

PERCIVAL EVERETT AND ALEX ANDRIESSE

A CONVERSATION WITH PERCIVAL EVERETT

This interview was conducted over the telephone on May 22, 2018. The author was in California; the interviewer was in the Netherlands. In the latter location, a storm was brewing, but despite some rumbling, and a little crackling, the connection held.

ALEX ANDRIESSE: I wanted to begin by asking about your relationship to animals generally, but also specifically: what was it like to have a pet crow? Because I see them around, and, you know, they look a lot more intelligent than most people . . .

PERCIVAL EVERETT: And they are. I did want a crow. But it turns out that, you know, they're wild birds. They can be kind of smelly. I had to build an aviary for it. There was some labor involved. It fell out of a nest, and so I raised him. I assume it was a him. I called it a him. His name was Jim. And they are very smart. And they're highly monogamous, so if anyone else came near me, it was not a pretty scene. He would scream at them and drive them away. But he was very engaged all the time. He sat on my shoulder while I worked. And if I stopped paying attention to him, he would march down my arm and start pecking at the keys on the computer.

AA: Sounds a bit like my cat. You've said you've learned something as a writer—or maybe just as a human being—from your work training horses and mules, too.

PE: I guess that's certainly fair to say. First of all, the relationship is so pure with animals, as you know with your cat. I've never had an animal lie to me



or betray me. I think it has to do with the consistency of the interaction: if you're consistent with your behavior, the animal will respond consistently unless there's something wrong. And I find the same is true as I take myself into work. If I treat my work that way, then I know what to expect and what to expect from myself.

AA: You began writing fiction almost as a consequence of the ordinary language philosophy you were studying in college and graduate school. What difference did you find between making up situations for the purposes of philosophy and making up situations for the purposes of fiction?

PE: Ordinary language philosophy consists in creating scenes in which characters speak to each other, so we can examine how we talk about philosophical concepts in a context. So I was already writing scenes, and I loved fiction, but I think I was probably a little too young when I was studying philosophy, and I got bored with it fairly quickly. On the one hand, I liked creating the scenes. On the other hand, I found the philosophical progress that was made disappointing and circular. It felt as if I were doing it simply as an exercise, rather than as an attempt to truly understand something.

AA: Your first novel appeared when you were twenty-six or -seven?

PE: I finished when I was twenty-four, I think. And it came out when I was twenty-five.

AA: Had you worked on any novels before that? Are there any lost Everett works?

PE: No. I'd written a couple of stories. I was very fortunate. I sometimes think about the dues that writers have to pay and I feel somewhat guilty—however, lucky—that that first effort found a publisher. I think it's as much a

function of circumstance as anything else, but I often have a twinge of guilt about that.

AA: You studied at Brown, and I've heard you express your admiration for Robert Coover's fiction—

PE: I'm a big fan of Coover.

AA: Did you work with him at all while you were there?

PE: I did not. When I was there, I think he was only working with undergraduates. Our friendship didn't really develop until after I'd left Brown, but his work has always been really important to me and my understanding of fiction. As a writer, I'd like to be like Robert Coover. He's in his eighties and he's still producing great work that never lapses into complacency. He's always pushing it.

AA: The words "influence" and "tradition" are strange ones, and it's hard to use them well. But I thought I'd ask about some of the books and writers who have shaped your sense of what fiction can do. I guess Robert Coover would be among them.

PE: Yeah, I think he would be. There's all sorts of writers that I think have influenced me, and I write nothing like them. Sometimes it's the way writers approach the art that affects me. In fact I think probably I'm affected as much by painters in my fiction as I am by writers, sometimes. But certainly two of the novels that have been very important to me are *Tristram Shandy* and *The Way of All Flesh*, the Samuel Butler book. Chester Himes I find incredibly smart, and in a remarkably accessible way. But there's just so many people whose work I like and admire.

AA: I was wondering if you'd read the work of Ishmael Reed.

PE: Well, I have, certainly. But there's an example of—if I were going to say he was an influence I'd be stretching it some, but he certainly opened some structural doors for me. But someone whose conception of the novel is like his who's probably interested me more is Kurt Vonnegut. As a kid, he was *the* writer I read.

AA: He was actually next on my list here. And I was thinking particularly of *Bluebeard*, because, from a reader's perspective, *So Much Blue* seems almost to be a response to *Bluebeard*.

PE: Well, that must be all subliminal. I hadn't thought about *Bluebeard* in many, many years, but I'm sure that that influence is floating around in there. It wouldn't surprise me.

