APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW WITH LEE SMITH

N: First I'd like to thank you for interviewing with me, considering how busy you are.

L: I'm not that busy (laughs). I'm delighted.

N: I've told you a little bit about what I want to do my dissertation on - Eccentric characters in Southern Literature -and most of your works have plenty of eccentric characters. But first, I'd like to ask you: what does eccentric mean to you?

L: Well, I will have to tell you frankly that I am forever being told that my work is full of eccentric characters, and I wouldn't have thought it. I guess because my whole family is full of eccentric characters and so is the town where I grew up because it's so remote. I think remote places can breed eccentricity in a way. And so I never thought of my characters as being eccentric until people have come around after the fact and told me they were. They just seem to be the kind of people that always interested me. My husband told me not very long ago that I didn't know what was normal, which may be true (laughs). That probably is true, seriously.

N: Do you consider yourself eccentric?

L: No, but I know other people that do consider me an eccentric, so it's hard for me to say. I don't search out eccentricity. I'm always trying to tone my characters down.

N: What about growing up in Grundy? You said that there were a lot of eccentrics there. Can you give me an example?

L: Yeah, but let me say one other thing first, Niles, which is that there has been a great deal of mental illness in my own family. And both my parents in fact were institutionalized several times apiece. Other family members were decidedly colorful. I had all these uncles and great uncles who would hang around together. They were all in politics. They all drank a lot. They were gambling men, betting men. I mean they would sit on the porch at my grandmother's and literally bet a hundred dollars apiece on what bird would fly first off a wire and stuff like that, and my uncle Vern told great stories, as did my father and my mother and other family members. My grandmother was certainly eccentric. Actually I wrote a story that is very closely based on her in Cakewalk - "Artists." She had gotten married herself at fifteen and had this notion that she wanted to rise above all that, and she was forever trying to make all the rest of us rise with her. She was always doing these things like taking correspondence courses in art. And for the last year or two of her life, she just sat over there all dressed up with these matching brooches and earrings, looking at whatever was on TV and saying it was art and telling people that she had a great deal of money that was hidden upstairs. So I simply grew up with all this. My parents had friends like-Well, my Daddy had one friend named Hardware Breeding, which is a name I love, who married his wife, Beulah, four times. There was always stuff like that going on. Any little town, I think, does produce that. There's a lot of tolerance because everybody knows everybody, and you're already accepted.

N: I'd like to ask you some questions about your works. I know that you've said you don't consider your work as necessarily thematic, but do you consider eccentricity a theme in your work?

L: I really haven't, until it was pointed out to me. Other people have said this, however, including Cindy MacKethan, whom I really respect. But I think if you grow up in the kind of tradition where people tell a lot of stories, they never tell a story about a perfectly average, normal person. They tell a story about the person who does

some crazy thing. That is the kind of story I grew up hearing, and I think that view has informed my own sense of telling stories. And this book - (pointing to Fancy Strut which has on the paperback cover a description that reads, "eccentrics") - I have never seen so many eccentric people in my life as in Alabama! When I lived in Alabama, I was a feature writer on the newspaper, and so anybody that was kind of weird or crazy or thought they saw a vision of Elvis on their refrigerator, I got to talk to them. Both the way I learned story telling and the places where I've lived had to do with that.

N: Do you think the eccentric character would be different from the grotesque character?

L: Yes, I do. I think the grotesque character goes over into an area of being repellant and frightening and dangerous. For instance, a lot of times Larry Brown, whose work I love, will veer over into the grotesque. I'm thinking particularly of his story, "A Roadside Resurrection." Harry Crews, certainly, gets into the grotesque. Flannery O'Connor in "Wise Blood-"- I think that those characters are not merely eccentric; they are in a seriously grotesque condition.

N: It's difficult to distinguish between the grotesque and eccentric. Historically a lot of mental illness is seen in literature as eccentric and grotesque. There seems to be a fine line between the two.

L: Absolutely. It is very interesting to me. I think it has to do with when it becomes threatening to us in some way. When it becomes threatening is when it becomes grotesque. It is also seen often - - - I'm thinking about Dostoevsky, maybe, Prince Mishkin - - - as a gift, like the wise child or the holy man who doesn't know how to tie his shoes but can see the future.

N: Do you think the characters in the South and especially in Southern Literature in general tend to be eccentric?

L: Yes, I do. And in fact I think it is a danger for those of us who are writing now and for young Southerners who start to write, because it has become so common it is trite. Nobody wants to hear about your crazy Aunt Lena who sits upstairs and won't eat anything but raisins, because we've encountered so many of these characters in Southern Literature. But the fact is that they still exist in small Southern towns, and they are part of the way people learn to tell stories.

