

An Interview with Reynolds Price

This interview was conducted by Seattle Arts & Lectures staff member Samantha Storey.

SS: I've read that you don't label yourself a Southern writer, yet you were born and educated there, and have worked as a teacher at Duke almost all of your adult life. How has this influenced your writing?

RP: I think we Southerners have talked a fair amount of malarkey about the mystique of being Southern. I think if we are realistic, the South—the old Confederate states—really only has one entirely unique feature that other parts of the country don't have, and that is this nearly 400-year history of tremendous intimacy, in every sense of the word, good and evil, between two very different kinds of peoples: people who were brought here against their wishes from Africa and a largely Anglo-white population. I was born in 1933, only 68 years after the Civil War ended, and I knew in my own childhood old black people who had been born slaves. I grew up in a part of North Carolina where the population was almost 70% black. So, that I think is the most important part for my own work; the South for me has been the tremendous influence of African Americans on our thinking, our emotions, the way we speak, the way we move our bodies, our attitudes about sex. All sorts of things are uniquely Southern because of that relationship....

SS: Your calling in life is writing, but your career has been teaching. Why do you continue to teach, even after your success as a writer?

RP: I've been teaching at the same place, Duke University, since I was 25 years old, which is 42 years now. I continue to do it because I love it, and with normal job frustrations, I still get a lot of satisfaction out of it. If you teach for several decades, you notice some decades are better than others. I always say the late 60s, early 70s in American education were really exciting times to teach. The late 70s, on the other hand, were awfully dull. People tended to be quiet and repressed and all headed off to business school or something. It's a rather good time now for some reason. I think someone may have dropped something in the water.

SS: Are there specific ways in which your students today are different from those of the past?

RP: Well, they have had a peculiar experience that my generation didn't have at all. That is that roughly 50% of them are children of broken homes. So they grew up in one-parent households and that has led to a new sort of tribalism. They are very addicted to friends their own age. I mean, lord knows, I had plenty of friends my own age when I was in high school and in college, but they seem to have a kind of dependence on this, which I think is relatively new in America. I said to one of my students a couple of years ago, what is it with you people? You never get off the phone to one another, you travel through whole continents to be with one another for 14 hours. And he said, Mr. Price, we had to invent families of our own, our own families disappeared. For what it's worth, I think there's some sad truth in that.

SS: What techniques do you use for inspiration or discovering subject matter?

RP: The main technique is regular habits. I sound like a boy scout master or something! I tell this to my students, but it's very hard to make young people believe you should sit down at the computer at 9:00 every morning until you've produced 'X' amount of work, even if it's rubbish. That also means that if you make that habit for yourself, you can't be falling down drunk every night! You have to realize that your work is done by your body, and if your body is in very bad health, it's not going to work for you no matter how young you are. So, I'm a bit of an athletic coach when it comes to trying to respect my body's needs and tendencies, and when I teach students, I try and persuade them of the same.

SS: You've written several novels from the point of view of a woman, for instance, *A Long and Happy Life*, *Kate Vaiden*, and *Roxanna Slade*. What sort of research do you do to prepare for writing in a woman's voice?

RP: None at all! The research has been my life. The simplest way to explain it is something that was said to me by my tutor when I was at Oxford in the mid-50s, Lord David Cecil. I once asked him, why is it that Tolstoy or Flaubert or various other men have written very successful novels in the voice of or from the point of view of women, but there were very few famous novels—at that time, 45 years ago—in the American and European traditions in which women inhabited male sensibilities. And he said—he was a very wise man—he said, “I think the answer is very simple. Men are reared by women.” Even now, after whatever gains feminism has made in involving fathers in the rearing of their children, I still think virtually all of us spend the most formative years of our lives very much in the presence of women. Our mothers, our aunts, the grandmothers, the babysitters, and if you're a boy, and you're a sensitive boy, which theoretically novelists are supposed to be, you do subliminally pick up a great deal about female sensibility. Girls can have a problem with it since they frequently, unless they have brothers very close to their own age, see men as people they see after 6:00 in the evening. David Cecil said something else that is very revealing. He said, “if you read Jane Austen very carefully, you will find that there is never a scene in which Jane Austen has a man in a room alone.” She knows how men behave when women are present, but she never risked trying to guess how they behaved when the women were gone. And Jane had brothers!

SS: Who are the writers you find yourself returning to for inspiration or influence?

RP: Well, I have a dark confession. The older I've got the less I find myself going back and re-reading or really reading new fiction or poetry. One of the problems gets to be you know so damn many people who are good writers and they send you their books, as you send them yours, and you've got about 50 on your bedside table waiting to be read, and you've got to read those, and you don't get a chance to do much else. If you started out very early in life, as I did, being a kind of addicted reader, you've read an awful lot of stuff. You've read the cornerstones of the western canons, and you don't necessarily want to go back and read *Anna Karenina* for the 50th time!

What I frequently do, if I'm working on something and a particular situation comes up in a novel or a poem, is go and take something off the shelf and see how Auden did it or Faulkner or Flaubert, far more than I'll sit down and consume *Madame Bovary* one more time. I probably rewatch movies now more than I reread books.

SS: What have you watched recently?

RP: Recently I rewatched Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*, which I think is one of the greatest movies ever made. I know the critics said it was boring and hyper-opulent, but I think it's a deeply profound and great film. When I was a boy I watched *Gone with the Wind* about 5,000 times! And believe it or not, I saw it again the other day, and they've revamped the negative, and God, it looks so beautiful! And, I thought, I was six years old when I went to see it for the first time 61 years ago in 1939.

SS: If you could recommend one book to our audience which would it be?

RP: One book? Oh, well, aside from the obvious ones like the Bible and War and Peace. Oh! You should have given me this question in advance! No fair!

SS: How about one you've read recently that you enjoyed?

RP: Well, a book that I love very much, that I recommend to my writing students as having the best writing about sex that I know of, is a book called *A Sport and a Pastime* by a living American novelist called James Salter. I'm not saying it's the greatest novel ever written or it's my favorite novel in the world, but I do think it's a neglected American novel that really is extraordinary in its treatment of sexuality.

SS: You've written novels, plays, poems, short stories, and film scripts. Is there one form you prefer above the others?

RP: It's the one I'm working on at the time. I don't have a particular preference. There are certain things within given genres that I think are easier to do than other things. For instance, if I'm writing a novel or if I'm writing a play, the dialogue goes very fast. That's a kind of built-in skill I have from having grown up in a talking culture like the American South, but I don't think there is a genre that I have a preference for. There isn't one that I dread, but I suppose I dread certain forms of assigned or commissioned prose writing like book reviews and so forth.

SS: Is there anything else you would like to try your hand at?

RP: I've written everything I've ever wanted to write except for a detective story. I have a new children's book coming out before I get out to Seattle, so I have a detective story yet to write. If you have any plots in mind, I'd be happy to buy one from you!