AA: I was thinking mostly of the very realist painting that the abstract expressionist who narrates that book is keeping in his windowless potato barn . . .

PE: Yeah. It never occurred to me, but yeah. That stuff gets in there.

AA: One last “influence” question, at least for now, and not about novelists or philosophers exactly—but I've been wondering whether you grew up watching the Marx Brothers?

PE: My sense of humor can be traced to three sources: Mark Twain, the Marx Brothers, and Bullwinkle.

AA: The conversations between Ted Turner and Not in *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* in particular are pure Marx Brothers, or, if not pure Marx Brothers, pure vaudevillian fun.

PE: Well, thanks. Sadly, it's very much like conversations I have with people.

AA: What writers make you laugh, besides Twain? Does Beckett?

PE: He does. I like the patience I find in Beckett. The dryness. Same with Robbe-Grillet. He's not often as funny in that way. But I really appreciate—not the detail so much as the patience.

AA: Of course, some of these people have appeared *in* your fiction.

PE: I often suffer from what in my household is called work amnesia. I really don't remember what I've written. So if you tell me things, I might remember, but a lot of times I'll be really surprised. So forgive me if I sound like I'm in the dark.

AA: I'll give you a good list! You have Ted Turner and Sidney Poitier in *I Am Not Sydney Poitier*, Roland Barthes in *Glyph*, Bud Powell in *Suder*, and all the many cameos in *Erasure* and *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*. Do these real-life characters enter your work by surprise? Or are they people whose personalities you've been thinking about in relation to the book?

PE: I don't know. I would imagine that sometimes if I need something said, that's the person to say it. Maybe I'm lazy. Maybe it's shorthand for me. But I also think importing a character that already has layers, adds some layers to the fiction. Or at least that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

AA: Speaking of more or less real people, you've had a character named Percival Everett in a couple of your novels. In *I Am Not Sidney Poitier*, Not has a class (The Philosophy of Nonsense) with a Professor Everett who seems to be a walking instantiation of nonsense.

PE: Reality mirrors art.



AA: Would you say you're seriously interested in the subject of nonsense?

PE: Very much so. I think nonsense is really important. It suggests the wonderful irony that in order for nonsense to work, it has to adhere more rigidly to the rules of syntax than sense. And nonsense is not the same as gibberish.

AA: In *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, you write: "it takes a lot more effort and comprehension of the inherent and ubiquitous structures of meaning to construct nonsense than it does to utter the plainest of mundane assertions."

PE: See, that's why I write novels. My characters say things much better than I can.

AA: Does the interest in the structures of nonsense have something to do with your attraction to abstraction, in painting?



PE: I'm sure. One of the reasons I keep writing is because, well—I have this belief that I can make an abstract novel, though I cannot describe what I mean at all. So I'm trying to figure out what that thing is while I'm trying to make it. And every time I think I've gotten close, I step back and realize that I haven't gotten close at all. It's a failure that I've come to embrace. I'm fascinated by it—by the power of story and the basic human need to create meaning, and to construct a narrative, when given a collection of words.



AA: There are passages in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* where—I'm not sure about abstraction—but where it almost doesn't matter who is narrating, and it becomes clear how little you need to get a story going . . .

PE: And that might be reflected in the reality that that book "fell stillborn from the press," if I may quote David Hume.



AA: Are you an orderly writer, who makes charts and outlines ahead of time?

PE: Oh no. I write lots of notes that are in many different notebooks. And I'm always looking for them. I've written a lot, apparently—from all evidence—but I don't keep any kind of schedule. If someone says let's go to a movie, I go to a movie.

AA: Where does a novel begin for you?

PE: Often I don't even know that I'm working on something. I start studying. All of a sudden I'll find that I'm reading book after book on geomorphology, or going into caves, and I have no idea why. I become obsessed with something that may end up having very little to do with the novel I'm working on, but it somehow provides me with a window.

AA: And how do you know when you come to the end?

PE: That's a question smarter people could answer more succinctly than I can. The quote is not original with me, but a work is abandoned as much as it is finished. You just decide that you're leaving it.

AA: "Difficult" is a word that crops up often in reviews of your work. Yet your sentences tend to be remarkably clear, even when they're talking about difficult things. I assume you don't bear reviewers in mind while you're writing, but do you have some sense of your reader, ideal or not?

