

# “The Delta Has Always Been a Magical Place to Me”:

Interview with Scott Ely by Catherine Calloway

*Scott Ely was the featured fiction writer at the 13th annual Delta Blues Symposium: the Sixties. A BA and MA graduate of the University of Mississippi, Mr. Ely also has an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Arkansas. He presently lives in South Carolina and teaches at Winthrop University.*

*Ely has published several works of fiction, beginning with the novels *Starlight* (1987) and *Pit Bull* (1988). In addition, he has published three collections of fiction: *Overgrown with Love* (1993), *The Angel in the Garden* (1998) and *Pulpwood* (2004). His most recent novels, *Eating Mississippi* (2005) and *A Song For Alice Loom* (2006), have all been published by Livingston Press. A third, *The Dream of the Red Road*, is forthcoming in 2008. His short fiction has appeared in numerous publications, including *Arkansas Review* and its predecessor *Kansas Quarterly*, and his work has appeared in the United Kingdom as well as in translation in Germany, Holland, Italy and Japan.*

*Ely's fiction defies easy categorization. One could easily call him a Vietnam War writer or a Southern writer, yet the breadth and diversity of his settings and subjects makes such labels sound hollow. Indeed, though Ely writes expertly of Vietnam and the Delta (and South Carolina and Alabama and elsewhere), with an easy verisimilitude, there is never a tranquil surface. His fiction disturbs and delights, is never written with anything but the sharpest insights and the most elegant prose. As George Singleton once observed, "Scott Ely knows the landscapes, both visible and hidden. [His*

*work] makes me believe in the short story."*

*Catherine Calloway conducted this interview with Mr. Ely in the Edge Coffee House, near the ASU campus, on 30 March 2007. And, as the reader shall soon see, Both Dr. Calloway and Mr. Ely were accompanied by Mr. Ely's wife, Susan Ludvigson, an award-winning poet herself, who offers clarity and wit to this rollicking conversation.*

**Catherine Calloway.** As a way of starting off, could you give some background about yourself?

**Scott Ely.** I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. My father was an electrical engineer for the Bell telephone company. When I was eight we moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where I was schooled when I went to school. The children there said I spoke like somebody from California.

I was an indifferent student. My mother had have a conference with my fourth grade teacher when I got in trouble for reading. I became famous because the teacher broke a yardstick on me, because I was reading when we were supposed to be doing something else. I just sort of drifted through school. I became a student at Ole Miss and majored in English. I was drafted and went to Vietnam, then came back and got a Master's with my GI Bill, then got a job teaching at a junior college in Alabama, where I stayed for nine years. Then I went to the University of Arkansas, in Fayetteville, to get an MFA and published one novel while I was a student and another the

year after I graduated. When I went to Arkansas I had been publishing a few stories in sort of middle level magazines.

CC. What about primary influences? Were there any particular writers who influenced you?

SE. I suppose Conrad, Faulkner, Hemingway. Always liked Nabokov, Flannery O'Connor. I read a lot of Welty's stuff, but I wasn't that influenced by her for some reason. I'm old enough, I guess, to be influenced by Conrad, Hemingway, and Faulkner. A lot of



Scott Ely Signing Books  
Photo by Richard Allen Burns

other people, particularly male writers.

CC. Any non-literary influences?

SE. That would have direct influence on my writing? I guess I've always been interested in the outdoors.

CC. That interest shows up a lot in your work.

SE. I did a lot of white water canoeing. I've hunted, I've fished.

CC. That shows in your writing. I mean, it

shows you know the territory well.

SE. Right. But you know, getting back to influences, Chekhov is probably my main man.

CC. He was an excellent short story writer.

SE. Yeah, and I've been recalling in Vietnam being given copies of--you know they were giving away books--and getting a copy of a Modern Library edition of Chekhov. And I was being taken up country to Pleiku on the transport--you know, doing what they call a combat load. There are no seats and you just sit cross-legged and they pack you in like sardines. I was sitting there trying to, you know read that book.

You've maybe read the story about my first experience with *Howard's End*. It's in in one of my stories or an essay. I got a copy of *Howard's End* and I discovered the publisher had dumped defective copies on the troops because when I got halfway through it started over again. I always wondered if there were some people who died right after they got to that point. [Laughs] Maybe the publishers were banking on that--that some people wouldn't need the second part of the book. It was years until I finally bought a copy and read the whole thing.

CC. Did you write any stories while you were in Vietnam?

SE. I think a couple of times I tried to write stories, you know, when I was in base camp. But no, not too much. I'm not the sort of writer that really keeps journals. Occasionally, I'll take notes. I figure if it's really good I'll remember it. That's what has worked out so far. I wonder if that's going to continue now, but it's worked out this far.

CC. What about research? Did you have to do a lot with, say, *Eating Mississippi* and the char-

acter Octavius Maury's story?

