

Q: When did you decide you wanted to study literature, and what is your earliest memory of enjoying literature?

A: It was, I think, pretty early on, although I wouldn't have known what studying consisted of. But I do remember that on the BBC in those days, rather than having Jonathan Ross, they had serializations of old novels. I remember they had lots of Victorian classics like Thackeray's *Pendennis*, *Doctor Thorne* by Trollope. They were all very good; because they were dramatizations, they interested you in the voices as well, because they weren't just like you'd have now, a celebrity recording this thing; you had a full cast of actors. From then I went to reading things like Charles Kingsley and Walter de la Mare and such.

Q: Have you been interested in drama all through—

A: Yeah, I think so. Although in the provinces in England there were correspondingly fewer opportunities to see it in those days, because the music hall had died off, and the actual drama companies rarely ventured into the provinces. So, basically, a lot of it was by hearsay. Local productions tended to be things like, "Murder at the Gallop" or "Sailor Beware," that kind of thing; British comedy of a really rather fatuous kind.

Q: Where did you go to college?

A: I went to the University of Warwick, which was a new university. It had only been open since the middle of the 1960s and I went at the start of the 1970s. Big, ugly building with lots of white tile that was all falling off. In *Changing Places*, David Lodge makes fun of that. But the "Plate Glass Universities" as they called them, as distinct from red brick, as distinct from Uxbridge and London which were very adventurous in their curricula, so they didn't do the same kind of—it was explained to me years later that it was an opportunity for faculty to experiment with different curricula. Essex was well known for its Marxist bent; Sussex was well known for a certain philosophical and religious bent, so they all had their various ways of skewing.

Q: What was Warwick known for?

A: Warwick was known for actually being very interested in Europe. The History department had a man called Jack Hale, who was knighted, and he had a great interest in Italian history. The professor who founded the English department was also interested in the Renaissance, and his book list, as I recall, had things like Burkhart and Huizinga rather than the standard English classics.

Q: Now, you called it a "Plate Glass University"? Is that because of its architecture?

A: Yeah, because it was all sort of airport lounge architecture. There's a famous story about George Steiner, the rather snobby and very traditionalist literary critic, being at one of them giving a lecture, and they say apologetically to him, "Well, you know, of course it can't compete architecturally. I mean, you must have heard it is an airport lounge." And Steiner says, "I guess, but in an airport at least fun is going somewhere else!"

Q: Do you think those universities were built in response to the loss of architecture and heritage through the bombings?

A: No, I think that the story is that they were built because of the swelling in post-war demographics. You know, many more people being born after the baby boom. Whereas the civic – what I call the "Red Brick Universities" – were built in the great industrial centers, Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Leicester, Nottingham, these were built around some kind of nice county town where they could safely install students away from the life of the community. The idea wasn't that they should indulge in, but they did indulge in much more of the Sixties type culture. They were York, Kent, which is in Kent Canterbury, the cathedral city; York is another cathedral city. Warwick is, although it's really outside Coventry. Essex would be the exception to that.

Q: Are there particular professors from Warwick that you recall fondly?

A: Yeah! I was friends with George Hunter and Claude Rawson for years. George just died recently. Both were at Yale in their latter years. Harold Beaver, who taught somewhat reluctantly at DU for a time and taught at Amsterdam, and had a great booming voice and a huge—he must have been about 6'6"—he must have been one of the best lecturers. Coe, in the French department. Because being in Europe, when we did a course called *The European Novel* the French department took over the French half of it, and so you weren't getting an English graduate's cooked up idea of what a French novel was, the French department took over that half of it, and a guy called Richard Coe lectured on French and Russian novels. He could speak Russian, Bulgarian, French and a few others, and he was a memorable lecturer, always very clear, always great to hear.

Q: Any other prominent figures that you worked with?

