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# The Morning News

BLACK AND WHITE AND READ ALL OVER

**Currently:** "Napoleon was ill with bladder problems and was very tense and unrestrained." And more:  
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B I R N B A U M V .

## Susan Straight

The great American novel doesn't exist—except in the minds of marketers (and those who believe New Yorkers write the best books). **ROBERT BIRNBAUM** talks to Susan Straight about regional writing, as American as apple pie.

**I**T'S POSSIBLE THAT SUSAN STRAIGHT'S NAME IS FAMILIAR TO YOU FOR HER membership on the infamous panel that nominated five female New York authors as finalists in 2004 National Book Awards. One of my hopes for this conversation is that the engaging and impassioned California novelist will make that notoriety a passing memory as we address some other (and not so) heady topics. And, of course, that you will be moved to read her work.

Susan Straight was born and raised in Riverside, Calif., which she claims was the methamphetamine capital of the world. She earned a scholarship to the University of Southern California, where she did not study with TC Boyle, and in 1984 received her MFA from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she did study with James Baldwin. Her first short story for *Zoetrope*, "Mines," was included in *Best American Short Stories 2003*. She has published six novels: *I Been in Sorrow's Kitchen and Licked Out All the Pots*; *Aquaboogie*; *Blacker Than a Thousand Midnights*, *The Gettin Place*; *Highwire Moon* (a finalist for the 2002 National Book Award), and most recently, *A Million Nightingales*. She has also written essays and articles for the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, the *Nation*, and *Harper's Magazine*. Straight is currently the director of the creative writing department at University of California, Riverside, and lives in Riverside with her three daughters.

As our chat unfolds we touch on literary regionalism, dumb literary issues, New Orleans and 19th-century Louisiana, raising three smart beautiful, black girls, slavery, and more.

We had lots o'fun. So should you.

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**Robert Birnbaum:** Tell me why you wanted to write this book about a mulatto, a mixed-breed slave girl in Louisiana at the turn of the 19th century?

**Susan Straight:** This is my sixth novel and I had started a contemporary novel after the last one, *Highwire*

*Moon*. There was an abandoned baby that I was writing about. And a woman found the baby in the back of her minivan and it was a day old. And she is recently divorced. She has two sons.

**RB:** You're speaking now of the novel that you started.

**SS:** That I started—I have always written about a fictional Rio Seco. I live three blocks from where I was born. I can see the hospital where I was born out my back window.

**RB:** Otherwise known as Riverside, California.

**SS:** Otherwise known as Riverside.

**RB:** The methamphetamine capital of the world.

**SS:** We used to be the methamphetamine capital of the world.

**RB:** No more?

**SS:** We're the smog capital still. We have outsourced that—but I was writing this contemporary novel—the newly divorced woman went to see her mother-in-law and all the parents in this book are from Louisiana. Her mother-in-law says to her, "He didn't leave you. He left those boys, because he couldn't stand to invest all of his love and attention and care on them." And this woman is stunned and the mother-in-law tells the story of their slave ancestors in Louisiana. And that contemporary novel just stopped. Right there, 50 pages in. And I had to figure out what had happened during slavery in Louisiana that four generations later that this family was still dealing with the legacy. And right then I remembered this sentence I had overheard—I met my future husband in the eighth grade. We are divorced now but we were together for 30 years. So I had been in his family all this time and we were at a family gathering once and our family is married into a Louisiana family, too. There were about 400 people there.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** Yeah, our family gatherings—all the women cook and all the men barbecue. We all have our side dishes that we make.

**RB:** Can I make friends with you and get invited to one if these feasts?

**SS:** It's something. We make about 300 pounds of ribs, chicken, and sausage.

**RB:** I notice you didn't say yes.

**SS:** You can come. Sometimes there is a white person besides me. Now and then. [laughs] There are usually about 400 people, for Memorial Day or a family reunion. So anyway, my father-in-law and some other of the family were sitting around and one guy came up and says, "Y'know, how did we get to California anyway, man?" This guy was from Louisiana. And he says, "I had this beautiful daughter and Mr. So and So was going to come get her one weekend. We had to pack up and come to Riverside." And that one sentence just



stayed in my mind. Because that was in 1950. He had this beautiful light-skinned daughter who was still in jeopardy. So my three girls—

**RB:** That took place in 1950?

**SS:** That took place in 1950 and I was born in 1960, so I was probably 16 when I heard him say that. The people I grew up with had parents from Louisiana, Oklahoma, Mississippi. My mother is from Switzerland. And my stepfather is from Canada. So all of my fiction has been obsessed with how did people get to southern California, to my little postage stamp of soil. So anyway, this historical novel, it just took over. And at first I tried to braid a contemporary narrative with the historical narrative and I found that it just didn't work at all. I think you lose—one is always going to be more compelling than the other when you try to braid a contemporary with a historical.

**RB:** Have an example of a failed attempt?

**SS:** Not who failed. It just didn't work for me. Amy Tan, for example, even in the *Joy Luck Club*—and my oldest daughter is a big fan of that—she says, “Even though the contemporary part is really good I couldn't wait to get back to the older part in China.” So I am not saying it's a failure, I just couldn't figure out a way to make them equally viable and compelling.

