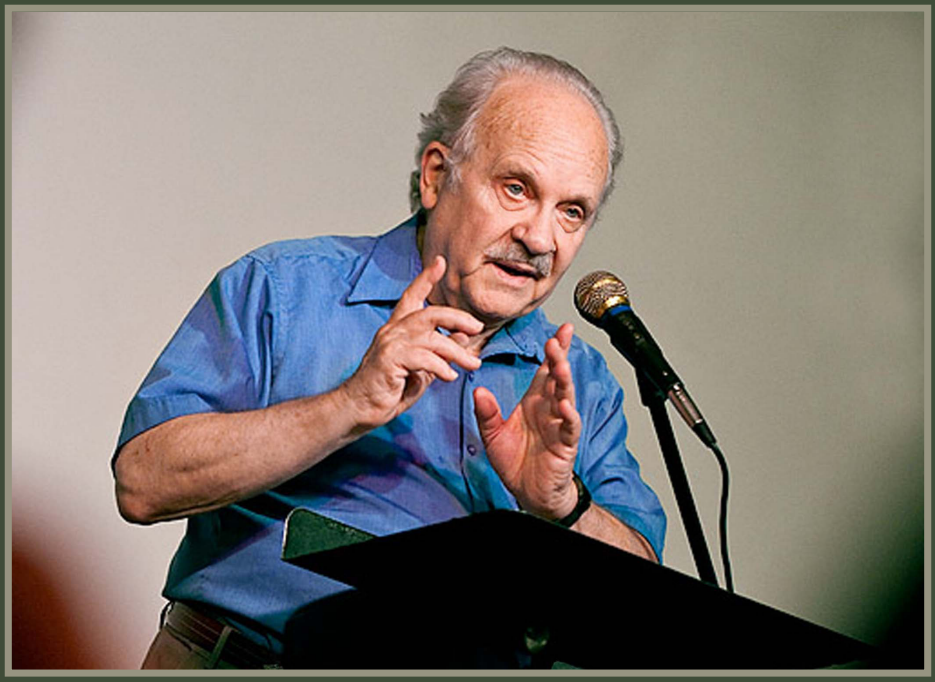
Interviews with David Madden



Compiled and with an Introduction by

CAROL MORROW

AND

JAMES A. PERKINS

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction 1

The Compulsion to Tell a Story: An Interview with David Madden, 1967 5
Greg Spaid

A Conversation with David Madden, 1971 31
Sanford Pinsker

An Interview with David Madden, 1974 43
Allen Wier

An Interview with David Madden, 1974 65
Ruth Laney

An Interview with David Madden, 1976 83
Samuel Prestridge

An Interview with David Madden, 1980 95
Ray Jones

Interview with David Madden: On Technique in Fiction, 1984 111
Jeffrey J. Folks

The Art of the Novel: An Interview with David Madden, 1984 129
William Parrill

David Madden on WUOT in Knoxville, November 1985 161
Jacqueline Jones

David Madden on Southern Literature, 1990 171
A. B. Crowder

David Madden on Writing, 1990 185
A. B. Crowder

Interview with David Madden: "The Theatrical Image," 1994 199
Peggy Bach

Outside Events: Inside the Imagination: An Interview with David Madden, 1997 215
Jeffrey J. Folks

David Madden on Creative Writing: An Interview, 2002 233
James A. Perkins

Web of the Imagination: An Interview with David Madden, 2006 255
Jeffrey J. Folks

Myriad Mindedness: An Interview with David Madden, 2009 281
William Parrill

Don't Write—Revise (And Break Rules), 2010 299
Susan K. Perry

Awesome Output, No Writer's Block: How? 2013 305
Susan K. Perry

Appendix 311

Preface

I have known David Madden since 1960 when I was a sophomore at Centre College and he was teaching in the English Department and waiting for the publication of his first novel, *The Beautiful Greed*. I heard him read in convocation during my sophomore year, but I never had a class with him. At that time, I thought I was going to be a lawyer, and Madden was too much like the front-porch-sitting, storytelling family members I was trying to put behind me.

Our paths diverged after my junior year. Madden went to the University of Louisville, Kenyon College, and Ohio University before becoming writer in residence at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. I became an English major and wound up taking a job teaching creative writing at Westminster College in Pennsylvania. I kept up with Madden by reading his works as they appeared. We saw each other at writers' conferences and at his readings.

At the 2000 SAMLA [South Atlantic Modern Language Association] meeting, I asked Madden if he would cooperate with me in an attempt to compile a book about his work. That led to *David Madden: A Writer for All Genres* (2006) which I coedited with Randy Hendricks. A reader interested in exploring more of Madden's work should consult the bibliography in that work or the bibliography at www.davidmadden.net. This collection arises out of some of the

research for that volume. Madden is an energetic and hardworking teacher of creative writing. He is a careful reader, and he is most observant of the techniques of writing. The best summary of Madden on the craft of fiction can be found in his *Revising Fiction* (1988), but the advantage of reading this text is that you get to know the man, his character, and his voice as well as his message.

James A. Perkins

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Most of the interviews in this book appeared previously, some of them in a slightly different form, in the sources listed below. Some have been reprinted previously as noted. For accuracy, readability, and consistency throughout the interviews, we have made minor revisions to spelling, punctuation, and the treatment of numbers. We are grateful to the publications listed below for permission to publish them here.

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Introduction

Carol Morrow and James A. Perkins

David Madden, the southern writer and teacher, is a force of nature, a lightning strike, a straight-line wind, a one-hundred-year flood. When he is talking about literature or the process of writing, he exudes energy. Interviewing him, trying to keep up with his narrative, trying to follow the allusions that arise from his wide-ranging reading is an exhausting yet educational task.

Madden is always reconsidering and reinventing his own material, discovering aspects of his own works even as he answers interview questions—and delighting in those discoveries. On occasion, he seems almost to stumble over his own words in his excitement to present an idea to the interviewer. And where better can readers, creative writers, and artists of all types learn about the creative process than from a man who has written short stories, novels, and poetry as well as radio, theater, and movie scripts? This collection is a fine presentation of the thought processes, creativity, techniques, and passions of Madden, who succinctly sums up his life and work best with the statement, "I feel the creative process is ongoing: it never ends."

If you have read even one of Madden's works, you already understand the depth of his description, the intensity of his loyalty to a sense of place, the reworking of many of his original texts, and his interest in sparking the imagination of his readers. As he writes,

reads, or spins a tale, you can almost envision him leaning forward, eyes sparkling in anticipation of his audience's pleasure in his efforts.

Madden's persistent focus is on storytelling, and his passion is evident in his voice. His recollections and observations take the reader to another time, when families gathered to listen to and participate in telling stories, before the electronic age pushed away such human interaction and intimacy. The oral tradition plays a prominent role in everything Madden does, from his public readings to his writing. In these interviews, a reader can hear the warmth and excitement in Madden's voice as he describes the experience of the oral tradition and how it has affected his approach to writing: "In everything I write—everything I write—I'm aware of [an] almost platonic universal listener but not . . . that's not purely metaphysical. That person is the hot-blooded animal. But still platonic. And I don't imagine a whole room full of people but at least one person listening to me, and I'm looking into his hot eyes."

Madden's amassed knowledge of technique and approach has been tried and refined over many years of researching, teaching, critiquing, and writing in multiple genres. If we were to try to distill Madden down to two words, they might be *imagination* and *place*. If we were to add one more, it would be *technique*. The Madden frankness and work ethic in his many roles should also be influential for those who would follow him. "If I'm going to teach instead of write, then I want the teaching to do what the writing does. And in the writing I try to make it really great. I try to make everything work. I try to write something that's going to affect everybody, even though I know it won't affect everybody. But it is there to affect everybody if they only respond." He is now Robert Penn Warren Professor of Creative Writing Emeritus and resides in Black Mountain, North Carolina after forty-one years at Louisiana State University. His

foresight and imagination pushed him to suggest the creation of the United States Civil War Center at Louisiana State University in 1992 and to serve as its director for seven years.

Since he was born and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, Madden's strong identification with the southern writer is biological, emotional, and spiritual. "I think that southern writers—most of them, not all of them—are basically schizophrenic, in a very good sort of way, really. Schizophrenia in the southerner as a writer comes in seeing the effect of two different traditions upon the technique and the content of his writing—one is the tradition of the oral storytelling, the oral storytelling tradition of the South—especially, from my point of view, of Appalachia. The oral tradition—all those wonderful stories, hunting stories in the case of Faulkner, and grandmothers telling stories about the family or about all kinds of characters and so on—had a great effect on many southern writers . . . We then go to the other extreme, the superliterary tradition influenced by the European modernist and going all the way back to Flaubert and Henry James and people like that."

Despite this identification, Madden's expertise and insights are certainly not limited to the southern viewpoint, nor his experience to that region. Following his undergraduate work at the University of Tennessee, Madden earned his master's degree at San Francisco State University and studied at Yale Drama School. He has given lectures at conferences and dramatic readings of his fiction at over one hundred universities and colleges, and he served as Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Delaware. He has served as writer in residence at UNC-Chapel Hill, Clark University, and Lynchburg College, among others, during his years at Louisiana State University.

Madden's writing has taken him to more exotic locales such as Venice, Istanbul, and Yugoslavia. The author is quick to point out

that he sees his work as more "universal" than strictly southern (much like Eudora Welty, who felt being referred to as a "regional" writer was condescending) and quick to acknowledge appreciation of other writers who have influenced him. "Thomas Wolfe . . . showed me the range of possibilities . . . after that, Hemingway, Joyce, and Faulkner." But Madden frequently mentions the man who seems to have most influenced him in his later writings. "I knew about style and technique by reading *The House of Fiction* when I was about sixteen. But the man who put it into practice most visibly for me was Wright Morris." Only two of the authors mentioned are southerners. Madden also speaks of his awe for the work of Charles Dickens. So, while having an instinct and affinity for things southern, he can also reach beyond those roots in his writing.

The interviews in this volume were conducted over a period of the last forty-six years, from 1967, when Greg Spaid, one of Madden's students at Kenyon, recorded this never-before-published interview, to 2013, when Susan K. Perry shaped Madden's answers to her e-mailed questions into a blog interview for *Psychology Today's* website. These interviews sometimes coincided with the publication of a Madden short story collection or novel, and they reveal the author's thoughts on his just-completed work. At other times they catch Madden at work on a new project, and he talks openly about the process he is in the midst of. Although the topics and conversations overlap slightly from interview to interview, they never fail to interest. Ranging from general writing observations to explanations of specific techniques, Madden offers major insights into his craft of writing and his method of teaching.

The Compulsion to Tell a Story: An Interview with David Madden

Greg Spaid, 1967

Comment by David Madden

In the spring of 1967, when I was teaching writing and a course called American Dreams at Ohio University, Greg Spaid, a painter, still a student at Kenyon where I had taught him freshman English, came down to Athens, Ohio, to interview his former teacher, preparatory to writing an honor's thesis on my fiction (it consisted then of one novel, many short stories, poems, and plays). Greg Spaid is now a successful artistic photographer.

Since the interview took place in my farmhouse in Athens, *Cassandra Singing* (Crown, 1969), a work in progress often referred to in the interview, has been published. A collection of my essays, *The Poetic Image in Six Genres* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), includes an informal introduction in which I touch on some of the concepts discussed in this interview; it also includes a long discussion of my problems writing and rewriting *Cassandra Singing* simultaneously as a play and as a novel over ten years. Some of the stories alluded to were included in *The Shadow Knows* (Louisiana State University Press, 1970). I am still at work on *Bijou*, the novel-in-progress referred to in the interview.

Listening to the tape recording of this interview, I am, of course, like most writers, appalled at my pompous tone. The only way to

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See the appendix for an alternative version of this interview.

avoid this tone is to avoid mock humility. I don't know which is more offensive.

Accompanying Greg on his motorcycle was a young friend who was also attending Kenyon. As a storyteller, I was very much aware of his presence (for reasons implied by statements in the interview). And as a teacher, I suppose I was eager to make some impact on the strange student. This situation may start to explain the overbearing stance. The interview itself became a paradigm of some of the teacher-student and storyteller-listener observations made within the interview.

SPAID: Do you feel that your formal education has encouraged you to write?

MADDEN: Well, I don't think you have to have a formal education to write, although if you do have a formal education, you'll probably write different things. James Joyce's formal education is reflected very definitely in what he wrote. Ernest Hemingway didn't go beyond high school, and you can see that in his writing—not in a bad sense, you know—but certainly no formal learning reflected in it. And the kind of education I've had has not been bad for the kind of writing that I do; although since I write criticism, you might think that the kind of education I have had—a master's in a creative writing program—would get in the way of that, would make that kind of writing difficult. And in a way, maybe it has, because I wrote 800 pages on Wright Morris when really all the publication asked for was 150, then I spent two or three years cutting it down. Now maybe if I'd had a formal education in literary criticism at Harvard or some place, where some teacher told me the techniques of scholarship and all that kind of stuff, maybe I could have shortcut the problems I had

with the Morris book, but on the other hand, I might have developed a distaste for literary criticism altogether and not written a word.

Spaid: You don't feel that your formal education has hampered your creative impulses?

Madden: Oh, no, not the formal education I have had, because for one thing, you know, I didn't go straight through—I kept dropping out to go into the merchant marines and that sort of thing.

Spaid: Do you find any merit in college creative writing classes and writer's workshops?

Madden: I used to wonder about that because when I first started teaching, I wondered what I was doing teaching writing since as a student I had never believed in taking courses in it. Now, I took one course in playwriting with Hazel Strayer at Iowa State Teachers College, but mainly, I think, just because I didn't want to be burdened with other kinds of courses. I could at least use that time to write, and I was writing anyway; I didn't need a course to do that, and I don't think that course did me much good. And then I went to San Francisco State College to study with Walter van Tilburg Clark; and again I did that because I wanted to get a master's, so I could teach—in high school, I thought then—but I didn't want to get a master's in formal criticism or scholarship. I thought, well, hell, I'm writing this novel—*Cassandra Singing*—I'll get my master's on that basis rather than criticism. As an undergraduate, I didn't take [writing] courses, because I really didn't believe they were particularly good for a writer, and actually the ones I had weren't too good. I had—well, Clark was a great man, but maybe not a great teacher of writing. He talked about stories in class in a wonderful way that was helpful. Then, John Gassner was a great man in playwriting in Yale Drama School.

After about seven or eight years of teaching these courses, I've found that there really, definitely *are* things you can teach people who really want to learn and who really intend to become writers and who are actively engaged in writing. But the most important things, they either have or not, they bring with them to the course. And at the University of Louisville, at Kenyon, and here at this University [Ohio University], I have had very dramatic examples of guys who would come in with stories that were almost completely wrong in every sense, but by the *way* they were wrong, you could tell the person had talent. And I would point out these very simple fundamental things that were wrong, like the language was very Victorian and pseudoliterary when they were talking about bums or the road or something. I would just point out to them how ridiculous this is and how far removed from their own thoughts and feeling this language was—one instance—and would get a dramatic change early in the course. So that by the end of the course, they would have completely thrown off ten or fifteen identifiable characteristics that were ruining their writing, and then they would begin to develop their own style.

But the guys who *don't* need these courses, and who seem to benefit so little from them, are guys who are writing a little or a lot and who have an attitude about their writing that makes it impossible to teach them anything. That is, they think, "Well, you know, I've got talent and I'm expressing my inner self." Especially people who are expressing their own subjective lives, their own soul, their own emotions, "I want to write honestly about my own emotions, and therefore it will be good, because it's, you know, about *me*, and I'm being honest about me." And these people you can't teach anything to, because there are no general concepts—I don't want to say rules—that pertain to autobiographies of that kind. You can't take a course in Greg Spaid, for instance, but you *can* take a course in writing. And people like that, who get into the courses, are very disruptive because

they expect to find a parallel to the spontaneous excitement they get out of masturbating. But I'm not going to masturbate 'em, and nobody else is going to masturbate 'em, and they wonder why they're not having an orgasm. It's because they're not at home masturbating—that's where they should be. Now I'm exaggerating, 'cause those very same guys can become good writers—on their own, eventually, *somehow*. In fact, I was that kind of writer myself. That's why I was reluctant to take a course in the first place—which made me wonder why the hell that kind of writer does take a course.

Spaid: What type of criticism has been especially helpful to you as a developing writer?

Madden: You mean from critics?

Spaid: Yeah, if you didn't take a lot of writing courses.

Madden: Well, I did read a lot of criticism, that's right, and I guess the *most* helpful thing was reading other writers—Wolfe, Joyce, Wright Morris, Hemingway, even James M. Cain. I think before taking a course, especially *during* a course, the most important thing you can do while you are deliberately, consciously trying to learn how to write is to read *as a writer*, which is very different from reading in an English class and writing critical papers. There's a whole different kind of orientation, and it's a technique, though; and sometimes you need a teacher, probably one who's also a writer, to teach you how to *do* that—just what that means, to read creatively as a reader.

But then to point to one piece of criticism which has been extremely important to me—an essay by Mark Schorer called "Technique as Discovery." It has been one of the most important critical works I've read, in which he makes the point that it is the technique that you decide upon that enables you to discover the deeper meanings and feelings in your raw material.

SPAID: Has there been any personal criticism of your things?

MADDEN: Yeah. Way back there when I was in about the eleventh grade, after having no teachers in high school except—there was one teacher back there in junior high who read my stuff and commented on it critically—somebody told me about a guy named C. P. Lee at the University of Tennessee who'd read stuff and told me at the same time about a guy named Robert Daniel who would read stuff by young writers. I contacted C. P. Lee first.

He sat right there where you're sitting a couple of months ago, after I hadn't seen him for years, and told the story of how this young kid called him up on the phone and said, "I want to bring you a few stories. Somebody says you read 'em." And he says, "I went to the door—it opened on a steep stairway—and I looked out, and I didn't see anybody. I started to shut the door, and then I looked down, and I saw a stack of papers. And then I looked and looked and looked, and there was a little kid underneath this big stack of papers, and he was like this and the stack of papers was like that [Madden acts out the situation]. And there were twenty or thirty short stories in the stack that he very calmly and coolly turned over to me, and he asked me to comment in great detail on each one of them.

So C. P. Lee sat down with me a week later, and we went over, I think in pretty much detail, all those stories and did to me what I was telling you it's possible to do with a young writer who writes badly in a certain way. He says, "This is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong,"—and it's such a fundamental thing that, if your attitude is right, you can see it, you can laugh at it, you can go on from there and be glad you found out it was wrong. Wrong because you did it in the story, not wrong in the abstract, because, hell, there's the story, and it's not working, it's all wrong there in the story. It's not a matter of abstract rules, you see.

To give you an illustration of what he did—a beautiful story of mine that I'd still like a couple of people to read—I wrote it when I was sixteen, called "Seven Frozen Starlings." It's about a little girl named Rosemary, who has a harelip, and she has a feeling for birds and all that kind of stuff, and seven starlings get frozen on a telephone wire in a snowstorm, and she comes along, and some little snotty-nosed boys are throwing rocks at the starlings and knocking 'em off the wires. And she takes the starlings away with her, and then the next day she puts the starlings on the little boys' desks at school to shock them into awareness of the awful thing they've done, and so on. Well, anyway, at one point I said, "Rosemary's eyes were like purple plums." And C. P. Lee said something like "Shit!" you know, in his Oxford accent—he's from Arkansas—he said, "Oh, David, that's just plain shit!" And I said, "What do you mean? That's a great line. It's *poetic*. How can you say a thing like that about something so beautiful?" But something about the way he said it made me see that, after all, it was shit. I began to laugh at it. From then on whenever he came to a similar passage in my work, he said, "There's that goddamn purple plum again," or something like that.

In a way, I've kind of adopted that technique—as being natural to my personality, anyway—with my students, so that I try—even in my freshman English, when we're talking in conference—I try to get the student to laugh at his problems with me, as though he's stepping back from it as I am. I like him, I have nothing against him, I just hate what he's done; and we are standing back from it together, laughing at it, and this enables him to go on; and in many cases this works.

SPAID: You make it far less offensive that way.

MADDEN: Yeah. I don't say, "Well, Mr. Spaid, I'm afraid here you've committed the sin of incoherence," I just say, "Shit!" or something like that and then give you a very formal reason afterwards.

Then Robert Daniel came along after C. P. Lee, and he had a very different approach. He was very gentlemanly and very firm and very judicious. He would weigh things. Where C. P. Lee would say, "That's really great," if it was, or "Shit!" if it was shit, Daniel would try very carefully to get everything in perspective; and he was very sparing of praise. I got very little praise out of him, so when I got it, I would really believe it. So those two kinds of criticism from people outside courses, I had from the beginning.

Spaid: To this point you had just written stories. When did you start thinking about writing a book?

Madden: Well, actually in the seventh grade I had about eighty pages of a novel that I just didn't finish—"The Yearning Heart," about a wanderlust kid—and two or three partials by the ninth grade. And the first novel I wrote when I was nineteen was called "Nymphs in the Wilderness." It was written with Gold Medal Pocket Books in mind. It was about a nymphomaniac and a young guy down in the slums of Knoxville, Tennessee, who was conning her out of her money by being her lover and so on; but it's a kind of good fun book. C. P. Lee, as a matter of fact, remembers it very vividly as a wonderful, melodramatic, romantic, exotic, weird, bizarre book.

Then, the next book I wrote—the first serious full-length novel I wrote—was *The Beautiful Greed*. And the way that came about was that I write a long short story for Walter van Tilburg Clark's class, almost like meeting an assignment 'cause the story's due, see, and I'm always so full of stories, you know, it just so happened this was the one, and it was called "The Naked Ambassador," because old Franco is naked with his briefcase at one point. Clark said that it really needed to be expanded a little. And I was working on *Cassandra Singing* at the time, wanted that to be my master's thesis novel. Clark said, "I don't think you can finish it in time the way it ought to be

done. Why don't you turn this long story into a novel and let that be your thesis?" Which I did, in about a month; and with a little bit more rewriting a year later, it was accepted rather soon afterwards.

Then I've written two novels in about twelve days apiece, one of which was a lyrical, satirical, southern detective novel, *Hair of the Dog*, just serialized in a magazine, *Adam*, which I wrote in eleven days. Another was a serious novel, which I wrote in the same place, Boone, North Carolina, in the mountains, in a remote farmhouse. It's called "Something Mourns," about the effect of a legend about Jesse James on some people living in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. That's a serious novel I really want to get published someday. A novella-length segment will appear in *Carleton Miscellany*. Both of them were written under the exact same circumstances. I had been working on the Wright Morris book and on *Cassandra Singing* simultaneously, twelve hours a day, almost every day, all summer long, and I had twelve days left before I had to get back to Centre College in Kentucky, one year, so I wrote *Hair of the Dog*. George Simenon said in an interview that he writes novels in eleven days, so I took that as a dare. Next year, the exact same thing, and I wrote "Something Mourns." So I've written only five novels.

Spaid: The ideas for these things, before you start writing, are they just floating in your head? Do you do an outline or something?

Madden: I used to do an outline very carefully, but I don't do too much of that anymore. I have a little note that I write down when I first think of the idea, and then I file it away and come across it every once in a while.

Spaid: You said autobiography was a problem for you in *The Beautiful Greed* and some of the other things you have written. Has there been anything you have written that is in no way autobiographical?

MADDEN: Yes. Well, you mean in no obvious way. Actually most of the things, in a way. See, *Cassandra Singing* is not autobiographical.

SPAID: There's just a lot of Knoxville, Tennessee.

MADDEN: Yeah, Knoxville, the locale, which is an indirect reflection of me. But where I think the danger comes mainly is when you're talking about yourself as a person in a narrative. And I think Knoxville is the only locale that will ever pose an autobiographical problem because it is so much a part of myself. So as long as the locale isn't Knoxville, locale has never been a problem. But any time I figure myself in a work, there are usually problems; see, there's nothing of me in *Cassandra Singing*, although there is a model of my daddy and maybe a little bit of my mother. There is absolutely nothing of me in *Hair of the Dog* and only a tiny bit of a character somewhat like me in "Something Mourns," but not really. And in *Bijou*, there is a problem really because it involves Knoxville and myself, directly. Now through *Cassandra Singing* I knew what the locale of Knoxville could do to me; so early, when I first began to write *Bijou*, I decided, by god, we're never gonna leave the theater—if Knoxville enters in it's gotta be by evocation. Well, I sat down to write, let everything out, and I've now got twenty pages in which I describe every street in Knoxville, every hill, every building, the river, and now everything that's interesting; though here I think it's gonna work, because I talk about the different theaters in Knoxville, and there really were a hell of a whole lot at that time—thirty, including neighborhood theaters and uptown theaters. So I was talking about Knoxville in relation to each theater, where each theater was located, and then I'm gonna talk about some facet of my life in relation to each theater, with two being the major ones, one neighborhood theater, the Broadway, about five miles separated from the Bijou at the other end of Knoxville. So that's what I mean by conception. There is an organizational plan involved there. And the technique will act as an agent of discovery for me.

Let me talk about "Traven," a novella, in connection with the autobiographical thing. It appeared in the *Southern Review's* special issue on southern writers. It's about my two brothers, who—as you may remember I may have said in class—were a couple of con men, bad check artists, and spent a lot of time in prison. Well, they've led fascinating lives, and one's younger and one's older than I am, two or three years difference each way. So as I was growing up and staying in school and finishing and then even going on to college, those guys had all these adventures, wild lives; and they were always *out there*, so to speak.

Spaid: Same relationship as Cassandra to Lone.

Madden: Right. That's good, man. I never thought of that. Right! So that *Cassandra Singing* is about me only in the *conceptual* sense. So these guys' lives were fascinating, and one incident in particular I always wanted to write about. After my year at San Francisco State, I was just getting *The Beautiful Greed* in final condition as my master's project, still working on *Cassandra*, too, and living in a big fancy mansion by the river in Knoxville—it's on a postcard as one of the most beautiful mansions in Knoxville, the home of the symphony conductor and sort of my benefactor—he sort of raised me culturally from the time I was about fifteen. So it was a great setup to really write, and my younger brother gets out of federal prison, and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation picks him up and extradites him, and they're gonna put him on the chain gang. He's in a state of exhaustion and a kind of serious mental condition. So I know if he gets on the chain gang he may die or get killed. You know, he might do something wild, and they'll kill him or something like that will happen. So I went across the Smoky Mountains from Knoxville about four or five times in the rain that summer, to go to this little town in Georgia to get my brother off the chain gang. This involved quite a bit of conning in a person-to-person way. I had to persuade

the people he passed the checks on to drop charges so that I could get him off the chain gang. I had to persuade the judge to be favorable. My brother—who was in the county jail there—had already persuaded the prosecutor, so he was on my brother's side, which gives you an example of what a con man he is and why he is *in* there in the first place. Why did he go to federal prison where he served three years and was released and then picked up and extradited to Georgia? 'Cause my older brother was a con man who told him how to pass the checks, taught him the techniques, betrayed him—*he* claims—and turned him over to the FBI.

Now this story is an illustration of why I don't think it's good to copy life exactly. That story is interesting enough in itself to have almost saved a girl's sanity in New York one time. This actress friend of mine, Collin Wilcox, whom you've seen on TV a lot, maybe, without knowing her name. I had told her that story a couple of days after it happened, talked about four hours, giving every detail of it. It's really two weeks long, the story, but I told her in a big burst of about four hours, acting it out and all. She really loved it. I had a great time telling the story, imitating everybody and so on. Well, about two years later in New York she asked me to tell it again to a friend of hers upstairs, a girl who was helping her. And the next day she told me a story. Well, I had wondered about the girl, she wasn't as responsive as most people had been to the story, you see, and I thought she didn't like me because I was being so outgoing about the whole thing—pulling out all the stops. But Collin told me the next day, she said, "You saved that girl's life." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, she had just been raped about an hour before you started telling that story, and she desperately needed something to take her mind off it, so I asked her down and deliberately got you to tell the story. And it did the trick. She got over it, her incipient hysteria." So as a writer—about seven years ago—I thought, "This is so

good, so right." But I just don't believe that to tell a fascinating story is enough. It has to have some shape and meaning.

Now the way it really was, *I* was the hero. I got my little brother off the chain gang. And I did it by really conning those people, not out of their money or anything, but just playing on their emotions, and so on. My big brother was in prison all this time. OK. When it came to making something meaningful out of this, but retaining the richness, I changed a lot of things around. I became a rather bungling young writer who tried to con these people but couldn't. As a character, I conned them by telling them stories—but not about my brother. The hero of the piece is my older brother who is not in prison in the story but who shows up at the last minute and with a grand complicated con-man maneuver, pretending to be a lawyer from Florida and so on, springs my little brother in front of my very eyes, after I had spoiled the whole thing through ineptitude. So that I come out looking sort of like the villain. Now what makes this meaningful is that the story turns out to be about the artist as con man and the con man as artist, and the point is that in life my brothers are the con men as artists, and I am the artist as con man—*only* in the telling of the story. Because I con *you* into listening to me, into giving me three or four hours of your life and into believing in my characters. And now the form and shape and construction of the story illustrates this. It's not just the theme that you get at the end—the whole *structure* of the story is expressing the statement that I just made.

Spaid: Yeah, and you're a con man, if you can get a reader to envision those films going on while a person reads your story "The Singer."

Madden: Exactly. And this is what they tell me when I give a reading of that story, two thrilling things that people can tell me—and this is instructive. *One* of the things is, "My god, I could *see* those images!" Why is that thrilling? That means that my presence up

there in the flesh as those two characters, Pete and Wayne, [caused] the audience [to see] what wasn't there. You see what I'm getting at? That to me is a beautiful—

Spaid: I can envision outside the tent, that girl that eventually—

Madden: The cross-eyed girl?

Spaid: I can envision her going from car to car and the revival tent and the whole thing.

Madden: Then the other thing that thrills me is when they say that Fred, the projectionist, is the most wonderful character in the story, and Fred himself, again, *is not* there physically. What I'm trying to do is *evoke* the most important part of any story. You use the visible and the immediate and the present, which is really secondary, in order to evoke the unstated, the unseen, which is more important.

But that's what I mean by technique and control and conception, as opposed to pouring out your own personal subjective experience, which to me is neither here nor there. Hell, I don't want to read about *your* subjective experiences, because *I* can have my own goddamn subjective experiences. When I read a story, a work of art, I want the creator of that work of art to be a god who has me in his hand and who for the moment is in command, by god. I can give up my ego for the duration of the story. I don't want to have to see a damn 'nother image of myself in somebody else who's doing what I like to do myself, pouring out his soul, you know? That's a phony kind of honesty. Like that was in the *Hika* that I just got the other day that Carl Thayler sent me, which I was glad to get, and I appreciated his sending it. But, the introduction to the *Hika*—by your friend whose poems I like, Epstein—said, "One thing about the boys of Kenyon, they write with honesty." Horseshit! Who cares about honesty? What do you mean, 'honesty'? What's that got to do with any goddamn

thing? As far as *I'm* concerned, he could just as well say, "They write with wonderful hypocrisy." That would have just as much meaning as 'honesty' to me. What does that mean? It means they're pouring out their souls, probably, in some cases. And I'm just not interested.

Spaid: It's often occurred to me that a writer like yourself who sometimes uses personal experiences for raw material, even though he's looking for some guiding conception—but is there ever a time when you don't feel like a writer who is collecting material, when you just simply experience something? It seems to me that it's possible that a writer who is so keenly sensitive to experience is missing out on something.

Madden: Right. You've gotten onto a very important thing about writers or about any creator, maybe even painters, too. [Greg Spaid is himself a painter]. Maybe that's why you asked the question, because you know the answer. An artist, I think, as far as I know, a writer (let's stick to writers and to my own experiences)—I have observed *this*, in myself—that I feel I love people and want to help people; I don't want to hurt anybody. The effect I have on a person, I want to be ultimately good, even if I'm very brutally frank. I want to be brutally frank like I was to this guy I was telling you about, who wrote this horrible poem; I told him, "You don't have a shred of talent." Well, I wanted that *really* not to be a heartbreaking statement, but to be somehow a kind of liberating statement for him. Even though I think about myself in that way—as caring about people—I've got to admit that I catch myself in the midst of a significant meaningful experience looking at things with the detached, cold vision of a disembodied mind. I am not really there in the flesh to participate. I am a disembodied spectator, at a distance from things. And actually in my teaching, as you may know, and in my life, somehow or 'nother, more than a lot of other writers, I think, I have found a way

to maintain that distance, that double vision even in my life, because I can make fun of myself, or I can be egotistical for the fun of it, hoping to share it with you. I'm sure you must have sensed this, like in class, you know. I'd say and do a lot of things that could be construed as being stupidly, horribly egotistical, but the reason I can do that is because it's not *me*. I'm really standing over there with you watching what this guy's doing. I can talk about "The Singer," which is my best work, I think, and I can praise the hell out of it without being, in my mind, egotistical, because, in a sense, I'm really these two very different people. I'm just looking at the thing, as a *thing* that's created, whether I had anything to do with it nor not.

Spaid: Does that bug you, sometimes?

Madden: Well, sometimes it does, but I think because I'm able to do this double thing in personal relationships, I feel less this isolation, this dehumanization that I'm talking about. See, 'cause I know a lot of writers who are completely cut off in their life *and* in their work by this sense of distance. They can't participate in events in *any* way. Well, getting back to old Fitzgerald, remember that "test of the first-rate intelligence"—that I used to spout off all the time pontifically—"is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Well, I think, as far as I consciously know, I can *do* that. I haven't been aware of being unable to do it and therefore getting sad about it or depressed. And, I think, this is a quality of certain writers that in their personal lives—well, look at the personal lives of a lot of writers. Why are they so fucked up? I think it may be because this detachment that is so good for their writing makes living difficult, and makes it hell, makes it horribly disappointing and full of anxiety and so on; and I guess what I've been trying to do all my life is make this distance operate and function creatively in life as in the literature. So that I'm not really

depressed by it; I'm not really neurotic about it. I don't drink and all that to forget this dehumanized side of me, but it *is* true that writers are really kind of inhuman in a way.

SPAID: As you were experiencing life in the merchant marines, were you all the time conscious that this is liable to wind up in fiction or something? Or were you fictionalizing all the time?

MADDEN: Not really, I don't think. Oh, I realized, yeah, it would be used. But actually I've never gone out into an experience with the idea that it would end up as writing. Maybe that's because I just had this *general* attitude that everything's gonna end up as writing, so that one doesn't feel that separation, that deliberate consciousness of collecting material. Actually, I don't know many writers who do that. I think that's an old-fashioned idea of a writer, like Twain or Jack London or somebody, who goes around collecting raw material background for novels. Or some guy decides to write a novel, so he goes to Alaska, let's say, and he gets the background. It's an old-fashioned idea of a writer. I think the writer today just collects everything indiscriminately and then uses what he wants to.

SPAID: It seems to me that the real problem with modern writers is that they try to write interesting fiction in an uninteresting world. This came up in Wright Morris's book *The Territory Ahead*.

MADDEN: Well, I'm personally getting kind of sick of the anti-hero, the anti-novel, the anti-event, although Wright Morris is the master of that sort of thing. He said in his "Letter to a Young Critic"—to me—that the so-called dramatic event isn't the only kind of drama there is, that you can take the ordinary and cause some revelation to take place by a sort of transformation. The imagination transforms the unfamiliar into something strange, and he's one of the few people who can do that; whereas a lot of other writers are presenting the

dull and the anti-hero and the anti-event, anti-novel kind of material, *straight*, just straight—there it *is*—as though they expect the reader really to glory in this and get some excitement out of seeing the world the way that they have been seeing the world every day for the last fifteen years or so. And at first, that was fresh and exciting, perhaps in the hands of somebody like Samuel Beckett in drama, and in the hands of somebody like Camus in *The Stranger*, where nothing happens, through most of the book, except that melodramatic event in the middle. But somehow or other this fashion has really thrown down very deep roots, and hundreds and hundreds of novels are written out of this banal experience. And then, of course, there is the opposite, the completely bizarre unbuttoned type of experience of Kerouac, and a lot now of the hippie and pop novels that are coming out—Barthelme, who writes stories about Batman and Robin and has just finished one about Snow White. But I'm still interested in real people and perhaps almost heroic people. I still believe heroes are possible, momentarily. A lot of the old stories used to be about people who became heroes just for a moment and then lapsed back. And I still think it's possible for people to be that way, and kind of wanted Lone to be that way in *Cassandra Singing*, at least in the eyes of others, and then to be aware of it and try to measure up and fail. But he used to get killed in a lot of versions of the play and the novel, which was working out of that pessimistic attitude of the literature of the forties and fifties—everybody was coming to a bad end and everything was dark and dreary. But I believe that the writer ought to show the world as mysterious and wonderful, and one way to do that, no matter *what* the material, anti-hero or what, is through conception and technique. So that Flaubert can write about a dull woman like *Madame Bovary*, but it's the art of it that makes it so exciting. The error that a lot of these people make is that they think dullness in itself presented as dullness is going to be interesting.

SPAID: Like Purdy's *Malcolm*?

MADDEN: Yeah. I heard about it. Is that dull?

SPAID: Yes. Very dull.

MADDEN: Presented as dull stuff?

SPAID: Yeah. It's interesting, though . . . You said something about love before and that the writer should present the world as being mysterious and interesting. And I just wondered, when you are writing, do you feel that it's an act of love?

MADDEN: Yes. Again, this goes back to the old beginnings I had—where I could look into the face of a listener, and he became mine, as much as the characters in my story; the listener became—for the time being—became my creature, like a mother to a child, or God to His children. You love the person who's listening. It's like when I give a reading of "The Singer,"[1] this feeling I have for the audience is one of love. I want to give you something. You came to me, and you asked for something, and by god, as much as is humanly possible, I'm going to give it to you.

And I'm not going to create any conditions which will excuse my failures. It's what I have against a lot of poetry readings. Poets come, they say cute things, they read a poem, and if the poem is badly read they can always back out by saying another cute, ingratiating thing; you'll forgive them, and then we'll go on. A guy gets up there, stammers around, can't find the poem that he was going to read, and he takes five minutes to find it; you forgive him because he's been boyish and charming and sweet, but goddamnit, he should have arranged those poems; he should have been in control. If that's the poem he wanted to read, he should have taken two or three minutes, out of consideration for the audience, to get it lined up. That's a mechanical thing.

But I like the idea that when I step up to the podium or wherever I am, I am on my own. Nobody can help me—*nobody*. Certainly not myself—outside the story. As soon as I open my mouth I'm *in* the story, when I close my mouth at the end I'm *out* of the story. I sit down. When the applause stops, then I will talk. But there's a beginning and an end, and in the middle there, I've got to deliver. Mainly because I *want* to. So that when I write—in there, in my study, alone—a story, I am thinking, in very general terms, of course, of human beings reading this and of my *giving* something to them. But only in this situation can I give it to them. I think that an audience's feeling in relation to an actor or to a play or a reader in relation to a work of art, a story, is one of the most beautiful human emotions there is. Because you've got that contact that people are so desperate to have in real life, that's so difficult to achieve in real life. Sometimes in teacher situations I've had it, where you're really together achieving something, like when we did *The Great Gatsby* in freshman English. I think we all felt pretty close about that, and a few other things in there. It's that kind of rare experience, in a different way, when I'm writing a story.

Spaid: It has something to do with discipline, too. You don't seem to have any problem with discipline—putting out so much.

Madden: Not any more. I used to. I used to be extremely undisciplined. On the other hand, it wasn't bad, because I wanted to write all the time, but I had to have discipline as far as getting it down goes. Because I wanted to write, and I had the stuff to write; but a more important kind of discipline is thinking consciously, critically, and intelligently about what you're doing, which is what I didn't have before. Before, I just poured it out and would think it was beautiful and that's it. Although I would change a few phrases, and so on. But as a result of teaching and reading critically and writing critically,

I think, I'm able *now* to sit down and pour out a story and make it right the first time, because I've had this whole process of thinking about stories in general. But I think discipline's a great thing, and technique. That's what this composer, David Van Vactor, in Knoxville, in whose mansion I told you I was living for a while, taught me—the exterior technique of getting it down. He would get up at six o'clock every morning and work until nine o'clock, before he went to school to teach. And in those two hours he wrote some great music, which I in turn heard played by orchestras. This had a tremendous effect on me. I thought, man, this is great! To be able to *do* it, not on schedule, exactly—but inspiration is such a small part of the act of writing, anyway. I used to cling to this romantic idea that nothing mechanical should enter in, not even a typewriter. Most of my old manuscripts are in pencil. I had this romantic thing about a pencil. It had to be my hand, my living hand! And the only thing between my living hand and the words would be a little piece of lead, and I was horrified about composing on a typewriter; but some way or another I got into that, and now I can't write; I have to do it on the typewriter. But *he* used to tell me all the time, you've got to develop a routine. Or the matter of lack of inspiration. Inspiration, it seems to me, is *before* the act of writing. You don't have to be thrilled when you sit down to write, but once you get to writing then, man, it really is exciting. Yeah, but the romantic error that a lot of people get into is, "Well, how can I start writing at eight o'clock in the morning, just like that, on schedule, and so on?" Well, goddamnit, what's to keep you from starting in a dull mood, getting started, and then getting excited? Which happens, every time.

SPAID: Do you have some sort of a ritual, like sharpening a fistful of pencils?

MADDEN: Yeah, wiping off the desk and sweeping the floor, or something, picking up infinitesimal things off the floor, little pieces of dirt. As you know, I'm very, very neat. You see the study there? You remember probably the other study in the Bishop's Palace at Kenyon? I can't really write with any messes around. I want everything clean and neat. This physical order around me is merely a metaphor, in a way, for the need that I personally have for order, since temperamentally I'm so *dis*ordered. You know, the way I used to conduct classes. I never really could go from this point to that point to that point. It was always this swimming around and swimming around; it was this circular thing. I'd finally get back to something . . .

SPAID: You said you write in the mornings, before you go to class?

MADDEN: Well, now my schedule is such that I go to class in the afternoons. I teach those two courses I was telling you about—Wednesday night from seven to nine thirty, I do that American Dream, and that's all; Thursday night from seven to nine thirty, Creative Writing, and that's all. I teach two nights a week.

SPAID: And you're writing about five hours a day?

MADDEN: Well, it is kind of like that. I'm trying my damndest to get back on a schedule in a way. When I'm really into something, yeah. But in a sense I am doing the work of a writer from the time I get up until I go to bed, except if I go to a movie or something like that. But I'm always thinking in these terms, doing something connected with writing.

SPAID: Hemingway did an interesting thing. He would *stop* when he got excited, and then the excitement would carry over to the next day and be his starting point.

MADDEN: Well, I think I could do that. I like that, and I think I have done that a number of times without thinking of it. But I think

maybe the reason I can't do that so well is because I'm doing a number of things at once—four or five projects going on all the time. Whereas, *he* would work on only one thing at a time, and that was all that was on his mind, and that was really good. This is one of my problems, you see, I spread myself too thin—criticism, all that stuff.

SPAID: Do you have any preference to any of the forms?

MADDEN: I guess, fiction, stories. I guess stories. Short stories. Maybe it's because I soured on the theater. I think there are such a lot of bastards in the theater—such ugly people.

SPAID: It seems to me that the theater—although watching a play is one of the most immediate acts, very much like watching a movie—I can get a hell of a lot more out of watching a good movie than I ever could out of reading a book, probably because I'm visual or something. But do you find there's something diluted about the experience from writer to audience when it goes *through* the players?

MADDEN: Yeah. Especially in movies. Except that the central intelligence in a movie, generally, these days, especially, is the director, who is often the writer. Even if he isn't, he's still the central intelligence. Whereas in the theater the playwright is—until recently—the central intelligence, and the director is about the next thing to him. Even so, you don't too much see the sensibility of the director moving on the stage, except for a few guys like Elia Kazan.

But today the trend in the new American theater—the new American so-called playwrights—is for the playwright really to be secondary, as he is in the movies, to the director. I think it's a director's theater. By that, I mean that the basic elements of theater—lighting, sound, blocking, the deployment of bodies on the stage, and handling of voices, and the various sensory components, all these basic techniques and devices for manipulating these elements to get

audience response—are more in the hands of the director, because the plays, being absurdist plays, for instance, or black comedy, or what have you, these plays take as their techniques some of these basic theatrical elements. So that, for instance, dialogue is subordinated in a way, or at least logical dialogue, and any time you have the playwright's contribution being open-ended—many possibilities open to the director and the other people involved—he's gonna lose that much power, and the other people involved are always ready to usurp as much as they can, and they're really going to go wild. So that *Marat/Sade*, for instance, if you've read the play, is boring as hell. The main intent is to put across a philosophical idea, which we all agree with. Anybody who goes to see the play has probably already agreed with this existential general point of view on life. And we don't need the play to teach it to us, but that's why the playwright wrote it. All right, if this damn thing's gonna play and have any theatrical immediacy, the director is going to have to compensate with theatrical elements for what is really dead and dull in the script. So one thing that happened was, they got a guy to poeticize the script, to make it kind of rhyme, and then they got another guy to write music so there would be songs, so it had the quality of a Brechtian musical or a Kurt Weill *Three Penny Opera*. Now this is all *after* the playwright has turned loose of the play. And then the director comes in—Peter Weiss did not write into the script detailed descriptions of what the insane people do—the audience of the play within the play. Therefore, the director had a free hand, of necessity—he had all those bodies on the stage; he had to do something with them (the playwright didn't say, because the playwright gave up his authority there); he had a lot of room to invent interesting, fascinating things for these insane people to do. Then there's another section where Charlotte Corday whips de Sade on the back. The script does not tell her to use her hair as a symbolic way of doing it. That was the

director's idea. Now that moment of flogging him with her hair and the different antics of the insane people are the two things that are discussed most often when this play is discussed. And they are all the creation of the director.

So to answer your question, traditionally, the playwright's work has always been diluted in production, and it's becoming more and more that kind of thing now as the playwright is collaborating in his own annihilation. So that in my article that I was telling you about in the *Massachusetts Review* and another one coming out in the *Shenandoah Review*,[2] I say at the end, "This is becoming a theater without actors, because the actor is imitating abstract forces like hate and love and machine and robots and so on—a theater without actors, a theater without playwrights, possibly a theater without audiences. Because the whole point of this theater is to assault the audience, to eliminate the audience as a separate thing out there, separate from the play, to integrate the audience with the play itself. And then I go further and say that it is eliminating the theater, because I see more and more of a trend of a theater outside of the theater walls. The way hippies dress, for instance, is a theatrical event. And protest marchers are theatrical events—on television and so on. So that most of our theater is really in our everyday lives.

This friend of mine has a great idea along these lines. He's writing electronic music; well, he's teaching some place—a school for girls—and he wants to invent or build a sensory machine which is a room that you go into and play by moving your anatomy with lights and sounds, so that there will be electronic devices on the wall to pick up a movement or something. So you can go in, and you go like *that*, and there might be a *wooooo*, or you go like *this*. The whole thing is you being active, the people on stage. One of the things that becomes appalling to me is that it's analogous to just sitting in a classroom watching a professor, or like sitting in a movie. If it's not a really

gripping movie, there's something about just sitting there and not doing anything—you do that so much, you do it at a basketball game or a movie theater, at the play, driving a car. But this sort of thing he's inventing is great, where you're active.

SPAID: Yeah. It's a great idea. The problem comes when you try to put it into effect.

NOTES

1. A short story included in *The Poetic Image In Six Genres*, originally published in *The Kenyon Review* (January 1966).

2. Reprinted as a single essay in *The Poetic Image in Six Genres*.

A Conversation with David Madden

Sanford Pinsker, 1971

David Madden is the sort of writer who seems more archetype than actual person. Born in Knoxville, Tennessee (June 25, 1933), he has been, at one point or another, a mail clerk, a filling station attendant, an elevator boy, a counterman, a merchant marine and an actor. Among his proudest boasts—one we quickly suspect is true—is that he was expelled from public school some ten or eleven times for writing stories.

Along the way, however, Madden managed to make his imagination pay off—in novels like *The Beautiful Greed*, *Cassandra Singing*, and *Brothers in Confidence*; in several collections of short fiction; in plays, in poems, in academic essays. For many years he has found an academic home of sorts at Louisiana State University, but it would be closer to the truth to say that Madden lives wherever his passions and his fertile imagination take him.

This conversation was arranged by Sanford Pinsker on 28 December 1971 at the Palmer House, Chicago, Illinois.

Pinsker: Reading your essay "Cassandra Singing—On and Off Key,"[1] one cannot help but be reminded of the old maxim about a work of art never being *finished*, only abandoned. Now that *Cassandra Singing*[2] is about to exist in a troika of forms—novel, play, and film—has her song quit ringing in your ears?

MADDEN: No, because the people are more alive for me still than most of my other characters. Some of the themes—such as the conflict between the life of action (Lone) and that of imagination (Cassie)—probably will show up in other works. How these two impulses interact continues to interest me. In fact, I think that's happening in a number of stories published since.

PINSKER: But how about Cassie herself? Do you imagine *she* will continue to haunt your fiction?

MADDEN: No, not really. I've spent too much time with her already. There were characters like her before, in stories written when I was eighteen or nineteen. For instance, a piece called "Seven Frozen Starlings"[3] was about a girl named Rosemary who had a harelip that set her apart from everybody else. Still, I don't feel that I created Cassie fully. And this is a result of making—of *telling*—the novel from Lone's point of view. That kept me from realizing what I wanted to achieve in the character of Cassie. I wanted to get into her fantastic imagination and try to describe the interior world she had created for herself.

PINSKER: Have you heard her prophecy?

MADDEN: In what sense?

