

Interview with Clyde Edgerton
Recorded on Thursday, June 28, 2018

CE: My name is Clyde Edgerton. I am a novelist and a university professor.

RW: What got you into teaching and writing?

CE: I got into teaching because my Sophomore year in high school I read Ralph Waldo Emerson. That was a little bit like a lightning bolt. I started to connect with ideas and got excited and I wanted to be in a position to have that happen to other students so I started thinking about being a high school English teacher. When I was in college, my Sophomore year, I read *Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway. That cemented my desire to be an English teacher because I realized then that the actual way of writing words could be powerful. But in the meantime, I decided I wanted to fly airplanes. I signed up for ROTC when I was in college also, which sent me to one year of pilot training and four years of active duty, at the end of which I came back and become a graduate student, got an MAT, taught high school for one year. I had an opportunity to come back, kind of thinking I was going to be teaching teachers now, for the foreseeable future. I had not though much more, except maybe secretly, about becoming a writer. I had an opportunity to be in a regional theater and play the part of the misfit in Flannery O'Connor's, *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. The language that she used in the story and then hearing Eudora Welty read "Why I Live at the P.O." about the time I got my P.h.D., made me more convinced to be a writer. I wrote one non-fiction essay for an educational journal. Of the three readers who read it, one said accept without qualification, one said accept with changes, one said reject no matter what. I realized that kind of academic writing probably wasn't going to be good and I was just suddenly getting turned on to fiction writing by Eudora Welty. That led me to writing fiction, teaching, both, and then I had the chance to just write for ten years.

RW: You wrote a number of books. How many novels have you written?

CE: Ten novels. The first short story I wrote appeared in the novel *Floatplane Notebooks*. *Floatplane Notebooks* was the one I started first, but it was the third one I finished. It was in process over about a ten year period, during which time I wrote two other novels.

RW: You had flown a lot. Was that partially inspired by your experience flying planes with them talking about the, kinda, mechanical stuff behind trying to get that plane to work?

CE: So I had wrote about this boy falling through a soft spot in the kitchen floor, because we had a soft spot. My first wife and I, we were living in an old house with a soft spot in the kitchen floor. Christmas, 1977 I hadn't written any serious fiction. I'd just started teaching college,

finished earlier that year my doctorate. Got a job teaching. Suddenly, I had two weeks at Christmas. First time in my life I can remember I didn't have anything to do, so I said I'm going to write a short story. I thought about the soft spot in the kitchen floor and someone falling through it. Then I made up the story, but I had the real kitchen in my mind. And that was the secret. Before, then when I played around with fiction a little bit, I had made everything up. I didn't realize I could use a real setting. That short story was dear to me; it was the first one that was published. It had two or three main characters based on my own childhood. In the meantime, these two other novels kind of interrupted. But I kept coming back to these stories about these – first of all these boys – it was based on family stories. And then suddenly I had a student named Bliss in a class – education class. I said I wanted to write about a character named Bliss. The novel wasn't working – I look back on it now – because it was too much about this one family. It was kind of insular. It was kind of almost familial, incestuous – in a nonsexual way – it was just all about this family. And so I said I'm going to write about someone named Bliss who comes into the family. As soon as I started writing about her, I made her up as a high school senior, A-student, loves adverbs and adjectives. She's really excited about this family that she finds through her husband-to-be. She starts writing about them. That helped me write the book. Of course, she and Meredith are at the middle of the scene that was upsetting to the evangelist.

RW: Could you talk about that scene? So I read the book and I also read somewhere that in order to prove how lascivious this one scene was, that Lineberry would actually print out the copies of these pages and hand them out to people which seems like the exact opposite thing to do if you're trying to get material censored is to spread it, but...

CE: It does seem that way. And I passed through - it either dreamed this or it happened - I didn't got to Hillsville during all this uproar because I think someone advised me not to and I think I asked Marion. I think we talked on the phone and I think she said it might not be a good idea for me to come up there and I could see that. But I dreamed or at some point it actually happened, at some point I was in Hillsville and I went into the grocery store and the page was there and you could sign a petition - you could read a page and sign a petition - that students shouldn't be reading that. I can understand that. I can see that. I was raised in a fundamentalist family. I can see, out of context, problems with that particular intimate scene, out of context. I actually saw the petition and the page.

RW: So, people were sending you editorials. Were they positive? Were they negative?

CE: They were all in my favor - excuse me - all the in favor of Marion Goldwasser. So, I don't remember how I first heard about it - the controversy. Somebody - it may have been Hilbert Campell, may have sent me an editorial, or a newspaper report. I think I saw a newspaper report. Of course back then it had to come in the mail. Saw it in an envelope and there was a piece of

paper saying a book had been banned. And of course I was very interested. I thought, what the hell was going on? Shortly following up I am in touch with Marion and I'm getting more editorials that are all saying this is outrageous. But, I read about this petition to get the teacher fired as I recall. They were taking the petition to the Superintendent and I thought to myself, what's the Superintendent going to do? Surely he is going to side with the teacher. And then I discovered that the teacher was a teacher of the year, had been there for twenty years and then I discovered that the Superintendent didn't go with the teacher. He went with the preacher. Then, I heard later that that had changed, that he had gone with the teacher. So I'm hearing these and I'm reading the editorials and becoming very interested. I'm sure I asked somebody about I'd be glad to go up there if that'd make a difference and someone said well that might not be a good idea. I thought that's fine I don't need to come up there. So I'm hearing about this political back and forth and I'm also hearing this, probably from Marion, that eleventh graders chose the book and that the principal or the Superintendent asked them - and they each bought the book with their own money - asked them for the books back. They refused to give the books back. So, I was hearing these things and in 1992 I would have been in the middle of writing another novel, working in my little office, but I was certainly interested in these things. But the thing I remember most, from the whole affair, was a phone call I got one day in my office. And it went like this - I wish I had a recording of it but I can do it pretty well I think -

"Is this, is this Mr. Edgerton down in North Carolina?"

"Yes ma'am it is."

"Are you the one that wrote *Floatplane Notebooks*?"

"Yes ma'am, I am."

"Do you know what's going on up here?"

"Well, yes ma'am, I've heard a little bit about it."

"Well there's this evangelist up here, J.B. Lineberry and he..." and right then in my mind is, which side is she coming down on. And I'm thinking to myself I'm about to get blown out of the water. So there's more talk back and forth and I'm kinda wondering how's this going to fall. Which way's the tree going to fall? And it culminates in this sentence. She says,

"This J.B. Lineberry says he's got salvation, but he ain't got religion." And I said hallelujah she's on my side.

So I said, "Thank you Ma'am you made my day. I appreciate your sentiment and I'm sorry about the hard things going with some people up there, especially the teacher." So we had a nice conversation and I don't know who she was. But that was the big event from my distanced viewpoint. Of course I heard, as it died down, that Marion left that school system and moved to Mount Airy [North Carolina]. To end the story, from my perspective, last year a student started working for me at UNCW where I teach fiction writing now. His name is Chase Culler. And as Chase and I talked he asked me if I remembered Marion Goldwasser and I did and she had been his high school English teacher in Mount Airy.

RW: So did you ever publicly talk about the controversy?

CE: I don't recall that I did. Someone may have asked me a question from the newspaper up there in Roanoke. I don't think it got much farther, though it may have gotten into the *English Journal*. I'm recalling that the *English Journal* may have covered this. Or maybe that was the *Rainey* controversy. Shouldn't be too hard to track down.