**SE.** If I had to do research I wouldn't write. And there are two reasons for that. One is I don't really like to do it. I don't know, I can get sort of excited, but I just like, you know, I prefer to work with my imagination. I guess that's not a completely popular way of doing things right at the moment. "This is a story that's true," seems to be the order of the day.

When I was at Arkansas, Miller Williams liked to say that for a writer the least interesting thing about a fact is that it's true. That's one reason I have a hard time writing non-fiction. I feel constrained, and if I do push things my conscience bothers me later, you know, that I've said this is true and it isn't.

**CC.** Well, when I read *Pit Bull* I learned a lot about pit bulls, and I thought, "How did he know that?"

**SE.** I did read a couple of books, and I had a man that owns some pit bulls bring the dogs over to my house.

**CC.** That's brave.

**SE.** Well, you couldn't go to a fight. Authorities were cracking down on dog fighting. There was a part of me that would have gone if I could have, but I really didn't want to go. I would have done it for the novel, but I knew I really didn't want to go. This guy came over with two pit bulls and his pregnant wife, and they sat around in my living room and I petted the dogs and felt the puncture wounds on the top of their skulls. I got close enough. I did go back to the Delta--since the book was set there. I hadn't been back to Mississippi in a long time. I drove down, hung out, looked around. Even when I wrote *Starlight* I had forgotten things, had to look up things. Names and such.

One time, some crazy independent film

producer wanted to option *Starlight*. He wanted to set it in either Guatemala or Nicaragua, somewhere where the US was having problems at the time. And he wanted to set it in the modern Army, so I went down to the military base in North Carolina, where Airborne is, got a tour, learned the names of newer weapons. I asked people about the food they ate. What's the worst thing you've had, I wanted to know. They said it's something that says on the can, chicken or pork. And I drove around with the information officer--a young guy who'd been married for about a month. He was a captain. And he said, "You know, the only thing I can think that's good about a marriage is two paychecks."

**Susan Ludvigson.** Speaking of research, you should mention the time you got reviewed by the *London Review of Books*.

**SE.** Oh, right, right. When *Pit Bull* came out, I don't know how it happened, I got the front page of the *London Review of Books*. It was a picture of a pit bull dog, there on the front page, and I was the lead story. Well, if you know anything about the *London Review of Books*, the people use the reviews as the basis to write an essay. So this essay writer dispensed with me. His take on the book was--let me see if I can remember--he said, "This novel has obviously been line-edited." Meaning somebody else did it. But yeah, the book was line-edited. By me! But the funnier part was that he said that this novel was the perfect indication of how novels get written in the United States by university professors and their staff of research assistants.

**SL.** Right, he indicated you had this enormous staff of researchers.

**CC.** He should come over to see the life of the average university professor. [Laughter.]

**SE.** Where are these research assistants?

**CC.** We've touched on this, but one thing that's a major setting in your writing, both short and long fiction, is the Mississippi Delta. And the Mekong Delta.

**SE.** I was never in the Mekong Delta, though, I was in the Highlands, around Pleiku. I was close to the Mekong Delata, just flew in to a base and flew out. But, yeah, the Delta has always been a magical place for me. But that's somewhat better than living there, writing about it. There's some contact I need. I like the flatlands, and I like the heat. I like the whole cast of personae, for some unknown reason.

**CC.** You write about the American South in general, too. You've set stories in Alabama and Georgia. Earlier, I should have said Southeast Asia, instead of the Mekong Delta.

**SE.** That is important. I remember when I was contemplating *not* participating in the Vietnam War; there were three choices: Vietnam, jail, or Canada. Parchman Farm didn't sound too good to me. One reason I probably didn't go to Canada was that I thought, "How could I sneak back? If I go out of the country, I'll lose contact." That wasn't the only reason, but it did go through my mind.

**CC.** In Tim O'Brien's novel, *The Nuclear Age*, he has a character go to Canada, and he can't come home for years. He has to watch his father's funeral from a distance.

**SE.** My new novel that's coming out from Livingston Press in the fall was going to be called "The Traitor." Turns out somebody else is publishing a novel with that title. Joe Taylor, my publisher, found that out and we changed the title to *The Dream of the Red Road*. But it is about somebody who deserted to the North

Vietnamese, who then comes back to the Delta, and then what happens when he returns and claims the house his family has lived in for generations. Lots of people in the area aren't too happy to see him there. I had a lot of fun with it.

**CC.** I look forward to reading that. That sounds really good.

But back to the South: Do you you consider yourself a regional writer?

**SE.** I think if you ask any writer if they're a regional writer, they would not like--

**CC.** That label?

**SE.** Just the same as it is for a black writer who wants to be treated as a writer, period.

I don't really consider myself a regional writer, though. I've set stories in France. I often wonder if it means you don't set stories in New York, if that's the real definition of a regional writer.

