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Jonis Agee: fiction writer and novelist

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Agee:

"Listen"

"When you tell these stories the men are just mentioned. The women are angry, bitter. They only see things that happened to them. Try to tell the other side, not the men's stories, but maybe show where the woman makes her mistakes, where she sees, admits her errors." Harry gives me advice I usually don't pay attention to. I keep trying to make it personal with him because it was once and maybe I can admit to missing it, the personal part, not the advice. He was always too full of that. "Just shut up" I used to whisper with my hand over the phone mouthpiece. "Don't say so much."

"It's not my style to take the other side too much. I mean I don't want these women to seem too whiney and wimpy." I argue with Harry because when he opens his mouth I'm always ready. Maybe that's wrong too. "I just don't see the point," I tell him, lying. I sometimes practiced lying when we were together. Told him I didn't do something like see a movie, when I did, just because I didn't want him knowing everything about me. Some things, okay, maybe I shouldn't have lied about -- how I didn't want him so close to me, how I wasn't planning a future with him, how I didn't mind that he took Prozac.

"I'm dangerous" he warned the first night. "I'm not afraid," I said, although I was. "Ask yourself what this woman in your stories did wrong," Harry urges. "What do you mean, personally speaking?" I answer. "I like the stories," he insists, "you just need the balance, the other side of it. What about her mistakes, her errors, the pain she caused the others?" "Oh, I don't know. Maybe they were just bad to her. Maybe she didn't do anything wrong." He's silent. Does he mean the times I invited him places to meet people and then cancelled out? Does he mean the times I wouldn't let him satisfy me when we made love? Does he mean the times I thought he knew too much and I disappeared for hours or days? There were good reasons, lots of them.

Harry doesn't have to be here to know that I'm pulling the covers up under my chin, clutching the phone so tightly the ends of my fingers tingle. I can't be wrong, these women can't be wrong, he's always known that about me from the first time he tried to make me drop to my knees and beg forgiveness. "It'd be good for you," he said. He knew didn't he? I told him that you have to be careful when you break horses that you don't break their spirit too, that you don't make it a contest of wills you can't lose."

Every time he said I'd never known anyone like him I said I had. Every time he asked me how many lovers I'd had, I doubled and tripled the numbers. Every time he asked me if I'd ever tried this in bed I said yes and laughed.

"You have to make the mosaic complete," he says just before he hangs up. "I'll see you Friday, maybe at that signing with that guy. See, I do care." I cover my head in the bomb shelter I've made for myself of an empty house. I'm not going to feel sorry for anyone. I'm not going to let these women slip away. They're tough, they're telling the truth. "Compassion," he'd said, "what about their compassion, their understanding of their own natures?" Something comes leaking into the blanketed, sheeted dark at me.

Outside the wind blows the sun dark gray and the trees mutter and glitter their leaves like knives in my direction. I can see them through the big back windows and the birds, all kind of robins and grackles and starlings and blue jays and sparrows, they keep flying into the glass thinking they see something clear, something they can get to the other side of. I've given up going outside to find their bodies; panting, bloodied, splashed, and broken on the grassy hill. When I mow, tufts of feathers come bursting up at me like blown apart flowers. What wrong there is here, what wrong I've been trying to keep away from myself, what wrong is so small I can finally admit to it, I ask the silence that used to be Harry's voice.

Rubin:
That was good.

Agee:
Thanks.

Rubin:
Very nice.
[inaudible]

Agee:
I stumbled, but --

Rubin:
[inaudible] That was really good.

Agee:
Thank you. [inaudible] Well, that's the problem is how to define them.

Rubin:
That's the thing. I want to talk like this about it.

Agee:
Okay.

Rubin:
Every take -- it's not like I have question one, question three.

Rubin:
All right. I'm Ross Perot. [laughs] Welcome to the Writers Forum. Our guest today, Jonis Agee, was born and raised in Nebraska and Missouri and educated at the University of Iowa and SUNY Binghamton, where she received a PHD in English and Creative Writing. She is the author of three novels; "Sweet Eyes," "Strange Angels," and the forthcoming "South of Resurrection," and three collections of short stories; "Pretend We've Never Met," "Bend This Heart," and "A .38 Special and a Broken Heart." Her two published novels; "Sweet Eyes" and "Strange Angels," and the collection; "Bend This Heart" were all named Notable Books of the Year by the New York Times Book Review in their respective years. Jonis Agee is a professor of Creative Writing at the University of Michigan at Anne Arbor and she is with us today. Welcome. It's nice to have you here.

Agee:
Thank you.

Rubin:
[inaudible] Poetry.

Agee:
Well, I always wanted to be a writer even -- I tell the story, you know when you have to give those talks; how I became a writer to high school kids or, you know I get a lot -- asked to do that a lot. And I -- my first memory of wanting to be a writer was when I was about three years old and I would wake up at dawn and -- I come from a large family and we lived in the country at that point -- and I would run outside and kind -- at six a.m. -- play by myself. And I remember trying to make up little songs and they were really crummy. [laughs] They weren't -- there was no genius there. [laughs] And I remember being very dissatisfied thinking, "Wow. I really want a good song here and it's not coming." So I think [laughs] I always knew -- I just told everyone I was always going to be a writer and it was -- people kind of said, "Yeah, fine. How are you going to support yourself?" But even as a small child I knew. Although I wasn't a prodigy by any means and it wasn't until I went to college that I started writing seriously.

Rubin:
At three years old you were thinking of making up songs to try to be a poet?

