

In

*Eccentricity as Narrative Technique*

by Niles Reddick

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW WITH JANICE DAUGHARTY

N: I want to thank you for taking time out of your schedule to do an interview with me.

J: You're welcome.

N: You must be excited about the publication of your first novel.

J: It is all I talk about. I am excited about it, Niles.

N: As far as your novel is concerned, we have discussed a little the concept of eccentric characters and eccentricity and what I'd like to ask you is: What does eccentric mean to you?

J: When we were talking about that the other day, I gave you an example of someone I considered eccentric. What Lee Smith said about she didn't know when somebody was being eccentric when she was growing up -- well, that was the way I was too. They seemed abnormal - I didn't know the word eccentric; it was not anything I would apply - maybe they were weird or a bit strange. And I think that is still a good way to characterize eccentric, although since I am becoming eccentric myself, I would like to give eccentricity a little more class.

N: Well, that was my next question. Do you consider yourself an eccentric or do other people consider you eccentric?

J: My children consider me very outdated. I guess they think I am eccentric because I don't do the usual things that they consider normal, like shopping and loving new cars. They are young and like that sort of thing. Mostly

they consider me an eccentric because I am fairly reclusive. In order to write, I can't think of any other way to do it. Balancing writing with work and taking care of a family and everything else, you end up being somewhat reclusive. And a lot of that comes from the fact that I've stopped socializing. As you get older, you do that. Not everybody does that, but I have. You start sorting your friends and keep those who are real friends, and then you aren't socializing so much and that is probably a lot of what they (children) are basing that on.

N: When you were growing up in Echols county, did you look around and see what you would consider to be eccentric people?

J: Constantly. Since I've started writing about those people - and I don't write about those people themselves - I make them better. I make them far more interesting, or maybe they always were interesting and I didn't know. Looking back and writing now, I know they were eccentrics and it is not having learned that as terminology. They are very interesting. I think Echols county is so rich with these characters and you know some of them, so you know what I am talking about.

N: What about family?

J: Oh! (laughs) I told you about my grandfather who raided dumpsters. And not just dumpsters, but old county dumps. He did his own thing. At the time, I thought he was just the crudest creep in the world because he was an embarrassment. Now, looking back, I think he made that choice because he was from a family of land owners. There is a great responsibility with land, as I know land, and my family owned many acres of land and this is a tremendous responsibility, a burden, more than a blessing. I know my family, the Statens, always considered it a great blessing,

but I don't think it always was. There is a lot to do in taking care of land and ownership and passing it on to other members of the family.

N: With your grandfather, what did he do with stuff he got out of dumpsters?

J: Often, he would give it to other people. Not because he was being charitable, usually it was some woman he was trying to impress. It was a gift, like a single shoe, an earring (both laugh). I don't think he was the brightest fellow in the world.

N: He would give one shoe away as a gift?

J: I shouldn't have told you that (laughing). He has been dead for about five years now, and my niece told me this story recently. She was in a high school play. I will end up writing about this; I know I will. She had this beautiful blue dress that she had bought for the play. At night after play practice, the students would store their costumes in a closet just off the auditorium. It is just an old schoolhouse and there is a little cloakroom and they would store them there. So Kathy, my niece, came in one morning and her dress was gone, as well as a couple of other items. But it didn't really look like a burglary because too much was still there and there wasn't anything of value that was missing - a tape player and stuff like that was still there. The teacher directing the play told Kathy, "Well, I think you probably just took your dress home, and you don't know where you left it." And Kathy said that she knew that she hadn't and she finally convinced the teacher, but they couldn't resolve this mystery. A couple of years later Kathy went to my mother's, her grandmother, to visit her, and the dress was at my mother's. And Kathy asked, "Where did you get my dress?" And my mother responded, "Oh Daddy gave me that." And that was my grandfather and another part of his gift giving. He stole from my niece,

for the deer hunts and the women would cook and the men would bring the meat home and have a grand time actually. That is my understanding of your family, since I never knew them, but I knew where they lived and have heard stories about them. My husband went to their deer hunts. And they were very generous people and knew how to have a good time. What I see with new generations, not your family necessarily, everybody is preoccupied with cars and so on. We make idols of our own bodies.

N: Merdie is obviously the protagonist in Dark of the Moon and the novel is written from her point of view, and through her eyes we see a very interesting world. And she by far seems to be the most eccentric character. Not only does she break those norms that are established within a marriage, but she is highly creative in her song writing and performing at the bars in Valdosta. Yet she leaves that, but she doesn't leave the area and stays to take over her mother's healing business. Do you consider her an eccentric?

J: I don't personally see her as eccentric. To me, she is eccentric in their view of her. And they are eccentric to her. I don't know if that makes sense.

