

Fiction Is like Fire

Jan Nordby Gretlund's interviews with Mary Hood in Oxford, Mississippi, March 26, 1996 and in Woodstock, Georgia, October 30, 2000.

Gretlund You demonstrate a powerful sense of place in your fiction, but the setting of your stories is not the setting of your novel.

Hood I chose the place of the stories. Many of them could have been told in the place where *Familiar Heat* is set. Some of them could have been told in New Jersey. When I made my decision to bloom where planted, I was there in the North Georgia mountains, and I looked around and I didn't know the name of trees, I didn't know the name of roadside weeds. There were trees that were unfamiliar to my eyes, I noticed them because they were different. The first things they ever saw were on the coast. When I go back to the coast now, I have a strong sense of being where I really belong, which is where the wide marshes are, very intense shade under live oaks, and the enormous dazzle of the beach, the marshes, and the sky. So you have mostly horizon, then a little bit of land, 'and way off, way off, the headland. This is the Georgia coast.

I went out West for a few weeks and everywhere that I saw sky, it looked like the coast, there where the marshes are. I liked the South Dakota high plains, anything with sly and grass, and I thought this is the marsh. I'm looking for the marsh. It is my native place of Brunswick, Georgia, Glynn County. The intense shade and then the sudden opening of tunnels into just glory! I still think that is the way everything should look because that is how it started out. I had gone out thinking I might find somewhere else to live. But on the way back, well the first place you pick up atmosphere and a little humidity in the air was Okla-

homa and things were a little greener, but it was still so dry, and when you got to Arkansas suddenly those little tiny hard leaves, on the trees became these flapping large poplar leaves, and there was humidity to spare. The trees have to transpire through these big leaves like elephant ears, and it looked like – home. It scared me. We crossed the river at Memphis, and we were back, and I thought, if I went into any of those little white houses, I would know what was on the mantle, I would know what's hanging on the nails, nailed into the mantle, I would know what's in the kitchen, and I could name something in one of the drawers. I thought, shoot I'm doomed to be Southern. I will just travel and look, but I don't have to move away.

I thought the stories all had to be about the same place, and I wrote about my neighborhood. I took the stories that I know from other places and made them fit where I was, which is Cherokee County in North Georgia, where I live. There is no reason why that's not the way one should do. Persons who might paint would paint out of whatever was driving them to paint, and paint what they see out of the window. What the painter is about and what the picture is of might or might not be the same. But the painter could still succeed in the painting without anyone ever realizing that the artist was from somewhere else. I think that is also true about fiction.

I was born on the coast, but my mother's people were from the area I am living in now. My father was born in Manhattan. He was second generation, but raised by an immigrant grandmother from Ireland and an immigrant grandfather from Sweden, Mary Margaret O'Dowd and William Wenlof. He was Lutheran and she was Irish Catholic, so it must have been a very interesting household, and they brought my father up. – There is nowhere to go back to for me in the North to say "this is home." But half of who I am is Northern. I was born in the South and brought up here, but the home that I lived in was half his and half my mother's, and we never had that Southern thing of a house filled with cousins and all that thing that I write about that seems so Southern, we didn't do that. We lived in many places, but I never lived in any town where we had relatives – that's not Southern.

Gretlund Maybe in that sense you are a modern Southerner? Josephine Humphreys writes "there are no normal families."

Hood A home was made. – My mother's father was a Methodist minister, so he was itinerant. Every two years or so, at that time, the church moved the man on. My mother said, once she was counting up, she was in her seventies then, that she had had more addresses where mail came to her than she had had years of life. I wanted to be Southern, because I saw my mother was. And the wonderful stories she could tell, she is a wonderful storyteller. Her name is Mary Adella Katherine Rogers Hood, she was named after all her grandmothers. Everything in the family was done to propitiate ancestors and the Katherine just because they liked it. And I am Mary Elisabeth.

Gretlund Besides the sense of place and family many Southern writers also demonstrate a keen religious sense, but you do not focus much on religion in your fiction, do you?