PE: I do. I give readings at universities a lot, and I see who shows up for the readings. I have a couple of small, rather tenacious followings. I get a lot of . . . nerds, a lot of computer scientists, and a lot of, I guess, people who love animals. Every work is so different. I'm always moved that people will spend time with the work. That's of course what I want. But in this culture it doesn't

always happen. And I don't mean simply finishing a book. I mean offering it some thought. I work hard on the layers of meaning in my novels, and I think hard about novels I read, and I really want to live in a culture where people do that. Where they treat books the way they do music. Nobody listens to a CD once and then throws it away or gives it to someone else. I like to think people spend time with the work, and that they discover something new every time they come to it.

AA: There's that Nabokov quote I can't quote about how the only real reading is rereading.¹

PE: That's very true. But then I think, what the hell do I know? I'm just an old cowboy.

AA: In *Erasure*, there's a rejection letter written by an editor named Hockney Hoover, where he says Thelonius Ellison's latest manuscript is "too difficult for the market. But more, who is he writing to? Does the guy live in a cave somewhere?" The context here is that Ellison is not a "black enough" writer. Do you find that kind of stupidity persisting, or, at least in the publishing world, has the conversation changed at all?

PE: I think it has changed some. I think we still have a lazy publishing industry that perpetuates that some. When I was growing up, if I were to rely on the bookshelf in the library or the bookstore to construct my picture of the world, I would have thought that black people only lived in the inner city or the rural south, and that they were all poor. I think much of the reason I became an artist was to address that deficiency in art and the culture's desire to marginalize people in such a way. There's a book I saw—I don't own it. I saw it at a used bookstore and I forgot to buy it. I don't know if the title was

1. "Curiously enough, one cannot read a book; one can only reread it."

Black, or African American, Abstract Expressionists. And I thought, wow, I wonder what that means. What does that bring to the meaning of the work? Am I supposed to, because of the title of this book, view this work differently from the works of Kandinsky and Motherwell? And so there's always that stuff floating around. The insidious, sort of afterthought marginalizations that reoccur and reoccur.

AA: Is art ever a place to vent a certain kind of rage at human idiocy, or small-mindedness? Or maybe the better way to ask this is—is the novel a form that allows people to pay attention to what's enraging, and simply let it be enraging, rather than dismissing it, or . . .

PE: Ideally, I don't think art should have a message, but I do think that art should reflect the deficiencies in the culture and create a picture of an artist's sensibility. And when I say the artist's sensibility, I don't mean a personal sensibility, but a sensibility that should be in the world. My example of how art can change things is always *Guernica*. I can only imagine what it meant when people first saw it. It doesn't come with a text next to it that says: "This is about the Spanish Civil War." It doesn't name Franco. But in its subtle and not so subtle ways . . . I mean, who can forget the image of that horse's face? Art is where change happens. We can say it flat out, but when people are moved by art, they can't argue with it. And I'd love to think that, at some point, some novel of mine affects somebody.

AA: I was reading *Watershed* the other day and came across the passage where Bissett tells Robert Hawks, the narrator, that the US army is storing anthrax on the Plata Indian Reservation and Hawks thinks: "I didn't believe what he was telling me, but I didn't know why I didn't believe him. The government was doing secret experiments like the Tuskegee thing, all the time, and I realized that that was the scariest part of all, that in spite of knowledge of past transgressions, I still resisted belief in a new one, somehow believing that my country was

somehow me, maybe. But it wasn't my country." Obviously, the character has particular reasons for saying this, but I was struck by this, maybe especially now in 2018, and I wonder if it's a case where narrator and author overlap.

PE: Again, I wish I could say I remembered. But: I agree with whoever wrote that.

AA: What were the origins of the sort of mosaic method, the composition by fragments, that one finds as early as *Erasure*, or—

PE: I think it starts with *Glyph*. I can't remember the order of the books. I guess I would say it actually starts with *Frenzy*, the novel about Dionysus. And I think it's probably more a reflection of how my mind works more than anything else. I kind of jump around and make connections. One of the reasons *Glyph* as a work came easily to me is because it's so much like the way I actually think.

AA: The trouble is that I read your books all out of order.

PE: Well, I wrote them out of order!

AA: Is that literally true, because of the quirks of publishing?

PE: No, not really. Though . . . the novel *Assumption* I call my procrastination novel, because I was working on *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* and it was very difficult going, and I said I'm just going to stop. And I wrote *Assumption* as a way to not work on that novel. I wish that would happen again.

AA: Despite your work amnesia, do you sense that there's been some progression from book to book? Do you see yourself composing a body of work that all hangs together?

PE: I think that the novels are all in conversation with each other, but not the first one. I can't include *Suder* in there. Maybe someone else can make it fit, but in my thinking and experience with all the books, it doesn't fit.