Agee:
Yeah. I just always -- and I once tried to write a story when I was -- I learned to type. My father and grandfather had a business college. So, you know we had typewriters around and so I remember trying to peck out a little story when I was about 10 -- eight or nine or 10. I was going to tell the story of -- I'd just heard about the Trojan War -- and I was going to tell the story of the last horse left over after the Trojan War [laughs] because I loved horses. And I got about, you know a page and I thought, "Wow. Writing is too hard. It's very hard work." [laughs] So, I stopped that. But I think reading really made me a writer.

Rubin:
This is a remarkable three year old, existentially speaking. [laughter] Pecking out her first [inaudible]

Agee:
Well, it was a little later. Yeah. No. I always had grand ideas. [laughing] I think I had to wait to catch up with some of them.

Rubin:
Well, when did you decide that you were going to do fiction?

Agee:
That happened fairly late in life. I mean I started as a poet. I tried writing fiction as an undergraduate and it took me five hours one night to write a couple of pages and I thought, "Fiction's too hard. I'll just become a poet. You can write it faster and there's some immediate

gratification." But it happened in about -- I think I wrote my first story literally in 1975 when I was driving back to the Plains, where I'd grown up, to take a job in Minnesota. And I was in the car and a man I was going to be married to was driving and I just -- this story came to me about a farm woman and it was in my first collection of stories. And I -- from then on I started writing stories as well as poetry and just gradually taught myself how to write fiction.

Rubin:

So, you did not intend to be a creative writer when you were in college at Iowa State?

Agee:

No. I was there for -- you know I went to Iowa as an undergraduate. I transferred from a small women's college I was at, and I had gone there specifically to work as a poet, you know to take courses. I took a course with Mark Strand and of course with Donald Justice. And you know I knew I was going to be a poet and I really -- I was reading everything I could find and, you know trying to be a poet. And when I was in graduate school my dissertation was a long poem, a 90 page long poem, in the tradition of William Carlos Williams and Charles Olson, but I -- but it was different because I didn't have a town to use. So -- I didn't feel close enough to a place at that point. So, I was failing.

Rubin:

And then in your first novel, "Sweet Eyes" you created a town.

Agee:

Yeah. I kind of grew to that point. And I feel like I was always influenced by those American poets who were so much into a sense of the land and place and I really believed when Olson said you know, "Dig a musty bone in your own backyard." You know it's "in your own backyard." And I really took that to heart as something that I needed to do to grow as a writer. And when I start writing "Sweet Eyes," it started as a couple of short stories and -- with a kind of compelling voice that wouldn't let go of me. Honey Parish [assumed spelling] kind of took over and wouldn't shut up, kind of like me. So, [laughs] I had to find a place for her. And she was clearly there, in Iowa, you know in a small town. And then I felt this great relief because I could invent the place. And so I'm not like Olson and Williams because I'm not using a real, real place.

Rubin:

Tell us some more about the Genesis of Divinity, Iowa since you created it.

Agee:

Yeah, it's one of my favorite acts of all my life I think [laughs] was finding Divinity, Iowa. Well, I had -- I've always missed and loved so much the rural landscape of the Midwest and, you know of the Plains. I like that big horizon. And Divinity is very familiar to me in a strange way. And I wanted a small town that was going through the farm crisis that was kind of feeling economic pressure. And my character had been forced to move to town, much as I had as a child. We lived in the country

when I was first growing up and then my father moved to French Morocco for a couple of years and we all moved to Missouri to be with relatives. And then when we came back I always thought we'd move back to the country and I would have all this land around me. Instead we moved to town and it broke my heart in a terrible kind of way. But fortunately my grandfather at that point changed his life and bought a farm outside of town. So, I spent a lot of my growing up time there and got a horse and just stayed there a lot. So, I've kind of -- you know to find Divinity was great because I could have both worlds and bring them together. And I liked having a town that I could populate, you know? I would go out in the world and I would see a baseball team and I would thing, "Yeah, there's a baseball team. Okay, and they go to the bar. Yeah, that's what they do." It was -- you know it felt very God-like. [laughs]

Rubin:

Yeah. You, as reviewers noted, you really did create and catch, for many people, the rhythms of a small Midwestern town. And you don't idealize it.

Agee:

No because if you've lived in those places and you talk to people who've lived in small towns, there's the good and the bad of it. What I like about it is how known you are, but it's also the terror of how known you are. It's very difficult to escape your history and -- in the action, particularly the bad ones you've undertaken in a small town.

Rubin:

And Honey, the narrator, has a relationship with a black man and that raises a lot of problems.

Agee:

Oh, yeah.

Rubin:

As part of that small town life is racism and black violence.

Agee:

Absolutely. And it's funny because after this novel was published, you know some people were saying, "Oh, is it really like that in Iowa?" And shortly after this novel came out there was a cross burning in Dubuque, Iowa and, you know there was a -- the racism kind of percolated up again, as it is doing all over this country now. So, I think this was important for me to write about. I felt, you know I had grown up with that kind of racism in Omaha and my own family -- not my siblings necessarily, but my parents -- were Southerners by nature, were -- had a lot of very negative, you know racist stereotypes and I had not felt that way growing up and I had really rebelled against their attitudes. So, for me this book was a liberation in a lot of ways and -- on the other hand my father was dying as this book was coming out and he kept waiting for it to be published and I was praying that -- [laughs] this is terrible -- but like, "Please God let him go before he reads about [laughter] a love affair between a white man -- a black man -- and a white woman" because I know he would have -- you know he would have never spoken to me again. But I have this image of him in the hospital bed, dying, clutching the

book because his daughter -- one of his children had finally made good, but having no idea [laughing] what it's about. And I think my life is rife with irony like that.

Rubin:

There is also an obvious kind of mythic dimension to the book. Did you think of it that way? There's an epigraph from Dante, "The Inferno," in the front and viewers have cited it. When did you conceive of this as providing some kind of pattern for the book, if indeed you did?