Hood My mother is Methodist and my father was brought up Episcopalian, or Anglican, and baptized in Trinity Church in New York City. In fact his home, where he was born, is where one of the Twin Trade Towers was built. But we did not attend Episcopalian churches. On days of obligation, or holidays, my father would come to the Methodist Church.

Gretlund Flannery O'Connor is, of course, *the* famous writer from Georgia. But she was out to save our souls, and you are not.

Hood Don't you think so? – I was out of college before I actually began reading. My family didn't know I was interested in writers. I was in college during the time Flannery was in Atlanta during her last illness. I didn't know that and I didn't study in school, so I had not heard of her in that way. And when I began to read in books, I read stories by a person named Flannery O'Connor. I had read Flan O'Brien, I had read European writers. One of my favorites is Frank O'Connor, the Irish short story writer, I absolutely love him, and V. S. Pritchett for just the suave way he can tell a story, and I love Elisabeth Bowen. I know she and Eudora Welty were good friends. But when I first read her, I didn't know Flannery O'Connor was a woman, and I didn't know it was a Georgian. I read a story and I thought: this person can write! We must watch this person.

At that time I was studying poetry, and I was caring more about poetry than prose, but I was struck by the story. I think it was the one about Julian and his mother, "Everything That Rises Must Converge," I'm sure it was. It was a torment to me, the story embarrassed me because it was so good. And I read "Revelation," it was exhilarating. But I came to a place where I thought, "she doesn't like me." I felt like I was that person, Mrs. Turpin, "the warthog from hell." But everybody tells me that's o.k., I am a redeemed warthog.

I found all the fiction by the same writer and found it was a woman, it was a Georgian, and what is terribly sad, it was already over, the life was over, and I was reading everything. One night on television I saw Bob Giroux talking about her: "I never saw anyone get as much better as quick as she did between this story and this story." And I envied that. She didn't misstep the way you do when you think you have life to burn. I wanted that said about me, but it wasn't. I was a very slow learner. So in my thirties I was still saying: am I, can I, should I? Ought I quit now? Just hang it up? This was before I had published.

The first that was published of mine was a story in *Yankee Magazine* (New Hampshire, September 1978), which has not been published elsewhere. It wasn't soft, I am not a soft writer, – I don't repudiate it, but it was a treatment of family stories in which I allowed hope. Later I wrote about Aunt Goldie, who had begun to cry and cried for five years. At the family reunion she was a broken sweet person. It was in "A Country Girl," but I've told that story without saying why she cried or anything. I left it more that here was more of the truth. Whereas in the story for *Yankee Magazine*, I stopped the story before there was any reason to cry. I changed the names of the mountains in Georgia to the names of mountains in Maine, and instead of cotton it was potato fields. I just changed that and they went for it, because the story was a story from anywhere.

Gretlund So your first story was a family story?

Hood Yes, I was sitting at the dining table, and I had been writing poems and poems. And I had been working on histories. I am fascinated by the chronicle of the conquest of Mexico by Hernando Cortes. I had found somewhere the actual chronicle. I was reading it and was doing the Spanish and the translation, and I was making like a cycle of poems, this

was all what my mind was involved with. I think the way my mind works was that when the fence broke under the weight of the roses in the chronicle, I saw it and thought it into "prose" in a kind of epic way, and instead of its being about Mexico, I dream-walled to my table and wrote a simple family story, very much *not* like the conquest of Mexico.

Gretlund Did you ever publish any of the poems?

Hood Yes I published poems, but I went ahead and put them in the stories, so they appear as paragraphs. – I don't think it hurts anyone to study poetry. My students now do not read poetry. They will say, "Oh, I don't have time." "What do you have time for?" I ask. I would want them to read Shakespeare, and a Russian poet, Marina Tsvetaeva, that I find wonderful, but it may be because she jumps around in my mind just like that. She is absolutely fabulous, but she is advanced. I've been teaching myself Russian, but I'm not anywhere from where I would know what it is that is so brilliant in the way she has done it.

Gretlund *Familiar Heat* shows that you know Spanish well.