N: Did you have an Aunt Lena?

L: (laughing) No, I didn't; I just made that up.

N: Do you feel that an eccentric character elicits a humorous response in a reader or the writer?

L: Yeah, it elicits a humorous response in me certainly, as a writer, and also as a reader. Every day my father would come home from the dime store and tell us about some wacky person that had been in there that day. I think that kind of story telling serves two functions: it's funny and makes people laugh, but it also puts the storyteller and the person hearing the story together saying, "Isn't that funny? We're not like that." It's a way of saying, "Oh we're okay." It's reassuring.

N: What about other contemporary Southern writers? Do you feel that some of them have eccentric characters?

L: Oh Lord, yes. One person is Ellen Gilchrist, whom I like very much. Clyde Edgerton certainly has a lot of eccentrics. Another person who is great with eccentricity is Reynolds Price. Like a lot of wonderful storytellers, he just has all kinds of stories.

N: What about Faulkner?

L: Well, Faulkner certainly has eccentric characters. Most people are eccentric in Faulkner. For one thing, because they are such <u>absolute</u> characters. Nobody is more eccentric

in a certain way than Sutpin. Benjy is, of course, crazy. You run the whole gamut in different ways. I remember specifically Louis Rubin, who was one of my teachers, talking about Southern writing. He was saying that Southern writing went off into two directions, both of them originating with Faulkner. One of those derives from the darker, serious vision of Absalom, Absalom. And another from the more chatty, humorous community life of, say, The Hamlet. The Hamlet has funny characters that make us laugh, that are eccentric in that sense; then there are the other characters, like Popeye, that are eccentric in the sense of grotesque or scary, embodying terrible mysteries and truths that we don't dare look at.

N: Your use of multiple perspectives offers a myriad of perceptions for the reader. Sometimes one character may be perceived as an eccentric by a character, but not by other characters. Do you think eccentricity is in the eye of the beholder?

L: Oh yeah, to some degree. What is normal to one group is eccentric to another. My family, for instance, was not perceived as eccentric in Grundy. We were one of the leading families. But when I write true things that happen, everyone says, "Isn't that eccentric?" It depends a great deal upon who is doing the perceiving. For instance, while my Grandmother and Granddaddy were still living in their house, my uncle wanted to build a Piggly Wiggly on that land because it was the only piece of flat land in town, and they didn't want to move out of their house so he built the Piggly Wiggly in a U-shape around their house and they stayed in their house. And you could go right out from their kitchen into the meat department. (Niles laughs) This is true! And everybody thought, "Well isn't that nice-they don't have to move!" And here's the Piggly Wiggly. And it never occurred to any of us that this was at all bizarre. I went off to college and I wrote a story about this-about going to visit my grandmother and walking in and out of the meat department, and everybody said, "That is so crazy-we've never heard of anything so crazy." Because that was **their** perception. It didn't seem at all bizarre to us. And of

course when they died, the house was torn down and all that land became more Piggly Wiggly. It is just a perception.

N: I'd like to ask you some questions about your works specifically. In your first novel, The Last Day the Dogbushes Bloomed, would you consider the Tates eccentric?

L: Yes I would, absolutely.

N: The Tates function in such a way that seems to propel the narrative. They are out of the center as far as place is concerned, and the novel opens with Susan's memory of having visited the Tates.

L: I would consider them eccentric and very important and somehow propelling. They were very bizarre to the children, and the iron lung, of course, is a grotesque image.

N: Do you think the Tates, especially Mrs. Tate, are seen by the children as mysterious? They don't understand them, so they are eccentric.

L: Yes, I think the children do see them as mysterious and eccentric. I doubt that adults in the town would have seen them that way.

N: Once Susan, Sara Dell, and her mother go and take the pie, they meet with Mrs. Tate; and they have a perceptual shift. They don't see her as eccentric.

L Yes, that's right. What usually strikes us as eccentric is what we don't know, what we don't have the necessary information about.

N: When they do have this change in perception and see her as a normal person, all of a sudden, this is when they tear up the rose bushes. They become empowered.

L: Yes, because she is no longer above them.

N: After they see Mrs. Tate as normal, they tear up the

rose bushes, and then they play the game "Iron Lung" where Susan gets raped and there is this spiraling downward.

L: That is right. To become demystified is to lose power.

