Cold Mountain*, which sold enormously. Between them, McCarthy and Frazier brought Southern fiction back into vogue, ending a long dry spell.

Afton: A spell you helped to relieve with two well-received novels and a lauded short story collection. Which comes more easily for you, the novel or short stories?

Gay: It depends on how strong the idea is. The "Paper Hanger" story came quickly. So did my novel *Provinces of Night*, which I started one February. I was living alone, intensely obsessed, and finished in October. I wrote *The Long Home* a couple of

times in eighteen months. Once from scratch and another time I rewrote the ending. I've been working on *The Lost Country* a couple of years off and on, but book tours and writing gigs distract me. All that social stuff breaks my intensity and takes me out of my fictional world. Writing my way back into it takes time.

Afton: You told me that writing is as an act of surrender. Can you elaborate on that?

Gay: Whatever impulse is driving you to tell the story has to be surrendered to. You have to give it its head. You have to get rid of self and write the story with your unconscious mind. Let it take wing on its own. Some days eloquence doesn't show up and you have to believe it ain't gone for good. You can't be worried about what somebody's going to think. You have to get everything out of the picture except what you're writing.

Afton: I think that act of surrender accounts for why you remind me of O'Connor. You both write with a confidence generated by what she called a suspension of disbelief. It comes off in the believability of your characters, and plots.

Gay: I absolutely agree with O'Connor. You have to have airtight belief in what you're writing to make it come off the page. The reader intuitively knows if there's a hand on the wheel, if somebody's in control who knows what he's talking about. One whiff of disbelief and your book's a paperweight.

Afton: That fits with what you were saying earlier about some of your characters being over the top. In *Provinces of Night*, Brady does these unbelievable things and then you push it even further, setting up a series of outcomes to coincide with his hexes: the mailman gets stomach cancer, Woodall's plane goes down, E. F. commits suicide. The

reader can find a logical out, but you never give it up as coincidence. You let the question stand in the reader's mind.

Gay: That's exactly it. I don't explain it because I believed it myself. Flannery was dead on.

Afton: O'Connor also says aspiring writers need to know what truth they're driving at, and why they want to write instead of becoming a bookkeeper and living a sensible life.

Gay: I take issue with that. If I'm writing toward any particular truth, I'm not aware of it. I'm inclined to believe writers are born rather than made, not born as writers, but with the inclination to write, and then they have to work their guts out to become writers. There may be people who can explain why they have that inclination, but that's too analytical for me. With me it's like being born left or right-handed, brown-eyed or blue-eyed. I was inclined to write because writers' lives interested me. There's a mystery to them. It's like Flannery's saying it's a career choice, but I don't think Faulkner ever had a choice about whether he was going to be a writer. He worked as a janitor because his inclination to write beat all else.

Afton: Your work is reminiscent of Faulkner's because you write a lot about the human heart. According to him, the human heart in conflict with itself was the only thing worth writing about.

Gay: That's the serious stuff that engages you as a writer. I'm not sure I consciously set out to write about the human heart, or to emulate Faulkner. I just wrote about what concerned me. What was important to me in *Provinces* was E. F. and the Bloodworth family, about as dysfunctional a family as there ever was. What made them

live for me – I’m not talking about the book, but the process of writing it – was that their problems were world-shaking to me.

Afton: That’s an internal connection with your writing. What about external? Tobias Wolff says, “once a story’s written it carries you with it wherever it goes, has its own life, and at the same time gives distinct evidence of yours. It represents you in the world. That’s very obvious when stated, but really mysterious when felt.” Does that apply to you?

Gay: I don’t know if I have the perspective to judge whether it fits me or not, but I certainly agree that the word “mysterious” applies and stories do have a life of their own. The whole idea of creativity is mysterious: Putting characters into the world, who weren’t there before by some process you don’t fully understand. And stories do represent you in the world though I’m not sure I wanted to be represented by “The Paperhanger.”

Afton: I don’t blame you. That’s about the most chilling story I’ve ever read. What sort of response have you had to it?

Gay: Well, I was going with a woman one time and she hadn’t read “The Paperhanger.” We were sitting here reading, and I would feel her eyes on me, and I’d look up and she’d be looking at me over the top of the page. Then she’d read a little bit more and look at me over the top of the page again, and finally she put it up and didn’t say anything for awhile. Then she said, “How much of you is in the paperhanger, and how much of the paperhanger is in you?” And I said, “Well it’s just a story,” but things were never the same after. That story warped the way she saw me. It cost me a fairly decent girlfriend.

Afton: Yet the genesis of the story is mundane compared to the paperhanger's behavior.

Gay: Yes, this plumber I knew was doing repairs for some lady with a lapdog that took a bite out of him. On reflex he hit it stone dead with a wrench. The woman was somewhere about and he didn't know what to do, so he took the tray out of his toolbox and put the dog in the bottom, replaced the tray, fixed the leak, collected his money, and left. Years later I was painting a house for this Indian doctor and his wife, and the woman and her four-year old daughter had this imperial air. For some reason, the two incidents came together.

Afton: "The Paperhanger" illustrates the violence in human nature. Yet humor is also significant to your writing, and on a level that goes far beyond surface levity.