Hood And Latin. From those two I read everything else in the Romance languages. I just work it out. I wanted to know what the big deal was with Dante. I would sit and read Virgil until that was not anything I had to go and look up. Then I had the feeling of that, the pattern, and then I went and read Dante. I had the English translation, I don't know whose, but then I just read out loud the Italian as though it were Spanish. I just read it and I listened and listened, and I said "Oh!" I didn't even need to know the meaning, although I usually knew. And after a while I saw what had happened to the lines. These enormous chains had broken and he had song. I saw suddenly that instead of this rhythmic-like horseback, he had song. To realize how anything like that is done is bound to help. It is like school-figures in skating. You wouldn't go out and skate a figure 8 for a program, but if you can do that there is something in the discipline of being able to. You need to have form. Even if it is pointless, it can be good for you.

Gretlund How long did it take you to write *Familiar Heat*?

Hood I began writing it shortly after I finished college. I had an idea from when I was a child. It was the first time death had stolen anybody from me and I felt that I had been cheated. I was about eight years old when I saw a beautiful man. I had seen men and women and children and dogs and cats and birds and Christmas and everything in the world that was beautiful and wasn't. I didn't have any idea what ugly was especially, but I had never seen the male person as beautiful, as glorious, and *he* was! It was the last time I saw him. It is hard to explain this, the book is not about this, but the feeling that I worked from was.

After WWII we did not have a new car for a while, you couldn't buy one. In 1954 we got our first new car, it had been ordered, and it was wonderful! Someone in town had a son who was going away to the service, and they wanted it for him. They asked Daddy if he would sell it, because they didn't have time to wait for theirs to come up. He didn't really want to do that, but, it was superstition I guess, he didn't want something that someone else wanted, and the man gave it to his son. That's who I saw that day. He came to our house to thank my father, and I looked up and he was standing with the sun behind him – which I did not mention about Cristo in the novel. It isn't at all like the same story, but at Christmas he was killed on leave – in the car.

The money we had got for the car we saved over the weekend until the bank opened. I think it was put in a canister of coffee. I would go and stand enchanted before the cabinet that a car could become a roll of cash and the cash could be buried in coffee, and you weren't to think about it. I can't explain it, it was like a tree going back to a seed. – But at that time we didn't know what would happen to the boy. It was months before ..., and the money had become furniture.

We had two wooden barrels, at that time they were as tall as I was, with a piece of plywood over them and one of my grandmother's crocheted cloths and a blue vase with goldenrod and lilies from the ditch. And I was so afraid that I said, "Mama, are we rich?" I was afraid, but it was beauty! I didn't understand then that beauty is not cash. Cash bothered me. I had heard some preaching I guess. I was in Sunday school from the beginning. And my grandfather Claude Rogers baptized me. That was at Echota in North Georgia, an Indian town; it means "new town," and it was the capital of the Cherokee nation. I don't know what it was, but the rich man's son sorrowing because he was to go and

give away everything he has, and everyone knowing that he wouldn't. He wouldn't get in, and that bothered me. And I remember asking, "Are we rich?"

Gretlund You have actually taken the trouble to "dream up" a plot in your novel, it has a plot, it is telling a story, which is not really the fashionable thing to do nowadays.

Hood I had hoped it didn't have a plot, isn't that funny? I didn't want minor characters, that was going to be ruled out, no *ficelles*, Henry James's little paper dolls, there was not going to be any of that, I thought that was false. Everybody said Henry James is the big cheese, he is the one to beat. And I can't read him ... but we would be impoverished without Henry James. I remember and know the world by sense impressions. If you said to me "what day, or what was the history lesson?" I might say, "I don't know but I remember that it was raining and they were burning the seashells at the oyster factory and the air smelled like," etc., and then say "I think we were studying the thirty-years' war." The book would have meant nothing, but the ambiance! That is just how I take in the world, so Henry James was verbal and not sensory. I finally realized that if I had to read him, I wanted to know what "the figure in the carpet" was. I had been reading interesting things about writers and that we had one, and I thought, "well I will have to read him, won't I," and I bought the book, and I suffered so! It is not at all Conrad, *his* is a physical world.