N: There are four stories in Cakewalk that I think have eccentric characters. "Between the Lines" is one where Mrs. Jolene Newhouse writes a column for the newspaper, and her behavior can be seen as eccentric especially when she whispers to Mr. Biggers who is dying that she made up the characters she writes about. Do you consider her eccentric?

L: I didn't when I wrote it. The idea for the story came from my reading of Mrs. Obra Simpson who has written a column for sixty-five years in the "Grundy Mountaineer." Of course I made up the character. I see her writing as her art, and every now and then she'll realize that it's nothing compared to what is really going on, but for most of the time she is able to sustain herself by it. I admire my real-life model, Mrs. Simpson, enormously. She's in her eighties now and still writes her column.

N: It is interesting that the cause of Mrs. Newhouse's behavior was when she learned that her husband had been sleeping with his adopted half sister for years. She wasn't aware and someone called her and told her this, and she took to the bed and cried for days. After she cried for about a week, she got up and started the column. Does that precipitate her eccentricity?

L: Yeah, it does. I think that in my writing, eccentricity is often linked to art. It is often linked to someone who functions as an artist in a story, which she (Jolene B. Newhouse) certainly does in "Between the Lines." And it-her art, her column-is a way of dealing with the pain that real life causes. Occasionally it won't be enough of a way, and she'll slip as she did and say, "They weren't real; I made them up." But generally speaking, it is a way of handling it.

N: What about "Georgia Rose?" She is an interesting

character in the sense that she has this ability to see the future.

L: This is one of those stories in which a slight degree of eccentricity, or kind of mental illness, is a gift --- but is it a gift or a curse? In some instances, it seems like a gift, and other times it seems like a curse. A certain kind of eccentricity may present itself as a special power, whether you want it or not.

N: And then, "The Artist," which we've already talked about, and the grandmother character.

L: And certainly she is eccentric. And as I said, she was very closely based on my grandmother. My grandmother also had that table with all those little figurines and everything. But again, the grandmother in the story is an artist figure, or wants to be. She is creating herself, and her eccentricity is all wrapped up in her sense of herself as an artist. And whether the art is good or not is secondary.

N: She has taken the correspondence courses which we've talked about, and she reads the encyclopedia cover to cover. Had your grandmother read the encyclopedia?

L: Absolutely. Or at least she said she had. She had me reading it, too.

N: With Stella and Florrie in "Cakewalk," Stella sees Florrie as an eccentric, because she makes all of these cakes, which, of course, Stella looks down on.

L: Florrie is the artist in that story, the cake maker. She may be perceived as eccentric, but she is the person who functions very much as an artist in her society, and it's a ritual, her making the cakes to celebrate everything that happens in the life of the town. It is an art that serves a wonderful function. She is definitely regarded as an eccentric by some, but to me she was wonderful. I mean, I was crazy about her, and I was making fun of Stella. When

you went to the State Fair, did you see the cakes?

N: No, I wished I would've.

L: That is where I got the idea. They had this huge contest for ornamental cakes, and those cakes I described in that story I actually saw at the fair, like the one about Mt. Saint Helens before and after eruption. That was at the State Fair. I thought these cakes were wonderful.

N: But Florrie also runs off with Earl Mingo, the Indian, and she nurses her babies all over town. This is something that Stella sees as eccentric, too. Florrie is a very disorganized kind of person, but even in her disorganization, she seems to be quite organized, especially in her ability to make cakes.

L: And to raise children, and all that. A lot of times, eccentric people are more in touch with the real things. The eccentric characters in my stories are often more in touch with things that really matter, and less in touch with the forms of things, the outside appearances of things.

N: In Black Mountain Breakdown Dry Fork is where a lot of the action takes place that is very important to the novel as far as Crystal is concerned. Nora, Grace, and Devere live there, and this is a place that is literally out of the center of the town and setting, yet so much that happens here propels the entire narrative.

L: Yeah, it's like the Tates. I had an Uncle Tick, who lived with his mother, my grandmother, always, and raised these dogs, and there was something wrong with him. Of course, there was never any incident like the rape in the novel. Anyway, there was Uncle Tick in my childhood, and when you go to writing, you write what you've got.

N: Uncle Tick inspired Devere?

L: Yes, in some way, but not in any literal way. My Uncle Tick was very sweet.

N: Devere is more of a grotesque figure because of the rape, but also because of a head injury and having been in an explosion.