PINSKER: Well, in so far as Cassandra is a prophetess and has a prophecy to tell. Do you feel you've heard it in your own being?

MADDEN: Her function in the novel is to try to communicate what she senses intuitively to her brother and the rest of her family. She does it through her songs and allusions to things she has imagined or things she has read. In that sense, I as a writer feel an affinity for her because some of my own stories have turned out that way. Things I have imagined have come true. For instance, in the story

"No Trace"[4] (about a man who tries to reconstruct his son's life after he has blown himself up with a hand grenade at graduation ceremonies) I sort of foreshadow the explosion in Greenwich Village that killed three Weathermen. In fact, one of them was my own student and was vaguely in my mind while I was writing the story.

PINSKER: If some stories are a foreshadowing of things which actually happen, are other stories a reflection of experiences that have *already* happened? In other words, how autobiographical is *Cassandra Singing*?

MADDEN: I've always claimed that *Cassandra Singing* is not autobiographical. In fact, it is the least autobiographical thing I've ever written. I'm really opposed to autobiography in fiction, although that's what I'm doing in my current novel, *Bijou*.[5] And, too, once I was talking with one of my students about *Brothers in Confidence*,[6] a novel which deals with the time I got my little brother off a Georgia chain gang. You see, there were three con men in my family. "Now *that* one's autobiographical!" I said. It was a rare thing for me. My two brothers would go off into the world and have adventures and tell me what happened. And this student of mine replied, "Yeah, just like Cassandra" and then I realized for the first time that this was a perfect example of a transmutation of one's self into another sex, an entirely different kind of person and all that.

PINSKER: Half of you, then, is Cassandra; the other half a fantasy of Lone?"

MADDEN: That's where the incest comes in—therefore, Narcissism.

PINSKER: You seem to wear a variety of hats: fiction writer, literary critic, teacher, editor. Are they complementary activities? That is, has your critical interest in Wright Morris or James Cain affected your own writing? And, if so, how?

MADDEN: Yes, I think it has, although I knew about style and technique by reading *The House of Fiction*[7] when I was about sixteen. But the man who put it into practice most visibly for me was Wright Morris. The more I studied him, the more I began to pick up certain stylistic devices. For example, the device which I call "impingement" where you set up the beginning of a sentence that seems to be going in one direction and then suddenly introduce a new element so that the first impinges dramatically on the second. The delight and beauty of a sentence like that for the reader is the way the second element is brought in rather than the first. In other words, the reader thinks: "Oh, here's another point that the guy's making. Here's another statement." And, suddenly, he realizes that the sentence structure exists to introduce a second or even third statement. So that one impinges upon another and the kinetic experience accounts, I think, for the fact that Morris really *moves* to a sympathetic reader. Even though he's dealing with static material. It accounts for the stylistic pace of . . .

PINSKER: But you're talking both as a literary critic and working writer. The last statement you made . . .

MADDEN: About the effects of impingement? Yes, that is what I try to do and also what I've seen Wright Morris do.

PINSKER: Like so many American writers, a combination of artistic voices helped to lure you from the Knoxville, Tennessee, of your childhood. In an autobiographical essay you mention Wolfe and Joyce. Your critics have suggested Tennessee Williams, Carson McCullers, and Eugene O'Neill. Whose singing—other than your own—do you listen to now?

MADDEN: Well, still mainly Wright Morris whom I read actively, but I'm beginning to get away from him. Now it's the classics. Dickens,

for example, excites me more than anybody has in a long time. The creative force that runs through *Bleak House* brought me to tears of appreciation, rather than the tears of sentimentality usually associated with his work. But I could only read about ten pages a night. I would just suddenly stop—in tears—and say: "My God, how can this man do this?"

PINSKER: In a novel entitled *Cassandra Singing*, one is tempted to look for mythic parallels, in much the same way that *Ulysses* announces the substructure of Joyce's work. But beyond a general identification, what function does the classical world play against the backdrop of rural America?

MADDEN: Well, *Cassandra Singing* started out some fifteen years ago with a conscious patterning of the Orestia. Cassie and Lone were Electra and Orestes. The mother was like Clytemnestra. And there was a faith healer who was her brother in the novel. The drunken father was a sort of Agamemnon figure. You see, I even had *names*. The mother was originally Helen, and Cassie was called Cassandra in the earliest drafts, and there was even an Uncle Troy. But when it became *too* conscious, I began rooting out the mythological and changing the relationships. Cassandra was simply Cassie and, as far as I'm concerned, the only remaining suggestions of myth are in the title.

PINSKER: And, yet, there is still an alienated protagonist named Lone.

MADDEN: Oh, yeah, that's right.

PINSKER: And a preacher named Virgil.

MADDEN: Right.

PINSKER: And, of course, Cassie herself.

MADDEN: It's still misleading, though, because I simply loved the name "Lone" and couldn't bear to part with it during that period when I was trying to get away from the pattern.

PINSKER: Still, it's a very conscious choice that Wayne is called "Lone" throughout the novel. After all, he *is* the alienated loner.

MADDEN: In fact, I play on that association in a popular culture way, with the Lone Ranger. I deliberately put that in to undercut any too esoteric reading of Lone's name, although it's there all the same.

PINSKER: What about Virgil?

MADDEN: That's just a wonderful country name I happen to like. His name was Virgil when he wasn't Lone's uncle. As it turns out, though, he's more mythical now than he ever was, because he is Lone's Virgil through Hell. He tells Lone that you've got to go through Hell first. And as far as Hell is concerned, Eastern Kentucky is the most perfect American landscape for that sort of thing.

PINSKER: At what point in your own composition was the implied incestuous relationship between Cassie and Lone both apparent to you and a problem in fictional control?

MADDEN: It *used* to be much more overt. For instance, in one version Cassie unbuttons Lone's shirt and kisses his chest. But, you see, this is the most apt metaphor for Cassie's demonic relationship with her brother. She wants to devour him. And, yet, at the same time, she won't *really* live if she can do it vicariously. At times Lone talks in a way which suggests that he understands how exhausting it is to tell Cassie everything that has happened.

PINSKER: Attraction and repulsion—what you call the separate drift toward action and imagination—is surely the thematic center of *Cassandra Singing*, but not all of its threads seem to tie up neatly. For

example, what about the Boyd/Lone relationship? In the novel they are portrayed as quasi brothers. But are they latently homosexual as well?

Madden: Of course. Boyd has such a bad relationship with his mother and father that he's full of hatred and resentment over this. And he sees that Lone has the opposite relationship with *his* family, although Lone's father abuses him too.

Pinsker: But Lone's mother is not really worthy of the respect Lone gives her. Furthermore, it is important that Boyd make Lone *see* this clearly. In other words, he spoils Lone's relationship to his family in the way *his* has been spoiled. But, again, does this constitute a latently homosexual relationship?

Madden: Well, on the part of Boyd, perhaps. With Lone it's more like adolescent admiration, hero worship. I'm not sure that any of the homosexuality—latent or otherwise—is conscious on Lone's part. Do you detect something else?

Pinsker: Not on Lone's part, but, then again, I am not sure how much he understood about his curious relationship with Cassie. Or the strange triangle of Boyd, Lone, and Gypsy. Let me put it this way: would you agree that Lone burns with what Theodore Roethke called "The purity of pure despair"?—that is, his quest for both power and escape via the motorcycle is directly related to a family situation he does not nor cannot understand.

Madden: Yeah, that's exactly what his situation is.

Pinsker: I know you have other stories featuring singing, including a marvelous one entitled "The Singer."[8] Are they related somehow?

Madden: Yes. Except that, in time, "The Singer" came afterward and I thought it was a different story. It was based in real life in a way that

Cassandra Singing isn't. With that one, the sources are mainly literary, with the exception of the locale. But once when I was working on a dramatic version of *Cassandra* I heard the beautiful sound of a girl's voice singing from a revivalist tent down the street. Her voice lifted me out of my chair and literally drew me down to the tent. I went in. After the service was over, I went up to her and said: "How is it that you sing so beautifully and with such feeling? Everybody else just rattles off their song and that's that." "I have a ministry to sing for Jesus," she replied, and the phrase really excited me. That's the germ of "The Singer."

PINSKER: As far as the songs go in *Cassandra Singing*, is there a pattern, some organizing principle which binds them together?

MADDEN: Not consciously. I think it would be a little too obvious if there were because the songs call attention to themselves anyhow.

PINSKER: What about the other images? Say, the very powerful one of Stonecipher's junkyard. Did you have Fitzgerald's Valley of Ashes from *The Great Gatsby* in mind here?

MADDEN: Not in *mind*, although it's a strong image from my literary background. But Eastern Kentucky—you've got to give *life* equal credit here—is filled with smoldering junkyards and shalepiles.

PINSKER: But the way the junkyard in *Cassandra Singing* is discussed, in terms of . . .

MADDEN: You mean, the junkyard image and civilization? That sort of thing? Yes . . .

PINSKER: What about the similarities and differences between emotions like love and hatred? Aren't these questions central to your concerns in *Cassandra Singing*?

MADDEN: Well, I can tell you this: I have been aware how this dichotomy operates in my own relationships. For example, I find the people who I develop a kind of hatred for usually end up being friends of mine. The same is true for literature. I get irrational dislikes for certain writers like Kurt Vonnegut or Ken Kesey and then force myself to read them in fairness. More often than not, I get seduced by them. Usually if I passionately dislike someone or something, it's because I basically *do* like them. I see something of myself in them that I don't like. And there is something of this in Lone and Boyd too. This love/hate or attraction/repulsion you were talking about.

PINSKER: Lone may not be modeled after figures like James Dean or Marlon Brando who, after all, postdate him, but how much of the character was based on Madden?

MADDEN: Well, in that I'm a passive observer of events as he and Cassie are . . .

PINSKER: But isn't it that part of you which is the *writer* that is Cassie? However, what about the part which fantasizes a Lone? In other words, if you had *not* become a writer, would you have been . . .

MADDEN: A person of action?

PINSKER: Something like that: a motorcycle rider. A person not doing very well, having trouble with the law, that sort of thing.

MADDEN: Well, to tell you the truth, if I hadn't become a writer I would have become a con man like my two brothers who *are* professional con men.

PINSKER: But isn't the writer a kind of con man? Isn't Shem always a sham?

MADDEN: Right. And that's the point of *Brothers in Confidence*, my next novel.

PINSKER: I take it that the last scene of *Cassandra Singing* is positive in its suggestions: Lone will return to school. He has learned—and can accept—the terrible truth about his mother. He can look at Cassie naked and she can look at him. In short, they have been stripped of illusions. Do you think of this as a significant departure from the endings we associate with the work of, say, Erskine Caldwell or Tennessee Williams—novelists with whom you are often compared?

MADDEN: I don't know why I should be compared to Erskine Caldwell, except in general locale. But the optimistic ending of *Cassandra Singing* is a very conscious thing on my part. In earlier versions of the play and novel, Lone is killed in a motorcycle accident. In fact, he still gets killed in the film version, but there is an upbeat ending as Cassie leaves Eastern Kentucky to be a country music singer. I came to feel about five or six years ago that much of the doomsaying in modern literature was artificial, a kind of artistic cop-out. Killing Lone was too easy. And, yet, it was hard to find another ending that would be both satisfying and believable.

PINSKER: Cassie and Lone do not consummate what was obviously a latently incestuous relationship. However, there may be some ambiguity about their resolution. What really happens?

MADDEN: They don't *have* to consummate it sexually because the incestuous impulses have been confronted and understood. Instead, there is a spiritual consummation in which Lone becomes Cassie and Cassie becomes Lone.

PINSKER: A final thought: I am struck by the similarity between your motorcyclists and those of Joyce Carol Oates. This is particularly true if one thinks of *With Shuddering Fall*. Could you imagine, say, Gypsy as the central consciousness of a story by Miss Oates?

MADDEN: Yes, very easily. In fact, that's one of the things I admire about Joyce Carol Oates. I had wanted to develop some of these qualities in Cassie and actually do in the screen version. She has a hard, grasping sexuality that's similar to Gypsy's. And more than that, she has a vulgar strain she would love to express if it weren't for Lone and his preoccupations about her. There's a character in an early version of the novel called Reba who was a striptease dancer. Cassie liked her better than anyone in the family and loved to talk to her about what it was like to get out there and take off your clothes with all the raucous music and everything. So Cassie is actually a very sensuous person. She loves to smell things, to put things in her mouth. She kisses or sniffs Lone's boots. She sniffs the hat that Boyd brings to Lone. She has quite a bit in common with Gypsy and I guess I was trying to develop that aspect of Cassie through another character.

PINSKER: There's much of Gypsy in Cassie. Much of Boyd in Lone. In effect, you've got two teams there and while there's no Gypsy/Cassandra relationship, there *is* a Boyd/Lone one . . .

MADDEN: In the movie version there is a Gypsy/Cassie relationship too—which is interesting because I felt the need to compare them. At the end of the novel Gypsy gives Cassie her clothes. In fact, this business of changing clothes is a constant motif through the novel.

PINSKER: And at that point Cassie becomes cheapened in a very Gypsy-like way.

MADDEN: Right. She is tremendously raucous and sexual when she wears Gypsy's slacks.

PINSKER: *Cassandra Singing*, then, is a sort of family novel—right?

MADDEN: I would say so. It doesn't tell you very much about coal slags. As a matter of fact, it was originally set in Knoxville, Tennessee—a

big city. There's nothing especially "regional" about it, though. It tells you about the McDaniel family and their assorted difficulties. And, I hope, some other things as well.

NOTES

1. David Madden, *The Poetic Image in Six Genres* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1969), pp.174-96.

2. David Madden, *Cassandra Singing* (New York: Avon, 1969).

3. David Madden, "Seven Frozen Starlings," *Twigs*, 7 (1971), 224-33.

4. David Madden, "No Trace," *The Shadow Knows*" (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 157-86.

5. David Madden, *Bijou* (New York: Crown, [announced publication] 1974).

6. David Madden, *Brothers in Confidence* (New York: Avon, 1972).

7. Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate, eds., *The House of Fiction* New York: Scribner's, 1950).

8. David Madden, "The Singer," *The Poetic Image*. . . , pp 87-115.

An Interview with David Madden

Allen Wier, 1974

David Madden was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1933. He graduated from the University of Tennessee, then got his MA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State College and was a John Golden Playwriting Fellow at the Yale Drama School. Now writer in residence at Louisiana State University, he has conducted writing workshops in six colleges throughout America, including Kenyon where he was assistant editor of *The Kenyon Review*.

His stories, poems, plays, and essays have appeared in a variety of publications, from popular to scholarly to avant-garde. He has had several books of nonfiction published including: *American Dreams, American Nightmares* (editor), *Proletarian Writers of The Thirties* (editor), *The Popular Culture Explosion: Exploring Mass Media* (coeditor), *The Cheaters and The Cheated: Nathanael West* (editor), *Wright Morris, James M. Cain*, and *The Poetic Image in Six Genres*.

His collection of stories, *The Shadow Knows*, was a National Council of the Arts selection. He has written four novels: *The Beautiful Greed, Cassandra Singing, Brothers in Confidence*, and *Bijou*, which was just published (March, 1974). A Rockefeller Grant for 1969 enabled him to begin work on *Bijou*. Madden visited Bowling Green to give a reading the week *Bijou* was published and was interviewed by Allen Wier, a member of the Bowling Green MFA program.

WIER: One thing that I'm curious about is that in *Cassandra Singing*, in *Bijou*, and in some of your stories, there are things that I see as related; I don't know if they are obviously related. One is the Homeric tradition. I know from talking with you before, and reading other essays, that your grandmother told you stories, setting up an oral tradition. Another is the play of stories within stories, like the image of the movie screen juxtaposed to the character, the usher, the stories that are written, the letter, the diary entries in *Bijou* . . .

MADDEN: Well, all that mixed together, all the different media, the letter writing, the short story writing, and in *Bijou* Lucius does get into radio writing and stage writing, and in a sense he's doing movie scenarios in those plot outlines he writes—and this is all a response to media for its own sake, to the special conditions of each medium that Lucius finds exciting because each medium sets up a different relationship between Lucius and the listener and audience. And that is what inspires him and activates him, and it affects the kinds of stories that he tells and the way he tells them. The primary medium, though, the one that I continue to touch base with, that is a continual source of creative energy to me—the primal source—is the Homeric tradition of oral storytelling, beginning with my grandmother, and then the movies as the second most important source of inspiration and creative energy, and then books, but later on.

WIER: I know that when you give readings you're concerned about them as *performance*, and this seems to grow out of that storytelling tradition. I wonder if this doesn't have something to do with the bigger question as to why you decided to become a writer.

MADDEN: I wanted to affect more people. When I was telling stories there were only a few boys, maybe my brothers and neighborhood kids, and in the classrooms during recess, it would be raining outside and the kids would want me to tell stories. So the sense of having

hundreds and hundreds of readers of the story probably excited me, that made possible by the magazine as a medium.

WIER: In *Cassandra Singing* Cassie lives in her imagination and then tells stories, because of her illness. In *Bijou* Lucius lives in this same world of the imagination through stories he tells.

MADDEN: Well, actually, Lucius combines Cassie and Lone. You see, in *Cassandra Singing* you had Cassie bedridden, living a life of the imagination and trying to affect Lone with it; then you had Lone living a life primarily of action and being afraid of the imagination, and affecting Cassie with his life of action by telling her stories of what happened that day. Cassie tells stories about the past or some weird situation that she conjures up that day. Lucius combines both of those personalities. Because he lives a life of action, he does a lot of wild things—almost robs the Bijou, but at the same time, even while thinking about robbing the Bijou or rehearsing that robbery, it would have been perfectly logical for me to have him dreaming fragments of a story that's already in progress. Right *there* I could have had him flash on "Billy the Kid Meets the Tennessee Kid." And right now I wish I had. Just one or two images while he's in the process of rehearsing his robbery.

WIER: Commenting on *Cassandra Singing*, Robie Macauley said that you had a lot of courage to write a book that was regional, southern, and about a family. Now with *Bijou* you have another book that's set in Tennessee and concerned with a family. It's also a five-hundred-page novel and it seems pretty unusual for a publisher to publish that type of novel these days.

MADDEN: But of course what transcends that regionalism and family in *Bijou* and didn't in *Cassandra Singing* is the universal interest in the movies. Movies is where we all came from. And also other

elements of popular culture. There is a big folk element in *Cassandra Singing*, and readers identify less with that element than they can with the many kinds of popular culture in *Bijou*.

Wier: What about the autobiographical elements, particularly in *Bijou*? It seems in a kind of Wolfian tradition, and that's interesting since Thomas Wolfe is one of Lucius's heroes. I have heard you say it's bad advice to tell someone to write about what he or she knows about. How do you see the imagination transcending or revitalizing what is raw autobiographical material?

Madden: Well, mainly the imagination is employed in trying to solve that very problem, in trying to wipe out the curse in some way. First of all, most obviously and easily through language. In other words, if some of these things did happen they didn't happen in the language that I'm telling them in, and so the language itself is a new thing, it is a result of imagination. And the fact that some of the incidents may have really happened doesn't compete with the uniqueness of the language, which happened only here for this occasion, in the actual making of the novel. But then of course the characters are very much changed, are combined, and there are characters that never existed. For instance, Duke is a combination of two or three people. There are very few people who are straight out of my experience.

Wier: Do you see yourself beginning to accumulate a body [of] work having similar places appear and having similar kinds of characters, like the con artists in *Brothers in Confidence* and in *Bijou* and in some of the stories? Do you see yourself building up your own fictional world like, say, Faulkner's? Have you thought of anything like that?

Madden: Well, yeah, I guess so. Cades Cove appears not only in *Cassandra Singing* under a different name, but it appears in a lot of

other short stories, and it may even appear in *Bijou*, I've forgotten. At least in one version it did. But I'm sort of getting away from that. The good thing about *Bijou* for me is that it brings together all those sort of folk elements and the immediate present-day popular culture elements—even though it's 1946, they're still active today. Whereas while reading *Cassandra Singing*, even though it's set in the '50s, you feel that it happened long ago, perhaps in the '30s—it has that aura about it.

Wier: We were talking earlier tonight about a sense of a reader that you have, about how many different people the reader might be at one time—the person reading the book, the person thinking about the person reading the book—and we talked about being conscious of that reader as one writes. Do you have any ideal reader in mind when you write? I think you said something earlier about not writing for yourself but writing for that reader.

Madden: Yes, the consciousness is in writing not for that reader but for a whole spectrum of readers. I don't have a single ideal reader. Now, once you write a book, you could say there is a particular ideal reader for that book, just as there's an ideal reader for "No Trace" who is very different from the ideal reader for "The Day the Flowers Came," and for "The World's One Breathing," or "Looking at the Dead." But when I write I'm aware of the living, breathing presence of a spectrum of possible readers, from some young kid who might pick up on what I'm doing to just an ordinary person who reads very little and might be charmed by the book, *Bijou* especially. So, I don't really think of an ideal reader, it's more that living presence of all possible readers. I don't write for myself *directly*; I'm writing for myself when I'm writing for all those people in that spectrum of possibilities. That's who I am. I am the person who is writing for all those people, you see? And in that sense *only* am I writing for myself.

WIER: So, writing for that spectrum of readers doesn't inhibit you?

MADDEN: Not in the least. It releases me. It stimulates me. I'm not saying this should go for other writers, but I will go so far as to say that other writers should pay more attention to it than they do, and should imagine it. They should imagine readers more than they do, even line by line in the story, but in my case it's simply staying in touch with the original impetus to tell stories, which was to tell stories to living people who were sitting there with their mouths open. In other words, what I am responding to is the same thing I responded to when I was a kid: "David, tell me a story." And when somebody asks you, "Tell me a story," what you tell is going to be affected by that plea, that request. The way you tell it is going to be affected by that request as opposed to sitting in your study thinking that I'm going to tell people a story, or that I'm going to write a story that I like and maybe other people will like. That's a very different thing from responding to the plea, tell me a story, a plea which is always in the back of my mind. And [in] anything that I write, whether it might end up in *Adam* magazine, or whether it is something that is avant-garde, like "Looking at the Dead," which ends up in *Minnesota Review*, it's always there.

WIER: You said, in respect to *Bijou*, that one of the techniques you hoped would unify the book was the creation of what you call the "charged image." Would you talk about what this means and how you work for it?

MADDEN: A charged image is an image that in its prepared context in a story or novel is so fully packed with implications about all the other elements in the story that whenever you encounter that image it recalls for you all those other elements that have been set up in the story. It's as if it sends a charge of electricity into all the other elements. For instance, the charged image in *Bijou* is the image of

Lucius standing on the main aisle, which is called "on the spot," with his back to the screen, in his uniform, while on the screen his hero Alan Ladd is talking to Veronica Lake in *The Blue Dahlia*, uttering some special phrase, such as, "Every guy dreams of meeting a girl like you, but the trick is to find you." And he's gazing out into the golden outer lobby in a kind of trance, and on the screen in the dome of his head he is projecting his own made-up story which takes elements from all the movies he's seen—let's say it's "Billy the Kid Meets the Tennessee Kid." See what I mean? He's a medium through which Alan Ladd is working in two different directions, he's on the screen literally, produced by some other group of people, and he's on the screen in this own head acting in a movie-story that he's conjured up. To me that's the charged image in the novel, and every time you think of it, every other element in the novel is illuminated. It illuminates the style, the technique, the character relationships, the theme—everything.

WIER: You've worked on so many different projects: books of criticism, studies of popular culture, textbooks; you've published plays, poems, stories, essays, novels. Do you ever wish you had concentrated in any one area?

MADDEN: In a way, yes. Not necessarily from the beginning, because I love the idea of trying every medium, including criticism. And even within the area of criticism, trying this type of criticism and that type. But I wish I had stopped it earlier than now. I have every intention of narrowing down to screen-writing—with directing, it wouldn't be meaningful only writing the script—and writing novels. And that only and nothing else, except for an occasional poem that I can't resist writing. But I wish I had been able to do it earlier. I made the decision ten years ago, and I'm still making the decision. But I don't regret having done it for a certain long period. In my

introduction to creative writing workshop, I insist that everybody explore every form. And quite often people find that they are good and like a form that they thought they were totally unable to work in.

Wier: And you believe you can make any of these things as creative as making a fiction or a poem if you look at, say, editing a book, as a creative act . . .

Madden: Yes, I think the reason I do something like a critical book is because I look at it as if it were a creative act, and I don't regard it as a chore. I chose to do it on my own. And there are no external pressures, such as academic. I think the reason I'm able to do that is because very early when I was a kid I took the attitude that *anything* I would do in life would be done in a creative manner, that any situation in life should be fraught with all kinds of possibilities for creative responses, and I have to be alert to them and when I sense them, then I respond with as much creativity as possible. And, of course, teaching is part of that. And giving readings is part of that. Just any given situation.

Wier: Perhaps because of writing in so many different genres, you've published in a variety of magazines, from popular and commercial to literary and avant-garde . . .

Madden: That's true. A lot of people who'd like to do a fix on me will say, "The kind of stuff he writes is that popular culture stuff for *Adam* magazine or the *Magazine of Science Fiction and Fantasy*," and curiously enough I've written more goddamn criticism—more books of criticism and more articles of criticism. You add them up and they're far more than any of my other stuff put together, and yet nobody seems inclined to say, "Oh, he's that critic." *But*, the explanation for it all is that I am responding to yet another medium, another human. These are all human situations. There are human beings reading that

goddamn journal, the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*—there are human beings reading that. To me that's not just some gray, dull boring thing. And so when I write for that, I imagine, I conjure up the people that are receiving it. How to set up the exchange so that it's dramatic and as intense as it can possibly be—and meaningful. Hell, I would love to do all kinds of quirky things: I'd love to write for *True Romances*. I'd love to do the script for a comic book, you know, an interesting comic book.

WIER: Would you want to use your real name?

MADDEN: Well, not necessarily on some of these things. In fact, I have published under a pseudonym, because the story was a little bit too sexy, and didn't have enough other elements to rescue it. Although I liked the story, and it's under the name Jack Travis which gets back to the old days when I was thirteen and had all those marvelous pen names like William De Cosgrove, etc.

WIER: What about the way some people sort of indict the commercial publications, or talk about pop culture elements as being a kind of exploitation?

MADDEN: In other words, you mean I wrote for *Adam* for money?

WIER: Well, what I mean is I think Graham Greene has one side of his desk for what he calls entertainment and another side that he calls serious work, and I was wondering . . .

MADDEN: I have the same attitude although I don't neatly cut it off like that. There are subtler middles between the two for me. But I really love that about him. I was already doing that before I became enamored to that idea. And it appeals to me. In the Twayne's United States Authors Series I have a book on Wright Morris, who represents the ultimate in aesthetic writing in this country, and one of James M. Cain, who is the absolute master of commercial fiction.

WIER: Then in *Bijou,* Lucius is making a similar exploration?

MADDEN: Yeah, Lucius goes from Luke Short and all those guys who wrote for the *Saturday Evening Post* to Thomas Wolfe. And he's well on his way to Faulkner, he's reading Faulkner, but he doesn't understand that Faulkner's great, you know, because there isn't a picture of Faulkner on the back that shows he's a great writer the way there is of Thomas Wolfe. I originally had him go as far as James Joyce, but again only because the picture of James Joyce makes him look like a great artist.

WIER: In a way there's an irony in the book; like Walker Percy says, it becomes a work of art using these elements of popular culture.

MADDEN: I hope there will be this paradox: that in trying to render his relationship to pop art I use some of the elements of pop art in artistic combination. In other words, this element of pop art and this element of pop art are used together in such a way that the experience for the reader is aesthetic, in *Bijou*.

WIER: Through juxtaposition . . .

MADDEN: Through juxtaposition, as when Lucius is telling Raine the story of *The Razor's Edge* which he's just seen on the screen. He first responds to the movie of *The Razor's Edge* intensely. He then tells the story of *The Razor's Edge* in the verbal tradition, the Homeric tradition, to Raine for a utilitarian purpose however, which is to convert her to his view of life. Then, when he fails to do that, he runs away from home, and on the train he daydreams his own version in which he is the main character. But in the course of that story he meets Larry Darrell from *The Razor's Edge* and W. Somerset Maugham who wrote *The Razor's Edge*, and the whole purpose of the fantasy is to triumph over Raine through an act of the imagination. Now, as the reader gets this story filtered through its various versions and

presented through its various media, I hope that a rare kind of aesthetic experience would emerge which couldn't come from any one of those experiences separately, such as seeing the movie.

WIER: What do you see as the future of contemporary fiction, and do you think the novels that are being written today have anything unique or peculiar about them in terms of technique maybe more than anything else? Closely related to this, what writers writing today are doing things that really interest you?

MADDEN: Let's just take the latter one because that first question really doesn't stimulate much in me. I could criticize and say that I don't like what's going on, but I don't think there's much of a trend; we're still doing pretty much what we've always done. Nothing that new is really coming along. But, just let me name some writers that I think are doing some really good stuff. The books that I've read lately that are very interesting: *Edwin Mullhouse: The Life and Death of an American Writer [1943-1954] by Jeffrey Cartwright*, a novel by Steven Millhauser, I think is his name, is a really incredible and very original book. It uses a very original technique—well, using one of the very oldest of techniques—where you pretend that you are editing a book that's obscure, or that has gone out of publication, you know, no longer in print, and so you're reissuing a new edition, and give a little preface about why you're doing this, and what we get is the biography of Edwin Mullhouse who was eleven when he died, written by a thirteen-year-old boy, Jeffrey Cartwright, who knew him, who is his sort of witness. And this biography is really incredible, packed with all kinds of popular culture things, not so overt as movies or comic books, although that's very strong in the novel, but school stuff: little things, little school folklore, things that kids do in grammar school, and so on. The wit and the humor in the book are incredible but compassionate. And the sense of this eleven-year-old kid who wants to be

a great writer, who's writing this masterpiece and who impresses his witness that he's a genius, is literally fantastic. A book not like any book I know. Another very exciting writer and original in his use of language is Barry Hannah who wrote *Geronimo Rex*. It's exciting and original in its use of language more than anything else; full of all kinds of bizarre incidents in presenting the life of a guy growing up and going to college and so on, but it's the vitality, the imagination at work in the book that's exciting. I don't know about his second book. Another book, from France, called the *Ogre* is a very brilliant, more intellectual work full of symbols, made-up mythologies and fantastic imaginative parallels about a guy who becomes a kind of ogre during World War II: he goes through all kinds of concentration camps and becomes an assistant to Herman Goering. The imagination at work in that book is really fantastic. Let's see, who else? Well, those are three who impressed me the most recently.

WIER: Do you write with a typewriter or a pencil?

MADDEN: I used to have a romantic attitude about writing with a No. 2 pencil, that that was the way to do it, because in movies I'd see people writing with quills, you know, Mark Twain and so on. That kind of Byronic attitude about the intimacy between writer and the pencil and paper. I have a kind of paper psychology: I can only write on certain kinds of paper because it conjures up a certain mood in me. Right now I type the first draft on blue paper or green paper, mimeograph paper, for the eyes, really, for vision. I work in an enormous room full of books. The room is clean and everything is in perfect order. For one thing, there are usually four books in progress, as there are now on that desk, which is an enormous L & N Railroad desk that I got for twelve dollars. You could almost open a roller rink on it, it's so big. The room is usually very, very dark because my eyes are sensitive. They get tired easily and so I type the first version very

quickly. *Bijou* I did in six weeks in just a total outpouring of two thousand pages, and then spent the following six years in revision. I usually start around eight o'clock after running a mile, pure orange juice always because that canned stuff burns a hole in my stomach, pure orange juice and tea and pretty soon a good healthy shit and then I'm really off and going until about two o'clock. But I'm always doing something about the writing, little bits here and there, you know, all day long. Right now, along with the writing I'm reading classics, *Middlemarch, Emma*, etc., and looking forward to getting back to Dickens.

Wier: What about the annihilistic view of writing? That a writer should write the *need* to write out of existence?

Madden: Write the need to write out of existence?

Wier: So there's no more need to use words? That's very extreme, almost too extreme to talk about?

Madden: Yeah, but it's interesting. But totally alien to my own feelings and therefore worth asking. Just to get the contrast. To me the act of writing is a joyous act, even if I'm writing about dead people. Somebody somewhere asked me one time, "Why do you write about death so much?" She asked me to send her some stories and poems so that her classes could study them and we could talk, and she said that my students are going to ask you why you're so interested and preoccupied with death, which is paradoxical since my whole attitude is that writing is a joyous act of creation even when it's hard, even when it's drudgery. But it's especially joyous when I'm revising, it's more joyous than when I'm pouring out that stuff, as I said, two thousand pages in six weeks, which was sheer joy for me but still it's even more of a joy for me when I revise which is what some people regard as an artificial mechanical thing. To me that's much more

exciting. To me a technical way of solving the problem of telling the story is far more exciting than the inspiration that gave birth to the story. You'll be driving down the road and suddenly you get an idea, "Jesus Christ! How great if I could write a story about a father who goes into his son's room and looks at all the objects to try and understand him because his son has just blown himself up with a hand grenade at his graduation ceremony." That's very exciting when you get that, you know. But that goes pretty quickly. To me, what is far more exciting is three years after that initial inspiration finding a way to tell the story. I didn't have any way to tell the story when I got the inspiration. So the day that I finally discovered what I call a technical inspiration rather than a story inspiration or character inspiration was more exciting.

Wier: And that's the difference between a notion and when the story becomes conceptual?

Madden: A notion is an instantaneous thing: Wow! Here's this idea that came floating into your head—from where? From no where as they say. You know, so many wonderful things seem to come from no where. But a conception is something you develop slowly, you carefully develop, something that calls on the very best in you in every sense. It makes great demands on your intellect, great demand on your emotions, just every aspect of you. And therefore, I am far more excited when the conception comes than when the notion comes. Because I believe that good things ought to come through pain and sweat and hard work, but also, as I said joyous, too, through a sense of creation and celebration. And also my attitude is that writing is an act of play. I used to say to my son Blake, "Would you quit making so much noise, I'm playing. Don't disturb me, I'm playing," instead of "I'm working." Because I'm not doing something serious, what I'm doing is not work and serious compared to what he's doing, which

is play and trivial. We're doing the same thing but his play is interrupting my play. The imagination at play is really the way I regard the writer. And of course there are these serious ramifications for it, but I think this is really what's going on for every writer though he or she may say the opposite. He may say, "I am expressing the innermost feelings of my soul. I'm trying to explore my spirit. I'm searching for my true identity," and all that stuff is really true, but I find that embarrassing to say because I know that basically it's just another form of play.

WIER: Some writers seem to have a mission in mind when they're writing. Like they are going to change the way people communicate, for example.

MADDEN: Yeah, like I'm going to change your head, stuff like that? I'm going to SHOCK you into another way of looking at life. I find that whole thing really offensive. That you go up to readers and *presume* to shock them into another vision, to *assume* that you're above them and that you're the one who's capable of changing them. That to me is really distasteful. It might happen; you might do that, but I don't see how you could consciously set out to do that.

WIER: There seem to be more and more university writing programs being developed, and more and more English departments seem to be offering creative writing courses. Do you think that this is a good or bad phenomenon?

MADDEN: I think it's a good phenomenon but I think that the reason the question is raised is because some people say that it's very bad for the writer, it's stultifying for him or her, but my only answer is, get the fuck out and quit exploiting the situation. I mean, you've got a lot of people who are hired to conduct creative writing workshops who say on the first day, "Well, I don't presume to try to teach you

anything about writing, it's a mysterious process," but they don't say to the bursar's office: "I don't presume to take $28,000 dollars a year from you, because I don't know anything about writing." And this schizophrenia to me is kind of disgusting. But there are plenty of writers who do believe that certain things about writing, which I call the secondary things, can be taught. The primary things you can't teach, of course, the important things you can't teach people. But then what's wrong with teaching them the secondary things? That's all in the hell you ever teach about anything anyway: you're not teaching the primary things about history, well, maybe science, I guess, but even then you've got to take those primary things and do something with them yourself, you're not teaching people to invent a polio vaccine, you see. But sometimes people presume that we are teaching people how to write—how to write, let's say *Catcher in the Rye*. But we're not doing that, we're only teaching them some of the techniques one can find in *Catcher in the Rye*. You use them in your own fashion. And so I very arrogantly say that I know goddamn good and well that certain things can be taught. They are however secondary things. The whole business of writing workshops, the whole atmosphere is very artificial. But what's wrong with *artificial*? I mean, a story *is* artificial. So what you try to do in a workshop is set up some kind of parallel to the artificial aspects of writing stories. And so I think the writers who think the university is stultifying should drive trucks—there are other alternatives which are being explored by young writers, by necessity, among other things, because they can't get jobs. And I think they're just as good an alternative for people who don't want to teach. There are some writers who don't believe in what they're doing, teaching, who are just taking the money, taking the soft situation, and then bad-mouthing it, and I think they ought to quit. Teaching, as I said before, is part of an unbroken creative process. It's just one manifestation of a total

creative attitude toward life. And I'm not at all cynical about the situation, student-teacher relationships, and so on. I don't waste my energy fighting with the administration. I do just what the hell I want to do, and if they don't like it, they can let me know, then we'll worry about it. I'm not going to sit around and worry beforehand, saying I can't do something because the system won't let me. I've done everything I've wanted to—the system hasn't kept me from doing anything I wanted to do.

WIER: So, talk about the conflicts between art and the university, the idea that the university is an unfair patron of the arts. You don't buy that?

MADDEN: No, not really.

WIER: James Whitehead once said that the dean is as good a patron as the duke used to be.

MADDEN: Yeah, that's true.

WIER: I remember seeing an article about you in a newspaper a few years ago: "He Wanted to Live in The South." Do you think of yourself as a southern writer?

MADDEN: Very definitely. And I *hope* that the southern experience is representative of the universal experiences. We feel that about Faulkner. None of his very particular southern experiences are only southern, they are universal also. This is interesting, you know I think of myself as a southern writer but I never think of the southern reader when I write.

WIER: You're not suggesting that there are southern readers?

MADDEN: No, I don't think there is a body of people that make up the southern readership, or the readership of southern novels. But even though I think of myself as a southern writer, it turns out that

I've written a lot of stories that are not southern. And some of my best stories, "No Trace," for example, are not southern. And "The Day the Flowers Came," which I don't particularly like but others do, is totally non-southern. And I really enjoy that. In fact the next novel is called *The Suicide's Wife* and it's set in the North somewhere, and deals with all northern people.

WIER: One hears a lot of talk about the death of the novel because of television, because of movies, because of even newer things like cassette movies that people can show on their televisions, the death of the imagination . . .

MADDEN: If that's true, it's the most protracted, longest dying since the death of Hamlet, where he keeps saying, "I die, I die, I die, Horatio." The critics keep saying that, and if you go back to when they first said it, which should have been the day *Tristram Shandy* was published, then it turns out to be pretty absurd, you know, since the movies have had time to kill the novel, TV's had time to kill it, and they haven't succeeded. We just happen to be going through a period which is purely economic, an economic problem where there're certain kinds of fiction that they, publishers, are afraid to try, just the pure economics of publishing, but there's a hell of a lot of fiction appearing and being read. I think the statistics bear out that fiction is in fairly good shape, as far as being read. And even the classics are being read.

WIER: But so often editors aren't willing to take creative risks. For instance, the unwillingness to publish the movie stills in *Bijou*.

MADDEN: It's an unknown kind of thing. You're mixing two different media and it's unproven, so why take the risk? But the fact is as I go around the country people say where the hell are my pictures? I've got a sort of scrapbook personal copy that just gives me a large

charge personally and I've been carrying that copy and I find people just fighting over it to see the pictures. I suddenly realized that, Jesus, if they like them that much then why shouldn't they be in their copies? Going back to another example of another very difficult book which is, again, an exception, William Gaddis's *The Recognitions* has been in print since 1951, that's twenty years *in print* and still selling just enough to justify keeping it in print. But a lot of publishers won't even do that when a book is sort of just on the line. That is just a case of Harcourt Brace just really believing in that book.

WIER: Let me ask you something related to this. About a year or two ago you published a novel, *Brothers in Confidence*, as an original paperback. Do you think that there will be any new paperback moves to change the tradition of not reviewing books unless they're in hardback, and to get paperbacks accepted as an economical way of publishing good books?

MADDEN: Well, my book was part of a movement by a really dynamic, creative editor, in, of all places, the paperback market, the reprint market, and that's Peter Mayer at Avon, who put out, I think, twenty-seven originals in *one month*. And he said, "Goddamn it, you mean to tell me that you're going to refuse to review twenty-seven good novels that aren't commercial properties, that are just well-written good novels, some by young writers, some first novels, some by writers who have published before and have been well received critically? Or are you just going to ignore them because of some absolutely unjustifiable taboo against reviewing paperbacks?" And the response was, "Yes, we are." And so they didn't review them. My book *Brothers in Confidence*, got absolutely no reviews despite the fact that it has a reputation in the novella form as very interesting and entertaining. Mayer made a whole big pitch, you see, and it just fell on deaf ears. He doesn't give up. He's still arguing this

at conventions and so on, he's still saying that the future of publishing is in paperback originals. And so people are beginning to listen.

WIER: Doubleday has taken *Intro*, now, the AWP [Association of Writers & Writing Programs] volume, and they're going to their paperback house, Anchor Books, and they are going to publish it as an original quality paperback and try to get it adopted as a textbook for writing classes.

MADDEN: Well see, Anchor Books is a good example of this new thinking. Anchor was a prestige line that made no attempt to be commercial, sort of out of the Modern Library mystique. They decided that they were going to go on newsstands. And so they changed their format, they started putting, not garish, but beautiful, dramatic covers on their Anchor line, and displaying them effectively, as opposed to the relatively drab but nice tasteful covers that they used to have.

WIER: What are your plans for the future?

MADDEN: Specifically, one thing that I have planned: a novel called *The Suicide's Wife*, from the point of view of a suicide's wife. A man kills himself and how does the woman react to it—she rebels. She's a very ordinary woman who's been subordinate to him, and what she discovers is that the man to whom she was subordinate was a total nonentity, even though he was a teacher and a poet. But as far as other people go, he was a shadow. This is a shock to her because she always assumed that when he went out into the world every morning that he was this important person that came back out of the real world each afternoon, while she just sort of served him and looked after him without resentment. But now she realizes that, my God, he didn't have a life and I didn't either! What is it to have a life?

WIER: What role did your poem "The Suicide's Wife," that was in *New American Review* have in conceptualizing the novel? Was the poem one method of expressing this notion? Or was the poem a step toward the novel?

MADDEN: No. The poem came about the way a companion poem came about. There was another poem called "Suicide Is the Eleventh Commandment" which I wrote somewhat more in a trance, not understanding what I was doing really, I still don't quite understand the poem—and I don't mean that to be complimentary, that's just a fact. Well, a lot of people think that, well, that must be a very good poem if you don't understand it, but to me it's just a fact. And I wrote that poem out of a sense of being haunted by the memory of a man who shot himself. Then I wrote "Suicide's Wife" out of the same kind of haunted feeling, how did she feel? And I'd never met her, so I totally imagined her and conjured her up. And then after I wrote the poem, I saw that there were so many implications in the poem, narrative, character, that I wanted to do a short story. So, I'm very eager, very interested to do this novel, from the woman's point of view. Though many male writers have done it, I want to do it especially convincingly. It's going to be short, too.

An Interview with David Madden

Ruth Laney, 1974

I interviewed David Madden during a violent thunderstorm on a July afternoon in Baton Rouge. The noise of the rain and thunder occasionally blotted out our voices as we talked and drank coffee in his study lined with the books and framed photographs of his heroes—Joyce, Faulkner, and Wolfe among them. Madden's latest novel, *Bijou*, a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection, details one year in the life of thirteen-year-old Lucius Hutchfield, a movie-mad usher in the Bijou Theater in "Cherokee," Tennessee, in 1946.

Madden, a native of Knoxville, Tennessee, has been writer in residence at Louisiana State University since 1968 and is a poet, playwright, and critic as well as novelist. His published works include the novels *Cassandra Singing* and *Brothers in Confidence* and a volume of short stories, *The Shadow Knows*. He has written book-length critical studies of Wright Morris, James M. Cain, and Nathanael West and is editor of *Remembering James Agee*, a collection of reminiscences about the writer, published last fall.

LANEY: How long did it take you to write *Bijou*?

MADDEN: It was conceived one morning about two o'clock when I became seized with a kind of terrible nostalgia for the Bijou, in our upstairs bedroom of this enormous house called the Bishop's Palace

in Gambier, Ohio. (I was teaching at Kenyon College then and was assistant editor of the *Kenyon Review*.) It was a kind of gothic, *Jane Eyre* type of house, up on a hill, surrounded by woods, a marvelous, Victorian, massive, haunted structure, where Robert Penn Warren also lived when he was writing the film script of *All the King's Men*. Somehow I was seized with nostalgia for the Bijou Theater where I used to be an usher when I was thirteen years old in Knoxville, Tennessee. It was a preoccupation not so much with what happened there, or even with the people, so much as the aura of the place and the various textures of the building—the carpets, the walls, the gilt paint, the texture and tone of the stills and the way they were displayed, with certain lighting fixtures turning them mellow. And the curtains, the draperies, the box seats, the whole deployment of the features of the theater, the projection booth and its relationship to the audience, the sense of the projectionist in there and his relation to the audience, the stage—which is an enormous stage where legitimate plays once were performed.

LANEY: My impression from the book was that the Bijou had a certain seediness.

MADDEN: Well, Lucius was there at a transitional period when they were trying out things like vaudeville road shows, which involved a bit of a striptease or girlie-show element. I was trying to imply that it was headed in that direction—which turns out to be prophetic, because I never dreamed that it would end up being what it is now, which is a skin-flick house, with a garish painting over of surfaces to hide the dirt. I also had *The Glass Menagerie* come there to sort of reach back into the past when they showed mainly plays. So I was reaching into the past and anticipating the future of the Bijou. It was a place where all these things were possible, including amateur nights and Bugs Bunny Clubs, and all the elements of the movie world

and movie theaters—I think they even had Free Dish Night sometimes. But to return to your original question, *Bijou* began there in Gambier, Ohio, in 1966, with this nostalgia. I kept trying to tell my wife, Robbie, about it and keeping her awake, and she said sleepily, "Yeah, why don't you write a novel about it?" just as a way to shut me up. I said, "That's silly," but the next morning I began to think about it and the idea began to work on me. About two years later, after I had moved to Athens, Ohio—which is a lot more like Knoxville than Gambier was—I began thinking about it seriously. But I was still thinking, as I took notes, mainly about the deepest kind of nostalgia for the Bijou as a place, rather than for events. I didn't really want to tell a story, about me or anybody else, I wanted to evoke *many* stories by the way I described the physical layout and the physical routine and some of the people of the theater. But this began to stimulate actual events—and also imagined events—and the novel began to reach out beyond the Bijou into events in the junior high school and in Lucius's own home life. I still have notes that say, "Try to make everything happen in the Bijou, make things happen that will cause him to remember these other events outside the Bijou," because I was trying to get a concentration of effect, a sort of captivity in the Bijou, which in a way I wish I had carried through. Because the novel now is too dispersed and episodic—the effect is kind of dissipated by setting it here and there. Also, the length is a consequence of getting outside the Bijou, and I think that the book might have been more of an aesthetic achievement if I had maintained more of a unity. A unity of place would have enabled me to shorten the novel and to realize my original purpose. But anyway, I was in Athens, Ohio, in 1967. But I didn't really begin writing *Bijou* until I got a Rockefeller grant—Robert Penn Warren recommended me for one. I got it in 1969 and went to Venice, and that's where I began writing it.

LANEY: I was curious about why you chose Venice.

MADDEN: Actually, I went there after I had made about eighty pages of notes in Athens. I went there with Robbie and our son, Blake, just before coming here to Louisiana. It struck me as we went down the canals into Venice that I was really coming home. I had always thought of Venice as the most bizarre place on earth, next to Baghdad or Iraq—but in a way I had thought of Venice as even more bizarre. But I had a feeling of déjà vu, as if I had been there before. And in a way, it seemed like I was in Knoxville. On the other hand, a less bizarre place, on the surface, is Yugoslavia—I was writing parts of *Bijou* every morning while traveling by car in Yugoslavia, where everything seemed more foreign than Venice and where I felt absolutely alien. Venice is such a bizarre and theatrical place; everything, every angle, is stage-lit. Nothing is real, it's all tinsel, it's all fake in a way, or it has that aura, despite its being weighted down to the point of sinking in history. When I got the grant, I thought the best place to go to begin the book would be to a city that paralleled the exotic quality of the Bijou and all the things that happen in the Bijou, both in the movies and in real life. In other words, my vision of the Bijou was that it was an exotic, weird, strange place—and the best parallel to that, in terms of a city, would be Venice. It was like the Bijou was a Venice surrounded by Knoxville, which was reality. And I thought it would be interesting to start *Bijou* in a city full of Bijous.

LANEY: I was interested in your descriptions of canals and tunnels and the tower that Lucius goes to.

MADDEN: Yes, the tower by the river, in that section called "In the Tower," is meant to suggest Lucius's Byronic impulses—he loves to stand on heights. And many romantic poets and writers are associated with towers, like W. B. Yeats, Robinson Jeffers. And in my own mythology towers represent the romantic, heroic figure, whereas the

garret of the artist is sort of a parallel to those caves. "In the Cave" means that he is going as a kind of exile into the caves to discover himself, to create stories that will give him a sense of power, so that when he emerges he is the Byronic, heroic figure, complete with the limp, and he ascends into the tower. That's a very deliberate kind of symbolism, but it's so obvious and so deliberate that I don't want the reader to feel that I thought it was subtle while he thinks it's a cliché. It was a deliberate literary cliché, just as the movies are clichés.

