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Joanna Scott: 12-02-2003

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Scott: Dad explaining that there are things a father can say only to his son, you telling dad about an old episode of Popeye, dad telling you something about the something he'd been wanting to explain, something having to do with the Nardi girl, you telling dad about the time Popeye went overboard with his anchor, Dad warning you about the explosion of nothing into something, all you have to do is look at a girl for the fun of it, you reminding dad about the BB gun you'd been promised, dad reminding you that there are confidences a father can share with his son, his wife never needs to know, no one else needs to know what the father says to his son on this balmy moonlit night on the island of Elba after too many days of rain, you telling dad you were kind of tired, asking, "Can't we go home now and if we can't go home, do you want to play ants?" dad asking, "Why the hell did we come here anyway?" but you weren't sure whether he was asking why did we come here to this place in the woods or to this island, dad pointing out that we could have gone to Mexico or Alaska or Louisiana while you tried not to yawn and to keep yourself a wake you decided to explain what a periscope is, dad cursing his Averil uncles, you reminding dad that your birthday was in 10 and a half months, dad reminding you that you were an innocent child, you telling dad that, unlike your brothers, you don't actually fall asleep, you just lie in bed thinking about sleep, dad saying that even if you didn't understand what he was saying, it sure felt good to talk, what a relief just to talk, father and son, you unable to suppress a great big yawn, dad giving a sad chuckle of resignation and cuddling you against his chest, you hearing his laugh as a crackle echoing from the cave of his ribs, dad shifting you a little so he could free his arm, rubbing his face as if he had a towel in his hands and you were blotting his wet skin dry, you lying there thinking about sleep, dad saying, "If only," you telling dad you were cold, though you weren't cold at all, you just wanted him to put his arm around you again, dad saying that what he'd like right then was a scotch, you thinking lazily about blowing the fluffy parachutes from the head of a dandelion, dad repeating, "if only," you enjoying the vibrations of his voice against your ear, dad telling himself, "if only he hadn't come to Elba," getting only this far in the hypothetical, Elba being the place where his troubles began as far as he could see, and he couldn't see very far, not in the dark, not with his son asleep across his chest, not with his head aching as the evening's alcohol dissolved, not with regret fogging his vision, regret an effective cover for the terror of self-knowledge, the story he could tell himself the story of an American guy who fucked up, don't we all fuck up sooner or later, he's sorry, Claire, he's sorry, Adriana, his deception, her deception, his cowardice, Francis Cape, all of which kept him from considering his original purpose in leaving home and thus he was able to make the decision to feel nothing worse than guilt, which manifested itself visibly with the hint of a smirk, a smirk which would never entirely disappear from his face, marking him as the kind of person who, with a shrug, was always ready to acknowledge his potential for fucking up, no matter what he did, he kept fucking up, sorry about that, Girls, regret lit with a soft glow of virility, that radiant Y chromosome, that sexy ex, the story such people could tell, always the same story, Sir Winston who loved Lady Jane who loved the Duke who loved Lady Jane's sister who loved Sir Winston, never more than that, never less, you know the kind of people I'm talking about, the edge of their personality a little dulled, their eyes a little blank, ambition a little muted, and always that smirk

to signal to others that they'll never be registered saints, and guess what, they don't give a damn, let someone else rise to the challenge, they can have it along with all the trouble, the confusion, the uncertainty, the suffering, the intensity of thought and feeling, no thanks, Malcolm Murdoch is going to ease himself into sleep by thinking about the only thing that really matters to a man who hasn't eaten for 24 hours, the antidote of food, in particular, a bloody steak just off the grill, green bean casserole, and well in a mountain of mashed potatoes filled with steaming gravy.

Black: Welcome to the Brockport Writers Forum, a continuing series of conversations with contemporary writers. I'm Ralph Black, Co-director of the Forum, joined today by my colleague and co-director, Anne Panning and our guest, Novelist and Fiction Writer, Joanna Scott. Joanna is a Professor of English at the University of Rochester and the author of many books including the *The Manikin*, which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1997 and *Arrogance*, a finalist for the PEN Faulkner Award. Her collection of short stories, various antidotes, also a finalist for the PEN Faulkner, won the Southern Review Short Story Fiction Award in 1995. She's been awarded fellowships from the Lannan and Guggenheim Foundations and was given a fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, their so called Genius Award, in 1992. Her most recent novel, *Tourmaline*, came out to wide acclaim last year. Joanna, welcome.

Scott: Thank you.

Black: A great pleasure to have you here slogging through an early Rochester snow storm to get here.

Scott: We're all used to it.

Black: Yeah, we are all used to it. I know that Anne and I have some questions about *Tourmaline* and maybe particularly about the passage that you just read, but maybe we can start by having you talk a little bit about your life and where you came from and particularly I'm interested in where the urge to tell stories came from.

Scott: OK.

Black: For you.

