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Interview with Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur

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Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur is the author of the short story collection, *Discovering the World: Thirteen Stories***,** which was published by Mercer University Press. He teaches at Valdosta State University. Prior to that he coordinated the M.F.A. program at Virginia Commonwealth University. He earned his undergraduate degree at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky and his Ph.D. at the University of Utah. He is currently completing a novel set in the Amazon basin entitled *The Green Shade of a Tropical Afternoon.*

Interviewer: Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

Thomas Jeffrey Vasseur: My maternal grandfather, Jovo Bubalo, was Croatian, then I have French and Cherokee on my paternal grandparents side. So I'm a mongrel. My mother is originally from an itsy-bitsy town called Kuttawa, Kentucky. She is a truly humble, genuine Christian who to this day influences me in her exemplary love for others and her openhearted compassion. She works as a registered nurse and still attends church regularly. In my youth, my brother, sister, and I went with her on Sunday mornings, Sunday evenings, and most Wednesday nights. My father pretty much said, "You need to go to church," then my mother took care of the rest. Anyhow, I grew up in a conservative Southern Baptist tradition in a very insular, gossipy, small town. Early on there was a profound metaphysical conviction that naturally grew out of the community of worshipers in our family's church. My father is somebody I love deeply who taught me more than anybody else what it means to work. To this day, I don't know many people who have worked harder than my father. He was in the Marine Corps. He ran his own little Parris Island in our house.

Interviewer: Was he physically tough on you?

Vasseur: From time to time, but overall character is what ultimately counts.

There's this letter of Chekhov's that I have all of my fiction-writing students virtually memorize. While advising an apprentice writer, he points out that every thing about a particularly flat character is uniformly negative. Then Chekhov trots out this amazing, aesthetic insight from the Old Testament: "Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham noticed only that his father was a drunkard, and completely lost sight of the fact that he was a genius, built an ark and saved the world. Writers must not imitate Ham, bear that in mind!" Sure, my father was tough and at times I deserved and benefited from his approach. Panoptical, rigid, stern. But he was also bright, inventive, witty, and very generous with his spare time. From the time when I was eight or nine, he would take me to work and give me a pragmatic sense of fixing and building things, working with one's hands. Also, I'll never forget this one mechanic who worked for our

small excavating business. You know, dump trucks, backhoes, bulldozers. This guy had a tendency to drink too much. He was flawed like all of us are flawed. He'd been in WW II and had been shot in the stomach and was probably an alcoholic. Over a two week period I once watched this old guy take apart a Caterpillar road grader, put all the various parts in three different storage sheds, go on a bender, then put the whole thing back together from memory—every nut, bolt, spring— then make it run. Consequently, because of many such experiences, I have an enduring respect for blue-collar intelligence.

Interviewer: What prompted you to begin writing fiction?

Vasseur: One of the changing points in my life occurred when my cousin died. The grief and confusion for me was earth-shattering. He was seventeen, three weeks from graduating from high school, one of the most vivacious, loving, warm, funny, unpredictable people I'd ever met. In college I set out as a philosophy major in part because of my befuddlement over his death. Going to a small liberal arts college also made a huge difference because of the wonderful teachers I encountered. Transylvania University has all this formal and informal Southern tradition surrounding it.

Interviewer: Can you talk a bit about how this confusion over your cousin's death surfaced in your writing?

Vasseur: Some of the difficult questions I had to confront are treated in my semi-autobiographical story "Pig Summer." As Pattianne Rogers points out, this fleeting world provides sufficient images and physical sensations for us to recognize the *sacred*. I can't imagine not feeling some sort of larger connection to the universe, which requires a going out of one's self and a willed connection with something other. How can we possibly eschew a spiritual and moral foundation? "The Sins of Jesus" is roughly based on an individual very important in my adolescence. A good man. A giver. A kind soul. Hopefully, I benefited from witnessing such humane generosity. Yet, after my cousin's death, my interests became more ecumenical than the tradition in which I was raised. And to have left a small town at seventeen for college was a transformative experience for me.

Interviewer: Did you feel you were leaving home?

Vasseur: Fleeing is perhaps a better word.

Interviewer: And later, why were you motivated to leave the South?

Vasseur: Is such a thing possible? Who knows where the curiosity to travel came from, perhaps those deserted island adventure novels of my boyhood. While the novella in my collection, "Malololailai," is autobiographical to an extent, it is also very much a piece of fiction. It is refraction of some experiences I've had and various extraordinary people I've accidentally met along the way.

We write about what we know and then we bend it.

Basically, I left Kentucky at twenty-one, worked construction and waited tables in Europe, lived out West for about seven years and finished my graduate degree. My first

job was at Virginia Commonwealth University in the very Southern town of Richmond, Virginia. Let me tell you, that place made me feel downright Midwestern. While living there, I made the decision that I didn't want to be labeled in a predictable way, as someone with a southern shtick. There are all these southern writers who feel compelled to appear in seersucker suits, or Colonel Sanders costumes, and who are hyper-conscious of their regional origins.