Elisabeth Bowen helped me a great deal: "plot is the knowing of destination," that helped me to hold back before I began writing the words down, to just go ahead and think through the pictures. I read her *Eva Trout*, her last novel, I didn't understand it, but she is fabulous. This ungainly, strange Eva Trout is about to get on the train in Victoria Station and this son Jeremy that she's had, for whatever reason, and no good reason, is on the platform, and Eva says to a companion, "Constantine, what is 'concatenation'?" The next line changed the way I wrote: It reads: "Her last words." She was assassinated by her son at that point. – *What* was that all about? That was such a shock. It was like turning that page in *To the Lighthouse* and finding out that Mrs. Ramsay was dead these many years. I thought: you can do that?

Gretlund Does your sense of place include an awareness of biracial living?

Hood Some of my characters are black, but I don't say so. I don't say when they are white either. And in *Familiar Heat* you discover that Ben is black. He is in *And Venus Is Blue*, that family in "Finding the Chain," and I couldn't let Ben die in the novel until I had him say somewhere else that he had a happy time. I knew that he would die in the boat, and it was years before I could figure out how I could allow that to happen. There's a part of me that still believes that fiction is like fire, you can hold the animals at bay. Light up a story, it will either change the outcome or it will lteep the things away, lteep death away. And so I made the story with Ben and his family and I *knew* when I had written that, that was the last story I wrote for this collection. That was the story I saved for last. I had thought the collection would be called "Finding the Chain." But when they read the novella "And Venus Is Blue" they thought that it was stronger, and changed the title for it. I put everything I had into that – that was what home was. People always ask me how many times does James die in that story. And I say, "he dies once but on every day of her life." He dies on the day he dies, he dies because Delia remembers it into the future, and he dies on every day of her past because every memory is tarnished by how the story came out. The idea is that tragedy attacks the past as well. Imagine a bullet aimed at a photograph album, and it burns a hole through every page. Now that scar is on every page in the memory.

Gretlund You don't seem to be agonizing over civil rights or brooding over Southern history in the Faulknerian manner.

Hood I think it is very possible that it is unrealistic what I have abstracted. I thought I was abstracting truth. If I believed it wasn't important, then I believed it wasn't necessary, and therefore I wrote stories that were not about racial disharmony, but about people. Perhaps I am wise enough still to do so in the book I'm writing about the South in the 1960s. I do not have the courage to tell what I know as the truth, except by lying about it as truth. I think it is very difficult, it is a compromising thing to have moved around, as I have, and made friends in new places and then discover that, either during the time or after, I did not see things

the way others saw things. And yet I was friends with the people with whom I did not agree, and how could that be? It made me feel treacherous, two-faced, and disloyal. On race and my fiction, all I will say is: wait and see!

Gretlund Few of your stories are humorous, and your novel is not much so. You are not really writing in the tradition of Southern humor, are you?

Hood The years of the stories were dark for me. Because of the things I worked out in *Familiar Heat* I will certainly never be the person that I was. In the first two books I was believing fiction could make up for things, then I came to a conclusion early on that it was impossible. "Inexorable Progress" taught me that in some way I had saved something in fiction, or I had given it another chance. I was writing to save what was already lost. I'm always writing against death and the complete shock of things changing that you do not intend to change. But that is what life is. I hate death. I hate the surprise of bad news. I hate corruption and inevitable decay of the high moment.

My grandmother saved the letters my Mam' wrote when I was just learning. She said that my first uncoaxed word came when I was in another room, and Mama heard me say "gone." I was probably either looking at a bird, and it was there and it wasn't, or it was sunlight and it wasn't. Already then something was and then it wasn't.

Gretlund Did you have a happy childhood?

Hood I enjoyed my life. There were moments that were hard and bark, family moments, there always are. And my family had volatile, strong personalities, with strong differences.

Gretlund You frequently attack male chauvinism, and there are several egocentric men in your fiction. It was a surprise that Faye Rios in *Familiar Heat* would choose the chauvinistic Captain over his much more positive brother.

Hood But wouldn't it be nicer if the terrible brother learned something?

Gretlund You do not give us much insight into the Captain's mind.