AA: Is that because you see it as a kind of apprentice novel?

PE: Probably. It's the only novel of mine that I've ever reread. After I've done all the editing and everything, I read it some twelve years after I published it. Of course, hopefully, I'd become a better writer those twelve years later, and there were all sorts of things I would do differently. I thought I could probably make it a better constructed novel, and then reality hit me: no, I could make it a *differently* constructed novel, but more importantly, I could *not* make it a better work of art. And that's what I'm trying to make. I'm not trying to write a novel that adheres to any kind of rules. I'm trying to make a painting. A concerto. Not a stool.

AA: We can just skip this one if you like, but I ran across it in my reading and want to ask: is it true you're working on a private work—something like the verbal equivalent of the private painting in *So Much Blue*?

PE: Well, yeah, and nobody will see it, so I don't mind answering that at all. [laughter] I'm very good at kicking dirt over my footprints.

AA: What role does privacy play in making a work of art—even if it is going to go out into the world?

PE: A while ago somebody asked me, or maybe I asked myself, what is one thing I really wanted to teach my children, and one thing is that their world is theirs and it's okay for them to have secrets. It's okay for them not to tell me something. I don't want to take that from them ever.

AA: It's almost a requirement in my line to complain about writers I admire being under-recognized. But then I wonder what I mean by that.

PE: Am I selling hundreds of thousands of books? No. Would it be great? Of course it would. I have to put two kids through college. Do I care? Not at all. I just want to make the next book. I just want to put art into the world. I don't care about being famous. I don't care about my books making lots of money. I'm very lucky. I have a university that pays me more than I'm worth. And I get to hang out with smart young people. That's not so bad.

AA: Especially seeing that you get to hang out with smart young people every year: are there things you think it may be important to ignore, or at least to put out of mind, in order to make art in the twenty-first century?

PE: One is—and maybe it's a flippant answer, but I'm more and more serious about it, even though publishing has taken a turn that might make it ill advised—to ignore social media. It just takes up too much time with a lot of unvetted voices without enough substance, and I would just like to see the next generation say, "I don't need this." You know, people had revolutions before they had Facebook, and the world changed many times before there was Twitter. And I don't mean to sound like a grumpy old man, which I probably am, but it really doesn't add anything to our understanding of the world. It's just made us more voyeuristic.

AA: What *do* you bear in mind while you're writing a novel?

PE: Making it real. Making good art. Trusting myself. I mean, the mere fact that I write fiction for a living is ample evidence that I'm mentally deficient. So if I claim to have any truth about the world or offer any advice about the world it should be rightly ignored, but as an artist, good or bad, I do see the world, and I try to represent it fairly and honestly. If someone thinks something

about the world because of that depiction, that's great. So I don't try to go to work and preach in any way. Though I cannot hide from myself or my politics. Those things will filter into it. But I don't go to work with a message. Except in one novel, and that was *The Water Cure*. That was my protest novel about the Bush years. The irony, of course, is that now I long for the Bush years.

AA: Do you ever find yourself hopeful these days?

PE: Often. I get to hang out with these university students, and they always surprise me with their seriousness and their intelligence, and I think somebody out there is doing something right. So, yes, I am hopeful. I look at my kids and their friends, and if I don't feel hope it makes it very difficult to raise them. But it's a scary, scary world. I am encouraged by the young people I talk to—and by the young writers. I don't think I would still be writing, or write as much as I do, were it not for the fact that I see so many young writers trying to do this and reminding me why I started doing it in the first place. And I mean unpublished writers. Writers who show up in workshops and who may never be writers, but who are trying to do it. Even something like Bread Loaf, where people, all ages, take ten days out of their summer, when they could be going to, I don't know, golf camp—and they want to get together and write poems and stories. I mean, how cool is that?

AA: I thought I'd end by quoting the novelist Everett to you just one more time, from a section called "Preface" in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*, where the narrator says: "your book might seem to begin in the manner of a definition dialogue, setting out to identify rhetorical stratagems, but concludes, as perhaps all things conclude, appearing as little more than an attempt to discern how one can best find some happiness in this life. Whereas we might be moved to plausibly regard the novel as just this, we would still be wrong, wouldn't we?" I wanted to close with this because it reminds me you started out from ordinary language philosophy, but that in the recent books especially

there seems to be a new interest in older philosophical questions—a reaching for wisdom, even. Though you may not like my saying that.

PE: That you would say anything about my work at all is flattering. That's why it's there, and once it leaves me it's fair game in the world. What it means I can't say. That it means is the most important thing for me.