A: Yeah, well, Hunter and Rawson I suppose; they were my teachers when I was there. Gay Clifford, who was a very clever, beautiful, and impossible woman, who died unfortunately—had a car accident in Virginia and never really recovered from that—she was pretty prominent. Germaine Greer didn't do much for me but she was a prominent figure in the way that when I came she was on her way out—I think had resigned—and gone off to be a media figure. Richard Coe must have been as prominent as anybody, and ended up at Davis. Strangely enough, he wrote books on Ionesco, Beckett, Genet. He didn't write anything about French Realism; that was one of the funny things about that system, that often people areas and what they lectured on were quite different.

Q: And where did you go after Warwick?

A: I went to Leeds after Warwick, which was not a happy business. The man who was assigned to my supervisor was a man called Jack Morpurgo, whose qualifications for being a professor of American literature seemed to have been to have met influential people in America in the war. It wouldn't have been bad because these things happen, but he was really one of those guys who—well, just to quote from one of his—he married Alan Lane's daughter, the person who founded Penguin, so this was not a bad way of connecting oneself to the literate world. He had also been in the army and he had been at Christ's Hospital, the school where Coleridge and Lamb went to, and he had all the love of the English establishment, so in one of his quotations, a quotation from his biography, he comments that "Alan Lane was unable to muster the kind of emotion that one finds in a good regiment or a good public school." I think that says enough for how he and I would not be really on the same page.

Q: What years were you at Leeds?

A: '75 to '77.

Q: So, would The Who have played there?

A: Yeah. The Byrds played there.

Q: You know, they have the famous album—

A: Live at Leeds, yeah, and then John Martyn, who I like much more than The Who, has his counter-album called John Martyn Live at Leeds, where he probably had about a third of the audience. Yeah, they would be; big rock bands played at all the British universities in those days, and I saw Fairport Convention at Warwick when Sandy Denny was playing for them, and of course The Byrds played at Leeds. I went to see them as I was more interested in American rock bands than British rock bands. Ry Cooder I went to see at Manchester Free Trade Hall, which has been knocked down now. That's part of Manchester's contribution to the European architecture movement, they went to knock the Free Trade Hall down. Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers played there too.

Q: So, you talk about Punk music in class a lot; when did that start for you?

A: Right from the start, actually. I remember, one of the things about being a graduate student, it's quite a lonely endeavor because there are no classes in anything, so you play on the radio all those things that are sort of built up; festering bitterness felt for Jack Morpurgo was transferred into "London Calling." Another band I liked was Joy Division—such waiflike lads.

Q: Two music references you've made (in class) are The Smiths and The Clash. Have you ever seen either band live?

A: No but I have all The Smith's records.

Q: Which Smith's album do you put on the top?

A: *Hatful of Hollow* is very good isn't it? I mean that has to be because it has so much on. But I'm not even averse to *Strangeways, Here We Come*.

Q: And how did you end up here at DU?

A: Well, I went to work on the railway for awhile. I've had periodic bouts away from academe to sort of enjoy life outside, but I've never been much good at them, and I wasn't much good at that. But I was at London Euston which meant that you could see two or three films a day when you weren't working. At that time England had a great range I don't think they still have to this degree, but they had a great range of cinemas like The Electric, the ICA, the Notting

Hill Gate Cinema whose name I forget, the Everyman in Hampsted, which had been a theater but then became a revival house, so you could see films from way back to 1920 out to 1970 there, and that was always very exciting.

Then I went to USC in Los Angeles and stayed there about four years to finish the doctorate off. There were people like Peter Manning who came through recently. Marjorie Perloff was there at the time. But one of the great things about that was that we lived near UCLA and there was a huge research library with, as well, a cinema. You could go every night to the cinema there, and there it was even better than in London because it was free and they'd just been processing all the films. There were two guys there who I can remember very well who used to introduce themselves, like, "I'm Jeff Gilmore and this is my colleague Charles Hopkins and we are the restorers of the UCLA Film Archive," and they had a special series called "Melnitz Movies," which was in the Melnitz Theater. Once that started, really, you didn't even need to go off campus for anything, although there were also those cinema houses like The New Art, a very good one on Wilshire Blvd. – the Vagabond – which showed old Hollywood films.

Q: Do you still go to the cinema?

