

In

*Eccentricity as Narrative Technique*

by Niles Reddick

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW WITH CLYDE EDGERTON

N: I love this office; this is great.

C: It works for what I need, which is to get away, hide and work.

N: Is this where you write?

C: I kind of split it between here and home. We got a new house. Before we moved into the new house, I came in here all the time. We lived in downtown Durham about five minutes away. We got a new house and I tried it there for about two months and didn't work too well, so I came back and tried here for a couple of months and now I've started back at the house.

N: Do you write on this thing? (a black iron typewriter)

C: I do some. I switch around. I write on this, by hand, and on the computer.

N: First, I want to thank you for agreeing to interview. I am glad that you decided to wear clothes to our interview.

C: You read that?

N: Yes, I read the interview with the class in South Dakota and was worried you might not wear clothes. (both laugh)  
What does eccentricity or eccentric characters mean to you?

C: I would say that in a gymnasium full of pipe smokers, a person without a pipe might be eccentric. I would say an eccentric is a person within a group who breaks social norms. For example, a snake handler among a community of snake handlers, seems to me, would not be eccentric. A

that said we still had grotesque characters in the South because we could still recognize them, meaning that if you're in New York, everybody is grotesque, and so there's nobody to seem different than normal.

N: What about in your family?

C: In my family, my Uncle Bob would perhaps be considered eccentric. I always like to qualify that because I'll often base a fictional character on an incident that happen to a real person or some aspect of a real person's personality. But by the time I get half way through the novel, the fictional character has taken on his or her own identity and while I see that the character might resemble somebody in my family, I never think about him or her as the same person -- as a reader who knows my family might. I think that people who really understand what fiction is understand that it is a made up story about made up characters. Nevertheless, some of the biographical background of a few of the characters, mainly Uncle Hawk and Uncle Grove, are based on my Uncle Bob. My Uncle Bob was, I would say, quite a character. He didn't fit a mold. I had twenty-three aunts and uncles. He was definitely different. He was a wonderful storyteller. He loved to talk and tell stories. He was married four times and was in traveling shows. He told me a story over and over about this game board that he used to have in traveling shows and this was in the 1920's and 1930's. He would set it up and spin the wheel, and he could get that wheel to stop anywhere he wanted it to by hip pressure against a certain two by four. He had it rigged somehow. He used to tell me about people he would cheat, people he wouldn't cheat. He wouldn't cheat ladies and children. Some guy drew a gun on him and was mad and Uncle Bob in turned pulled his gun. There was a stand-off and the other guy backed down.

Uncle Bob drove a transfer truck. But my uncle only resembles the fictional characters Hawk and Grove. I had an Uncle Clem who was an alcoholic and committed suicide and

was depressed all his life and was missing an arm. Uncle Nate in Raney is based on him in some ways, but the personalities were very different. If some of my aunts were lifted out of their social environment and dropped in New York or California, they would probably be considered eccentric. But in the communities where they lived, you wouldn't call them eccentric because there were too many people like them. My mother uses the same paper napkin over and over and over. She reuses ice. That's a norm in her house.

N: (laughs) How do you reuse ice?

C: Wash it off, put it back in the freezer. (Niles laughs) It gets littler and littler, but it lasts several months. Finally it just kind of disappears. (both laugh) That is kind of an eccentric behavior, but in her family, that is the norm. Some of our cousins come to visit us and if we're at a picnic, we're reusing plastic and paper products - unless it's soiled and then you've got to throw it away. They want it. They reuse aluminum foil, which is eccentric given today's consumer habits. And far from dumb - in fact it's wise. In our culture we have wisdom as eccentricity.

N: Do you see a difference between the eccentric and grotesque?