Scott: That -- I mean, my life's not that exciting. I was raised in a suburb in Connecticut and stayed there until I was 18 and then went off. But what -- I've been thinking about this lately for some reason -- maybe it's because of my children are at this age -- but what I was able to do was spend long hours playing. I'm not sure we make time or allow time for our children these days to do that. But I -- my -- most of my memories of childhood involve knocking on my friend's doors and asking if they could come out and play. And no one ever had quite as much time as I did [laughing] to play. I had this infinite amount of time to play, all day long. I -- and was just at -- by the age of five or six -- was just out of the house wondering around the neighborhood.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: So, I learned to play on my own to some extent. I learned to -- I drew my friends out of their houses and -- and organized them into these games of make believe. Even when they didn't want to, I would try hard to get them out there to come. I -- I just feel I exhausted them with my determination to just play, keep playing [laughing].

Black: You will play [inaudible] now. Yeah.

Scott: It's like Miss Havisham in Great Expectations, "Play! I want to watch you play!" So, anyway, I think that -- at a certain age it became clear that I was getting too old to play. And that was the age when I started to pick up my pen and make scratches on the paper and somewhat in secret, but I think that, you know, taking that imaginative life elsewhere into language.

Black: What were the early scratches like? Were they narrative story scratches or poems or -- what were you writing?

Scott: I -- there was this transition stage. It's kind of interesting to think about. That -- the writer, Jim Casia [assumed] has a fascinating essay about play and the -- the somewhat restrictive roles that we come to rely on forgetting that we can make rules as we go along [laughing]. We should be allowed to make up our rules more often. But, that -- so, when -- when I started to feel a little too mature to be, you know, walking through the marshes around the house pretending I was a revolutionary soldier, I started to make these little clay figures in a shoe box. And they became the -- the thing -- the place where I could live these stories.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And I got to the point where I hid those because I knew I -- my brothers would have made fun of me if they found them. In fact, when I was 12, we moved from one house across town to another house and I thought hard about it and I hid that box of clay figures in the back of the closet and I left it there in the old house. I did not take it with me because I was too embarrassed at that point. So, I got to the new house, hit adolescence, and started to write a -- little attempts -- always attempts at prose.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Later I tried poetry in school, but my first attempts were prose, half written stories that often didn't get finished, lots of -- ideas generated and then clearly I was impatient and eager to move on to something else.

Panning: Right.

Scott: But there was a narrative drive right from the start.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And, you know, I think it made sense that I was living these stories, first in person in the woods and fields around my house, and then with these little clay figures, and then -- and then with words.

Black: Mm-hmm. It -- you know, it's funny this image of little girl and the clay figures particularly, you know, in the box and hiding them away. It sounds like a character in any number of your books. I can imagine her in *The Manikin* certainly.

Scott: Yeah. Yeah.

Black: With that imaginative act. But there -- the revolutionary war image too sticks me because, of course, your -- so much of your work is interested in history.

Scott: Yeah.

Black: And particularly the history of science.

Scott: Yeah.

Black: Where did that passion come from, and that interest?

Scott: Let's see. I think I first -- my first book involved this old fisherman who is -- exists in a -- some strange contemporary world that he doesn't recognize. So, he feels that he belongs to another period of history and that contemporary world is grotesque to him when, to the world, he's the one who's grotesque.

Black: Right.

Scott: I -- and I think that that was the -- I -- I don't know. I suppose I imagined his life -- I had to do some research, reading, that took me into unfamiliar areas and, to creative a voice for him, I even started to read some journals and letters from the 19th century even though, you know, as I said, he's a contemporary character.

Black: Uh-huh.

Scott: So, that's when in fiction I started to realize what -- how I could approach other times by weaving, by gathering information. I used to call it research. Now I prefer to call it gathering. And so then by my second book, I was quite bold about that and felt I could use a voice that was archaic, set in another time on -- a slave ship, an illegal slave ship, in the mid-19th century. And -- and, you know, read as much as I could about the period. I read sources -- secondary sources that were quite reliable and then these strange -- I don't know -- some purported journals, letters that the authenticity's was in doubt, but it didn't matter to me because I'd hear voices and hear -- read stories in these various odd sources. So, I just started become excited about the possibilities in the library really, the things hidden on the shelves, books that hadn't been taken out for 50 years.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Seeing lost stories and those sorts of things. So, that -- in a way that's how my method got refined and from book to book. But why I was originally interested in history, I don't know. It's back to those days of playing, I -- the thing I most liked to imagine was this period in the 18th century in this town in Connecticut. I guess I'd read a couple of books about the area and -- and the time when the frontier was, you know, a river away.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And I suppose that excited me.

Panning: Did you -- were your parents big readers? Were your siblings big readers? Was it that kind of family where -- you know, were you kind of a bookish kid?

Scott: No. They were big on football. Football was the thing.

Panning: Oh. OK.