L: He certainly is more of a grotesque figure than my real Uncle Tick. In that novel, I think I was really writing about depression to some degree, because a large part of my childhood was shaped by the fact that my father was so depressed. This was before they had anti-depressants like they do now, and he would just go off to the hospital. Before that, there was always this period of his lying down in the dark. I believe I wrote that novel to come to terms with his depression.

N: Do you think a lot of writing is understanding ourselves more?

L: Yes. I have written constantly ever since I was nineteen, and I think sometimes I write fiction the way other people write in their journals, as a way of trying to make sense of my own life, or to put certain puzzling or upsetting situations or people in some context so that I can manage them at least for the length of the time I am writing the novel. You never know what you're doing when you are doing it, and then later you'll go back and see.

N: What about Aunt Nora and Grace? They are colorful kinds of characters. You consider them more eccentric than grotesque?

L: Certainly they are more eccentric.

N: They are both very non-conformist in their behaviors, but they both embody this sense of history. Times have changed, but they haven't. They seem stuck in time in many ways. Is that positive or negative or neither?

L: I think it is probably neither. It is just a given in the world of my fiction. There will often be these characters that represent history and are simply stuck in time. I know they are there; I don't know why.

N: Let me ask you about Family Linen. Are there any characters in Family Linen that you see as eccentric?

L: Well, sure (laughs). Certainly, Fay who's sitting there eating and getting bigger and bigger and bigger. Certainly Fay, Clinus, and Arthur.

N: Arthur is the alcoholic.

L: Exactly. I think if we understand why people behave the way they do, it's hard to see them as eccentric, but I could see where some readers who might not have encountered anybody like Arthur would consider him an eccentric too, maybe not as eccentric as Fay. Is Fay eccentric or grotesque? She's one that really walks the line.

N: It is interesting that you say what we don't understand we might call eccentric and once that sense of mystery has been unraveled or unfolded then the reader understands. Arthur has a drinking problem, and we would understand his behavior we'd understand his behavior via the alcoholism. Clinus, for example, is said to be retarded.

L: He is another one where sometimes it seems almost like a gift because he knows stuff that not everybody knows. Gee, there is a lot of this in these books! I hadn't really thought about that.

N: Fay has, interestingly enough, been described in several articles as mentally ill, crazy, and so on. And yet there are no descriptions in the novel that ever label her as such. This is a mystery. We don't know that she is mentally ill. When she was young, it is said that she could have gone to school and learned had she applied herself, but she chose not to and instead wanders about in the woods which is somewhat romantic, because she doesn't want to conform.

L: Well Crystal, in a sense, chooses. She chooses that sort of darkness. I don't know why. I didn't mean with

Black Mountain Breakdown that she was so traumatized that she became catatonic. There is a degree of choice. There is a choosing not to conform.

N: With Fay, there is not enough given to determine if something happened. And then there is the mystery at the center of the whole text.

L: Fay did it. I don't think that was clear enough. She did it and what I was trying to show in those sections that are from her point of view was that he had promised her that he would take her away to the beach. He would take her to Florida and when she heard that car starting up, she thought she was gonna get to go. And then when he, in fact, wasn't going to take her, she killed him. It wasn't as clear as I hoped it was. I remember when I first heard about this; Reynolds Price was coming over for supper at my house and this article was in the paper. It was from Raeford, North Carolina, about this woman who had had a headache and had gone to the shrink and under hypnosis had remembered that she had seen her mother kill her father and throw him down the outhouse, and the children in the real story had shined a light down there and had seen these eyeballs and everything. Reynolds Price came over for dinner and said, "Did you read this-it's just wonderful." And I said, "Oh yes, and I'm gonna write about it." He said, "I'm gonna write about it." And then he said, "Alright, I'll flip you for it." And so I won, I got it. But he said, "You've got two years; that's your statute of limitations." (laughs) Or he would have written about it.

N: It is more than just a murder mystery. You talked in one interview I read about the mysterious nature of the family in general. What do you really see as mysterious?

L: For one thing, it is the strangest thing to me, that you are born into this group of people with whom you may have less in common than any other group in the world, and yet they are privy to everything you are gonna be, and everything you are as a child, and what you will become. It is just so mysterious to me. There are always things that

you share with your family that you can't share with anybody else, even though you may like a whole lot of other people better. The bond there is so mysterious and so important, often determining how we deal with the rest of our life. I mean, do we rush toward new things or do we hang back? Everything we do is informed by the way the people in our family of origin reacted to certain situations.

N: It is interesting to me how perception works in Family Linen. There is a chapter where Arthur sees Fay sitting on the couch like a giant, green slug. She has on these bizarre slippers and hat and is watching the stories. It is interesting that he sees her one way, Clinus, a different way, and other family members, yet another way. You have this unique ability to reveal all of that.