C: I would say grotesque is more likely related to some kind of physical deformity, or is more extreme than "eccentric." I would think an aunt who keeps the shades drawn all the time is eccentric and not grotesque. You could have someone physically grotesque who had been burned badly and who people shy away from because of norms beyond the social milieu of a particular social group. A grotesque character would be grotesque to most people in the world. An eccentric character would be eccentric, but not grotesque, and he would be eccentric depending on the group he's in. He wouldn't be eccentric the world over. So I

C: Aunt Scrap a little a bit, but mainly Aunt Vera. But Faulkner's time around the turn of the century was a time that could have been two hundred years ago or even four hundred years ago, whereas Eudora Welty's or Flannery O'Connor's people could be fifty years ago, but it would be hard for them to be three or four hundred years ago. Some of Faulkner's people did have that archaic quality that would distinguish what's considered grotesque from what's considered eccentric.

N: What about the outsider? Do you see a difference between the outsider and the eccentric character?

C: Oh yeah. I can tell you a good story about outsiders. Also, my wife just wrote a book called The Christ Haunted Landscape: Faith and Doubt in Southern Fiction and Reynolds Price talks about the saintly outlaw.

When I was writing The Floatplane Notebooks, I worked on that book for several years, and the characters belonged to a family - - the Copeland family - - and for a long time, those were the only characters in the story. For a long time, I was unsuccessful in writing the book. I couldn't get it to work, and I didn't know why. Then, while I was working on it, I had a student in an Education class and her name was Bliss. And I said, "I've got to write about a character named Bliss. That's a wonderful name." So I happened to be working on The Floatplane Notebooks, so I said, "How can I do that?" I didn't think about what I needed. I thought about I had to get her in there. So I had her marry into the family. As soon as she married in the family, married Thatcher, she started looking at these people, and she saw something different from what they saw. It seemed so obvious and simple to me, but I didn't realize that is what the book needed. I solved my problem bassackwards. It needed an outsider to make it work. I was able to look at these people differently through her eyes in a way that she could see and understand differently than any of the family people could. So she was an outsider.

Mainly outsiders are outside the blood. I do deal with this some in In Memory of Junior. Evelyn marries into the family. A lot of times in the South, it is the nonblooded person who is the outsider. Or, I guess I should say extra-blooded. If you grew up in a Southern family, some more than others, if you're blood kin to the people in the family, you can murder somebody at the dinner table, and you'll be all right. But if you marry into the family and burp, they are going to talk about it for years. (laughter) That is not exaggeration. I've got blood kin who murdered blood kin and is in prison and family members go to see him and they talk to him, but not about him very much. But in other cases, someone marries into a family and they don't look exactly right; they might be talked about forever. This is not all that unusual in families and groups everywhere, I suppose.

N: In Raney, something that strikes me is Raney's perception of Charles and his family as eccentric because they are Episcopalians from Atlanta and not small town conservative fundamentalists.

C: It seems to me that the larger the scope, the harder it is to spot eccentrics, but once you get down to a community, you start seeing them. With Raney and Charles, Raney saw some of the habits of Charles' family as eccentric. And Charles would see that in Raney's family, too. It is in the eyes of the beholder. Raney's view was that nobody in her family was eccentric at all. In Charles' view the opposite was clear. And he could define it. And he could state the criteria in which you decide whether or not a person is eccentric and certain people would meet those criteria. Raney's criteria would be entirely different.

N: In Walking Across Egypt and Killer Diller, Mattie seems, to me, to be an eccentric character because she doesn't conform to what most old women at her age are doing. She keeps the dog and tries to help this boy. He comes into her

life, and he's an outsider - this juvenile delinquent - and this throws her life into a state of chaos.

C: The difference in Raney and Charles and Walking Across Egypt is that in Raney the social norms between the two families are quite different and cause tension and conflict, which help propel the novel. With Mattie and Wesley, it's a matter of difference in persons rather than families. Out of these differences, we grab an angle or point of view and eccentricity shows up. I think Mattie, in many ways, is a typical grandmother. From the church's point of view, when they look at what this woman is doing, entertaining this young guy, cooking for this young guy and all, then she would fall into a place of being different or eccentric.

N: But what she is doing is really adhering to what she has heard in church, by helping this poor boy become better.