Interviewer: Getting back to "Pig Summer," can you describe the particular confusion you experienced that contributed to the writing of that story?

Vasseur: My confusion occurred because of the grief I experienced and the way it didn't mesh with some of the things I'd been taught and told. I have a very keen memory of going into the hospital and seeing my cousin's damaged face. There was a lag in technology that kept him from living. There's a particular device called a PEEPS respirator that, had he been in a bigger city, had the injury occurred later in human history --- for today this device is common in most hospitals --- he would have been able to breathe and survive. But he did not and his sudden death threw me for a loop.

Interviewer: "Pig Summer" is connected to another short story in your collection, "First Love." Why did you decide to revisit those characters?

Vasseur: "First Love" is the minimalist version, and then hopefully "Pig Summer" fills things out. One writes short stories to get started. In these two short stories, I wanted to counterpoise a big trend in American letters today, minimalism versus maximalism. I love Raymond Carver. His greatest stories are those huge-hearted stories like "Cathedral." Of course, he wrote a smaller version of his great story about a child's death, "A Small Good Thing," and that smaller version is called "The Bath." It's an ineffectual account and I believe it to be a piece of flawed verisimilitude, particularly at the moment where the other little boy can't decide whether or not to eat the next potato chip after seeing his buddy hit by a car. I don't buy that line for one fleeting nanosecond. It is minimalism at its try-to-shock them, promiscuously cool, trendy worst. Personally, my feeling is that as Raymond Carver matured, met Tess Gallagher and stopped drinking so much, he realized his greatness in full blossom.

Interviewer: So Carver influenced your writing in those stories?

Vasseur: Absolutely, and some of his shorter pieces are amazing. When I was attempting my first short stories, I had to wrestle with a kind of writing that was very much in vogue at the time, a lot of brand name references, present tense verbs, second person narratives sometimes referred to as "K-Mart" fiction. These were stylistic ticks substituting for depth. I stopped writing for a while and decided just to read. It wasn't until I came across the Latin American novelists, particularly the South American Boom novelists of the 1960's and their Eastern European counterparts like Milan Kundera, that I decided that this trendy, commercial version of minimalism just wasn't right for me. If one is a realist committed to verisimilitude and writing about the hard things that occur on

earth—ovarian cancer, car accidents, the loss of a child—you have to deal with it in some way. I suppose the same thing applies to representations of human joy and happiness.

I consider myself to be a contemporary literary realist. I love imaginative writing. I love magical realism. Everyone who looks deeply at the genre will see that its best practitioners, Garcia-Marquez, Gunter Grass, Salman Rushdie, Clarice Lispector and Toni Morrison—they all know hard history. That's the great, often overlooked secret of Garcia-Marquez who more than any other living author made me want to write. More than any other book, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* just happened to be the one that "took the top of my head off" in part because of how he blends the ordinary with the extraordinary, the physical with the metaphysical, humor with bloodshed, straightforward storytelling with metaliterary patterns of a larger and more complex design. Plus, like Faulkner, he is also very funny. He made me want to write something that might remotely have an effect on somebody, which that single book had on me.

Shelby Foote explains that Hemingway's notion of realism is that you are looking for that precise, quick, psychological reality. You go to a bullfight, you see the red of the blood, the white of the bone, and once those things are captured, that quick precise depth of detail, that's the heart of realism, something that really grabs the reader and connotes something deeper below the surface. It's what's going on in "Hills Like White Elephants," and exemplifies what sometimes is called the iceberg theory of fiction. Think of the amazing war stories of Isaac Babel, or the wonderful folk narratives of Bob Dylan and John Prine.

At its best, minimalism is a powerful way to write. However, there's also a Faulknerian maximalist version of realism. Faulkner wasn't only interested in the red of the blood and the white of the bone. He was interested in all the people in the crowd, their family histories, what's going on in their heads and hearts, the colors of the toreador's costume, and some funny things that happened at the fiesta.

Interviewer: In "Pig Summer" you have all that local life dancing around, and then the boy Theo is punished for being perceptive and honest when he speaks out about the sexual relationship between the minister and a woman in town.

Vasseur: This is a true event. The first time my cousin and I were at church together, the preacher of our congregation, as told in the story, was suddenly stung in the throat by a wasp. Of course, we were thrilled because we got to go home and ride the horses. Then the second time my cousin came down the preacher basically in an opaque way confessed an infidelity. He just stood up at the pulpit one Sunday and said, 'I'm no longer fit to serve this congregation,' walked down the aisle and left the church. We didn't know what had really gone on. "Pig Summer" is a story that attempts to show the impact of my cousin's tragic death on our entire family. The fact that he'd guessed the precise truth about thirty minutes into the scandal was sheer accident.