**CC.** I like the story, "Walking to Carcassonne."

**SE.** Thanks. I had fun with that story. That was quite moving, though, looking at that memorial from the story. It's really there, right there on the highway. Susan and I go by it all the time. Well, it turns out that person who was killed went to Davidson College, which is just up the road from where Susan and I teach.

Peter Stett, the editor of *Gettysburg Review*, stayed in our house once and got interested in this and re researched the Davidson connections. That's how we found out about it. This guy sacrificed himself in a way that seems incredible today. People have a hard time getting their mind around it.

**CC.** The son in that story, Richard Purvis . . .

**SE.** [Laughs]. Like I said, I had a good time with that story, and a good time with that character. It stirred some people up.

But you know I'm always getting flack from reviewers about how they wouldn't want to go to lunch with my characters. You know, that seems to me that's not the whole point of writing. I don't want to go out to lunch with my characters either!

**CC.** Most writers don't like what their characters like, it seems to me.

**SE.** Right. I certainly might not like my characters, and I don't know why one should. To me, the stories are beautiful things. Hopefully, like a vase or a painting. Beyond that, it's up to readers to figure out how they should feel about them. I guess that's not a popular view perhaps, at present, for many people.

**CC.** Some, maybe.

**SE.** Some want to see a more political context for things, maybe?

**CC.** The world you depict does often involve violence, though. Even though it balances back, that violence might bother some readers.

**SE.** I think it does bother some. I think people still make the mistake of equating what they see in stories with the writer's life.

Though violence since Vietnam has been a big part of my life. I started at Ole Miss with James Meredith. Most freshman get drunk, go to parties. We had riots, people died, thousands of troops on campus all semester.

Then when I came back from Vietnam, and went back to Ole Miss for graduate school, I went to a rock concert that happened in that same grove where the riots took place. I sat down and about five seconds later a person three rows down from me took out a pistol and

put several holes in the person next to him. I heard pop-pop-pop and tried to find a place low to the ground.

**CC.** You recognized that sound?

**SE.** I just couldn't quite believe it. You know, I can't even remember what happened next. I think everyone just dispersed. Kind of ruined the whole concert.

**CC.** Your characters often are veterans, either of Vietnam or other wars. Do you think they're trying to deal with war's devastation by returning to their native ground?

**SE.** I think that's partly true. It's sort of what people do. And I keep returning to that subject. The last short story I wrote started from an image of a friend, who's an architect who comes down to Winthrop to speak in Susan's Creative Processes class, and he has a son that went to West Point. The last time our friend came down, his son had orders for Iraq and he was doing a reenactment of some battle in Virginia, in the uniform of a Confederate private soldier. That's where the story took off. It's called "Champions Hill," which refers to a skirmish involved in the Battle of Vicksburg, fought just outside of Jackson. When I was a boy scout we walked up Champions Hill. And the story's about a guy trying to figure out how to tell his bride-to-be that he wants to volunteer for the Army. It mainly looks into his head and tries to turn it a different way. He does want the experience of being in a war, but he's also a biologist, who thinks he's going to see a snow leopard up in the mountains somehow. Susan hasn't read it. I think it's done. Maybe it's done. She might have other views. Since she's my one and only reader before I send stories out, I'm lucky I have a poet for a reader.

**CC.** Another of my favorites is "The Child Soldier."

**SE.** I don't know where that one came from. I think I read about a child, maybe in Africa, and I somehow transferred it over.

I don't think I ever published that story in a journal. I didn't seem to have much luck with it.

**CC.** It certainly captures one of the most chilling aspects of the war: that children were involved.

**SE.** I'm constantly thinking about the effect of war on people. Because that's one of the things I was worrying about when I went over. If you get too much with the program, when you come back, you're going to have problems. I thought I was a fairly decent person, and hoped I could come out of the whole thing more or less unchanged.

I had this recurrent dream after I got out of the war and came home. I also had trouble going to sleep for about ten years because I had this silly fear of being killed when I was asleep. Most people would say they'd rather get it then. Yet there was this one image that troubled me--I never experienced it myself except apocraphally. According to the story, the NVA army issued a specially-long and flexible bayonet. The purpose was to kill the sleeping silently, by slipping it up into the brain. But on those nights I could sleep, I'd often wake up and see this NVA soldier by the bed. He recently came back. This time, he got triggered by my having to get a six-month scan for cancer. I was nervous about it. Sure enough, there he was one night. I woke up out of bed, arms flailing, and took a huge swing at him.

Susan and I laughed about it afterward, but if she'd gotten out of bed I probably would have caught her in the jaw and then I'd be in the hospital explaining to some social worker, "This is the really the only time I've hit this woman. I don't do it every Friday night."

But I wasn't as affected by the war as some

serious cases. I was just more afraid than most. What do they say? That it's bad for infantrymen to have a good imagination. That's not a desirable character trait. I thought every moment, "It's coming now! It's coming now!" And you just can't live like this.