**RB:** Let me back you up a little. You start a contemporary novel and you must have had some idea, something about the backstory—

**SS:** I did.

**RB:** So you already knew something—

**SS:** I knew something was going on and that's what—I'm kind of grateful, as a fiction writer I had never done this. With one of my novels, *Highwire Moon*, I started it when I was 19. And I didn't finish it until I was 34. But the other novels all came—I wrote them in two years or so each. And during all that time I had kids, I have three kids and I got divorced in '96 and yet I see my ex-husband every day, my mom every day—he calls me three times a day—

**RB:** (laughs)

**SS:** “What am I doing today?” And then he'll call me an hour later—

**RB:** What's the point of getting a divorce?

**SS:** No, then he listens to me when he calls me three times a day. If we were in the house [together] he wouldn't be paying attention. So yeah, I felt as if this historical novel actually had to be written—so I have a trilogy going. That's what it turns out—here was the backstory, and I would walk down the hallway and look at my three girls and they are really smart besides being beautiful, and that's frightening.

**RB:** To who?

**SS:** It's frightening because a lot of times people still expect them to be dumb or want them to be dumb. Because they are beautiful light-skinned black women.

**RB:** Really? Why do you think that? You think that or it's just a feeling you have?

**SS:** Because—they know, they know.

**RB:** They are treated like dummies?

**SS:** People don't quite know what to make of them. And my oldest one, who is going to be 17 in a couple of weeks, looks like Halle Berry but has hair down to her waist, she just got 790 out of 800 on her SAT. She's been around books. She brought me *Rolling Stone* in February and Kanye West was on the cover. And there's an interview with him and Gaiyla is a big Kanye fan. And she said, "Mom, I want you to look at this." And in there is one where Kanye is asked about this song about leaving for a white girl. So the interviewer says, "Are you against race mixing?" And Kanye's like, "No, I am all for race mixing. If we didn't have race mixing we wouldn't have video girls."

**RB:** [laughs] Race mixing presumes racial purity, which doesn't exist.

**SS:** There are no pure races. But for him to say there wouldn't be any video girls and then the next line he says, "No, my friends and I love mutts. We think mutts are great." And Gaiyla's like, "I'm not a mutt." And she says, "What is this 'video girls'? It means girls who look like me are supposed to be dancing around wearing bikinis. I am not supposed to be this intelligent." So the characters in this novel are intelligent.

**RB:** Is Riverside or Rio Seco a retarded community? Where does the idea that three variously colored girls would be automatically looked upon as dumb?

**SS:** Not dumb. [Just] not expected to be intelligent.

**RB:** And the difference?

**SS:** What I am saying is, where we live everybody is mixed-race. That's why we find it funny. It's when we go outside Riverside. When I was married in graduate school at UMass-Amherst, my husband and I never experienced the kind of things we experienced until we got to Massachusetts. Do you know where we have been made to feel like that? Here, on the East Coast. When people meet them—

**RB:** I can imagine them at a mall.

**SS:** What happens is people meet my kids [here on the East Coast] and they say this and that and then, "Oh so what do you listen to, 50 Cent?" And my daughters say, "No we listen to Cake. What do you listen to?" "Don't you and your friends listen to rap?" What I am saying is the expectation is that of certain people. In the novel I am writing about this girl who is mixed-race and she is very intelligent and you could own someone's body during slavery but you couldn't own his or her mind. So if you imagine all the wasted brilliant genius minds in 200 years of slavery. Also there are white characters, white female characters. I felt quite tender about Céphaline, the girl who dies early in the book. She dies because they're trying to fix her pimples and make her hair beautiful. They have put mercury on her face and they put lead on her hair. So she dies of lead and mercury poisoning. People used mercury back in colonial times to treat everything and most of the patients died.

**RB:** Her pimples were that unsightly?

**SS:** Once I decided I was going to write this novel, I spent five years and I read about a hundred books and historical documents and went to Louisiana twice with my neighbor, who is from east Texas. And she is five-feet-ten and she had gotten out of the military. "Let's get a truck and go to Texas." "OK." And she said, "I can kill a man with my bare hands. Remember that." "All right, you drive."

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** She was fond of saying that. Whenever anyone bothered us.

**RB:** She would announce, "I can kill a man with my bare hands"?

**SS:** We had a neighbor that was threatening us once—he was across the street from me. He was a methamphetamine guy. He was cooking—we went over to tell him to get out, told him to get out of the neighborhood. And he said he knew jujitsu. And he had seven brothers. We started laughing. And I said, “I only have one brother but he has an Uzi.” [giggles] And Julie says, “I don’t have any brothers and I can kill you with my bare hands.” [laughs] That’s when she used to pull it out. So, we went to Louisiana, to a plantation north of New Orleans called Laura—named after a girl who lived there. There was a story associated with that—another girl who had lived there in the late 1700s. Her father was the handsome son of the plantation and he was very vain and he had gone all the way to Germany to find the perfect wife in 1765. So he came back with her and he had this one child, a girl. And she was perfect in every way until she was 16. She developed *boutons*, or pimples. So they completely lost their minds because she didn’t look perfect. And they sent her to Paris where she was injected with something and died. And they brought her body back to the plantation and buried her and the mother went into her bedroom and never came out for 42 years. Not to eat, not to use the bathroom. Nothing. For 42 years.

**RB:** Here’s what puzzled me. Historians will say that the history of slaves and poor people is not written. So what were the documents that you relied on to get these stories?

**SS:** You know where I found most of my source material? In court documents. Most slaves never learned to read or write, of course. They were banned from reading and writing under the Americans. The French didn’t care. The Spanish didn’t care. First Louisiana was French, then Spanish, then French, and then American. Under the American laws, things became more and more restrictive. Under the French law, though, slaves could buy their own freedom. But they couldn’t free a slave until a slave was 21. They bought their parents and freed them immediately. But if you bought a child, which is what happened in this novel, you couldn’t free that child until they were 21. Some of the things I read, I read a lot of court documents and I have to tell you I read things like estate sale documents from 1797 and I am a fiction writer—I mean, I’m perfectly willing to take a fact and make the imaginative leap because that’s what I do, what I love to do. So I held this one estate sale document in my hands. I got a copy of it in Louisiana and brought it home. On the right side of the document is listed the human property that’s being sold and on the left the physical property and it goes on for several pages. On the right hand side you have all the slaves and slaves only had first names. They couldn’t have last names.