Hood No, I never did. There were several things that I did, I had time to be intentional. One of my absolute masters of instruction in fiction is Joseph Conrad. He impresses me greatly with his effects. How they are achieved I have never been able to know. His effects of light and dark and the action being seen in a lightening flash. Is it in *Lord Jim* where the woman holds the torch through a window, she can't see what's going on in the shed, but they are killing each other. And in one little flash of light you see that and it's gone. How he did that, I don't know! His people are so real that you can follow them in the dark. The physicalness of his characters delights me, and the maleness of the males. I have no objection to maleness, I really approve and encourage it. If it is churlishness or bad manners or rudeness ...

Gretlund Or wife beatings?

Hood Well I think I'm pretty rough on that! Wouldn't you be? That is not a very pleasant thing to go through. The story I wrote about that "The Goodwife Hawkins" is a pathetic story, that's mortal combat between those two. And all she does to extricate herself is nothing.

Gretlund Her doctor prescribes valium for *her!*

Hood But she lets him die! That is what it amounts to. She is very sorry, because what she thinks is that she is going to get another chance, and she doesn't. And that's something she has to live with, which is personal responsibility.

Gretlund The feminism that celebrates the family of women and the matriarchal heritage dominates Southern women's writing, but is not reflected in your Faye Rios character and is not a focus point in *Familiar Heat*. Why not?

Hood I always try in everything I do in my books to tell what people do. How they work. My pulpwood cutter is a very true glimpse of what it is to be a valiant human man. But this man is out in the woods cutting, not

because he *wants to*, but that's everything to him. That's all my politics. Anything you would ever want to find about me, you can read in that story called "Moths." That would be my democracy, that would be my religion: love one another! That's the text I live by, and that's right out of Jesus's mouth. Whether it has to be beaten over your head, the way Flannery O'Connor did, or that one is condemned by one's Protestantism or salvaged by one's Catholicism, seems to me to be a question that rather floors art.

If Flannery has succeeded, I think it is *in spite of* her religion. She would be very hurt to know² that, but I feel rather strongly about it – people compare us. I think she would disapprove of me deeply in a personal sense. But I wrote about Catholics in *Familiar Heat*, and I wasn't trying to prove that they weren't what they should be, or that they were. The black people were black and the Catholics were Catholics, it wasn't such questions I was writing about. In that sense I understand how you say that I am not racially entangled, or religiously or gender politically entangled.

Gretlund Your novel shows that you know a lot about Cuban immigrants. How did you learn about them?

Hood Well, I've read and read, but I was in school in Atlanta in 1964, which was three years after, and there was a sizeable Cuban exile community in Atlanta. In my classes in Spanish, which I just kept taking, literature classes, I wanted to become fluent. What's the use of knowing a language if you can't even read the literature. So I just kept taking "the literature of Spain and South America," at Georgia State. I majored in Spanish, it is my degree, in Spanish literature. I like the poets very much, I like Pablo Neruda tremendously and I have always loved Garcia Lorca. I think that Gabriel Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, the first section of that book, what happens on Pentecost Day, is just so amazing and wonderful the way that's written and it is an inspiration in English or in Spanish. Among my classmates there were three or four English-speaking people, the rest of them were Cuban exiles, who were taking the courses because they wanted to talk about *their* literature, so I saw this. I also saw attitudes within the school and I saw brothers – that got me started. But then where I live I see how brothers compete. Human beings

are fascinating. The Cuban brothers, the American brothers, the North-Georgia brothers, you name it, I loved watching and after a while I just had a file in my mind on how brothers behave.

Familiar Heat is not the first novel I have written, it is the third. The first one did not involve me at all. I was able to write a story, begin it and end it. I shaped the fiction. I haven't *read* it again, but I looked back later and I thought that the two main characters should have been one. The conflict would have been within a person instead of across boundaries, and it would have been tighter. Now I can see, but at that time it was: you have this, you have this, and I had fiction. It was not a challenge, except that I finished.

Then I wrote a book called *Racing's Precinct*. That involved a man among men, and also Delia's father from "And Venus Is Blue," that was the same man. When I sent it off, I received comments that I had good characters, but trouble with point of view. I didn't understand what point of view was! It was a term I didn't know. Being self-taught, you can overdo this, I thought New York was saying I was provincial and that I was Southern. I didn't know you could be cherished for these very qualities, if you come from the right part of the country. I thought "I guess I am provincial," and I started reading "the Great Books" of the western world.