Agee:

I did. I see this character -- you know I'm very -- one of the things I'm doing with the first three novels is a trilogy and one of the things I see myself as really exploring and very concerned with, in all of my work, is the nature and source of love and desire in the late twentieth century in America. And -- well because America's what I know, but I suspect it's world-wide and I have always been obsessed, in some way or another, by issues of spirituality, if not traditionally informed spirituality, regulated spirituality, at least, you know some sense that we have to negotiate these various kinds of reality and territories. And I -- personally I just love the medieval period. Isn't that weird? But I did and I have always longed for a kind of world that is -- that has a kind of spiritual cohesion and the kind of -- at the same time that it's capable of comforting all its citizens, which of course is impossible. So, there's a little idealism there. And that also gave me a way that -- I like how Dante could criticize his society in "The Inferno." How he could really point out some issues and I feel like small towns are -- there's a lot of people trying to help you [laughs] morally and ethically. But I felt like my narrator also, this was something that she had to do as a kind of coming of age for her. And so I see -- the three books actually, there's a quote from "The Purgatory" in "Strange Angels" and I really was trying to see; what would happen if we examined these issues in this culture at this time, you know? And so that's what these books are about.

Rubin:

"The Purgatory" as quoted in "Strange Angels," are you using Dante in the south of [inaudible]?

Agee:

Absolutely. Now the "Paradiso," absolutely. Although I've noticed that each book is almost a recapitulation of the entire trilogy of Dante and I make no claim to be anywhere near the kind of wonderful poet and visionary that Dante is, but I feel as if there is some spirit of that over my shoulder. And it probably comes from my own background where I've had a kind of a -- I'm confused geographically, I'm confused spiritually, I'm confused -- you know I've had -- you know on one hand this kind of -- the most negative, racist, prejudiced forces and, you know in my ear constantly growing up and on the other hand I had this very strong sense of something else that was more important that was -- I was learning about through my reading.

Rubin:

Which at a really early age you started reading Greek.

Agee:

Yeah, I found out about those things. I -- actually it's really interesting. My father was a very well educated person and both my parents read enormous amounts. My father read, as I said in "Strange Angels" where I have a little dedication, he read a book a day about. And he read everything. He had Masters in History. He was very, very, very smart. When his father was going to college -- putting himself through college during the depression and earlier when they were very poor -- my father, as a young boy, was reading his father's textbooks -- college textbooks. So, he was very smart, but he was one of those people who should have been doing something much different in life. He had a tremendous amount of intellectual energy that -- and imagination that kept getting twisted and it was kind of a scary [laughs] place to live. So, I escaped into books and found better people and better places.

Rubin:

Well, it's an interesting layering of stuff or melding of things with the mythic level and the sense of Dante and the kind of realistic portrayal of the Midwestern town and your own emotional concerns that run through the book. It took you 10 years to do "Sweet Eyes" I've heard you say.

Agee:

Yeah. I had written two novels before that, which were just terrible. And thank God we're allowed to do that. [laughing]

Rubin:

Did anyone read them and say, "These are terrible" or did you -- ?

Agee:

No. I sent them to an agent and he assured me [laughs] because they didn't make any sense and they were -- and he was right. I mean he was right. I knew it, but I didn't want it to be true, but it -- when I finally buckled down and started writing this book it was very freeing because I didn't have a time limit for myself. I was simply giving myself the luxury of really creating something that was whole and also it started out 1,000 pages and I had to rewrite it several times. I rewrote it about five or six times. When we finally sold it the final version took two years. So, that was, you know that was good.

Rubin:

You're a terrific reviser aren't you?

Agee:

Well, it's funny because I've always hated revision, you know? That's another reason why I loved poetry because I could write great amounts and then I could cut back to the poem that would be and I preferred that process to starting over again over and over. So, it's very ironic that I end up in a genre that I literally have to rewrite all the time. Which I hear about these people who write a novel in six or eight months and I'm so darn envious I can't stand it.

Rubin:

The novel, "Sweet Eyes" is told really in a first person kind of point of view.

Agee:

Oh, yeah absolutely.

Rubin:

Of the character Honey. Did this give you trouble? Did this come natural to you as a -- ?

Agee:

You know I was -- this book was started at a time when -- lot of women -- I was living in Minneapolis, Saint Paul and Susan Allen Toth and Trish [assumed spelling] Hampl were both publishing autobiographies. And I kind of felt like I didn't want to write an autobiography because in a way I feared that I'd give -- if you write an autobiography or memoir you give away your material and then it's permanently public and it's -- you can't fictionalize off of that again. And so, at least I felt I couldn't. So, I wanted to write a memoir, you know I felt like, "Yeah, that's a good idea," but I wanted to write a fictional memoir about somebody. So, no it was very -- it was good. Honey Parish is not me. People always say, "Oh, that's you." It's like, "No, that's really not me. I didn't grow up in a trailer. I swear, I'm not living in a trailer now." Although I've longed for a trailer. My sister Jackie [assumed spelling] and I bought land in the Sandhills of Nebraska that I really spent a lot of time in for "Strange Angels" and I keep threatening to put a trailer out there and she keeps telling me -- assuring me -- she will burn it down. So [laughter] I [inaudible]

Rubin:

Let's talk about the character Clinton for a moment.

Agee:

Okay.

Rubin:

Who sort of haunts her through the book. Is -- helps her. Is he -- to what extent is he drawn from reality and to what extent is he an inventive character?