**RB:** What of their tribal origins?

**SS:** You had their names and their birth origins. If it said Creole they had been born in Louisiana. If it said Bambara, or Senegalese, they were presuming where the slave had come from. So, anyway, at the bottom of this list on this document from Pointe Coupee Parish, from 1797, there is a name, and it says Creole, which means she was born on that plantation, probably. She is 60 years old and she is worth \$5. And on the other side, there’s an armoire, linens, and a set of preserve dishes, which are \$25. So I went walked around my house and I look at that and held it in my hands—at that point the woman was 60. She was born there and she was worth nothing. And she was certainly a grandmother, probably. Things like that and looking at books of photography. I looked at old photographs. Those were the ways that I imagined. And then the court documents, like I said. There was a real, live women who partially inspired the woman Moinette, a woman who bought her own son and then couldn’t free him. And she ended up having to mortgage him out a few times and then he disappeared from the court documents. She never learned to read or write, that woman.

**You are 14 or 15 and  
you are supposed to be  
thin and you are not  
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It seems like we have  
regressed right now**

## and for teenaged girls, they are still prey.

**RB:** The character does.

**SS:** The character does but the real-life woman didn't, so that's exactly—your question is so interesting because the way

I know about my family by marriage—slave ancestry—is only through all the stories everyone tells. I have always been obsessed with the oral storytelling in my neighborhood versus the actual facts you can get. In *The Gettin Place* I wrote about the Tulsa riots, which was family legend.

**RB:** There was a book about them relatively recently.

**SS:** Finally, but for years and years—we knew about them for years. My husband's great-aunt gave birth to her first baby that night, during the riot. She had to drive herself and she had never even been in a car. Her husband was locked in a basement to be saved—

**RB:** Wasn't Toni Morrison's *Paradise* about those?

**SS:** It had a riot but not that one. My novel, and *Magic City*, and one other novel.

**RB:** This direction that you took with your character Moinette made me think of the novel that Brian Hall wrote of Lewis and Clark and the Indian girl/guide, Sacajawea—she speaks no English but he has a wonderful way of making first-person narration for a character for who, you know their language is not yours, the readers. It rang true without relying on the natural language. It seemed close to her linguistic boundaries. There is a section where Moinette goes off and says there is no "I." Or was it her mother?

**SS:** It was her mother. What it is was in Louisiana in that time, it was such a unique place in American culture in the late 1700s. You had Swiss mercenary soldiers who had their own laws and rules. You had French settlers, French-Canadian trappers who didn't even speak the same French as the French settlers. You had people coming from Paris because they had been given huge tracts of land and they didn't speak the same French as the Acadians. And the African slaves from seven, eight, nine different nations who spoke Congo, Bambara. And then you had German settlers. And then Native Americans who had their own distinct languages. So, for example, I speak French, which helped out, but when went to Louisiana my French—actually my mother is from Switzerland, the same thing with German there. She speaks a very particular dialect of Swiss German. Which, if you go to Germany, they have no idea what you are saying. So Moinette thinks that if everyone is an animal in the end what's the difference between your language and the food you eat and your bones and all these things. And the truth is, if there is English and if there is French, if there is African it all melds to become this Creole language—what is it then, and what are we then?

**RB:** I was thinking of the diminution or dismissal of person and personhood When the mother says there is no "I," it is as if to say they are not recognized as people.

**SS:** They are not. I think if you imagined being 16 years old and prey, you are constant prey, and everywhere you go you are prey and you are navigating in these different worlds in Louisiana. First you are in southern Louisiana, south of New Orleans and then you are in New Orleans and then you are in Opelousas, but you are constantly navigating this plantation, which has its own rules and boundaries. You get sold to one plantation, you are punished in one way. And then you go to the next place and you'd be punished in a different way. It would be like being dropped into a different planet every time you moved. And you are always seen as prey. Moinette does start to see herself almost as not even human. She is just, "Here I am. I'm this..." Then she has a baby and she doesn't want to love the baby. Because why? Why should you love this baby? I think you are right. There is one part in the novel—I remember writing this because it was so strange, where she says, "I have to be quick in my mind and slow in my mouth." And then people are measuring you and judging you and you're holding these words in because you are thinking, "Should I let someone know that I think this? Would this be dangerous?" You can imagine the constrictions you feel walking through the day like that. In some ways, again, young women still walk through the day like this. They're supposed to be obsessed with their looks. Society still assigns 90 percent [of their] value to their looks,

young women. So you are 14 or 15 and you are supposed to be thin and you are not eating, and you are supposed to have the right Ugg boots, not the knockoffs, and are you supposed to be smart? What does someone want from you? It seems like we have regressed right now and for teenaged girls, they are still prey.

**RB:** Regressed from what?

**SS:** From the brief period in which [chuckles]—you know what was thinking about the other day? I was thinking of the power-suit era of the '80s. Remember when women were in the workforce and they had the big shoulder pads and the big hair and they looked very powerful? In a sense, didn't they? And I am not saying I am nostalgic for the '80s, I'm saying that was really weird to think about that and then I am looking at, again, I got these three girls. My house is full of girls. All the time—there is Keisha eating and Anastasia comes over and I have a whole basketball team of girls. And there are always girls eating at my house and talking at my house and I am looking at the way they look at themselves and what they think is expected of them. And they are not looking at, "I'm going to get a job and wear a suit and have this great apartment." That's not them—instead they are looking at Paris Hilton, who is skinny and has a lot of money. That to me is a bit of a regression, I'm going to say it. And then my-soon-to-be 17-year-old is navigating this world where people are expecting certain things of her. And you know what? Sometimes she is very quiet and I see her judging and looking, and she reads a book a day. So she is—she likes Jane Austen. She loves Jane Austen.