Laney: Adolescence can be a painful time. I wonder if you felt detached from your thirteen-year-old self or if, as you re-created that time, you reexperienced that anguish?

Madden: Oh, yeah. When I was writing the story, I really was thirteen. It was a very painful and frightening experience. One day while I was working on *Bijou*, I walked into the living room and Blake was watching *Love Letters* with Joseph Cotton and Jennifer Jones. I'm not even sure I had noted that movie in my notes for *Bijou* yet. My first reaction was a condescending smile of recognition, oh yeah, there's Joseph Cotton, instant recognition, playing the game of recognizing the movie. I don't remember now what they were saying to each other, but my next reaction was a kind of terror, I really just went berserk for about three minutes. I don't know what it was. I've seen it twice since on television. It's really a very corny movie, but I'm very moved by it, even as recently as last month, because of its associations. And, of course, in the novel Lucius steals one of the love letters from that movie and quotes it in his letter to Raine. I still have that passage, cut out from a movie magazine and pasted in a scrapbook. There were all kinds of pitfalls, I felt, lurking for me as I went back into the past; I was afraid some kind of awful psychological trap would spring on me. But when I say painful and terrifying, I don't mean because I don't want to remember—because I *do* want to remember, I do want

to reexperience those times. The terror and the pain is that they are gone forever, not that they were awful. Because I've always had a feeling that my attitude toward the so-called bad things in my life is different from that of even most writers that I know. I think of Yeats's line, "a terrible beauty is born"—to me, those things were supposedly terrible events, but a terrible beauty was born out of them. They're beautiful in a very painful way because they're gone, they've ended, and they can't be experienced again. I was really so overwhelmed and fascinated and in awe of things I witnessed and things I actually experienced myself as a kid, that I feel I had an incredibly beautiful and happy childhood, partly because things were so miserable. It wasn't that I enjoyed misery or that I was masochistic, it was that my feeling about the quality of life was so intense. I don't quite know how to explain it, maybe that's why I wrote the novel. It's a feeling that, just because you're alive, everything is beautiful. That's why, when people speak of nostalgia as a trivial thing, I don't agree, from my own experience. I speak of a terrible nostalgia, in the way that Yeats was talking about "a terrible beauty is born," in that nostalgia is more profound, *because* it can be terrible, than a lot of people think. It's not just a recitation of trivia, it's not just a triggering of sentimentality, it goes much deeper than sentimentality. There are probably points where I unconsciously lapse into sentimentality in *Bijou*. There are other points where I deliberately lapse into sentimentality because that was part of the stuff of his sensibility at the time. But for me the implications of nostalgia go much deeper, and I think that's what I was trying to do in the novel. A major review in the *New York Review of Books,* by Roger Sale, went on at great length about the trap of nostalgia that he felt I had fallen into in the book. But I hope that's a description of what I failed to do rather than an accusation of what I unconsciously did. In other words, I knew what I was doing, I was trying to do a lot of the things he was touching upon. But he seemed

to be accusing me of not knowing that I was into nostalgia. I was trying to analyze nostalgia, by implication. In fact, the kid himself is into nostalgia, even at the age of thirteen he's nostalgic for the time he can vividly remember when he was one or two years old. So how the hell can you criticize a novel for being about nostalgia unless you have a preconception that nostalgia can only be superficial? I think it's important that I get into this, because I think that's one of the major misreadings of the novel.

Laney: Your work on *Bijou* reminded me of Thomas Wolfe, in a way: here's this huge stack of material and how do you mine the finished work from it?

Madden: Well, the first version of twenty-two hundred pages took about six weeks to do, in a Wolfean outpouring. The rest was about six years of Joycean paring down and recombining and trying to achieve some artistic unity. I'm very aesthetically minded in my writing—and in my reading and in my criticism. I go more by aesthetic considerations than anything else. Of course, in an autobiographical novel, I knew that I was violating many of my own principles and committing many of the errors that I had accused others of. But that comes with the first decision you make, that you're going to write something based on your own life. As soon as you make that decision, you're just going to have to accept the fact that some of those errors, no matter how hard you work, are going to plague the novel. Someone has said that no writer ever really finishes a work, he simply abandons it. That's the way I felt this time last year when I turned in the last draft. It was mainly cutting—I spent ten days in New York in a classic author-editor relationship with David McDowell, eight hours or more a day in the office and then long hours in my hotel room, simply cutting. I finally just couldn't see any other ways to cut it. But when the paperback rights were sold, I asked Peter Mayer

at Avon, who had done two other novels of mine, if I could cut it. I wanted another chance to respond to my own misgivings about the book as I had "abandoned" it and to many reviews by very sympathetic reviewers that said, this is really good but just a little too long. But the editor said he thought it would be misinterpreted by readers, that the cutting might be misinterpreted as a dictate from Avon itself.

LANEY: How do you organize the material of memory, take these vignettes which in real life have no beginning or ending and give them form?

MADDEN: You force it, you contrive it. I think it's a mistake to say, "Well, this is the way it happened, and to render it in all honesty, without the contrivances of art, is the best way." That's ridiculous, because that implies that life is really superior to a work of art. Then why do it at all? Why not leave it in the realm of life, where it was indeed rich and exciting and interesting? That's where it belongs. But as soon as you decide to do a novel or a story, it's appropriate to begin to contrive—in fact, it's dictated by the form, by this new occasion, this new life to the events—and to impose structure. Not just in terms of meaning, but in terms of an artistic, aesthetic experience, because an aesthetic experience is a controlled, contrived, experience. Now the artistry comes in making it *seem* natural, whereas you know—and anyone who studies the novel, who reads it three or four times, will know—that this seeming naturalness is contrived. But the only way it can seem natural is for it to *be* contrived. If it is indeed natural, it's a contradiction, because the reader says, this isn't a novel, this isn't a story, this is pointless memoir of what probably happened to the author. This is what I call the me-rack for subjectivity. If you're stretched out on a medieval rack, to one degree or another of pain, you can think only of your own personal feelings. Everything that

happens is equally important. You're examining your own navel. You're not seeing the relationship to other people of what's happening to you, because, stretched on the rack, you don't give a damn about anything but how *you* feel. And so you think, this is the most important event that's occurring in the universe now or ever did occur. And that's very natural if you're stretched out on a rack. But novels have nothing to do with what's natural. Novels are contrivances, they're artifices, and the whole magic of them is to seem to be doing one thing while you're doing another, like a magician. A magician is doing all this stuff that looks like nature, looks like the real thing, whereas he's really doing something very unnatural with the left hand. And it's the entire production, it's the being tricked, that accounts for the excitement and exhilaration. In other words, when you read a novel, it's important for you to feel that it's really happening and then, when you finish, to realize that the artist has been a magician and a con man. That's part of the enjoyment. It's "My god, how can Dickens make me think that all this stuff really happened? How can his techniques make me willingly suspend my disbelief?" To me, that's the beauty. I'm not at all impressed by anybody being honest about what really happened to him. That's a bore. And it's a bore to me to write about what really happened to me. That's why everything that excites me in *Bijou* is the stuff that I imagined. There were no caves in my real life. They were a totally imagined thing, suggested by a rumor that there is a network of caves throughout Knoxville. Since I was a kid, that vague rumor has fascinated me. Of course, a parallel is what actually happened to me as a kid: we used to spend a lot of time crawling through rain drains and sewer pipes, which was very scary and marvelous and fascinating and intriguing. I simply wanted to carry that on in the caves episodes. The reason I had the father become lost in the caves in *Bijou* was to show that grownups, adults—no matter how old you get, you're still lost in the

past. You're still lost in the world of fantasy. Which, of course, is what a drunk is, a drunk is a superadolescent—he's really just wallowing in childishness. Of course, in that cave-like thing, I'm sort of borrowing from Gorky's *Lower Depths*, where whole civilizations were living in the sewers under Moscow. And in the novel itself there's *Les Misérables*, where they're going through the sewers. And there's *Phantom of the Opera*, where he lives in the sewers. So there's this whole romantic image of the sewers, which we don't think about as obviously as we do the tower. To return to your question of form: to me what matters is not how a thing was created, but how it comes across, the way it's received. So that in my mind if I know that in the composition of my story "No Trace" I did a lot of extremely mechanical things, it doesn't matter as long as the people who read it are deeply moved and feel that it's the most natural thing in the world. And, actually, I did do a lot of things such as cutting up the story into little strips and very deliberately rearranging them. I actually do this. I work pretty much the way a movie editor does. In almost all of my stories, I will cut up the second or third version into strips and rearrange sentences or fragments until they come into explosive juxtaposition.

Laney: I think I would find it hard to maintain my perspective in doing that.

Madden: Well, I think I find it harder to do in my autobiographical writing than in my other writing. I like to think I'm really more a writer when I'm not using autobiographical materials directly and consciously. That's when I really think of myself as a creator, as a writer. The reason I can write *Cassandra Singing* for fifteen years, over and over, as a play, a novel, and finally as a movie script—and I wrote three major totally different versions of it as a movie script—the reason I can do that, I think, looking back, is because of my

consciousness of technique and my belief, my conviction—which is an emotional conviction as well as an intellectual conviction—that technique is more important, *finally*, in the revision process at least, than inspiration or than these other romantic concepts about the writing process. Because every morning, when I start to work, if I have all these technical possibilities in my head, then I can recharge the electricity of the raw material. If you, on the other hand, come to your raw material with the preconception that the vital experience in the writing process is in your immediate perception of it—well, naturally, that's going to die pretty damn quick. You can't recharge the uniqueness of the original experience—it's a contradiction in terms to recharge something that's unique. It either is unique or it isn't. But through technique it can be recharged. This is related to the idea that a work of art, once it is finished, is something you can reread and reread. I can reread *Gatsby* sixteen times, because it's rechargeable, and it's rechargeable because it was an aesthetic creation, not a literal re-creation of something that happened to Fitzgerald—as *This Side of Paradise* is, for instance. You see? And the thing about Wolfe is, the reason you can't reread Wolfe, is because it's all hot off the wire, it's all done in the heat and immediacy of recalling things just the way they were. I can reread Wright Morris over and over, even when he's writing about his own childhood, because he has artistically, through various techniques, made that experience available and accessible to me and to other people. And that's what all of my rewriting energies and efforts over the years go into—making it the kind of thing that you could reread and reread and reread. So that, for me, Cassie and Lone never got boring, *Cassandra Singing* never bogged down for me. Every day, every time I worked on it, I was excited. I didn't feel driven. And even in my critical works—I worked six years on my book about Wright Morris—the attitude that it can be done so many different ways, that no one way is the only way,

enabled me to experience it over and over and over, so that I could still get excited if I were to rewrite that book. The creative process is never-ending.

LANEY: Yet you hear a lot of writers say that they hate to revise, that the real fun is in the heat of creation, that cold revision is torture.

MADDEN: I would say that those writers do use, both consciously and unconsciously, techniques, and that's how they are able, finally, in the revision process to complete the work that they find so boring. But there's a whole other group of writers who consciously know techniques and get a thrill out of using techniques, and for them the revision process is at least as exciting as the initial process, and in many cases much more exciting. Of course, Flaubert and Joyce and Hemingway, and maybe Fitzgerald once or twice, come to mind as examples of that sort of artist. I have had as many thrills in discovering the right technique to solve the problems of a story. For instance, "The Singer"—I didn't know for five years how to tell that story without committing all kinds of errors and problems for myself and the reader and making it a trivial work. But the day I discovered *how* to tell it was much more thrilling, in a way, than the day I was inspired *to* tell it. The inspiration died very quickly, but once I found the technique it opened up so many possibilities.

LANEY: I noticed some colloquial expressions in *Bijou* that were new to me, such as the grandmother's "you all hersh." Were those peculiar to Knoxville or are they more generally southern?

MADDEN: I think some of them may be local to Knoxville, and some of them may even be family things. Like, "I want a naner" (for banana), and "I'll be there in a few drecklies," those may be idiosyncratic to the characters. One thing that a lot of hostile readers don't understand is that very often southerners will use words like *hersh*

consciously. Maybe they originally did it out of ignorance, but there comes a point where they realize that that is a "southern" way of talking because of the effect they've gotten, and they'll deliberately do it anyway. You can hear in the way they say it that they're conscious of it. In *Bijou*, when the grandmother says, "You uns hersh," she knows she's saying *hersh* instead of *hush*. I think there's a self-conscious delight in having the words in your mouth. I see this as a sensual thing, that my grandmother was holding certain words and phrases in her mouth the way you hold a jawbreaker. Southerners suck on phrases and words. There's a self-conscious, self-aware theatricalization of language, and when you mispronounce a word or use a colloquialism consciously, you're setting it off, the way an artist does. The northern writer, the non-Jewish northern writer, has to create his effects in different ways. He can't do it so much in language, except for Hemingway, who was very self-conscious about using language simply. He was almost as self-conscious in using simplicity as certain southern writers were in using colloquialism. Also, there is the rhythm of the speech. Even if you don't have the colloquialism, the rhythm comes through. A lot of people who like *Cassandra Singing* speak of the poetic speech. Well, it's poetic not simply in the use of colorful speech, but in the rhythm. I think southerners are art-for-art's-sake artists. They say what they say not for utilitarian purposes, even though what they say may have a utilitarian purpose, but they say it the way they say it for its own sake.

LANEY: Do you think of yourself as a southern writer?

MADDEN: Oh, yeah, very much. Mainly in terms of language, not just in raw material, not just southern events. Because, actually, there're very few black-white relationships, which is so much of the southern experience—there's very little of that in my work. But it's in storytelling, traditional storytelling, and in the use of language

that I feel very southern. And I would like to write more stories with dialect, but I realize I'm very inhibited because there's this attitude people bring to a dialogue story that it's the Beverly Hillbillies, that it's all comic. Even my sympathetic readers do see that comedy is one way of bringing out the richness of the language. And they get the richness mostly in the comedy. But still, the hostile reader won't be able to hear the more serious passages because it's coming to him through dialogue. Wright Morris, for instance, won't read *Cassandra Singing*, won't take it seriously, because all that southern talk puts him off. Although he says *Bijou*'s the best thing I've ever written.

LANEY: I was surprised that Larry McMurtry thought *Bijou* lacking in humor. I found a lot of it funny, particularly Lucius's diaries and stories, his melodramatic choice of words.

MADDEN: I think the weird thing is that some very sensitive, intelligent readers enter into the book with an early misconception that they are to read the book the way Lucius reads himself. They think the author wants them to regard everything from Lucius's point of view, from Lucius's attitude, whereas really I'm trying to say, I want you to experience it through his attitude while retaining your own objectivity which enables you to see the humor. In other words, I'm not going to come on as myself, as the author overtly twisting situations so that we make fun of Lucius, which is the usual approach of an adolescent novel. The author is so afraid that you're going to accuse him of being sentimental, that you're going to accuse him of being ridiculous like his character, that he presents the events in a satirical vein. Which I don't do at all. I try to set things up in such a way that the situations are intrinsically funny, and you have to take a certain overall attitude to the entire book to be receptive to that. Because I'm not going to hand it to you by the way I present the incident. None of those funny situations is set up by me to be funny—they're either

implicitly funny or not. And I think McMurtry and a few other people simply mistook the approach.

Laney: When you're working on a book, do you try to stick to a schedule? Get up every day at the same time to work, for example.

Madden: When I had a heavier teaching schedule, I got up at six o'clock to work. In this, I was imitating the working habits of a composer named David Van Vactor, who was sort of my mentor since I was fifteen. He used to get up at six o'clock to compose, and I would see him do this because I used to babysit, stay overnight, and get up to go to school. I was so impressed by this, at the same time that I was contemptuous, because I didn't believe that he could do anything really good to a mechanical schedule. I had the romantic concept that it had to come through hot inspiration. At the same time, he was teaching me over the years. I loved the music he wrote, therefore how could I argue with the way he did it? He was a romantic figure to me. He was a romantic artist, he was temperamental, he was always flying into rages. And although that was also *my* temperament, to fly into rages and to be unpredictable and to do all kinds of irrational things, I was always in a way aping the image of the artist in the movies: Cornel Wilde in *A Song to Remember*, the tempestuous artist. I think it's in my temperament, because you can't really put on something like that, but it was certainly incited or aggravated by the models all around me. At the same time, I was also influenced by the very quiet, bourgeois, everyday meticulousness of James Joyce, who was a hero to me as early as the age of fifteen or sixteen. He usurped the throne from Wolfe. But I've always had that Dionysian strain. It's in the tension between the Dionysian and the Apollonian that I think I do my best work.

Laney: I suppose most writers have the problem of how to make a living. It seems to be a choice of either teaching or making a

benighted effort to support oneself by writing, which for most people is impossible.

MADDEN: I've been very lucky, in that I've been able to support my end of things through writing for ten years. And I feel good about it, but I wouldn't feel guilty if I weren't. If Robbie were doing work that she wanted to do, if she were bringing in money earned in a job she loves to do, which she is—she is director of the Consumer Protection Center here—then I wouldn't feel guilty even if I weren't making a penny. Because she chooses to do it. But I think the writer and his family have to decide. Whatever job you have, if you can't write in that job, then you should start sacrificing yourself and your family, with an understanding—you'll have to sit down and come to this conclusion—that it's either one or the other. Teaching is also said to be a serious disruption, but, you see, I look at my life as a continuing creative process. The product of that process may be a story or it may be an hour in class. But I don't look at real-life situations as something I might use some day. I've never looked at life, even going into the merchant marines, as raw material. But it often turns out that you do. I think few writers enter into a specific experience with the idea in mind. They have a general idea that anything can be used. But actually, I've had so many rich, marvelous experiences as a teacher, it's strange that I haven't written about them. I've written few stories about the teaching experience, and the few I've written have been satirically turned against the teacher.

LANEY: I identified with Lucius's hatred of school and books and teachers—I remember struggling through *Silas Marner* in high school.

MADDEN: You see, any time I find myself in a situation like that, I always imagine an alternative. So the whole time I was having those experiences, I was imagining alternatives. And then there came a

point where I thought why don't I become a teacher and implement those alternatives? Then I thought, well, I don't want it to be in high school because then I couldn't write at all, so I thought, it will have to be in college. Then I came to a point where I thought, even in college there's still not enough time. So for the last ten years or so I've worked part time. Some people might cynically say, well, if you love teaching so much, why don't you teach more often than one course every other semester, which is all I've taught for the last six years. Well, the answer to that is, I put so much time and psychic energy into it that it's totally consuming for that time, even though it's one class. So that my playwriting class—well, during no semester in which I've taught at LSU have I been able to write very much, even though I've taught only one course with maybe six students.

LANEY: I recently read that you are working on a novel called *The Suicide's Wife*.

MADDEN: Yes, it's a very short novel inspired by something that happened—not directly related to my life, but sort of on the periphery of it—a suicide. It's told from the point of view of the suicide's wife—not in the first person, but filtered through her intelligence. It's a story that I first explored in a poem of the same name, a dramatic monologue by the wife. I had a lot of notes on it, and one of my sort of secondary purposes was to see if I could convincingly get inside a woman's mind and emotions. It's a very exciting challenge to me. In other words, I feel arrogantly that I can think and feel the way a woman does, through my imagination. And this comes out in my attitude that a writer ought to be able to imagine anything that he decides he wants to. I wish we could cultivate this attitude in our society about the artist, so that more writers would think of themselves as full of unlimited potential—try anything and see if you can do it.

LANEY: What kind of woman is the wife?

MADDEN: First of all, it's a blow to her that she is the suicide's wife. The second blow is that the suicide had no great life, to speak of, anyway. She is still a wife, even though she doesn't have a husband—she is that suicide's wife. At first she actually goes in the direction of trying to become even more the wife by trying to find out: Who was the man I was married to, who was my husband? I didn't know he was going to kill himself. Who was this guy who killed himself? I wasn't living with a guy who would kill himself. So who was he? And the more she finds out about him, the more she realizes he wasn't anybody, he was a pretty vague person. In the process of investigating him, she becomes more and more herself a person, responding to the things she discovers and the people she meets as she investigates his past. She develops as a real person, so that by the end of the story she has begun to be real to herself. There isn't any dramatic or miraculous change, but the reader should feel, even though Anne maybe isn't conscious of it herself yet, "You've really had quite a few fantastic experiences, Anne. You've had experiences so totally different from this routine housewife-mother life that you've led. In just a few weeks, or a month, you've had fantastic experiences, you've had something to build on, you've had perceptions, you've changed attitudes, you've grown. And when it dawns on you that you've grown, you'll be ready to begin." The novel could almost be called *The Beginning*. But lots of people say *The Suicide's Wife* is a beautiful title. I don't think it's particularly beautiful myself, I just thought of it as a working title. It's going to be very short, I *hope*.

An Interview with David Madden

Samuel Prestridge, 1976

This interview took place in Bernard Kaplan's office after the reading David Madden gave on the University of Southern Mississippi campus [on] February 19. Madden is writer in residence at LSU.

Prestridge: When did you first start writing?

Madden: When I was about eleven years old.

Prestridge: As did Lucius?

Madden: Well, Lucius had been writing two or three years at that point. But before I started writing, I told stories in a very conscious way, thinking of myself as *the* storyteller. Inspired by my grandmother, since I was about three years old. Many occasions in school, when it was raining outside or hopping a freight out to the swimming hole, sitting along the railroad track, at night to my brothers in the orphanage and so on, so I thought of myself as a storyteller long before I wrote anything.

Prestridge: What was your first publication; when was it?

Madden: First significant publication, I guess, was in a national issue of *Corradi*, a literary magazine put out by the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina. It was a contest issue, stuff submitted

from all over the country. And that was in 1951. It was a short story very imitative of Thomas Wolfe called "Imprisoned Light."

Prestridge: I remember your saying that Wolfe was one of your earliest influences.

Madden: Yes, but I want to make it clear that I don't think I learned anything about the craft of writing from Wolfe, and I would suggest that young writers not read him to learn how to write because he doesn't stand up to future readings—he's a one-time experience. And the reason he doesn't is because he hasn't created a work of art that has an inexhaustible inner source of energy, as *The Great Gatsby* does. You can read and read and read that, not just because there are more meanings to it but because the way the creative energy is set in motion, it keeps moving.

Prestridge: At what point did you decide to go professional?

Madden: From the beginning. As soon as I started writing, I knew that that's what I was going to be—a writer—and that I would try to write full time.

Prestridge: Another writer I interviewed said that he does not believe that any writer should extend himself beyond one genre. That is, a novelist should only write novels, fiction; a playwright, only plays. [In addition to] your plays, novels, short stories, [and] poetry, you have a book of criticism. Obviously you disagree with the idea of restriction to one genre.

Madden: Well, it sounds as if you advocate what you do because the writer mentioned writes only short stories so he advocates that restriction. I do write in many genres so I'm advocating maybe even more forcefully the importance for writers, unless there's something in their temperament which works against this, exploring all genres,

because I think what you learn about the craft of writing in one genre you can adapt to another genre and thereby enrich that genre.

PRESTRIDGE: I do agree with that; but do you personally have trouble making the switch from one genre to another?

MADDEN: Not at all, because I really believe that it's absolutely important for a writer to be fully aware of all the characteristics of the form with which he is working—all the possibilities and the limitations—and to consciously write to that. I think that my whole attitude is that what is constant is the creative process, not just the genre that you're working in. That's not the main consideration for me; in other words, the creative process, to me, can take any form. So I don't feel as though I'm leaving one thing to go to another thing even though I'm very conscious when I'm moving from one form to another, I'm very conscious of the conditions of each of the forms. I still feel a kind of ease of movement and I think that's due to the fact that it is the creative process that I'm thinking about, that I'm into.

PRESTRIDGE: In *Bijou*, much of Lucius's adolescent development is shown through dreams, fantasies, his journals and short stories. We see Lucius as the peer with the other school children, Lucius trying to appear as the older adolescent with the ushers, Lucius the son, Lucius the guardian brother of Bucky, his sexual development through fantasies and dreams. These techniques are experimental. What experimental writers that you have read have influenced you and which one would you recommend?

MADDEN: Well, I can't really trace an influence. By the way, I didn't think of it as experimental when I did it. I realized of course that it wasn't conventional because I was using so many different kinds of things and I was deliberately and consciously juxtaposing them in very special ways and so that amounts to a kind of experimentation,

but I wanted to give the impression that it was all very natural, so that nobody feels, "Hey, I'm reading this very far-out experimental novel." But, basically you're right; it is experimental. As far as the influence on me, in that book or in any of my other experimental stories, which are obviously experimental—one of them is called "Second Look Presents: The Rape of an Indian Brave," another one is called "Looking at the Dead." I think "The Singer," one of my very best stories, is basically experimental because there is no story that I know of that's written quite in that technique. But I can't really trace back to any particular author [as] an influence. But I can mention experimental authors that I would like people to read. Ronald Sukenick is one; Borges is good; Barthelme is good and Barth. There are very few experimental writers that excite me, because I think usually it comes off as being kind of hokey.

Prestridge: In the first part of the century, everything that could be done was done. We have little left but the form: we twist the form, we experiment. You said that your best story was experimental. Do you think that the very conventional straight story-line fiction piece has any hope in the future?

Madden: Well, if you mean sort of dead center conventional stories, yeah, I think there will continue to be readers for those, and I will continue to write that way sometimes. But, I would rather talk about going back and resurrecting some of the old kinds of writing—such as Thackery. The omniscient, far-out voice of the author who talks to the reader. We have some experimental writers who sort of play around with that, but it's like they're not really serious about it. They're either making fun of it, or being ironic. I'm talking about a serious use of the same technique, which I'm going to do in a novel I'm going to write, a Civil War novel. I'm going to push that

omniscient point of view as far as it will possibly go, really making it do things that it hasn't done before.

PRESTRIDGE: There is a sequel to *Bijou*?

MADDEN: Yeah. Called *Pleasure-Dome*. I feel that *Bijou* is too long. Aesthetically, I don't believe that long books can be works of art. They can be something else which is very good. For instance, *Look Homeward, Angel* is not a work of art, but it's something else. It's very exciting and moving. And I think *Bijou* really is a fascinating book, a kind of unique book, a beautiful and memorable experience. It's what I wanted to give people. *But* it's not a work of art because it's not compressed enough. It's much too strong, much too episodic. The devices are not really at work in it—well, they *are* at work to compensate for the overlength in a sense. But in *Pleasure-Dome*, I'm trying to create a more compact, compressed, intense, aesthetic experience, so it's only going to be about 270 published pages, composed of three or four major incidents or episodes: Lucius in the merchant marines, Lucius getting his little brother off a Tennessee chain gang, Lucius in a relationship with an old lady who claims to have had a child by Jesse James and we get the legend of that experience mixed in with things that are happening in the present. So that's going to be a very different book, not too much preoccupation with the movies, but a real preoccupation with the romantic vision of life, with the romantic attitude of young men toward life. I almost called it "A Romance of the Fifties," and I think I will. Subtitle, I mean, you know: *Pleasure-Dome: A Romance of the Fifties*. It comes of course from Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." This is an image I have of the aesthetic experience, but also of the storytelling experience. I have this feeling that there is one universal pleasure dome, a kind of platonic ideal, and on rare occasions of our lives, we enter that pleasure dome. One of the ways

we enter that pleasure dome is in the company of a writer, or a storyteller, or a nonliterary person, a con man for instance, who makes us suspend our everyday life for a short period of time—the length of a novel, the length of a poem, the length of a story, the length of a con job—suspend our relationship with our ordinary life and enter into a very rare and intense and very marvelous experience, which in the case of the con man, becomes very bad when you come back out of the pleasure dome, but in the case of a work of art, is a beautiful experience when you come back out of the pleasure dome. But I don't think you go into the pleasure dome in every story you read, or every story you hear, or every con man you encounter, because the world is full of con men every day. But it is those rarest and most perfect experiences. And to me, the most beautiful image, the image I have of the writer, is the ancient mariner. People have something to do: "I've got to go to this wedding, I like stories, but I'm not into stories right now. I have to go to this wedding." And the old man fastens his "glittering" eye upon him.

Prestridge: Also, he only stopped one of three.

Madden: Right, yeah. It's a one-to-one relationship. He doesn't attempt to mesmerize everybody. That's why it's a literary metaphor rather than a storytelling metaphor; if it was a storytelling metaphor, he would have told it to everybody. But it is characteristic of a work of art that the artist has a kind of obsessional desire to capture you and take you into the pleasure dome.

Prestridge: Does the title *Pleasure-Dome* have any connotations of the theater to you?

Madden: I'd never thought about that, but it's a good concept. It reverts back to *Bijou* because the Bijou theater is a pleasure dome;

whereas what I'm talking about is that platonic pleasure dome that we all enter into. I think of myself as a con man who is conning you into the pleasure dome and using many of the same techniques as a con man, but to give a *good* time—of course, a con man gives you a good time also; but I want to give a good time that has a nice aftermath to it. As a teacher and a writer I'm trying to deal with the question: "What is the writer trying to do to the reader? Now that implies that the act of reading is almost a physical act; it's certainly an emotional act and that's physical. Of course, I think intellectual acts are physical too, but we won't get into that. But anyway, we certainly understand when somebody does something to us. Then we look at the passage in order to see how the writer set up the scene in terms of the structure of the scene, especially in terms of the style, how he activated the response that he got from the reader. And I think you can go back and find it if you're looking for that sort of thing. You can find it; you can talk about it and you can come to an understanding of how fiction works. Now, that's opposed to having a primary objective of "finding the meaning" of what the writer's trying to say, because the more you talk about that, the more you get away from the specific experience and get into philosophy. Now, I really believe that when you're talking about what he's doing to you and the techniques he uses for doing it to you, you will end up talking about meaning in its proper perspective and to a proper degree. I'm reacting to the phrase "what was he trying to say." It really irritates the hell out of me because I thought I *said* it. I thought "I *did* it," to put it in my terms. In the first version of *Bijou*, the two-thousand-page version, I was *trying* to do it. After six years of rewriting, I *did* it. So I think the terminology is very important. When you say, "What was he trying to say?" you're throwing the whole thing off as far as I'm concerned.

Prestridge: How do you write? Do you have a schedule?

Madden: Yeah, from eight to three thirty every day. It used to be every single day, including Christmas, but I've sort of hopped out—well, I say I have, but I still get into it on Saturdays and Sundays. I sustain these hours pretty well. For one thing, when I'm doing a first version which is all sort of intuitive and impulsive and spontaneous, I simply, personally, have such a drive that I can't stop. I just don't want to stop. It's sort of like starting out and running. When I get to the place where I'm going to stop, I'm tired and I physically can't go on. I hope it doesn't show—well, I don't think it does show in the ends of my chapters because they seem to be pretty "up" and work pretty well. You'd think it would kind of wind down, but it doesn't. But, I seem to write short stories that way, the first version. Most of my stories are exactly the same length because that's my endurance stretch.

Prestridge: You mention one short story that you wrote in . . .

Madden: An hour. "The Day the Flowers Came" for *Playboy*. Yeah. I wrote it in one hour, retyped it in another hour and sent it off. And it was published that way. But, after it was published in *Playboy* and after it was published in *Best Short Stories of 1969*, I rewrote it before I put it in *The Shadow Knows*. Not because I only wrote it in an hour and made a lot of mistakes. It really did hold together. The reason I rewrote it is that I feel the creative process is ongoing: it never ends.

Prestridge: In your schedule, you're saying that you write a chapter at a time, that is, a whole chapter in one day's work?

Madden: Yeah. I can't stand to leave a chapter unfinished. So I could write *The Suicide's Wife*, my newest novel in eighteen consecutive days. Even though some chapters are shorter than others, I just

put more energy into them. One thing I want to say about that question of inspiration—"how do you get inspired?"—every single day in a routine manner—that old question. My answer is, I don't have to work on inspiration, inspiration comes in getting the original idea, and maybe in the first draft, I'm writing under inspiration. To me, most of the writing takes place in the rewriting. The way I get started in the morning is not by waiting for inspiration to hit me, but by calling upon the range of techniques that I know about to rev me up again. For instance, style. The stylistic techniques that I have at my disposal enable me to become fascinated and excited about the creative process all over again.

PRESTRIDGE: In rewriting, the sound is very important. When I rewrite, I go into the bathroom, shut the door, pace up and down and read it aloud. To me this is very important. Sound is very important to you also. I can tell by your readings. In rewriting, do you need another ear? Or do you just rewrite, sit on it for a few days, then come back to it cold?

MADDEN: I do it in several different ways, but generally I just go right through the story looking for problems, inconsistencies, awkward phrases, scenes that aren't working, cutting out things. Sometimes I'll restructure totally; I'll lift a whole big passage from chapter 13 and put it in chapter 1. Mostly stylistic changes. I'll write every sentence three or four different ways. To me, this is the most exciting part of writing. This is just as exciting as "working under inspiration." It's not drudgery.

PRESTRIDGE: Do you need another ear?

MADDEN: Yeah, my wife is the only other person—the only person—who listens to a story. Sometimes my son, too. She will go over it, and then I'll use some of her comments in the revision. I don't seek out

friends or other writers; I don't send stories to other writers. No two critics will have the same opinion of any work. They may agree that the work is good, but they'll like and dislike entirely different things. That's why I don't ask anyone. I create the different voices and the different ears to listen to it, and I entertain, I imagine all the possibilities and then choose the most effective from those.

Prestridge: Who were your first influences?

Madden: Thomas Wolfe only to the extent that he showed me the range of possibilities. What you can write about: he gave me an attitude toward life that sort of affected me in my earlier writing. He taught me that you can write about yourself and your own people, which I wasn't doing: I was writing purely made-up stories. Then very quickly after that, Hemingway, Joyce, and Faulkner. They were the main ones. And now, well for the last fifteen years, Wright Morris has been the greatest influence. I feel that he's the best writer in America. For young writers, you can't read anybody better, especially for style, because he is so beautiful in control of all the nuances of style, all the things that style can do for a reader, he makes it do to his readers.

Prestridge: Who do you read now?

Madden: Well, for the last eight years, the books I've chosen to read have been classics, going all the way back. At first it was sort of haphazard: this one or that one. People that I wanted to read. Now I'm engaged in a sort of reading plan, the purpose of which is to read one novel by every writer before 1900. That's sort of a cut-off date. Therefore, I have little time to read new stuff unless I review it, or somebody sends me a copy and asks my opinion. I don't read too much brand new stuff that comes out, but try to keep up with the sense of it: the kinds of things being written, the reputations of the writers.

PRESTRIDGE: How has teaching influenced your work?

MADDEN: I think the more a writer talks about the techniques of writing, which is what I hope writing teachers talk about instead of "theme" and stuff like that, I think the better you get at what you're doing. I think a writer should be super-conscious of what he's doing. I don't really believe in writing out of blind intuition or blind inspiration. By super-conscious, I mean at some stage before it's submitted. I don't mean while you're writing the first draft. I mean at some stage, the writer should be super-conscious of what he's doing. I think teaching helps you to do that. *But*, I think it drains your energy if you're a creative, energetic teacher, then it drains your energy for writing. If you're not a creative, energetic, imaginative teacher, you shouldn't be teaching because it seems to me to be a contradiction for a creative person to just walk through a class, just mark time through an academic career. It seems like an almost sinful contradiction because you know what the imaginative possibilities of life are, I would hope, and then to kind of do it in a routine fashion, I think would be terribly sinful. So I think most writers do put everything they have into teaching when they teach. That's bad for them in terms of time, and so on.

PRESTRIDGE: What would be your advice to young writers?

MADDEN: Well, one thing, to read as much as possible from the point of view of a writer, not just as a reader, because if you just read a book, you're getting no more out of it than an ordinary reader as far as improving your writing, but if you learn how to read as a writer who is looking for techniques to add to his repertoire of possibilities, then that's what I mean by reading as a writer. Another thing is to really try to reach the stage that you regard rewriting as just as exciting an experience as the initial writing under the influence of the experience. You have to learn too that you can have technical

inspirations, as well as inspirations about the stories you're going to tell, to experience the excitement of finding a solution to a problem in writing. Also, write a great, great deal. Write as if the story that you're writing has been written and read many, many times before. You then have to reimagine the story. Even if you've never read it before, you have to imagine that the reader has read it before.

An Interview with David Madden

Ray Jones, 1980

David Madden first learned about storytelling from his grandmother in the mountain country of eastern Tennessee. "She was a master of the oral tradition," says Madden. "She'd tell the same stories over and over and I'd never get tired of them. I was more interested in the way she told the stories than in the stories themselves."

By the age of thirteen, Madden had made up his mind to become a writer. Devouring movies at the rate of three a week in a theater near his home in Knoxville, he often wrote his own versions of the scripts, revising them to suit his ever-hungry imagination—a process detailed in Madden's autobiographical novel *Bijou*.

Now thirty-five years later, Madden has published seven novels, numerous plays and short stories, and enough nonfiction and criticism to fill a shelf. During one twelve-month period recently, five separate Madden titles were published. Madden, who serves as writer in residence at Louisiana State University, holds degrees in creative writing from the University of Tennessee, San Francisco State College and the Yale Drama School.

Yet Madden's attachment for the oral tradition has never waned. In 1976 he logged eighteen thousand miles by auto in a campus-to-campus trek, telling stories to college students. The influence of his Appalachian-born storytelling skill can be traced in his novels

Cassandra Singing, *Brothers in Confidence*, *Bijou*, *Pleasure-Dome*, and most recently *On the Big Wind*.

The interview below was executed in a single afternoon at Madden's home in Baton Rouge.

JONES: So much of your fiction is a celebration of the oral, Homeric tradition in storytelling. Your novels *Cassandra Singing*, *Bijou, Pleasure-Dome*, and more recently *On the Big Wind* are wonderful examples. What has compelled you to write so often about storytellers?

MADDEN: I think it was the influence of my grandmother, who, when I was three or four years old, as I depicted in *Bijou*, told stories to me and my two brothers and whoever else might be sitting around the table. She was almost always the main storyteller. Other people in the family told stories but much briefer, more anecdotal, more personal. They were very dramatic, like my mother is a very dramatic storyteller. But my grandmother was the one who told stories about members of the family or people she had heard about. The rest of my family weren't as keen as she was on passing on stories about other people and stories about the family in the past. Because everybody was a storyteller, most of them were very bad listeners. They were too eager to jump in and out of the story. I just listened. But because of the competition between the storytellers, I became aware of the dramatic possibilities of different kinds of listeners or various relationships to the stories being told. I was aware very early of the complexity and whole layout of any given story time. And so that's what attracted me—not the stories themselves.

JONES: Cassandra tells stories, and of course there are the Lucius stories in *Bijou*. Where does the oral tradition that you follow have its birth? Is it the mountain tradition?

MADDEN: The mountain tradition. I always associate storytelling with the hills, with mountain people, or at least country people. But mainly mountain country people, sitting on front porches, I always have an image of high front porches—not wide or broad front porches but high ones, which would suggest living on a slope. I don't know that I had firsthand experience on that, because my grandmother's house as on level ground and out of the mountains, though you could see the mountains all around, but maybe because you could see the mountains, I had an image of her coming out of those mountains. Her voice and the kind of stories she told, which were usually set in the mountains, gave a feeling that the mountains were very much alive in her. Now, the storytelling tradition is experienced all over the country but is most alive still along the Appalachian Mountains. You don't think of Rocky Mountain storytellers, do you? You always think of Appalachian storytellers.

JONES: The southern tradition then?

MADDEN: Yes, I see it as a southern tradition.

JONES: What do you see as special or unique about the southern oral tradition?

MADDEN: A love of language for its own sake rather than for utilitarian purposes. The difference between non-southern and southern is that the non-southern person will tell a story to get from here to there, from the beginning through the middle to the end. A southerner will use that structure as an occasion to enjoy language for its own sake. All those expressions that people make fun of, that is, southern expressions, are very self-consciously used. Somehow people from outside, or local sophisticates, like to think the people who use them don't know any better. But if you really listen you can hear that they deliberately frame a lot of these sayings and phrases. And

of course I try to find techniques that are somewhat similar to that in writing. I try to find a literary equivalent to those effects that I know storytellers get.

JONES: You mean techniques like in *Pleasure-Dome* where you begin, "Have I told you the story about . . . "?

MADDEN: Yes, that's one storyteller's technique. And what is implied is that some listener says, "Yes, you have." Because the next line is, "Oh, I have?" And then somebody else says, "But tell it again." And then the storyteller says, "OK, I will tell it again." And then, of course, many times in oral stories I also show how the story is more important than the factual, or more important than the daily concerns. I'm always trying to say that the imaginary life is more important than, or transcends, or is superior to the factual life. It's as if someone comes in here and says, "My God, you stay cooped in here all day? That's really terrible! You sit in here all day and *write*." And the person who says that has been out in the real world where everything is going on, and they haven't done a damn thing during the day. They don't come in here and tell me about the wonderful things that happen to them out there. And yet they see me sitting in here imagining all the wonderful things that I've been making happen in the imagination and they can't see the irony of what they're saying. They don't envy me. They think I should envy them. And yet I not only experience these things, I am the author of them, I am the creator of that which I experience. They're coming out of a world where they just let things happen to them.

JONES: Is the oral tradition, the storytelling process, connected in any way with the preservation of the language?

MADDEN: Yes. The only reason I write is to have an occasion to use the language—it's not the only reason, but the main reason. Not to

preserve characters or stories, but to make the language happen in various ways under different circumstances: character relationships, events within a conception. In *Cassandra Singing* the language is supercharged. It doesn't sound like natural speech, it's too heightened. That's a good combination—the southern way those characters talk and the literary style that I as an author use. In *Bijou* the literary style is played way down and the southern way of talking is not as pronounced as in *Cassandra Singing*. Most of the people in the family talk fairly straight, except for a few odd expressions, until you get to the grandmother. Then in *On the Big Wind* you have a lot of contrast—radio speech, television speech, disc jockey speech, commercial speech, news speech, documentary speech. Big Bob himself talks very differently under various circumstances. When he's Daryl Don Donovan he talks very differently from when he's Big Bob; when he goes back home his language is totally flat.

Jones: Have we lost the oral tradition?

Madden: Yeah, pretty much. I'm trying to keep it alive. Not as such, because in a literary medium you can't keep the oral tradition alive. It's a contradiction. The sound of the human voice is the main element of the oral tradition and the living proximity of the storyteller and listener. And on the page a lot of that gets lost unless it's reactivated in the imagination of the reader. That's really what I want to do—to create a new form, which on the surface doesn't sound new because we've had it before in different voices, from Faulkner and other southern writers.

Jones: What are the consequences of losing the oral tradition?

Madden: Content and subject matter become important. And style—*style* is the *literary* term for oral tradition—is de-emphasized. As you can see on television and in books today, it is the subject

matter that is grist for the mill, and that's really scary to me. Because there is no longer appreciation of the sentence, of the literary sentence *or* of the oral tradition.

JONES: *Bijou* spotlighted the movies as a generator of pop culture as well as a creative dynamo for the imagination.

MADDEN: Yes, but it was still augmented by the oral tradition and the electronic tradition on an oral level—radio drama. The only visual experience was in the theater; you couldn't have it daily in your home. And you see, I wasn't going to the movies to see a story; I was going to the movies to see Alan Ladd. I did not necessarily want to experience the story—the story was the excuse. And so then I would cast myself in stories of my imagination on that same line or level. And at the same time I was being fascinated by real life and didn't know why and didn't make any association between the life of the imagination and real life. But as soon as I made that connection, I could not only tell stories in which I was the power source that my grandmother was, but I could tell stories *about* my grandmother. I could not only tell stories in which Alan Ladd was a character, but I could tell stories about the world which included movies with Alan Ladd in them. So that was the real change, and I'm not exactly sure how that came about. But I was always moving out of realistic details toward some kind of high plane. But the fact that I was dealing with those details probably laid the groundwork for the time when I would say, "That's what I really want to write: I really want to write about the everyday lives of people rather than the heroic level which doesn't influence me." When I was about fifteen or sixteen the heroic level began to drop away. And I began to get fascinated by the old houseboats on the river and the everyday life I observed in Knoxville. Usually poor people or foreign people because they seemed exotic and bizarre, and the facades of their lives, the way they looked, suggested many, many fascinating stories.

JONES: I love that expression, "the facades of their lives . . ."

MADDEN: Yes, what you see on the surface. I think from the beginning surface has almost always been *all* to me. I wrote a poem recently called. "Surfaces": "I always thought that / there is something / beneath every surface, . . ."; what attracted me to the surface was that there's something beneath it, "waiting to be revealed . . . / I have looked beneath the surface / and there is nothing, / except, perhaps, / another surface." Which in itself is interesting. "Mystery is simply a manipulation / of surfaces." Things are mysterious simply because surfaces are being manipulated or you are manipulating surfaces.

JONES: Is there some way we can correlate that with Big Bob? He has so many surfaces.

MADDEN: Yeah, he loves those surfaces.

JONES: Is there anything beneath?

MADDEN: No. Some critics say there isn't much to Big Bob. That's the whole goddamn point. But meanwhile . . . you see, the irony is, they can't see the surfaces because they keep looking for something beneath the surface. If you only look at the surface—that's where the enjoyment is.

JONES: The surface of Big Bob, the various personae and personalities . . .

MADDEN: Yes, the verbal surfaces and personae are interesting as they are being manipulated, as he's manipulating them, as I'm manipulating them, as the reader is manipulating them. That's the whole interest. And what amazes me is everybody's looking somewhere else for what is never intended and nobody is looking—and very few people are looking—at what I actually was trying to deal

with there. And it's really surprising to me. Because, of course, we live in a culture in which surfaces are the main attraction and are being manipulated. And yet we have this tribal delusion that there's some big mystery beneath the surface. As I draw near fifty years old, I swear I've never gotten a glimpse of it. That may be my shortcoming. But what has sustained me all these years, what's kept me writing, what's kept me interested, hasn't been the certainty that there is something beneath the surface, it's been the enjoyment of the surfaces. Surfaces have offered a tremendous amount of fascination and interest, emotional excitement, philosophical speculation, everything that human consciousness thrives on—it has done that. I cannot trace back that anything but surfaces have had these effects on me. And I see no evidence in the writing of anybody else, even the most philosophical writers that I like, say, *Recognitions* by William Gaddis—it's all about surfaces. Nine hundred pages of surfaces! The main character is a forger of paintings.

Jones: Gaddis's character forges paintings; Big Bob forges voices, personalities . . .

Madden: Which he's heard before. Nothing new about it. Oh, yeah, this is the way you're supposed to sound: "It's Big Bob of the Big Bob night owl show—gonna play every one of your favorite tunes, neighbor." "This is Robert Epstein, reporting from . . ." or "Hello, darlin', did you take your vitamins this morning?" All that. And he's conscious of it, but then he disappears into the role and he never loses the voice. He's not in search of his true self. You see, that's the reason people who haven't seen the point of this book are really bewildered, because here's a guy who's totally empty and he's not in search of himself! I personally cannot imagine what anyone would be in search of. I was so damned fascinated by the surfaces that I wanted to write the book. So if he's fascinating enough for me to want to

write a book about his surfaces, why should I have him searching for somebody else? It's ridiculous!

Jones: Then the role is the person?

Madden: Yes, I guess. That used to be an indictment against the person and against the society that produced the person, and maybe we ought to ask the question, is that all there is?

Jones: But when Bob Travis returns to Black Damp, he's looking for something . . .

Madden: Well, he's returning, though, for a practical reason.

Jones: Yes, his mother.

Madden: That's the surface again. See, surfaces dominate. But he has this vague sense of: Now that I'm here in pursuit of the surface, which is "mother dying, son returning," now that I'm acting out this surface drama of son returning to his roots, my society teaches me that I ought to be looking for myself and what's beneath the surface. But what's far more fascinating to me and to him is that he's seeing parallels, not digging into surfaces. Contrasting parallels: I am like and very unlike Harl Atchley. You notice he doesn't want to say, who's the real Harl Atchley? Because the superficial Harl Atchley is very fascinating to everybody. And he says, if only I had the camera here, I'd be in command of the scene; then he'd be in command of the surfaces. This is very disillusioning to people, probably even to me, who always thought that there would be something beneath the surface. But I'm only just now working this out in this conversation—I haven't really thought about it, obviously. I've been dealing with it without thinking about it, but now that we're talking about this, it's really becoming clear to me that although I would like something to be beneath the surface, I swear to God I can't think of anything that

would be, can't imagine it. Oh, I have a vague yearning for it. But meanwhile, I'm sustained by the surfaces.

Jones: Why did you choose to tell the story of Big Bob Travis as a series of loosely related episodes?

Madden: Well, in the first place, they were written separately over about twenty years and ended up in different kinds of magazines. There's only one story in there never published before, "Daryl Don Donovan," which I'll never understand. I don't know . . . it's a lot of fun and nobody wanted it. So I found I had a bunch of Big Bob stories, and I thought, well, this character has shown that he has serious implications and I have a lot of other stories about people in radio and television and I wonder if this doesn't reveal an ongoing concern? So I pulled all those stories out and looked at them and sure enough, they were different in point of view—some were first person, some third person, some present tense, some past tense—some weren't as squarely Big Bob stories as others, but I thought the whole interest, which is a contrast between the oral tradition and electronic media, *is* there. And the character who gets lost between the two is there. So why not reconcile all these stories to each other and let Big Bob stories be the constant? The changes I made in the stories [to link] to each other are not really very major at all. The option open to me was to supply true narrative bridges, not just reconcile the tales but supply bridges—a disguise for the eager critics who want to say, "Aw, he's just telling me a bunch of stories." But why say he left here and he went there and he ended up there and go through all that?

Jones: You left out the bridges?