Scott: And I loved football too. I just, you know, I put on my helmet and I'd go running down the yard. But I -- there was a lot of talk about reading and, in fact, I think some members of my family might object if I said we weren't big on reading because they [laughing] -- we all thought of ourselves as a bookish family. But spent most of our time, in those days, outside.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: So.

Panning: Yeah. So, did you have -- I'm thinking what got you from there to the part where you got fascinated in research and history. What was your formal training as a writer? Did you -- you know, did you pursue the normal pursuit of, you know, getting an MFA and studying creative writing? Or how did you come to it?

Scott: I did. Although, back then I wasn't really -- normal pursuit. I -- I'd heard of some people who'd gone to these things called MFA programs and I found myself in New York having graduated from college working at a literary agency trying to write. When I got home off the subway, the number one train, my apartment on 111th street, sitting down to write at eight O'clock at night, I would -- with the sound of Broadway down below, knowing that I had to get up for work at seven the next morning. So, it was just frustrating. I wasn't -- I didn't have the time I wanted to. And needed. I saved up -- my first salary checks I used to buy this big pink IBM typewriter and I brought it -- I carried it. I lugged it from -- what was the street on? Was it 18th street? There was this famous street that I -- famous for typewriters and typewriter ribbons. Go down to that street. Was it in the 20s? Anyway, I went down to the street, I bought my -- the used -

Black: Not to place by the Chelsea Hotel, kind of in that?

Scott: It might -- it might have been.

Black: Typewriter repair, old typewriters --

Scott: Right. Yes. Yes.

Panning: OK.

Scott: Exactly. All right. So, this big pink typewriter. I lugged it up town and I put it on my desk and rattled away. They were such noisy things. But I was trying out a lot of new things and failing at a lot of things and didn't have enough time to fail. But I think that was it, you know. I needed more time to throw out work. And so -- so, that's when I decided to go back to some sort of graduate program. Now -- I wasn't really sure whether I wanted to go through a PhD program in literature, which seemed more practical, or to go to an MFA program, apply to MFA programs and ended up at Brown University where I worked with some interesting people there. First, Robert Coover and then Susan Sontag.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Oh Robert Coover.

Scott: And then -- and then Jack Hocks [assumed]. So.

Black: Interesting.

Scott: And then while I was there began what -- a story that then became my first novel.

Panning: Oh. OK.

Black: Because it's interesting because of the trajectory of your work. I don't -- this is maybe a cliché, but you think a lot of writers -- young writers starting with the short story.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Black: And writing as -- particularly in graduate school I think -- writing short stories, publishing perhaps a collection or two of short stories, and working toward the novel.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Black: But you went the other way. You started with the story, developed it into a novel, published a couple two or three novels I think.

Scott: Yeah.

Black: Before the story collection came out.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Well, and to add to that, usually you start with an autobiographical novel. The thing that is your story. And then you go from there. And yours is completely unlike that.

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: One would think [laughing].

Scott: Well, you know, an old fisherman who has lost his wife after 53 years. [Whispers]It's really an autobiographical novel [laughing].

Black: Well, so -- I mean, so the old saw about you write what you know, you're writing what you gathered. I mean, that curiosity.

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: Yeah.

Scott: Yeah. This is -- I was thinking about this the other day. Why do we say to fiction writers, "Write what you know?" We don't say that to musicians. Don't play -- or don't compose what you know to composers. We don't say that to artists. "Don't paint what you know." Or, "Paint what you know." Don't insist on that. Why is it with fiction writers? Is it because this idea we have of realism, of very strict idea, stricter than it was in the 19th century. But it's different from what it was in the 19th century, what it meant to Dickens and Balzac. What realism -

Panning: It's something about the authenticity. You know, we had a story in my workshop today, a 300 level workshop about an Aztec mask that somebody found and it was great. We suddenly all sat up because it was -- you know, it wasn't the usual what you know. We didn't know. She didn't know. So, it does -- research does add a lot into it.

Scott: Yeah. I think it's -- people have started to grow tired of hearing, "Write what you know." It's still said and will probably not be said for much longer I think. Unless the docudrama triumphs and we lose fiction entirely. Which is a possibility. You know, based on a true story will no longer be base. We'll use that word, "Base." It's all a true story.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Well, your stories are -- they're really -- they're really funky. I -- I'm really drawn to the book. It's so different from most short fiction that you read. It's similar to the novels it seems like in ways, so in some content ways. You know? But I was wondering in terms of the obvious time of labor and so on of writing a novel how you -- how you proceed, what your practice is in terms of going after a short story, writing a short story versus a novel, in terms of what you try to -- what you try to accomplish in each. I mean, I know there's the epiphany story and all of this. But yours don't really seem that traditional in that sense.