**RB:** Really. As a high school kid I read a lot, but I could not read the assigned books, many of which were classics.

**SS:** I couldn't either, and I was reading James Baldwin and Toni Morrison, and I was obsessed with those James Michener books, I thought those were the greatest books in the world.

**RB:** Yeah, yeah, *Hawaii*—

**SS:** I loved them. I learned everything. Leon Uris, *Exodus*, I read all those books and refused the Nathaniel Hawthornes and the stuff I was assigned. But Gaiyla loves everything, I have to say. Here's the funny thing. She loves Jane Austen, so I reread Jane Austen. Which I never was assigned in high school. Where I went to high school if you stayed in the back of the class and you didn't hurt anybody, you got a C.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** That's how it was. So I read. I read all the time but Gaiyla was reading Jane Austen and Edith Wharton—she was obsessed with Edith Wharton this year and so we read all of Edith Wharton and we started to see our world in very Jane Austen-like terms. Think about it. So we would go to certain things, especially prom. [At] prom we have a lot of wealthy friends and a lot of really poor friends. And we are right in the middle—so [at] prom we were checking out all the people. And Gaiyla said, "What do you think about this?" and I said, "It's exactly like the ball at Netherfield." I said there were the Bingleys over there, and there are your friends so-and-so, and over here were the Lucases. And we were cracking up because we were walking around looking at society as still being stratified in the same ways—you had the people that had a Pemberly. We decided we lived in Lucas Lodge. We were like right there, in the middle. It's a very funny way to look at the world. Again, for someone who looks like Halle Berry. You see what I'm saying. You are going to look at her and you are going to think, *What is she doing reading Jane Austen and making jokes about Pemberly?* Where you wouldn't say that if she were blonde. And when she navigates through the world, I am looking at her and the way she is navigating and—

**RB:** What are your aspirations for her?

**SS:** My aspirations for her are already complete. She reads a book a day. She loves language. She calls me four times a day. She is a kindred spirit in that way. What ever she decided to do, I would be happy. But she is the sports editor for her paper and she loves to write. She is a better essay writer than I was at that age. Certainly. She likes to edit. Wouldn't it be great if she were an editor? That would be wonderful. Maybe she'll be a writer. That would be sad.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** She is not going to make any money. She is going to come back home. Anyway, the second one is a basketball player and a track star, and she is very beautiful, too. And my youngest one is a dog person. She has a dog-walking and dog-grooming business. Yeah. She is the child of mine that looks the most Indian. So when I was working in this novel and I had gone to Louisiana, I had brought back a piece of sugar cane for her because she—we have a lot of friends from Mexico and El Salvador and they like to eat sugar cane. So Rosette said to me, “Why did you go to Louisiana, and where is the sugar from?” And when we had that discussion and we talked about slavery—because she asked me how did I get Indian in me? She was only five when she was asking me this. I told her the story of her dad’s ancestor who was half Cherokee, and half African. And she stopped and put her hands on her hips and she’s like, “What do you mean they bought somebody? You can’t buy people.” Five years old when we had that talk about that concept. And that information went into her brain, her five-year-old brain, and she thought, “My people were owned at one time.” See, that is permanent information encoded into her system, and that’s what I think about when I am raising these kids. And so all of that to me is what works its way—I process this stuff during the day the same way we all do, right, but then at night, after my kids go to bed, y’know, I am writing fiction every night, and I stay up until midnight or one o’clock, and those are the things I’m thinking about.

**RB:** There were a number of references to the illegality of bringing slaves in to the U.S.—when did that happen?

**SS:** It was outlawed in 1809. And there was actually a slave ship that landed on the South Carolina coast. It was an illegal slave ship that landed after that. What happened is that it was made illegal to bring to slaves—to import slaves from Africa and part of that was economic. The Virginia colonies were already exhausted, soilwise. And they wanted to be able to sell their slaves to Louisiana, so you had this huge exodus of slaves from Virginia and the Carolinas, and they were sold down the river, which is where the term came from. And they were sold west to Arkansas, which was deadly at the time, for cotton. As the soil was exhausted, the exodus of slaves began. People still wanted African slaves and they were allowed to import Africans to Cuba and Haiti and the Caribbean. That’s why Jean Lafitte, who is in the novel, he and his crew would hijack slave ships and sell the slaves because people wanted fresh Africans. They would sell the slaves in a place called the Baratavia. They had a place called the Temple and I went and looked at it. It’s this place that’s deep in the marshes of the Baratavia, and they held slave auctions there. And people would go down there and buy 10 Africans. It was against the law. But Jean Lafitte and his partners made lots of money doing it. At that time, in 1811, 1812, there also was the famous battle—the Battle of New Orleans. You had free men of color, Indians, newly arrived Africans—this huge mix of people.

**RB:** What is your reaction to the aftermath of the devastation in New Orleans? It was argued by some that it would be a waste of time to rebuild New Orleans.

**SS:** I just had this conversation with someone, too. I am going to New Orleans to speak to the American Library Association. They are having their convention there. So there will be hundreds of librarians there. I’m looking forward to it. I heard some people don’t want to go. I went to Louisiana twice—

**RB:** There was the suggestion that it wasn’t worth rebuilding—

**SS:** I said, “Let’s say Boston was vulnerable to hurricanes, which it has been in the past, right? Let’s say because of global warming and a shift in climate, it became vulnerable year after year. And ten, 25 years down the line you had a devastating hurricane and someone said, ‘It’s too much trouble. We can’t do it.’ Do you think Boston would stand for that?”