Madden: Yes, not only narrative bridges but explanations of how his character changes. I can show you in almost any novel that the character moves from place to place and situation to situation,

modern novels where this stitching shows worse than mine. You see, in mine I deliberately wanted it to show by its absence. And what really depresses me is that so few people . . . I got a letter today from a major writer who said, "I was disappointed in all that jumping around—not that I don't do it myself."

JONES: What about your concept of impingement?

MADDEN: That's usually for emotional effect. The syntax is set up in such a way that one phrase impinges on another phrase kinetically, almost physically. And that sparks an emotional response in the reader. And there, too, implication is at work, because the reader isn't getting all the elements in a predictable order. So what is implied is that they *are* going to get the elements, but they don't know in what order. And then, when it hits them, the effect is much stronger. They feel as if the sentence is not describing something that happened but that they are caught up in a sentence in which the process of what is happening is happening now—to them. It happens to the reader and the character simultaneously. I work very carefully to get the response I want from you, and you're caught up in that process to such an extent that it happens to you and the character at the same time. Now, that's not implication, that's impingement.

JONES: The words, the sentences . . .

MADDEN: That's what I write; I write sentences, I don't write stories. I guess temperamentally that's probably my failing, I don't see the whole except in terms of the sentence. Characters, motivations, all that kind of stuff, is OK. A writer has to deal with that. I do. But my point of entry is the sentence. And what I mean by rewriting is taking out or modifying in order to imply rather than to state. The implication, in other words, is the whole thing. And why implication? It's because if one and two imply three, the only place three can

occur is in the imagination of the reader. And that's what I really want. I want the reader as an imaginative collaborator. The only way to get the reader as an imaginative collaborator is sentence by sentence, through implication.

JONES: Could you tell us anything about the Civil War novel you're working on now?

MADDEN: Yes, it's about two historical figures. One, William Brownlow, was publisher of a Republican newspaper in Knoxville, was a Unionist during the war while still believing in slavery, which wasn't too unusual. A lot of the Unionists, especially mountain Unionists, were violently anti-Negro, pro-slavery. And the other character is Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, who was a historian of Tennessee, a banker, a farmer, a railroad man, and a doctor. I suppose I'm dealing with two opposites in character and trying to reconcile them, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's sense: The test of a first rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Now these two men aren't trying to pass that test, but I am, because I have strong sympathies for the very characteristics of each of the two men that make them so different. For instance, Brownlow lives in the immediate present while Ramsey lives in the past. However, when the Civil War makes demands on them, Ramsey moves very effectively in the present and Brownlow draws on the past as a way of manipulating the surfaces of the present. Brownlow uses words whereas Ramsey uses deeds. Brownlow acts as if to utter the word is to create the law. And through the newspaper, he incites the burning of the railroad bridges along the 270-mile ride, which is the main supply line of the Confederacy, from the Deep South to Virginia through Tennessee. The arsonists get hanged; he gets thrown in jail a little while but later goes free. It's part of his whole idea that he doesn't have to do it, all he has to do is

say it and it's done. He had once been a preacher, a circuit rider: In the beginning was the word. Now Ramsey believes that you do have to do deeds and those deeds should be done out of character, out of a sense of family and tradition. And then you record the deeds as history, the best deeds. So you might say that Ramsey is out of the Lee tradition and Brownlow is out of the Lincoln tradition.

Jones: Could you give us some feel for the structure of the novel?

Madden: I open with an emphasis on Brownlow at the burning of the bridges and his imprisonment and then his exile into the North, where he gives inflammatory speeches against the South. He writes a book or two. Then part two comes when the North invades Tennessee and takes over Knoxville, the Battle of Fort Sanders. And the two families, Brownlow and Ramsey, are there at the same time. Brownlow has returned to Knoxville triumphant, with the Union forces, to open his newspaper again and denounce all the rebels that have been defeated, including his worst enemy, Ramsey. Then the structure breaks apart again and we follow Ramsey as he, in exile, wanders all over the South, carrying the Confederate treasury in a little chest. Not until recently did I find a way to hold all this together, and that is through the consciousness of a guy called the Sharpshooter, who is from Carter County, the mountain part of the country near Knoxville. He went into the army when he was only fourteen and became a sharpshooter. At fifteen he shot a famous general, or made a general famous by shooting him, at Knoxville—General Sanders. They named Ft. Sanders after him. Anyway, Sharpshooter is himself divided where those two characters are. He's fascinated by the two people, and so it is he who tells the story. He says, "I know I fought in the war and I'm reasonably certain I'm the person who shot General Sanders, but then why do I have the feeling that I missed the war?" So the whole novel is his effort to relive his

part in the war through the eyes of these two characters, and repossess it and make it meaningful. So here again is a kind of shifting of surfaces with the idea of seeing them clearly.

JONES: What relationship does he have with the two characters?

MADDEN: He doesn't know either one. He just hears about them in relationship to the General. He gets interested in Brownlow, then he drops Brownlow and gets interested in Ramsey. He finally concludes that the only thing that matters is not what really happened, what he seems to have been looking for, but the imaginative repossession, the imaginative seeing or experiencing of the war through other people's eyes. To transcend yourself, go beyond yourself, to have compassion for other people, to become other people imaginatively, that's a rich and meaningful experience in itself. He realizes that to have made sense of the war would almost be meaningless—which goes with a lot of other things I've been doing.

JONES: Yes, it's not so much of a departure from your other novels as it at first sounds. I see a lot of relationships here.

MADDEN: It's all in the oral tradition. Brownlow speaks the way a circuit rider used to speak, *writes* the way a circuit rider used to speak. So I'm saying that even this early the old oral tradition, as a way of disseminating information and attitudes, is falling away in the hands of a man who used to promote the oral tradition. And Ramsey's veneration for history, on the other hand, the literary, is falling away too—already. And what remains is the individual imaginative vision.

JONES: What's the source of your interest in this story?

MADDEN: I was reading about Knoxville, Tennessee, when I was writing *Bijou*, just to see if there wouldn't be some historical connection or allusion to get in there. In one version I used the Ramsey stuff;

Lucius goes into a bookstore and finds a burned copy of Ramsey's *Annals of Tennessee*.

JONES: How long have you been working on this?

MADDEN: I have the days numbered at 136—that's not very many. But those were concentrated days, broken by a few trips here and there.

JONES: Working on the first draft?

MADDEN: Yes, because the year before, you see, I had five books come out. And yet I feel really terrible; I feel like I'm not doing anything. Because nothing's coming out and this is all I've been working on. It's very unusual for me.

JONES: I'd like to go back to something we discussed before. What does your theory of surfaces do to the symbol of the lamp in the final paragraph of *On the Big Wind*?

MADDEN: Well, Big Bob is reaching for the available cliché. That light is a literal light, but it's also symbolic of the light of the past lighting your way through life. Now, I mean that seriously; his past has lit his way. He defines who he is at the moment by who he was. "I used to be this country disc jockey, now I'm Daryl Don Donovan." Well, he's Daryl Don Donovan much more effectively for having [been] the disc jockey and knowing that he was the disc jockey than if he had only been Daryl Don Donovan. Some people think it's horrible to be Big Bob, but look at how horrible to be only Daryl Don Donovan and not to have been these other people, and not to have other people to look forward to becoming later on in life.

JONES: An Epstein.

MADDEN: An Epstein. He's not just stuck in one role. So the light at the end is whatever you have, then, lighting your way. Now if it goes out . . . My grandmother just died and I've lost a hell of a lot.

Jones: She did just die?

Madden: Yes.

Jones: I'm sorry to hear that. How recently?

Madden: About four months ago. And every surface looks different.

Jones: Do you feel the influence of that loss as a writer?

Madden: It's a little too soon to gauge; I haven't written anything since. But the novel I'm working on now may be salvation, because it's dealing with events which took place before either of us was born.

Jones: Does the flow ever stop?

Madden: I may be in for a slight writer's block here—there's a lot of hesitation. It's not a block, it's a hesitation, I've been busy, I've been doing a lot of research, but I'm not doing a hell of a lot of writing. But when I really flow is those four or five times in my life when I've said, "I'm going to write a story a day for five days." So I write a story a day for five days, and then revise them over a period of three or four years. With *The Suicide's Wife* I did a chapter a day for eighteen days—that's the whole novel in eighteen days. But then I revised that one in only three months.

Jones: What's the reason for cramming a whole story or chapter into a single day?

Madden: Well, I can do it. Partly because of the oral tradition. You don't stop in the middle of a story, you don't get up and walk away from a story. So I guess I have that sense of an audience waiting to hear.

Interview with David Madden: On Technique in Fiction

Jeffrey J. Folks, 1984

David Madden has authored and edited over twenty-five books. His works of fiction include among others *Cassandra Singing*, *Bijou*, *The Suicide's Wife* and *On the Big Wind*. Mr. Madden is writer in residence at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge, a position he has held since 1968. He was interviewed on 11 November 1984 in Athens, Tennessee, following a reading at Tennessee Wesleyan College.

Folks: Let me start with Henry James, where he says that art lives on discussion, on experiment, and on curiosity. As I read that, I really thought of your work, of some of the things you tried to do, especially with popular culture, television, oral storytelling, stories like "The Singer," as experimental types of fiction. So let me start by asking whether you see your work as experimental in terms of fictional technique.

Madden: Pretty much, but I don't think of myself as an experimental writer who is looking for ways to be experimental. I'm not opposed to that. I think there should be that kind of writer, and I like some people who do consciously and deliberately look for new ways.

Folks: Like William Gass or Thomas Pynchon.

Madden: Yes, but there are better examples of people who do a *lot* of stuff. Those two guys produce very little, but what they do produce,

they do it in an experimental way. But what happens is that when I get an idea for a story, it usually comes as a sort of "story." That's what I call a narrative or a character inspiration, whichever happens to be the focus. Then I either seek or wait for, or *will* or whatever, a technical inspiration, which to me is just as exciting and just as important.

Folks: You said somewhere that all of your stories start with a decision about point of view. It sounds like a very Jamesian thing to say.

Madden: Yeah, and an experiment sometimes comes from the point of view. What I ask myself is: technically, what is the very best way to bring out everything I want to bring out, and a lot of things I don't even know I want to bring out? Now I do know certain of the things I want to bring out. By things I want to bring out, I mean *things*, I mean experiences; I don't mean ideas necessarily as ideas but I want to put the reader through the experience. Essentially it's an aesthetic experience; it's not an experience of what it's like to have been a soldier in the Civil War or what it's like to have been a wife whose husband killed himself.

Folks: It's not a subject or theme but . . .

Madden: It's a process, a process in which the faculty which is most exercised is the imagination. I talk about my fiction with students, by saying: I first want to stir the emotions, and if I've stirred your emotions, I've stirred your imagination. But I do certain things *to* stir your imagination, just as I do certain things to stir your emotions. And then last, and usually this comes after you finish writing the story, I want to stimulate your intellect.

Folks: I know you worked with the *Kenyon Review*, and with New Criticism. How do you see your relationship to the New Criticism with its emphasis upon intellect, craft and shaping of fiction?

MADDEN: Awareness and consciousness, as opposed to the Dionysian unconscious.

FOLKS: Did that contact with the New Criticism have a large impact upon the way you developed?

MADDEN: It came very specifically through exposure to *The House of Fiction*, edited by Caroline Gordon and Allen Tate. Their commentary on those stories. It was like a revelation; it was like Paul on the road to Damascus. There's *before* and then there's *after*, and everything after can be directly related, if not to that experience of reading those commentaries, at least to what I picked up about the New Criticism from various other people; and the next most important thing that clarified everything for me was the essay by Mark Schorer.

FOLKS: "Technique as Discovery."

MADDEN: Yes. Then studying in the light of all those things, on my own, Wright Morris's artistry, the stories and the fiction of Faulkner, of Conrad, of James Joyce, of Henry James and of all these aesthetic writers—who are also experimental to some degree. And what I am pretty convinced of is that I don't imitate any of them, even though Wright Morris—consciously to this day after thirty-five years—I think of as my main master. I think that a look at the technique I use will show that I have done things that none of them have ever done. None of those writers have done anything like "The Singer."

FOLKS: It has always seemed to me that what you do with technique, with the craft of fiction, is in a way to introduce a kind of dynamic into the whole concept of crafting fiction that pulls against these ideas of the novel as the Jamesian novel. What about your use of storytelling, or the use of songs, of popular culture?

MADDEN: Yes, which is not Jamesian, but which I worked into the Jamesian aesthetic, in a sense. Very consciously.

Folks: James argued against the idea of writing fiction as "story."

Madden: That's right.

Folks: You know, he questions the whole concept of a dichotomy between story on the one hand and revelation of experience.

Madden: "The Singer" is a very good example of that, because the "story" which did attract me was a *story* inspiration. You know, what if a girl went to a camp meeting and became overwhelmed and then for forty days and forty nights she wandered over the hills of Eastern Kentucky and whenever the spirit moved her, she sang. What *if*? What would happen? OK. That story is so sentimental, so shallow, so "folksy" in the wrong sense, that even though I wanted to tell it, I *couldn't* tell it because of my consciousness of art on the one hand and because it wasn't very interesting to me on the other hand. Not until I got the *technical* inspiration of having an unsympathetic narrator, an unreliable and unsympathetic narrator, tell it, did everything really open up, all the possibilities open up, so that it's not a story any longer, but is a process in which our emotions, our imaginations and our intellect are engaged in a "dynamic," as you said.

Folks: This is the idea behind introducing a frame to oral storytelling, so that we have an oral story which has a great deal of vitality, that's based perhaps on immediate experience, but that's filtered through or framed by a third-person consciousness.

Madden: It gets filtered through three characters who are on the scene, Fred the projectionist, Pete and Wayne, four, if you count me, and a whole bunch of other people who perpetuated the legend of the girl as if she was still alive. It's then filtered through the sophisticated technique of a dialogue and its story frame of being set in the church. There are an incredible number of sophisticated mechanisms at work there, and yet when I give a reading of it, before a live audience, there

is a feeling that it's all very, very real, very oral-storytelling, and people get all absolutely into it, and they think that I'm somebody else. I can actually make them believe that I'm not reading, and that is the perfect combination, you see. The whole thing is, as Flaubert said, the artist must be everywhere, he must be very conscious, but nowhere seen.

FOLKS: Yes. Invisibility.

MADDEN: Yeah. You know, you don't see my hand unless you stop and say, "Oh, yes, I see what he's doing," but in the immediacy of reading it or hearing me read it, there's just this impression that it's just this simple story of the girl. And to me it's an incredibly complex story. I've claimed, and nobody's called me on this, that nobody has ever really written a story quite like the way I *do* that; *somewhat* like that, but not really . . .

FOLKS: Somehow the strength of the immediate inspiration of the story, the feeling you had for the girl in the story, required an equal amount of calling forth of craft or distancing from the subject matter.

MADDEN: Exactly.

FOLKS: And it was that balancing of distance, of craftsmanship, and the raw materials that produced the power in the story.

MADDEN: Right. You see, for five years I really wanted to tell that story, but I kept waiting for, consciously waiting for, a technical inspiration to strike me, and it literally did one day. I won't tell you how—it's a long story—but it came out of some practical concern. I said, "Oh, yeah, what if I did *this*?"

FOLKS: Did you play around with different approaches to that story?

MADDEN: I explored it in an essay which is published in *The Poetic Image in Six Genres* along with "The Singer." That essay was a lyrical

essay exploration, and I then got into the story. What I wanted to say though about "nobody's ever done it" was that the experimental side of me is a lot stronger than I've been given credit for when people write about my work. I don't know why it slides by them, because if you really look at it, *The Suicide's Wife* is pretty experimental in the kind of strange style and the use of tenses and so on, jumping back and forth, the leaps that I make, and the opening chapter. And then the story "Looking at the Dead." *On the Big Wind* is the most experimental of all, and everybody just misses that.

Folks: The narrative shifts in *On the Big Wind*, for example.

Madden: You see, my point is that my job in the style is to create a context whereby I imply everything that's important and state only what's unimportant. You create the context with those things that are not terribly important but which are interesting. The superficial reader or even the serious reader enjoys them, but that's not what it's about; and then the reader's participation, cooperation and collaboration conjures up, given the context, what I leave out.

Folks: The same way that with oral storytelling, you provide the image.

Madden: Yeah, and the same way with radio drama. The thing about *On the Big Wind* is that it's the context of the whole novel. I create a context with the whole novel, and you're supposed to fill in imaginatively the leaps between the episodes, not to mention the leaps within episodes.

Folks: The novel covers ten or twelve years in the life of the protagonist, and you wonder what he was doing in the period when he left Nashville, and went to Camden, and from there to Western Kentucky. There are significant gaps.

Madden: It's all implied by the context, not just by some carefully planted facts.

FOLKS: I've always been struck by what seems to me technically the difference between *Bijou* and *The Suicide's Wife*. I marvel that these two works come out of the same writer. Maybe there's more similarity in technique than I've noticed.

MADDEN: No, there's not, but that's my point. My point is that people are struck by the difference because they're thinking of subject matter, more or less, and characters, and length and other things like that, and locale, and all the traditional elements of fiction, but if you take the attitude that I take, that what I am doing is producing stories and novels out of a creative process, out of a range of techniques, then there's no surprise whatsoever. It's just that I did *that*, and now I'm going to do *this*. But actually within *Bijou* there are those juxtapositions of rather different kinds of things, like the journal entry, which is a rather traditional element, with the midnight reverie, which is not so traditional; you know, nobody really has that in a novel, even *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. You don't have him lying in bed reviewing his life.

FOLKS: Yes. The ending of *Bijou* seems to be experimental. You may need to explain the ending.

MADDEN: There, the novel is pretty straightforward. I then again relied on the reader to see more than I think any reader is going to see, that at the end of this experience when Lucius ceases to be innocent and to be a child (or doesn't cease to be, but he's about to cross over a threshold) I'm more or less hinting that in his future, he will write the book that you just read. So by having that bed, where somebody has just gotten up, still rising, the mattress still rising—I mean he caught it just at the instant, still rising, and the sheet is slightly rippling—that gets an instant emotional response from him. He feels it in his scalp, like when your hair is standing on end. That's the emotion, imagination, intellect thing. His emotions have been stirred,

the novel ends. It's implied that his imagination will be stirred, and it's implied he'll think about this—the intellect will be stirred—and you're supposed to do the same thing about the novel that you've just read, and he's going to do, as a character in the novel, the same thing about the material of his life, you see. That's too much to expect anybody to catch. So that it ends up being a kind of miniature version of my whole aesthetic. But in a sense it's not asking too much to say, "Well, I end it abruptly there as if to say it goes on." By the way, that goes back to Faulkner's story "The Bear."

Folks: Oh, yes.

Madden: You know, the footprint in "The Bear," the water rising.

Folks: Yes, that great scene in "The Bear," with the paw-print filling up with water, implying that a bear has just passed through there.

Madden: You see, I learned more from that one passage about implication, about context and implication, than even from the New Critics, but that's not a thing the New Criticism would talk about.

Folks: I suspect, at least from the reviews I've seen of your novels, that one reason why some reviewers miss the technical or experimental quality of the work is the Appalachian subject matter.

Madden: Yeah. Typing.

Folks: Typing. Or the assumption that the Appalachian novel is always going to be naive in its technical qualities, that we're still writing the local color fiction of Mary Murfree, in 1984. I just wonder whether you would agree with that.

Madden: By the way, speaking of Mary Murfree, I would say that one of the finest symbolic images of the Civil War, for me, is the horse trapped in the cellar in *The Storm Centre*, the Civil War novel. Anyway, yes, I think that's part of it. Why they wouldn't remember

the sophistication of Faulkner, who uses equally raw southern material, or of Robert Penn Warren in *All the King's Men*, I don't know, instead of thinking of James Still or somebody. But then, you see, the other novels, like *Suicide's Wife*, should tip them off, if they know that novel, and the short stories, "No Trace" along with "The Singer." Some of the things I've written about "No Trace" also apply to "The Singer," in that "No Trace" is incredibly open-ended but incredibly controlled at the same time, simultaneously very controlled. Absolutely everything in there is very consciously crafted to produce something that is completely open-ended, that cannot be closed up. None of the questions, not a single one of the questions raised by that story in the mind of the character or in the mind of the reader separate from the character, can be answered by referring to the material in the story.

Folks: How much effect does the audience, or your conception of the ideal reader, have upon decisions about the technique? I'm sure it has everything to do with your decision about point of view. As you write, do you sense that you are writing for a particular reader?

Madden: Not a particular reader, but actually here's where the relation between oral storytelling and the literary fiction comes in. No matter what kind of fiction I'm writing, I am imagining or I'm feeling the presence of living human beings listening to a human voice talking to them, which is the opposite of what a lot of writers I talk to do. They say they don't hear any kind of a voice. They hear the voice that's in the story, but they don't feel the presence of people listening. So that when I give a reading, and I see those people *today*, for instance, sitting out there, and I look into their eyes . . . I feel I have to have the eyes of everybody in the room available to me. So it seems only natural to read to somebody, even the most literary story, which in "No Trace" is purely literary, absolutely no oral quality to it; when

I read that story to an audience, I don't feel uncomfortable or uptight at all because it seems it's part of the whole process that's been there from the beginning.

Folks: But you seem to me, perhaps, further than any writer I know, to be reaching toward an oral audience. Of course, there have been many writers who have. Dickens is another good example with his constant need to feel a dynamic both ways with his audience. Does that alter the technical process?

Madden: It doesn't alter the technical process at all except that it seems that every element of the art of fiction like point of view and everything else is a consideration of how you want to affect the reader. You know, everything helps you to affect the reader, everything. It isn't just a matter of telling a story and maybe somebody will read it and be affected by it and maybe they won't, but the reader is built into the process, word by word, phrase by phrase, sentence by sentence, the overall technique and so on. The reason why point of view is so important is because the readers must have a very clear orientation to the source of authority for everything that they're learning, or everything that they're experiencing. So that when students and teachers ask me questions about "The Day the Flowers Came," they say, "Well, how'd this happen?" and "What happened then?" and "Why did this happen?" and "This seems unusual" and so on. I say, well, you can't ask *me*, because it's all through the point of view of this one character. It's how *he* perceives everything.

Folks: Right. That's a good example of a story that uses a great deal of implication. We're limited in what we can know about the events.

Madden: Throughout the story, he is referring to Carolyn as an empty-headed person, such an airhead, with the pink stove and everything pink, and we, because we're in his point of view, are

thinking, "My God, this is a really stereotyped housewife," to the point where some people get really teed off at me, the writer, for portraying women that way. The same people very often miss what I deliberately did, which was, I delayed letting you hear her voice. There are all these references to her, there are even surrogates of her, like the woman from the PTA who is just another one of those people like Carolyn. At the end, near the very end, he remembers what she said as she got on the plane, which is, you know, "Our life, it's the way we live," and she goes on in this very poignant way. She comes alive in the immediacy of dialogue for four lines, in the context of his insensitivity to what she says, and I want the reader who is more sensitive to leap in and say, as if to J.D., "My God, this woman isn't the woman that you have been perceiving and I've been perceiving through your eyes. This passage that you're remembering in one context implies to me that she was a totally different kind of woman." And so what I wanted to happen was this great rush of intuition, for readers to intuit a wholly different story, to run that whole story back through their minds, from *her* point of view, by implication, intuitively, not literally and consciously, but intuitively in one great rush to say, "Oh, my God." So that in a sense you can almost say that the story is about Carolyn rather than about J.D. I mean, in a sense.

Folks: I'm not sure I did that in the story, but I did feel a sense of the poignancy. I was struck by the despair that the relationship seemed to conjure up. A lot of your stories seem to me to be about subjects, fragmentation or loss or kinship falling apart, the loss of the community or the oral storytelling. Now I'm not going to get onto that as a subject matter, but I suppose I'm interested in whether that affects the techniques that you use. Is there some kind of a parallel between the theme and what you need to treat that theme?

MADDEN: I don't consciously think very much about theme at the outset, but I can see how the choices of techniques that I have ended up with produce a feeling of fragmentation and alienation because one of the techniques I use is the juxtaposition of fragments, as in "No Trace." "No Trace" is nothing but fragments, using the metaphor of the hand grenade blowing up. Nothing but attempts to take fragments and put them back together again only to have them blow up in your face, in Ernest's face, all over again at the end of the story because they don't really cohere at the end. And so, yes, maybe the techniques do give the sense of things falling apart or of alienation. In a story I just sent off, two lovers meet every once in a while at airports and have quick meetings. It's a story about how they meet over many years. When he takes business trips, she jumps on another plane and they meet at airports, go to a city and have a night or two. It's called "Looking for Pittsburgh in Cincinnati" and what is happening is that he's saying, "Well, now, this place I'm going to take you to, honey, this is really terrific," and they drive around and around Cincinnati and he's looking for this little quaint neighborhood and this great restaurant. At the end of the story he says, "Oh my God, that's in Pittsburgh." And by this time you have a feeling that this whole relationship is at a point of critical development.

FOLKS: Gurney Norman says something about that, that the reason he places so many of his stories in automobiles is that it's a way to maintain the unity of the story but also to create this perhaps uniquely American experience of mobility. You can have the characters in motion, but also imprisoned together in the automobile.

MADDEN: This business of a character in motion, who's supposed to be a relatively insensitive character like an insurance salesman, does go through several stories. In "Looking for Pittsburgh in Cincinnati,"

he's a computer salesman. In "The New Orleans of Possibilities," he's a salesman again. In "The Day the Flowers Came," he's an insurance salesman. OK. Now all three of these stories are pretty much about guys who are on the move all the time, and I capture them in the latest story in a car. "The New Orleans of Possibilities" is in a flea market, and then "The Day the Flowers Came" is in that house where he feels quite trapped without the people who are usually there. So there's this great mobility, generally with an occasion where everything is very cramped. So that *we* can focus, and *he* can focus on these things. But you know, I'm inclined to take all those stories, and put in "No Trace," which is sort of similar, and "Frank Brown's Brother" and put them together and make them all the same character, as essentially it turned out to be. But I keep getting these damned critics who will say, as with *On the Big Wind*, "Oh, these are a bunch of stories he put together as a novel," you know. As if I was trying to publish another title, which is very frustrating when you find these patterns after many years . . .

Folks: The father in "No Trace" really is one of these rootless men.

Madden: He's really the same guy. They're all the same guy, and none of them are me. You know, they're all an imagined person who's totally different from me. But I can't do it because I continue to get this damned attitude of, "Oh, yeah, he's trying to put that together as a novel." It would allow the reader the great experience of having this incredibly Kafkaesque focus on this guy who has this really weird life, you know, which the reader would have if you put all those stories together, right?

Folks: Styron took a number of years to write *Sophie's Choice*, publishing portions of the novel in *Esquire*, and could have been subjected to the same criticism.

MADDEN: Yes, but you see, in my case, it's not a matter of setting out to do something and publishing part of them as you go along. It's a matter of discovering after you've done it *that* you have done it. Now, how can I maximize the effect? Well, bring them together. And you can't do that.

FOLKS: This is really the natural outgrowth of your technique.

MADDEN: Sure, it is. I mean, if I carefully worked out the technique of these stories, and if these techniques happened to interact with each other, it makes *artistic* sense, not commercial sense, to put them together. But the people who object are the people who say, "Oh, yeah, subject matter." You see, they can only look at the subject matter or theme, and say, "Oh, yeah, he just put all these together."

FOLKS: One of your comments that struck me was when you were talking about the humanizing effect of the bond between the listener and the storyteller. There's something inherent in the process of creating a novel and having people read it that you see as humanizing. Maybe just briefly, what do you mean by that?

MADDEN: One way of putting it is—*again*—to put it on the technical level. You use all these techniques solely to have an effect, and the three effects that I've already talked about are emotional effects, imaginative effects and intellectual effects. Now if you can take a person such as the Ancient Mariner, you know, with that gleam in his eye, then take the other Coleridge poem "Kubla Khan," and the Ancient Mariner with his story puts you under a pleasure dome and you can get your reader to engage his emotions, his imagination and his intellect in such a controlled and intense and dynamic way, that experience is humanizing to the extent that those are the faculties which make us most human. Not "most human" because we feel emotions (maybe animals do, but I doubt that they feel emotions

because emotions are inseparable from consciousness), but what makes us most human *especially* is the imagination. Well, not especially, I guess, the intellect too, but to me, it's the imagination—that we can imagine being what we're not, and that brings in compassion; you can only be compassionate if you can be imaginative. So all of our finest qualities as human beings cluster around our emotions and the emotions that people have are good emotions even when they're bad emotions. That is, it is good that a human being can feel this way for the sake of a story or for the sake of another character, and it is good that people who don't normally use their imaginations a great deal have an experience where their imaginations are stimulated. It is good that they are able to think about the experience that they've just had, and to that extent I think it's extremely humanizing.

Folks: This can only happen through technique.

Madden: Only through technique. Not through subject matter, not through a "nice" story, a "good" story, an "interesting" story, a "fascinating" story, a "thrilling" story, a "suspenseful" story. You see, none of those things really cause all these three things to click and to interact dynamically, to use your word back there, unless the artistry is at work. As an example of artistry or what I mean as the artistic effect, I would cite, for me, *The Great Gatsby*. I'm not interested in the theme "the American Dream," which I wrote a book about. I'm interested in having that aesthetic experience all over again where a guy named Nick runs the experience of somebody else through his consciousness in such a way that he ends up being the character that I'm most interested in.

Folks: Is there something about your new novel *Sharpshooter* in terms of technique that you're struggling with? Has your new novel engaged you in terms of technical qualities?

Madden: Oh, yes, very much. One of the technical things I wanted to do which was artificially set up in front of me intentionally, early, was to write the most omniscient novel ever written. To take the omniscient, which I think is the most undisciplined point of view (I'm trying to find a novel that is really omniscient but is extremely disciplined and artistic, and I can't find any examples; I look for them to be sort of inspirations), and to write the most omniscient novel of all.

Folks: *Middlemarch*, perhaps?

Madden: Yes, right.

Folks: It covers everything under the omniscient point of view, but is disciplined.

Madden: Yes, except that it wouldn't be me as David Madden coming *in*, the way she comes in as George Eliot and makes comments. It would be impersonal. I guess I'm looking for a god-like omniscience rather than the omniscience of a George Eliot who is god-like. I want it to be god-like from the beginning, you know, and I'm not in it. In other words, the way Joyce was able to refine himself out of *Portrait of the Artist* was to use mostly the third person, central intelligence. I want to see if you can do that in some form of omniscience.

Folks: You almost want the Faulknerian *The Sound and the Fury*, the different colored prints, which is dramatic but enters every character's mind at the same time.

Madden: Yeah. You mean the last part of it, or the whole design?

Folks: The Quentin section, in particular.

Madden: Well, that's first person, though, you see. Not omniscient. The whole book is omniscient but the individual parts are not omniscient till you get to the third, but I found that I couldn't quite do

it and do other things I wanted to do. I thought, "Well, I'll have a character, the Sharpshooter in the tower, who's an extremely minor character, I'll have him be a kind of omniscient author in that he takes an interest in all these other people and tries to become totally omniscient about all these other characters, by an effort of will and imagination, and reading and listening and researching." And what happened was that I began to tell a little about him and I got so caught up with him that he became equally important as a character. However, the effect is exactly what I wanted. He consciously strives for omniscience. Here you have an interesting situation where a first-person narrator in fiction for the first time as far as I know (and he's just an ordinary guy at first, as you know) consciously and deliberately strives for omniscience. That is, he wants to know everything, but he wants to know it not in terms of facts but through a combination of facts and imagination.

Folks: This derives from his uncertainty about his own action. He wants to look back and he wants to find certitude about what his role was.

Madden: That's a theme throughout the whole thing. You see, did I kill General Sanders or didn't I? Well, by the end of the story he still doesn't know, but in the course of asking questions he asks a hundred about other people. He doesn't answer many of those either, but by the end of the story he realizes, "What I have really wanted all this time is omniscience, is to know everything, and omnipresence as well. To be in the tower, one of the towers, and to be everywhere, to know what went on in the tower—did I shoot him or not?—and also to know what went on everywhere else." And that becomes a conscious thing for him toward the end of the novel. Not in the beginning, of course, and not through most of it. We, I hope, begin to suspect that. You know, this guy thinks he missed the war, but look

at all the stuff he keeps bringing in. Look at all he's learning. Look at all he's interested in. How could he say he missed it when he experienced all these things in his imagination?

Folks: It sounds like a marvelous character, really. A major fictional consciousness.

Madden: I hope so. I hope that's the way it turns out.

Folks: Maybe to close, will you ever get shut of Lucius Hutchfield of *Bijou*?

Madden: I'm going to write a whole novel about my little brother Bucky. I can get shut of Lucius fairly easily but it's more difficult to get rid of Bucky. Bucky is the one, the little one, that I want to write about. I'm going to see him tonight. But about Lucius, there is one more thing: Lucius in the army, which was originally going to be part of *Pleasure-Dome*, but it inflated the book too much. It's going to be about his experiences, that is, my experiences, as a kid nineteen years old in the army who refuses to sign Joseph McCarthy's loyalty oath. But one of the things that has kept me from writing that is this—it's too simple and there doesn't seem to be any opportunity for any technical resonancy.

Folks: But again that takes off from "The Cartridge Belt" story. Again you have a novel going there.

Madden: Yes, and that was conscious. That's an exploration of the novel, that one story.

The Art of the Novel: An Interview with David Madden

William Parrill, 1984 (extensively revised, 1991)

> "Did I ever tell you about the time I tried to get my little brother off the chain gang? . . . Oh, I did? . . . Okay, I *will* tell it again."
> —*Pleasure-Dome*

Sharpshooter, David Madden's eagerly awaited novel of the Civil War, is in a final revision. Madden, a tireless reviser of his own work, even in some instances after it has been published, works on a manual typewriter in a large room dominated by a huge railroad desk. On this desk are usually five manuscripts in progress. The room has bookcases on all sides, and the novelist writes with his back to a high stained-glass window. The bookcases are filled with fiction and with reference works used as historical background for *Sharpshooter*. A number of Civil War photographs are tacked to the wall. There is also a reproduction of Winslow Homer's wood engraving from *Harper's Weekly* of a sharpshooter's lanky frame perched in the top of a tree.

Madden, a prolific writer, has been for twenty-three years writer in residence at Louisiana State University. He has published nine volumes of fiction and has written or edited twice that many volumes of criticism. Madden's first novel, *The Beautiful Greed*, appeared in 1961, his most recent, *On the Big Wind*, in 1980. His two best-known

novels are probably *Bijou* and *The Suicide's Wife*. *Bijou* was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection when it appeared in 1974, and *The Suicide's Wife* (1978) was made into a television movie starring Angie Dickinson. Madden's short stories, collected in *The Shadow Knows* (1970) and *The New Orleans of Possibilities* (1982), are intimately related to his novels and often deal with the same subjects and characters.

Madden responds to my questions slowly and carefully, stroking a cat which he is holding in his lap and sipping on a cup of coffee. His answers tend to gain force as they go along. On subjects that he feels deeply about—such as the charge that he reuses old material from his books—he alternates between a forceful defense of his own position and a bemusement at the injustice of the criticism.

PARRILL: David, in what sense, if any, do you consider yourself a regional writer?

MADDEN: I wouldn't use the term *regional*, but I would probably use the term *southern*. Now of course, you could say that "southern" is regional, but that leaves us only with the North and the South, so it's not much of a region concept. In the sense of East Tennessee, that would be a region. I would say that I'm definitely a southern writer. In that sense I'm regional. *Regional* has such a bad connotation; it's almost as bad as *local color* as a term. As a matter of fact, John Gassner once told me—I was his student at Yale Drama School—when he saw *Cassandra Singing* in play script—he says, I want to warn you to stay away from regional identification because it can kill you the way it did E. P. Conkle [laughs], who seemed terribly ancient to me even then. So I take his advice to that extent, but not to the extent of denying, as Walker Percy says of himself, that I'm a southern writer. I'm very much a southern writer even though I wouldn't

hesitate to write about any locality or any other kind of people than the southern. In other words, I don't feel confined to the South, but I do definitely identify myself with the South.

PARRILL: People my age had a close identification with Thomas Wolfe. I remember when I was seventeen or eighteen; we used to read *Look Homeward, Angel* out loud outside of the student union where I went to school. I judge from *Bijou* that, between say thirteen and eighteen, you must have had a close identification with Wolfe also.

MADDEN: Yes, very much, very strongly. As you know, the last long chapter of *Bijou* deals directly with Wolfe, and Lucius's admiration for Wolfe is a motif running through most of the novel. In fact, he steals a copy of the *Portable Thomas Wolfe*, which in my own life was not the "Portable," but the Penguin "Short Stories," to give it added value. In other words, he's making a connection between an action and a literary value, and they seem to be inseparable for him. So then, Wolfe had a great influence on me, but pretty early I decided I'd better cut myself away from him as a literary influence.

PARRILL: I remember when I was in college, teachers told me I wouldn't like Wolfe as well when I got older as I did then.

MADDEN: That's true of me because I was asked about three or four months ago to give a reading-sort-of-lecture at a meeting of the Thomas Wolfe Society in Raleigh, North Carolina, demonstrating Wolfe's influence on me when I was a kid. And I reread some things and he had pretty much the same impact, but I continue to be horrified by some of his stylistic excesses which undercut the kind of effect he clearly and obviously was striving for. I use him often as an example of the writer who consumes the experience as he describes it by overwriting so that the reader doesn't really experience the experience but rather experiences his writing about the experience, which

is a totally different thing. I as a writer believe in doing anything I can to set up a context which will stimulate the experience in the reader in a controlled fashion rather than describing an experience directly in the style itself. Do you see what I mean? And I think that there's a combustion which takes place there which ruins his intentions, so you say, "Oh, what beautiful writing!" rather than, "that was a fine experience he just put me through." I think most readers confuse the two. I think most readers think that the effect of beautiful writing is the same as experiencing what the writer is expressing.

Parrill: You grew up in Knoxville. Were you aware of James Agee at that time?

Madden: No, not until about the third year I was writing *Cassandra Singing*, which took about fifteen years to write. When I was about twenty-two, I became aware of him. Well, I was aware of him earlier, but I really became aware of him when I realized that *A Death in the Family*, which came out about 1957 when I was writing *Cassandra Singing*, was set about two blocks from where I was living and that he was being hailed as a really fine writer about Knoxville. And I wanted to be the writer to write about Knoxville. So I began to kind of compare my writing with his and to feel in some sort of competition with him.

Parrill: I judge that your story, essay, or whatever it is, "James Agee Never Lived in This House," pretty much represents your ambiguous and changing attitude toward Agee.

Madden: Yes, as do all my critical writings about him, and over the years, the ambiguity hasn't much altered. But that's not why I wrote the story—it *is* a short story, but with deliberate mixing of the informal memoir essay and a sudden turn into pure fiction in the middle, a combination I was glad appealed to James Olney when he accepted

it. I've had a lingering compulsion to write a story about the lady (as I imagined her) who lives in the house in Frenchtown, New Jersey, where Agee wrote much of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. My original intention was to tell it straight up to where she refuses to let me see the house and then to tell the reader, directly, the many imagined perspectives I had on that situation—Agee admirers bothering a lady living in that house. So when I was in Knoxville a few years ago to give a talk on *Famous Men* and Robert Coles, the main speaker, had an accident, and they asked me to fill in, I wrote the story in one sitting and read it the next day, and decided it needed little revision. In the midst of writing it though, the old lady wouldn't stop talking, so I let her talk. I've read it all over the country now and folks seem to love hearing it. I certainly love *doing* her voice.

Parrill: Were you aware of Agee's film criticism in *Life* and *Time*?

Madden: No, not until—I probably read it but I wasn't aware who he was or that *he* was doing it. My editor for *Cassandra Singing* and *Bijou* was his close friend and editor, David McDowell. So I really didn't become aware of the film criticism until it came out in those volumes David McDowell published at McDowell-Obolensky.

Parrill: I had a letter or two from McDowell about some reviews that I had written, and I think that he is unquestionably one of the great editors of the twentieth century.

Madden: He is one of the few editors I've encountered who is truly in the Maxwell Perkins tradition. He is the kind of person I thought all editors were supposed to be, or were trying to be. In other words, every editor wanted to be as good as Maxwell Perkins, and what you would do is to compare every editor with Perkins, and find them either as good as or wanting, and I thought that David McDowell was pretty close to Perkins.

PARRILL: I think of you as an intensely dramatic writer because in a sense your characters seem to talk themselves into life. Is that the dramatic influence, do you think?

MADDEN: I don't think it's the theater. It's the storytelling tradition, the dramatic immediacy, the southern mountain storytelling tradition as exemplified in my grandmother, who was very dramatic in the way in which she would tell a story—sound effects with her voice, and so on. And so storytelling was extremely immediate to me the way that radio drama was without the image, and movies were in a very obvious imagistic way. I got interested in the theater because seeing a play was like just another more vivid version of what my grandmother was doing. It was a live actor on a stage being spotlighted the way my grandmother was a live actor sitting in a chair, which was her stage, and her spotlight with the lamp beside her. I was wondering today why, given my sense of the dramatic, which comes from storytelling and from actually seeing a lot of plays and from wanting to be a playwright, I haven't been successful as a playwright—why? I haven't been able to write a play that would work on Broadway. Now, I've written a lot of plays, and almost all of those plays have been performed, but none in a really big Broadway sense, or Off Broadway.

PARRILL: Without digging into your personal life, could you say something about the way personal experience went into *Cassandra Singing*?

MADDEN: The only thing personal went into the early versions and not into the published version. The personal element was simply the locale of Knoxville, Tennessee. I shifted the locale to Eastern Kentucky because just the locale alone of Knoxville, Tennessee, was having the incredibly inflating effect that writing about oneself usually has, as with Wolfe and some of Fitzgerald. When you write about

yourself, you go on and on and on. Well, I was only writing about the locale, and I was committing the same autobiographical fallacy, so I changed the setting. Now, my father was a kind of a alcoholic, a drunkard, the way Coot, the father in *Cassandra Singing* is, and I sort of had him in mind, but the biographical details are not there at all. So that's one of the two or three works of mine that are the most imaginative, the most totally imaginative.

PARRILL: I suppose that in terms of number of copies sold *Bijou* has been by far your most popular novel.

MADDEN: Well, not by far: *The Suicide's Wife* sold pretty well.

PARRILL: I assume that at some point *Cassandra Singing* was optioned for film because it says on the back of my venerable paperback copy, "Soon to be a Major Motion Picture."

MADDEN: I was commissioned by Tony Bill, the producer of *The Sting*, to go to Warner Brothers and write the script for *Cassandra Singing*. I was in residence there for about two or three weeks in 1969, soon after the novel came out, and I was among the last resident writers. John Milius, who is still writing and producing (*Red Dawn, Flight of the Intruder*) shared an office, or shared a secretary—he had a room and I had a room and she was in the middle—and we were the last, I think, along with Evan Connell (*Son of the Morning Star*, *Mr. Bridge, Mrs. Bridge*)—writers to be right there on the property. I finally came on home to write. I did the Faulkner thing with the full knowledge of the producers because they're no longer that excited about having the writers around and economically it wasn't working out. It was one of these independent deals and the reason it didn't get done was not that they weren't satisfied with it, but because a group of sort of hippie types took over the Hollywood scene.

PARRILL: Yes, in 1969 and '72.

MADDEN: The guys who did Woodstock pretty much took over at about that time, and they didn't want to inherit projects that were underway. So it was a typical Hollywood story. *Bijou* got more interest from the movies than any book Crown had published, and yet it didn't come as close as *On the Big Wind* to being done because no one could figure out a way to translate that story into a film, which is incredible to me because most readers see it very easily as a movie, you know. The way I see it is to confine the entire movie to the movie theater, making the movies on the screen an actor in the movie, not just a background and not even just an ambience, but a real presence in the movie, so that when you're looking at Lucius talking to an usher or customer, those people have as much power in the screen as Alan Ladd does on the screen in the theater in the background. So that you always feel that all of the actors or the characters on the screen are always competing with the characters in the movie. And I could never get them to see that. In fact, one producer who considered it said that for aesthetic reasons, we don't think it works, which is ridiculous, since it was the aesthetics that I was really emphasizing. I was making an aesthetic judgment and what she meant was that, [laughs], you know, it wouldn't sell, that it wasn't a typical kind of Hollywood movie.

PARRILL: I assume that there would have been a kind of contrast between the world outside, which represented the world of more or less mundane reality, and the world inside the movie house, which was larger than life.

MADDEN: Well, but what I wanted to get was not so much that—you could just imply that; everybody has that in their own background—I could bring that into the theater. I could bring everyday drama, everyday situations into the lobby of the theater, because in those days a theater was like almost a town meeting hall. There was a very

rich kind of life of characters coming and going who were clearly identified, and there were events taking place in the lobby and backstage and in the restrooms, and it was a very living sort of organism. And the stuff on the screen was just part of a larger picture, as I tried to suggest in the scenes in the Bijou. For instance, when the father comes in and says, hide me, so-and-so broke out of prison and he's trying to kill me, and Lucius takes his father backstage downstairs and into a cave. That event competes with any event on the screen. The interesting thing is that Lucius never sees that what he's caught up in is just as interesting as the movies he's seeing. He thinks the movies is where real life is.

Parrill: I think in a way you may have been too successful in that novel in that, after you get away from the novel for a while that theater reverberates in the mind and expands so that it becomes something as big as the theater in *The Phantom of the Opera*—

Madden: Yeah, right.

Parrill: —and I think that may have been the quality—

Madden: That's what I want. That's what I want to get in the movie. In fact I have revised the novel, cut it from 700 pages to 150 on the principle of: we'll leave nothing in the novel that does not take place in the Bijou. There are a few scenes outside the Bijou that I would rewrite to take place in the Bijou because it's their value that I want to capture, it's the character relationship that I want to capture, not the event for its own sake. So a parallel kind of—a similar kind of event—could be transposed to the Bijou.

Parrill: I hope you can get a publisher to publish it. But the only two novels I can think of that were published in revised versions were that one by John Fowles (*The Magus*) and a novel by Ira Wolfert (*An Act of Love*).

MADDEN: Well, two of Faulkner's works were published in different versions, *Sanctuary* and *Sartoris*, or *Flags in the Dust*.

PARRILL: Yeah, but they weren't published until after the writer was dead. [Amazingly enough, neither novelist nor interviewer thought of Henry James.] One of the things that strikes me about your work is that, in a sense, you seem to move into history. That is, you have moved from *Cassandra Singing* into what seems to be a central kind of experience, that is, from things which are located outside of history to *The Suicide's Wife*, which are located very specifically in history.

MADDEN: Well, now the reason I did that—somebody writing for an encyclopedia got that all wrong—she said that that meant that this was a feminist novel because it took place among those public events of '68, but the reason I chose '68 was not because Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy were killed and all those other horrible events were happening, but because I wanted a year in which a great many things were happening to contrast with what some people might see as nothing happening in her life, what she perceived as nothing happening in her life, but what I hoped that the reader would perceive toward the end as being something very important happening in her life. As she became more and more interested in the kind of external events that had been fascinating other people, I wanted the irony of the reader becoming far more interested in her, who had no life, than they were in those public events that they had experienced and that she was relatively missing. Do you know what I mean?

PARRILL: I understand.

MADDEN: And so it had nothing to do with my commenting on historical events. I was simply using them to bring something out in her, to contrast with her. Actually it was something that she was experiencing in a way that most other people wouldn't experience.

Her experience was simply, "Oh, you mean that there are really other things happening out there, you can really get interested in these things?" That's different from my using them to get you, the reader, interested in those events. Now, you come to the Civil War novel I'm working on now, *Sharpshooter*, then that's where what you're saying really applies. That is really true. There for the first time I really am interested in historical events.

Parrill: *The Suicide's Wife* strikes me as very much an American novel in the sense that—well, this is not specifically an American technique—but it's the Hawthorne way of telling the story, with Hawthorne beginning *The Scarlet Letter* with the events which most writers would write about having already taken place. It begins in effect a new story there. *The Suicide's Wife* begins with the death of the husband, and the story is about what happens to the wife.

Madden: That's why it's really strange that people say they wish they knew more about the husband and why he killed himself. That's not what the novel is about. The novel is about the woman wondering why he killed himself. She has so little to go on that what we're supposed to be interested in is the process she goes through, not whether she finds out, not what she finds out. None of that. We're not meant to say to ourselves, oh, yeah, that's fascinating, that's more and more fascinating, and now he's coming alive, he's getting richer, yeah, I can see him more clearly now. That's not it at all. You're supposed to be experiencing it from her point of view. Whereas in the movie, they tried to fill in all that stuff.

Parrill: Considering the structure of the novel, you could never find out anyway. It has to remain a mystery.

Madden: They tried to do it in the movie. They showed him having trouble with the school . . .

Parrill: That's a mistake.

Madden: . . . which was really phony. I've forgotten, but there were some more phony details that aren't even true of teachers. They just didn't trust the story as it was. Why they were attracted to the story is a mystery—if they didn't trust it.

Parrill: I have at home a paperback edition of *Brothers in Confidence* but I couldn't find it. I assume that wasn't published in hardcover.

Madden: No, not that way. It comes out in *Pleasure-Dome* as you know. The paperback is kind of a collector's item. It's really rare. I think they're charging $30.00 for that.

Parrill: I'll keep my copy.