Gay: That's why I like Mark Twain. *Huck Finn's* a crucifix of sadness, but the funniest book you'll ever read. Too often in fiction, tragedy is wrought without the real-life humor that accompanies it. A book without humor is just a projection of the writer's angst. That doesn't have a whole lot to do with life. When I was young and more adventurous, and terrible things like car wrecks and cops turned up, someone always said something inappropriately funny. That's part of the stoic quality in Southern people. I ran into it a lot growing up, listening to old guys' stories. They were fatalistic about getting perpetually screwed by life, and they survived on laughter. I'm sure oppressed people everywhere develop survival humor, but the South was a weird place. People think that when the Civil War and Reconstruction were over, things clicked into normal. But the rural South – I can't speak for Atlanta and country-club people – was a place of oppression, right up to the Civil Rights Movement. Before that, even though the South

was a part of the United States, there were still an awful lot of old ways. People still thought differently than they did everywhere else.

Afton: So, in life, humor's about survival and in writing, it's about balance?

Gay: It's an instinctive need for balance in both. I watch how people use humor in life and I pay a lot of attention to the way episodes are arranged in a book. It's like film editing. Deciding what goes where is as much a task as the writing itself. You know the general skeleton. This bone goes here, that one there, but the tiny bones and the funny bones have to be set just right. Sometimes, I think I write in too much humor. I like putting people in outrageous situations and seeing what happens. But I have enormous compassion for the inept, bumbling characters.

Afton: Like Allbright from *Provinces of Night*, who sends a crimping tool nose-diving off a roof?

Gay: Yes, he's a favorite and that scene ended up having a lot of plot mileage. It came straight out of my working crew on a building where I had to operate a crimper. Boring as walking a dog, holding that cord *click, clack, click, clack* all the way down the roof seam. It was way up in the air and I wondered what the hell would happen if I got distracted and the damn thing walked off the roof.

Afton: That's shortly before Allbright complains, "That ladder sure is one long son of a bitch."

Gay: Yes, and the boss says, "It only goes from the bottom to the top." I was pretty qualmy myself about ladders. That scene was a bunch of fun to write.

Afton: Dialogue is a tremendous vehicle for humor in your work.

Gay: My intention with dialogue is to be dead on, tape-recorder accurate, as a counterpoint to the narrative, which is poetic and has a couple of levels to it. Once I heard this drunk guy in a pool room heading home. He'd already decided he was going to have a fight with his wife and said, "I'm going home and if my wife ain't got dinner ready I'm gonna raise hell and if she does I ain't gonna eat a God damn bite."

Afton: You've found inspiration in your community. What about within your family? It's clear seeing you with your grown children that being a parent is important to you. Has it influenced your writing?

Gay: I always tried to keep the two separate. When my kids started reading my stuff, my oldest daughter was appalled. The violence in *The Long Home* was 180° out from how she saw me. To my kids I was a Pa Ingalls from *Little House on the Prairie*, just a straight, hard-working guy who never lost his temper. Reconciling me the father with me the writer was tough for them. I wanted to be a great father and have my kids love me, which worked, I guess, because we're very close.

Afton: I wonder if Faulker's family ever made such a reconciliation. You've said you thought he had an unhappy life. Do you think that's a coincidence?

Gay: No. I wonder sometimes if writers don't screw up their lives on purpose. Creativity and contentment don't go hand in hand. People write out of chaos and pain. It's an unpleasant thought and no one would admit to it, but writers create situations in order to draw on the emotions felt during whatever it was they screwed up. It's not flattering, but that's often how it is. A lot of writers are con men. They palm off their obsessions and idiosyncrasies, their eccentricities, perversions and fixations on a non-suspecting public and get paid for it.

Afton: Where do you see creativity and contentment not going hand in hand?

Gay: In Bob Dylan. Dylan's a singer, but he's really a poet, and his life's been painful. He's put himself in situations where he'd get hurt and used the experience to write knockout songs.

Afton: Poetry's a clear influence in your work. Have you written any?

Gay: I can't write it. It's too disciplined for me. Every word has to count. If you could reduce a situation to its core, take some kind of concentrate from it that you could mix with water, to me that's poetry. I've always loved reading it, and though I never wanted to be a poet, I want my narrative to be poetic. I want it to have another layer, like a myth with a universal lesson. People become undone in similar ways from too much ambition or ego. The story stays the same, only the characters change. You can capture that mystery in the layering of poetic language.

Afton: I know you like Yeats and Blake.

Gay: Yeats' "The Second Coming" is my favorite poem. There's no particular poem of Blake's, but I'm drawn by the fact that he had an epiphany, a revelation in the Christian sense. I thought if I kept reading him I would get a handle on the world, maybe even have an epiphany of my own. That's why I gave Winer one in *The Long Home*. He has a moment when he's drinking strawberry wine in a deserted house. Time suddenly exists in compressed layers like paintings on stacked panes of glass held up to the light. The wine was strawberry, but it was also the earth before the strawberries were planted. He sees a woman's face, not the way she looks now, but how she'll look when she's eighty-five and how she'll look after she's been a in a casket a year with the flesh gone

from her face. It's as though he's been unmoored from a present moment and is existing in time.