Scott: Yeah. I -- I've been reading a lot of the work of Lydia Davis lately. And I'm so struck by how every single thing she writes takes a different form.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: That form may be a sentence long or it may be 30 pages long, it may be a dialogue, it may be a single paragraph, but everything -- I just -- I didn't know there were so many forms that prose could take.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: So, I'm struck by, reading that, how important structure is to -- to fiction. And in that way I think for me the stories aren't that different from the novels. I'm always trying to find the form that's integral to the subject. I will do that in the novel. I will do that in the stories. So, the stories have different forms. I'm particularly comfortable with the fragmented form. I -- in varying constructions. But it is -- you know, I have to contain the story in a way that I don't have to contain the novel. And that takes the kind of discipline that I don't necessarily have [laughing].

Panning: Is that a struggle for you to, would you say, contain that?

Scott: It is. It is.

Panning: Yeah. I was just reading in the New Yorker the article by Menand -- Menand? About the short story. It's the most -- it's the tightest form other than the sonnet.

Scott: Mmm.

Panning: That there's no harder form to write because of its economy.

Scott: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Yeah.

Panning: But you were talking before about your method. You said you have a method. You've sort of developed this method as you started your first novel that kind of works for the other books you've done.

Scott: Although I have to say that I -- then, through -- throw off that method because I'd write the same book. I -- I couldn't simply go to the library and gather material and write these books about history. I couldn't do it. I refuse to keep writing the same book.

Panning: So, how does it change?

Scott: So I stop.

Panning: How does it -- does it always change?

Scott: Well, I -- the -- with the stories that I told myself, "I'm not going to rely on these historical figures in the way I had with *Arrogance*," or the -- the particular historical documents as I did with my second novel, *The Closest Possible Union*.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: So, with the stories, I try to bring in more -- not more imaginative material, but to push away the history a bit more.

Panning: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Scott: And by the time I get to The Manikin, I'm using history, using sources in a very -- I don't know -- a way that's just -- you know, just taking a little bit, just what I need, and not saturating myself. And then I decided to just turn back to the contemporary world with make-believe and go down to the neighborhood garage and see what I could see.

Panning: Right.

Scott: And so that -- so, really with each book I found myself gathering in a different way. And I had become a little nervous about research as the necessary step. Just as I don't want to tell my students, "Write what you know," I don't want to say, "Do your research," either. Somehow to find the method just like we find the form that integral to the subject, that's what we have to do. And that has to keep changing I think.

Black: Both in Manikin and Tourmaline it seems that -- I mean a couple images pop into my mind. You know, kind of puppeteer kinds of images or something where you're taking these characters and you're setting them on a particular stage and just letting them spin, you know, and seeing where their lives on the stage will lead them. You know, and the research is there if you're going to talk about the chemical composition of Tourmaline, you have to do that work and get it right.

Scott: Right. Right.

Black: But, otherwise, the geologists who are reading your book are going to be jumping all over you.

Scott: Oh, I know. I consulted with a geologist.

Black: Right. Yeah.

Scott: And I thought, "Oh, I wish I'd gone into that field." Forget the fiction [laughing]! I want to study rocks. That's [inaudible].

Black: Yeah. But it wears, I think, very lightly. It's kind of wonderfully integrated, you said, where the -- well, let me get back to this and maybe even back to the passage that you opened our conversation with. You know, Elliot's famous dictum about form being no more than an extension of content.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Black: Is that -- do you see that as a method for yourself?

Scott: Yeah. There's an accidentally quality to it for me. I have to -- it's like I put my hands in this bag full of stuff and then, if I'm lucky, I find the form I need.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And I don't always. I might think I have a fine idea and I can't find that form that matches the subject.

Black: So, how in *Tourmaline*, did you find the form of this conversation between points of view?

Scott: This conversation.

Black: Oli and Claire?

Scott: That -- it did seem to happen somewhat accidentally. I wasn't planning that. I had an idea of the progression of the narrative told solely from Oliver's point of view.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But after I finished his first full chapter, then I found myself reacting to the possible melodrama or exaggeration of that, and also wanting to keep him thinking about what he didn't know, which is hard to do if you're telling a story based on, you know, accumulated knowledge to be reminded of what he didn't know. It's hard to do it within his voice. And so that -- her voice just sort of interrupted.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: "That's not how it was," she said, "let me tell you how it was."

Black: Yeah.

Scott: And that -- that tension then between the two provided me with -- I don't know -- something that fed the imagination. You know, then it seemed to lock into place and I could move on.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: It helped to have this island that, you know, off the coast of Tuscany that I could imagine from afar, but also, you know, do that gathering and climb around and explore.

Black: Yeah. And your -- you're heading there again for more gathering?

Scott: Yes. Yes. This is -- the center of *Tourmaline*, there's a very short retrospective scene about the war, the liberation of Elba. And I couldn't tell it in the way I wanted to tell it. So, I just decided I was done with it after I finished *Tourmaline*. And then a few months went by and I decided I wasn't done with it and I needed to go back to it. So, I've been exploring in ways and trying out some fictional approaches to the subject of this -- this violent period in the history of this island.