Madden: A lot of people kind of like the purity of *Brothers in Confidence*, you know, just being by itself. Some people even go further back and say they prefer the very first novella version. I fleshed out the novella for *Brothers in Confidence*. The way that happened was Peter Mayer at Avon wanted to do the novella the way it appeared in *The Southern Review*, which would give us a paperback of seventy pages, just blow it up and space it out, and maybe we can get seventy pages. He says, no, that's the way I want it, just the way it is, until he realized that it was only going to be this thin seventy-page book. Then he said, "Well, I don't know if I can get away with this. Do you happen to have more material? Is there a longer version?" It so happens I was doing *Bijou*, I was caught up in the richness of the relationship between the brothers when they were younger, so it was very natural to draw on all that. In fact, I think there were some scenes that I had cut out of *The Southern Review* version that I reinstated, and so that was how we got it to be just long enough—barely—to be in paperback. So it wasn't an artificial filling is what I'm saying. It was a very natural amplification.

PARRILL: I think that the paperback publication of American fiction now is something of a public disgrace, but I do think that Avon over the years has published more good fiction than any other paperback publisher.

MADDEN: *Miss Lonelyhearts*, *Call It Sleep*, and that's all Peter Mayer. He's a very good editor. He's another good editor.

PARRILL: Were you satisfied with *Pleasure-Dome* as a sequel to *Bijou*?

MADDEN: It's a sequel only slightly in my mind and maybe in yours. People who really know a lot of my work may see it as a sequel. I kind of thought of it as a true sequel, but it got out of hand and got too long. I didn't want another long novel. Originally, it was supposed to be in five parts rather than two, so that we were supposed to go with Lucius into the merchant marines. That was going to be a total revision of my first novel, *The Beautiful Greed*. You see, I wanted this sequence: he leaves home, goes into the Merchant Marines, then we were going to have him in the army, which is a novel I'm going to write—I haven't written it yet, but am going to write—but I have written one section which is in *The New Orleans of Possibilities*, "The Cartridge Belt." "The Cartridge Belt" is really the centerpiece of a short novel about the army. OK, so we're going to have the Merchant Marines, then the army, then he was going to get out of the army and go into these other two experiences. Then, there was going to be a fifth dimension, which was where he would be teaching. So the con-man concept, the artist as con man, the con man as artist, would have been another dimension: the teacher as con man. It would be a lot richer. So that was to be a five-part thing with two new elements, the army and the teaching. I had three elements already written, and they got too long, so therefore as a sequel *Pleasure-Dome* kind of doesn't flow. It relates to *Bijou* but doesn't flow the way it was originally conceived. In the editing process, things got eliminated, things

got changed, and we ended up with something which is not a true sequel.

Parrill: I found to my amazement when I was looking through my books today that I was quoted on the dust jacket of *Pleasure-Dome*.

Madden: Yeah, that was a very good review that you did.

Parrill: I think I must have reviewed *Bijou*.

Madden: You reviewed more than one or two.

Parrill: I remember in my review of *Pleasure-Dome*, which I looked at, I expressed some hesitation about whether or not the two main stories in that novel went together. Do you feel that they do?

Madden: Yeah, well, that's another problem, too. Some people think that they do and some people think that they don't. But then again you have to remember that it is two parts of what was once five facets. At some time, I think I had a subtitle, "The Romantic Adventures of . . .," or something like that. Each of the five would be another way of looking at the temperament of a young romantic in his encounter with reality, with the everyday world. Even so, when it came down to just being the two, I had fewer opportunities to play one thing off another, but if you really look at that, the way the thing goes together is not so much in terms of the character situations—and of course they don't go together that way—but the mentality and sensibility of the main character who is telling the story. So what you're getting is the same sensibility looking at a similar kind of experience in two totally different contexts, because he goes on to con Zara Jane in the Jesse James story just as he did these other people in the story of the brothers, but for a different reason, a personal reason. It's his way of looking at the world; it's his vision of the world and how he imaginatively recreates the world. First, we see how his two brothers do that. They take reality and change it right there on the spot; then we see

how Lucius working with this old lady takes a myth and transforms it and works on it and has that effect upon a witness, which is the kid on a motorcycle. So that's a similar thing; the kid on the motorcycle is a lot like Bucky, the little brother.

PARRILL: Was there any pressure put on you by the publisher or by the editors or by anyone else to write a longer more expansive follow-up to *Bijou* since that was an extremely successful book?

MADDEN: No, as a matter of fact—maybe . . . *The Suicide's Wife* came out before *Pleasure-Dome*, didn't it?

PARRILL: Yes.

MADDEN: Those were bought at the same instant, and I think *The Suicide's Wife* was finished. It was written right after *Bijou*, and it comes, in the sequence of publication, right after *Bijou*. The nice feeling by a lot of reviewers was that—oh, he's gone from this very long thing to this very short thing, and they're totally different for other reasons—and there's generally a good response to that. We like this. A lot of reviewers seemed to enjoy saying, I don't see how the same guy who wrote *Bijou* could write *The Suicide's Wife*. I, as a writer, like that; it was a very good feeling to be able to do it and to have people see that and to consider it a value. Then with *Pleasure-Dome*, as I say, it was going to be as long as *Bijou*, but I really didn't want it to be that long. The editor seemed to feel that those five different stories were really a little too different. Now, when we get to *On the Big Wind*, we have about twelve stories, and they're all very different from each other.

PARRILL: What happened to the stories that were cut from *Pleasure-Dome*?

MADDEN: One of them was published in *The New Orleans Review*, and that was a totally rewritten version in the first person of *The*

Beautiful Greed, my first novel. The novel was originally in the third person, and it was also short. So it is published. The army novel is in a first draft, and the teacher novel I'll probably never write. That's too much out of the sixties and the guru scene of teaching—you know, the old guru approach to teaching.

Parrill: I know you do a great deal of criticism, and I know that you're interested in James M. Cain and the so-called tough guy writers, but I don't really see any of that, or at least not much of that, in your own fiction. Is there some reason for that?

Madden: Well, I think the interest in Cain was very close to my interest in movies because the way I got interested in Cain was through the movies of Cain's books, *Mildred Pierce* and *Double Indemnity*. And I think I like the best of the tough writers because they were very crisp and imagistic in the way the good crime movies were. So that's an element which doesn't really get into my fiction, an interest out there separate from my fiction. The only thing is I wrote a detective novel called *Hair of the Dog*—you probably haven't seen it—and which I really like and which several people like Richard Poirier and I think Robert Coles the psychologist really like . . .

Parrill: Where was it published?

Madden: And I can't get the damned thing published. Well, I published it in *Adam* magazine as a serial, but I can't get anybody to publish it as a book, and it's really kind of a charming sort of lyrical southern semisatirical detective story. It's not a tough guy story. It's very fast-paced and very succinct. I wrote it in eleven days the way Simenon writes his novels. In fact, I read Simenon's statement that he wrote all of his novels in eleven days, and I decided to write one in eleven days. It's eleven chapters long, I wrote it in eleven days, and that's it.

PARRILL: One of the other characteristics you have in common with him, you go about it slightly differently, is that when he started writing a novel and he didn't like it, he would just write it and publish it and then give the characters different names and do another version of it, and sometimes end up with three or four different novels until he got what he wanted.

MADDEN: Could you give me an example of that later? I'd like to see that. I can do that by the way—if you want to comment on the way I write—I can decide, I can will this, I can say—I spent fifteen years on *Cassandra Singing*—starting tomorrow I will write a story for five days, and I'll go to my files of stories and I'll look through it. And the five stories will leap to my attention, which excites me—and one or two of them may be stories which haven't particularly excited me lately, but for some reason they will under those conditions. I can take that schedule and actually write a story a day, and spend maybe two or three weeks rewriting each later on. Out of one of those experiences—I've done it three or four times—came "Traven," which is *Brothers in Confidence*, written in a day. "The Day the Flowers Came" and two or three others that I can't remember right now, but there was one stretch—no, "The Singer"—three of my best stories were written within a five-day period and rewritten with not a hell of a lot more work. On the other hand, I can spend fifteen years writing *Cassandra Singing*, and six years writing *Bijou*, and six years writing this *Sharpshooter*; and so what I'm saying is that there is this ability to write very intensely and to get totally absorbed in the first draft and to be able to get it down the way Simenon did.

PARRILL: I notice that you're interested in art. You have a print of Rockwell Kent over there and—is that Hopper over there?

MADDEN: Yeah.

Parrill: I collect Winslow Homer wood engravings from *Harper's Weekly*. And I see you have a copy of *The Sharpshooter*, which is probably his most famous one.

Madden: I write about that. Just today and yesterday I was writing about that, and I'll show you what I was doing with it. Drawings are very important in *Sharpshooter*, and photographs of the Civil War. Willis Carr meditates on them very deeply. In fact, he is a sketch artist, the sharpshooter, and the Homer sharpshooter is the one I have in mind for him, except that he is a Rebel and not a Yankee the way the one in Homer is. Homer did a sketch, or woodcut, and then he did a painting a few years later. I think his first mature painting was the one of the sharpshooter.

Parrill: How long is this book going to be?

Madden: First, it was seven hundred pages, and I cut it down to about four hundred, and then I reinflated it to about six, but I want to cut it back down to under four hundred manuscript pages.

Parrill: I sort of hesitate to bring this up and to express this point of view, but I'm of the opinion that you should go full bore with the fiction and sort of let the criticism take care of itself. There are a lot of good critics around, and I realize that there are a lot of southern writers like Warren and others who combine fiction and criticism and sometimes poetry, but I feel that, if you hadn't written so much criticism, you might have written more novels.

Madden: You could say this. It definitely is true that critical work has detracted from the fiction, but the way I was able to do that has absolutely nothing to do with the profession of teaching, absolutely nothing to do with academia. I've been here [at LSU] a long time and whatever situation I have here is almost totally based on fiction and

very little attention is given to the criticism. Nobody ever says a word to me in the department about my criticism. Well, maybe a word.

PARRILL: That's ironic. It's the reversal of the usual situation where they're telling some poor devil he has to publish on John Donne when he wants to write the great American novel.

MADDEN: I have the same attitude toward fiction that I have to all the other genres. To me, any form is exciting if I decide to work in it. To me, there's just one creative flow. I have the same attitude toward everything I do. There is one university. There're not a thousand universities. There's only one. I don't have any allegiance to LSU, just to the idea of a university, you see. So if I'm visiting a university, it's not as if I'm going from where I belong, LSU, to Cornell, where I don't belong, doing a lecture. The creative flow is all one, and whatever you do in it is just as important as anything else. But still it is true that it would be better to have written thirty novels than to have written twenty books of criticism and ten books of fiction. By the way, every one of those books of nonfiction is pretty distinctive. Nobody ever did a book like *Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties*, and somebody imitated *Rediscoveries* recently.

PARRILL: Some novelists seem to think that writing too much criticism is bad for a novelist because it makes him overly analytical.

MADDEN: The easiest way to test the premise behind that question is [to] consider mine as a good example; since I have written and published criticism during the same period over which I've written and published fiction, one could look at the fiction, characterize it, then look at the criticism and characterize it, and then ask: do both fiction and criticism share a similar analytical quality? I expect the answer would be that the fiction, when it isn't clearly in the oral storytelling tradition, is never overtly intellectual or analytical and

that the criticism, while certainly analytical, is full of imaginative conceptions and developments. As I've said, to me both fiction, general nonfiction, and criticism, even textbooks, come out of an undifferentiated flow of creative energy, directed at an imagined, receptive audience. Another way to test this often-heard theory is to look at more and more cases, such as Robert Penn Warren, people who have consistently published both criticism and fiction. My tone of voice suggests I have my own answer, and it is emphatically no, because, for one thing, in the crucial stage of revision, all fiction writers become, essentially, literary critics.

Parrill: I love both of the *Rediscovery* books. Was the second one as well received as the first?

Madden: No, it was hardly noticed. *Why* is one of the mysteries of book reviewing that I hope someone solves quick because Peggy Bach and I are about to send in a third volume called *Rediscoveries: Nonfiction*. I think somehow or other the books just never got to the reviewers because it's clearly the kind of book they would almost all snatch up. Do you know the imitation *Rediscoveries*?

Parrill: No.

Madden: Well, the imitation just kept referring and referring to *Rediscoveries*.

Parrill: The only criticism I had of the *Rediscoveries* books was that one or two of the rediscovered books were so well known that they shouldn't have qualified.

Madden: Well, that happens when you get contributors who insist on writing about a certain book.

Parrill: What part do you think a novelist should play in the community life of his time?

MADDEN: As a novelist, no part at all. I think that the novelist more than justifies his existence and his role as a human being in society simply by writing good novels, but I think that every citizen should do certain things. And those are the things I do. I have a tremendous reverence for the democratic process and for democracy as a concept. I think it's the most humanizing political structure ever devised. I have a real, vital desire to see it work and to participate in it, and when I see it being violated, it's extremely upsetting to me, so I get drawn into—or leap into—various kinds of controversies. When I write something to the paper, or when I go on television to express an opinion, it's not out of an obligation as a novelist to participate at all, and it's not as a novelist that I'm speaking, not even in the censorship cases. Of course, when it happens to be my own novel, then it's very hard to separate the two. Of course, I do separate them, but it's very hard for anyone to understand what I mean when I say I separate them. What I do is simply my own concept of an active citizen. And I guess that it's simply my own attitude as a teacher that teaching's part of my creative flow and that probably gets into my attitude toward the democratic process. I guess I love processes in which things get worked out, the teacher process, the student process, the writing process, the acting process, the democratic process.

PARRILL: The writers that you admire most—Henry James, James Joyce, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, Wright Morris—are not people who, at least in their work, seem to express any kind of social comment except in the most general way.

MADDEN: That's good. I'm glad you mentioned that because that's what I mean when I say that I don't think a novelist has any particular responsibility to take part in political experiences or issues, because I'm personally more interested in the art of fiction than I am in the subject matter of fiction or the themes of fiction. I'm interested

in creating an aesthetic experience for a reader [rather] than in reporting on the way people happen to be living in a certain decade. In other words, I would hate to have people say in classrooms of me what is too often said of other writers; he drew a very convincing portrait of Victorian society at the turn of the eighties or something. To me that is absolutely no accomplishment whatsoever. I want a sense of accomplishment about what I write, and I don't want anybody to say that, in *The Suicide's Wife*, he really captures what it was like to be alive in 1968. [With animations.] You go to hell man, I wasn't even thinking about that, you know?

Parrill: I would like to ask your opinion about some other serious writers of your generation. What do you think of George Garrett?

Madden: George Garrett stands out, stands way out, from all other fiction writers or poets that I know as a man who has a generous attitude toward the writers around him. He helps more writers than any other writer that I could mention, and I think he's a good writer and one of the most valuable men on the literary scene today. Peggy Bach and I dedicated *Rediscoveries II* to him.

Parrill: Reynolds Price?

Madden: I feel some communion with him. We were published in the same year, and Granville Hicks reviewed both of us in the *Saturday Review* within months of each other, and he was on the cover, and I was not. So ever since then, I've had this feeling that Reynolds Price and I were competing with each other. Now, this kind of thing is not very important to me. This kind of thing is not very meaningful to me, but it's just a kind of little sidelight that I've been following for the past twenty-five years. How's Reynolds doing? How am I doing? The real fact is that I read only one novel of his, the first one, and I saw these incredible similarities between—what is it, *A Long and Happy Life*? —

PARRILL: *A Long and Happy Life* was the first one.

MADDEN: —and *Cassandra Singing* because it starts off with a guy on a motorcycle with his girl hugging up to him. I felt then and I still feel that the writing was precious. Now, some people feel that about *Cassandra Singing* too, but I tried my damnedest not to write with a Faulknerian lushness.

PARRILL: Cormac McCarthy?

MADDEN: Well, Cormac McCarthy is the worst offender as far as imitating Faulkner goes. I think Reynolds Price is a much better writer than Cormac McCarthy.

PARRILL: I want to put in a good word for McCarthy. I like him a lot.

MADDEN: I like *The Orchard Keeper*, but I liked it only because I could say to myself, well, it's a first novel after all, even though it's slavishly imitative of Faulkner, but then all the others have been slavishly imitative of Faulkner—even what is it?—*Suttree*, the last one.

PARRILL: Well, *Blood Meridian* is the most recent one, but *Suttree* is the one he spent years and years on. He worked at it off and on for twenty years.

MADDEN: I wish him well. We're both from Knoxville, you know. I tried to get friendly with him, but he was very standoffish.

PARRILL: John William Corrington?

MADDEN: I haven't read much of him, but I can say I'm not attracted to him. I'm not drawn to his work.

PARRILL: Are you familiar with Ron Hansen, who wrote *Desperadoes* and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*? I thought of him in connection with the Jesse James story in *Pleasure-Dome*.

MADDEN: He and I are in correspondence about that. He loves *Pleasure-Dome* for the Jesse James stuff. He was about to write that when he read *Pleasure-Dome*. We were at Bread Loaf together. I liked it pretty well.

PARRILL: Are you talking about *Desperadoes*?

MADDEN: I don't think I read either one of them all the way through. I sort of dipped into them, then wasn't drawn to them, but I think he's probably very effective.

PARRILL: Which of the older generation, the revered elders, do you feel most drawn to? What about Warren?

MADDEN: Well, Faulkner mainly, Conrad, Camus, Wright Morris, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* mainly. I've got a kind of collection, a pantheon of my favorite writers that I'll show you. Dickens has joined the pantheon. Joyce.

PARRILL: What about the Wright Morris books of prose and photographs, especially *The Home Place*?

MADDEN: You know I did a book on Morris, and you saw my essay on the influence of photographs on southern writers. I'm going to do a book out of that essay and include Morris for contrast.

PARRILL: Is there anyone else that you particularly admire that we haven't mentioned?

MADDEN: Jules Romains's *The Death of a Nobody* affected my writing deeply. Michel Tournier. I think *The Ogre* is one of the finest books to come out in a long time. And *The Garden*, by Yves Berger.

PARRILL: I reviewed that.

MADDEN: That's a wonderful book.

PARRILL: Weird.

MADDEN: It's imitative of Faulkner, but in a way that transcends imitation. It's not imitative; rather it's influenced by Faulkner.

PARRILL: I think the Latin American writers have used Faulkner in a much more creative way than the Americans have. They can't misuse him. They're far enough away from him that he's not overpowering in the way that he is for the Americans.

MADDEN: In the same way that the Italians have used Hemingway. I've been reading Vittorini and those guys, and I think that Vittorini is better than Hemingway in some of the things that he does stylistically.

PARRILL: Shelby Foote was so much under the influence of Faulkner that he disappeared, and he never really reappeared until he turned to nonfiction and did that three-volume narrative history of the Civil War.

MADDEN: I've been reading a lot of Civil War history for *Sharpshooter*, and I think that, leaving out Grant, his Civil War writing is among the very best, but it's also full of infuriating mannerisms that I find detestable and that I picked up in so many books about the war. People write about the Civil War because they're really full of a sense of the importance of the Civil War, and the incredible horror and magnificence of it, but as soon as they start writing about it, they somehow seem to have to show us that they're above it, and they get condescending in their word choices, and they trivialize things in an incredible way. They take great generals and say, well, now I'm not going to fall for this great-general thing, so they start describing these generals in a way that really trivializes them. And then when it suits their purposes, they'll soup up the language to make them sound really magnificent. Foote is one of the worst at that.

PARRILL: What did you think about the Ken Burns film on the Civil War which got so much attention recently?

MADDEN: The occasion of this kind of massive assault on the public was terrific, wonderful. It was a fine happening. But the film itself was rather static and predictable in its technique and seriously irresponsible in its misuse of photographs, the single most unique archive of the war, misused from the beginning, of course, when Brady took or was given credit for more photographs than he deserved, and when others did as he did, and when books on the war decades later cropped and knowingly mislabeled them for the same reason Burns did: to illustrate, above all, whether appropriate or not. He used one photograph in two or three totally different contexts, while using most of them authentically, and so the misuse of some distorts the effect of all. The camera playing over photographs was certainly allowable, but it got monotonous, and so did the music. Most of the voices, however, were very effective. My various criticisms aside, I watched every frame eagerly; and the whole series, I am happy to observe, woke a lot of people up, North and South, to the fact that this was the central event in our history, with the most reverberations, and most serious, throughout our history to the present day, with Desert Storm, coming in conveniently for timely comparison.

PARRILL: The series seems to have made a media star out of Shelby Foote. According to a friend of mine, his accent seemed to get thicker with each battle.

MADDEN: The anecdotal sensibility thrives on accent, as Andrew Lytle's, for instance, does, and Faulkner's did. You know, I often wonder why it is that southerners, when they deal with serious human dramas, feel compelled to structure the telling as a kind of folkloric joke, with a humorous punch line at the end which brings to the

pursed lip of the teller the trace of a smug smile. I have thoughts on that, but they are long, long thoughts.

PARRILL: Your story, "The Demon in My View," connects the Lucius Hutchfield material with the death of General Sanders and the *Sharpshooter* material.

MADDEN: Yes, because "A Demon in My View" is a short novel follow-up to *Bijou*—Lucius much older returning to live inside the abandoned theater—and it was while reading some Knoxville history for *Bijou* that I read about General Sanders being taken wounded to the Lamar Hotel (the Bijou theater was built inside the hotel, so to speak, the hotel remaining on the side and above the front part of the building) after a sharpshooter in Bleak House tower, so the legend goes, shot him out on Kingston Pike. I knew the story of the shooting all my life, but not that he died in the bridal suite of the hotel. So I like the feeling of that story merged with Lucius's story.

PARRILL: You have the tendency of a certain type of novelist to connect materials from different novels and stories. Do you ever feel that, like Wolfe, you're really writing just one big story? When did you start that? Is that desirable?

MADDEN: There is nothing inherently closed, or complete, about a story of the lives of characters, although any given story or novel in which they figure should, to my mind, be a complete work of art. I want first of all to create works of art, so places and characters interest me on many other levels; they are inexhaustible. The new place (London Bridge for a novel in the works) and new characters have no special value in themselves. Wolfe was, I feel, writing about places and people, his own places, himself, his own people and friends, so that being his primary focus, plus grand language in which to talk about them and not art, it enhances our lifelong enjoyment of Wolfe to think of all he wrote as one vast story.

PARRILL: Who are some other authors you like?

MADDEN: Another writer I really admire is Davis Grubb. I'm fascinated by him generally, but I haven't read anything besides *The Night of the Hunter*. And William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness* is one of my favorite books. Another favorite writer of mine is Virginia Woolf. Graham Greene. Henry James. Fitzgerald is another major writer for me, but only in *The Great Gatsby*. Only *The Great Gatsby* for me is a great work of art. But you're right when you say that I go for writers who don't have a social concern at their center. These are works that you can read over and over and over again. What is magical and fantastic about them is rechargeable by virtue of their artistic qualities, whereas I could not possibly read *Man's Fate*, which is about the Chinese revolution, a second time. There's no way. You would have to hold a gun to my head to make me read it a second time. It's OK the first time because I'm interested to see how he's handling this social event since the artistry is not very commanding.

PARRILL: I think Dickens is the only exception I can think of to that statement.

MADDEN: Yeah, but you know the issues aren't alive for me. All the issues are dead. I say, yeah, that's sort of interesting, he handles that well. *Hard Times*, I guess, is the best example people would point to of his social consciousness, but the social problems were not what interested me in that book. What is good about a book transcends those transitory interests. The proletarian writers are the best examples of all. There's only one or two you can force yourself to read. *The Disinherited*, by Jack Conroy, but that's only because it's a picaresque story of a guy who goes from one job to another. It's kind of nicely written, but most of them are really, really bad books. But the tough guy novels, written in exactly the same decade, which have no

social purpose whatsoever, I can reread and reread. I can reread *The Maltese Falcon* over and over.

PARRILL: I think anybody could. But what about *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* which I was looking at last night.

MADDEN: I could reread that several times, about four times. [Laughs]

PARRILL: You don't see that as being social?

MADDEN: No, that's existential. I think the metaphor of the marathon is a better existential image than you find in Camus.

PARRILL: You wrote an essay about Jesse Hill Ford (*The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*), the Tennessee novelist whose career as a novelist was interrupted by a personal tragedy. What interested you about the incident?

MADDEN: The essay grew out of one of Willie Morris's last assignments at Harper's. He asked me to cover the killing and the trial and a three-hundred-page book exploded out of my visits to Tennessee. He and I had been talking about the irony in the many parallels between the facts on which Ford based *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones* and the events of the killing and after. Also, the elements Ford's imagination added also had parallels in the events of the killing. And further, how all Ford's earlier writings seem to prefigure both the real and imagined events of the novel and of the killing. Many writers saw all these things, but somehow they struck me so deeply, I wanted to capture them in a long essay or a book, and over a decade later, I derived from the massive writings and long thinking over the years, the memoir "On the Loose." As with the Agee short story, James Olney felt a somewhat new approach was being taken, and I felt it, too. And I see some relation between my memoir of writing

about Ford and my story about Agee. I'm working on several long pieces about my feelings about certain writers—Wolfe, Faulkner, Nathanael West, O. Henry.

Parrill: Apparently, Ford never recovered, at least artistically. So far as I know, he hasn't published a book in almost twenty years.

Madden: No, he's been working mostly on movie and television scripts. I wish he would write about that experience, but I sense that he never will.

If you don't mind, I haven't really said too much about this, but I want to say something about how I was using earlier material in my books. Several people have commented on my reuse of earlier material. Some see it in its proper light and others distort it as if I have to do it, as if I'm really desperately reaching for material to do new work. But if you just look at the very works they're also discussing—these are people who are talking about all my work, well, sometimes they are people who just know about the work and are talking about new work—but if you knew all my work, you would know that I'm prolific and that I have a rich body of raw material and that I don't need to reuse old material. To me, writing is not material anyway.

Parrill: I also know that that's what Faulkner and all the other southern writers have done.

Madden: The point is that the reason I'm doing it is for the very same reason Faulkner did, which is that no story is complete and total and finished and consumed. Every story has so many rich possibilities and dimensions in relation to so many other stories, and as time goes on, you begin to see these connections and you want to bring them to a fuller realization than you did before. I want to do a short version of *Bijou*, not because I want another book but because I think it will be better than the earlier version, you see, more intense,

more concentrated. That's just my feeling about it, whether anybody agrees with it or not, that's my feeling about it. And it's incredible that anyone would consider that a negative factor in the development of a writer. I showed you my drawer full of story ideas, you know, versions and things that I've started and not finished. I've no paucity of material. My material comes as much from my imagination as it does from my life, so that it's incredible to me that anybody would construe that reuse as a negative. It's like telling the same story again, but in a different way. The reader is supposed to enjoy that along with the writer. If the writer truly enjoys it—truly enjoys it, and if it's good in the first place—redoing it could not . . . I don't see how that could be a negative factor. The reader has to be able to enjoy that just as much as the writer does, if you liked it in the first place. Wright Morris does this all the time, in a very sort of subtle different way: similar situations, even the exact same lines, totally different context. And to me that's wonderful, that's rich and exciting.

PARRILL: I judge from what you said in one of your essays that you've had some difficulty in getting *Sharpshooter* published.

MADDEN: Yes, it fulfills nobody's expectations for a commercial or serious Civil War novel. No romance, for instance. But the revised version is more accessible, I think, while still having the effect I wanted—of a sharpshooter, who was almost a child, having been in most of the battles with Longstreet and having, probably, been the person who shot General Sanders, but who somehow feels he missed the war. I imply that he has lived it much more vividly in his retrospective mulling over of facts and in his imaginings than if he had come out of it feeling, as most men did, that he had fully experienced it. And in the end—a major part of my revision—he almost starts all over again when he recalls with surprising vividness, his relationship with a black Union prisoner, who had been a slave of

the Cherokee nation, under his guard tower at Andersonville—who taught him how to read and write—Cherokee language—and who he shot when he stepped over the deadline. An interested publisher awaits my revisions.

Parrill: It seems that writers today, no matter how well they are regarded, constantly have to start over. Does that discourage you?

Madden: No, nothing discourages me because I live in my imagination. Oh, on the third level it very much does, because, yes, writers today with ten works of fiction out there, must start all over in a sense. Why a publisher thinks a new serious writer is a good investment, I don't know, when they ought to know what I would think is very well known, and that is that the majority of writers don't really keep on writing new, good fiction. I don't really mind having my new works considered in isolation if editors would only do that. But, they insist on getting the whole picture, past, present, and future, before venturing with the new book. I have just finished reading six hundred pages in manuscript of the letters of William Goyen, one of the finest writers of the past half century, and, like most other writers I know, he had a hell of a time publishing his later works and was, even though he had been an editor himself for seven years for a major publisher, constantly surprised and hurt by lack of faith in the books that got published and lack of recognition for a body of work everyone agreed was superb. But he lived in his imagination, where there is no time, no fixed place, no transience, but purely, what I call the world's one breathing.

David Madden on WUOT in Knoxville

Jacqueline Jones, November 1985

Jones: This is Jacqueline Jones. David Madden is the Knoxville-born author of *Bijou*, *Pleasure-Dome*, *Remembering James Agee*, and *The Shadow Knows*. Mr. Madden, who now serves as writer in residence at Louisiana State University, recently paid a visit to Knoxville and while here, he came by the WUOT studios to talk about Knoxville, the southern oral tradition, and to reminisce about his early association with WUOT.

Madden: When I was a freshman and sophomore, back in the early fifties, taking English classes and rehearsing plays for the UT Theatre Department, I drifted down to WUOT, which was in the basement of Ayres Hall, and I did several separate programs. One was reading modern poetry with commentary, which was recorded and then played while I was in the merchant marines, going through the Panama Canal. It was delayed until the summer. And I liked that idea; that I was still in Knoxville when I was away. And then the other thing that I like to remember is that modern adaptation of Robinson Jeffers's play, *Medea*, adapted for radio by me, was broadcast starring John Cullum. Then a few years later, I did a religious play called *From Rome to Damascus* and John Cullum was in that, too. That was in the fifties.

JONES: You have written many novels but those that are most pertinent to the Knoxville area are *Bijou*, *Pleasure-Dome*, and *Remembering James Agee*, and *The Shadow Knows*. Can you tell us a little about some of these books, and also how Knoxville has inspired your writing?

MADDEN: Let me start with how Knoxville has inspired my writing. First of all, it was my grandmother who inspired me to *tell* stories and that led to the writing of stories and only when I was speaking before a class here at UT a few days ago, a drama class, did I realize how I made the transition from *telling* stories to *writing* stories. I've never been able to remember it. But I was talking about the fact that movies and radio drama affected me and, again, how would you go from all that to writing? And I remembered that I used to read these screen story magazines, where they would give the entire story of the movie before the movie came out. And that was the only reading that I actually was interested in. So what I must have done is try to do *that*, since I couldn't write a movie script. So that's how I began to write stories and I would just write these long drawn-out, very complicated movie plot sorts of things. But then Knoxville itself had a look about it, a strange look about it, and the people had a way of their faces, and the way they walked and especially the way they talked had a way of stimulating my imagination very powerfully. I was walking down a railroad track at sundown one day and it was very chilly and the sky was red with the sun going down and I heard a woman call "Her-r-r-man. Her-r-r-man. Come to supper, Her-r-man," you know. Her voice drifting out over the area of North Lonsdale haunted me and I wrote my first play, *Call Herman in to Supper*, from that and it was produced, when I was in high school, here at UT in Ayres Hall, as a result of a state contest. So it's the landscape and the buildings, the old buildings and the look of the

people that stimulated my imagination. And so *Bijou*, of course, is set in the Bijou Theater and there are scenes in Market Square and Christenberry Jr. High School, and Lincoln Park and so on.

Jones: How has Knoxville changed since the Knoxville of your childhood and the Knoxville of the present day?

Madden: Well, you've heard of Hiroshima. That's a poetic metaphor that I privately use, not in a mean-spirited way, not in a resentful way or hateful way, for the disappearance of many of the buildings that fascinated me, which were often slummy buildings, buildings that had to go. But I sometimes say that, you know, that that building was "Hiroshimad." Especially when you look at the hillside over there where the Hyatt Regency and the police department are. That was wiped out so totally and completely and so many things that I remembered were wiped out over there, including a house that I lived in, that it was like Hiroshima to me. So every time I see something gone, little or big, I say 'OK, that was Hiroshimad,' you know, leaving only, like the shadow of the man on the bridge beating his horse in Hiroshima, leaving only a shadow across my consciousness of the past. But a shadow that results in many stories, including the collection of stories called *The Shadow Knows*.

Jones: Knoxville's changed physically. Have you noticed a change in the environment, in the sense of the people and the sense of life that is Knoxville? Or Knoxvillian?

Madden: Yes, I have, very much. I think what I didn't notice as a kid, because I really wasn't knowledgeable, was the way the TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] people from various parts of the country came in and just by their physical presence upgraded things because of the demands for better living conditions that they had to have to be lured here for a job. But then I would say that now it

would be very, very evident to anyone who had been here earlier and came back that that process has accelerated and there are all kinds of people coming here for all kinds of reasons. So consequently, I see these very nice places, restaurants and stores and so on, created where there were maybe kind of slummy conditions. But I also see, more this trip than last trip, a lot of very, very poor people roaming the streets, you know, up and down the streets, in a way that I hadn't seen in the past ten or fifteen years, but that I *used* to see when I was a kid during the Depression and the early forties. So it's a mixture now, *visibly*, as I ride down the street, it's a mixture of these affluent middle class people and these very, very poor people wandering around. So the *look* of it is what I'm describing, because I don't know what's beneath the surface.

Jones: I highly favor both the oral and literary tradition, but I feel until recently most people have ignored the oral tradition and have neglected it, not valuing it for the treasure that it is. Do you feel that today more people are valuing the oral tradition? And are trying to preserve it and make it as vital and as vibrant as it once was?

Madden: No, I'm afraid that's not true. I mean, that's not what's happening. I'm trying to preserve it in my own writing so people can read and hear it in their own ears privately, because people tell me when they read on the page things that have influenced me from the oral tradition, they can hear a voice. So to that extent, it's being preserved. Of course, we have the oral history projects around the country, which are very good, where people go around getting these stories from the old storytellers all over the nation—but of course I'm certain it's going to be richer in the South—and then there are these storytelling festivals. But the storytelling festivals are great and they're good, but they're a little too much like a museum piece. What I would like to see . . . here's my solution that I hope everybody right

now, listening, will agree to. What I would like to see is that we have oral storytelling week or year, if we can manage it, where we turn off all the electronic media—all the televisions, all the radio . . . even, although that influenced me very much, the radio drama . . . turn off the radio and the TV and the record players and then we'll be *forced* to sit around . . . and maybe the lights . . . and then we'll be forced to sit around the candles or whatever, and tell stories because we won't have the babysitting function of the electronic media. This is something I took up in a novel of mine called *On the Big Wind*, where I showed a radio announcer going from a tiny station in Eastern Kentucky to *CBS News*. And we see how the oral tradition is almost totally eliminated by the time he reaches *CBS News*. There it's just pure "canned" stuff. Not that that's not effective. I listen to *20/20* and *60 Minutes* all the time and that's powerful stuff, but it's totally different, is what I'm trying to stress.

Jones: That was David Madden, Knoxville-born author of *Bijou*, *Pleasure-Dome*, and *Remembering James Agee*. Thursday, in part two of my conversation with Mr. Madden, he will give an impromptu rendition of his story, "Willis Carr at Bleak House." This is Jacqueline Jones.

[**tape break**]

Jones: This is Jacqueline Jones. Today, in the second part of my conversation with Knoxville-born author David Madden, we begin our conversation with my asking him about the impetus for his story, "Willis Carr at Bleak House." You have a work in progress entitled *Sharpshooter*, and one of the inspirations for this is a story which you made up as you went, for WUOT. Can you tell us about that?

MADDEN: That was two years ago when I was here for a writers conference, and five or six writers were here and we each had to give a reading from our fiction. I was prepared to read from my latest book of stories, *The New Orleans of Possibilities*, some of which are set in Knoxville, and I think I was going to read one set in Knoxville. I was about to get up to do it when I realized, 'I'm *in* Knoxville and I'm writing a novel in which the main character was a veteran of the Civil War, in fact thinks he may have been the sniper who shot General Sanders, and he's [been] telling this story for sixty years, and this is out of a longstanding interest of mine in the oral storytelling tradition. So what am I doing here reading from a page a very superliterary story?' Which is what I planned to do. So I felt this impulse, 'Well, if you believe so much in the oral tradition, you should get up in front of these old friends of yours and former teachers and writers and give an example of the wonderful oral storytelling tradition that you love so much. That is, you should get up and become your main character, Willis Carr, the sharpshooter, and let him just tell his story and you should pretend to *be* him.' And so, what happened was, I went up to Joe Trahern, the head of the English department, and I said, "Can you introduce me as Willis Carr and can you pretend that we're at a meeting of the Daughters of the Confederacy in 1927 *in* Bleak House, *in* the music room, where there is a cannonball wound in the wall and can you present me as an old veteran who is going to tell about his experiences?" And he said yes. And he got up and did this incredible job. And everybody was totally thrown, in a wonderful way, for about two or three minutes as I got into my part. And then when they realized what was happening, it was very exciting, very terrifying when I got up and said [assumes gravelly voice of character], "Well now, a lot of people have asked me to talk about it, but I haven't talked about it up till now. Now I've *heard* a lot of people *tell* about it. They *tell* about their experiences in the Civil War, but

I've kept my trap *shut* until he asked me to come here and tell you about when I . . . we're *in* the music room of Bleak House, right there where General Longstreet would walk up and down in his boots and I could hear him down here because I was up there, in the tower. I was up there and there was three or four of them, wounded laying on the floor, and you know there are windows all around, except for the west, that's blind. And I'd look out that window, and I had a fever, for we had marched in the mud and rain for days. But there was a Virginia boy that was shooting people, sharpshooting people, from up there. And Yankees over across the Kingston Pike, up on the hill. And he was shooting them and he said, "I got one!" And I was just sitting over there and then he aimed again like he was gonna get another one. And I kept waiting, and kept waiting. It was like I was looking through the telescope myself. And he never did pull that trigger. And I thought, 'Well, what's the matter with him?' And I saw blood tricklin' down between his legs where he was kneeling. And I went over there and he'd been shot in the head. And so I picked up his rifle and I was in a fever, I couldn't think straight. I looked through the telescopic lens and I saw this man on a white horse, this general, all dressed up with a sword and there waving the sword and everything, and he looked beautiful, he looked terrific, he looked marvelous. I thought, 'Nobody's crazy enough, our side *or* their side, to be riding up and down in front of all those people in the crossfire.' I said, 'This is a fever dream. This is just my *fever* dream.' I thought, 'You know, it'd be interesting to just pull the trigger, shoot, wouldn't hurt anybody, wouldn't kill anybody, I'd been killing people all during this time. I can just shoot at that man riding so beautiful on that horse, won't even hurt him.' So I pulled the trigger. I didn't even say I'd got him, because I thought he was a fever dream. Two or three years later, somebody told me that a general named General Sanders had been shot there. And they had to tell me because I's only fourteen

years old. I didn't think about nothing I was doing. One place was the same as another. So that's haunted me all these years. And I don't even know if I can go back up *in* that tower."

Jones: That was very good. You have been inspired by the oral tradition of Appalachia. Can you tell us a little about this, and how much it means to you as a writer, and also the southern characteristic that it epitomizes?

Madden: I'd love to, because I think it's very interesting. What appealed to me was not just the stories that my grandmother told, but the words she used, the phrases she used, the way she spoke, the way her body moved, the gestures. That's really what fascinated me. And what I was watching, without knowing it, was technique of the storytelling. Technique. Good storytellers don't tell stories, they speak words, especially in the oral tradition. Because in the South generally, even when people aren't telling stories, they use words for the love of it. It's almost like 'art for arts sake.' Which is a bad phrase. But it's true. They speak the words for the sake of the words, because they love to hear them. And they love to hear them resounding in their chests, and their ears; they feel them physically, they want to affect other people almost physically with those words. Without even touching you they can touch you with the words, they can shape your attitudes and your responses and keep your eyes focused, as you're looking at me right now, you see. And it's a kind of benevolent, playful *power* play. We don't have power with money, you know, the poor people, black and white, in the South. But we have power . . . and by the way, I think we got that *love* of the words from the blacks, who were *learning* the new words. See they were learning the new English words and they were learning how to use those new words on their masters and on each other to get what little they could get. And they could do it by charm, very often, when they had to charm people

. . . slaves, you know. And it worked. And so they would use the language in this wonderful way. And then the whites picked it up. The rich whites and then the poor whites and middle class whites, which came later. What amazed me when I was a kid was that I would meet some rich white lady and she sounded more countrified than the poor whites or the blacks. Because she had been . . . all she had really been exposed to was mostly, I think, maybe the women, who in those days didn't get out an awful lot, they would sound real countrified. And that always amazed me. But anyway, what I'm stressing is that from the poorest to the richest, it's the love of the words. And so therefore, when I became a literary writer influenced by James Joyce, and Thomas Wolfe, and Ernest Hemingway, and Flaubert, I was doing exactly the same thing, because they loved to spend days and days and hours and hours and weeks and *years* perfecting the phrasing of a sentence for the page. For the literary effect, which is the opposite in a way, of the oral tradition. But where they come together is in the pure love of the words. Neither one of them care that much about the story itself, it's the pure love of the words coming out of the mouth, or out of the hand onto the page. So what I'm doing in my work is trying to keep the two in balance. Letting one affect, influence, enhance the other on the page. So that when I give readings, I am really getting the benefit of both. But when I told you the story of Willis Carr, or let Willis Carr speak to you, I was making it up all over again in front of you. But I seldom do that. I usually read from the page. By the way, let me make a little reference here to where the Willis Carr story can be found. It's in the fiftieth anniversary issue of *The Southern Review*. Thanks to WUOT. I had no idea, you know, of doing that. But because they happened to be there, recording everybody, and they recorded that, I simply took it straight off the tape that you all did, and typed it on the page and *The Southern Review* printed it exactly the way it is. Except I have to say the last part had

gotten erased [laughs] accidentally, and what I had to do then was make up the rest of it. So it was an interesting combination.

JONES: That was Knoxville-born author David Madden. This is Jacqueline Jones.

[end of tape]

David Madden on Southern Literature

A. B. Crowder, 1990

Crowder: What do you think basically characterizes southern writers and southern writing?

Madden: Well, I think that southern writers, most of them, not all of them, are basically schizophrenic, in a very good sort of way, really. I think they are all trying to pass Fitzgerald's test. Fitzgerald said, in "The Crack-up," significantly enough: "The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time," which is one accomplishment. And then he adds, "And still retain the ability to function." A lot of characters in southern literature somehow *do* hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, but they are *not* able to function. Fitzgerald himself was not able to function most of the time. *The Great Gatsby* is about the only place I think he really could hold two opposed ideas and still function as an artist. As a southerner, apart from being a writer, I think this two-opposed-ideas [concept] is best illustrated at the end of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, when Shreve, Quentin Compson's Canadian roommate, after he has listened to this long, incredibly complex and involved tale of the South (Mississippi), says to Quentin because of an attitude that he has been catching all through the whole thing: "Why do you hate the South?" And the way that Faulkner presents this is as if it never occurred to Quentin that he hated the

South. So Quentin says, "Well, I don't hate the South. I don't hate the South. I DON'T HATE THE SOUTH!" You see? Marvelous line! And that ends *Absalom, Absalom!* I think the whole problem is, in one way, summed up in that progressive realization "I don't hate the South," and then screaming at the end.

One other aspect of schizophrenia in the southerner as a writer comes in seeing the effect of two different traditions upon the technique and the content of his writing—one is the tradition of the oral storytelling, the oral storytelling tradition of the South—especially, from my point of view, of Appalachia. The oral tradition—all those wonderful stories, hunting stories in the case of Faulkner, and grandmothers telling stories about the family or about all kinds of characters and so on—had a great effect on many southern writers.

And this oral tradition can be broken down into various parts, one of which is the folk songs that we listen to, which then became the popular country music songs which tell stories; and the religious songs which sometimes also tell stories, but whose phrases at least are extremely vivid, full of blood, fire and brimstone, and so on; folktales and legends that we hear as young southerners. And one of the most important sources or aspects of this oral tradition is the semiliterate political and religious oratory that we hear—and I stress semiliterate, because it's really wonderful how a semiliterate person, picking up some of these sorts of literary phrases, biblical phrases out of the Elizabethan tradition, can mangle them and transform them in marvelous ways into incredibly effective phrases that move us and excite us as young southern writers. Even as we reject the religion behind it, we're impressed by that rhetoric and by the dramatic flair with which these politicians and these religious orators present their ideas, with theatrical immediacy and flair. Another aspect of this oral tradition is a love of language for its own sake. The function of the oral storytelling tradition is not to tell the story necessarily,

solely, or primarily, but to give the storyteller an occasion for playing with language in a way that only southerners can do. And the only comparison I can think of is the Jewish immigrant of the early part of the twentieth century on the East Side of New York, who would take the English language and do all kinds of marvelous things with it. That impressed me, as a matter of fact, when I saw them in movies.

The other tradition is the literary tradition, the literary storytelling tradition which has affected southern writers. If we looked at the southern writers in terms of these two strong elements, we would find on one side in the oral tradition, writers taking the oral tradition and trying to capture it, perpetuate it in a literary medium. And that would be Joel Chandler Harris in *The Uncle Remus Tales*, George Washington Harris in [the] *Lovingood* tales, and Mark Twain in *Huckleberry Finn* and other things. We then go to the other extreme, the superliterary tradition influenced by the European modernist and going all the way back to Flaubert and Henry James and people like that. I think the following writers exemplify the literary tradition extreme: The Agrarians, generally—Andrew Lytle, in particular; Caroline Gordon; Robert Penn Warren; Truman Capote; Reynolds Price; Walker Percy—he's very definitely influenced by the European tradition of his time (Camus and other existentialists); James Agee; Elizabeth Spencer; Doris Betts; and Madison Jones. I'm saying that if I had their novels here and I read to you the first paragraph of a novel by each, you would sense in the style this immersion in a literary tradition despite the fact that there may be some oral-tradition storytelling going on in the novels.

Crowder: Are you saying that these extremes characterize all or most southern writers?

Madden: No, because I think you can have a third column, sort of in the middle, writers who assimilate the pure oral tradition and

the pure literary tradition to become distinctive southern writers (I shouldn't have said *distinctive* because I want to put myself in this column, and I'm supposed to be modest here). I *will* list Faulkner first, though. Faulkner, I think, is a marvelous example of a southern writer whose work is full of pure oral tradition mixed beautifully, assimilated beautifully, with all the finest elements of the modernist European literary tradition. Eudora Welty is probably more oral than literary, also Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. In the drama, Tennessee Williams combines the two traditions. He has characters step forth to the edge of the stage and tell you a story; what he calls his artist in *Suddenly Last Summer* comes up and tells you this long story, just steps out of a play. This is the sort of technique that came over from Europe and is perpetuated on our own stage. Yet when one of Williams's characters steps out of the play, Williams resurrects the oral tradition in the way his character tells a story of some horrible thing that had happened to him. Harry Crews, I think, is in this tradition that strongly combines the oral with the literary. Barry Hannah, William Goyen, Alice Walker, Ernest Gaines, Cormac McCarthy—I kind of think Robert Drake to some extent.

CROWDER: What do you think is going to be the effect on younger southern writers coming up now, without any oral tradition?

MADDEN: Well, that's sort of one of the big dangers, the specter that hangs over us. Storytellers are not so overwhelming a presence. We do not hear their voices, as we talk, reverberate in our heads quite as much as we once did because we have so many competing voices racketing around in our heads. Most of the people who are most likely to become writers, sort of educated people, are born in southern suburbia, which is almost totally interchangeable with suburbia anywhere else. I've been all over the country, and I could go from your shopping centers in suburbia in Little Rock to Portland, Maine,

and not tell any difference. I often do that, flying from one place to the other, and I end up in a Holiday Inn, right in suburbia, so that I don't see any cultural difference whatsoever, except for the slight southern accent. The invasion of suburbia is eliminating the oral tradition. Suburbia does not offer enough to produce a literature.

By the way, I hear that southern accent disappearing into this kind of pseudo-British accent that I catch as characteristic of a lot of young people nationwide. There's a kind of hauteur and British-ism about their enunciations and their accents that ride over a Maine accent and a southern accent. That distresses me because one of the things about a southern writer, even when he leaves the South, if he never even returns to the South, is the reverberating echoes of those southern accents. He may hate the South, and he may hate the southern accents, but that's part of who he is. And in the old days, he would have been hearing those accents as stories were told. So I think new would-be writers are going to be caught up in the sterility of suburban life, which has its own culture, but it's a culture of video games and computers in the home and so on. As they come out of that kind of relatively, well let's just say different culture, they're not going to be able to produce, I don't think, the distinctive literature which we still are, right now, producing. However, we're producing a transitional, distinctive literature, and it's characterized by both elements. A lot of the best southern women—especially women somehow—and men writers, young ones, first novels, first stories, are really combining the two. They *are* talking about suburban experiences in the South. They *are* talking about—and maybe there's some kind of slight hangover from the past—the old southern way of life. Maybe they go on a weekend and visit a relative or something. But it's all very self-conscious, like being a weekend cowboy. That's probably a very good example; a man in Houston, being a Texan, and becoming that kind of weekend cowboy as in the movie

Urban Cowboy. This sort of thing is what probably will be reflected in literature.

CROWDER: Your view of the future doesn't look very bright at all. Are you convinced that the future of southern literature is that bleak?

MADDEN: My problem is that I haven't really been keeping up with what's just been written by southern writers because I've kind of been working on a historical novel for about five years, and I've tended to read the old classics that people of the time were possibly influenced by. So I really can't speak that much about the future—not with confidence. In a way, I kind of don't think there's much you can do about it anyway, if you can isolate what the problem is and what's going to happen. You can't set out to do anything about it, you know, because the writers will follow what has set them in motion. And whatever that is, is what we're going to have. But I am fascinated by southern writing up to this moment. I would like to talk about some aspects of that.