**RB:** Course not, but this is a white community.

**SS:** But New Orleans was 70 percent African-American and it becomes much easier for the federal government—in my community, in the black community, this is common

## How would most

knowledge, people say, “Of course they don’t want to rebuild New Orleans.” I have lots and lots of friends whose parents were born in New Orleans—when I went to do research for the novel I spent time south of New Orleans in Plaquemines Parish, where Jean Lafitte operated and where the novel is set. And one of the few places that survived south of New Orleans was this plantation house from 1790. I looked it up on the web and it was surrounded by water but the high ground that it stood on, it’s still completely intact. Things that were built in the ’50s and ’60s and ’70s were completely washed away. What’s really weird is that it was owned and built by river pirates who were in league with Jean Lafitte. They used to go down the river and steal slaves while they were out washing clothes or something and bring them back then sell them in New Orleans. So it’s very eerie that it survived, and we spent the night there and I mean, it was very strange.

## Americans feel if this many months after a disaster you couldn’t have basic services?

**RB:** New Orleans seems to be the most interesting community in the U.S.A. The most unusual and—

**SS:** Exactly and the most preserved. Think about the history, think about the fact that a lot of people are like, “Well, those people don’t even speak English down there, why should we rebuild it?”

**RB:** No one speaks English-English.

**SS:** Well and look at how many people that we know from Louisiana have preserved their culture intact for hundreds of years and that does include partially speaking French and eating exactly the same food that their ancestors lived on—that’s a great thing. That’s not a bad thing. I think what people in Louisiana feel, not just in New Orleans but outside the city as well, especially south and in St. Bernard Parish, is that rejection you feel when the federal government says, “Well I don’t know if it’s really worth it.” Of course, if it’s your birthplace, you want to feel as if you are worth it.

**RB:** How much worse could they feel after being abandoned? There has been this sense of shock that conditions could be as horrible as they were and are.

**SS:** I had two activists come to Riverside in early November and I gave them \$1,000 to come and present photos, a photo essay—they were a photojournalist and a filmmaker—and I put them up in a hotel because they hadn’t had a shower. She was Yuma Indian and her grandmother doesn’t speak English, she speaks French and Yuma. And they live in St. Bernard Parish, which is one of the ones most devastated. [St. Bernard Parish, on the eastern side of New Orleans, suffered the brunt of the storm’s winds and water.—eds.] The grandmother, who is 98, rode out the storm in her canoe. In her pirogue, and this Monique and her grandmother took a tour of the house and the church in the Indian community and that’s the film that she presented, she and her partner Mark, and he is Cajun. And he liked to joke that the Cajun people would always survive because they will eat anything, and they can shoot and eat anything. They emailed me two months later and they still had no shower and it was Christmastime, and they said that there were just clusters of lights in the city and that people were finally going to get new refrigerators because they hadn’t had any refrigerators since September. And they live in the middle-class part of New Orleans. And they said what was the worst thing was that no one could drive, and people were putting the refrigerators on hand carts and wheeling them a mile or so home. And Mark said, “It looked like third-world country. And this is America, this is where I live, that’s an ultimate betrayal.” It’s that now, right now you still have places that haven’t been touched, because people are still dickering about should we rebuild the levees, should we do this? Again, how would most Americans feel if this many months after a disaster you couldn’t have basic services? If an earthquake hit Los Angeles can you imagine eight, nine months later people still without any basic services? Their houses still in rubble. No, that wouldn’t happen. So it all comes down to the same thing it always does—which is money.

**RB:** I’m not clear about what you are referring to as a trilogy.

**SS:** What I meant by trilogy is that *A Million Nightingales* is the first in the trilogy. And I have gone back to the contemporary novel now and in *A Million Nightingales* you have Moinette, and there is a character named Fantine. She is a pretty minor character but the people I am writing about now are the descendents of Moinette and Fantine. And they live in a place like Riverside, my fictional Rio Seco, the neighborhood I always write about. The descendents of Moinette and Fantine are five women, and their parents all moved at the same time in the '50s from Louisiana to a place like Riverside and moved there because they had these five beautiful daughters and there was a serial rapist, an older white man, who was stalking them. And one by one, these families all moved to California and they made their own community. And in this community is where the next two books are set. And there is still the abandoned baby, and that's what I am working on now.

**RB:** Why do writers do trilogies? Why not quartets or quintets?

**SS:** I have no idea. I have only learned to say "trilogy" recently, so give me a break. I still stand up there and think I if I were Cormac McCarthy, who said, "I'm writing the Border trilogy," I would remember this but I barely even remember. So don't give me a hard time about a quartet! What I think is that all my novels have had recurring characters, anyway. Ever since *Aquaboogie*. So if this is my sixth and the first one to depart from having some of the same characters, then I would think more of my work like Louise Erdrich, someone whom I adore very much. [In her books] we have these characters and have this place, and we are writing about generations of people living in the same place.