Agee:

Well, it's interesting because he just appeared, you know? He literally appeared. And I think I've always been haunted. I was part of the anti-war movement. I was very concerned with -- obviously with the war in Vietnam and I was a political radical for a long time and I've been haunted by the soldiers that came back and what we knew of them, the ones we met. And later as I met people who were in the war who weren't as damaged as some of the men I knew it formed a kind of a more balanced feel of that time and people who were a part of it. But I feel as if Clinton is the ghost of that war that still haunts the landscape and very specifically haunts this character because he was her first lover and because he represented the promise of everything that's taken away, which I think is true as you grow up. A lot of things that you hoped to be aren't, and you have to learn to live with what's taken away as well as what's being given. And I see Clinton as, you know he represents kind of the history we can't move beyond in our lives. And all of us do drag part

of our history with us or certain specific moments or people or pain. And partly because I have that Southern background, I feel as if I've always been haunted, my family has always been haunted by different kinds of wrongs that they've dragged with them and different pains and we were always aware of that in my family. [laughs] We never forgot it.

Rubin:

You mention -- you cite Dwight Yoakum.

Agee:

Yeah, that's in "Strange Angels" and I cite him actually everywhere. [laughs]

Rubin:

Yeah, how important is music to you? Country music.

Agee:

Well, it's funny because when I was younger I loved country music, but then of course when you go to high school you learn how bad that is and you should love rock and roll. So, I did. And then I tried to mock country music along with everyone, but secretly when I was alone I would listen to country music sometimes. [laughs] And Buck Owens, I always loved Buck Owens. And I'd grown up on western movies and horse books and I've always loved that culture. And I like the kind of emotional honesty, you know and everybody says that, but I like the grittiness of country music. I like the fact that it's very hard to pretend when you're down to your last dollar. [laughs]

Rubin:

Did you say you sent "Strange Angels" to Dwight Yoakum?

Agee:

What I sent was "Bend This Heart" and "Sweet Eyes" and I had told him about "Strange Angels," you know? And he wrote me a note back and sent me his picture and I was just -- [laughs]. And we had talked about, you know I wanted him to be this star of "Strange Angels." I wanted him to be Cody, [assumed spelling] which of course, you know other people want him to be -- want Cody to be Brad Pitt. [laughter] And one of the things you go through when you publish novels is everyone casts all the characters. [laughter]

Rubin:

Well, I wonder who you'd cast, but we know it'd be Dwight Yoakum. So, I think [inaudible].

Agee:

Well, maybe not.

Rubin:

Opposite of yourself? [laughter]

Agee:

Well, ideally, but I think he's too young and he probably has a life of his own.

Rubin:

Yeah, probably. "Strange Angels" is set in the Sandhills of Nebraska and it's a real inter-landscape for you. Say something -- did this landscape provoke the novel?

Agee:

Well, actually I'd always wanted to write a western. My first novel that I tried to write that was the first terrible novel was a western and it was awful, partly because I didn't have a real place. And I've learned now that my work really -- my novels come out of a place. I have to have -- that's the root of my psyche. And I was -- I started -- I was waiting for "Sweet Eyes" to come out and I felt I had to do something with that time. The most terrible time for a writer is waiting for a book to come out because you swear that you'll be humiliated publically and you will never raise your head again. And it's like waiting for a baby to be born, you know? You're hoping it doesn't have two heads. So, anyway I was taught -- my father and I, who had been estranged most of my life, started talking because he, fortunately for him, had a year left in his life, and he knew it was about a year. And so we start talking and I told him about the book I was writing. He was always trying to get me to write about his family, which drove me crazy, but he said, "Well, why don't you set it in the Sandhills of Nebraska? It's very western." And he had always hunted out there and I had never been out there. It's weird. You grow up in Nebraska and never go places. You go, you know in Omaha you want to go east. You want to go to New York, you know? Or at least Iowa. [laughs] But -- so I went out there and fell in love with the place. It's a real -- it's a western culture. It's a very raw land. Very beautiful, but not like Wyoming and Colorado.

Rubin:

It's really a book about family.

Agee:

Yeah, I think all my books are.

Rubin:

Fracturing and coming together.

Agee:

Yeah. Even when I'm dealing with small towns I -- or neighborhoods -- I feel -- that those are forms of family, that community and family are replicating each other in different ways and that we seek that. It's possibly one of the best things about human beings and also one of the most awful things because of the things that happen within those structures, the way you're known and the way you're forced to become. But I think -- yeah, I see this as a novel of reconciliation.

Rubin:

What started it? What started the "Strange Angels?" There's a lot of plot [inaudible].

Agee:

Yeah.

Rubin:

A lot of narrative stuff, if one was going to summarize it.

Agee:

Yeah. I really -- I usually have to see a character. I heard Honey's voice and saw a story that ended up not being in that novel, you know as the first way she appeared. And in this novel I saw Cody one winter night. It just came to me. I saw him. He was in the barn. He was saddling his horse. He was furious, it was snowing, he had to go out and get his sister and I saw that he had had a fight with his brother and that's when the novel began for me. And so the war between the two boys was always there. There was always an argument. And there was this sister who was both loved by both of them, but also who was driving him crazy. And Cody's -- the big love affair he has, you know he finds this woman -- this older woman -- that really appeared shortly thereafter, but it took me a long time. I wrote about 1,600 pages for this novel to find the [laughs] things that would work.

Rubin:

So, your novels -- and perhaps your stories -- start with maybe an image.

Agee:

An image. I see a scene or I hear a line. You know often with the stories a line occurs. I hear the first line of the story.

Rubin:

It's the poet in you maybe.

Agee:

I think so because that's the way I always heard poems too. You know I still do when I'm writing a poem. It always starts as a line. Often when I'm writing a story I don't know whether I'm going to write a poem or a story.

Rubin:

Do you know where your -- when do you know where you're going to go or how far you're going to go? I mean, let's talk about the novels. There is this problem of plot.

Agee:

Oh, yeah.