N: Certainly, she is, by far, eccentric in their perceptions.

J: Right. They certainly see her as eccentric. They would say, "Why do you always have your head in the clouds?" I always have these characters that are going to leave the place where they were reared. When I first started writing this novel, I wanted to do a humorous novel because I like working with humor. I love Eudora Welty's Losing Battles and the schoolteacher who is holding up the one remaining wall with one hand, standing on the encyclopedia, and hovering above the children in the storm - you know women doing everything. That is hysterical and ironic. When I

started out, I was just going to have these bootleggers kill a revenuer, but instead, they captured him.

N: What about the revenuer? He's the outsider.

J: He is the outsider and I always have an outsider who comes in and sees these crazy people.

N: He does see them, but at the same time, he does come to appreciate them and respect them.

J: He does respect their ability to survive, and this is something that I admire very much. I think we get the instinct and will to survive educated out of us. He does consider them pretty ignorant, and I see that so much with outsiders doing that with backwoods people.

N: What about Hamp? He is the one who makes the moonshine and has them hold the revenuer hostage for a long period of time. He is very focused on surviving and maintaining the old way. He is very strong willed, but he changes. He joins the church.

J: Merdie says that old men often do this. They pick up religion because they know they are not going to be able to start over and sow their wild oats or "cut the mustard." That is something I really wanted to show - him weakening and going back to religion because a lot of old timers become very religious when they know there is not much else left. And like Merdie says, "you sort of get the feeling that they planned this all along." It is like, "if I don't live forever, I can always turn to religion." It is a sort of insurance policy that says they go to heaven and will at least have that admiration of their neighbors and peers in their old age.

N: As a validation of his faith, he burns his money. He has changed, but burning his money seemed to be pretty

bizarre.

J: Yes, and that was the seed that started the whole story right there because that was something I had heard of an old man doing. Once he got sanctified, he burned all his sin money. In the story I heard, the wife does grab some of the money to save it because she really had a hell of a time gathering the collards and milking the cow so she is going to save a little bit of that money and who could blame her? But I never knew why the woman saved the money and that is what I wanted to know. What did she want it for? What would she have done?

N: Also Hamp doesn't want inside plumbing because he "doesn't want anyone to shit in his house," which is an interesting way of looking at it.

J: My great uncle said that, and I thought I'd use it.

N: Did he have indoor plumbing?

J: No, he never did. He never would have it.

N: Are there people now in the flatwoods of Echols county that still have outhouses?

J: I really don't know, but there are a lot of people who are so poor they probably don't. I saw this recently and it broke my heart - where people were hovering around an old chimney outside because there was still heat from the bricks and they were cold. Being cold and hungry are stark facts and getting fed and staying warm rank above getting indoor plumbing.

N: What can we expect from Janice Daughtery in the future besides the short story collection and novel that will also be out soon?

J: I have rewritten three novels since last summer. I can't have anything else published until fall of 1995 because I have sold so much and there needs to be this time in between. I feel like I am at a standstill. Joyce Carol Oates gave me some advice that I really like about going back to your old works. That you should go into it and write until there is nothing left. She said that she did this quite frequently. I love Joyce Carol Oates, and she will let a novel lay for two years or so and then go back and pick it up and rewrite. I am doing that to a novel now. I don't know if it will be published or not. There must be something there because you never would have written it in the first place.

N: Do you foresee Dark of the Moon becoming a film?

J: I can't and I am not at all excited about that. Everybody keeps saying you should be excited, and I could really use the money. I could get my car fixed. A Spielberg scout who picked it up last week is very interested. I didn't even know that they had movie scouts, but there are some out there slipping around or something. Michelle Pfeiffer productions has asked about it too. They have already read it. Apparently what happened was that my agent sent out some galleys; my publisher sent out bound galleys. And then when the catalog came out, which has been just a couple of weeks ago, Hollywood started picking up on it. I'll show you why. My publisher made a mistake on the cover of my book in the catalogue - a picture of a man and woman making love - not the cover that is going to be on my book. But that was supposedly an accident, and it is this hot thing and the catalog has generated a lot of interest.

N: Do you think contemporary writers are using the theme of eccentricity?

J: We talked about Greg Johnson. It is hard for me to



J: I think they are. My son who is twenty-two years old asked me if I am going to look like Joyce Carol Oates. In an interview with Playboy, she says that you are not looking at the physical in me; there is no physical left. It's just the spiritual - the writer - that is what is left. My son asked me that and I told him, "Let me tell you this. Most of the writers I know would consider you very strange in your Ralph Lauren shirt, or shallow at best." I guess it all depends on who is doing the considering.

N: Thank you so much.

J: You are very welcome. It was my pleasure.