**RB:** And William Kennedy.

**SS:** He's one of my favorite writers as well, I love his work.

**RB:** And Faulkner.

**SS:** What's really funny is I was in Albany, outside of Albany I was talking to someone and I was in New York City. And I was explaining to them that my poor husband—when we came back from UMass-Amherst after I got my master's, we came right home, and we have never left after that. But we had this \$500 car. He had wrecked our car during graduate school because he was driving on black ice and kept joking around that he was black, so black ice wouldn't bother him. Then he wrecked our car. So we had this \$500 car we bought from this Algerian guy and I told him we had to go to Lorraine, Ohio, on the way home because that's where Toni Morrison's books are all set, the first four in Lorraine, Ohio. So he was like, "We gotta go where? We gotta go why?" So we are in Lorraine, Ohio, and driving around and it looked pretty bad, the neighborhood we were in, and he looked at me, "Why are we here? What are we doing?" And a piece of our car fell off, and we had to hang around and get it fixed, right. And then he's like, "Have you had enough? Did you get what you came for?" "Yes." We kept driving, kept driving, and we ended up going to New Mexico because I wanted to see Laguna, because that's where Leslie Marmon Silko's books are all set, in Laguna Pueblo. We got a flat tire there.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** Had to wait all this time to get the tire fixed, and he said "I can't believe you are making me drive around this place. What are we doing in this one?" And I told him the story of *Ceremony*; I told him the novel on the way home. He likes hearing me tell stories. He won't read the book so he wants me to tell him the story. So on the road tour that I have been on for this book, I've been thinking of these wonderful fictional landscapes and some of my favorite novelists are mystery writers—I was thinking of George Pelecanos's Washington. Dennis Lehane's Boston. I have read every Dennis Lehane book. It's not always accurate, but it's his Boston.

**RB:** Chuck Hogan does Boston well...

**SS:** Here's what's funny: I was thinking of William Kennedy's Albany, so I am glad you brought it up—nobody brings it up any more and William Kennedy is amazing. I was thinking of Walter Mosley's L.A. I love Mosley's work. And he is a good friend, and I often think of his distinctive vision of L.A. that he brought, ever since *Devil in a Blue Dress*, which nobody knew. And then I think of Louise Erdrich

and my Riverside, which I am sure nobody is going to come to Riverside to look around, but what a great essay that would be. About all these places.

**RB:** What about Chicago?

**SS:** I couldn't think of anyone for Chicago.

**RB:** There was Eugene Izzi but he died under mysterious circumstances.

**SS:** My favorite Chicago writer is Stuart Dybek.

**RB:** Good choice.

**SS:** So I'm going with Stuart Dybek.

**RB:** I was thinking more of the crime stories.

**SS:** I couldn't think of anyone. Isn't there a Sara—

**RB:** Paretsky? Not impressive.

**SS:** I don't know her work at all, I'll confess have never read them. So when I was thinking of Chicago, I was there on Tuesday. In New York City on Monday and I was thinking about Jerome Charyn. I love his work—

**RB:** He has a recent bio of Isaac Babel.

**SS:** He writes great stuff. And then in Chicago, Dybek.

**RB:** There was anthology a few years ago called *The Place Within*, in which writers opined on this topic of place.

**SS:** I don't know that my Riverside is ever going to be as compelling as someone's Chicago or Boston.

**RB:** Why not? It could be. We are talking in the make-believe world of fiction.

**SS:** It should be. Maybe. We'll see.

**RB:** So you have charted what you are going to be doing for the next few years? Are you going to continue to teach?

**SS:** Ten more years. I know what I am doing for the next 10 years. I have a 10-year-old. I know I am always going to have to work. And I know the next three books.

**RB:** Maybe not. Another Lannan [Foundation Award]?

**SS:** That was a long time ago. I have three kids—that's a lot of kids. That's lots of laundry. A lot of food. We live pretty darn cheap and I am lucky that my kids don't expect to get \$100 sneakers and stuff—we shop at Old Navy twice a year, because it's 30 miles, [snickers] but I know for the next 10 years—I

**T.C. Boyle, he did talk  
to me, when I was a**

have my house where I've been for 18 years. I have been in my job for 18 years. My husband has been at his job for 20 years. He is a correctional officer. He works at a juvenile prison. He coaches my middle daughter's basketball team and my oldest daughter is going off to college, and I have chickens and rabbits and I have a big yard—

**RB:** No dog?

**SS:** We are going to get a dog as soon as I'm done with this trip. Our dog died the day before Thanksgiving. And we'd had him for all of my youngest daughter's life—so she's been very sad, and every time I come home she cries and says, "When do we get the dog?" Its really strange, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to stay in my house. And write these books and go to a lot of basketball games.

**RB:** Would you give up teaching if you could?

**SS:** I like teaching. It's a lot of work. But, you know what, I have—we have an MFA now, and I founded it with another professor. A professor of theater. We co-founded this MFA four years ago. So I have former student who has a book coming out from Random House next spring. It's about Colton, Calif. His name is Alex Espinosa. He is writing about the next community over from Riverside. And he calls it Agua Mansa. All chicano. I'm so proud—I had him as an undergraduate, and another student Michael Jaime-Becerra who had a novel out from Rayo, Harper Collins, called *Every Night Is Ladies' Night*. And its story's set in El Monte—Mexican and Mexican-Americans. So I am really proud of my students.

**RB:** Are your students of lower economic origins?

**SS:** Yeah. We are the most diverse campus, I think, in the nation. We have 25 percent Caucasian-American students.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** Maybe 30 percent. But we are 60 percent Asian and Asian-American. We have a huge concentration of Latino students. Right now I have a great graduate student who is from Boston. He is half-Guatemalan and half-Irish. He's writing these great essays, creative non-fiction about his Irish background and his Guatemalan background played out against Boston. So I think people come to study with me because they know I'm going to say, "You write about your community that nobody else has ever heard of. You write about your Turtle Mountain Reservation like Louise Erdrich or Albany like William Kennedy." So I have these students who write about communities that they feel tender toward. And a lot of Chicano students.