Rubin:

When do you have a sense of the road you're travelling, if you're ever --
?

Agee:

Probably when I get toward the end, but I -- the reason I need to revise a lot is because I get obsessed with one thing and take that to the end and then I realize, "Oh, that's not enough" or "That's way too much," and then I have to go back through. For me it's like making a very elaborate rug and I keep having to pull it apart and weave it back together and, you know sometimes I overdesign them and I have to pull them apart again and bring it back down.

Rubin:

When you're working do you keep rereading what you've just done that day to get a sense of where you seem to be headed or what?

Agee:

Well, when I'm working I try to read just a little bit of what I've done the day before so that I can pull the voice out and hear it again and I always have notes. I'm always working. When I'm on a novel I'm always working, night and day. Not in the sense that I'm always at the keyboard, or typewriter, whatever, but that I'm always thinking about it and I'm keeping notes. I carry a notebook all the time and wherever I am I might -- you know if something pops up, I hear dialogue or I'll realize a character should do this or that. So, there's elaborate notes I keep all the time and then [inaudible].

Rubin:

You also drive around in the landscape you're writing about, don't you?

Agee:

Yeah. It's -- for me it's a way of -- I've learned, probably because of my training as a poet, to really trust what my eye catches. So, whatever my attention lands on I realize that's what I need. So, I'm kind of like this animal, or this -- you know trying to collect food -- or a bird collecting stuff for a nest. I literally go out and look and just -- it took me a long time. It's almost a Buddhist exercise [laughs] to just -- I used to go out and think, "Okay, I'm going to make something happen. I'm going to find what I need." And after a while I realized, whatever will happen will be what I need. And so that's how I've taught myself how to write. And I try to teach my students how to write that, to pay attention to what they're paying attention to.

Rubin:

I picture you driving around through the Sandhills with a notebook open, jotting down. [laughs]

Agee:

That's exactly -- yeah, right on my knee or right --

Rubin:

Country music on the --

Agee:

Yeah, exactly. But the other thing I do is I've learned to research and of course when you get a PHD of course you're sick of research and you're over critical. So, I had to dismantle that whole construction and I had to teach myself that I could actually do field identification of plants, for instance, because when you go to a land -- you know most of us don't -- can't identify those things. We don't -- we hear birds, we don't know who they are or what their job is, you know what that sound is. And so I've really had to train myself to learn about the world in that way and I get books and I stop and I draw pictures and I learn to be there.

Rubin:

Your characters are very rooted in the natural world, the sight -- nature provides something. It's not exactly a consolation, but it's another source of something in your novels.

Agee:

I think, yeah. And to me if I were standing outside of my work, you know which I do sometimes, and I think, one thing that really influenced me was the fact that I realized that the classical world was -- had a cohesion and I realized that the divinity that occurred, you know the relationship between the plants and all the stories about how that plant got that name or that tree or the fact that there were critters in all the trees. So, you had to be careful if you chopped a tree down or be careful in that water because there were critters. And I realized that was a way of making real the spirituality of that world and it also made people very respectful of their environment. And so I also see what we're doing [laughs] in our world and how that world, the natural world, is eroding and disappearing, receding, and I guess I'm a romantic in that way. I feel as if I have to somehow hang on to it and preserve it and make -- you know so my characters are aware of it, or have to become aware of it, you know the physical world.

Rubin:

There's a Native American element in "Strange Angels."

Agee:

Yeah because part of -- the Sandhills is right across -- right down from the boarder of South Dakota, right along Pine Ridge and Rosebud, and there is a lot of discourse, interaction, a lot of negative interaction, between those two worlds, the white world of Nebraska and the Native World that perches right above it. And that's the kind of tension I was interested in exploring.

Rubin:

Do you think of your novels as having cruelty and violence in them.

Agee:

Oh, absolutely. I think --

Rubin:

Does that give you any trouble when -- to deal with? I mean was it any sort of technical problem?

Agee:

No, unfortunately my agent always says -- [laughs] Ned Lovett [phonetic] always says -- you know your best writing is about sex and violence. [laughter] And --

Rubin:

They sell. [laughs]

Agee:

Well, yeah, but I don't know it just -- it comes naturally, which is a kind of horrifying thing to realize about yourself and I think sometimes

some of the work is gritty for people, but I'm very interested in how that violence comes out of us and how it can turn -- you know how the cruelty can turn and become something else. I'm always amazed by both people's capacity for kindness -- you know people that you think are the most lithesome things on earth can turn and care about some little thing. You think, "Oh, my God." And then they can also, with the blink of an eye, kill.

Rubin:

That's the title, "Strange Angels," isn't it?

Agee:

Yeah.

Rubin:

Yeah. When do you get your titles? Are they working titles or what?

Agee:

My working titles seem to always have the word sister in them, but they have -- but it never shows up. [laughter] And "Sweet Eyes" was originally called -- God, what was it called? I can't remember, but it was much different. And "Sweet Eyes" came out of -- both those came much later -- you know late in the novel.

Rubin:

The new novel was called "Salvation's Sister."

Agee:

Yeah, that was a working title.

Rubin:

It was a working title and now it's "South of Resurrection." Now that you've done two of what you say is a trilogy, but with different characters and places, do you have a stronger sense of what -- did you have a stronger sense of what the third was going to be than you perhaps had going into the first two?

Agee:

I knew I wanted to complete the trilogy and I think that was harder. It made it very hard for me to think like that because I tend to like to -- when I write, just have the world open and unconceived of. I like to invent it. And yeah, it was harder. And also the place I'm writing about, these three states that I've, you know taken to bring into this place is -- you know Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri are three places that I lived during my early life and three places that kind of formed my psyche.

Rubin:

So, each novel is -- has its [inaudible].