Interviewer: What does it mean to you to be a southern writer?

Vasseur: History is important to me. Race, socio-economics, contemporary morality. You can't be a southerner and not respond in some way to these issues. What I also wanted to do in this collection was try to also be a multi-cultural realist. As I suggest in

the afterword, merely look at the first paragraph of each story and you can see, whether successful or not, that I am trying to do something with various points of view. If the South has any plague hanging over it, it is hegemony. Trying to be a single thing whether it is all cotton, or all white, or any one thing at all. The South today is more interesting because it has grown out of that hegemonic and, to a large extent, patriarchal view of the world. Again, this collection often features or focuses on women as lead characters, say "The Woman Who Sugared Strawberries" which is set in France, or "The Most Beautiful Day of Your Life." This is something I was very conscious about in moving from story to story.

Interviewer: I have a quote from "Talk, Talk, Talk" that might suggest you are indeed a southern writer but you're not in the culture. You're outside the culture along some dimensions: "The little Georgia community they lived in would have been outraged, wouldn't have tolerated an abortion. Yet most of their Bible Belt neighbors would have been doubly shocked if this particular kid had even seen the light of day."

Vasseur: Well, as you know, the daughter in this story likes to date African-Americans. She has just seen *Pulp Fiction* and gotten her tongue pierced for whatever series of motives. This narrative honestly came from a woman who cuts my hair. She confessed to me that her daughter was rebelling. Once the girl's Air Force father learned that she was dating black boys and forbade her from doing so, the situation just got worse. Renee sees her mother parading a cosmopolitan lifestyle and worldview and finally some chickens come home to roost. She is definitely rebelling, but by the story's conclusion, a heightened sense of parental love occurs.

Interviewer: With the wide range of experiences you've had and the complex people you have known, how do you filter this raw material and find what interests you?

Vasseur: Personally, I think it is impossible to leave your roots. When you say that I am outside of this culture I don't feel that way. I have a southern accent. Some people say it's not as much of a drawl as others have, but the accent's still recognizably there. We are getting ready to host Rodney Jones at Valdosta State University. He has a beautiful book *Elegy for the Southern Drawl.*

I don't believe we're mourning the passing of anything, because things are blurring in interesting ways. The accents we have purely and simply came from where we grew up. Certain habits and practices and beliefs never leave us entirely. However, one definitely has to cultivate an outsider's eye to a certain extent, that sort of "in the world but not of the world" approach that allows for some objectivity. Yet every time I go home I feel very much in touch. Every time the UK Wildcats go to a final four basketball game, I am a hyper-intensive and 100% loyal Kentuckian. Luckily, the South has changed a lot over time. It has been 114 years since Henry Woodson Grady proclaimed the so-called New South in a speech in New York City. He was promoting crop diversification, investment, education reform, and clearly the region has evolved. I'll give you a couple of examples of what I like to call the "New New South." My next-door neighbor is a French professor, Mabup Babacar, and he is from Senegal. Every time my Golden Lab escapes, which she is talented at doing, my next-door neighbor brings her

home and we speak French together. By the way, I was horrible in foreign languages in college. It wasn't until I got a construction job in Switzerland and fell in love by accident that it became a practical thing.

Lately, I've been spending a lot of time in Miami and needless to say have been forced to work on my patchy Spanish. Some might contend that the whole state of Florida is its own thing, not really the traditional South. Still, the region as a whole is now incontestably more varied and many-tongued.

Interviewer: Yet the image an outsider has of the South is far from multi-cultural.

Vasseur: Perhaps this is due to the ways in which Southern literature has been canonized. The Fugitives and the Agrarians were fabulous in some ways, but they were also part of the problem. Last summer I taught a course and we read various essays in the collection *Why the South Will Survive* commemorating the fiftieth year anniversary of the manifesto *I'll Take My Stand*. My students and I were particularly interested in various points made about morality, family, and the need for better stewardship of God's creation. Then I asked the whole class what was lopsided, what was odd, what was missing from the collection? After a period of prodding, I finally pointed out that all fifteen essays were from Southern white males, not a single female voice, much less an African-American voice was included. Going back to what I was saying earlier about the New New South, I have a next-door neighbor from Africa and it just so happens that the local Rabbi's daughter sometimes proofreads my manuscripts and vice-versa. Furthermore, one of my other good friends in Valdosta is Palestinian. He brings a global sense of things that I wouldn't be aware of unless I knew him. He talks about images from the Al Jazeera satellite network that never make it onto CNN, and while no image should be taken at face value he understands how our media version of events is often biased. For example, during this year's bombarding of Yasar Arafat's compound, my friend's three nephews were kept in sweltering cargo containers without sufficient water for several days. Without going into much more detail, I'll also tell you that recently we had a wake for Moyaad's mother who lived in Ramallah. She was seventy-one years old and diabetic but otherwise healthy. She died because of the Israeli roadblocks that prevented her from getting an insulin shot. So last spring a bunch of friends gathered for a traditional lamb roast and wake on a local farm owned by the son of Zero Mostel, the actor best known for *Fiddler on the Roof* and Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Therefore, it seems to me that contemporary human reality is now transnational. It's simply a matter of looking harder and paying attention, seeing the way in which the high-capitalist diaspora has forced all sorts of people to follow their training, go where they can get a job, practice their vocation and build their middle class lives.