L: If I were trying to do anything specific in Family Linen, it was to get that notion across. I wrote Family Linen after I wrote Oral History, and I had been doing quite a lot of interviewing, not only my own family, but just anybody else I could nail down for Oral History. I did a lot of interviews that I didn't use, but one thing that just fascinated me with the interviewing process is that you could ask five different people about the same event, five different people who had been there, and they would give you five completely different accounts. It all depended upon the perception of the storyteller. You begin to wonder whether there is any truth at all, any objective truth, or whether it is all subjective and all has to do with who is telling the story. This is one of the things that fascinated me the most. And even about family --- I remember talking to a bunch of my cousins about these Sunday dinners that we used to have to go to at my grandmother's. You had to go. I remember them as horrible. And I remember the feet of the table were like these talons on a ball. But other cousins remember these as the happiest afternoons of their lives and felt that grandmother was wonderful. It could have been a completely different family. It was just so striking to me.

N: And the family goes on, it changes, but continues on. We don't really know the history of the family then.

L: We only know what people tell us. After I wrote Family Linen, I wished I had known a lot of stuff I learned later. When my Mother got really sick, I mean physically ill, she started giving me all of these revisionist stories, all these things that she'd told me that I had believed for years; she'd say, "Well now, I never told you about when he ran off with the high school girl," all this different stuff, and it was like layers and layers of truth that were being uncovered.

N: In "Intensive Care" (from Me and My Baby View the Eclipse), Cherry Oxendine, who is dying of cancer, says to her daughter, "When you get too old to be cute, honey, you get to be eccentric." And Tammy recalls thinking after her mother has died that it is one of the truest things her mother ever said. There is a lot of truth in being an eccentric, especially when you get older; you can't be cute.

L: Somehow, cute and old don't go together. People who used to be cute when they were children become eccentrics when they are older.

N: Cherry Oxendine is seen as an eccentric by the reader and also by her daughter because of the things she believes in. She believes in all of these mysterious things, Bermuda Triangle, U.F.O.'s, ghosts. She's had her palm read. She believes in Atlantis. And this is seen as eccentric from her daughter's point of view.

L: Right, to believe in things that are beyond the normal range of experience. Like Georgia Rose. I tend to have a lot of those characters. I worked one summer for the Duke Institute for Parapsychology when I was a student. I was at Carolina in Summer School and that was my summer job.

N: Was J. B. Rhine there?

L: He was not actually there that summer, but he was still connected with it. I just went in and did the most mundane kinds of stuff, but the ideas were so fascinating to me.

N: R.C. is described in The Devil's Dream by Lizzie time and again as eccentric. He's a person of extremes, very dramatic.

L: Yes, he is. He is also a person of vision, in that he could see the future. He is the only one, for instance, who has a notion of what the recording business might become after the Bristol sessions.

N: And there is a sense of genius embodied in R.C.

L: Oh yeah, he's a genius. I think many of my eccentric people are geniuses. They are often not geniuses in a way that is recognized scholastically.

N: What about the Melungeons? Is this based on a true story?

L: Well, Melungeons, sure. When I was a child, my father always used to tell me that if I weren't good, they would give me to the Melungeons. The Melungeons lived all around in Southwest Virginia, particularly in Wise, Virginia, which is really close by, and in East Tennessee. They are a very strange racial mix, an isolated group. Many of them lived back in a cove called Newman's Ridge, by themselves. They were viewed like gypsies, or something. A lot has been written about them recently. There have been things written about them in the New York Times that people keep sending me about where they came from. People used to say they were from the Lost Colony. The latest thing is that they are probably of Arab decent. But they are real good looking. They are dark, but they have light eyes. Like Jake Toney is described.

N: Since he is a Melungeon man and is the father of R.C., he comes from a place no one knows about. There is again the theme of mystery embodied with the eccentric.

L: Absolutely, and one of the attributes would have to be an attractive quality.

N: Since R.C.'s father is a Melungeon, do you think that R.C. gets his vision, his creativity, his eccentricity, from his father?

L: That was my idea. That was what sets him apart.

N: That sense of otherness.

L: That enables him to look on things from outside, to understand their worth, for instance.

N: And he kills himself.

L: Yes. I don't know why that happened. I was just writing along, and all of a sudden I wrote that. Sure he would. The music has gone so far away from what he thought it was. It's all gone so far past his vision of it, and into something else that is commercial. It is gone away from the otherworldly pure essence of it. It has turned into all this crap.