Black: I used the -- in my writing classes, sometimes I'll use the image of the geode for students. You know that sometimes you find an image or a line in a poem that is geode like, and if you crack it open, you know, there might be all kinds of wonderful discoveries to be made there.

Scott: Yeah. Yeah. And it's often ugly on the outside or plane. Or.

Panning: Right. Yeah. Yeah.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Black: And so I -- I get that sense from this new project that you're working on that -- that image of Adriana in the cabinet becomes with a geode to free -- open it up and -

Scott: Yes. Hopefully.

Black: Another cabinet of wonders.

Scott: Yeah.

Black: To [inaudible].

Scott: Yeah. But it does remind us of the accidently quality of all imaginative writing. Doesn't it? I mean, do you feel this? Sometimes it's -- you know, I talk about pulling the form out of a bag, but also just that what happens in a conversation you have in the grocery store or, you know, your car happens to break down -- you're on the side of the road and you see something.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: These -- these things that are accidents or interruptions in our lives that intrude upon our routines, that's the stuff that can spark art.

Panning: Yeah. Well, I think, as we've been talking -- I was thinking the setting is really primary to you. Even if it's the taxidermy mansion place in Manikin or especially Tourmaline. To me, I know that's where things usually start is I think of a setting.

Scott: Oh, yeah.

Panning: A pig farm I used to live on or, you know, [inaudible].

Scott: You used to live on a pig farm?

Panning: Yeah [laughing].

Scott: Oh, well, that's a good setting.

Black: Yeah.

Panning: Yeah. But I was wondering --

Scott: What was that pig farm -- I mean, how many pigs?

Panning: Lots. About 100.

Scott: Wow.

Panning: Yeah. And the smell, every day when I got off the bus -- yeah. So, that was a great -- that permeated my imagination.

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: Definitely through adulthood.

Scott: It's difficult to describe smells. Isn't it?

Panning: Yeah. You kind of have to go with the mud and everything. But -- but for me -- so, for me, it's setting -- I was wondering -- if you kind of turn to a craft, technique level for a second -- if you do consider, you know, a -- I don't know. I know that writes don't really think about

them that separately. But if you do consider a certain craft element, a top one of yours, or a favorite, or the things tend to come from. Because I know you said -- this is related to another thing -- you said something about character you visited [inaudible] last week. I wanted to follow up on that. You said you kind of came around back to that.

Scott: Well, yeah. Yeah.

Panning: Can you talk about -- but first, if you have something like setting. Is that -- you know, do you have a key craft element that you're drawn to or that you really give high priority in any conscious way?

Scott: I -- in describing setting?

Panning: No. Just in your writing. I -- globally.

Scott: Give me an example. I'm not sure what -- I mean, what would it be for you?

Panning: For me it would be setting. I would -- I would go for setting first right away. And that's usually where everything starts from and centers around.

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: I'm just wondering --

Scott: And how do you come up with those settings? You know? Like from memory or -- ?

Panning: You're sitting at a rest stop somewhere on I-90 and -- or memory. Yeah. Or memory.

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: Or travel. You know, all of it.

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: But place. You know?

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: Is what -- ?

Scott: There's -- for me there's a kind of theatrical element to setting.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- in fact, sometimes I think -- or maybe I used to think that I would have preferred to be -- have been a playwright. Then I did write one play and experience it in production and that was so terrifying to me [laughing], never again. No, I might do it again. It was so exciting.

Panning: Well, it's like writing with your hands behind your back in a way because you're so limited. I think the fiction writer writing a play is incredibly hard.

Scott: Yeah. It -- what I didn't expect was how profoundly different it becomes when that audience enters the theatre.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: You can see it in dress rehearsal all finished, ready to go, and then the audience is in and it's a totally different piece of work.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But it's illuminating, helpful to experience that. But -- but so in imagining settings, I think of them with a slightly -- often with a slightly -- a theatrical or -- artificial quality. Is -

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And I don't mean that I ever want to miss the chance to describe what it means to be in a real setting, what it means to experience, what it -- the -- the complexity of sensual perception. I want to capture that in language.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- but it's like that little box, that shoe box with the clay figures. You know? I'm aware of placing words to -- to create the diorama.

Black: But place -- I mean, Wendell Berry has this great line in [inaudible] where he says, you know, we can't know who we are until we know where we are. And that -- that relationship between identity and place, which is so important for him, when I think about Tourmaline, I think about how Murray respond to place and how the boys respond to place. It couldn't be more divergent. They are both out there wondering the same mountains both looking for, you know, their treasures in a way. Right? And -- and Murray walks up to the cave and sits down and has a smoke and takes a nap and walks away.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Black: And the boys find wonder after wonder. You know? It's just that sense of the uncanny, you know, that the world is sort of imbued with life that they see, the star -- what is it? The wonderful moment where they find the star in the -- in the steel tube or something. Right? And they see it.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Black: And then they sort of toss it aside. They say, "OK. It's -- you know -- for a few minutes, it's great." and then they're off again.