A: No, the DVD means now that you can watch most of it in your basement, which is in some ways good but in some ways bad, isn't it? There's nothing like going to the old, ratty cinema and having the toffee paper under your chair and that ghastrly coffee some of them make. I miss that, but don't you think it's nicer? You can play them back and watch the extras?

Q: Do you have any films that stand out for you from when you were going to the movies in London and at USC?

A: There's one called *Moonrise* that I've always liked, I think it's Frank Borzage. A guy's father is hanged, and the opening shot shows the guy's father being taken out, and you see his feet, and it's very dark. Really, you never see the guy's face. I remember that as a particularly good opening sequence that lasts. No speaking done in that by people in the audience or people on screen. And then the rest of it is too really rather good—Dane Clark is one of the actors who never became very famous. He's not a terribly good actor but he has to play a fresh faced but doomed American youth, which I think he does very well.

Tod Browning's *Freaks*; really, any Tod Browning, *The Unknown*, the one with Lon Chaney as the knife-thrower who has no arms, the usual plotline for a Tod Browning. I used to quite like Werner Herzog in those days but I think he probably went a bit over the top. One of the things I should have mentioned is that growing up we had three cinemas that changed twice a week, so what you failed to get from the performed drama you got from the cinema, which was only a few pennies to go to.

Q: Who are the directors today that you watch?

A: I like Eric Rohmer a lot. There's a Frenchman, Andre Dumont is he called? He does very depressing films, and they usually have sort of theological twists. Those two I like a lot. Also Robert Brosson: *Au hazard Balthazar* and *Lancelot du Lac*.

Q: And where did you teach after USC?

A: I taught in South Africa for four years. I still have some good friends there, not really among the faculty, but among the students. One of them, he's a lawyer, but he was the trainer for the South African distance running team, and he's written and just brought out a book on black distance runners, which of course was one of the few outlets in the Apartheid era where black runners were very famous. He's called Richard Mayer, and I remember teaching him right in his first year as an undergraduate. That was at the University of the Witwatersrand which is in the Transvaal Province. It always considered itself the liberal university, and indeed, looking at the New York Times, there's an article about the University of the Orange Free State. It does seem that it would be the liberal university, because it was more liberal in 1984 than The Orange Free State seems to be in 2009.

Q: And from there?

A: It was to DU.

Q: What year did you start at DU?

A: '88. In the summer, as it happened, which I've never done since. I think they were very short of a Modernist at that time, and had had the usual ins and outs about getting one.

Q: Is that what your PhD focused on? Modernity?

A: It was American Lit, really. Sort of the idea of the artist as God in three American writers. Very ill-chosen, because if you were going to choose the idea of the artist as God the three I chose really were not the most worthwhile ones. You probably would have chosen Conrad, Nabokov and someone else, but I did Barth, Hawkes and West. Half of the dissertation had already been written in Leeds under the tender auspices of Jack Morpurgo, but he didn't seem to want to—well, no, let us say I hadn't quite written it, and he seemed to eager to see it and I didn't seem to want to show it to him, so it was your typical sort of situation of which there were many at Leeds. Another man I knew quite well was the man who at one time I think was the minister of energy in Tony Blair's government, John Battle, who at that time was doing a dissertation on William Empson with the poet Geoffrey Hill who is at Boston, but they didn't see eye-to-eye—which seemed to happen a lot more in those days—and it never got finished and he went into Parliament. I don't think he's been terribly popular because (a) he's an anti-abortionist of the rabid Catholic kind and (b) he's never really been able to fit in with the New Labor, which is strange. I mean, he'd been given one of the safest seats. It's like being given Ted Kennedy's seat; he'd been given a very safe seat in Leeds that was previously occupied by Denis Healey, the foreign minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer.

Q: Did you ever work subsequently after the dissertation on West, Hawkes, and Barth?

A: Yeah, the first book, *God the Artist*, as it came to be called. The University of Illinois. I think in some ways that it might have been an idea to rethink that, but I didn't do it.

Q: Are there any other jobs besides the railway that you've had outside of Academia?