Interviewer: Your collection begins with a story called "Noonan" in a small Kentucky town where a young boy is spinning the globe in his living room, thinking about the world, full of backyards like his own, one country repeated after another. Was that you, did you ever spin the globe like that?

Vasseur: Well, I put that story first for a reason. Basically, the thematic arc of *Discovering the World* moves from innocence to experience. I begin with a little boy

from the rural South. He plays Little League baseball and has never seen a bird's eye view of anything. Yes, I guess I was that boy in many ways. I wouldn't trade for a million dollars the way in which I grew up. Ours was a seventy-acre Hereford cattle farm which was handled in a relaxed fashion. As I say in another story, my father would let the cattle fornicate randomly and voila! Suddenly there would be another cow! Growing up, we had virtually every kind of animal, baby skunks, baby squirrels, baby rabbits, all kinds of dogs and cats. So I grew up with a more wide-open sense of the natural world. We built tree houses and something we always referred to as "forts." Do kids play in forts up north?

Interviewer: Of course, there are tree forts and snow forts. And in my hometown there is Fort Butts where kids could play among the trenched mounds that were the remains of a fort built during the Revolutionary War.

Vasseur: What a cool thing this is to be sitting down here and talking Appomattox-like with a Yankee! It's real interesting how nomenclature breaks down, isn't it? There are farms, not plantations, up north and what about rednecks?

Interviewer: Actually, we call them 'swamp Yankees.' There are no 'rednecks.' I believe that term enjoys a wider recognition; far fewer people know the term 'swamp Yankee.' But they are comparable, living in the back woods. You might find quite a few in the interior environs of Maine and along the Canadian border. They are tough enduring souls with a culture of their own**.**

Vasseur: Now you're evoking Faulkner in speaking about the toughness and their ability to survive. But let me guess other qualities as well: occasional orneriness, closed mindedness, maybe a little bit of xenophobia – "you don't sound like me, so who the heck do you think you are?" Personally, I feel that anti-intellectualism is the real problem. I believe in getting my students aware of the fascinating ways in which different people have a lot in common. Most importantly, I want them to think about other cultures and parts of the globe, also other aspects of our own country to which they perhaps have not been exposed. Right now, we are reading Barbara Ehrenrich's *Nickel and Dimed: On Not Getting By in America* in which the author unsuccessfully attempts to live on minimum wage, also a book by Tim Kasser from MIT Press, *The High Price of Materialism.* Recently I came across the first instance of the word hillbilly. Apparently the word was first used in 1905 and referred to "a resident from the hills of Alabama who dresses as he likes, drinks whiskey when he likes, and shoots off his revolver when his fancy takes him." I don't know whether you see a lot of these folks in 2003 Atlanta, but there are still a lot of good ole boys, throughout the South and elsewhere, who still like to do *only* those kinds of things. That can lead to various problems.

Interviewer: What is our fascination with hillbillies? Do they live some underlying truth we are not willing to openly admit?

Vasseur: Some of these people have had tough lives. Everyone uppity with a fine education, perpetually full bellies, and straight teeth should never forget it. They've had

to find their own version of transcendence, whether it's in music, moonshine, quilting, cooking, or coon-hunting. I must say that some of my deepest friendships and some of the best stories I've been told came out of the mouths of people in eastern Kentucky who have a sense of disenfranchisement and poverty that in part defines the region. These days the poor are spread out, quasi-invisible, and we don't notice them nearly enough. But you cannot talk about the South without talking about the legacy of slavery, sharecropping, and poverty.

Interviewer: With the poor, there seems to be a rawness to life that is easily seen if you can break into the culture and interact with the people and see what it is they have made of their lives.