Afton: Time is clearly tied to plot in your work. Do your novels start with plot, or does story emerge from character?

Gay: I've never come up with anything based purely on plot. For me, it grows out of character grounded in landscape. Things happen because of who the characters are, what they've done or not done, and the plot moves according to what they set in motion.

Afton: You use revision mainly to order scenes into a final manuscript, and do a lot of pre-writing your in head, right?

Gay: True. If my mind's bored, it tells me a story. *Cut Flowers*, a yet-to-be published novel, just flew into my head and during breaks on the job, I would write myself little shorthand notes to remember exactly how I wanted it. At night I wrote up what came to me hanging sheet rock, or laying brick during the day. Visualization's key. I have to know everything, the way the light falls, what direction's what. I have to be there. I don't tell everything I know, but the things you don't write leave ghosts and by their omission they're there, if that makes sense.

Afton: Do your ideas change as you put them on paper?

Gay: No, they stay pretty much the same. Sometimes I have a scene, but not much dialogue, because dialogue grows out of action. I don't have a thousand words in my head for straight transcription. It's more like a short-hand encoding of the tone of the piece. The rest's a natural outgrowth.

Afton: Tone is really important to you, then?

Gay: Yes, though I couldn't really say what it means. I just know intuitively when it's right. Sometimes you try to kid yourself that something will work, when really you know it jars like a bad chord on a guitar.

Afton: Is searching for that right chord part of a larger search of writing to find yourself?

Gay: No, that's not me. It's a little high-flown. I've never really consciously tried to find myself. Frankly, I don't want to know a lot about myself. I'm not that interested in me. Everybody's got something they're supposed to do. I like to think that people have a purpose and my purpose is to write. It's unavoidable. From the time I was a kid, it's what I've been obsessed with. I've met writers who came to the craft in other ways, accidentally. For me, it was always what I was going to do whether I was successful at it or not.

Afton: You've been successful despite the fact that several of your novels are still unpublished, right?

Gay: I've had some bad luck. *The Lost Highway*, my first novel, went astray at the publishers. *Cut Flowers* is tied up, and another called *Twilight* was stolen in a burglary. *Cut Flowers* is one of my favorite titles. It's a quote from one of the characters in the book, this kinky undertaker who says, "How compliant are the dead. You can arrange them like cut flowers." *The Lost Country*, which I'm at work on now, will be my sixth.

Afton: Tell us something of its story and when it's due out.

Gay: Hopefully, next spring. It's set in 1950s rural Tennessee and concerns a young guy named Edgewater, who's been discharged from the Navy. He's hitchhiking

across country to East Tennessee because his father is dying, but he's ambivalent about making it as there's been a lot of conflict between them. He has a lot of picaresque adventures. Much of it plays out on the road. Edgewater gets involved with a one-armed conman named Brewster Fish. There's a runaway young woman, with a mother from hell, whom a sheriff's hunting. There's also a villain and a hunchback, some phantom horrors. There's some magic realism, which I'm a little uncertain about. The end's written, but it's still a work in progress. A lot of bridging scenes need writing.

Afton: Your short stories seem quite a departure from your novels. They're mostly set in the present and have a contemporary feel compared to the novels, which are set in the '40s and '50s. Can you talk about that shift?

Gay: I never really saw it as a shift. I never consciously tried to move into the present. Ideally stuff would be timeless. The concern would be the story. What happens to the characters and the time wouldn't particularly matter, but practically that doesn't work. *The Long Home* is set in the past by necessity because in a contemporary setting Hardin would have been a drug dealer, or meth lab operator, but that holds no interest for me. To me, there was something almost romantic about the idea of a guy who was a bootlegger.

Afton: Your novels do have that romantic quality, which really isn't present in the stories with the exception of "My Hand is Just Fine Where It Is." The stories are edgier, harsher, and less redemptive than the novels.

Gay: Yes, you're right. What I'm after in a novel is a kind of a mythic quality. I want it free floating, not tied to a particular period. Like an old folk tale. In a short story

you have to get it done. In a novel, you can write pieces that don't move the story along, but that help with the atmosphere, or fill out the mood.

Afton: The final passage of *The Long Home* speaks profoundly of your obsession with time and its connection to the allure of nature:

For he had the white road baking in the noonday sun, the wavering blue treeline, the fierce, sudden violence of summer storms. At night the moon tracked its accustomed course and the timeless whippoorwills tolled from the dark and they might have been the selfsame whippoorwills that called to him in his youth.

That's all that matters, he told himself with a spare and bitter comfort.

Those were the things that time did not take away from you. They were the only things that lasted.

Gay: I rewrote that passage more than anything I've ever written. What I was trying to get across is that the old man, William Tell Oliver, has come to know that nature is all that endures, it's all he can count on. Everything else is temporary, and he's thrown his allegiance in with what lasts.

Afton: If people do throw their allegiance in with what lasts, your work will be read a for long time to come. Would you agree?

Gay: It's not for me to say, and it doesn't matter.