**RB:** You said earlier that you hoped that your daughter would become an editor, not a writer—

**SS:** [chuckles]

**RB:** So why aren't you counseling your students to [laughs] find other work?

**SS:** You want the truth?

**RB:** Yeah, sure.

**senior, and he encouraged me and that conversation we had was a basis for me having some confidence in myself and he was amazing. And I was very sorry that I never took his class. I was a big chicken.**

**SS:** If you are cut out to do this, this is what you do. You know that.

**RB:** Yeah, yeah.

**SS:** I always tease them and I say, “Well you have to be a sick puppy if you want to keep doing this.” And you can tell from the beginning can’t you, who is really cut out for this? Because they’re obsessed. And my student Alex, I knew he had it—he was really raw the same way I was—so raw when I got to UMass. I mean I was still raw, grammatically.

**RB:** Even after U.S.C.?

**SS:** I was a sportswriter at U.S.C.

**RB:** Even though you avoided taking T.C. Boyle’s classes?

**SS:** You knew that? [laughs] I looked at T.C. Boyle and I thought, *Man, he looks like this biker dude from Fontana.*

**RB:** T.C.?

**SS:** He’s the nicest guy on the planet. I didn’t think he was mean. I just thought—I left Riverside so I wouldn’t have to hang out with biker dudes.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** I wasn’t afraid of him, I’d heard he was nice. But I just—I don’t know what was wrong with me. I took the same two professors over and over again at U.S.C. Because I wasn’t afraid of them. And when I was at U.S.C I hung out with football players. And I was a sportswriter and didn’t have the best grammar and I had crappy clothes. And I was from Riverside. And so a lot of these students at U.S.C they’d be like “Where are you from?” And I’d say, “Riverside,” and then “What do you have out there?” And yeah, I’d say, “We have methamphetamine. We have cows.” And I couldn’t do it. A lot of the time at U.S.C, I felt like I was really from the country. So T.C. Boyle, he did talk to me, when I was a senior, and he encouraged me and that conversation we had was a basis for me having some confidence in myself and he was amazing. And I was very sorry that I never took his class. I was a big chicken.

**RB:** You studied with James Baldwin, yes?

**SS:** I did, and what happened when I got to UMass—now, I’d been a sportswriter and an editor, and I’d only been writing fiction for a year. So I still was very raw. And Jay Neugeboren, who taught for years at UMass and now lives in New York City, he was the one who really taught me to line-edit. He taught me to go through my work and make it as perfect as it could be.

**RB:** As you went along?

**SS:** No, after you’re done. You get that first draft out. And you know, I turned the very first short story to him and of course it was all black, right. And he didn’t say “What are you doing?” He said, “This is wonderful. Come see me.” And then he would go through and show me how, “You see where you did this here, really this story starts on the third page. Think about what you were doing on the first page.” He was just great. And then I was so lucky to have had James Baldwin, too. He would say things like, “This character here is the key to the story.” And of course it’s a very minor character. And I’m looking at him like, *What is he taking about?* And he was right. Every time. He would say, “Go home and think about this character, Leonard.” In some of my very first short stories. And I would go home and I was married and Dwayne and James Baldwin got along really well. Dwayne was this huge guy, six-feet-four.

**RB:** Baldwin was this teeny-tiny guy.

**SS:** Yeah but he had these two assistants, Skip and Rico, and they were big black guys who liked to play basketball. So they would go out and shoot baskets with Dwayne, and Skip and Rico and Dwayne would hang out for hours—James Baldwin and I got to talk. It was great. I couldn't say how lucky I was. But Baldwin would say things like "Go home and think about Leonard." And I'm going, "Leonard?" Here he is, like, this minor character. He was immensely helpful the way he taught me to think about these larger questions and Jay showing me how to fine-tune and line-edit the work and clean it up. I couldn't have asked for a better education.

**RB:** Are you aware of—allow me to editorialize, the *New York Times* has done stupid stuff by asking people what the best novel of the past 25 years—are you aware of this?

**SS:** No.

**RB:** They had the genius idea to ask a hundred-plus literary people, editors, writers critics, who knows what.

**SS:** For one best novel—I would never be able to answer that question. Who would ask what the best song is?

**RB:** Well, sure but can you guess the choice?

**SS:** No.

**RB:** *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.

**SS:** Really? That's not my favorite Toni Morrison novel. My favorite novel is *Sula*. I read *Sula* every year and I read *Ceremony* by Silko every year.

**RB:** For how many years?

**SS:** Since I was in graduate school.

**RB:** I tried doing that with *100 Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera* but I could only do it for a few years.

**SS:** I can read them every year, and every three or four years I will read *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and I'll read *Little Women*. I wrote the introduction to the new edition of *Little Women*. I found myself staying up all night to finish it.

**RB:** The introduction or reading the novel?

**SS:** The book. It took me six months to write the introduction. I wanted to make sure it was good; I love the book so much. But this asking about the best novel of the last 25 years, that's not a question—you wouldn't ask the best song or the best movie or the best president.

**RB:** I wondered if a larger group was asked and many people demurred.

**SS:** I wonder, too. I wouldn't have answered. If someone had asked me, I wouldn't have answered. I have been asked my favorite 10 and I have answered, but I have qualified my answer with, "I am not the person who has read the most books in the world so my 10 are going clearly to be colored by

**I got people whose  
parents are from**

my consciousness and where I came from, whereas your 10 are going to be totally different.” And Jay Neugeboren’s are going to be different from that. And Ernest Gaines’s 10 are going to be full of his favorite writers. I was one of the vilified judges on the famous National Book Award panel. [Five women writers from New York City were chosen as finalists for the award.—eds.] Remember? I didn’t know they were from New York—it’s not like I ran into them at my grocery store in Riverside. I wrote an essay about it for the *Believer*. And people said we were insiders and I’m like, look you could say that about Rick Moody, you could say that about other people. But I live in Riverside. I mean, people were calling me, we had conference calls, and I am on the other side of the world. The other side of the continent, in a sense, from New York City. OK? I had no idea where these people were from. Or what they did. I live in a place where no one ever discusses books or talks about books with me. I can go months without talking about books to anyone in my acquaintance. My neighbor and I talk about the methamphetamine dealer next door, now a prostitute lives there. We’re going to chase her out, too. We go [into] survival mode every day. So for me, reading for the National Book Award—[almost a whisper] I got 300 books delivered at my house.