Agee:

Yeah, it has an autobiographical -- yeah it's a state in a lot of ways. And I think Missouri's the hardest because that's where my parents are from and that's a place we went when my father was away and I was a small child and that's really where my mother was -- had a lot of mental

illness and that's where she really began to break down, when we lived there. And so I have a lot of mixed feelings about that place. It's been very hard to write that novel, but fortunately it's near the end.
[laughs]

Rubin:

Well, you published two collections of short stories before you did a novel and they came out in the same year, 1989. "Bend This Heart" came out from Coffeehouse Press and "Pretend We've Never Met," that was Peregrine Smith -- two fine, small publishers.

Agee:

Yes.

Rubin:

Where they drawing on the same set of material and how did they get into two different collections that year?

Agee:

Well they -- actually they should have been published two separate years, but Peregrine Smith moved the pub date. So, I've always felt a little bad about that. But the "Pretend We've Never Met" material was a lot of stories I was working on when I was working on "Sweet Eyes." So, some of the people in that town --

Rubin:

Are who -- yeah.

Agee:

Yeah. They have their own stories and they're in there and they're my early stories, the first stories that started getting some attention from -- and getting published and stuff and a few newer things. And "Bend This Heart" is really a new book. There's a couple of older stories in it, but it was really written at a -- during a single period of time -- about six to eight months.

Rubin:

So, what was the move into the novel for you? You were working on stories and the novel, "Sweet Eyes," simultaneously. In a sense the stories there were a kind of backdrop to the novel or -- ?

Agee:

Yeah, I kind of went back and forth and because my head is often crowded with a lot of characters and a lot of ideas, I find that if I can write short stories it kind of pulls them away and they don't distract me from the work of the novel. And sometimes I write stories, you know when a novel is done or before I start a novel I kind of warm up by writing a series of stories or poems.

Rubin:

Does the technical challenge of the short story differ for you from that other novel in a really serious way or is it just a matter of time/space managing?

Agee:

No, I think what I most admire and wonder if I'll ever be able to do are -- you know is that great kind of medium length short story that -- the short stories you see by Joyce Carol Oates or Charles Baxter. Those kinds of short stories I admire tremendously and don't know that I'll ever be able to quite do that kind of story. For me the short stories are probably the kind of -- the most avant-garde or radical part of my writing for -- you know psyche. That's where I really test out a lot of fictional forms and fictional ideas and narrative techniques. You know that's probably why I moved in -- you know I write the short shorts and people say, "Well, what are these exactly? What are you doing?" And it's --

Rubin:

You're talking about "A .38 Special and a Broken Heart," which was full of them [inaudible] short, short stories, some of which are really a long paragraph, some of which might go on for just a couple pages.

Agee:

Right.

Rubin:

The longest may be about six pages or so.

Agee:

Well, 10 pages I think. The publisher, Allan Kornblum, he's a -- gosh, one of the best publishers in the world and just has been a wonderful friend and editor. You know he gave me -- he said, "No more than 10 pages." So, I'm busy cutting. [laughs] But you know it's a -- I liked that form. It works for me for a lot of different reasons and I -- so I admire the one thing I feel -- I don't know that I can write that big, traditional short story. I've got a few of those. I'm not sure how well I succeeded though.

Rubin:

Well, let's talk about the short shorts in "A .38 Special and a Broken Heart."

Agee:

Okay.

Rubin:

They're really characters as voices in part aren't they?

Agee:

I think so. I think I do explore the character through voice, through the small kind of -- sometimes brutal -- incidents that occur to people.

Rubin:

Why these incidents? What is their principle?

Agee:

Well, this is a book about love. [laughs] It's a book about -- there are things that I think we really know the most about people when we see what

they desire and what they love, how they love and how they suffer and what they're willing to suffer for love and desire. And I have a theory that every story -- every single story -- is a love story because even, you know "Moby Dick." Who knows what people fall in love with? And I think there's -- you know most of our literature's about love and being an outlaw. I think there's a frontier in all of us that we kind of are sometimes driven to and on that frontier we're the wildest thing there, as Hawthorne says in "Young Goodman Brown." And I think one thing that's interesting about this culture, this country, is that because of our cult of individualism, because of democracy, which is wonderful and I would never do without, we still allow, and push people to those frontiers quite often. And I'm not surprised by the violence that we see depicted. I'm -- or sometimes by the violence that is there. I'm endlessly pleased by the amount of imagination I see. You know particularly in the Plains where people are kind of free, because of all that landscape, to create things -- as I was telling you the other day about Carhenge in Western Nebraska. [laughs] It's Stonehenge done with cars and it's actually perfectly -- it's a perfect replication. I don't know whether I told you, they're now -- they have their Summer Solstice celebrations there and Native American people come down from Pine Ridge and take part in it. [laughs] So, the two cultures are coming together in Carhenge.

Rubin:

There's something that you're nostalgic for out there in the plains that maybe, inevitably, transforming into something else, or passing away.

Agee:

I think so. Even Rosebud that I -- whose reservation I love, it's some of the most unpopulated land in the world. It's quite beautiful. These stark, rolling hills and beautiful light. Now there's Rosebud Casino sitting perched, right there, above Nebraska. They put it right on the Nebraska border, which I loved. I think that, you know it's inevitable that everything changes, but I think as writers we both write into the -- at the future point, but we also see how quickly things are passing before us and that's probably where I am. I try not to be too sentimental, but I can't help it. I long and desire and love. [laughing]

Rubin:

"A .38 Special;" the pieces in there really are little tom-toms, the characters are at moments of decision, awareness, pain.

Agee:

Cruelty. [laughs] Right?