C: Yeah, she has taken "the least of these" seriously.

N: In Killer Diller, the theme is picked up on again. The college is a bizarre place with BOTA House and the Nutrition House for overweight Christians.

C: Yeah, that is a good study.

N: Mattie and Wesley show up again there. Did you know anyone like Wesley and Mattie?

C: My mother is like Mattie in some ways. My mother sat through a rockingchair and got stuck for about fifteen minutes. That's what got that whole thing started. She told us about it one day. I was working on The Floatplane Notebooks and went home one Sunday and she said, "I want to tell y'all what happened to me yesterday. I won't gone tell anybody." My aunts were there too. She said, "I sat through that chair over there and got stuck. My legs were up, my arms were up and I couldn't budge. I thought, 'How

in the world did this happen?'" She went on to tell us she got out in fifteen minutes. Immediately, as soon as I got over the humor of it, I said, "I got to write this." I very quickly wrote a story exaggerating it all and that was the first chapter of Walking Across Egypt. I left it alone and went back to work on The Floatplane Notebooks. The character, Mattie, resembled my mother more initially than by the time I finished the book. There were resemblances. When my mother read it she said, "That character seems like me in some places." We kind of laughed about it: Falling through the chair, feeding the birds, the funeral home. My mother and her sisters really did go and pick out caskets. I followed that for about two or three weeks. My mother actually telling me, "Oma wants to go. Lila said she'd go. I don't know if I want to go or not." Then she said, "Well I just decided to make a day of it and dressed up." They didn't have the stainless steel caskets in, so they went back the next week and looked again when they were in. That was too good to write; you have to tone it down to write that kind of stuff. To some people who read that, that might be eccentric. It's also human and normal. Depends on your point of view.

N: What about the scene in the church with Wesley?

C: Now I never met anybody like Wesley. I taught high school. I taught remedial students. I did hear a cousin of mine telling me about her grandson who locked himself in the bathroom. I had not met him at the time. He was a hard-to-handle sixteen year old. Lamar wasn't enough of a contrast. I realized I needed another character, and the fact that I had just heard about this guy locking himself in the bathroom gave me a kind of mental image of what he might be like. That is where Wesley came from.

N: In In Memory of Junior, Grove was by far the most eccentric to me. The novel opens with Uncle Grove and ends with Uncle Grove. Harper Lee's To Kill a Mockingbird does



brothers. I had this boy in there. Grove is an outsider. He's coming back and the purpose structurally in the novel was to connect with this boy. Then the kid ends up telling his own story. For a reader, Grove might be seen as eccentric. But the purpose was to connect him with this sixteen year old boy in a way that seemed to make a difference.

N: I thought the sections from Gloria's point of view were extremely well done. How difficult is to write from an African American point of view?

C: The novelist's job is to make it appear as if the thinking is coming from the character's head, and you can do that with language. I think I was able to do it in part by hinting at her dialect. When one of my aunts died, she had a bird that was half-naked with his feathers gone like in the book. I imagined a practical nurse's reaction to that. Also there are more ways whites and blacks are alike than different, so, for example, I can tap into my own anger about some things while I'm writing from a black character's point of view.

I first tried to write that book not from voices, but from an omniscient point of view. My publisher, Louis Rubin, said, "This book needs to be told from different points of view." I said, "No. I want to write it from an omniscient point of view." Then I realized that the strength came when I was more with the characters. So I started splitting it up and thought I had eight points of view, but as it turned out, I had twenty-one points of view, which is kind of baffling. It gives me concern when I think of approaching the book as a new reader. If I see a family tree in front of a book, I don't read it. It tells me it's going to be all this crap to figure out. (laughs)

N: Of course Lee Smith does that. It's sometimes difficult to keep up with, but that is extremely realistic. Big families do have all of these points of view. What are you

working on now?

C: A Western.

N: A Western?