Scott: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Experiencing magic.

Black: Yeah. Exactly. So, that kind of theatricality where place becomes a sort of backdrop for character. Right?

Scott`: Yeah. Yeah.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- I suppose it -- I -- ultimately, if it's successful, it has to have some deep connection to character.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And I think that's, for me, where my fiction does begin where -- or what -- um -- I don't know -- excites me most is what we've come to call character. And when I was in graduate school, I remember reading Rogrier [assumed], psychology was this embarrassing thing we just did not want to allow it to be present in fiction anymore. And there's something

to be said for, you know, the simplistic cause effect psychology that one might find in any representation of behavior. But can't give it up. I mean, it -- even Beckett doesn't give up character. We -- some writers prefer to call it voice or voices, doesn't have to be a singular voice. But I still -- I like that word character. It has a nice crunchy sound. Doesn't it? And so that -- so, setting, then, does grow out of character. The -- I'm trying to think do I ever have a setting that I -- isn't inflected in some way by the character, or by a very idiosyncratic narrator who's describing it. I don't think I do. I think there's, you know, it's -- it's described through impression.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But I want it to be felt. I want -- I want to emphasize again and again what it feels like to be in the world, what it feels like to, you know, walk over a mound of earth, to travel over varied terrain, to experience the weather. Charles Wright, you know, endless spins on the weather.

Black: Yeah. Yeah.

Scott: I feel that, you know, I could read about the weather for, you know, weeks and weeks and read about nothing else but the weather. The weather is so interesting. So, trying to give a sense of what it really means to snow or to rain or to feel the humidity around us. I'm always trying to do that through a singular sensibility.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Panning: So, was that what you were referring to when you talk about Rogrier [assumed] and so on with the character statement that you said?

Scott: Well, what I'm -- that, you know, I couldn't stand giving up psychology.

Panning: OK.

Scott: I couldn't stand giving up character.

Panning: Uh-huh.

Scott: I couldn't lose the interior in fiction.

In fact, if anything, I've gone further into subjectivity and whatever, you know, particular subjectivity I create in the fiction.

Panning: Uh-huh.

Scott: So -- So, it, you know, I found that model was not, I don't know, appealing to me individually as a writer. Though, I can see how important it was in the 20th century.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: As, you know, writers were changing and negotiating the possibilities.

Panning: So, having studied with Robert Coover -- I'm thinking of your graduate school experience --

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: It -- do you think he had an influence on you and, you know, do you think he would call your work experimental?

Scott: You know what Robert Coover did? He -- he taught me how to use a computer.

Panning: That's good.

Scott: See, I came up with my big IBM pink typewriter.

Black: Uh-huh.

Scott: And he said I had to learn how to use the -- a word processing program.

Black: Uh-huh.

Scott: And I was too impatient to learn.

So, he taught me -- he sat down and he taught me this program, Script, we used back then.

Panning: Uh-huh.

Scott: That was, you know, before Bill Gates got his hands on everything.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: And so I learn -- and so he -- now, you know, I say that as -- you know, that's emblematic in a way of what he -- the kind of instruction he gave to us all, his students. He was very exact. He'd isolate the word. He'd want to know why we used that word. He'd -- lots of marks on the paper. Took a lot of time reading.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Very helpful and a good example to use to -- as I went on to teach myself.

Panning: Mm-hmm. Would you call your work experimental? Or when people call your work that, what do you think? When they say this -- she's a very experimental writer?

Scott: Um.

Panning: You think that fits you? Does that fit with you think of yourself as a writer?

Scott: Yeah. That -- I -- that -- I would hope all art is experimental to some degree.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But it's perhaps a word that's thrown around too easily.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- I get most excited about work in any genre that makes me think of new possibilities.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: You know, that -- I -- just does something new or different.

And it can do it in the most -- I don't know -- the quietest, most subtle way. It doesn't have to be in your face new.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: It could be Chekhov. You know?

Black: Mm-hmm.

Panning: Mm-hmm. Well, you had talked about the novel *Everything Is Illuminated*, I think, at the reading a couple weeks ago.

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: Which is, you know, I guess if you want to use a term it would be experimental.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Panning: But, you know, it's -- takes chances. I mean, that's the thing.

Scott: Absolutely.

Panning: It's not traditional.

Scott: Yeah. Yeah.

Panning: So to speak. Other -- other things that you've read recently like that?