**SL.** Since we're on the subject of nightmares, I thought you might want to mention the snipers in the trees.

**SE.** I don't want to go there.

**CC.** I had started to mention snipers because there are many snipers in your work. Starlight, of course, is about a sniper, and in some of your short stories, particularly "Love in Singapore" in *The Angel in the Garden*.

**SL.** He still looks for the snipers in the trees.

**SE.** I'm still wondering where the safe place might be.

**SL.** He was a little nervous in our own backyard for a while. I met some reluctance to having lunch out there because it's surrounded by trees.

**CC.** There's a guy in "The Sniper," from *Overgrown With Love*, that said he was a sniper on the tower at Ole Miss.

**SE.** That's a true story.

**CC.** A true story?

**SE.** Oh yeah, completely true. He was a fraternity brother. He and another guy got drunk one night and said, "I think I'm going to shoot the light off the water tower." They took a twenty two rifle and a box of ammunition and went down to the tower and started shooting at it. And this wasn't too long after the University of Texas's tower sniper. And the

bullets were ricocheting off the dorms. Policemen were lined up on the grass. Meantime, these drunks sauntered back to the fraternity house, turned on the ten o'clock news and there they were. Then the discussion ensued about how to get rid of the rifle. They went and tossed it into the Tallahatchie River.

**CC.** And did one really confess later, in a bar?

**SE.** I think I made that up. I have never seen the person who did it since I left school. I vaguely remember the story.

But I know where the snipers in the trees come from. The first time we got ambushed, these fools who were in charge were walking us through a very deep creek. The creek had thirty foot banks, with water up to my chest. There were only six of us and nobody thinks to put somebody on the bank, up top. I'm thinking the whole time in the creek that somebody in the trees is going to pitch a few frags down and we're all gonna die. And I also remember thinking I hope I get killed right off, I don't want to get wounded and drown. Seems like it would be best to die one way. But we get out of the creek and there's a hill here, a hill here, a hill here, a trail that cuts down the creek and goes right across a dry rice patty which has recently been cut. So instead of going against the hills, the squad leader marches us right across the field. As soon as we got into the field, somebody opened up. It's just like all the John Wayne movies: the rounds are hitting the ground and mud was coming up. I fall down and it's like we're all gonna die. I completely expect to die. Then whoever was shooting just stopped.

Finally, my English degree did me some good. The guys down at this very deep, very safe bunker, who were doing fire support patrol for the mortars at night, played Scrabble. They found out I was an English major and knew words like "Tarn" and they requested me. I got pulled off that other duty. I was safer than I

would have been in the United States. I didn't have to drive a car. It would have taken a direct hit to do any damage. I sat out the rest of the time there, watching the Army deteriorate.

You know what finally happened? I had a squad leader come down and I found out he couldn't read a map. He was going to take a patrol out. You mark a location on a map where the men are going to be so you can calculate where fire support needs to be. But this guy couldn't read a map. I told him, "You know where that big banyan tree is." He said, "Yeah." I said, "I want you to go set up your ambush there and try not to kill any drunken Montaguards that wander out of the building at night. It might be nice if you just shoot people who have weapons. But whatever you do, I don't care if an entire NVA regiment attacks, don't move. Just die right there. Because if you move, we can't give you fire support. Nobody's going to know where you are. But that was the deterioration. The army was just falling apart, bringing in a guy like that. Just awful. But that's where I think the sniper came in--first time I got shot at. It's not like I got shot at a lot. But it made an impression on me, I tell you. I was scared, I was really scared.

But maybe I just exaggerate.

**CC.** The boy in "The Child Story," Dallas, really touched me because he would say these prayers at night for the many people he had killed. . .

**SE.** Right, right.

**CC.** And those people he prayed for needed to be remembered, all of them.

**SE.** You know, I heard a writer on NPR say that he tells his workshop students that he's never particularly happy with anything that he writes so why should he be happy with what they write? You're never satisfied.

But I do have to admit, I really liked “The Child Soldier” and was sort of mystified when I started sending it out and people were saying, “Why did you write that?”

**CC.** A lot of Vietnam Veterans chose to write one book only, mostly for cathartic experience, and a lot of them chose memoir. But you began with fiction.

**SE.** Like I said, I prefer fiction to the memoir and I really, after I published the first book, wanted to get away from the Vietnam veteran experience; I did not want to write another book about Vietnam.

**SL.** But you’ve said many times that Vietnam’s in everything you write.

**SE.** That’s true.

**CC.** There are numerous allusions in your work. Even in *Eating Mississippi*, you mention a character didn’t go to Vietnam, but the allusion’s there.

**SE.** Of course, that’s what happens to a lot of people in publishing, you know. It’s not like *Starlight* became a best seller; it did okay. We sold the movie option. Yet I didn’t want to get stuck in that type of fiction. I was very happy to get out of it. I just didn’t want to do it. I wasn’t going to do it

**CC.** I certainly admire you for that. Preserving your integrity that way.

**SE.** Well, I had a job. It would have been different if I didn’t have a job.

Of course, I’d just quit my job then.