Vasseur: I love the way you say "rawness." Some people simply cannot avoid a certain elemental approach to life. In a recent *Chattahoochee Review* interview, Tony Grooms reflected on the time he went to Africa. He said that once he got used to not expecting certain things, he adjusted easily. One of the most fruitful things I ever did was to leave graduate school for six months and travel through South America with a backpack. I lived for six months on two thousand dollars, rice, beans and sandwiches. The humble warm hospitality one encounters there is very much like southern hospitality. It's a generous attitude that admits that while we don't have very much, you can have part of it. I saw this everywhere in South America. My favorite poet is Pablo Neruda whose odes capture this kind of rawness and this elemental approach to the solid, simple, pleasures of life. His poems about fish stew, or an onion, spring from an awareness of individuals unable to buy and have everything they want but who make family, food, friends, and simple human joys count for a lot. This awareness surges forth in many Latin American writers. I came back with a completely different perspective on things, after seeing people who don't have any bootstraps and who, once they'd worked to have them, still might not ever have them. It was a very moving experience. What I got from the so-called Third World people I saw in Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile and Bolivia was a sense of *urgency*. Perhaps it's that which makes for re-readability and what one might call an Ancient Mariner quality in the stories one tries to tell. Whenever I'm teaching fiction writing I tell my students to remember the Ancient Mariner who stops a guy on the way to his wedding. That's a very big day, right? But the old sailor says: "Hold on there buddy, I've got a story you might want to hear."

Interviewer: What about the theme of violence in your stories; for example, at the end of "The Sins of Jesus" and elsewhere?

Vasseur: Largely because of the lies perpetrated by Hollywood about violence, telling the truth about human behavior and our species' potential for aggressiveness is important. Many Americans are so comfortable these days that for some reason they prefer a diet of escapism, sentimentalism, and bad taste simplifications. Some people shun the mere awareness of anyone else's pain. I recently read an article about the honest unloveliness in the work of Irish writer William Trevor who says: "Truth is the most important thing there is, and if you lose sight of it, your writing will be destroyed in the end."

Interviewer: Is that same urgency which you felt from the South American experience something you want to bring to your readers?

Vasseur: Particularly in the short story, this is often something you're after. But I enjoy quieter narratives as well. In this collection, I write in various voices and from various perspectives. The story about the little boy who goes flying is also about him trying to understand certain profound mysteries of adult behavior, his parent's financial stress, a neighbor couple who fight. There is this guy who takes crazy chances in his scarlet red bi-plane and who does things like drink to the point where other people in town gossip about it but overlook bad habits of their own. He's pushing the envelope. In addition to some tension in the boy's household, his next-door neighbors have had unfaithfulness infiltrate their marriage. We retell stories that have to be retold. Therefore, urgency and intensity are hallmark traits of the genre. This goes back 150 years ago when Edgar Allen Poe first codified the short story. When we think of Poe, don't we think of intensity? He said in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* that a short story should be about a single premeditated effect and that intensity was part of the genre. To give a more contemporary insight, the South African writer, Nadine Gordimer says, "the short story has its beginnings in a life-giving drop---tear, sweat, blood, or semen---that spreads itself on the page and burns a hole in it." That's a kind of departure point; then there are aesthetic considerations, because any narrative should feel emotionally complete. In good literary realism, we write about the urgent things in life and keep true to what is important and true on the planet.

Interviewer: There are some pretty scary things going on in your short story "The Enduring Nights of Sidney Wingcloud."

Vasseur: That's an odd story in the collection. Did it surprise you?

Interviewer: I was surprised by the devastating take on his life and the view of capitalism raping the Native American culture.

Vasseur: More than any other in the collection, this story came from my fascination with Garcia Márquez and his lyric comments on history. If you read his work and know a bit about Colombia, you know that there is nothing frivolous whatsoever about what he is doing. He says in interview after interview that he loathes fantasy. If people think magic realism is frivolous, I encourage them to go back to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. It is full of references to a period in Colombian history known as "la violencia," a roughly forty-year period in which there were dozens and dozens of new governments and constitutions and hundreds of thousands of deaths. It's still one of the most politically messed up countries in South America, a continent filled with corrupt leaders and a *caudillo* mentality. My story is about haves and have-nots, and the reference to indigenous Americans is chiefly a metaphor to get the language moving. The tone is both dead-serious and playful. Basically, it's a story about money, privilege, hedonism, individual selfishness and American history.

Interviewer: Let's talk about your approach to writing. You mentioned Poe and that there must be some premeditated story in mind before you write.