Scott: A writer I have just come to adore is Sebald. Most -- [Inaudible Comment] The book Austerlitz, in particular, I found just utterly satisfying.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: So moving. In the story of this man's quest to recover his lost past wrapped in this strange narrator's impressions. You know? This narrator keeps fading in and out of the text. So, there's -- there's this thing between the reader and Austerlitz. But it's an important thing. So, the -- he does -- he's doing fascinating things using images, taking the narrative in really unexpected ways.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But he's so in control. And it never seems, I don't know, ostentatiously experimental.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Or -- it's just unique. You know? It's a unique sensibility, a profound control of language. Even though it's coming through translation.

Black: Yeah. Do you find that there are writers maybe like Sebald who -- whose work you return to, whose work sort of feeds you as a writer?

Scott: Yeah. Yeah. You know, I took -- I -- just the other day, I slapped on my desk The Magic Mountain and Absalom, Absalom! [Laughing]. I don't know. I just -- I put those two books on my desk just so I could crack them open and I -- get the sound of the language in my head. In fact, I think -- well, it used to be Faulkner's language that just, I don't know, made me -- arouse this passion in me and helped me to face the blank page each day.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Now I am -- you know, I mentioned Chekhov earlier. I go back and back again to Chekhov, the quietness there. Again, in translation. I mean, it's frustrating to think that there's -- there's even more to it that can't absorb. But the quietness with the contained grotesque. The extraordinary compassion in his representations of solitude and loneliness and miscommunication. The violence contained in his stories. Quite extraordinary. So, he's been a writer I've gone back to. I go back to Woolf, Virginia Woolf, to -- um -- I think about the way a sentence can move, the way a narrative can move through time.

Black: Well, you -- I mean, mentioning Woolf and Faulkner, and Mann, but Woolf and Faulkner particularly, as some kind of influence. And, back again to what you read at the beginning, to page sentence. I mean -

Scott: Right. Right.

Black: It's just this kind of wonderfully lyrical meditation where the rhythms -- I mean, to me, as a poet, what I -- what I hear first, of course, are the rhythms of the language and the rhythms just kind of propel that sentence. As they do, I think, often times, in wonderful sentences by Woolf or by Faulkner.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. It -- it is -- I -- there is a sound there that -- it has to do with the form.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But have to have that sound - that beat.

Panning: Right.

Scott: In order to keep going down the page. Yeah. And, again, you know, I -- I attach it to character. I attach it to the voice to character. Once I can create a character who exists within the confines of something we call a self, um, then I can start to shape this, you know -- design this pattern, this linguistic pattern that has, hopefully, some driving rhythm, that tells me then, you know, what beat's going to follow.

Black: Yeah.

Panning: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And whether you want to call it experimental or taking chances in terms of language, this novel really does -- I mean, I'm thinking of the passage with the mosquito. Right?

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Panning: That goes.

Black: Yeah.

Panning: Runs throughout.

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: And there's -- there are poetic things that are used. The repetem, and repetition -- the thing you read started with, "you know," almost every time.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Black: Right.

Panning: And then at the beginning, actually, you know, that -- what I call this sort of riff at the beginning of the novel, this thing you go on.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Panning: Flows through to the end of the book. You know, when you have those imagined kind of conversations going on. I mean the book is a conversations of the narrators. But then you have the imagined conversations going on within -- was it with Oli and the father?

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: Taking place sort of in imagined --

Scott: Or Nat, he's imagining.

Panning: Nat. Yeah. Nat.

Scott: He's imagining Nat and the father.

Panning: Right. Right. So, that's certainly, you know, embarking from traditional, I'd say straight narrative.

Scott: Uh-huh.

Panning: In a way that, you know, is as bold as in some parts of Ulysses or something. You know, it seems to borrow from some of the modernist kind of writing.

Scott: Sure. I'll be as bold as Joyce, you know [laughing]? I have nothing to lose. Right? No, I think, though, in terms of the sound of it, I learned that from Dickens. That -- that rhythm, I look to Dickens. The wildness of language I'll look to Faulkner, but just repetition, rhythm.

Black: Yeah.

Scott: No one does it better than Dickens. And to great comic effect, which I've yet to master. But, um, I just -- the -- the way he can position the words so that the repetitions keep varying. Hemingway must have learned it from Dickens [laughing]. You know?

Black: Now, I know this was kind of a joke earlier on, but you don't actually worry about the death of the novel. Do you?

Scott: Um -- all the time [laughing].

Black: I mean, do you think it's something that -- I don't know -- that -- ?

Scott: The -- I get -- I do find myself, in more peevish moods, wondering why people are so afraid of the imagination.

Black: Yeah.

Scott: This need to create authentic texts to have, you know, real life situations on television, to have based on the true story narratives in the cinema that -- it just frustrates me sometimes that we can't play. You know? That we can't see the value of the mind's imaginative work, I'll even call it. But that's been a problem that's been facing novelists for hundreds of years. I love sending my students back to Defoe to see how, you know, introducing Robinson Crusoe. It's -- it's truer than -- fiction is truer than life, than history. It's -- it's more authentic or -- or tells us more. It treats its subject with more care. Just trying to outdo history. The novel has -- that's a game, a contest, competition we've been feeling since the genre has been flourishing in this language at least.