**CC.** You did?

**SE.** Yeah. I got the job at Winthrop. I met Susan there, the fall semester. She’d been in

France, on a Guggenheim, done some other things for a couple years. We met, fell in love. She had an arrangement where she taught spring semester and summer school, and that was considered full time. It allowed her to stay in France about six months a year. She was going back, and I was definitely going with her. So I went to the Dean and said, “Al, sorry. I’ve only been here half a semester but this is it.”

What did he say? He said, “God, I never thought you two would fall in love. I never thought I’d hire anyone who’d fall in love with Susan Ludvigson.” [To Susan] Just kidding, Susan. Just kidding.

But no, the administration said I could go on half-time and still be tenure-track. So we went to France until the money ran out. Not that it was a lot of money. I wasn’t getting advances anymore. Royalties from the books were gone. But France was the right place to put the money, looking back on it. We got a lot of work done. It was quite pleasant.

**SL.** We went into great debt in France.

**SE.** What was that trip to Nice we took, when my agent said that screenwriting job was in the bag? We went to Nice, celebrated, then came back to hear--what was it my agent said? “Those were the craziest people I’ve ever dealt with.”

**CC.** Another prevalent theme in your work is absent parents or spouses.

**SE.** Weird, isn’t it? Why is that?

**CC.** I don’t know.

**SE.** I don’t know either.

**CC.** You have Elaine in *Eating Mississippi* who dies in the beginning, and the mother in *Pit Bull* who abandons the family.

**SE.** Well, you can't put this in this interview. Or maybe you can. But I have a difficult relationship with my mother. My father died about six years ago; he's buried in Jackson, where my mother will be buried, too. She's ninety-three and complaining about her health lately. And the other day this Irish poet came to Winthrop and asked me, "Been back to Jackson lately?"

And I said, "No, both my parents are dead." Susan laughed and laughed. It was a Freudian slip. See, it just caused me to take off my coat.

But I don't know if there's some reason connected with that or if it's just a good way to not have to deal with extra characters. But I really don't know. I'm sure Susan has an idea.

**CC.** I just thought, you know, there's the grandmother in "The Bear Hunters" . . .

**SE.** I'd never thought of that before. I really never have. But that's really interesting.

**CC.** But there's Breland and his father in "Pulpwood," whose father committed suicide." In "Fishing on Sunday," the father's killed in an automobile accident.

**SE.** No, I had a very stable, middle-class life. My mother stayed at home.

**CC.** I wasn't thinking this was at all autobiographical.

**SE.** No, it's not. My life was idyllic, in a way. Well, sort of.

**CE.** What about the motif of the journey? It seems there are physical, emotional and spiritual journeys in your work.

**SE.** I don't really have an answer to that. I guess I read *Don Quixote* and got stuck on it forever. I don't know. I guess you got these characters and you have to do something with

them. The scenery changes. But I have no greater explanation for that. I know there are a lot of writers, and novels and stories, with characters who stay in one place. But that's not me.

**SL.** The journey's a kind of dominant motif.

**SE.** It is. It's an indication . . . . You know, over the years, I've become firmly convinced that learning to tap the unconscious is the most important thing. Everything else is technical details that are easy to learn and not that big a deal. Some people don't want to go to their unconscious because it's a scary place. Others think you should learn to write another way. Analytic methods, I don't believe, work. Students come at me wanting to know the ten things they need to learn. I don't want to do that.

**CC.** They want a blueprint.

**SE.** Sure. But you know I am convinced that a lot of the unconscious is. . . . Well, I read a quote from Rilke, who went to be a secretary for Rodin. Rilke claimed that Rodin said it's work all the time, work everyday. And that was news to Rilke. Up till then he'd been waiting for inspiration, and being with Rodin changed the way he approached his art.

This might sound strange, but I worry about the treatments for obsessive/compulsive disorders. We treat these too much we're not going to have any scientific discoveries, artistic discoveries, or anything else. That kind of thinking is necessary. I'm certainly compulsive about writing in that I think about it all the time. When I'm not writing I'm not comfortable.

**CC.** Do you write every day?

**SE.** I try to. Right now I'm between things; I'm trying to figure out what that next story is. But

once I find it I'll work on that story every single day. I'll do something with it. Change something. Particularly I'll try and figure out what the next sentence is supposed to be.

CC. Sometimes you do have to work through it, you just have to look at what you're working on.

SE. I try to get my students to do that but it's pretty difficult. I say you don't even have to write anything, but just get up and read what you're working on.

CC. As an undergrad, I remember waking up in the middle of night and writing papers in my head. I'd get up, write a few sentences or a paragraph, go back to bed. But if I get away from something, those days, months at a time, I lose those ideas.