Vasseur: I don't really know how stories finally gel. Basically, that's just a question of time. For me, stories often begin by accident. Some people say, 'I start with an image.' Faulkner sees a girl playing and climbing up a tree and she's got on dirty underwear, and that sets the process going in him, then finally we have *The Sound and the Fury*. I'll give you an example of one of my story's beginnings. "The Angels" is told from the point of view of a woman born in Mexico City who then lives in Los Angeles. Thus, the story's title. It's the only short story I know about concerned with the U.S. invasion of Panama. This woman has lost her boyfriend who was a paratrooper. It began simply with my watching CNN and seeing one of the commanders of the U. S. forces, in a thrilled, jeez-the-camera-is-on-me voice, talking to Ted Kopel. The palm trees were waving, the helicopter blades making the palm fronds blow, and the first thing he said in a booming confident voice was, "Good evening Ted, it's good to be talking to you." It just set something off in me. You really need to see the footage. Afterwards, I basically tried to imagine a scenario where somebody might not like what we had done in Panama, so I imagined this threshold character with ties to Latin America. But perhaps some stories stretch further back than we know. Now that I am talking to you, there is maybe a further point of genesis. In fact, I remember sitting in a Buenos Aires kitchen with my friend Adolfo Rodriguez's family. His father worked in the meat industry and his family did not have much. Anyway, I was there in1989. There were a lot of latter-day *peronistas* who sanguinely hoped that Carlos Menem would improve the economy of Argentina. If you've been following in the newspapers, it is a disaster until this day. One of the things I had in Buenos Aires was the experience of an electoral process where everyone in the city was talking excitedly about politics, the taxi drivers, the waiters, the local butcher. Everyone believed and genuinely felt as if the upcoming election *really* mattered. Back to where this story came from, one night perhaps half-a-year before our invasion of Panama, I got a tutorial, as a gringo, in a very modest Buenos Aires kitchen. My friend's family had invited me to a meal and the American press was threatening Noriega. At some point, I made the comment along the lines of "he's a son-of-a-bitch" and everybody looked at me funny. I expected them to believe as I did that Noriega was a homicidal maniac who must be stopped and that this particular case definitely warranted U. S. involvement.

Interviewer: Were they not as critical as you were of Noriega?

Vasseur: They did not like the fact that I instinctively thought that we should get involved. So I was very confused, but I also learned something about how other countries sometimes view U.S. involvement. At first, I didn't know how to respond except to register that they felt differently. Mind you, South Americans have hundreds of years of reasons for resenting gringo involvement. It has to do with the sugar industry, Exxon, the United Fruit Company, and so on. Let's just say that while I still think Noreiga needed to be removed from power, a big part of my global education came from my excursion to this other America. Two of the books my friends suggested were Edwardo Galeano's

Memorias del Fuego and *The Open Veins of America Latina*, a worthwhile book that explains some aspects of colonialist involvement of which I was completely ignorant.

Interviewer: What about Vietnam? You were too young to serve in that war and yet you were compelled to write about it.

Vasseur: While attempting my first short stories, the work of Tim O'Brien, Robert Stone, and a story by Kate Braverman captured my attention. So much high quality fiction about the war has been produced. But mostly, O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* was a notable influence. I consider the title story to be a masterpiece. The character Kiowa carries a hatchet and a Holy Bible, another character carries M&Ms, another his favorite dessert of canned peaches and pound cake. O'Brien is not just a writer who writes about Vietnam. He brings stylistic range and ingenuity to the subject matter. For some reason, reading such stories was just like a meteor hitting the earth. All writers necessarily begin with what they know, their passions, their relationships, their most colorful family members. Personally, I became captivated by writers who could go also beyond the personal to a collective sense of human experience. O'Brien fought in Vietnam. Robert Stone was a journalist there. Thom Jones, who recently wrote about Vietnam in *The Pugilist at Rest*, did not actually fight in the war but he was in the Marine Corps. All these writers have what many European and Latin American writers have which is a combined sense of personal and collective history, larger social and cultural patterns, which have heft, and which make their books more resonant. African-American writers do that, Lucille Clifton, Elizabeth Alexander, Marita Golden, Ernest Gaines, or John Edgar Wideman. You get that collective sense of human experience. By reading writers who work solid history into their poetry and novels in particular, I gradually started thinking not only about Kentucky or my own life but other perspectives and other circumstances.

Interviewer: Your narrator in "Malololailai" is propelled out of his routine blue-collar job into another level of social awareness when Robert Fitzgerald slugs him for making some light comment about Vietnam.

Vasseur: That novella is based on a guy who lived in the marina with a great friend of mine in Ventura, California. Actually, the young narrator throws the first punch, and then Robert Fitzgerald gets down to brass-tacks. Most everything I tell you about the central protagonist is true from his living in a toolbox, to his reading calculus on the side, to his dying before he could realize his dream of finishing his sailboat and moving to five acres of land on Mt. Shasta. He was a real guy. But this is a work of fiction. The real life Vietnam Veteran happened to be a Marine, but since I'd written about my father's Marine Corps ethos so much in the collection, I turned Robert Fitzgerald into a member of the 187th Airborne and wrote about the battle of Dak To. Essentially I was trying to write about various issues that surrounded the 1960s, from the racial aspect and civil rights movement to some references about individual freedom. Robert Fitzgerald, as you may recall, has an African-American girlfriend. He's based on a really intelligent human being who hopefully explodes the stereotype about Vietnam veterans being people who uniformly suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome, nervous ticking bombs that when a