Rubin:

Cruelty. A lot of -- and have -- is there a different sense of closure for you in those pieces? You talked about revising them. I was wondering if you -- if these had less revision than others perhaps.

Agee:

Well, when I revised these, because they're short, you know I'm revising single words. I'm trimming sentences. I'm still revising by taking out, lots of times. A lot of them start as several pages and got, you know

dropped down. They're also driven by language in a very intense way, the way a poem is driven by language.

Rubin:

Very poetic. What is -- you've talked about language's relationship to empathy.

Agee:

In the sense of -- ?

Rubin:

What is it you want us to -- how do you want us to be affected by these voices in these short shorts?

Agee:

[laughing] It's interesting, I was having breakfast and the woman that was fixing it this morning was -- works in a library here in town and she said that she had gone -- she had read this book and she had gone to the thing that you punch up. I wanted to say the card catalogue, but that's not true anymore. And she punched in, "broken hearts, women" and found this book and she really liked it because she's suffering from a broken heart and it really meant something to her. And I guess I was trying to say, "Look, we're all in this boat. We're all suffering. There's different forms of cruelty we give each other. And maybe we don't have to be doing that so much." And I -- sometimes I want people to be -- I want people to feel. I want them to be moved again and I find it difficult for people to feel quite often and I think in my work, most of all, I want to move people; move them from one point to another, make them have an experience. Maybe that's cruel of me, but [laughter] sometimes shocking them helps.

Rubin:

The writer -- you -- are really trying to keep people alive in a way.

[inaudible]

Agee:

Yeah, and sometimes pain is the only way you know you're alive and people -- you know when I go through periods of suffering and pain people say, "Well, now you know you're really alive. You can really use this," and I want to kill them. [laughter]

Rubin:

But in different line you've talked in workshop about the summary God.

[laughter] What's the summary God?

Agee:

The summary God is the -- it's one of the deities of writing that gets ahold of you and makes you recapitulate everything at the end, -- just to make sure that your message got across.

Rubin:

That's in everybody's drafts and has to go.

Agee:

Oh, I think so. Yeah. I always try to stop a moment before I think I should. You know I try to stop in the middle of a breath rather than a completed breath. And it -- and because I started as a poet, that means something to me, you know?

Rubin:

You're still a poet and you still go to poetry readings.

Agee:

Absolutely. I still write poetry. I believe in it, but you know as you publish more fiction people begin to say, "Oh, you write poetry too?" as if -- you know when in my heart -- and maybe, you know they always say novelists are failed poets, but I don't want to think of myself as failed. I think I just chose this other road because I had -- my wings got too long, [laughs] which it really feels is true.

Rubin:

Are you setting yourself any conscious or any different technical challenge in the new novel?

Agee:

Yes. Every novel, to me, is a completely new invention. I -- this -- "Sweet Eyes" took a year. "Strange Angels" took six -- you know in terms of the time covered -- took six months. This novel covers a month and to me that was very difficult. You know how to move characters through time, make a lot happen. And I have other kinds of things I'm doing in that novel. It's first person, but I'm taking on a different kind of first person in it. And I'm already working on the next novel in my mind too. So --

Rubin:

And you're still working on short pieces at the same time.

Agee:

Yeah.

Rubin:

How do you work? I mean you up early in the morning?

Agee:

Yes. I've just gone through a period -- while they're -- you know while they're reading the draft of this current novel and my editor isn't getting it back to me. So, I kind of took a little break, but usually I try to get up every day and work. Sometimes I'm up in the middle of the night working. It just depends on my schedule, you know my teaching schedule, and my other commitments, but I have to work every day and I -- in revision stage I can work for great lengths of time; five to eight, 12 hours, which is really hard on your back [laughs] and other parts. But what when I'm doing raw, new material I try to work a couple of hours, two to five hours.

Rubin:

Do you play any music while you're writing?

Agee:

No. I have to have absolute silence. It's funny. You know people kind of think I'm surrounded by music, but no.

Rubin:

[laughs] What keeps you going?

Agee:

If I don't do that I'll probably become a bad person. [laughter] I just like it. It's the greatest pleasure I have in life. And it's funny because my ex-husband -- this last one -- was -- one time, you know -- I don't know. Never do this in marriage, I'll just tell you write now. This is my advice to everybody.

Rubin:

Advice to everyone.

Agee:

Well, here's what we did. We decided to rank the most important things in our lives. [laughter] Well, bad choice. Of course writing came first, and after that, my daughter, after all I'd lived with her for 30 years, [laughs] and then my sister because I'd known her my whole life. Well, he -- when he was fourth -- I said, "Well, maybe your third." I think that kind of set him back. Maybe that was a bad thing to do [laughs] because I was actually first on his list. And that kind of -- you see how things go when you decide to rank things. [laughs]

Rubin:

Yeah, the rankings may always be a bad idea.

Agee:

Yeah, but my writing has always been that. It just seems like the thing that is most me and most my life.

Rubin:

Have you -- earlier in this conversation you mentioned your father not having read the novel, you hoped.

Agee:

Right.

Rubin:

Have you gotten feedback from say, family members or people from that part of the country?

Agee:

Actually, yes. When I go to Iowa to read or people have, you know have grown up in small towns, they say, "Wow, I think that was my town. That was exactly the way it was." And then they want to tell you about all the people they knew who are these characters. They think I've known their life. And then my family actually is -- my sisters are very supportive of

my work and I -- sometimes I'm even writing for my sister Jackie, who gets all my little in-jokes and is a great appreciator of all kinds of writing. And you know sometimes we just -- we write for our best reader and I feel like she's one of my best readers.

Rubin:

Does she read your stuff in manuscript?