I was reading on my own and started at the first book in the set. It took my a long time, I'm dyslexic, and I toiled. I had other things to attach to because one of my heroes of prose and I think of philosophy, too, is Sir Thomas Browne, I absolutely adore him. So there were things along the line that I would think, "Oh, soon I will get to it." And I loved Thomas Aquinas, but by the time I got to him, I had already been reading Flannery's mentors. I had read Jacques Maritain, and I was deeply moved by his essay "The Responsibility of the Artist." Before that I had a sense of triviality of my chores. Was fiction trivial? Was art trivial? What "good" did it do? Reading Maritain was very important for me, because he said: you are allowed to do this if you care and it is *not* trivial. You are not helping lepers, but you are not crocheting something to cover them with either.

Gretlund Were you disappointed with the reception of *Familiar Heat*?

Hood I was not disappointed in my readers, and I feel my work with it was successful. Like Miss Jean Brodie I was a little surprised that my season was so short. But I had three printings and then a paperback. I don't think it was a failure, and I don't think it was artistically a failure. But commercially it was a challenge because I never received money after I turned the manuscript in. I had the advance which I was paid over about eight years. It took me that long to finish it, and then since the day I handed in the last piece of my manuscript there was no more money from the book. The paperback sales went against the advance. That was a huge shock to me, and it wasn't that there was anything wrong, it was just that I hadn't prepared myself for how I will live these next years till the next one is finished. And that is one reason I am working at Kroger.

Gretlund You wouldn't want to live off another advance?

Hood I would like New York's ideas about that to change. I would like publishing to change. I think the idea of blockbuster and bestseller and midlist and university, and all of that, ought not to be how you decide what is a success. And one way we can stop the madness is to stop asking for payment in advance. I don't think it is right for literature, I think a lot of times books get written that do not need to get written, just to keep it going. I left Knopf, I had a two book contract, and I was supposed to publish short stories with them, but I asked to be released from that contract. Fortunately it turned out that I had an editor-out clause, and my wonderful editor Barbara Bristol had left!

It has been several years, about twelve, since I wrote a short story. I laid them down to finish my novel, but I just wrote a new one that is coming out in the *Georgia Review* this quarter.

Gretlund You don't work in Mark Twainian humor in *Familiar Heat*, do you?

Hood Well, I can't say. What is "Twainian humor"? Frankly I think I am a hoot. There is much that makes people laugh in my first novel, some of it intentional! The novel I'm doing now is, I think, so dark and yet it's so funny. About my short stories, the collection I am writing on is kind of legendary now by the title: "Survival, Evasion, and Escape." The one

from the recent *Georgia Review*, about a Navajo girl, will be in it. The collection will have stories from all across America, and there will be three stories, I think, about a Jew from Poland, one story will be set in Europe and two in America. The stories are not Southern in the sense that they are set here. One of the things I realized was that I did not wish to sound like myself, meaning imitate. I want to *be* myself. There are always new stories that I want to write, but years went by and coming back to the short story and reading the army manual that gave me the title, I realized that the new stories were really about modern life, American life. I wanted to show how you survive, evade, and escape in American life, and how we are isolated behind enemy lines in so many ways. And certainly in the new South this is going to be an issue.

The new novel will be linear, the plot will not be curlicued around. It will be based on something I thought I saw one afternoon on a roadside as a girl and probably misinterpreted. And it was inspired by Hurricane Alberto that dumped 24 inches of rain on Albany, Georgia, in 1994, and the flash flood came and the vaults would let the water in. The caskets were sealed, but about five hundred or so flew up out of the cemetery, like rockets almost, and the hydraulic pressure would pop the lids off. I covered this for the *New Republic* (August, 1994). I thought to myself, the dead rise, it is Judgement Day! They required forensic experts to put the bones back together, so now they got another shot to find out if somebody died of natural causes or not. And in my mind I made a fiction going back to what I "saw" on the roadside. An old flood occurs in my next novel, I call it "The Other Side of the River," it is both a Biblical and a Southern topic.