SE. Yeah, I think people believe writers just go type-type-type and that's it.

CC. I can see where it would take somebody years to write a novel.

SE. I think in a good semester I'll write two short stories.

SL. And that's a lot.

SE. It is a lot. But I'll be working on them all the time. I don't know if I write faster than most, either way. I don't know if that's a good or bad thing. But I don't want to go as far Flaubert went. That's going too far. You don't need to research every last single detail. But of course the guy was a great writer so maybe that's what you should do.

CC. My recent favorite is *A Song for Alice Loom*. That book really blew me away. I liked the dead character who speaks from beyond the grave.

SE. That was an interesting book to write. It's been a long time from when I started it and its getting published. I wrote that back in the early nineties, most of it in France. And I can remember writing the first part of the dead soldier, and again, I was very unsure of that. I gave it to Susan and I thought she was going to think, "What is this?" But she said, "No, this is great. Keep on doing it."

Yeah, that novel went through a lot of revisions. I think the first thing that happened was, in typical Scott fashion, I sent the first two chapters out after Susan was badgering me to apply for an NEA fellowship. So I waited for the very last day to apply, and sure enough, I get the fellowship, which was really nice but didn't help at all in getting it published. My agent sent it around all over the place. The publishers who did read it, we'd get these glowing reader's reports but no one published it. I thought we had it sold at Knopf; two editors there just loved it. But Sonny Mehta thought it needed some more work. Right at the same time, the William Morris Agency got in a big dispute with Random House over electronic rights, so they weren't sending manuscripts to Random House, which Knopf was part of. So I complained that's good for y'all but not for me. I wanted to send it back to Sonny Mehta after I did some more work on it. Because you never know. Knopf would have been a nice place to publish. Maybe some attention would come. Maybe other books would get published. I'm certainly one of those writers who'd like to get my books made into movies but the money has nothing to do with it. Although I'd like the money, if the book's being made into a movie, that means some publisher in New York will publish at least maybe one, maybe two of my novels before they figure out they won't make any money off of them. But I would at least get them out there.

CC. I plan to teach *Alice Loom* in the Fall.

SE. That's great, that's great.

CC. You seem to do more with female characters in this novel.

SE. Yeah, I tried to do things with female characters. I mean, you want to be a writer for everybody. Of course, it's very much harder for a man to write about women. Susan or someone else once said I do better with crazy women, I don't often have characters who are that normal. But then you don't put normal characters in too many stories.

I did have Susan to ask, though, and she'll tell me, "No woman would ever say that," so it's nice to have her around. So she can tell me these things about women I haven't learned in all these years.

CC. There's Elaine in *Eating Mississippi* but she's offstage mostly. And Amy in *Pit Bull*. I didn't particularly like her, though I don't expect you intended the reader to like her.

SE. Amy comes from this prostitute one of my friends knew, professionally, in Memphis. She's a real person. I never met her but that's where the character came from. I'm not like William Vollman, crawling around . . .

CC. She sells out everyone in the book.

SE. Yeah, right.

CC. Of course, readers wish she would have been in the house where the Mafia or whatever took all those people out.

But you also have the father/son conflict with Jack and Dexter, an interesting part of the novel.

SE. Yeah, what happened with that novel was that I started writing and didn't know ever how to make it long enough even for me. And I dropped that stuff. Maybe if I had to do

it over again, I'd have done something else. In fact, my agent once had me write a screenplay of *Pit Bull*, and he was going to take it out to the William Morris Agency in LA. They didn't read it. Dogs, that kind of stuff, just wasn't going to sell. Cartoon dogs, maybe. In any case, nothing ever happened, though I think it got optioned one time. Somebody in London had some Ninja Turtle money, and we separated them from that money, but I knew nothing was going to happen. Books get optioned all the time and maybe one percent ever get made into movies.

CC. You've written screenplays and you do teach screenwriting, don't you?

SE. Uncomfortably. I'm not really a screenwriter and I don't really like writing screenplays. Unless I were doing it in Czechoslovakia or Russia or even France. I've done a couple of adaptations for *Starlight*. I've done it for small operations and some times for sharks. I wrote one for Michael Philips, who produced *The Sting* and *Close Encounters*. And they had this director named Bobby Harmon, whose main claim to fame was a horror movie called *The Hitcher*. He did a bunch of Jean Claude Van Damme movies, but we were trying to do this thing--*Starlight*. It's said screenwriters are paid to deliver stereotypes in interesting ways, while quote-unquote serious writers spill out their own conscious all over the paper. And it is original.