CROWDER: Well, how about facing the issue of regionalism?

MADDEN: At one time we had many regional literatures in the country. We had a movement of regionalism in which there was a distinctive literature out of New England that was regional, a distinctive literature out of different parts of the South that was regional, out of Ohio that was regional, out of the West that was regional, distinctively regional, with one or two good writers out of each of those movements, and a whole lot of bad writers, giving regionalism a bad name, writers who were not really regional but simply exploiters of local color. And it was such a strong movement that a powerful reaction set in against it, mainly on aesthetic grounds. It was said that much of this regional literature was just badly done and that there is limited interest in talking about the little ways of life of this or

that village. But what's interesting is that the only regional literature that remains vital and a subject of tremendous interest, producing very good writers, is the southern regional literature. Name a New England regional novelist. Name a New York City regional novelist, in that sense, because New York City used to produce all kinds of New Yorky writers writing about immigrant life, and so on. Where are those? We don't even have those any more. We certainly don't have a Midwest regional writing, that is, novels about life in the Midwest, groups of writers writing about life in the Midwest, in the way that Sherwood Anderson and others did. So this seems to testify to me to the difference of the southern literature in relation to other areas.

Crowder: What about John Cheever? Was he not a preeminent regionalist?

Madden: Well, in a way, except that most of the stuff he wrote kind of reflected suburbia more.

Crowder: Would it be possible to consider suburbia as a kind of region?

Madden: Yes, well, a region dispersed evenly across the country. Yes, in that sense, Cheever was a regionalist. But if you stop and look at it that way, it ceases to be interesting after about an hour.

Crowder: What are your feelings about the word *regional* being used as a put-down?

Madden: It *is* used in a pejorative sense, and I'm sorry that it is because I think that consciousness of region, in every region of the United States, would be very beneficial to American civilization in general. The big problem is getting people over the pejorative sense, the sense of parochialism or provincialism that everybody who wants to be anybody wants to escape from. Nobody wants to associate just

with where they are. They want to feel that they are universal. Every writer wants to feel that way. Sometimes it is hard to get a southern writer to admit that he's southern. Walker Percy says he's not southern, and I've heard many other southern writers say they are not. I kind of sense that maybe Reynolds Price might take that approach. Or am I wrong?

CROWDER: No, to my surprise. He used to worry about being labeled a southern writer, but he says he has learned not to let it bother him.

MADDEN: But a lot of writers will refuse to say that for very practical reasons. You don't want to get identified as a regional writer, especially as a southern regional writer, because reviewers will attack you, as I've been attacked. Because they impose clichés of southern regionalism upon your novel. They assume, even before they begin to read, that they're going to encounter all the stereotypes, mostly out of Faulkner, and if they can latch on to even one, they will then conclude that here is another southern novel coming down the pike. They won't say another Cheever New York novel coming down the pike, you see. Southern writers know that, and they don't want to be stigmatized in that way in the eyes of northern reviewers, because a review in the *New York Times* is the only review that really matters. And those are written mostly by New York establishment people. Even southerners who write for it identify with the New York establishment as they look at a southern novel. You don't want that to happen to you.

I can give you an example. My agent says, "Well, we're going to sell *Bijou* for about $600,000 for paperback rights." This is what we totally expected. Of course, it all depends on what the *New York Times* says. Well, the *New York Times* came out with a review by Sarah Blackburn, who was identified as a southern novelist that I never even heard of, and so she attacked it for all the preoccupation

with movies. She said, "I don't care anything about movies myself, so I don't know why David Madden's so interested in the movies." And so, just because of that negative tone, I got $10,000 for paperback rights—$10,000 instead of $600,000.

Now, money isn't everything, but it figures in somewhere. It also figures into your literary reputation. If you're a serious writer, as I am, you would like your reputation to have a kind of serious, unified look to it. And it doesn't help for someone to say, "Oh, well, he's a southern novelist," or "Oh, well, he's an Appalachian novelist,"—by the way, *that* regional tag is even worse—an Appalachian novelist. So a lot of these writers will either deliberately lie when they get up in front of you this way, and say, "I'm not a southern writer." Or they have lied to themselves subconsciously and they're innocently saying that. But I would say that if a writer is born in the South, anything he writes—whether it's set in the South or not—is a southern novel, because I can't think of one that is able to eliminate traces.

CROWDER: A few years ago you wrote an article about southern writing and southern photography. Could you connect your observations in this article with what you have just said?

MADDEN: I define southern fiction as fiction written by southerners, simply that. If I ask myself, "What is a southern photograph?," having looked at the photographs, I have to say, "A southern photograph is a photograph taken in the South by a Yankee." That's interesting. The most famous photographs which influenced writers of the '30s and '40s are by Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, all kinds of people who came from the North down to the South. Great Civil War photographs are all by Yankees. There are very good southern photographers now, but a lot of them are not taking pictures of the South now, because they are taking pictures elsewhere. But they aren't really famous and do not have the impact that some of the people I've

named have. Now that's very interesting. Turn that around, though, and I can think of no significant novel, or even insignificant novel, written by a Yankee or a northerner about the South. Real quick, off the top of your head.

Crowder: No, I can't think of any. Are there any?

Madden: No. And that's very interesting. I can name many novels by southerners, set in many different places besides the South that, however, as I say, remain kind of southern. *Set This House on Fire* by William Styron is set over in Rome or someplace. All the characters do is sit around the pool, listening to country music, haunted by all that. This is very interesting to me.

Crowder: What about Jewish writers? Are they not similar in some respects to southern writers?

Madden: Sometime when you get around to it and have time, compare some of the Jewish writers in terms of love of language and richness of character and incident and richness of background with southern writers. I think there is more of an affinity between Jewish writers and southern writers than there is between southern writers and any other types of writers.

Crowder: But there are significant differences.

Madden: What mostly interests me is the difference. You see, what I would stress are the very powerful and distinctive differences between the southern writer and any other identifiable group of writers. And they seem to me extremely powerful. Some of these differences are, for one thing, up until recently anyway, up until this transitional period, a sense of the past, an historical sense, and a vision of that historical sense, grounded mostly in guilt over the slavery question, as it has been handed down in terms of black-white relationships in the South right on up to the present. But even if there is no mention

of the Civil War, there is an aura of the Civil War. You can *trace* the consequences of the Civil War upon events and attitudes that have been enunciated in the work. I can think of very few northern writers who write out of a sense of any kind of a history, especially of the Civil War. The Civil War just did not sink that deeply into their consciousness. They saw the South revolting, they had a job to do, they did the job, and then they kind of walked away from it, historically. There's no preoccupation that I can see. Some of them may write Civil War novels, but—one of the best Civil War novels, by the way, *is* by a northerner, called *The History of Rome Hanks* by Joseph Pennell. He wrote only two novels. But he had half of his family in the South. And this is a very good example. I think you trace in that novel and in Pennell's life and in his few statements that the most powerful effect on him to write that novel was the southern part of his heritage, the southern part of his family. That's what fascinates me.

Crowder: Does all this have to do mainly with the fact that the South lost? You just don't write about what you win; you write about what you lose.

Madden: The answer is that the people who are defeated have a much richer, much more complex life in relation to that event than the people who win. When you win, that's it; you walk away from it. When you lose, you are haunted, for one reason or another, whether it's guilt or whatever. Some people think it's guilt. My feeling is it's pretty much guilt. I grew up with this feeling of guilt. But I don't think it's necessary. I don't think you find it in all southern writers; in fact, a lot of the Agrarians, of course, aren't driven by guilt at all. Faulkner is, though.

Crowder: Do you think there are two southern attitudes about the War Between the States—those who fret over what went wrong and those who feel guilt about it?

Madden: My approach to that as a poor white trash kid is this: nothing went wrong because we didn't have anything to go wrong. We were beneath most blacks in the condition of our lives. So in *my* case, it's pure fascination, pure animal curiosity and fascination. And I would stress that fact very strongly in my own life and as regards a few other writers, Harry Crews, for example. It's not this historical sense of what we lost that interests us, because we didn't come out of the aristocratic tradition that lost anything. It is a sense of total fascination with the life that we experienced as a consequence of the Civil War, but not with any awareness of the Civil War as the event. I had absolutely no awareness of the Civil War when I was growing up. It was some foreign thing, totally abstract for me.

Crowder: But if one grew up with a Confederate veteran grandfather in the house, as Robert Drake did, then the question will appear differently, won't it?

Madden: That's the total difference. There's a whole group of writers who came out of that—Faulkner and a whole bunch of others and the Agrarians—and then there's this poor white trash group that I came out of. But there are really three groups. There's a very good book called *Plain Folk of the Old South* by Frank Lawrence Owsley, published by LSU Press, in which he said: Now, we're losing sight of something. We've got two extremes. We've got the aristocratic plantation people who had all this history and stuff going into the Civil War and a civilization and a way of life that was destroyed and that whole relationship with the slaves and so on that was destroyed. And then we had on the bottom this poor white trash that fought the damn war. Most of the people who were killed in the war were North Carolinians, come from the mountains, who had nothing to do with slavery. And a lot of those fierce Union soldiers came out of

East Tennessee and had nothing to do with slaves and slavery. And Owsley said: But wait a minute, the people that really held the whole thing together, while this war was going on, while the poor white trash was dying on the battlefield along with a few aristocrats on white horses, and the aristocrats were moaning and groaning about the fall of their mansions and their plantations, there were the "plain folk" who just went right on planting corn and harvesting it and keeping everything on an even keel. And when the war was over, they kept right on moving and kept things going. That's a whole area that is left out. But see, what I want to emphasize, what's really interesting to me is, they didn't produce *one writer.* And if they did, that writer, for material turned either to the aristocrats and the moldering plantations or to the poor white trash because both of them were far more fascinating. There's nothing interesting about being "plain folk."

David Madden on Writing

A. B. Crowder, 1990

Crowder: When did you start writing, and *why* do you do it?

Madden: Having made a reputation among family and friends as a storyteller in the Southern Appalachian oral storytelling tradition—though I based many of my tales on movies, comic books, and radio drama, while making many others up—I began to write when I was eleven and no longer felt the impulse to tell stories as strongly as before; I was more solitary, I suppose. But my first written story was my own version of a movie, as were several others. I wanted fame and fortune, certain I would be a rich and famous writer of poetry, radio plays, and novels (not, however, movies, oddly enough) by my thirteenth birthday. My deeper motivation was to experience the complex thrill of affecting readers as I had affected listeners, using these other forms new to me (new because I never read much—but started with Erskine Caldwell, Thomas Wolfe, James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway right off). My excitement began in imagining the stories, but the prolonging of that feeling and the augmenting of it came in knowing the stories would affect people. That double motivation moves me still.

Crowder: Would you explain how you see yourself in relation to this oral tradition and the literary writing tradition that you spoke about in the earlier interview?

MADDEN: Well, the South that produced me was Knoxville in the mountains of East Tennessee. It so happens that East Tennessee was the most schizophrenic of all parts of the South during the Civil War. Knoxville itself, the town, was mainly Rebel, but the surrounding countryside of East Tennessee was mainly Union. I'm writing a Civil War novel about two or three figures, strong figures who exemplify the separate views. Parson Brownlow, out of the oral tradition, was a Unionist; and Dr. Ramsey, out of the literary tradition, was a Rebel. Now, as a southern writer, I have imagined the content of my fiction and expressed it in styles that are produced, I think, by the tension between those two traditions—the oral which inspired me to write and the literary which I picked up from the Agrarian writers among others.

CROWDER: What were the main influences on you as a writer?

MADDEN: The first major influence on my writing was my grandmother telling me stories. I had her living presence which was very powerful, and she was doing all these gestures and imitations that I could visually pick up. But another oral tradition that affected me and that contrasted with my grandmother's was radio drama, which was an electronically transmitted version of the oral tradition in which stories were told to us by voices coming out of a little box. And I was very affected by that, and I think the reason I was is that that seemed to be another version of the oral tradition that so excited me.

The other powerful influence on me as a writer was the movies, which emphasize visual techniques, so that in my writing you'll find very strong attempts to create powerful imagery and to try to avoid simply telling you things, but to show you things vividly. This all produced what I call a compulsion to tell a story. It's like the compulsion we see in Quentin Compson in *Absalom, Absalom!* This man obviously has a compulsion to tell this story.

CROWDER: Because you keep referring to *Absalom, Absalom!,* I am about to place that as a major influence on your writing. Would I be correct?

MADDEN: Maybe so. We observe in that novel a dynamic relationship between the storyteller and the reader. Shreve is dynamically involved as a listener to Quentin Compson in a process in which the storyteller is the transmitter of energy. The relationship between the teller and the receiver of the story is affected by two things—they're a little too abstract maybe to go into, but I'll just mention them—by the position of the storyteller and the listener in time and space, in their relationship to the elements of the story. I think it's extremely crucial. Where does the storyteller stand in time and space in relation to the elements in the story? Where does the listener stand in time and space in relation to the elements in the story? I'm conscious of all those elements when I write. I'm conscious of where the listener or the reader stands in relation to that material, and that comes out of an awareness of the dynamics of the storytelling process.

CROWDER: Could you explain your own schizophrenia, as you call it?

MADDEN: I think I can show very briefly this schizophrenia of mine in the content and style of my work if I read the first paragraph of a few stories. I think I try as a writer to make the first paragraph contain almost the whole story in some sense. There you will find the technique, the style, the subject matter, all very actively trying to make an impression on you right away. You can hear the pure storytelling tradition in the opening of this story—"Lindbergh's Rival" from *The New Orleans of Possibilities*, which is my variation on "the house of fiction has many windows." This is one of two stories in the two or three hundred stories I've written that I composed on a tape recorder, I did it in the car, running the tape recorder, as I was

driving along a highway in Ohio; and this is appropriate because the story is about a bus driver who is driving along through Cajun country in lower Louisiana toward Grand Isle. Here is the first paragraph:

> I'm standing in the bright sun, in front of the abandoned neighborhood theater in my hometown, Cherokee, telling my little boy about the movies I used to see there—*The Sea Hawk*, *The Curse of the Cat People*, *Stagecoach*, *Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, *Public Enemy*, *Flying Tigers*—when an image comes to me somehow connected with this neighborhood or those old movies, something I think really happened: a man is bent over, his back to me, and he's building an airplane in his basement—a real full-scale airplane. If I ever saw him with my own eyes, I don't remember. Maybe my dad told me about it.

You see, there you can hear the voice of the oral storyteller. This is as recent as about 1960.

This next story is probably the second serious story I ever wrote. I wrote a lot of trashy detective stories when I was fifteen, sixteen, thirteen, fourteen. I was about fifteen years old, under the influence of Thomas Wolfe, great southern writer, and of the Agrarians and of the literary tradition when I wrote this story called "The Fall of the House of Pearl," which obviously harks back to Poe. (This is first person, too, but notice how the literary has self-consciously crept into the story. In fact in this story I say the main character is a sixteen-year-old kid who is writing this down; he's writing the experience down pretty soon after it happened.) The first sentence: "Used cars are parked now where Pearl's house once stood." That kind of sounds a little bit like somebody's going to tell you a story that has the literary stink to it. I've already been polluted a little bit.

> The lot lies just inside the city limits on the main highway. If it's night when you pass by, the colored lights, the wind-whipped banners, [Did you ever hear an oral storyteller do that?] and streamers, and the blinking neon signs make it a mock carnival.

I'm obviously *wri-ting*. This is a sixteen-year-old kid who has discovered literature. I didn't read a book all the way through until I was thirteen, and that was *God's Little Acre*. I was looking for all the sex. The literary tradition hit me hard and suddenly. So I ended up writing lines like "mock carnival":

> But with morning mist and no lights and the colors dull, you think of gray things, like the cars being full of wan shadows, the streamers—things left behind by a wanderlust idiot.

Just try telling a story around a campfire with phrases like that in it and see what happens to you. This passage was overwritten, under the influence of Thomas Wolfe. I was deliberately trying to show in that story a young writer using and abusing the language in telling ways.

Then it gets a little bit more complicated in my second serious story—which was the direct consequence of picking up rather innocently *The House of Fiction*, an early textbook by Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon, husband and wife at that time, Agrarian southern writers from Tennessee and Kentucky, I think. I read their analysis of a short story by Peter Taylor, which he has disowned (he didn't include it in his selected short stories, called *Sky Line*; in fact, Tate and Gordon kicked it out in the second version of their textbook). Their analysis of it taught me about the importance of style, and, you know, those things produced this superliterary opening to a story dealing with poor white trash kids in the South, and this is the mess

you get, although it really is not that bad. It's called "The Pale Horse of Fear." It's better than the other one. Here it is:

> In the autumn dust the ridges on the horizon were softly contrasting tones of lavender, and as wind-strummed trees moved in the evening mist, grass by the road shimmered, and two brothers walked a short distance apart along the dirt road. Bains walked with a dragging limp: a wiggly scar followed him down the weed-ragged road. His arms encircled a worn wicker basket heaped with persimmons, his knotted fingers stained with juice. When Bains's awkward gait dislodged a persimmon, Robbie's shadow disappeared into Bains's as the child stooped to pick up the fallen fruit. Smiling, he polished the persimmon in the whirling abundance of his golden hair where a few dead leaves were stuck. "It's bitter!" [he said].

Well, you can see Peter Taylor a little bit, at his worst, not at his best, unfortunately. Thomas Wolfe at his best. Carson McCullers sort of in between. And Truman Capote enough so that the editor of the magazines to which I submitted it at eighteen said, "This is too much like Truman Capote" and rejected it; and, hurt, I filed it away for twenty years and when my book of short stories *The Shadow Knows* was about to come out, I—because I had an affection for it—sneaked it into the pile, and the editor said, "This is the best story in the lot." Because I'd written another story that opened this way, I'd finally become, you know, a master literary writer in the tradition of Joyce, Flaubert, and, my favorite American writer, Wright Morris, who writes somewhat this way. But this other literary story is me as much as Joyce, Flaubert, or Morris. It is "No Trace," which I think is one of my very best stories.

> Gasping for air, his legs weak from the climb up the stairs, Ernest stopped outside the room, surprised to find the door wide open, almost sorry he'd made it before the police. An upsurge of nausea, a wave of suffocation forced him to suck violently for breath as he stepped into Gordon's room—his *own* two decades before.

Now here you have all this flowery language kind of modulated. It's not as flowery, not as literary. It's a kind of midstyle between maybe James Joyce and Ernest Hemingway. The oral tradition has not totally disappeared; the literary tradition has not totally taken over.

CROWDER: Are you saying that you abandoned the pure oral tradition, then?

MADDEN: No. I haven't abandoned the oral tradition because in another one, a novel called *On the Big Wind*, which is about a radio announcer from the hills of Eastern Kentucky, who is raised on the oral tradition and gets into radio, I try to trace his disappearance as somebody coming out of the oral tradition of the South, this disappearance into the electronic media of modern American civilization, from radio, to different kinds of radio programs, to television. And this is what happens to him. The opening of about the second story:

> Cousin, you touch that dial and I'll never speak to you again. Right *here's* where you'll hear the best, the latest and the greatest country music on good ol' WFTZ in Wickliffe, Kentucky, where those two great rivers, the Mississippi and the O-hi-O, crash into each other, and the finest people in the world make their home. You can just make yourself at

> home on WFTZ with good ol' Big Bob until, oh, seven o'clock—that about right, Toby?
>
> Toby Mayfield over yonder, nodding his head. Toby Mayfield, your good neighbor and mine, from birth to balding middle age, a man you can trust today and still track down with no sweat tomorrow, none other than the manager of Colonial Mobile Homes, right *here* in the tri-state area, one of one thousand Colonial Mobile Homes lots in the U.S. of A. You'll find them all *up* and *down* and *across* this great land of ours, cousins.
>
> We're broadcasting on this cloudy, sultry Saturday afternoon out of a tent set up here at Toby Mayfield's Colonial Mobile Homes, between the Wickliffe city limits and the Indian mounds. That's what you keep your eyes out for—the Indian mounds, and you'll know you're not far from a place that will welcome you with open arms.

There you see, I continue, despite this literary tradition, to work both sides of the highway. And in this particular one, I'm trying to show the oral tradition and what is happening to it in an oral medium, which is radio, and bringing together the oral and the visual in television.

In his next incarnation (he changes his name as he loses jobs) he goes to Des Moines, Iowa; he has a talk show, and this is the way he sounds on this talk show, which is aimed at women at home during the morning:

> This is your secret admirer, Daryl Don Donovan . . . Did you miss me over the weekend? I missed

> you, darling. I missed your sweet voice on the telephone, I missed the way you walk in that slinky, satiny house-dress, or revealing shorts, as the case may be, and your perfume. Did you get your hair done over the weekend? I hope so, gorgeous, because I like you looking your best at all times—a knockout, baby. Yeah, not going around with your hair in plastic curlers, floppy furry houseshoes, scuffing from room to room, wearing a bulky, quilty bathrobe all day long. Who can see you? I can see you. I expect a certain mode of dress to set off a certain aspect of your personality during the day, and I mean smashing—that's how you look for Daryl Don Donovan; otherwise, don't even let me in the house.
>
> It's nine o'clock, the kids are in school, or off in the gameroom watching TV, the ol' breadwinner is putting in his eight to five and this is time for Daryl Don Donovan, your secret lover, our time, from nine to nine-thirty each morning, Monday through Friday.

So you see, the wonderful thing about the oral tradition is, of course, especially if the audience can't see you, you can become totally somebody else, as he does here. Then he develops through a couple of more chapters, or episodes, I call them; he decides that the way to get into television, which he wants to get into, is to become Jewish, so he becomes David Epstein. And this story is presented in the form of a television script: "NINE MOTORCYCLES IN A ROW IN BRIGHT SUNLIGHT." Now you see, this is the influence upon me of the visuals of movies, coming out in the story:

(The song of morning birds)

[Over the image and] (David Epstein's voice over) [what you're looking at.] On the morning of July 3rd, 1976—a Saturday—nine men astride brand-new Kawasaki 901s like these, set out from San Diego, California, on a journey that was to have ended at a stunt contest in Billings, Montana.

[And we see] FOUR MEN, HOLDING TO ROPES ON EXTREMELY STEEP HILL, READY TO CATCH ASCENDING MOTORCYCLE AND RIDER IF THEY FALL.

[David] (Epstein's voice over, covering a garbled voice from loud-speaker) A perfectly respectable—perhaps even middle class—annual event that attracts far more lovers of the sport than violent gangs. But the nine novice riders did not make it to Billings, Montana. Their journey ended in San Carlos Pueblo, near Albuquerque, New Mexico.

AERIAL VIEW OF THE KIVA, A WINDOWLESS CIRCULAR STRUCTURE, A LADDER UP THE SIDE, ANOTHER PROTRUDING OUT OF A ROUND OPENING IN THE ROOF.

[of the Indian kiva]

(Song of morning birds)

[Then we see] DAVID EPSTEIN

I'm David Epstein, and this is "Second Look," a

> bi-monthly special news feature of the Southwest Entertainment Network.

So he has disappeared before your eyes, because you can see him disappear into a whole different ethnic structure, into a whole different media, into a whole different persona, into a whole different growth, facilitated by the electronic media.

CROWDER: It would appear, then, that in various ways you are making a special attempt to preserve the oral traditions. Is that correct?

MADDEN: Yes, I'm preserving that tradition, deliberately and consciously. And I can't think of many writers who deliberately do that. Now there will be moments where people tell stories, as in Faulkner, and so on, in almost every southern writer, but there won't be that attempt to zero in, as far as I know, on the dynamics of the storytelling process, which I think is incredibly complex and mysterious, almost even religious. To me, even giving a reading is an attempt to carry on somehow that Appalachian storytelling tradition. Now there's another storytelling tradition that is totally different from my flamboyant, energetic style, just as there is in country music. You know you don't have all country music singers being very active. There are a lot of very wonderful storytellers in the South who just kind of stand there, you know, and say, "Well, uh, 'member the time Ah hunted a bear . . . ?" There's a long silence and these guys keep on just sitting around, because they know that's his technique, you know. "Yeah, that old slingshot I used 'bout wore out, but, yeah, I hunted a bear one time." And I remember one guy in Appalachia, in Boone, North Carolina, where I taught, that could really kill me; he was the silent, quiet type, who could say anything and crack you up. Maybe this won't crack you up because I'm imitating him. But he was sitting there; we were just sitting there on the porch talking about everything one day, and somebody said, "And then I reached in the

glove compartment of my car to get a cigarette or something—" And he was sitting there, "Ever hear of anybody reaching into the glove compartment to get a glove?" Then there's that other style, the flamboyant, jumping around style, the style that excited me when I was a kid, like my grandmother's very active style and the fundamentalist preachers. For a while I even believed in their religion, but after I dropped the religion, I was still committed to the preacher who would go up and down, and jump up and down, [shouting] "And I'm telling you, I'm telling you now, if you don't, if you don't, if you don't . . . , you're going to hell!"

CROWDER: Southern traditions obviously are very important in many of your stories. But there are some that seem devoid of any southern influence. What about that?

MADDEN: I suppose you mean a story like "No Trace" or "The Day the Flowers Came" and a novel like *The Suicide's Wife* in which there is no trace of the South at all and no trace of my own personal experience. I *am* really drawn very powerfully and very deeply and am emotionally committed to that European literary tradition that stimulates and inspires writers; at the same time I feel a compulsion in certain works to preserve southern traditions.

CROWDER: What are your writing habits? Do you put yourself on a schedule; do you have to play tricks on yourself or anything like that?

MADDEN: I'm really into the writing. The main character of the novel I'm working on—by the way it's called *Sharpshooter*—the main character is a poor white trash from up on Holstead Mountain, by Elizabeth, and he had nothing to do with slaves, and he gets fascinated with a Dr. Ramsey, who represents the slaveholding element and the old southern tradition, and with a Parson Brownlow, who himself is from the mountains and becomes a Unionist. My main

character's a newspaper editor, and he himself feels that he has missed the war, even though he's a sharpshooter who *thinks* he killed General Sanders in Knoxville. He's *sure* he's the one that killed him. And he is so fascinated by these other two extremes that, by looking into their lives, he begins to clarify his own otherwise colorless life.

The way I write, though, to answer the question in the simplest way, is to say that I just write. I've never had writer's block, and I've never found it difficult to write. Whenever I decide to write, I sit down and write. Now what I would attribute that to, again, is the oral tradition. I imagine an audience sitting somewhere waiting to read and simultaneously listen, because I try to get a sense of the oral in the sound of my sentences. I'm very aware of living listeners as I write and their expectation for me to do it. My compulsion is to give them what they're expecting and to play upon their responses in as many different ways as I can. So I never have any trouble writing at all. And of course, also, the revision process enables me to keep writing because I always know what the technical problems are that need to be handled, and I *enjoy* handling them. So there is no discontinuity at all. My feeling is that there's this creative stream that I can step into at any moment.

CROWDER: At what stage in the writing of a novel do you first revise? What is your method of revision?

MADDEN: Revision begins, I neglected to say in my new book, *Revising Fiction*, in the very imagining of the story and includes revising the techniques before one puts down a single note. For me, major revision begins AFTER I have written a complete draft of a story or novel; I seldom revise chapter by chapter as I write the chapters. I usually revise a novel about eight times, cutting two thousand pages down to seven hundred in the case of *Bijou*. My least revised novel, *The Suicide's Wife*, was also the most successful artistically—which

proves nothing. Writing is mostly, for me, in the revision process. My new book, *Revising Fiction*, tells all.

CROWDER: What subjects stimulate your writing?

MADDEN: The sense of time. Place and beauty and sense of time and of history and of the passing of time; it's kind of a sadness one feels in places imbued with time; one gets the feeling that time is passing. This comes out of my childhood when I saw so many old structures moldering away before my eyes; they gave me a sense of something happening there in the past. I have a fascination with decadence, I guess. But place really fascinates me. Eastern Kentucky overwhelmed me as a place, and as a consequence I wrote thirteen novels, and five or six stories, under the fascination merely of place and the kind of people that place would produce.

Interview with David Madden: "The Theatrical Image"

Peggy Bach, 1994

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1933, David Madden graduated from the University of Tennessee, served in the army, earned an MA at San Francisco State, and attended Yale Drama School on a John Golden Fellowship. Writer in residence at Louisiana State University from 1968 to 1992, he was director of the Creative Writing Program until 1994 while also serving as director of the United States Civil War Center at LSU. He now serves full time as director of the Civil War Center.

Random House published his first novel, *The Beautiful Greed*, based on his merchant seaman experiences, in 1961. For Warner Brothers, he adapted his second novel, *Cassandra Singing*, to the screen (not yet produced). *The Shadow Knows*, a book of short stories, won a National Council on the Arts Award, judged by Hortense Calisher and Walker Percy. His second collection, *The New Orleans of Possibilities*, appeared in 1982. His stories have been reprinted in numerous college textbooks and twice in *Best in American Short Stories*.

A Rockefeller Grant, recommended by Robert Penn Warren and Saul Bellow, enabled him to work in Venice and Yugoslavia on his third novel, *Bijou*, a 1974 Book-of-the-Month Club alternate selection. His best-known novel, *The Suicide's Wife*, was made into a CBS movie. *Pleasure-Dome* and *On the Big Wind* are his most recent

novels. He has just completed a Civil War novel, *Sharpshooter*, and is finishing *London Bridge Is Falling Down*. His poems, essays, and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of publications. His plays have won many state and national contests; several have been published. He has written and edited many books of literary criticism. Madden and Peggy Bach have coedited several books, including *Rediscoveries II: Fiction, Classics of Civil War Fiction* and *Rediscoveries: Nonfiction* (in preparation). They are writing a play about Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams.

Madden has given lectures and dramatic readings from his fiction at over two hundred universities. He was writer in residence at Chapel Hill, Distinguished Visiting Scholar at the University of Delaware, and he held the Chair of Excellence at Austin Peay State University.

This interview was conducted on the highway between Baton Rouge and New Orleans on several occasions in July 1994.

BACH: What connections are there between your roles as southern novelist-short story writer and playwright?

MADDEN: You know, even though I believe in and deliberately play upon the distinct differences between one medium, one genre and another, there is a sense in which the connection is that both are products of a single, compulsive flow of creative energy.

BACH: Did the southern Appalachian oral storytelling tradition affect your playwriting?

MADDEN: The live storyteller with an audience *is* a playwright, and also an actor, director, costumer, lighting technician, etc. As a child, listening to stories, I noticed all those roles come into play, and that one-man or one-woman show impressed me. I wanted to do it

myself, be center stage, so I did, with my brothers and neighborhood kids as audience. I began by telling stories and was surprised in a way when it dawned on me that I could use print, or magazines. I recall that my motive in publishing though was to see my stories adapted into movies. A neat circle, because movies are, in the way I've been talking, like theater. Gradually, I dropped the theatrical oral storytelling and stuck only to writing, but in my writing I see, looking back, many effects of my primary role as storyteller before a live audience—imagery, immediacy, dialogue, techniques that "work" the reader the way a storyteller works the audience.

Bach: The power of the spoken word comes out very dramatically when you give readings around the country from your stories, especially ones, like "The Singer," in which the narrator is speaking directly to an indicated audience of one or more. I recall that in your reading of "The Singer" a member of the audience thought you were actually speaking to him and came to the front, even though you were speaking to an imaginary character.

Madden: As I write, even the most literary kind of story, I am speaking directly to an imagined live audience, so that when I give what I prefer to call a *dramatic* reading, they are simply *there* in the flesh. And I convey the impression I am making it all up as I go along, even when they suspect I'm not.

Bach: Family stories run all through your fiction. Did they affect your playwriting, too?

Madden: Oh, yes, definitely. What I try often to capture in writing is the dynamics of a family sitting around telling stories, competing for attention, for center stage, and so when I write a play, that awareness of an audience that you must captivate and hold and satisfy, from the family storytelling sessions, helps me exploit all the resources of

theater. Families telling stories provided the first interactive theater, or happenings, as we used to say in the sixties, a kind of theater that struck me as an example of the hysterical discovery of the obvious.

Bach: What about your own oral storytelling when you were young?

Madden: Did it. Did it. Often. Daily. Loved it. Thrived on it. From the cradle to the—well, from age three. Don't shake your head. Mostly my own adaptations of movies I had just seen about Zorro or Huckleberry Finn or Laurel and Hardy, humming the background music for dramatic emphasis. In my stories and novels and plays, the characters are always telling each other stories. To experience what I call the pleasure-dome effect.

Bach: Although *In My Father's House* is set in San Francisco in the late fifties, the "house" is middle-class Virginian of about 1800, with modernity grafted on. What is being expressed in the "charged image," as you would put it, of the house?

Madden: "Modernity grafted on," as you put it, goes to the heart of the house's symbolism. For the hero, the house he built, carrying on in San Francisco after the great earthquake with his father a tradition of master-building developed in Virginia at the other end of the American continent, represents not only the values of a craftsman proud of his craft but all the values of a society he revered. The relentless and mendacious attempt to graft modern tastes, out of a lack of strong modern values, onto the house he and his father built, and onto the houses he himself builds elsewhere in San Francisco, is what he struggles to resist. The behavior of his wife and children seem to him to be motivated by notions as anchorless and shallow as those that produce shoddy workmanship in the building of suburban houses and freeways, for which well-built houses are destroyed. In the theater, my term *charged image*, for that image in fiction that is most powerfully focused, becomes *the theatrical image*.

BACH: Would you elaborate a little on what you mean by "the theatrical image"?

MADDEN: Look at photographs of certain productions of the plays of Eugene O'Neill and of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams and you will see theatrical images. The entire play is conceptualized in the set itself or in the placement of the characters within the set in the photographs. Jo Mielzinger's set for *The Death of a Salesman* is one of the most charged. In my play, one sees simultaneously all levels of the house at once, and each person isolated in his or her role within the house. The title, *In My Father's House*, is ironic.

BACH: How and why were you directly influenced to write plays?

MADDEN: Come to think of it, I bet it was partly the *look* of studio-filmed movies, with their controlled lighting, their variously dramatic use of entrances and exits, the edited movements of actors within a room or some other stage set. Especially *Citizen Kane* and *The Magnificent Ambersons* and film noir—as in that stage-set-like room where MacMurray and Stanwyk first meet in *Double Indemnity*. I saw plays only in junior high and hated them and hated the ones in high school, but then I saw plays put on by university students and I was attracted to that way of taking an audience by the throat.

BACH: Did you act in school plays?

MADDEN: Not much. Not until high school, a one-act by Oliphant Down called *The Maker of Dreams*. But I was acting in radio plays. In junior high and high school, the plays were boring and juvenile. I was a snob, joyously. At UT, I, who looked young for my age, almost always played old men, as in *Golden Boy*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *The Enchanted*.

BACH: You wrote radio plays also. And, later on, television and movie scripts.

MADDEN: Started radio in junior high. I can see myself sitting at a table in the library, poring over script formats in a book they had there and trying to write something that Jean Hersholt would put on his radio show *Doctor Christian*. I adapted *A Portrait of Jennie* from Robert Nathan's book. The appeal for me was very similar to the voice in the dark telling stories, as I did when I was a child and when I spent a few months in a juvenile detention home and an orphanage while my mother was in a hospital. In high school, I wrote, directed and starred in about twelve shows—had my own program on one of the local radio stations.

BACH: What was the first play you ever saw?

MADDEN: I was an usher at the Bijou theater in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the fall of 1946, thirteen years old, and I walked in one afternoon, and up on the stage a woman and two men were sitting at a kitchen-type table, talking casually. I was totally unprepared to find anything like that. Suddenly, a man in the darkened auditorium spoke something and the three people became actors sitting at the table talking in a play, which turned out to be Sean O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*. It was an electrifying experience, even though they were only rehearsing. In my novel *Bijou*, I changed the play to Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* because it provided more implications, and possibly because when my first play was produced a few years later, a critic accused me of imitating Williams. I had never heard of him before that.

BACH: What was the first play you ever saw in print?

MADDEN: Probably Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* in a collection John Gassner edited. When I got a John Golden Fellowship at Yale Drama School, he was my teacher. Terrific at sleeping while we read our plays, then blinking awake and cutting with a few

comments to the heart of the problem. A play surgeon, or doctor, they called him. Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams called him that, I was told, for very good reasons. What a lovely soul.

Bach: The first play that was produced was *Call Herman in to Supper*. Why do you call it a *mountain tragedy*?

Madden: Ignorance. I hate it when people use that term, as I did at fifteen, so loosely. A child dies at the end, drowns, so that, I thought, was tragic. Pathetic. Not tragic. Of course, it sounded great, made the play sound more important. Did I ever tell you how I got the idea for the play?

Bach: I'm sure you have, but tell it again.

Madden: I was out walking the railroad track, delivering gift certificates for a portrait studio, just at red, smoky dusk, through the slums of Knoxville, when I heard a woman calling Herman to come in to supper, and the sound seemed so sad, it made me feel he might be dead, and my imagination went to work on that. There's a scene in my novel *Bijou* where I tell the idea of the play to my grandmother, who had told *me* so many stories. It won a state contest while I was still in high school and was performed at the university.

Bach: You also adapted your own stories.

Madden: Well, it's that compulsion to explore the many possible ways of experiencing the relationship between myself, as many kinds of writer, and corresponding audiences. I was writing a short story version of my second novel *Cassandra Singing* when I realized the deadline for the same Tennessee state playwriting contest put on by UT was near, so I adapted it. After my short story "The Day the Flowers Came" appeared in *Playboy* and in the *Best American Short Stories 1969*, I sensed a play in it, at about the same time a high school

student in Michigan wrote to say that *he* saw a movie in it, and asked to adapt it. While I was a Fellow at Bread Loaf in 1970, I adapted the story to the stage and it has had many productions around the country. They say I'm one of the few writers who actually wrote something at Bread Loaf. Count in John Gardner because he used to keep me awake all night typing in the room below me when I returned as a staff member.

Bach: Is *Call Herman in to Supper* the only play of yours that you adapted into a short story?

Madden: No, I adapted *They Shall Endure* into a story called "Love Makes Nothing Happen," which Walter Van Tilburg Clark, my teacher at San Francisco State, praised for its complex use of multiple point of view. The reason was that not seeing the plays done more than once (I was a graduate student at San Francisco State University when *They Shall Endure* was produced), I felt a sense of loss, neglect, depleted energy, so I reached out for a larger audience.

Bach: And you have adapted the stories and novels of other writers, from the Greeks to Thomas Wolfe.

Madden: Yes, Euripides has always appealed to me, as he did to Robinson Jeffers who did his own version of *Medea* that inspired me to do a modern radio version. Then when the composer David Van Vactor asked me to adapt *The Trojan Women* to serve as a libretto, I did it, and in play form, it won a national contest and was done as an educational television production at the University of Nebraska, called *Hecuba's Lament*. Van Vactor never finished the opera. By the way, I hate opera, but I've written five or six libretti, one of which premiered at the Brooklyn Conservatory of Music.

Bach: It seems you have always adapted classic works. How did you come to adapt Plautus's *Casina*?

MADDEN: I wrote it on request. Kenneth Costigan was a senior at Yale Drama School in 1960, and he saw potential in a modernized version of that play for his thesis production as a director, so I dashed it off as a farcical satire on the beatniks of the fifties and sixties that I had known in Greenwich Village and San Francisco. Everybody at the drama school detested it, it was the only show ever snowed out on opening night in the school's history, but I heard that a classics professor loved it. Never produced since.

BACH: Just as you reach out to other media than fiction to explore the author-audience relationship, you seem to want to test the power of your favorite writers on the stage. Seems odd.

MADDEN: I can understand how it would. Seems natural to me, though. It's all about creative energy flow. When I was about seventeen, overwhelmed by the power of Thomas Wolfe's words, I tried to plug into that power by writing a play adaptation of *Look Homeward, Angel*. I showed it to Samuel Selden at Chapel Hill where Wolfe's plays had been produced at the Carolina PlayMaker's Theater. Selden didn't give me the scholarship I sought, nor did he produce the play. Ironically, my religious verse play about St. Paul's conversion, *From Rome to Damascus*, and two other one-act plays by Tennessee Williams and Rupert Brooke that I directed were staged at the Carolina PlayMaker's Theater about eight years later at a drama convention. It's also ironic that the section of *Look Homeward, Angel* that Ketti Frings adapted only a few years after I adapted Wolfe's novel focused on exactly the same events mine did.

While I was attending Yale Drama School and writing a book about Wright Morris's fiction, I envisioned his novel *The Deep Sleep* as a play with a three-tiered set, showing the basement, the first floor and the attic of a house. It's the very simple drama of the way a middle-class family reacts to the death of the father, who was a judge. Sort of like Agee's *A Death in the Family*. It was never produced.

While I was writing yet another version of *Cassandra Singing* as a play, I somehow decided I would adapt Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.* I wrote the first act and showed it to McCullers and asked her if I could adapt it and she said she had decided she would do it herself. There's an irony there, too, in a way, because you and I are writing a play *about* Carson McCullers. And Tennessee Williams. Two young playwrights writing in the same room one summer at Nantucket. Will we ever finish it?

Bach: Someday in our spare time, I hope. When your plays are being produced, how do you work with the director and the actors?

Madden: For most productions of *Cassandra Singing*, as [a] one-act and as [a] three-act play, I have been present during rehearsals. A production of the one-act at San Francisco State went very well, but the "world premiere" of the three-act produced at Albuquerque Little Theater did not go well. The director got enraged because I spoke to the actors about ways their interpretations were off. During productions of *Fugitive Masks*, about a troupe of commedia dell'arte actors, at Barter Theater and at Ohio University, I felt pretty much resented and that affected my own behavior. Both productions were near disasters because neither the director nor the cast could capture the improvisory spirit and feel of commedia dell'arte. So my answer—and the answer many playwrights I know would give—is that I *don't* work with directors, except in conference before rehearsals begin, and never *with* actors. Good questions though, because directors and actors love to talk about how wonderful it is to have the playwright right there when the production is taking shape.

Bach: How crucial is conflict in these plays? The conflict seems so clearly posed.

Madden: Odd you should feel that because I believe that my ultimate failure in the theater—anything less than fame is failure in the

theater, given both the predicament of theater today and especially my own origins, and expectations—derives, I suspect, from an attention deficit disorder regarding conflict. It somehow doesn't interest me as much as characters, situations and talk, talk, talk—a major criticism of my plays. The language, even in realistic plays, is perhaps too heightened, too poetic, maybe too allusive, too wrought to produce implication where the spotlight is on the literal. If you see the conflict clearly posed, I'm glad. But the hearts of audiences are not so soon made glad. For instance, the conflict in *Cassandra Singing* is too intellectual: the conflict between a life of action and a life of the imagination. I could dwell on that through fifteen years of revision, but audiences, in the end, could not endure it for two hours. How does what Lone wants come into conflict with what his invalid sister Cassie wants? The controlled answer to that question is theater, but my own interest in that question fades quite quickly. The plays that most appealed to me early were *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Member of the Wedding*. Unfortunately for me as an impressionable young playwright eager for examples to support my own similar ways of writing, those impressionistic plays were great successes.

Bach: You've acted and directed a great deal. Have other southern playwrights had that kind of experience?

Madden: I can't think of any. Nor do I know that any of them ever thought of themselves as oral storytellers when they were kids. So just how typically southern I am, I wonder.

Bach: A little history here. You've entered many contests and won several. Do they inspire you to get going on a play?

Madden: In the early days, yes. I heard about a statewide contest at UT and wrote *Call Herman in to Supper*, and got second place,

and wrote two other plays to win that contest and got third place for *Cassandra Singing* and first place for *They Shall Endure*. I entered many, many statewide and national contests, and won a decent number of them. Winning a contest as an opportunity to win an audience—that appealed to me.

Bach: Why so many versions of *Cassandra Singing*?

Madden: Each one-act and three-act stage and radio production revealed flaws that I wanted to deal with. Sometimes the director guided me through two to three versions. Most were set in Lonsdale, on the outskirts of Knoxville, my hometown in East Tennessee, and, as in the novel, I tried out of sheer nostalgia to get into the play elements from my childhood. Living in Eastern Kentucky so deeply affected my imagination, as opposed to my memory, that I shifted the setting to Hazard, Kentucky, and that freed up both the play and the novel tremendously. Put more simply, one three-act version had thirteen scenes (watching a curtain go up and come down twenty-six times becomes a drag for an audience) and twenty-five characters, few of them minor (who's who?). Also I could never make Lone's death at the end in the early versions seem anything more than a young playwright's notion of theatrical seriousness, and in the later versions in which he doesn't die, the play just seemed merely to end.

Bach: What do you think of other southern novelists who wrote plays?

Madden: None have produced major plays but I am very fond of most of them, especially McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding*. Capote's plays were merely OK, but at the time, the concept and the theatrical image of *The Grass Harp* appealed to me. Calder Willingham's adaptation of his novel *End as a Man* was a powerful play and the movie was very memorable, with Ben Gazarra as Jocko de Paris.

Bach: One might well ask—well, I'll ask it now—why more southern novelists don't write plays. For that matter why are there not more southern playwrights?

Madden: I think perhaps it's because all the elements in the southern culture that one might think, from Poe to Faulkner, would generate playwrights came out in Williams's many plays, and the many theatrical means he employed. Maybe that was discouraging to other would-be southern playwrights—especially if they were first and foremost novelists. I haven't seen or read any of Peter Taylor's or Reynolds Price's plays, but only for lack of opportunity or time. I'm very glad they do it, though. Evelyn Scott's novels make her, for me, a major writer, but I haven't read her play yet. Maybe you'll let me read your copy.

Bach: Did either Lillian Hellman or Tennessee Williams influence your plays?

Madden: Learned nothing from Hellman, tried to learn nothing from Williams, but did learn some things, as I say, that set me off once and for all in the wrong direction. Eleven scenes is too many even in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the greatest play by an American. The thirteen-scene disaster version of *Cassandra Singing* is, of course, all Tennessee's fault. I first met Tennessee when he came to Knoxville to bury his father in 1957 and I told him the story of *Cassandra Singing* and he promptly saw parallels to *Orpheus Descending*, which I did not then know.

Bach: Not only are you attracted in your fiction and other work to a great variety of forms, but your plays range from realism, to poetic expressionism, to verse, to religious, to classical, to opera libretti. Is there something in your southern background that begins to explain this compulsive exploration?

MADDEN: Everything goes back to the southern Appalachian storytelling tradition—and parallel always to that, radio drama, and music and voices on radio generally. When you associate your storytelling with the smell of an old mattress in a little old house, whispering a story to your younger and your older brothers in the dark, with the smell of the chill spring night air on a steep flight of front porch steps telling stories to neighbor playmates, with the smell of chalk, of sweaty, unair-conditioned bodies in a classroom and the distant smell of lunch cooking, and with the black dark of a cell, under wool blankets in the juvenile detention home, telling stories to other inmates, fearful of detection, which would bring on mass, bare-ass paddlings, audiences are intensely real, hot eyes, hot breath, warm bodies, sweaty hands, stinking feet, all focused as if demanding, expecting something to happen, and you feel the old, never-lessening compulsion to capture and hold and leave them somehow deeply affected, you want to explore all the ways that pleasure-dome effect can happen. So there are the ten or so verse plays, the Greek tragedies, the Chaplinesque dramatic workouts of Harlequin, and, having forsaken the drama of the fundamentalist sermons, the religious plays, the historic religious figures standing up to testify.

Plays by David Madden, Produced or Published

FULL LENGTH:

Cassandra Singing, adapted from the novel by David Madden (Crown Publishers); national contest winter; five major productions; radio version for *Earplay*, Public Radio. Published in *First Stage*. Movie Script: adaptation of *Cassandra Singing*, for Tony Bill, Warner Brothers, not filmed.

Hecuba's Lament (verse), national contest winner; educational TV production; several speeches published as poems. Radio production.

Casina (verse), book for musical, produced at Yale Drama School.

Fugitive Masks (verse), two major productions: Barter Theater, Ohio University; published in *Theater Book*.

ONE ACT:

Call Herman in to Supper, Tennessee state contest, produced at University of Tennessee.

Cassandra Singing, Tennessee state contest winner, produced at University of Tennessee, San Francisco State, Actor's Studio and several other places; published in *New Campus Writing* #2 (Putnam, hardcover; Bantam, softcover); several radio productions.

From Rome to Damascus (verse), Pearl Setzer Deal Award, Chapel Hill production; six other productions, including radio.

They Shall Endure, adaptation of his story "Love Makes Nothing Happen" published in *The Southwest Review*, Tennessee state contest winner, produced at University of Tennessee.

In My Father's House, published in *First Stage*.

The Day the Flowers Came, adaptation of his story in *Playboy*; published by Dramatic Publishing Company; ten productions.

Outside Events: Inside the Imagination: An Interview with David Madden

Jeffrey J. Folks, 1997

Born in Knoxville, Tennessee, in 1933, David Madden graduated from the University of Tennessee, served in the army, earned an MA at San Francisco State, and attended Yale Drama School on a John Golden Fellowship. Writer in residence at Louisiana State University, in Baton Rouge, from 1968 to 1992, and director of the Creative Writing Program (1992-1994), he now serves as director of the United States Civil War Center at LSU.