Black: Yeah. And so much of I think pop culture, the media today is about -- it's kind of confessional. It's kind of surreal, confessional mode where everybody just wants to bear all.

Scott: Yes. Yes.

Black: It's, you know, yes, this really --

Scott: And we're right in the perfect setting for this.

Black: And, yeah, here we are. This is [inaudible].

Scott: Ralph, tell me now [laughing]. What worries you?

Black: I know. It was very painful. Let me tell you how miserable it really was [laughing]. And --

Scott: Wait! Commercial break [laughing].

Black: But then --

Scott: We'll be right back [inaudible] going to tell us.

Black: But Thoreau -- Thoreau, you know, thought that Melville was wasting his time as a writer because he was writing fiction. You know? He thought, you know, tell the truth. Tell -- you know, if you're going to write about [inaudible].

Scott: Melville wondered that too. You know? You feel him wondering that in Moby Dick.

Black: Yeah [inaudible]. Right.

Scott: But the -- yeah. You're right. You're right that that -- that that ongoing concern about the -- the superfluous nature of fiction or the frivolous nature of fiction. It's -- we're not going to shake it off. It's going to be there.

Panning: So, would it be fair to say that you have no interest in writing memoir or, you know, going -- do you go into that genre of nonfiction? I mean, not -- not factual nonfiction, but whatever you want to call it?

Scott: Right. Right.

Panning: Creative nonfiction.

Scott: Right. You know, I'll write movies [inaudible].

Panning: Or would you like to look at that form as something to play with you use -- I mean, I know a lot of writers do write very imaginatively.

Scott: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. It's wonderful form --

Panning: But is that appealing to you? Or are you not interested?

Scott: I would -- I wouldn't say no to any possibility.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- so, we'll see. You know [laughing]?

Panning: Fair enough. Fair enough.

Scott: It's not -- it's not -- I'm not planning it any time [inaudible].

Panning: It's not a pressing need. Because you've talked -- when you were giving your reading and talk the other week, you -- what I got was a sense from you of this person with ideas pressing -- kind of galloping behind you, that you want to -- there's always something at your back that you want to write about that you're excited to write a novel.

Scott: Oh, that's a nice saying.

Panning: But that you are always -- you couldn't wait -- it seemed like there was this sense of --

Scott: Yeah.

Panning: Not impatience, but couldn't wait to kind of get to the next thing sometimes.

Scott: Yeah. Yeah.

Panning: You know?

Scott: Yeah. I am in danger of being impatient.

Panning: You think so?

Scott: I fear. I -- it -- the urge to get to the end of a narrative sometimes might drive me too quickly through it.

Black: Do you ever work on more than one project at once?

Scott: I -- I made to little projects.

Black: Mm-hmm.

Scott: Along with whatever big one is consuming me.

Black: You don't get half way through a novel and get bogged down and start another?

Scott: Well, then I lose a novel.

Black: Then you lose -- OK.

Scott: Then I -- then I [inaudible].

Panning: How about short stories? Are you still writing those alongside -- do those just come randomly?

Scott: I -- I -- they do. They -- they're usually between novels. They're what I work on when I've finished a longer project. But now I'm -- I'm going back and forth a little bit more than I have in the past because I have some idea for -- at least for a short continuous series of stories.

Black: Yeah.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: But I'm not sure if that's going to come to anything. But usually I have to concentrate. Time is just so scarce anyway these days.

Black: Yeah.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Scott: I -- I usually focus on one project.

Panning: Mm-hmm.

Black: Well, let me ask you this. We've been talking a lot about -- about rhythm and sentences. Can you take us out, as they say, by -- ?

Scott: Oh, I can [laughing].

Black: By reading the opening of Tourmaline?

Scott: Oh, sure.

Black: Just the opening passage?

Panning: Oh, yeah. That'd be great.

Black: And -- that would be lovely.

Scott: Water laps against the quay of Portoferraio. Hungry dogs blink in the sunlight. A grocer stacks oranges. A carabinieri checks the time on his wristwatch. A girl chases a cat into a courtyard. Men argue in the shade of an archway. A woman rubs a rag over a shop window. Heels click on stone. Bottles rattle in the back of a flatbed truck. A boy writes graffiti on the wall above the steps leading to the Liceo Raffaello. German tourists hesitate before filing into a bar. An old woman, puzzled to find herself still alive at the end of the century, sits on a bench in Piazza Repubblica, her eyes closed, her lips moving in a silent prayer to San Niccolo.

Panning: Thanks.

Black: Thanks, Joanna, very much for talking to us.

Scott: Well, thank you.

Black: And Anne. And buon viaggio.

Scott: Gratzì.

Black: This winter and spring.

Scott: Yeah.