One time I got to do an independent project. This guy [laughs]: it was real crazy. I played tennis with this actor in Charlotte. He was always playing a judge on Andy Griffith's show *Matlock*. He was always playing cops and judges because he just looked like them. He'd been in *A Time to Kill*, he does commercials. Anyway, he'd been contacted, my friend, by the son of this producer of industrial videos, who got in touch with my friend the actor, to make a feature film. I said I'd do it but I wanted

the money up front and I wanted them to go through William Morris. So we got all the money up front and I inherited this script. The movie was supposed to be about children who train dogs, these bad boys who've been in trouble who are sent off to North Carolina to train these undisciplined dogs. And he'd hired a woman who'd written this goofy, four hundred page script, where the dogs talked, actually talked. The dogs' names were like Beauregard and Sweet Pea and they talked Southern, with subtitles on the screen translating for the Yankee audience what the dogs were saying.

So I got rid of that. But the rest of it was like it's been with every producer I've worked with. I wrote a treatment, then a screen outline and he said he loved the treatment and the screen outline. I wrote the script, got paid, Susan and I went to France, got back and the producer called me up, saying he didn't like anything I'd done. He wanted a new script. I said, "Call William Morris." Which they did and my agent said I'd delivered what they'd asked of me and I'd write another script if I got the money up front. Then the guy wanted to sue. I worried he'd sue me and I'd end up having to give him the money back, take out a loan to repay him. Ended up he threatened to sue William Morris, and they just laughed at him.

I did do a re-write for Michael Phillips of *Starlight*. But he treated me exceptionally well. He had a good track record and was trying hard to make that movie, but unfortunately he was involved with the last film that John Travolta made that failed; it was called *Eyes of An Angel*, I believe. This is how these things work. He couldn't raise money for *Starlight* because the Travolta movie had failed. I got paid but the movie was never made.

I guess I went off on a tangent. But that's why I write. I like to tell stories. But I'm not really a natural screenwriter. I guess I'm a very visual writer and it's easy to do it. They pay a lot of money, too.

**CC.** Do screenplays detract from your other writing?

**SE.** Yes. I've found when you do that, you sort of sell your unconscious. Your mind wants to go one way but you're getting paid to do this other thing. And I already have a job. I can afford to be saintly.

**SL.** Do tell the story about trying to work with Phillips from France.

**SE.** Right, right. I was working with Michael Phillips on *Starlight* and we were in France. This was before computers got cranked up, so we were doing these long script conferences by phone. And French telephones are easy to listen in on because they have these listening devices attached to the phone. So Susan would listen and she'd get nervous. They'd say, "We're going to hang up now. We want this new scene. We'll call back in twenty minutes." I'm not the only one who says this, but screenwriting's easy, and I'd go down to the computer, write the scene.

But they had a secretary who was taking notes, which they'd send to me, and the transcripts never bore any resemblance to what people said in the script conference. They'd forget what they said, they'd contradict themselves. And then it really got funny. You know how some movies have a title for each act? Phillips decided he wanted *Starlight* to have these titles, like in *The Sting*, which Phillips produced. I can't remember what I came up with for the first two acts, but Phillips was satisfied with them. But I couldn't come up with a title for the third act. Phillips, though--I think we were on the phone--said, "We're going to call the third act, 'Darkness'. That's metaphoric." And of course you have to be a sycophant, so I said, "Great idea, Michael," then I just typed it in. [Laughter]

Another time, I was at a script conference

with Phillips. And they'd have these glass tables--this was in the eighties--with fifty paperback copies of your book and you feel like you really like this. It's pretty cool. But you know, *Starlight* has all this magic in it and wierd stuff and we were trying to figure out up front in the script how to lay out all the exposition out. And Bobby Harmon and I thought we should use a voiceover, so we say so and waited to hear back from Phillips. But he had this machine on the table before him, this machine people used to try and control road rage in their cars. You punched a button and it would make the sound of a rocket launcher or a machine gun. Well, Phillips pressed the rocket launcher button and we hear this sound and he says, "That's what I think of the voiceover," and we say, "We always hated it, Michael. It was just an idea."

Like I said, every novelist who has been out there to write screenplays has the same stories to tell, about these collisions between these two opposing ways of looking at the world. They treated me very well, very politely, paid me very well. I still get Christmas cards from Phillips.

**CC.** Let's go back to *Alice Loom* for a minute. Love seems to be a main theme there.

**SE.** Yeah, it sure is. I'm not the first writer who thinks in the midst of all that terrible violence in the world that love might redeem that. Some days I think it can, some days I'm not so sure. But at least I guess you have to try. And that's what some people are trying to do in that novel.

**CC.** How do you pronounce the last name of the character Louis SA-BEEN?

**SE.** I pronounce it SAY-BINE but that doesn't mean anything. Susan will tell you my command of English is not so good. It's hard for someone from Wisconsin to deal with

Mississippi speech.