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** And all my neighbors couldn’t figure out what the heck, they were like, “What the heck are you doing over there, staying up all night?”

**RB:** You made friends with your UPS guy.

**SS:** I gave him a cake for Christmas. I looked at those books like a treasure, “Look at this, I got 300 free books!” And when I read them, I read each with immense pleasure. I was able to give so many books to my students, for gifts and to my neighbors and to my grocery store checker. She loves books. And I gave her about 20 books. It was funny. But to ask me the best five books of that year was also a difficult question. But the five of us had a wonderful time. And then to get mad at us because we picked books by five women who happened to live in New York City was immensely unfair. I paid no attention to that. Like I said, I’d be the last person—I had to go to get a dress to wear to the book awards and my three girls and my mom had to go to the mall, and we don’t go to the mall very often. And my mother said, “Why are you are in trouble?” I said, “Because they are angry that the books were all by women,” and my mother, who is from Switzerland, who came here by herself. She left her family in Fontana and moved to Riverside when she was 17, and has lived on her own ever since—she had a horrible life. And they tried to marry her to pig farmer. She got a job with an alcoholic manager of a household finance company and she did his job for him and she wrote to them and said, “I deserve to be manager.” And they wrote back to her and said “It will be a cold day in hell before we make a woman a manager.” And so since I was little my mother has been telling me this story. She said, “You’re in trouble because you picked five women? Let’s go get you a good dress.”

**RB:** [laughs]

**SS:** She was furious.

**Michoacan, Mazatlan, and from Oaxaca, from Veracruz. They eat all different kinds of food, the same way people from Brooklyn are not going to eat what someone in Louisiana eats, who is not going to be eating what someone in Chicago eats. So that’s what fiction is supposed to be, to me. In that why would you want to have one book be the great American novel?**

**RB:** I didn't get the responses. I thought, *So what? Saying a person is from New York is not informative, it doesn't tell you anything, really.*

**SS:** Why are those of us, and again I am going to go with Louise Erdrich, I am going to go with A. Manette Ansay, me and some other of my favorite writers—we're writing big social novels, I know we are. But why are we called in some ways different than a guy who lives in New York of whom it could always be said, "Oh, so and so's latest is a great American novel. It's a great social novel."

**RB:** Are yours called domestic novels?

**SS:** No one can call them anything because no one knows where to put them. But ours, in a sense, are called regional novels. And when you think about *The Corrections*, which was a great novel. But it's regional, too, is it not? It's an East Coast novel. You know who's a great writer? Tim Gautreaux.

**RB:** Yes, he is. I loved *The Clearing*. A great book

**SS:** Thank you, that was a great book. Why is he a regional writer?

**RB:** Southerners have always carried that burden.

**SS:** What am I? I am someone writing about southern California and the South and race and class and sex.

**RB:** You know, these are lazy and thoughtless classifications. It's part of the same culture that asks a question no one has previously cared about—what is the best novel of the past 25 years?

**SS:** [laughs] You didn't like that, did you?

**RB:** I'm that obvious, huh?

**SS:** What I will say to you is when I went to Tim Huggn's store last night, Newtonville Books, I had the best time. Because Tim is a guy who had everybody in that store that I love. Peter Ormer, a great new novel, by the way. I've been out selling it with mine. I hold up mine and I hold up his right next to it. I'll sell Tim Gautreaux, Peter Ormer—I'll tell people how much I love ZZ Packer's stories, I got no problem with that. And if we are all regionalists, but we all show the same passion for our work—I would never want Tim Gautreaux not to write about what he writes about.

**RB:** Do you know Steve Yarbrough's work?

**SS:** I like his work very much. That's what Tim and I were talking about last night. You have all these great regional writers. That's really truly American in a sense. Why would you want to have a great American novel, which would mean it had to blandly cover too much ground? When I was writing *Highwire Moon*, I was having a lot fun with the idea of being from California. I have a lot of friends whose parents were born in Mexico, right? But you don't say, "Oh you like Mexican food?" That would be like saying we eat hamburgers every day. I got people whose parents are from Michoacan, Mazatlan, and from Oaxaca, from Veracruz. They eat all different kinds of food, the same way people from Brooklyn are not going to eat what someone in Louisiana eats, who is not going to be eating what someone in Chicago eats. So that's what fiction is supposed to be, to me. In that why would you want to have one book be the great American novel? When you have Chicago and Albany and southern California.

**RB:** Aw, you know why.

**SS:** There is no reason to.

**RB:** There is—it's the convenience of marketing.

**SS:** That has nothing to do with art.

**RB:** Sure, but who has the louder voice, you or the marketing managers or the editors at the *New York Times Book Review*?

**SS:** But it doesn't matter because we have more voices. So as long as I am loving Peter Ormer's work and as long as Dave Eggers is working so hard on McSweeney's Books to get out voices and as long as Tim Gautreaux is out there and look at Ernest Gaines—he was seminal writer for me. He moved from Louisiana.

**RB:** What has he published lately?

**SS:** Some essays, *Mozart and Leadbelly*.

**RB:** Is he considered a Southern writer, still?

**SS:** That's what so great. He moved to California and yet he still writes with such immediacy and a passion about Louisiana, which is where the parents of my friends left to come to California—that's why we are all connected, that's why if I could still read a book a day, I would read a book a day.