N: Someone brought up this afternoon in the panel discussion that there is a lot of truth in fiction. I see your work not as specifically Appalachian regional kind of literature, but as something far beyond that embracing much more.

L: Well, I would hope so. It seems to me that you do have to use whatever materials you have at hand; for instance, the particular kind of speech I have access to is Appalachian. It has to be to be something that you have access to. I'm not going to write about Catholicism. I am gonna write something about fundamentalist religion, because I know about it. It does seem to me that I can tell the truth better when I am writing fiction. I can get at it better than I can when I am writing non-fiction. When I first began to use all this Appalachian material, my idea was really to write a non-fiction book, because I'd been going around and collecting stuff and talking to my relatives for years, and I had all this <u>stuff</u>. I wanted to make all this available to people, but then when I really

started writing about it, I would put something down and think, "Is this really true? Or is it just this woman's experience?" I could never get beyond that, so I decided it would be better to keep on writing fiction. One hopes that there is some truth embodied in the story, but for me I can't separate it from the story, so I never was able to write non-fiction. I just had to see it all in terms of story.

N: I was privileged enough to be at your reading last night where you read from what you're working on now; what can you say about it?

L: It is one woman's story. I got the notion for it when I went to write the introduction to my friend Shelby Lee Adams' book of photographs of Eastern Kentucky, and some of those photographs are of a serpent-handling congregation. I had been taken to the serpent handling churches as a little child. I had gone a couple of times, and all of a sudden, I got really interested again. I went to some of these churches and saw a lot of documentaries and read about it and thought about it a whole lot as I was writing the introduction to Shelby's book. There is a narration by a woman who is a serpent-handling believer, and I was writing along and all of a sudden it was really easy to do it; it was really easy to do her voice. I don't know why. It was like she was saying it and I wasn't saying it. One thing she said was that you go back to it. That you always have to go back to it. That is what they all keep saying in interviews. If asked, "Well, what about your teenagers? I don't see any teenagers here." She'd say, "Oh honey, they run off, they don't want to have nothing to do with them snakes. But they'll come back. They always come back." (both laugh) I was just fascinated with this notion that they would come back, and so that is what my character in the novel is going to do. I am writing about the daughter of a serpent-handling believer, and she will escape from all that; she will marry, and so on, but when modern life fails her, she's going to go back. So at the end, we are going to see her ready to take up serpents herself, I think.

N: And it's going to be called Grace?

L: I think so. I was also thinking about calling it The Fullness of Time because that is another thing this woman said. She said, "They come back in the fullness of time, honey." Or, The Fruits of the Spirit. The fruits of the spirit is what God gives you if you're a believer; you're rich in the fruits of the spirit. So I don't know. I've got several different notions about the title.

N: How do you find time to do research, write, teach, and manage a family?

L: Well, I'm old! But I started writing when I was very young. My first book was published when I was a year out of college. I wrote it as a senior in college.

N: Did you have a scholarship to Hollins?

L: No, my father did well in business, so he could afford to send me. My parents were so poor when they married that they had to live with his parents. They were very, very poor, but when Daddy came back from the Navy, my uncle Curt loaned him the money to start his dime store, and he worked and worked and worked. By the time I went to college (I was an only child and that helps, too) they could afford to send me. But they didn't only do that, they sent me away the last two years of high school. I went to prep school. I was the only person I had ever known who went to prep school.

N: Did they do that for any particular reason?

L: My mother came from the Eastern shore of Virginia. She came from a family of school teachers, a family of people who knew about such things as private schools and the notion of being a lady. I would have never heard any of that stuff if I had just grown up with a mother from Grundy. But because she was from outside, she always had this notion, and Daddy did too, to send me away. He always felt trapped by the mountains himself, and by his family. For instance,

he went to see his mother every day. And so consequently my mother felt trapped, too. And so they were determined to send me off to prep school my last two years, to St. Catherine's in Richmond. They did have some friends who had much older children than me. One of those had sent a child off to school. Another reason they sent me was because I might have married my boyfriend. I would have done that, probably! Then I don't think I would ever have written anything. At St. Catherine's, I got really interested in English. But I chose Hollins College because my mother didn't want me to go far away to school, and she didn't want me to go to school with boys either. Hollins is a girl's school in Southwest Virginia. One of my cousins had gone there. Luckily, it has this incredibly good English department, with creative writing offered. I took it, and that's when I started writing seriously.

N: Thank you so much.

L: My pleasure.