C: That's right. Cow's up there (pointing to a wall on which a cattle skull is hung). Those are notes up there on the wall from some Western History. The book is in this box with a bunch of notes (The cardboard box is sitting on the floor in the middle of the room). I was writing about a free lance embalmer in Durham in the 1990's (both laugh). Talk about eccentricity. At first, I had this normal family I was writing about. I didn't know what they did. I just had this one short story about them being at the beach. I overheard my wife, Susan, talking to a friend of hers and her friend was talking about her son, a little boy about three years old. And talking about her neighbor, Susan's friend said, "I won't let him go over there to play. They eat out all the time." They - the next door neighbors - had an embalming service in their kitchen. That's pretty eccentric wouldn't you say?

N: They would bring dead people into the kitchen?

C: Yeah, embalm people in the kitchen! And I said, "that's my family" (referring to the short story he was working on). You don't see many free lance embalmers around. Most of them work somewhere. This guy works out of his kitchen! So, I got interested and started reading up, and I found out all you need is a vent and a tile floor. That will put you in the law. You can embalm wherever the hell you want to as long as you got a vent and a tile floor! Once I got to writing about that, I went to Colorado to Mesa Verde, these cliff dwellings. I was so fascinated with that. I grabbed a biography of the first white man who went in there in the 1880's, and "discovered" these things. The Spanish had gone around it and missed those particular dwellings. And nobody

else had gone in. The Indians were in there enough for people to stay out. It was hard to get in there. Well, it turns out that there's something like six hundred cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde. About eighty percent held about four or five people each, but some of the other twenty percent held as many as two to four hundred people - just a little city stuck in a cliff. Well, this guy, his life was so dramatic. He lost his ranch because he got obsessed with archaeology. He'd go in there excavating and he collected all kinds of stuff. He found mummies and all that. Well, his life was very, very interesting. I had the beginnings of a fictional plan. I kept reading and I read about the West and took all these notes, and I found out about a massacre that took place in 1857. Some Indians and Mormons, together, wiped out a wagon train in a very tricky, treacherous way. The Indians attacked and then withdrew and hid. The Mormons went in with white flags and said the Indians had withdrawn, and if the immigrants would walk back to town with them, they would deliver them from this. They had to put their weapons and wounded in a wagon. And then when they got to where the Indians were hidden, on a signal, the Indians wiped them out - all of them. That is what the book's about. And I've topped it off with my eccentric character in a way, a bounty hunter, who is looking for people who were involved in that massacre. He's got a dog named Redeye. The dog is eccentric because the dog has not unlearned his instinct to hook into the nose of anything that is alive - -and not turn loose. Did you know that bulldogs were bred to do that to bulls? What they did originally is capture bulls. They would go to a bull, grab him in his nose and not turn loose, and the bull would be completely immobilized. That is what they were trained to do. Pit bulls and all have come out of this, but catch dogs that are used to hunt wild boar, they'll hold on to the boar's ears. I first heard about it when somebody told me about this little dog that would catch on to the nose of any other dog, small or large, and wouldn't turn loose. That's what got me interested. So my bounty hunter has got this

dog who has this problem, and the bounty hunter is trying to break him from jumping on everything.

N: Will you have a section from Redeye's point of view?

C: I've thought about that, but I won't. I am telling from different people's point of view. Who knows? Maybe I will. The bounty hunter would be considered eccentric, I think.

N: I understand that you did come under fire because of Raney?

C: Yes. What happened was that I was called to a meeting, where a couple of administrators told me that the book troubled them. Three specific reasons were that the book, in their view, caricatured the body of Christ meaning, I assume, that it made fun of Free Will Baptists. The second problem they had was that it showed a clash between the old with the new, with the new replacing the old. The third problem they had with it was that it showed alcohol as a catalyst. Then they asked how the book furthered the purpose of the university. They were holding my contract, by the way. I asked them if my answers had anything to do with my contract or whatever, and they said it did. I waited three weeks and kept it all a secret. Then I was asked by a reporter how the university was responding to my novel and I told them the truth - that they had withheld my contract. Front page the next day. Then I was called into another meeting. It was a big issue for the media. They finally offered me a contract without a raise. Then offered me a raise. I was asking for a hearing and was refused. By then, I had other job offers. So I finally resigned.