car exhaust goes off out in the street are going to duck under the table. I tried to work in a series of parables concerning our involvement in Southeast Asia, like the scene where the hubris-filled American millionaire tries to do battle with Hurricane Oscar off the coast of Fiji. Anybody who studies the war knows that the U. S. government misled people. That's not a left or liberal point of view. That's historical fact and it comes from a former CEO of the Ford Corporation, Robert McNamara, who has admitted this in two books. In a way it's brave of him, but I also understand what George McGovern and Max Cleland mean by saying that his "Presbyterian confession" came far too late. I had to approach this topic as somebody born in 1961, someone who is green, an FNG, a fucking new guy. That's what David Stillman calls the narrator in the story. Again, my awareness of the war chiefly came from reading, then meeting and becoming friends with a lot of veterans. I first read from the novella at a conference of Vietnam scholars in Philadelphia. Afterwards I talked about being anxious with this guy who, like my central character, went to the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California. I told him that the two wound stories came directly out of the mouths of veterans. He made the comment that mine was the Crane-like generation of commentators on Vietnam, and pointed out that Stephen Crane never fought in the war described in *Red Badge of Courage*. Again, its hard to say why I had to write about this, but after a certain point I felt the need to set down and be loyal to some of the amazing individuals I'd met who'd been through it. As the narrator says in "Malololailai," they smelled it, they lived it, and they carried it with them every day of their lives.

Interviewer: And then your novella moves into another kind of structure that begins the section with "let's rock and roll." Very quickly you move us into a much later period of American history.

Vasseur: Novellas tend to be about history. They also tend to be intensely about a sense of place. The narrator is from Kentucky and the central character is from Connecticut. I asked myself, what am I writing about here? It's kind of unwieldy as subject matter. It's certainly not a short story. Maybe a storvella. Maybe a novella. But I wanted to write something at length about Southerners and say something focused about American history. I'd been thinking about the war and if you think about *Heart of Darkness, The Bear*, or *Death in Venice*, these are novellas solidly concerned with the passage of time and sense of place. All of these texts take a chunk of the globe into very sharp consideration. In this case I'm taking America into consideration, reviving our bellicose division of North and South, choosing a particular narrator and opposing him to Robert Fitzgerald. I'm also trying to invoke a similar north and south geographical division within Vietnam at the time of the war. But this isn't a traditional novella at various points. If I were ever stranded on a desert island, the books I'd take along would be by Cervantes, Sterne, Rabelais. I absolutely love those erudite, wildly pranksterish, universal humanist novels of theirs and the way their writing implies that knowledge is everything, yet knowledge is nothing.

Interviewer: If not a traditional novella, would you characterize the latter part of "Malololailai" as your post-modern style?

Vasseur: Sure, I suppose. If post-modernism is defined as having the characteristics of self-reflexivity, playfulness, and fragmentation, then certainly this section could be labeled in such a fashion. You have also called it non-linear which is a phrase I like very much. The section you refer to begins with the phrase "rock and roll," which was Vietnam war slang for flipping an M-16 onto semi-automatic rapid fire, then ends with a reference to Jimi Hendrix. Meanwhile, I have a go at some of the contemporary political hypocrisies and shenanigans that at the time made my skin crawl. I work in references to famous satires like Jonathan Swift's *Modest Proposal* very early, then later on there is a reference to the "theologico-cosmolooningology" parodied in Voltaire's *Candide*. The primary mode of the section is cultural satire and I show various debts along the way.

Interviewer: And yet, what makes "Malololailai" work is that you don't have to be that erudite a reader to get those references. I felt I was in conversation with this narrator who has a fascinating mind, the way he processes information, his use of rhythm and imagery. It was fun to read. Here's how he refers to his writing:

> **"…**this is a one-time-and-one-time-only, written in-the-year 2000, time capsule novella on the subject of war. Friendship and sailing. Human nature and nature period. Next time around, I promise something tighter, perhaps on scrimshaw, however, this piece is called a 'narrvella' and these are 'sprawlagraphs' in progress. … This style is also called 'centrifugal' since everything the Vietnam War was cannot be spun inward, then compacted into a neat-and-tidy nugget or tasty gumdrop."

Vasseur: Well, I hope it's humorous at times. As you know I contemplate some things that happened recently in American political history. I hated the goody-two-shoeism and hypocrisy during Clinton's last term.

Interviewer: You refer to Odysseus as a draft dodger. That's fun stuff to read.

Vasseur: When the Peloponnesian War broke out, the Greeks wanted their gifted warrior in on the effort, but Odysseus loved his wife and she'd just given birth to his son. So he started acting crazy. He kept compulsively sowing his field with salt, pretending not to understand the recruiting officers until they placed his infant baby boy in the path of his plow. In the wild-looking part of the novella, I'm not doing anything the modernists or even Lawrence Sterne hadn't done long before them. All art stands on the shoulders of its predecessors. Note that it is family values and love of his son, which originally makes Odysseus not interested in the war.