Random House published his first novel, *The Beautiful Greed* (1961), based on his merchant seaman experiences. For Warner Brothers, he adapted his second novel, *Cassandra Singing* (1969), to the screen (not yet produced). *The Shadow Knows* (1970), a book of stories, won a National Council on the Arts Award, judged by Hortense Calisher and Walker Percy. His stories have been reprinted in numerous college textbooks and twice in *Best American Short Stories*. He has published eight novels, two books of stories, and more than thirty books of criticism—on James Agee, James M. Cain, Wright Morris, Nathaniel West, and the tough guy and proletarian writers of the 1930s, among others. He coedited, with Peggy Bach, *Rediscoveries and Classics of Civil War Fiction*. This interview was conducted via the Internet during July 1997.

Folks: *Sharpshooter* gives us an immense panorama of the Civil War and its aftermath, as we follow its protagonist Willis Carr from East Tennessee through General Longstreet's battles, then to Andersonville and Willis's two years in the West. What sort of narrative problems did you face in organizing so much history and keeping it from being a bare chronology?

Madden: You left out the sinking of the *Sultana*, at the end of the war, a key metaphor for the way all the battle experiences sank into Willis's subconscious as "missed" experiences. In the first version of almost two thousand pages, Willis was only an anonymous sharpshooter on a single page, a charged image bridging Parson Brownlow's story to Dr. Ramsey's. Now Brownlow exists on only a few pages and Ramsey on only one. I realized that the first version was indeed chronological narrative and that it didn't express my growing conception of the war. I knew I needed to centralize the focus through a single intelligence, either my own as omniscient narrator—my original intention—or that of a character who stood outside the lives of Brownlow and Ramsey, but who developed an interest in them and in General Sanders. The character could stand above them and see more than they could, like that sharpshooter. Suddenly, I had solved the technical point-of-view problem and simultaneously given birth, without knowing it then, to my main character.

Folks: Could you describe the genesis of your interest in the Civil War and some of your research for the novel? Did you visit the same battlefields as Willis in the novel?

Madden: The first and greatest influence must have been seeing *Gone with the Wind* (when I was five and every five years thereafter). Although I didn't care for history as a study until I reached the university, I have always been a preservationist in attitude (don't tear down those wonderful old buildings!) and an archivist (I have every

piece of paper I ever wrote anything on and every program for every play, etc., as a way of preserving my own time within a historical context, and later the context of the history of the nation). As early as age fifteen, I responded to the legend of the shooting of General Sanders by a sharpshooter in Bleak House. Maybe that high school American History course affected me more deeply than I knew, but I paid close attention at the university and in reading for a correspondence course in history while I was in the army; then, while researching my autobiographical novel *Bijou*, I was taken not only by the discovery that General Sanders died in the bridal suite of the Lamar Hotel, which wraps around the Bijou Theater where I was an usher, but by learning about Knoxville during the war generally, and, specifically, about two opposing historical figures: Parson Brownlow, the Unionist newspaperman operating in the heart of the Confederacy there in Knoxville, and Dr. J. G. M. Ramsey, the first historian of Tennessee and a treasurer for the confederacy.

I started active research, reading Civil War fiction and history, in 1978, and actual writing in 1980. And yes, I did visit all the battlefields, Vicksburg being the first, and Manassas one of the last. They moved me deeply, especially Shiloh and Gettysburg, but maybe Harper's Ferry most of all, with its natural beauty and strangeness, its connection with Washington and Thomas Jefferson, the armory, the fabled Virginius Island industrial community, and John Brown's raid, bringing in Lee and Stuart—and many more associations. But a visit to Richmond, city of Confederate monuments, preceded those places, and I thrived on a sense there of the war in a broader and more complex context. The Brady photographs and the art works of Waud and Forbes and Homer enhanced my visits to the battlegrounds.

Folks: How did your work on the novel and your work on the United States Civil War Center parallel each other, or did they?

Madden: I had spent ten years researching and writing long versions of the novel before the inspiration for the Center struck me one day in 1988, or maybe a little earlier, as I drove onto the Louisiana State University campus, only a block from where the Center now stands. I realized there was no Center for all the various Civil War interests. I was shocked, as everyone is who hears about the Center now for the first time. So I convinced, quite easily, then LSU Chancellor Wharton to set a process in motion that would create the Center. I continued to work on major revisions of the novel while planning and creating and then running (since 1992) the Center, and even after it was accepted for publication three years later; in fact, I wrote a new chapter about engineering in the war after I had published the novel.

Folks: Though we are communicating by way of the Internet, I really hear your voice in your answers to my questions. For many writers, especially for southern writers, voice is something of a touchstone for narrative, perhaps because southern narrative is linked to oral culture. Richard Ford says that the voice in a story like "Rock Springs" is close to his voice. How much did you have to work at Willis's voice, and is it similar to "your own" (whatever that means)?

Madden: That's an interesting question because I have always been aware of the eagerness of listeners, maybe *a* listener quickening my tongue as the teller, to paraphrase Jane Eyre. I speak in response to a sense of living eyes looking at me expectantly, eager to listen to a voice, not my own voice, but the voice I use in each story, a different voice each time, I hope, but with, I guess, enough of me always in it for you, Jeff, to hear my normal speaking voice, as you know it. I didn't really work at getting Willis's voice—it simply answered the call of that story, the need for that kind of voice. I improvised it, as you know, in front of a live audience, and wove what I made up that night into the narrative after it appeared first as "Willis Carr at

Bleak House" in the *Southern Review* in 1984, and I think that voice is consistent throughout the many long and shorter versions. But listen to other, more literary first-person voices in my short stories. Do you hear my voice in those? We aren't speaking here, I think, of voice as people speak of it in creative writing workshops and literature classes. I've never been sure what is meant by voice in that context. I guess that's because, out of my oral storytelling childhood, I have always thought of a voice as one telling stories to live, listening audiences.

Folks: This may not be a good question, but did the comparison of the American Civil War and the Civil War going on in Bosnia (with its own sharpshooters in Sarajevo) influence your writing? Did the similarity complicate your work?

Madden: No, but the parallels capture my attention, and I am fascinated by key bridges, especially the one at Mostar. We witnesses certainly missed that war, but surely all those involved in it "missed it," partly because it is one of the most complex wars in history; it is not a typical *civil war*, and so maybe that term doesn't apply at all. I am working on a nonfiction study of civil war throughout history, trying to find parallels and differences, patterns, themes, key elements—partly to guide leaders who approach a civil war, are into one, or are coming out of one.

Folks: For twenty years I lived a few blocks from Lee Highway (in Athens, Tennessee, and later in Knoxville), a road used by Civil War troops, and I came to feel the palpability of the events that must have taken place near my home. I also heard local stories of the war, as if it were still a haunting event. But most Americans do not have this sense of the Civil War, or any history, as a living memory. As a writer, how do you connect with a public that may lack a historical context for understanding the war?

Madden: I didn't really think about that problem in the way you pose it, but now that you do, I realize that the main theme of *Sharpshooter*—that everyone missed the war, both during the war and after, right up to us today—is aimed primarily at the ahistorical public, to move them with the pathos of having missed the war and to motivate them, maybe, to make an attempt—as Willis did—not, finally, to miss it. Willis's uniquely obsessive and imaginative effort not to miss it results in his being the American of all time to miss it less than everyone else. He came out of history a member of the ahistorical public. But I, like you, have always been attentive to the ground history has passed over, in Knoxville and everywhere else, everywhere I've been. I started with the history of my family.

Folks: I'm interested in your description of Willis Carr's summation of his research in 1913, where he describes himself as entering a "new realm" of partial detachment: "In striving to experience through others fully what I missed, I reached the realm of the impersonal. Feeling, imagining, thinking neither as General Sanders nor as myself." I assume that Willis has reached a condition analogous to that of the "artist." Are you suggesting that the artist must be detached from his or her personal feelings? Does this leave the artist without emotions or commitments? Can the artist ever be separate from personal opinions or perspectives?

Madden: The highest form of self-ness is self-lessness. Feeling, imagining, and thinking as other people, Willis gradually achieves freedom from the narrowness of his own experience, and that process finally raises him to another level, the impersonal, from which he can experience both his own self-ness and that of others. Those fiction writers who are not writing mainly about themselves and who create a work of art, do, yes, achieve a kind of impersonality, such as Joyce achieved in *Ulysses* and in *Finnegan's Wake* and "The

Dead" and that I hope I achieved in *The Suicide's Wife*, but not in *Bijou* (see, however, my radical revision of that novel, if and when it's published). All Civil War memoirs have this in common—nobody really knew what the hell was going on and in the writing about it, they don't attempt any kind of conception about their experience or transcendence of it.

Yes, the artist must be detached from personal feelings, but not the writer who focuses on personal experience, which to me produces only a kind of rarified journalism, and yes, the artist can be separate from personal opinions or perspectives if that is what he or she strives to achieve. Sure, some of my novels are based on personal experiences, feelings, and thoughts, but "pure" imagination created the best of my novels and stories. Willis Carr is that rare fictional creature, a man who seeks and struggles to feel, imagine, and think about an experience he missed and who realizes one day that he has achieved the state you quoted and is, then, more akin to the literary artist than to comrades. I intended him to be a common and ordinary child who becomes an extraordinary, ordinary old man.

Folks: You say that the pure imagination is the "only real place," but there's always a tension between the imagination and the world of experience. The greatest photography is imaginative, but it also honors experience in its respect for the subject. I felt you were conveying this in "The Singer." Has your sense of this tension changed since you began writing about the Civil War, a subject that is documented to such an extent?

Madden: Historical documentation is subordinate to the power of imagination. Reverse Marianne Moore, not real toads in imaginary gardens, but imaginary toads in real gardens. No, my twenty-year brush with the real world of the Civil War, the facts, only authenticated for me my conviction that the unimagined life is not worth

living. You know, I am more and more aware of the power of imagination as I become more aware of the creative energy of dreams—dreams draw on reality as I draw on facts of the war, only to transform reality into something unique. In dreams we don't remember, we (or some force loose in us) create.

Folks: Why do you make Willis a self-reflexive narrator, self-aware of the problematic nature of telling history? At what point in your thinking about the novel did Willis become this kind of narrator?

Madden: My answer to a previous question gets into answering this one. Having experienced and then read history, he realizes the problems of writing history, his own and that of the war. Human attitudes and perceptions make all so-called facts suspect. A true history must include those misperceptions and their effects, lifelong in most cases, upon the participants and the readers of contradictory accounts up to our moment in history. It must include what one assumes or imagines, as well as the untrustworthy facts (and that includes the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* in 128 volumes). It must include the emotions of the participants as one can imagine them in shifting contexts. Because he was young and feels he missed the war and because he is in many ways unique, getting into areas others have not explored, he experiences more problems in writing history than most participants and later historians. He evolved into this kind of narrator. He was an even more complex narrator in two major previous versions. I have, I confess, simplified, while fearing that the published novel would itself prove too complex for the average reader; based on the responses of readers who speak and write to me, I am delighted to confess also that I underestimated the appeal Willis Carr has for the average reader.

Folks: I do feel that "appeal" of Willis Carr. Part of it, for me, is his multidimensionality: He combines so many opposites, he becomes

universal without intending to be "representative" of any group. Do you think so?

MADDEN: Bless you, yes. You've experienced just what I hoped for, with the difference, however, that it is by way of his uniqueness, paradoxically, that he becomes universal and representative. He thinks he's not like everyone else; but in becoming interested in everyone else, he becomes himself, and the self he becomes embodies everyone else. So, in that odd way, he is universal.

FOLKS: One of the powerful aspects of Willis's story (and of other characters in your fiction, I think) is that he returns to no family, no group, no intact culture. Although there is a similar "failed return" in the work of Poe, Melville, Faulkner, Wolfe, and others, your characters may be disinterested in that they continue to seek self-understanding. Where does this instinct come from? I like to think your characters retain a memory of social order, perhaps from the relatively traditional culture of East Tennessee.

MADDEN: I wanted his fellow man to be his family, with no distractions from a real family, and it is his search for understanding of other lives that gives him what you call *self-understanding*, which is a term that distracts I think from the larger impulse, to know others through emotion, imagination, and intellect. Social order, yes, but in an almost metaphysical realm, more than in the realm of *society* as we usually mean the term. So it's a "failed return" only on a relatively unimportant level.

FOLKS: Did you consciously try to avoid anachronism in dealing with names, descriptions, attitudes, language, etc.? For example, you speak of the *optical illusion* of General Sanders appearing on a white horse—not a nineteenth-century phrase, right? Or is it? Or did you deliberately try to merge past experience with present, to "update"

the war in a sense by using contemporary attitudes and language to approach it?

Madden: *La guerre c'est moi*. This is not the war Sam Watkins or Henry Kyd Douglas or Ulysses S. Grant, the best of the memoirists, write about but the one that Willis Carr and I fashioned together. Even so, I wasn't trying to "update" the war with language like the phrase you quote. If it is modern, I slipped. However, Oliver Wendell Holmes, in essays in *Soundings from the Atlantic*, in which he discusses photography, uses that or a very similar phrase. Think of Poe's "The Sphinx." The idea seems of an even earlier time.

Folks: Were you influenced by Civil War photography?

Madden: Civil War photography has haunted me all my life, and photography in general has been a preoccupation. I have written about it in what I am told are some unusual ways. I also published a long chapter on photography from the novel, which, in the final version, I reduced to that single obsession with the Sharpshooter in Devil's Den. I strive to create images that yet new images beget, as Yeats said, and "abstractions blooded," to use Wallace Stevens's phrase, on every page. The charged image is what I strive to create, and cinematography influenced me from childhood. The first great impact was the Gardner photographs Dover published, which I bought at Lincoln's house in Springfield.

Folks: What about Willis's feeling of being "outside events"? Does this repeat situations from your other fiction? Is this a general theme of your writing?

Madden: Willis is outside events because of the convergence in him of several factors: his youth, his mature looks, the isolated culture out of which he came, his isolation from family, his accidentally going off with the "wrong" army, his status as a lone sharpshooter, his role as

a kind of artist, and then his profound conviction and sense that he missed the war (he encounters no one else like himself). As such a person, he is inclined to respond to the unusual and finally to seek the unusual and to bring a unique perspective to the war. Coming from a specific place, he becomes, even when he returns to that place to spend the rest of his life, placeless; from a clearly defined family culture, he returns to no family and does not marry and create one of his own. He is a loner who develops, out of his isolation and impersonal perspective, an embracing compassion for his fellow man, which finally concentrates upon the black man he killed. Yes, he is, I recently realized, like many, maybe most, maybe all, of my characters in all my fiction in all genres. Metaphors that help me see my role in this world as artist are: as a benevolent con man, or as a man who fell from Mars, or as a poet like Byron, who wrote, "I moved among them, but was not of them."

When I was asked to give a talk on my writing in France recently, on the theme "Other Places, Other Selves," I realized for the first time that I do not sometimes set stories in "foreign places," such as Alaska or Chile, but in a sense more literal than metaphorical, I set all my fiction in a nowhere, "outside events," as you put it. Alvin Henderlight, in my first novel, is on a ship; he ends up its scapegoat. Cassie, in my second novel, is confined to her bed in Eastern Kentucky. Lucius is trapped in his imagination in the Bijou forever. The suicide's wife has no sense of connection with anyone, anywhere, even less than Meursault in *The Stranger*. Big Bob in *On the Big Wind* exists only as a voice on the radio. Ernest, J. D., and the unnamed girl in three of my best stories, "No Trace," "The Day the Flowers Came," and "The Singer," are solitary people, marginalized by the predicaments they are in. So the only real place for all my characters is that so-called unreal place: the human imagination. My novel-in-progress, *London Bridge Is Falling Down*, poses two different possibilities,

each attractive in its own way: the very strange present draft that expresses the many ways the unique life of shopkeepers on London Bridge from 1100 to 1828 affect my consciousness as myself; or a more conventional narrative that delineates the complex interaction of the inhabitants of the shops and houses on the bridge built around a horrendous sin, with some sense of redemption as a community at the end.

Folks: I don't know if you want to get into *London Bridge*, but since you mention it, what attracts you as an artist to the subject, so different in time and place from your other fiction?

Madden: It's not different. On my first trip to New York, I made a record at Coney Island and sent it to my mother, saying, "I was born in New York." In Venice, I felt perfectly at home, and in Rome, and in Paris (not in San Francisco, although I loved it and I dream of it more than any other place). So when I learned about life in the houses and shops on ancient London Bridge, I felt at home, more than any of those other places. What do they all have in common? They are exotic, bizarre, strange, unearthly, especially London Bridge, although the brute mechanics of the building, maintenance, and demolition of the bridge fascinate me. There is only one time and place—*now*, in my imagination. "Did that really happen to you?" people ask me, with a knowing smile, after my readings from my fiction. "Yes, in my imagination."

Folks: I see the influence of Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, even of Rufus Follett, on Willis Carr as a child narrator. Were you consciously influenced by this tradition of American fiction? How does Willis Carr differ from earlier examples?

Madden: Yes, Huck Finn, now that you mention him, and maybe Holden Caulfield. Huck is deeply ingrained in my experience and in

my nature. Walker Percy said Lucius Hutchfield was like Huck, as did several reviewers. And my affection for the loner Holden Caulfield is undiminished by time, although his actions do not parallel my own, as Huck's do. Holden exists for me in Salinger's words and the attitudes they express. Huck is both more unique and more universal than Holden—as are Lucius and Willis. Homage to Huck is paid in *Sharpshooter* when Wirz interrogates Willis, and Willis tries the same con as Huck with the widow: "I'm just a poor little feller looking for his daddy." But as Huck's way of catching the widow's yarn betrayed him, Willis's eyes betrayed him to Wirz—he knew that Willis's eyes had seen the war. Willis differs from Huck and Holden in that he makes a unique effort, unconscious at first and gradually more conscious, to comprehend his experience emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually as a task that is intrinsically transcendent, not, finally, self-reflexive, as you put it earlier. By 1933, he has become a new kind of intelligence, he has become already fit for the territory ahead—the new millennium.

Folks: Yes, I see now that Willis's task is intrinsically transcendent and not self-reflexive. I did have a sense of his striving toward wisdom outside of himself, especially in the last sections of *Sharpshooter*. This comes across. In terms of his character, is this search related to all he has seen in the war, and maybe also related to his guilt as a participant?

Madden: I see just now that the first impulse to understand comes from the guilt he felt over killing Cherokee, who taught him to read and write. Maybe not because he was black, but that would come into it, for him, I think. It's all unconscious, though, right up to the last chapter when he thinks his obsession with General Sanders is over, and he's ready to die and suddenly he is there again in Andersonville prison, looking down from the guard tower at Cherokee, and every

tiny detail comes rushing back into his consciousness. I want to leave the emphasis on this one-to-one relationship, not on a guilt over all he has seen and done up to that point. The dead call to him on an impersonal level throughout most of the novel—the General, the sharpshooter in the photograph, the victims en masse of the sinking of the *Sultana*. He takes a first step, at the end of his life, as Ann does in *The Suicide's Wife*, as Meursault does when he attacks the priest: direct human contact to give personal dimension to all the other feelings, imaginings, and insights he has had about people and the war in general.

Folks: You've written about fellow Knoxville author James Agee in several books and have sometimes contrasted his fiction with your own. Agee wrote some powerful nonfiction about World War II and Hiroshima; I wonder why Agee did not make more use of history, especially Knoxville local history.

Madden: His Lincoln documentary and a few other projects aside, history wouldn't have appealed to Agee, I think, not even as he grew older. He was too self-centered, in the most divine sense, of course, and we see that, and his awareness of it, most dramatically and movingly in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In a way, I want to do for the folks on London Bridge what he wanted to do for the folks in Alabama. But only in a way. I am going after much, much more than Agee, given his sensibility, would have gone for. Yet, if you look not only at all his work but all his notes and plans and poetry, maybe I am doing on London Bridge just what he would have done. I feel a great kinship and aversion to Agee, and suspect he would have felt the same about me. Wait a minute. I think *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* influenced me in some ways, ways I can't trace at the moment.

Folks: Could you contrast Willis Carr with another child-narrator in your fiction, Lucius Hutchfield in *Bijou*? I see some similarities,

although Willis seems more "mature" in his drive to understand historical events through his sketching and writing.

MADDEN: At the same age as Willis, I only just now fully realize, Lucius lives in the imagination of others (movie makers) and in his own (the stories he writes) more than in daily life. He misses what I came to see, that the people around him and his own experiences among them are also fascinating. To him and to me, what he imagines has a reality that competes with life, successfully as often as not. Out of that conception, I have revised the published novel (seven hundred pages) by confining it to the walls of the Bijou Theater (making the novel now less than two hundred pages, a process similar to my revisions of *Sharpshooter* from two thousand to about two hundred pages). I want to express now the idea that he is as an adolescent trapped in the Bijou, as all Americans have been since the invention of the medium and are now (including television and videos) and that as an artist, he lives most intensely in his imagination. That is a conception, I realize, that is in some ways diabolical while being in other ways divine.

FOLKS: I'm interested in the process of revising down from long manuscripts to severely focused novels, as in *Sharpshooter* or the revised *Bijou*. When you revise in that way, what do you want to exclude? What are you hoping to discover?

MADDEN: In revising a published work, I am trying to get back to the original intention. *Bijou* began with an obsessive all-night recall of the theater, itself, and the people in it; then most of the published version deals with events outside the theater, and so I lost the focus. In *Sharpshooter*, I wanted to exclude everything that expanded the major themes to the point of diluting the force. The one photograph of the dead sharpshooter is carved out of fifty pages on photographs, an obsession that began with the sharpshooter photograph.

Folks: Willis Carr seems remote from current events and has no real position on the Union; he doesn't care about "history in the larger sense." Is this remoteness from events necessary for you, too, as an artist?

Madden: The artist's life is his art and his personal commitment is to his art. Ideas, stories, characters, narratives are interesting and meaningful only in the process of making art and for the reader in the achieved work of art. For the reader, the illusion of life is just that, an illusion; what the reader experiences is a work of art (the medium is indeed the message). I care passionately about the Civil War, the Cold War, World War II and Vietnam, but not as mere material for a novel. I hope that the reader, like Willis Carr, experiences the Civil War as no one else back then or since has experienced it, through the paradox that full of a sense of having missed the war and motivated to recreate it, I, he, and the reader end up missing it much less than Sam Watkins, Douglas, and Grant did. Meditation upon the negative "miss" results at last in a positive, impersonal, but passionate possession. Recall, too, however, how Willis returns at the end to the most powerful personal experience in his memory of Cherokee. The implication is that Cherokee will truly haunt him for the rest of his days, that he will, in time, feel the most intense guilt, remorse, and maybe redemption—after the end of the novel, I mean.

Folks: What about Willis's transformation of identity from Union to Confederate to Union to Confederate? Is there any real change of sympathies? Are you suggesting that soldiers could actually change sympathies so easily? Or is this only because Willis is thirteen years old?

Madden: Willis's age enables him to achieve a kind of impersonality. Recall how nebulous his sense of the war and of allegiances was in that first chapter, and remember that his mother and her family

are Rebel. His early thoughts on the subject are superficial. So he misses that sense of deep identity, as well as the events by being both a child and asocial in the sense that families living in isolation on top of Appalachian mountains often were. With no ties to the only social unit he knows, his family, he is all the more adrift. He is also free to have a wide range of missed experiences, so that when he tries to recapture them, and gather those of others on both sides, he is more open to possibilities, and thus achieves the uniqueness I spoke of before.

Folks: Finally, I see Willis Carr as a champion of his culture and class, opposing his imagination to the voices of more privileged, official, or remote commentators. Do you think that his voice works in this way?

Madden: Yes, but not as a champion of his culture and class. I can see how that may be the effect, though, on you and many other perceptive readers. He critically questions others only because he is bewildered by the way they speak and act, individually and as groups. I celebrate the human imagination at work in him as an end in itself. What you, Jeff, sometimes latch onto are elements common to other fiction that in my own fiction are simply raw material, like any other raw material, like bridges and streets and buildings that are interesting in a transitory way as I strive to create something transcendent. What goes into the pleasure dome is not as important as the pleasure-dome effect. Stuff is common, but I strive to make something uncommon out of it. You know, your questions delve and excavate; they make me realize how very little I have in common with writers of my time.

David Madden on Creative Writing: An Interview

James A. Perkins, 2002

Although I was a student at Centre College when David Madden was teaching there, I did not take classes from him. I followed his career book by book and saw him now and again at writers' conferences or readings. I spoke to David Madden about his career as a teacher of creative writing in his home in Baton Rouge in January of 2002. This was the second half of a long interview. The first half covered his writing and was integrated with an interview Randy Hendricks conducted at the William Faulkner Conference in Oxford, Mississippi, the preceding summer in our *David Madden: A Writer for All Genres*, University of Tennessee Press, 2006.

Perkins: David, you have taught writing for, well, I don't know how long.

Madden: Since 1960, I guess. Maybe 1959, just before my first novel came out. Morehead State College, I think was the first place I taught writing. But that was the third year of teaching per se. I taught at Appalachian State Teacher's College in Boone, North Carolina. But I didn't teach writing. However, I did teach directing and directed the plays, so there was some creative interaction there. Then at Centre, I didn't teach writing. Wish I had, boy that would have been something. With that bunch of students, wouldn't it? I don't think they had a writing course.

Perkins: No. They finally hired a person in creative writing this year.

Madden: That's incredible. OK, and then . . . so then I was hired at the University of Louisville, by Harvey Curtis Webster, a Hardy Scholar, because I had taught at Morehead State and Centre in Kentucky. But anyway, my first experience teaching writing was on the same staff with Dayton Kohler, who was a Faulkner scholar; R. V. Cassill; Robert Francis, who was a novelist from Kentucky, I think. And Andrew Lytle and Caroline Gordon came to visit. Now I actually did two or three years, I'm getting some of these people mixed up. And Harriet Arnow came in later years. And James Still.

Arnow and Still were pretty much against my approach to things. They're very off-the-cuff and didn't really believe creative writing could be taught and all that sort of thing. But Cassill and I were perfect for each other and have been throughout the years since. Oh, my novel came out while I was at Centre. So the novel's out, then I teach in the summer, then [Webster] lures me up to the University of Louisville to teach creative writing, and one student stands out there, or two of them . . . one of them is Dorothea Stallmaker, who is an older woman, very attractive, about forty, seemed to me very old but still attractive lady, and a lovely person and extremely talented, and she never did much with it until about three or four years ago, she calls me up or writes to me and she's now written two books of stories and two novels and she's one of my favorite clients. And the other one was Terry Bisson, the science fiction writer who sometimes is on *Car Talk*, and he's won awards and written a science fiction civil war book. And I reprinted one of his stories in one of my anthologies. So that's kept up. And then I went to Kenyon and I taught creative writing, but it wasn't a big deal there, somehow. I guess I was hired to teach creative writing and to be assistant editor of the *Kenyon Review*.

Perkins: And at that time, Robie Macauley was there?

Madden: Robie and a novelist named George Lanning were there, and then Robie left for *Playboy*.

Perkins: Well, he and George put together one of the better books . . .

Madden: Oh, yeah, *Techniques for Fiction*. And then R. V. Cassill, the first guy I taught with, put together the *best* one, before *Revising Fiction*. *Revising Fiction*, you understand, is *the best one*. I'm really not bragging, I mean, I just know it's the best because it lays down the law with such irrefutable examples, bit by bit, that you know there's no question. I mean, there it is, there's a great writer using that technique, you know, in revision.

Perkins: Let me interrupt you here, because if I'm not mistaken, at this same time, as you're teaching this, you're busy learning by writing reviews of first novels.

Madden: Yeah, I think I had a policy of 'I want to review first novels' at the same time that I was also reviewing things like the best short stories of the year, *Transatlantic Review* short stories, but doing it in a teacherly fashion, and this was way back there. That's how I got on the *Kenyon Review*. I reviewed John Hawks and a couple of other novelists like that all together.

Perkins: One of those omnibus reviews?

Madden: Yeah. And then by the way in the *Southern Review*, I reviewed a whole bunch of books and called it the 'Death of the Omnibus Review.' So that's a bad policy. Anyway so that's a good point to make because Bob Lumas, who was a very good editor among many good editors in those days . . . my own editor, David McDowell, being one of them, in the Max Perkins tradition. He was

my editor at Random House for *The Beautiful Greed*, while I was at Centre. And I've got . . . I ought to reread those . . . I've got a packet this thick of his letters to me for revisions of *The Beautiful Greed.* And he said at the end, and he repeats this to people, he says, "I've never seen anybody learn how to write a novel after it was accepted." He said, "I could just see you learning how to write a novel." So immediately after I published the novel, in which I learned how to write a novel, I started teaching how to write. But as I recall, the way I taught, many of the essential approaches were already there, one of which I'll give you an example of. Steve Allen, who just sent me a novel, who was in that workshop, was involved in this exercise. There was Dayton Kohler, and myself, and R. V. Cassill, and one other writer, maybe Bob Hazel, up front of the class. We used to meet with all the writers . . . four of us would meet with all the writers and go over a published story. And agree and disagree and dissect and show the techniques. So we said, 'Well, this story by Chekov is really wonderful. Now you people can really learn a lot from Chekov in this story. The way he describes moonlight, for instance.' And so I said, or somebody said, I don't even know who said 'the way he described moonlight.' Somebody said, "Well, show the students the passage we're referring to." We spent the whole hour flipping through to find the passage that described moonlight. And we left unsatisfied. The next day, Steve Allen, who's just an old country boy from the mountains of Kentucky, came out, he says, "I found it." And he says, "It's not there literally, it's there by implication." It says he's walking down the road, something like that, saw a piece of glass, saw a sparkle of light, and so the context was night, therefore it was moonlight and as soon as you read that little thing about the spark of light on the glass on the road in the context of night, moonlight has to be the source. It's out in the country. Well, that's brilliant on Chekov's part. And that's a perfect example of how writing ought to be taught.

Perkins: It's also pretty good for that student to pick it up.

Madden: Oh yeah, for him to pick it up. That's what I mean by 'that's a good way to teach it,' You're teaching students to pick up things and learn from them. Student says to me, 'Well, I didn't like that story.' I said, 'Well, what's that got to do with anything? What'd you learn from it?' 'Well, I didn't like it so I didn't pay that much attention.' 'Well, if you had, you'd have learned this, this, this, this and this. Whether you like it or not, that's irrelevant. You're not reading it to be entertained; you're reading it to learn." And it takes them a little bit to get that. They don't know quite what that means.

Perkins: When you're dealing with a student paper . . . story . . .

Madden: That's right, I always correct them. They never use the word *paper*. 'What'd you think of my paper?' I said, 'What paper? You're talking about a story that you handed me, a story.' 'Oh, I'm sorry Mr. Madden. I used the word *paper*. Get the academic stink off of it, you see.

Perkins: I remember two colors, pink and green. Is that a technique that you still employ?

Madden: Yeah, I do it more, but I do it differently. This is for my little boy in a way. At the red light, he'd say, 'Red stop Daddy.' At the green light, he'd say, 'Green go Daddy.' And that's what I'm saying. I'm saying, when I mark red, I want you to stop and think about it because it's not working. It's not effective. I don't think. And in this context, at this moment you could take that same thing and shift it and maybe it'd work. Or you could take that same thing and rework it, whatever. And what I say doesn't work always will work in another story. I like to say as in *Revising Fiction*, Conrad went in one morning, wife had locked him in, came out for lunch and she said, "Joseph, what'd you do today?" She's eager to know if he was progressing

because they need the money. And he says, "Oh, it was a wonderful day. It's really a great day." She says, "What'd you do?" And he says, "I took the comma out." And . . . I say that is deadly serious. A deadly serious artist. He took the comma out and it made all the difference. She locked him in hopefully, full of hope, came out for supper. She said, "Joseph, what'd you do this afternoon?" And he said, "I put the comma back in." You see, so nothing is trivial. Nothing is small. You know sometimes when I give lectures on creative writing, I use "The Day the Flowers Came." The teacher will say, 'Well, that was really great, David, they really needed that. You really gave them the nuts and bolts.' And I'm thinking, "Oh, and you give them the metaphysics? Oh, and you give them what's really important?" You know the term *nuts and bolts* sounds trivial, mechanical. But what it means to say is you finally taught them something. Because if *you're* not teaching them nuts and bolts, what the hell *are* you teaching them? You're probably teaching them your sensibility. You're probably teaching them yourself. You're probably teaching what *you* like as well as what you *don't* like, which is what goes on in many workshops.

Perkins: Wait a minute. Before you get to the workshops, I want you to get back and tell me about the green.

Madden: The green means it's going well, it's working well. And a variation on this, just recently, is that I put a line under a phrase or a line down the side of a paragraph and I'll put an 'X' or a check. A check means 'stop' 'look at this' or 'use this as a model of what you need to be doing throughout.' In other words, this paragraph sets the standard. So try to bring everything up to this level. And this one with the 'X' is below this level. So compare the two, and then ask yourself, without me telling you, ask yourself, 'What makes this better than that, according to *Revising Fiction?* And I even go 'R.F. 38,' sometimes. And sometimes not. I say . . . well, the first time I

make the comments and I give the reference to *Revising Fiction*, first story. The second draft of the first story I do this check and cross . . . or check and cross bar and say now you go to *Revising Fiction* asking yourself, 'Well, I think it's this, this, this or this that he's referring to.' And you go look and you'll find, probably, the one. Then on the exam, at midterm and final, I'll repeat the process, both halves of the course. They have to come in and make the same kind of comments I make from "The Day the Flowers Came." And further, have to key it to *Revising Fiction*, like the old *Harbrace Handbook*.

Perkins: Do you do anything to make them aware of the process?

Madden: They have to write an essay answering a question about a technique of their choice, as applied to their story. "Which technique are you employing most fully? Choose that technique, show me what you did and refer to how you got there through your vision." OK. Now if you compare that with the Iowa workshop model, which all these imaginative writers have been using for fifty years, what you do is "I don't like that story. Do you think that he'd really drink Pabst Blue Ribbon?" In my story ["The World's One Breathing"], Reatha Dameron says, "It tasted like Papst Blue Ribbon." I've had people actually say that. "Pabst? Why Pabst Blue Ribbon?" As if it mattered a damn.

Perkins: Well, behind the book *Revising Fiction* there's a tremendous amount of work, which shows up in that book that I just saw from the Scarecrow Press [*Writer's Revisions,* 1981]. Now you had looked up, it looked to me like, every example of somebody revising fiction in the English language.

Madden: And poetry. And nonfiction in that case. Thoreau. There's a wonderful book on the writing of Thoreau. And there's a wonderful textbook that's in the same league as mine and Macauley and

Lanning and Cassill, and that is *Creative Vision and Revision*, which came out in another version called *Creative Writing and Rewriting* by Kehl, K-E-H-L, in which he puts the two versions side by side.

Perkins: Oh yeah, he has a piece of *Proud Flesh* and then *All the King's Men* next to it.

Madden: That's right. And I miss that book. And so one I picked up today, up there at the office, was Malamud's "Idiots First," and "A Ticket for Isaac," or whatever. And man, when you compare those two things, you see the principles that I'm teaching.

Perkins: Earlier I asked you about the problem of specialization in literature; that critics like to see people as one thing or another thing and they have difficulty dealing with them if they are polymaths. I'd like to look at the other side of that issue. Do you believe that writing across genres allows you to see and solve problems in your work more easily than, say, a specialist could? And do you think that you're able to show students that same strength?

Madden: Yeah. I believe that my working with the same work, such as *Cassandra Singing*, in *all* genres except poetry helped me realize it. It started in my mind as a play but it pretty soon started as a short story. Then I went back to the play, and then a critic of the same contest, in which James Justus directed *Call Herman in to Supper* years earlier, in that contest at UT it was performed as a winner and the comment was . . . ironically I was third place instead of first place with that one . . . the comment was that "there's enough in here for a whole novel." And I think one of my old teachers said that, C. P. Lee, one of my *best* teachers, of creative writing. And well, I didn't have a creative writing *course*, but he taught me informally. And so I thought, 'Well, yeah." And so I began to do a novel version, and it started experimentally, somewhat influenced by *The Sound and the*

Fury, the structure. Different voices. And the emphasis shifting from Cassie to Lone in one version to Lone to Cassie.

Then I did it as a film script, which brought me back to my original conception because I've told you I was revising *Bijou* back to my original conception. So Hollywood, far from destroying my novel, directed me right back to my own original conception, after the novel had already been published. Which was to look at it from Cassie's point of view instead of Lone's. And to do it cinematographically from her quality. And he accepted the final version for production and then the studio was bought out. Warner Brothers. And a hippie crowd came in.

And then I did it in a one-act play, a three-act play. I did it as a three-act play with twenty-five characters and a three-act play with six characters. And then I did it as a radio play for *Earplay* on public radio. I don't know if you ever heard about that. *Earplay*, public radio. Which brings me back to one of my original inspirations. The radio format. Now I think that the novel benefited from all that work on the play. Because the novel is scenic. You go from one *scene* to another scene.

And the scene is very vivid. The dialogue is very, very vivid, as if to be played on stage. And then the novel version developed complexity of characters that I tried to capture on the stage and failed because it wouldn't work on the stage. So it failed in the one way, but it worked in the other way. Ironically, the failed play helped the successful novel. But the successful novel-writing didn't help the failed play; whereas, they were always going on simultaneously. I was almost always doing a play version while writing the novel version. And I would change the point of view, told the whole thing in the first person in the novel one time and lost a lot of the dramatic stuff. Went back to third person central intelligence, which is all interior, and which benefited from the dramatic externality of things, you see.

Perkins: Uh-huh.

Madden: And then we got into the radio play, I don't know, I can't really claim a symbiotic relationship there, but I'm sure there was because . . . no, wait a minute, it had already been published by that time. And it had already been published by the movie version. *But*, the movie version is so successful from my point of view that I almost wish I could do with that what I've done with *Bijou*.

Perkins: Well, I can't comment on what you teach as a teacher of writing because I've never had you for a class, but I've learned by watching you as a professional. And what it's taught me is to not think of myself as a poet, or as a fictional writer, or as a novelist. And I think that it's kept me away from something I see a lot of my colleagues suffer from. And that is writer's block.

Madden: Yeah. I've never had it.

Perkins: Well, you can't have it if you are working in a whole bunch of different genres because if you can't write a poem that day, you can write something else.

Madden: Well, two things. If you're comfortable in all the forms, you can always go to another form. That's why Robert Penn Warren and I, and perhaps you, are always working on many things at the same time, even if it's four novels. Still, we're adaptable to move from one project to another but usually it's different genres. And another thing that enables you even more not to have writer's block is that, if you believe in your craft and you love your craft, and you enjoy solving problems, the craft is always there.

Perkins: If you don't have a story to write, you have a problem to solve or an exercise to do.

MADDEN: You see? The craft is always there if the story's not there. And if the craft is there, the story will follow because one of the greatest essays ever written is "Technique as Discovery" by Mark Schorer, in which he shows that it's the technique that produces the story. Not the other way around. Any fool can dream up a story. Especially since all stories are alike. I mean, there's no new story. There's only a new way of doing it, right? So there are two ways to avoid writer's block. It's to think in terms of technique and to be able to shift from one project or genre to another. Let me go back to teaching creative writing. When I first came here, the course everybody had to take first was a course in all the genres. Introduction to all the genres. And you had to write in all the genres. And some of the students kicked and screamed about it. Other students, who weren't so sure what they wanted to do, benefited enormously. Then when the new teachers came in—Stanley Plumly, and Kit Hathaway—they said, "I don't know anything about fiction." So we gradually dropped it. Nobody but me has taught all the genres. I'll teach it at the drop of a hat. You could say to me, "Now classes begin". . . let's say "tomorrow." You could say, "David, we don't have anybody to teach film." Scriptwriting. I'll walk in and I'll teach it. And that's part of the myriad mindedness. That's part of the interdisciplinary temperament. Predisposition. Predisposed. And it's also technical. Like one teacher said to me, "I'm sick, this is the last day of my class, I can't prepare them for the exam. I can't do the review. We were going to do the review with the novel we're teaching today. Would you take the class for me?" He says, "Have you read Ernest Gaines?" *Eight Old Men* . . . what is it? *The Old Man* . . . something. And I said, "No." And he said "Oh shoot!" I said, "What?" He said, "Well, you haven't read it." I said, "That's OK. It doesn't make any difference. You want me to teach it, I'll teach it." I walked in there . . . I started asking them

technical questions, "What's the structure of this novel? What's the point of view? Which character is the most important character? They alternate among five or six different voices. Well, which one is most reoccurring? And what happens when this one is juxtaposed next to that one? Every single question was grounded in a technical term, none of which they knew. Except I'd explain it if it was really difficult. And they said, "This is the best class we've had so far. We're totally confident going into the exam." Because nobody'd ever nailed the damn thing down. It was always, "Well, is racism a bad thing?"

Perkins: Well now, I'm seeing some real differences in this approach and the Iowa approach. Why do you think that this approach is not more widely used?

Madden: Well, I guess people would have to think of it, people would have to be less content, people would have to be willing to work harder intellectually, be on their toes in the classroom. See the Iowa workshop method, all you got to do is be Vance Bourjaily. And by that I mean Vance Bourjaily was at Iowa for many years and you know what he was like by reputation. Which is, he hardly ever did anything for his students. Then he came here and ran a program and I could actually *see* what they were talking about. What he would do is simply sit in there and smile. As they all talked. And a lot of the talk became so acrimonious and personal that some people testified they had to get drunk before they could go to the class. And now that's not because Vance was a bastard, he should have been a bastard, but he wasn't. At least if he had been a bastard it may have helped a little bit. But what he did, was, you know, was just smile and then he'd make a few comments and then they would think that they were really good because he'd published all his novels and had a good reputation and so on. But man, writers . . . too many writers exploit the situation. They think, "This is so easy. All you've got to do is just meet the class

for three hours a week. Then it's all over with. You can write the rest of the week, maybe hold a few office hours and shoot the breeze. Talk about the students' personal problems, and seduce some of them. And that's all you have to do as a teacher of creative writing." Not R. V. Cassill. Not a few others I know. I think R. V. Cassill probably did not do the regular workshop. And I know that Wright Morris didn't. Wright Morris said, "I know what I'm talking about, listen, and I'll teach you." And Cassill, probably, the same thing.

Perkins: Well, the key to what you're talking about is that you have to make the students read their own work critically, and you have to read it critically in order to teach them how.

Madden: Well, I only do it once now. This is my new method in the last two or three years. I only *read* it once. I read it every time, but I only *tell* them once. I say, "Look, there are two ways you are going to learn this . . . three ways. You're going to learn it by reading *Revising Fiction*, which all of them do and love. Everybody loves that book. And that's really enough. But if you're in a course, you're going to learn from exercises derived from your own work. I'm gonna give everybody the same exercises, but you each have your own story."

Perkins: What sort of exercises?

Madden: Like "Make a list of any kind for your character. It can be a grocery list, it can be a wish list, it can be any kind of list." Simple things like that illuminate their own story. Everybody's doing it but it's different for everybody. And the only reason I have them read them, three of them, usually, read them aloud is just to compare a little bit of how the technique worked, not who's better. And nobody ever says, "Well, that's terrible." Or "That is good" . . . well, sometimes they'll say, "That's good," but I tell them that's irrelevant because . . .

Perkins: "That's not why we're here."

Madden: Yeah. I'm not here to praise you or to damn you. Talent doesn't get you anywhere in this class. Hard work. What you've got to do is work hard. That's all. You get an "A" if you work hard, not if you're good. It's progress. She got an "A" not because she's a good writer but because she worked hard. She was a good writer, and worked hard. And somebody who was not as good a writer also made an "A" because she worked hard, just as hard. So I say to them, "Well, what I think of your story, what other people think of your story, what your mother thinks of your story is irrelevant."

Perkins: Doesn't matter.

Madden: "It's what the technique of fiction thinks of your story. If you want to know how well you're doing, turn to the craft. Employ what you're learning as you learn it. Back to the story and interrogate the story," I love to use that phrase. "Interrogate your story in terms of the craft of fiction."

Perkins: Students tend to believe that they are under attack when you go after their work. They identify too closely with it.

Madden: They'll say, "But you're making fun of my phrase" or "*my* writing style." I said, "Well, how did it get to be your writing style if the worst Victorian writers were using it before you were ever born? It's not your style, it's a public, bad style that belongs to everybody and you don't want to associate with it," you know. In class they'll say, "But Mr. Madden, what if that's your style?" If we're not talking about them, then they want . . . And I'll say, "Well, name five great stylists in literature, in American literature. Five great stylists." They can't even name a single one. Used to be able to name Vonnegut. But even *Catcher in the Rye* isn't distinguished by its style, it's the tone. And I'd say, "Well, I can. But only five outstanding stylists. You say it's *their* style and *theirs* only and you better not imitate it.

Hemingway, Woolf, Faulkner, Fitzgerald and James. James above all. I mean there's no mistaking Henry James. My point is, to them, is they're among the very few and they're great stylists. I've written all kinds of things, but there's no Madden style. There's a different style for each one, which means I have no style.

Perkins: Do you think that that came out of your being pretty much washed over by New Criticism when you were developing, so that you looked for the form for each thing that you're doing?

Madden: Oh yeah. Because the New Criticism was "look at every word." And out of Chekov, you know, "cut a story at any point and it would bleed" and Coleridge, that everything is so well integrated that it moves like a snake through the grass. You know? And Madame Bovary, the *mot juste*. And his desire to write a story with no people in it, just the style. Flaubert. Most recently William Gass, 'I don't write novels, I write words.'

Perkins: Well, earlier you were talking about students recognizing style and that led me to think that the students that I run into in creative writing classes recently seem to have read nothing and seem to *want* to read nothing, and I think the great shortcut to learning how to write is to read. If you had to put ten works on a list for young fiction writers to read, what would they be?

Madden: I've been giving it for years. And it's books from which you can learn, no Dostoyevsky, no Joyce Carol Oates, no Dreiser, but *Madame Bovary*, because the guy knew what he was doing and he could write about it too. You know, the notes from the notebooks and the letters to Madame Couvere. Let's see, *Madame Bovary, Field of Vision* by Wright Morris, *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf, and/or *Orlando*. Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury*, or *Absalom, Absalom!*, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*,

Conrad's *Victory*, not *Lord Jim*, *Victory*, and let's see . . . Camus's *The Stranger* . . . let's see . . . anything of Graham Greene's but *The Heart of the Matter*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Wuthering Heights*, and a Henry James book, *The Ambassadors*. I've got that list I've got to give to you.

Perkins: You give this list out to the students. Is it your assumption that they are going to go and read them? Or are you pushing them with specific assignments?

Madden: No. I give it out at the end. But I've got an annotated version, too. I would like people all over to pick them up because I have them divided into categories like romantic novels of the romantic . . . classical . . . using the terms *romantic*, *classical*, or *naturalism* and all these things and saying, "OK, what you can learn from this about creative writing is this, primarily . . . many things but primarily this." And with . . . for instance, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the multiple points of view technique. Not point of view, but the alternation of sections focusing. It's omniscient overall. You read *The Ram in the Thicket* . . . or you read *Man and Boy* for an alternation of third person central intelligence voices . . . or not voices, but point of view. From the man to the woman, the man to the woman, the man to the woman and so on. You read *Field of Vision* for the alternation of about five different characters. And then comes into play the technique of juxtaposition. Why has he juxtaposed *this* third-person point of view with *that* third-person point of view? And what is the transitional device? He'll have Boyd squirting the bull at the bullfight with pop. The next one will be from the point of view of his childhood friend, McKee. And McKee will start off by saying to himself, "There goes Boyd again acting like a kid, shooting that bull with a pop." And so you get a juxtaposition and you get two different sensibilities and that gives rise to thoughts of your own. Purpose of juxtaposition is to

give rise to a third thing. It goes back to Eisenstein's movie technique of montage. Or you read Hemingway for style. *The Sun Also Rises,* the structure's not terrific, although people like to say they go from the plains to the mountains and all that kind of stuff. But look at the fishing scene. I have no interest in fishing but it moves me to tears every time I read it. When Jake Barnes is in context and considering who he is, what his sensibility is and how he's feeling, you are deeply moved by the way he puts those fish in that pack. Layer of ferns, a layer of fish, a layer of ferns, ice in the bottom. Pops them out of the cold stream.

Perkins: Well, it seems to me also that most everything you've talked about in your teaching of creative writing evolves in one way or another from *The Poetic Image in Six Genres*.

Madden: Which I now would call the charged image. See the term *poetic image* . . . boy, we keep coming back to Centre, I tell you. The poetic image came up with Tom Hester and a bunch of us studied . . . Jack Thornton wrote the best piece. I've still got his paper. Thornton and Tommy Hester and a few others, were in there in a survey of English literature. But it came up . . . and I don't know whether it was Jack Thornton's phrase, 'the poetic image.' But I think several people were asked to write about the poetic image. It may have been my idea but somehow or other, I have the feeling I need to credit all the students in creating that idea. But that idea, that charged image idea helped me make sense of a lot of literature.

Perkins: Can you give me some examples?

Madden: Some of the same examples, *The Spider Web* and *All the King's Men,* and it comes in the Civil War chapter. The Huck and Jim on the raft on the Mississippi River. Don Quixote and Sancho Panza going toward the windmill. The green light at the end of

Daisy's Dock. Coupled, in that case, with the eyes of T. J. Eckleberg. Two different worlds. And in "The Day the Flowers Came," there's another coupling of the sound of the chimes, the sound of the telephone, and the delivery of the flowers. Because they're all juxtaposed and repeated so often that they . . . you can't call any one of them the charged image, they have to go together.

Perkins: Let me point out something that's unusual about that last example. It's a sound, and we're very weak on using sound as an image. We're even weaker using smells.