Agee:

Not at all. I once tried to give her a draft. She threw it down. She's a doctor. She threw it down after a page. She said, "I can't read this in this form. [laughs] I can't." So, I didn't know why, but it had a few crossed outs and I realized that's why she wasn't a teacher. See we're so used to reading things in draft with mistakes, it doesn't bother us, but she likes the book. And so I feel as if one of the things I do is I give her books to read.

Rubin:

What is it you would like your students to know, really, about writing?

Agee:

Oh, I think I want them to really have a love affair with writing. I want them to also see that it's -- creating something is one of the best things you can do in life and it's the best gift you can give other people and that it's one of the things that we do as human beings, for each other. I think all animals, all living matter, has jobs and one of ours is to create these things, these other worlds. And I think you can use writing by creating other worlds. You can not only share your life, but you can also help save some lives that way. It saved my life to be able to read.

Rubin:

I wonder if at the very end you'd help us by reading one of the short pieces in "A .30 Special and a Broken Heart?"

Agee:

Yeah. I'd love to.

Rubin:

I should say, I really -- for all the violence and pain that throughout your work and these stories, they're clearly something redemptive about them, as the trilogy implies. [inaudible] Paradiso so -- read any one.

Agee:

Well, with that note maybe I should read "Asparagus," which is a little more redemptive, if we have time.

Rubin:

Say something about dream. Dream matters to you. Do you write out of dream images sometimes?

Agee:

Often I do and I see dreaming as another form of writing. And I'm saddened in this culture that we've done away with the notion of dream as vision, dream as having import.

Rubin:

It is a route to spiritual truth.

Agee:

Well, and truth about the psyche and archetypal cosmic truth. So, about the species. And so anyway, this story has -- I'll just read it. This is -- it's called, "Asparagus."

My father won't look at the fish finder his father's holding as we walk through the asparagus patch by the house because he's never believed in such things. "It catches eight pounders," grandfather insists. "And it's only slightly more bulky than your regular rod and reel." There are rules that a son shouldn't have to remind his father of. That's what my father's face says as I bend to slice the white-green bottoms of stalks. They're so ready the knife slides easily and the asparagus topples and I can't cut enough to keep up. "Come on," they urge. The bowl will be full before we get to the patch down yonder. My father has a big, round wooden bowl dangling from his hand and I've got the dented aluminum one. Its side caved in like a head. I noticed my head isn't feeling too symmetrical either. My landlord showed up this morning to carpet the narrow rooms upstairs and after I yelled at him I could tell I'd be moving soon. "What about the carpet I bought? What about how I'm fixing this place up?" I said in a not nice way. His bland, fat face ignored me with a kind of shrug that doesn't have to be made to let you know you don't count. His assistant giggled on his knees at the baseboard. They were dripping paint everywhere, a couple of defuses. I wanted them out, but how do you kick a person off the land he owns? The wild west show was over and I just went downstairs to the shove of their laughter. I don't tell the men in my family that I have no place to live with my children and that the asparagus is a memory I've come back for, like the horse that gallops away from us in the big green pastures, unrolling like wallpaper. They're in a dream with the small tensions of the returned. They have their own issues to settle as father and son. I'm just along for the same reason I was ever there. Being related, they had to put me someplace. No wonder I want to ride away on that horse, make concentric circles like a good explorer mapping the land around the farm. Daily the circles grow larger until pretty soon I have to take my lunch and don't return until nightfall. No one asks where I went. They approve of the tired brown on my face and arms when I do the dishes and go to bed. Small failures have begun to appear on my skin. My father and his father don't notice of course. We never make it to the asparagus patch. The fish finder argument hangs in the hands of my grandfather with the gray metal box that sends his line singing through the air. So, he never fails to catch something. He's waited all his life for this kind of break and now it comes in a dream. My head feels boggy and there's a sharp pain cracking the side like a telltale split in an overripe melon. It was only a fork he tapped me with, whoever that man in my house was all those years. A fork to the side and my head, as thin skinned ripe as could be, just cracked. "It happens," he told me. "Just a lucky hit. You won't die. You won't die," they all tell me. "Sure, there'll be some blood, a clot

maybe, headache, nausea." When I fell forward, unable to move my limbs, I wasn't surprised. I knew things could be worse. That's why I went back there with my bowl for the asparagus, for the disagreement that was so slight it made the world safe again. Gathering the sure stalks that would taste like a butter green sun at supper. This was before my house was reclaimed by its landlord, before I was reminded of how temporary I am at living. We don't make it to the patch down the hill in the horse pasture however, because I realize, I can go back. I can go back to the house before. I can buy a house and live in it with my children or whoever cares to follow a life laid out in dreams, before and after it is being lived. This isn't an intentional thing they have to understand. I ordered carpet for the bedrooms without notifying the landlord because I forget that being comfortable doesn't mean you own the place. I miss those men, the farm, the horse that took me on his broad, brown back so fast sometimes, through the tearing weeds and sticker bushes, and who ate bologna and lettuce on Wonder bread secretly because it was lunch and there was no one there to witness how he could step out of his hide and stand beside me in the old cemetery, the graves sunken so low I thought they'd been robbed until I realized; no one would want those old German farmer bodies, so used up they couldn't hold the pressure of earth back when it started to push down. I don't ask my father for money. Housing is a personal matter, a kind of failure and success we create and destroy on our own. It's enough he lets me go along for the asparagus, that he lets me hear grandfather again, explaining the fish finder and says, "I was out here just this morning and I swear it's shot up since then. I guess we have to cut them before they get woody or pulpy, but don't take too much. Don't fill your bowl too early. We still have to go down to the other patch." On my knees in the hot dirt it's his knife I use for slicing, thankful, and only a little anxious in this place I can dream us back to again.

Rubin:

Jonis Agee, thank you.

Agee:

Thank you.