A: I worked at a clay pipe works that my granddad had worked at for 40-odd years. It seemed clear to me and most of the people that worked there that I was not the best at that. Although, since I've always been very interested in the clay industry because it seems to call on great reserves of strength and fortitude. I looked it up and really most people had a similar business to what I did when they started—barrows fall off huge roofs and they hit people because they put too much in. I don't think I ever collapsed, which somebody did in a similar plant in Canada from the heat because they get up to about 130 degrees.

I also worked in a paper mill for a bit longer than that, about seven months.

Q: This was after Leeds?

A: No, this was after school. I left school at about 16 and worked in a paper mill, worked in the pipe works, and then went back and did my A-levels, as they were called, and then went to University.

Q: And since then, back in academia, what subjects that you've worked on have you found most satisfying?

A: Well, they've all been pretty good, because one of the beauties of academic life was that that going to South Africa meant that I came back here with tenure, so I didn't have to go through all of that paraphernalia. So that means that from then on it's all sort of self-chosen projects and they've all been pretty interesting. Probably working on Raymond Williams and Kermode in a series that never got really very well thought out, but the books in due course got their appropriate reviews. Those were very interesting, because they're both very different figures. I didn't know when I started that Frank Kermode came from a very working-class background but I did know that he came from the Isle of Man, which is not the center of anything close to being much in the humanities although one or two people from there have been quite famous. Raymond Williams I knew was a sort of veteran leftist who had gone further and further left as the governments went further and further right. And he never seemed to me a terribly entertaining figure about the way he talked about literature but did seem very good when he talked about culture. He has a famous essay about "Culture Is Ordinary." What's strange about Williams is that I'm not terribly sympathetic with some of the things he said that tried to attack the idea that there's a special enclave that you call "Beethoven," and another enclave that you call, let's say, this little clown here [Jan is holding a toy clown], and he fights that out rather remorselessly. Whereas Frank Kermode I suppose is about special enclaves for art and the idea that Henry James deserves more attention than, say, Mary Higgins Clark or that kind of thing, so they were interesting in that they were both sort of different facets of dealing with similar subjects. They had great careers as literary journalists, both of them, and that always struck me as a more humane route than say writing about literature that comes from teaching. Although we just had a rather good class that I enjoyed, but I mean I don't think that you can say that generally speaking you can drive out of your AHUM and into writing an article about Robert Frost, and so they always seemed helpful about that.

And then the cannon book, which has probably done me the best in terms of having people asking me to come and talk. That was very enjoyable. But then you get the problem of do you keep writing or do you do things that require lots of research, and then you get into problems in some ways where you have to decide which kind of work you want to do. In some ways I've gone into things that have taken more time, like 18th Century things and Conrad and the secret agent

novel which requires you to bury yourself in the British Museum and check out, well, not check out because you can't check out, but get out lots of secret agent novels that nobody has ever read—and there is a reason why nobody's ever read them. William Le Queux is one of the great scaremonger writers of that period. So yeah, I've always enjoyed what I've done really.

Q: And at the moment?

A: I'm writing about T.S. Eliot's literary journalism and I think that will have spin-offs because Ezra Pound wrote lots of literary journalism for *New Age*, a journal done by a man from the midlands (very near Nottingham). A man called A.R. Orage edited the *New Age* in the early twentieth century from about 1907 to about 1922, and the interesting thing about that is whereas you tend to think of little magazines as being intensely literary they're also interested in politics, public affairs, so you have arguments about British policy and South Africa and such. So that's been very interesting.

Q: But those topics wouldn't be breached by Eliot or Pound?

A: Well, Pound has a roving commission. What people looking at periodicals now are very interested in is what, say, an article by Pound or Eliot is adjacent to. Just as famously in one Irish journal one of Joyce's stories is next to a tractor ad. So in that sort of sense they're not as remote from these more mundane concepts as you might think. And Pound fires off about most things in the early journals including what we looked at within the Nietzsche, the business of vast Germanic research universities.

Q: Do you have a favorite fictional character?