N: Did it help book sales?

C: I'm sure it did. I don't know how much. I am very glad that before the situation I was in became public, the first printing had been sold out. So I know it did well on its

own. I wouldn't feel as confident if I thought all the sales were due to the controversy.

N: For younger writers getting started, what advice do you have for those attempting to get an agent or publisher?

C: An agent is important if you're writing novels, but not if you're writing short stories because you send those to magazines. Based on the strength of the stories, you might get an agent. But for novels, agents are very important. The way I got an agent was through my publisher. Luckily he just said, "You need an agent." I got a good one. It was against his interests in a lot of ways, but that is the way Louis Rubin is. I sent Louis Rubin a couple of chapters to read because I knew he knew a lot about Southern Literature, and I didn't know he was starting a publishing house. He liked it and ended up publishing it. Previously, I sent parts of Raney to about eleven agents. As I recall, three of them read it and said, "No way or no thank you." One of them said that on the basis of Raney, other publishers might look at other work. I was kind of working with him, but he went on vacation, so I ended up not with him.

N: I have Lee's "The Devil's Dream" tape and also the "Walking Across Egypt" and "Killer Diller" tapes and love the music on them. Do you write your own songs?

C: Susan wrote "God's Waiting by the Side of the Road" and together we wrote, "You Made my Day Last Night," and "Quiche Woman in a Bar-be-cue Town." I wrote a lot of them: "Walking Across Egypt," "The Longstar Rattlesnake Bar." When I met Susan in 1972-3, I didn't know anything about Southern Literature. I didn't know about Eudora Welty, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor. I'd read Hemingway, Twain, and Crane. And I played a little bit of blues and rock and roll piano. I didn't play any folk music. I didn't know any folk musicians. She brought to me the whole folk music tradition, and I started playing banjo after I met her. She

also got me started on Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor. I had read a little bit of Lee Smith. In 1977, I got more interested in writing fiction. She's an editor. She's an English teacher, has a Master's in English Education and has taught English at State (N.C. State). She's editing for Doubletake magazine. That will start next year with Robert Coles and Alex Harris and some other people. She has been interviewing Southern writers for about four or five years. Her book of interviews and her essays will be published by the University of Mississippi. There are twelve interviews having to do with fiction and religion. She looked at twelve contemporary Southern authors who seemed to write about their own religious background, and asked questions writers don't usually get asked. She published a piece of fiction from each writer and also an essay on each writer.

N: Do you recommend any other writers that might be using eccentric characters?

C: Larry Brown. His short stories are good. Another writer is Lewis Nordan. If you read Lewis Nordan in the next three weeks, and you're gonna write about eccentric characters, you'll drop all the rest of us (laughs). The first collection you should get is Welcome to the Arrowcatch Affair, which is a book of short stories. In fact, there is a person I know in Chicago who is planning to write about how Nordan doesn't do what you expect with grotesqueness; he does new things with it. He's got a book of closely knit stories called Music of the Swamp. He's got a new novel called Wolfwhistle. It's about the killing of a teenager in 1954 in Mississippi. He lives in Pittsburgh. He's a marvelous writer. Harry Crews. His novels have what you would consider grotesque and eccentric characters. Tim McLaurin. He's writing one now that is about to come out about two characters who are burned, one externally and one internally. Those are the main ones I know about.

N: How do you find time to run a business, write, have a

band, have a family, and teach?

C: I'm trying to cut back. Next year, I'm going to stay with Catherine (their twelve year old daughter). The way I manage is with a very able assistant. Pat Hutzley was a nun for two and a half years. And is an Elvis freak. She was a court stenographer. She worked for a health insurance company. She helps me out a lot. She's well balanced.

N: Sounds like an eccentric to me. I wish she were here, so I could interview her too. Thank you so much for your time and the interview.

C: You're welcome.