Interviewer: It seems to me Clancy's blood-and-guts approach has nothing to do with the Hemingway approach; whereas, in your writing the blood-and-guts come out of a character's awakening and awareness.

Vasseur: My overall view of things comes through in the novella. But there was definitely a myopic aspect to some of the left's excessive behavior during the 1960's. Think about Tim O'Brien's story "On the Rainy River." The main character is divided.

He doesn't want to go, yet he's psychically ambivalent. Because after all he's an American and you're taught as a young man that patriotic values are important. I'm saying that it was myopic among some of the left that they couldn't imagine themselves in scenarios where they might have been more ambivalent or more confused.

Interviewer: Some of our own poets of the time, folk singers like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan mobilized people to consciousness about values and actions. They distilled the feelings and thoughts of many young people who were alienated from the values of their parents' generation.

Vasseur: Yet those folk singers have a certain indebtedness to the 1950s, because some of the Beat Generation ethos leaked into the folk singers which in turn leaked into the 1960s. Again, origins are things you have to trace very carefully. This brings us again to the South, Bob Dylan's great song "Oxfordtown" and his own involvement with our region. Although he was from Duluth, Minnesota, and had the last name Zimmerman, he was interested in injustice elsewhere and spoke about those tragic deaths in Mississippi. What an exciting time that you lived in and I will confess a certain envy.

Interviewer: You describe yourself as a contemporary literary realist. Are there any Southern writers whose stories are considered by you to be written along the same vein and address themes of passionate desire and death?

Vasseur: Well, perhaps there's a dearth of writing about eros from some of the more traditional Southern writers. Occasionally, the theme emerges in the fringes, as in Peter Taylor's wonderful "In the Miro District." But I should mention William Styron, Charlie Smith, and Carson McCullars as powerful exceptions.

More recently, I admired some of Randall Kenan's groundbreaking pieces in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead.* Also, there's a masterful short story by Eudora Welty, "No Place for You, My Love," in which two people are taken by a brief moment of passion, but because of complex circumstances they withdraw their emotions from that intense moment as sharply as they entered it. In this story, Welty maintains a measured distance, but nonetheless she produces some amazing insights such as, "They were what their separate hearts desired that day, for themselves and for each other."

Interviewer: Can you tell us a bit about your current novel, *The Green Shade of a Tropical Afternoon*, in terms of how you address these themes?

Vasseur: Basically, the plot of the novel moves between North and South America. Everything reaches its climax on a river in the Amazon basin, and the jungle provides the central focus and metaphor for the unfolding human action. *The Green Shade of a Tropical Afternoon* is about a love triangle. It's set in 1989 and blends history, personal happiness and heartache into a constantly varied method of storytelling. After a quick initial scene set in Brazil, the chapters basically unfold from a female then a male point of view. Also, there are some epistolary sections. The narrative jockeys back and forth, and there are both heterosexual and homosexual characters, insofar as I want to be true about the complexity of human nature. Think of D.H. Lawrence, Wendell Berry, and Carson

McCullars going on a backpacking trip together! Seriously, my convictions come through about protecting and revering the environment, various notions about the natural world and human instinct.

You know, when he was living in Europe and responding to the work of Flaubert, Zola, and Maupassant, Henry James once suggested that by comparison most 19th Century British novelists seemed intent on representing their characters "only from the waist-up" and that, therefore, they were leaving out "the great relation between men and women." Look at the oeuvre of Flannery O'Connor and see how many examples you can find of strong friendships, much less a positive erotic relationship between two human beings. Her stories are superb, but this omission stems from her worldview, and perhaps it constitutes a blind spot of verisimilitude. I believe that it does leave something very important out of the human tapestry of feeling, emotion, and need.

Personally**,** I've always loved that moment in *A Room of One's Own* when Virginia Woolf pauses to meditate on the all important phenomena of two people becoming a couple. Why leave out the force of physical love, its attendant confusions, and all its responsibilities? Overall, my novel is a contemplation on adult desire. There are three contrapuntal tales, three main characters—Laura, Michael and Christina—whose lives and histories echo back and forth, illuminating each other and all the tributaries that ultimately feed into the same powerful current.

Interviewer: You've given us a powerful collection of stories with a wide range of themes and styles. I'd like to close with a quote from one of your short stories we haven't mentioned, "The Life and Death of Stars." There's an italicized section at the beginning of the story that captures an underlying belief, which runs throughout *Discovering the World: Thirteen Stories.*

> "A map is small, flat, and limited to a page in front of you; the sky is huge, domelike and all around you. It will take time to absorb and remember constellation shapes, their relationships with other star groups, the names of stars and other objects. But the reward for doing so is great."

The time it takes to read your stories is well worth the time. Thank you, Jeff.