[Laughter]

**CC.** I want to get the name right before I teach it!

**SE.** Well, that's what I would say, like the rape of the Sabine women. That's where I got the name.

**CC.** You deal somewhat with racial relations, too.

**SE.** I tried to. Of course, that's hard to write well. It's a hard subject to deal with.

**CC.** I love Miss Ella. How you thought of the tire machine baffled me.

**SE.** Well, the Tire-Gator's real. There really was a guy who came over when I worked with the garbage department for a while and I really went to Vicksburg with him and he really tried to sell us the Tire-Gator. Watched him cut up a few airplane tires and was suitably impressed. It was just too good an image, I knew it was going to go somewhere, someplace, sometime.

You know, it was almost a shame to have kill Miss Ella off. She was such a good character. I hate to kill off good characters.

**CC.** She stood up for what she believed in.

**SE.** She sure did. She was a tough woman.

One time Susan and I got Rockefeller fellowships for Bellagio. While we were there, they also had conferences coming in. One was called "Black Children and the Black Family." Every important black leader from the US was there, and someone asked me what I was writing about. When I told them, a woman said, "Why do you want to write about black people?"

I can understand the question, and find

myself thinking things like you have to have been in Vietnam to write about it. I've heard Tim O'Brien say that. Emotionally I agree with him, but intellectually I think differently.

CC. Stephen Crane hadn't been in the Civil War, of course.

SE. Yeah, in fact O'Brien has complained about Stephen Crane, that the book was written by a non-combatant. But some could say to Tim O'Brien, well, that Vietnam was not that much of a war. Not a lot of people were killed, not compared to wars of the past. What did I read not too long ago? A Russian general was at Gettysburg, I think, and he asked how many people were killed. Fifty thousand, he was told. Skirmish, he said.

I sort of take issue with what O'Brien's saying, I think. I was just in this one, little tiny place, very circumscribed. What did I know?

CC. O'Brien wrote about the My Lai massacre even though he was there a year after it happened.

SE. That goes back, for me, to Miller Williams's idea that the least interesting thing about a fact is that it's true. Not everything has to be told first hand.

CC. Reconciliation seems to be a main theme of *Alice Loom*.

SE. I've got an unpublished novel where the whole idea is forgetting the injuries of the past, an idea from psychotherapy. I know Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq don't plan on forgetting any time soon, but everyone would be better off probably if they would forget. I kind of hope it gets published. I'm not trying to stir up controversy, but I'm sure it would earn lots of complaints, if it got published.

CC. I like the ending of the novel. I wondered

what would happen to Wendell and Anse.

SE. They're villains, they're villains. And I worried about that because I didn't want the book to be about how the villain gets it in the end. But sometimes bad people have to die. They certainly deserved it. One of my teachers always said that if you're going to kill somebody off, make sure they deserve killing.

CC. I felt sorry for the family down at the coast.

SE. Oh yes, I worried about that too. That was too bad.

CC. Innocent victims.

SE. A lot of innocent victims.

CC. That's life.

But what of contemporary writers? Are there any you read or that influence you now?

SE. I like Alice Munro. Of course, we're very different sorts of writers. But I like to read a lot of writers who are unlike me, how they tell stories and also in terms of prose style. I have a very simple style. I'll read Gibbon or someone like that. Or Nabokov, somebody unlike my style completely. I think it brings a new energy to my prose. I'm not going to write like that, of course. I'm going to write short, which is the way I'm inclined to do.

That's caused me some problems because New York seems to like to sell books by the pound. I've had conversations with agents and publishers about this but it doesn't do any good to point out how many short things have sold. They're probably right, though; it's easier to market longer books. I don't write long and don't see I'm going to be able to and don't see a reason why I should.

Other contemporary writers? I like Peter Mathiessen's prose style. I've read a lot of his travel books. It's a joy reading him. For some

reason, Lorrie Moore comes to mind. I like her short fiction, I like her imagination, like the way she goes about things.

There's really no one--and anything I say might sound egotistical; but if you look at Faulkner or Hemingway, you say, "God, I wish I could do that." But I don't see a lot of "God I wish I could do that" people out there.

That postmodern stuff. Some of it I like, some I don't. You can go too far when you start stripping away too many things from the essential story. If you do that, if you strip away things from the story, you've got to replace them with something. And if you're going to replace them with language, boy, you better be good. Really good, I think. You're saying to the reader, "I want you to read this because the language is so good." Narrative has such a power.

But then again, I've heard complaints from critics that my stories should be structured

another way, that they don't have resolution.

**CC.** A lot of people believe stories must have resolution.

**SE.** I don't agree. Chekhov, like I say, is my hero, and of course he invented the resolution-less story, and we're pretty much still there. I wasn't in the MFA program in Arkansas in the seventies, but I've been told people were wandering around saying, "We're no longer going to write the Chekhovian story," and people running the program said, "Well, what are you going to write? Let's see it." And nobody's come up with a great alternative, as far as I can tell.

I'm certainly on the look out. If something's new is happening I want to try it out, see if I can do it, see what it looks like, see how it reads. ▲▼▲



*Scott Ely Reads During Delta Blues Symposium XIII  
Photo by Richard Allen Burns*