A: Yeah, Mr. Toad. Definitely. Mr. Toad with his mixture of bravado and song. Although if you mean serious literature, I suppose Falstaff. The way he changes from pathos to simple opportunism.

Q: Mr. Toad is a reference to?

A: Oh, *Wind in the Willows*. It's a children's book. Mr. Toad is the exceedingly egotistical fall guy rather than the hero who everybody has to keep continually pulling out of jams because he's terribly rich (he lives in Toad Hall). But he's a total prodigal and he's always buying fast cars or other expensive items. It's a book that's written in the first years of the twentieth century so in a way it's like Mr. Toad is the spirit of Zeitgeist. But one of the things that I like about him is he has a series of songs. Things like "All the philosophers in the colleges didn't know what one half he knows," "Whoever said there's there's land ahead encouraging Mr. Toad." And he has a series of epithets that he confers upon himself which are of mounting favorability. Great guy.

Q: Do you have a favorite artist?

A: I'm interested in Chagall actually. I've always been interested in him with traditional representation in wildly different ways of referencing. In a peculiar way I suppose Stanley Spencer, the strange visionary British artist, was always interesting in a way. Rembrandt of course.

Q: There was a German painter you brought up in class...

A: Was it Casper David Friedrich? Oh yeah, very much so.

Q: Do you have any favorite writers?

A: Thomas Bernhard I like a lot, Brian Evenson introduced me to [him], he's a very satirical scathing writer of Austria. Didn't last very long. I think '53 or '54 probably imploded or something like that. But he's a very interesting writer. Let us see. Henry James of course I've been reading a lot of recently. I hated Henry James when I was younger because he seemed sort of effete but as he grows older either I grow more effete or I like the tangled way they're put together. Tacitus the Roman historian who is an effort to try to learn to read because he's so curt in his syntax but is absolutely fascinating and really for the Bush era probably is as good as anybody to read. And some of Twain like *Pudd'n'head Wilson* too is very good for the Bush era (that sort of mixture of crassness and wickedness that you associate with [the Bush era]). I like Diderot and Stendhal an awful lot. And maybe, from what I read last year, Pierre Bayle the man who did the strange dictionary that tries to undercut all the religious figures in it. And nobody can quite make out whether he's the last Calvinist orthodox or whether he's the dawn of the free-thinking movement. I suppose Kleist too. Yes, *Michael Kohlhaas*, that's a great story and *The Earthquake in Chile*.

Q: In hearing what you like and what you write about, I'm curious what your process is in determining what projects you'll undertake?

A: In a way what I've done is been a bit self-protective in the last few years I've been interested in the history of ideas and criticism. The beauty of doing that is that often the topics become fascinating in their own right. And in some ways you still have things like Kleist and Thomas Bernhard in reserve so that you can read for pleasure.

Q: So where does Eliot fit into the history of ideas?

A: Eliot fits into the history of ideas because for a start he really... in about thirty essays written over only a period of about three years he sort of made English criticism much less of a... in some ways he saved it from ideas. In a sense English criticism, not in the immediate period before Eliot, had gone into a bit of a backwater but if you look further, back to 1870 let's say, there are many ways that English criticism could have gone towards the history of ideas, so Eliot was the man who sort of got it talking about literary form and how one word looks next to another which can easily be forgotten when you get into great debates about ideas. So in a way I have a sort of love hate relationship with him. Because I myself—I'm interested in ideas. Pessimism (things like that). Whereas he said keep away from them.

Q: Any advice for those of us looking to make a career in literary studies?

A: Make sure you don't get distracted from the thousands of other jobs the whole structure is designed to keep you occupied with. If you find yourself sounding too humanistic and positive, check yourself, because I think that the root to doing something useful is not necessarily through benevolence. The other thing is to keep reading and not just each other. You've got to keep finding people (Brian Evenson was always very good at this), you've got to keep finding people like Bernhard who are completely out of your experience and have a really different voice because they're in very different conditions.

And keep your eye out for anniversaries because they're a stimulus to composition. Those things I think. I don't really like giving advice.