Madden: You know how I got a smell image in *Cassandra Singing*? Consciously and deliberately, I don't know if it happens because that's the way I worked it. I wanted people to smell those leaves burning in the fall in the hills of Eastern Kentucky. OK. Well, how do you describe a smell? Well, "the acrid smell of leaves burning . . ." Ha! All the descriptions of the smell of leaves burning have fallen far short because, for one thing, you're talking about it directly. When you talk about it directly, you lose it. You know from "The Short Happy Life of Francis McComber?" Wilson says, "If you talk about it, you lose it." It's another great phrase. This is what I used to call 'the word.' Every day I'd come in and first I'd write 'the word' on the board. I'd quote some great quote like that, you know. I think I worked them all into *Revising Fiction*, I hope I did. But anyway, 'if you talk about it you lose it.' So I thought, "Well, how can I evoke it by implication? OK, so I simply had Lone, riding the motorcycle over the swinging bridge . . . bumpity, bump . . . and noticing things like . . . not just one thing, but a bunch of things. And among those things was the smoke on the hillside. Well, as soon as you say . . . you already know it's fall, and you're told it's smoke, so you assume it's smoke from leaves burning on the hillside, and that makes you smell them.

Perkins: If you have a very alert reader.

Madden: Well, that goes all the way back to the moonlight on the piece of glass on the road. Which my teacher . . . I mean which my student, not the teachers, my student and Chekov taught me. I was so glad to tell him when he called the other day with his novel, that he riveted that in my mind and I've taught that over and over and over and over.

Perkins: If you were in charge and you could get the creative writing people of the country together, say be the keynote speaker at AWP [Association of Writers and Writing Programs] for example, and say, "Folks, we're not doing a very good job teaching creative writing. And I've got the next few minutes to tell you how to shape up." What would you tell them?

Madden: Well, I would tell them that everybody ought to use *Revising Fiction* until a better one comes along. And if not *Revising Fiction*, at least R. V. Cassill we need to get reprinted. And, or one of those others, you know. *Creative Writing and Rewriting* . . . all four of which have universal admiration. And get away from those textbooks that are 'inspiring', you know, 'stir up your soul, get you in touch with your true self,' and all that crap. 'Help you find your voice.' 'Your voice.' You know, personally, I couldn't possibly identify my 'voice.' And yet people tell me they always hear me talking to them. But I would say that we ought to . . . on a less arrogant level, I would say we ought to all get together and agree to put a moratorium on the Iowa workshop method, meet and talk about what variations we're doing on that method, and forefront those, put them together in such a way that they become a coherent strategy. But I guess I would say to them, "Refute my statement that teaching the techniques of fiction through the process of revision is *not* a good way to do that." Refute that. And if you can, then OK, forget about it. But we all know that that's where the real writing comes. And if we

admit that, then let's also admit something else. The reason we don't teach it is it's harder. And then . . . you know, just use my approach as a way to bust up the old approach and then what develops on down the line will be better, but it doesn't have to be my approach. But surely telling a student that they should turn to their craft to determine how well they are doing, generally and specifically, this story and this writer, is more important than asking the opinion of people who just happened to sign up for the course, half of whom will never be writers, or who are just mean spirited SOBs.

Perkins: Let me ask you this about students, because I've watched you deal with students at Saranac and I've run into your students here and again, and I know that you are respected as a teacher. You also are demanding as a teacher. Are you aware of the fact that some of them just aren't going to get it?

Madden: Well, I am now. Didn't used to be. Well, I knew they didn't, and it tore me up. If they're not looking at me or they have a glazed look, it's almost like I'm dying a little. I mean, you know, people say 'We died in Boston.' I don't want to waste my life on earth doing something that's not going to produce a result. If I'm going to teach instead of write, then I want the teaching to do what the writing does. And in the writing I try to make it really great. I try to make everything work, I try to write something that's going to affect everybody, even though I know it won't affect everybody. But it is there to affect everybody if they only respond. And so . . . but in teaching, I've got them standing right in front of me, I can see whether they're sleeping or yawning or you know.

Perkins: Well now, in the writing, you have an audience in mind and in the teaching you've got an audience there but . . . this is probably going to be a curious question . . . is there an ideal audience

between the real audience in the classroom and you when you're teaching? Do you imagine a student that you're teaching to?

MADDEN: Well, in the sense that I am operating on the assumption that they all want to be here to experience what I'm trying to enable them to experience. And that assumes an ideal individual. It's a little harder to maintain since they're there contradicting or supporting. When everybody is looking at me, that's a confirmation that they're listening, whether they're getting it or not. I think your job is to do the very best you can. And if people tell you you're good, you should continue to be good. You try to be even better. That's why we are here.

Web of the Imagination: An Interview with David Madden

Jeffrey Folks, 2006

David Madden was interviewed in his hometown, Knoxville, Tennessee, on Sunday, October 8, 2006, one day after his book signing and talk at Carpe Librum bookstore. The interview focuses on Madden's two new works of fiction, *Abducted by Circumstance* and a work in progress, the *London Bridge* trilogy.

Folks: Your latest book, *Touching the Web of Southern Novelists*, has just been published by the University of Tennessee Press. It is an outstanding collection of your essays tied together by the idea of a web of relationships, not necessarily involving direct contact, among southern writers, readers, critics, teachers, and all others concerned with southern writing. I know that the idea of a web of writers and readers that connects the essays in your new book was suggested by a passage in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. But is this just a southern web? Is there a northern web? A Canadian web? A western web?

Madden: Oh, yes. Warren's web and my conception of the web is totally universal. The thing about *All the Kings Men* is that Warren didn't really want it to be centered on Louisiana or the South, although of course it is set in the South. He wanted it to be universal, and speaking of that, he wrote some of it in Italy when Mussolini

was around. Mussolini was just as good a model as Huey Long. So in his mind he was probably making global connections, too, and the whole thing is so philosophical rather than political. The political is just another character to be able to make transcendent insights, and the web is the best metaphor for that. It begins on a personal level in the way he said Cass Mastern touched the web, but it then moves from one's personal experience and one's web relationships to some transcendent sense, to the degree that you are aware of the web. That's why I kept touching on that yesterday. You've got to become aware of the web; if you *do* your life is richer. When you said, not necessarily direct, that's why I talk about people I've never met. It's because of my relationship to those people—not just my relationship as a writer to Faulkner, whom I never met, but the effect he had on my life, and the story I tell about Warren's curing me of my jealousy. You know about that story?

Folks: No.

Madden: I was teaching Warren's novel, and I was telling my students how irrational Jack Burden's jealousy of the Boss was, and that same day my wife said, "The thought crossed my mind today, the only way I'm going to get relief from your irrational jealousy, which is almost daily and full of rages, is to leave you," and instantly, the way I became a Christian, I said, not any more. So I attribute that to Warren. I also attribute going to Louisiana to him because I wanted to go where his novel was set. So I was following the Huey Long thing, too, and the Louisiana thing.

Folks: Did Robert Penn Warren bring you to Louisiana?

Madden: That's what I mean—reading that book and *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy. I wanted to go where that's set, and I had known Warren before in Athens, Ohio, and he read "The Singer" and said, "You know, I want to give you this Rockefeller grant."

Folks: But, since you mentioned *The Moviegoer*, my impression is that Walker Percy was someone who was not so much inside the web.

Madden: He was not in anybody's web. He was very reclusive, but he was very friendly to me. He made a comment on *Bijou* that was published, and he wrote an essay for me, as you know, for *Rediscoveries*, and I knew him at the Agee conference. He's a good example of what I mean when I talk about my relation with Faulkner. He had the same relationship with Agee, whom he never met: Agee was a very important part of his life. And, to give an example from outside the South, Wright Morris felt the same way. I asked Wright Morris, "Before you wrote *The Deep Sleep*, did you read *A Death in the Family*?" He said, "No, I was afraid it might influence me." The irony is that *The Deep Sleep* came out a year before *A Death in the Family*, so in his own mind he felt such an affinity. They were published in *New Directions* together, Agee photographs and text, and Morris photographs and text, in the same years.

Folks: Stephen King called you "America's most neglected writer," and that is a great honor, but I imagine it would be more satisfying in some ways not to be called a neglected writer, and I see some indication of that coming about with your nomination twice for the Pulitzer Prize, for *Sharpshooter* and *The Suicide's Wife*, and now the critical book dedicated to your work, *David Madden: A Writer for All Genres*, edited by Randy Hendricks and James Perkins. So, do you see yourself starting to get the recognition you're due?

Madden: Yes, and at a time when my agent has had *Abducted by Circumstance* for seven months and has tried to market it by a plan, asking ten people to read it, not all at once, and she is encountering people who said no, and she herself doesn't understand the technique. C. Michael Curtis at *Atlantic* didn't understand it, and my first editor, who is one of the best editors in the world, Robert Loomis at

Random House, didn't understand it, and yet two hundred undergraduates and townspeople at Pellissippi State College gave me a standing ovation and Professor Ed Francisco got a flood of e-mails showing that they understood it—it wasn't just my performance—and then the editor of *New Letters* understood it and published the first chapter.

So here is my problem: I keep doing a different novel every time. Every one of them is very much different. Some are based on my own life, but *Brothers in Confidence* has a major difference between the reality and the book, and so does the first one, *The Beautiful Greed*, and *Bijou*, but then there are others that are purely made up, such as *Cassandra Singing* and *The Suicide's Wife*, *Abducted by Circumstance*, *Sharpshooter* and *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*.

FOLKS: Why is there so much difference from one novel to the other?

MADDEN: I thought of it this morning. First of all, I'll remind you that a major reviewer, maybe it was James Atlas in *Time* or *Newsweek*, said, I cannot believe that the same author who wrote *Bijou* wrote *The Suicide's Wife*, and King in the *New York Times* said we are different: "I write for the moment, but you write for eternity." I thought about it this morning, that really unlike some of my contemporaries and the young writers coming out, most of whom want to be like journalists and to be true to the way "ordinary" people "really" live and to reflect their times, I never really gave a shit about reflecting my times. I wasn't interested. So that what I'm interested in, and "No Trace" is one of the best examples and maybe "The Singer," is the life of the imagination, "the drama of human consciousness," to use Wright Morris's phrase. He said, "I'm not interested in the drama of overt action, I'm interested in the drama of human consciousness." OK, so I didn't know that that's what I also believed in, but that's what I'm dramatizing in *London Bridge*, that's what I

dramatized in *Sharpshooter*, and that's what I'm definitely dramatizing in by *Abducted by Circumstance* with the drama of that woman's consciousness as she is imagining and talking to another woman who was (or was not) abducted. She thinks she was—but where's the evidence?

Folks: But your problem is that the average teenager in America reads seven minutes a day, and that reading is not devoted to literature. We have a whole generation of young people who have probably never read a novel in their lives. We have a small readership for fiction, but that readership, though perhaps very well educated, is, it seems to me, declining all the time.

Madden: Absolutely, but the thing is not only what you said, but when they are in a literature class they're generally not being trained to read the book that the writer wrote; they're being trained to find what the newest criticism, whatever you want to call it, calls for: to look for issues of race, gender, and so on, and to see if you can't indict the writer for handling that in a way you don't want to handle it according to the theory, not according to you personally as a student in the class. And, if not books to attack, they choose books of a much lower quality, simpleminded books that advocate what you want the students to think and feel. So that makes it even worse than what you're saying, but the good side is the phenomenon of the Harry Potter books and also the C. S. Lewis books, the great children's books, which are the ones that are most often spoken of as being read by the young.

Folks: I'm really impressed by the section of *London Bridge* that you've allowed me to read. I do think it's a next stage in your writing, though I admit I haven't been able to absorb it completely.

Madden: You haven't read the entire novel, either. Neither have I.

Folks: No. The main thing is just the intensity and the power of the language.

Madden: You know, I don't think I've ever written better. When I read it and reread it, I say, "Where the hell did that come from?" That's common to writers, but more than anything else I've ever written, where the hell did that come from?

Folks: I can see that. It's so dramatic. Everything in terms of the language is exactly what's needed and not too much. That's what I felt. I don't want to ask all those questions about your research and the historical background, and what's real and what's not real. I'm sure that other readers will ask those questions after it's published.

Madden: Except that I will make an observation that my study is full of books of those two periods, about the early history of the building of the bridge—twelfth century—and the civil war, and plague and fire—seventeenth century—and bridges per se and so on, but the key thing is that the interest that I and my hero the poet simultaneously felt (the two feed on each other) arose from a single paragraph. The only thing known about Peter de Colechurch, the priest, is in the first book I ever read about the bridge, and it's the bare fact that he was the priest of St. Mary Colechurch on Poultry Street next to Mercer Hall, which was adjacent to Thomas Becket's family's home in Old Jewry and that he already rebuilt the ancient bridge of elm, which was destroyed or severely damaged by a gale. He then built the stone bridge with the intent of putting the chapel dedicated to Saint Thomas Becket in the middle, where Chaucer's pilgrims would always stop and gather at the tavern at the other end on their way out to Canterbury. That's all, and when I discovered that, I thought, this is terrible. This is awful. People said, you're going to London to do research, aren't you? And I said, yes. I want to know more about Peter de Colechurch, but I should have stopped and thought: this

guy who wrote that one book has been to all these Latin sources, and then somebody else says, if you go look at the record, the Latin is very obscure; it's different, but this guy could read it all. It was all right there, and when I went there and asked about it—absolutely nothing. So therefore, I thought, Oh, I'm going to resurrect him in my imagination.

Folks: But it must be totally imagination.

Madden: Totally imagination.

Folks: But then you did go in search of facts?

Madden: I went in search of them, and I'm glad I went: I'd never been to London. But then the poet may have been born as a result of that, I've forgotten how he came about, but he certainly became the central consciousness, because he does to Peter what *I* do to Peter. He always says, Well, this is interesting. He reluctantly takes up his father's self-appointed job of keeping the chronicle of London Bridge because he feels guilty; his father's missing and they never had a good relationship. But then when he discovers Peter, it's like the writer and poet in him really seizes on it. And, by the way, he was an assistant to Milton for a while. So your question about research is relevant because the first research produced the most imagined part of the novel, by the *lack* of evidence. So the idea that he built the bridge of stone so he could erect a stone chapel to Becket is my idea. There's no proof of that: there's proof he built it, and he's supposed to be buried under it, and when they destroyed it, they found a bone, and in the London museum a label on a tiny box says, "a bone of Peter de Colechurch discovered when they broke into the crypt." My story has it be the bone of Thomas Becket. And the idea of Becket's body being missing came from the research, where I did read about Becket, whom I'm really fascinated by. And there's one recent book

that said that the body of Becket is missing, right now—they discovered it's missing, but there's no agreement among scholars on that.

Folks: You know, the naive reader, the nonliterary reader, might ask, What's the point of the imagination in all of this? Why not just tell us what happened to Becket? What's the point of a story that is largely imaginative?

Madden: Because the drama of human consciousness acting upon something that is both imagined and based on fact to some degree—there's a mingling of fact and imagination as in *Sharpshooter*, but not in *Abducted*. That act, the drama of human consciousness, acting upon this material, fact *and* what is imagined, is an event in itself that is on a higher plane than the author simply telling a story and the reader simply reading a story that the author simply told. If I have a mission, it is to convince people that the drama of human consciousness which we find in other writers like Nabokov and Virginia Woolf, the active imagination, the consciously stimulated imagination which stirs your emotions and your intellect, is something that is neglected by writers and by readers, and by everyday people.

Folks: Very much so, though I think at one time not so long ago people did live a richer life of the imagination.

Madden: As kids, for instance, when they didn't have all this other stuff doing it for them.

Folks: Exactly. Everyone had an imaginary world of play. But now my grandson, the first thing he wants to do is to plug in the computer, turn on the video games, and this zombie look comes over him, but he can't resist it.

Madden: There's no room for the imagination. It's like pornography being right there where you are doing your work. If you click on it, and if you watch that pornography, there's no imagination.

FOLKS: Of course, there's a lot of sexuality in the section of *London Bridge* that I read in which Peter has an erotic encounter with a young girl. How is that different?

MADDEN: In the beginning, in this section, Peter follows a vision of this goddess, and the closer he gets, the realer she gets. She asks him to have intercourse, and he says I've got to go, the knights are going to kill the archbishop. That's a long way from that visionary woman. Then he thinks, maybe that wasn't the right woman. Maybe the real visionary woman will come along across the bridge when I finish it. The sacred and the profane is what I'm doing there.

FOLKS: I noticed that toward the end of the section that I read you talked about Becket in very ambivalent terms. You write, "the martyrdom of a man in whom good and bad faith were so mixed as to render him unfit for martyrdom." Is this the same thing, the sacred and profane?

MADDEN: Yes, the very guy who's going to erect the most conspicuous monument, this chapel, and name it after him, and who stole the body, is in this divided state of mind, and vacillates back and forth. But that's his feeling about him earlier, too.

FOLKS: I had trouble with that, the ironic depiction of "Saint Becket."

MADDEN: No, he had this earlier experience of being this whoremonger, although Becket wasn't quite that bad on the record. It's not that widely known, since there are only one or two sources that get into it. Yes, he has that ambivalent feeling. You see, this is my perverse state of mind. You do things because it is a good thing to do irrespective of your mingled feelings about the people involved. Just as you love your child even though she may be doing bad things. And Wright Morris's idea that impersonal love is the highest form of love. No strings attached; you don't love a person because he did

something for you or will do something. It's impersonal love. That's what he's striving for.

Folks: *London Bridge* seems to be a kind of web-like novel in its own right. When you turn to Britain, it is an intricate society—a fabric of church tradition, statecraft, folk and high cultures, a society endowed with a great deal of self-consciousness about its own history and identity. It's a social web that seems even more intricate than our own, just because it's older, encumbered by this self-consciousness and tradition. Is it a problem in writing about that kind of society?

Madden: No, because the technique I used in writing about the Civil War, which was a macrocosm, I'm using in the microcosm in the bridge. Just as in *Sharpshooter* I approach things in fragments. There was one piece of it I published called "Fragments Found on the Field." That same mentality applies to this story. It's the fragments that I find on the field of my imagination or of my research that I deliver as fragments in the novel, and the reader fills in the spaces between by using her own intellect, imagination, and emotions, as sparked by the juxtaposition of the fragments, and that necessarily happens to be the process that the poet is going through as well. He's finding this out, and this out, and this out. And for him, you see, he's almost in the same position as I am, because he doesn't know automatically all that stuff about the history. About the history of the bridge that he's living upon, he really doesn't know anything. Almost nobody in London today really knows the name Peter de Colechurch.

Folks: Remarkable.

Madden: The member of Parliament from Canterbury is a friend of mine, and he never heard of Peter. The member for Canterbury!

Folks: I had the same feeling in Rome. As I was walking down one of the streets that lead to the Coliseum, I thought, I wonder how

often they stop and think about where they are. Do they actually *see* the Coliseum? I thought, how strange to live here and not appreciate it.

Madden: Well, the double consciousness that I had about the Civil War and have about this is that although I'm moving through this experience now, I move through my ignorance of the things you are referring to, the tradition and the history and so on, and simultaneously move through what I imagine with an equal sense that I've been here before. In other words, I lived on London Bridge. What I'm saying is, I feel comfortable, I feel at home.

Folks: What was attractive about London of that period and about the bridge? It seems like such a departure from the South?

Madden: Well actually, it's only the bridge at the beginning. And then as I read more, I got really fascinated by the plague, not just that one in 1665 but the earlier ones, and I've always loved bridges. You see, the literal inspiration is the painting of London Bridge at the beginning of the movie *Henry V*. That seeped into my subconscious because I didn't remember it until I started writing, and when I saw it, I thought, *that* planted the image. But one day I saw another illustration of the bridge and I thought, man, to live on a bridge, to have a shop on a bridge! The poet's house is Nonesuch House, which is the most attractive house. He's on the sixth floor. The first floor is under the bridge, the only floor which is under the bridge. But the inspiration I must go back to is Gay Street Bridge in Knoxville. So that I loved bridges. Brooklyn Bridge is the mythic bridge that I've always loved. I've always wanted to write a movie about Hart Crane and Thomas Wolfe writing about Brooklyn Bridge. So it's Brooklyn Bridge, Rialto Bridge, Bridge of Sighs, and Gay Street Bridge, and more recently Mostar.

Folks: Knoxville has some beautiful bridges, and some rather historic ones.

Madden: Well, Gay Street Bridge, I used to walk there all the time. I took the loves of my life there, looked off down at the houseboats and the slums. From the bridge I'm looking at all these slums, and these houses thrown up against the hillsides. I'm looking at the houseboats. If you lift those up and put them on Gay Street Bridge, and I just now thought of this for the first time, it's like, when I went to Venice, I said, Knoxville is the Venice of my imagination. Because everything that is submerged about Knoxville that I brought to the surface through imagination and reality mingled, I saw out in the open, and in the air I breathed, I was looking at it. The city of the imagination that is so fascinating. It's like San Francisco, not so much New Orleans . . .

Folks: But again, why is this consciousness of the imagination important to ordinary people? I would say that almost everyone in Knoxville is running around hassled in their jobs and families, immersed in obligations, and they don't see much of the past. They don't even see the landscape, the beauty, the river that they cross every day.

Madden: You say, why is that important? The purpose of what I've been writing recently, *Sharpshooter* and *Abducted* and the *Bridge*, is that I want to persuade those people of the supremacy of the imagination. Wallace Stevens wrote a little book about the supremacy of the imagination, *The Necessary Angel*: *Essays on Reality and Imagination*, and Marianne Moore wrote, "I want to create imaginary gardens with real toads in them." That sums it up for all writers, but I'm trying to bring that to the forefront of consciousness rather than it being only the source for me as the writer, just between me and it: I want to make me part of it. Like "The Singer" is that process,

"No Trace" is really that process. "No Trace" is about the triumph of the imagination over the facts. The father said, I want to find out why my son blew himself up, and he finds these artifacts, and facts, fragments that he tries to piece together, and he gets seduced by the story of Carter over his own son. His mission is to understand his son through the physical artifacts that he can find. The artifacts and the postcards stimulate his imagination to follow the next thing he can find about Carter, pulling him away from his own son. The fact of his son blowing himself up with a hand grenade in front of everybody, the fact of the locusts out there screaming, cannot compete with Carter's story. The same thing in "The Singer," when Pete wants to tell you the facts, and Fred wants to show you the myth.

Folks: How far along are you with *London Bridge*?

Madden: I'm finishing the second volume. You know, it's a trilogy, though it's really a quintet, because the first three are about the bridge. Let me tell you the architecture. *London Bridge Rising* is about the twelfth-century building of the bridge, the poet being the consciousness but not strictly—I intervene once in a while, I'm almost tempted to put the label "authorial intrusion" on it. The second one that I'm almost finished with now is *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*, 1665–1666, and that includes the building but emphasizes the plague and fire.

Folks: So the section I read is from the second part, *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*?

Madden: No, it's in the first *and* the second parts, literally. So if you read the second part you're going to encounter some stuff that's in the first, and nobody's ever done that before, and why not, because if it's something really good, you should reread it anyway, and now you've got it in a different matrix. It's not the building of the bridge;

it's the threat of the fire and plague on the bridge, and then the third one is wilder still: it's a meshing of the two, literally.

What did you think of that interruption? Did it throw you when I interrupted his writing about Peter going to Canterbury and the girl comes in with the message from the mistress?

Folks: It woke me up. It struck me, in a good sense. It brought me out of the quasi-historical level into the level of thought.

Madden: And you recognize that this positive disorientation is a deliberate technique. When you get disoriented by my technique, what I'm imagining is that by reorienting yourself, you go through a process that makes you more deeply involved than if it were a smooth line.

Folks: Mentally, your work is quite challenging, but, you know, I've actually had people who have pulled out novels and have told me, this is a great novel because you don't have to think about it. You can read it and you don't have to think about it.

Madden: And those readers say, I'm just an ordinary reader, but that's an incredible act of egotism. That's an incredibly egotistical statement, "This is easy to read, and that's what I want, and therefore it's great, and therefore I'm great. I'm participating in the greatness of this novel because it is like me."

Folks: There seem to be a lot of literary parallels that you may or may not have intended. There's an obvious comparison with Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. I've not read it in a number of years, but I remember the use of actors and chorus and the very ritualistic style of dialogue, and maybe in some way there's an echo of that: these long sections of dialogue where there was a chorus of knights and a speaker. Do you see a comparison?

MADDEN: Well, that is what was literally said because what makes Becket incredibly unusual is that there was more written about him by contemporaries than about any other figure of his time, more than about Henry II, who was his friend. So John of Salisbury, one of the most famous political writers of the time, was Becket's personal friend. There were two or three other personal friends who were eyewitnesses, and who wrote biographies. Four biographies of Becket by four eyewitnesses, including the guy whose arm was injured.

FOLKS: It's amazing that the authorities allowed them to survive.

MADDEN: Well, actually Salisbury disappeared from the scene: he got out of there but he saw enough. So it's a matter of historical record, and I'm quoting what was actually said though I varied some and added some. But there's nothing from *Murder in the Cathedral*, and I don't know whether Eliot read those pieces or not.

FOLKS: Let me ask you about something else. I hear so many voices in *London Bridge*. I was thinking as we talked on the phone to arrange this interview that you have such a fine speaking voice, and I know you have done quite a bit of acting, and of course a lifetime of public speaking, readings, and teaching.

MADDEN: You know, the BBC interviewed me, and this young woman said, You have the loveliest voice.

FOLKS: It's true, but if I had that voice, I would be so conscious of it, and, as I wrote, that consciousness would enter into the writing. Does the sound quality of your own voice come across in your writing, and are you very much aware of it as you write?

MADDEN: Almost everybody who comments on my writing after a reading will say, "When I read it, I heard your voice, and tonight it's the same voice."

Folks: That's true. I can't read *Bijou* without hearing your voice reading *Bijou*.

Madden: Now the thing, not so much about Willis Carr in *Sharpshooter*, but the thing about *Abducted by Circumstance*, and especially *London Bridge*, is that I truly heard voices. I wrote *Abducted by Circumstance* in a month. Every morning I would write a part of it, mostly in Baton Rouge but in London and Paris, too, and I just listened to this voice, and she is imagining another voice, that of the abducted woman, but she created that voice. I, the writer, am not taking you from one voice to another. It's all one voice—her voice and she ventriloquizes the other voices, including the rapist.

Folks: That's a remarkable narrative idea.

Madden: And it came full blown.

Folks: Some would say, remarkable for a male author, to be writing a woman's voice imagining a woman's voice, and imagining that situation.

Madden: Several people at Pellissippi State College a couple of months ago, said that. "You have such a strong feminine side, because you're not worried about revealing your feelings, and you're so enthusiastic, and so giving to the audience, which is not typically a male thing." Now let me tell you how I did *London Bridge*, which will really amplify what you're saying about voice. I wrote *London Bridge* every single night for a year, and deliberately said, from Christmas Eve to Christmas Eve, then I'm going to shut it down. I'm going to write every night. Just before going to bed, I would—about ten minutes average—write out of the reading I had done in that one book but mostly out of my imagination, and what I was doing was writing down what the voices were telling me. And the same thing happens to the poet: he keeps hearing these voices. And my agent says, who

says what? I said, damn if I know, it's a voice. It's a voice that happened to me, it's a voice that happened to him. The reader should accept it as voices that are speaking to me and to the poet and we don't know where they are coming from. And that was literally true.

The fourth book in the quintet is a literal transcription of what I wrote. It's very avant-garde and surrealistic. So I just wrote down anything whether it made any sense or not. I had Harpo Marx coming in the year 1250 onto the bridge, with his coat full of junk.

Folks: But do these voices come from childhood, from memories, from the past?

Madden: I have no idea. I thought they came from London Bridge, I really did, once I had certain things about the bridge, the initial inspiration of those houses and the life on the bridge, set into the eight hundred years of the history, more than eight hundred years, the whole history of Britain and therefore of the Western world too, of the Romans and so on, because the Romans constructed the first actual bridge. The original one was just stuff thrown together that they could step across. You know, London was created from the bridge onto the land, not from the land onto the bridge.

Folks: I don't know if it's there or not, but I did feel especially in *London Bridge* that there's a deepening, a richness of experience in your writing. For ages, philosophy has taught that you don't live just with your own generation: you live with past generations and you live with future ones. This idea seems to have been lost within our youth-oriented culture, but that's exactly the kind of enrichment I see in *London Bridge*, and in *Sharpshooter*, too, in which the Civil War experience is refracted through consciousness over a period of generations. I wonder if this is related to your conversion to Christianity.

Madden: Well, no, *Sharpshooter* was just coming out before my conversion, but after being converted, what I see in my work, looking

back even in *Cassandra Singing*, is a strong spirituality. People call this spirituality, but I think it is pure Christianity, because I was a pure Christian until I was sixteen. And now I'm really into the Holy Spirit because Jesus said, "I leave with you a comforter." So my feeling is, God created the earth, goodbye. What more do you expect? So I thank God for creating me and putting me in the world. That's it. And I thank Jesus for dying for my sins and for being a great teacher, and a pilot and a physician, and a shepherd, and all that. And then I thank the Holy Spirit, the indweller, the comforter Jesus left behind. I believe God had a design and a plan, yes, and who the hell am I to ask God to change His plans because I want to pass a test or because I don't want my loved one to die? So I don't believe in asking God for things; I believe in calling on the Holy Spirit to guide me and to comfort me. To guide me as I go into class, to comfort me as I'm experiencing grief or worry or some kind of trauma. So I look back and I see all that stuff, almost everything I wrote submerged, and then in *Abducted by Circumstance*, once it got going, I deliberately shaped it to Carol's consciousness to be the best example in literature of a compassionate life. Nobody else in literature has ever talked all day long for seven or eight days to a stranger she saw in trouble, and in this case she had to imagine following somebody because it was an abduction. But, by the way, we don't know that. It could have been a lover. Right? I want you to think of that possibility.

Folks: But even that might be a source of concern.

Madden: Yes. Because she's leaving this wonderful life for a guy driving this ruddy old truck. So in the end after she's gone through this whole process, Carol likes to imagine that Glenda did elude her rapist and that she consciously was leaving her former life with a secret bankroll and is in Paris. She wants to think that, but, of course, she knows that it very well might not be true. That's a Christian thing,

to create a character who's the ultimate in empathy, and compassion is just a major Christian virtue. I was that way before I returned to Christ.

Folks: How does that compassion express itself in *London Bridge*?

Madden: With *London Bridge*, I'm deliberately doing the sacred and the profane, with this character who is not perfect and who consorts like Jesus did with a prostitute and who holds up to veneration and memorializes an imperfect person, as Jesus also did. Resurrecting the voices of people who lived on the bridge is an example of Christian compassion, and wanting people to know who this architect, Peter de Colechurch, was, in spite of the fact that he was a Catholic and, quite frankly, the whole history of Catholicism is repugnant to me. And related to that, I'm on a campaign to persuade Christians to set the Old Testament aside as a major distraction from the essence of Christianity, and the Catholic Church is the big promoter of the Old Testament. Marcion came down from the Black Sea in 160 to Rome to try to persuade the church fathers to set aside all scriptures except Luke and Paul's letters, because there you have the essence of Christianity, and in a sense Marcion is the father of the New Testament because, in reaction, the church gathered everything together. They said, we'll offer all of it, all of this stuff which became an incredible burden, and many people have been turned away from Christianity because of what I call the Flannery O'Connor Old Testament Christianity. So that's another facet of my Christianity, so it's ironic that the hero whom I want to resurrect was a Catholic priest.

Folks: That is remarkable.

Madden: So many writers, especially poets, want to write about themselves in one guise or another. I want to write about people who

are totally different from me, but then it's still about me. It's about me wanting to write about others.

Folks: Yes, the history of the modern novel is full of writers wanting to write about themselves. They never break out of that ego.

Madden: Roth, Agee, Hemingway, but the writers I most identify with are European writers like Thomas Mann, I'm reading a lot of him. Nabokov, and Joyce, who wrote about himself in one book and who still wrote about himself in *Ulysses* but tried to get into so many other realms of experience.

Folks: But in terms of "inside" and "outside," he was so far outside that he seemed to lose the inside. He moved further and further outside his native culture with his use of mythic inversion, multilayered irony, and ridicule.

Madden: And so to me Faulkner is the best example of what I'm talking about, because Faulkner never directly wrote about himself. My big argument is that Quentin is Faulkner, and Faulkner even admitted that.

Folks: But you can't imagine that as an egoistic act—writing yourself as Quentin.

Madden: No, there's nothing about Quentin that anybody would want to emulate. You can't say Faulkner's egotistical. And my character Carol, as compassionate as she is, there's nothing about Carol per se in *The Suicide's Wife*. My consciousness, my being, was submerged in Ann, this woman who was a zero in a sense, and we see her being more and more conscious, who lived in the body. "One would almost have thought her body thought." You know, one of my favorite sayings, that I think I made up, is "the unimagined life is not worth living." It's a play on Socrates: "the unexamined life is not worth living."

Folks: Randy Hendricks and James Perkins, who edited the collection devoted to your work [*David Madden: A Writer for All Genres*], refer to you as "a writer for all genres." It's true that you've produced important work in several genres, but I wonder if this characterization is a bit off. First of all, the genre on which you focus, whether in writing, teaching, or criticism, is fiction.

Madden: Yes, but part of the mission of the book is to point out how much I really have done in other genres—the plays, the poems, the creative nonfiction, the academic textbooks—and that the criticism is more of nonsouthern writers than southern (Camus, Kafka, Bronte, Romains, etc.). And I have always taught all genres for both readers and creative writers. All out of a single, unbroken, incessant creative flow. So I would not want to see what has been minimized further minimized.

Folks: But, despite a great number of critical and theoretical works, it is your fiction itself that I keep coming back to. I can see how carefully crafted it is—as the *Time* reviewer wrote of *The Suicide's Wife*, "chiseled with a grinding wheel." Am I on the right track?

Madden: You are on the right track for yourself as one of my most perceptive readers and interviewers, and I imagine most of my readers fix upon that, but again, multigenre exploration is a major part of my creative identity, part of my every waking day and dreaming night.

Folks: How do you think of your writing of fiction in relation to the other genres that you've worked in?

Madden: All genres enwebbed, meshed, never separate, because the careful crafting of fiction draws upon all other genres. Plays: dialogue. Poetry: style. Vision: history. Cinema: narrative and imagery (juxtaposition). Reading, writing, teaching: all genres simultaneously all the time.

Folks: We've talked about how, after a long period of agnosticism, you returned to the Christian faith about ten years ago. Along with that, I was thinking of a writer I met back in the 1970s—John Gardner. In his case there was, as he imagined, a "moral center" in his work. I wonder if you see a moral center in your writing, or do you think about it in these terms?

Madden: Never. Gardner's moral invasion of the realm of fictive art appalled me. Pure being, right or wrong, good or bad, is my prevailing interest, hard focus, rendered as artistically as I can. My ideal is to achieve a work of art that is its own justification as the product of a very human act: a willed act of the imagination, an act that is most neglected by people in general and even by writers, by Flaubert, Joyce, Poe, Wilde, even Faulkner—his morality being so simple as to be nonintrusive, leaving the act of imagination in style and conception triumphal. People in my writings may be preoccupied by, obsessed by, or oblivious of morality and politics, but their creator breathes life into and shapes them and then steps back. Do you sense all this in my work? I remained an agnostic for fifty years partly because I feared that returning to Christ would have a negative effect on my writing. I was totally wrong. I write more, I write more effectively, I cast a wider net into uncharted psychological territory, but I must stress this, that I do not take a moral or religion stance, even though readers have sensed a certain spiritual value all along. In *London Bridge Trilogy*, the villain turns to Christ in the end, is a Christian for thirty rhapsodic seconds, and dies, but the rendering of pure being, his, the other characters, the bridge, my mind at work on all that, remains my aspiration.

Folks: You've been in Baton Rouge for a very long time, but you still maintain close contacts with East Tennessee, both actual and imagined. Yesterday, you mentioned a "terrible nostalgia for Knoxville."

Madden: That phrase is attributed to one of my characters or maybe I said it outright, but it sums it up, "terrible" in the sense of Yeats's "a terrible beauty is born" and extreme nostalgia in *Bijou*, and in most of the early stages of my Knoxville-related novels, full of gratuitous scenes in Knoxville, as in the eighteen-hundred-page version of *Sharpshooter*, some of it published as some of my best stories, as in "A Piece of the Sky."

Folks: And you stressed that Knoxville is the "Venice" of your imagination.

Madden: I'm fond of that conception, as if what is submerged in Knoxville, dredged up in memory, imagination, and desire, is in Venice everywhere on mysterious but dramatic display with every stone or water path you take. In the same sense, I speak of "The New Orleans of Possibilities" that we imagine as we approach the city and as we walk in it, turning around and around in it.

Folks: Coming from another direction, I have the same nostalgic feeling about my childhood in Oklahoma. I've called East Tennessee my home for thirty years now, but I still have vivid memories of the Great Plains, and I sometimes find myself living "in" that culture, even as I live here. Sometimes that can be a little disturbing! Do you feel the same thing, being pulled in two directions, living inside different cultures?

Madden: I'm glad you put it that way because of the assumption, based on such cases as Cormac McCarthy's coming to Knoxville as a kid and going West as a published author, that other cultures stimulate writers at primal levels of being and imagination. But not all. Not me. I have written one story set in New Orleans, and it could have been set in San Francisco or Venice. And a glimpse of London Bridge in an etching, not a visit to London, inspired the trilogy that

has turned me away—living as I do primarily in my imagination—from Cajun, New Orleans culture. Before I moved here, I set one story on the road to Grand Isle, pure imagination. Baton Rouge culture is here somewhere, I just can't quite locate it, but maybe one story set here for its bland effect. And no stories set in San Francisco or New Haven, Boston, or Louisville area (Eastern Kentucky is like Knoxville, Venice inverted, for me). So, in a very real sense the setting for all my stories is Knoxville and the culture is literary. Not, by the way, that my characters are not real. Being creatures of my imagination, even Lucius as myself at thirteen, they are much more immediately real than people I know well, never dead as my dead friends and relatives are dead.

Folks: Have you ever thought of moving back to Knoxville?

Madden: Every day, once or more a day. Although, as I said, I am living there.

Folks: I can't end without an Agee question. James Agee may be a very fine writer, at times a great writer, but for me he is not a southern writer.

Madden: I think I know in what sense or senses you mean that, and I agree.

Folks: And ultimately not really a Knoxville writer, any more than Gore Vidal, who grew up in Washington, D.C.—at the time a small and rather southern metropolis—and whose grandfather was a senator from Oklahoma for many years, is a southern writer.

Madden: And I agree with that. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is less about the sharecroppers, the Depression, the South than it is about Agee, whose temperament, literary and otherwise, was European, as I think even Faulkner's was, to some degree, but Faulkner is a southern writer for certain, if there is such a thing finally, and there may

not be, in anything more than mere subject matter, which is mainly local, while Art is universal.

Folks: How can a southern reader ever get past Agee's apparent contempt for so much of the South, and for Knoxville?

Madden: If I ever felt contempt for Knoxville, it was for isolated items, and was simple and more superficial than at any depth or complexity. So I never had to get over it. I am always more in Knoxville, in writing or imagination, than away from it, than I am in Baton Rouge (for thirty-eight years now).

Folks: At what point does a writer resign from the web of southern novelists?

Madden: The web does not, for me, nor, I believe, for any writer, begin and end in the South, but embraces all creation. I have always, in mere subject matter, "resign"-ed from Knoxville, even when I wrote about it, but more obviously in the works of whatever genre that deal with elsewhere, which is maybe 60 or 70 percent of it. I like thinking of myself as a southern writer even though I identify with Simenon, Graham Greene, Jules Romains, Kafka, Mann, Joyce, Woolf, Mansfield, Camus, Conrad, and write about them, and read them more than southern writers, past or present.

Folks: Thank you, David, for a very stimulating discussion.

Myriad Mindedness: An Interview with David Madden

William Parrill, 2009

My first interview with David Madden was published in *Louisiana Literature*, Fall 1984, as "The Art of the Novel: An Interview with David Madden," and was reprinted in *The Long Haul: Conversations with Southern Novelists* (1994). Both the previous interview and the current one were recorded in his home in downtown Baton Rouge. The enormous old house, now listed as an historic property, has been totally renovated since the first interview, except that, allowing for the occasional photograph or picture on the wall, most rooms are now much more crowded from floor to ceiling with books. After forty-one years at Louisiana State University, David Madden is preparing to move to Black Mountain, near Asheville, North Carolina, hometown of the hero of his literary adolescence, Thomas Wolfe.

Parrill: David, my first interview with you was published in *Louisiana Literature* more than twenty years ago. I know that there have been big changes in your life since then. Where would you like to begin?

Madden: Big changes for me as well as the house? Well, I was into developing the United States Civil War Center as founding director then. I did that until 1999. A big change there. I resigned to return to writing novels. That meant finishing *Sharpshooter*, a novel of the

Civil War, which had been underway in different forms during the last interview we did. And I needed concentrated focus time to begin *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*.

Sharpshooter is unique in the history of literature. I know of no book—maybe you do—the research for which produced an institution, which was endorsed by a resolution of an even bigger institution, the Congress of the United States. This came out of the research on my novel which I was in the middle of. One day as I was on my way to Baton Rouge, I thought that it would be nice to have one place to go which would have all the information you would need to write about the Civil War. It would have the Civil War from the perspective of all kinds of art, photography, engineering, just everything you can think of that is touched upon in my novel. I would like to go to a place that has all the photographs, all the books, all the artwork, and I realized there was no such place. An hour later, after I had called the Library of Congress and the National Endowment for the Humanities, I called Chancellor Wharton, and he said, OK, let's create one.

And you are talking to me the day after I have addressed the Faculty Senate to say I want a resolution supporting my effort to bring it back up to what it was, move it out of the library where it is, before I move to Black Mountain.

I can also look back on an extremely successful creative writing program which I started [in] 1968. The changes since our first interview may not be thoroughly literary, but they're related to what I've been able to write during those years.

Parrill: The problem for writers generally twenty or thirty years ago was getting out from under Faulkner, but a lot has changed since then. Poussin said that Caravaggio came to earth to destroy painting. I think Cormac McCarthy came to earth to destroy Faulkner. That is, he went where Faulkner did not go, but went where nobody else could go either.

MADDEN: I have a lot of similarities with McCarthy. We're about the same age and went to the same university and became writers at about the same time. I had a real struggle with him, not quite as intense as the one I had with James Agee. Agee had a much greater talent and wrote a much greater book in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* than anything McCarthy has written.

PARRILL: What did you not like about Agee?

MADDEN: He was too self-congratulatory, too self-indulgent, egocentric, all the things you can easily say. In my case, it was a mindless attitude against him, and I've gotten over it by now. He lived three blocks from where I lived.

PARRILL: [Laughs] I know. I walked by his house every day. As I remember, it was not that different from this one.

MADDEN: Actually, his was ordinary; his grandfather's was like mine. Well, Robbie and I lived in the basement our first year.

PARRILL: McCarthy was at Tennessee as an undergraduate when I was in graduate school, but I never met him. A friend of mine kept talking about him and how smart he was, but I never met him. I've always regretted that.

MADDEN: We were all three there at about the same time. I think McCarthy imitated Faulkner too cravenly and too long, but he got away from it and then started imitating Hemingway. Maybe I haven't looked closely enough, but now maybe he has forged his own style. Of course, his stature came when he got out from under Faulkner, that is, when he went to Texas.

I have never been only southern in my fiction, as you know. I set *The Suicide's Wife* in San Francisco, West Virginia. There's no such place. For example, William Styron in *Set This House on Fire*

was talking about expatriates in Rome. Faulkner's *A Fable*, Elizabeth Spencer's *The Light in the Piazza*, and other southern novels are set outside the United States. I don't go abroad in my fiction, but I do go outside the South. We are now, I think, in the waning days of the power and influence of the southern writer.

There were writers of nearly Faulkner's stature when he was still alive. Robert Penn Warren was still writing southern novels, but then along came Lee Smith, Bobbie Ann Mason, Ellen Gilchrist, Anne Tyler. The new novelists, especially the women I've just mentioned, started dealing with suburban types, southerners in small towns, with one foot in the folklore of the past—folksy stuff in the way people talk—and another foot in the cultural and economic changes, changes in fashion—what I like to call the A&P school of southern writers, because they always wanted to give you all the brand names. They know the details of life as it is lived in the South today.

PARRILL: Isn't that pretty far from Faulkner and the older school who always dealt with the weight of the past pushing down against the present?

MADDEN: Yes. The past in those writers and some male writers also—not Barry Hannah, however—is more like the old local color fiction of many decades ago.

PARRILL: Unlike a number of southern writers, Faulkner was very influenced by Joyce and other modernists.

MADDEN: Faulkner was very European. I don't mean that by itself being European makes you better. I think Faulkner is the greatest writer since Shakespeare. It's not just that he's innovative, but that he's successfully innovative. I think he is more successfully innovative in his works than any other writer since Shakespeare. Who the hell can compete? Tolstoy? Hemingway? Cervantes?

Parrill: I know that one critic has said that, if God could write, he would write like Tolstoy. At any rate, we're totally in a matter of opinion here. Certainly, if we measure influence upon world literature, the only other American writer who could compete with him is Edgar Allan Poe. If the Americans never could figure out what to do with Faulkner, the South Americans certainly could. Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* would be impossible to imagine without Faulkner. I do think that, because of the veil of language, it is difficult to compare novelists in another language. And James Joyce seems to me totally Faulkner's equal, if not superior, in English. And in his mastery of language, he was clearly his superior.

Madden: There are so many writers in the South today that need to be rediscovered. Davis Grubb, for example, who wrote *The Night of the Hunter*. But with the focus on Faulkner and Eudora Welty, others are neglected. Teachers and young scholars seem to feel that dealing with the famous writers best promotes their standing, their careers.

Parrill: Of course, Agee wrote the screenplay for the wonderful film version of *The Night of the Hunter*. What happens is that, as time passes, teachers just get two or three people they're writing about, get interested in, and the students follow them.

Madden: Writers do get revived. Evelyn Scott, for example. I was involved with Peggy Bach in the revival of Evelyn Scott, and that has taken hold. *The Wave* is the greatest Civil War novel, unless you consider *Absalom, Absalom!* Even though it is not literally about the war; the effect of the war and reconstruction upon descendants gives it its power.

Emily Toth was largely responsible for the resurrection of Kate Chopin, and look how deservedly popular Chopin has become. This is the kind of work that can be done. What gets in the way of it is theory. What I mean is all the stuff about the body, the gaze, queer

theory, and that kind of stuff muddies the waters, so what we really need to do is to revitalize the study of American literature as composed of works of art, not mainly as posing subject matter than can be discussed in terms of ideas, themes, etc.

Parrill: I think literature is never still. If it's still, if it's not going somewhere, it is moribund or dead.

Madden: Is it possible that the literature lives, as in art is a joy forever, while it is the teacher or critic who is, in some sense, "dead?" When people say something is going in a new direction, that doesn't mean that it's *really* going in the direction that people say it is, or that it's going to last. The idea that it needs to go in the same direction is not the same question. Some people think it's going in the direction they want it to go in and are studying it that way. That can be very transient. The kind of change you're talking about is the kind that Emerson and others were talking about when they wanted a new kind of literature. Emerson, Whitman, and Emily Dickinson took us in a truly new direction. But new directions in the future do not necessarily affect the life of their literature.

What I see in the southern novel today that may revitalize everything is Atlantic studies. I don't think that's a fad. Let's study American literature, the South and the North—but they're really focusing more on the South, I think, and going down into the Caribbean in the relationship back and forth from Europe and Africa to the Atlantic—the flow. Let's see how migration and transmigration have changed the culture novelists are writing about. If you expand Atlantic studies all the way up to where the Appalachian Mountains begin in New Brunswick, come down about three thousand miles to southern Georgia, the area is incredibly rich. We will be redefining not only southern literature, but American literature.

Parrill: Put me down as a doubter. The South, with its aristocratic tradition, its heritage of slavery, yeoman farmers and sharecroppers, seems to me a great literary heritage which would gain nothing and lose much by being tossed together with all those other groups.

Madden: But isn't that the kind of change that you implied keeps literature alive? Or do you mean change among writers, not teachers and scholars? Imagine both dwelling upon the same page. I think the great breadth and depth of Atlantic studies has the potential to affect the way writers view their raw material, more in a huge conceptual way than the local detail fixation seen in much new southern fiction. In fact, the writer from the South who sees and draws upon that far vaster area may put fiction set in the South into a richer context that could alter in positive ways the consciousness of all Americans who read it.

Parrill: You teach creative writing, and one of the things I wanted to ask you is what the function of teaching creative writing is anyway.

Madden: What most people really mean when they ask that question is: can you teach somebody talent? Is that what *you* mean?

Parrill: Well, that's part of it, but don't they always rebel against the teacher, that is if the teacher is really a good one and the student is really talented? I was thinking about what Madison Jones said about his best student, Madison Smartt Bell. He said he had something he thought he could teach him but that Bell was not interested.

Madden: Well, that's irrelevant to the question of whether you can teach creative writing. Let me fill that out for you. Jesse Hill Ford shot a young man and I wrote about that.

Parrill: I read recently what you wrote about Ford.

Madden: The last thing that Jesse said to me when I was investigating that event and he took me to his house and talked about

a glowing review of Madison Jones' latest novel, Jesse said, "When I was in a class with Madison in Gainesville, Florida, our teacher, Andrew Lytle, favored him and didn't think I was very good." The last thing I said to Jesse was, "How do you feel now that I have told you that you have hurt a very fine teacher by making her a major character in *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*, turning her into a whore?" And Jesse said, "Well, as Andrew Lytle said, 'When you're fighting your way through the swamp, you can't worry about the mosquitoes.'" That put him even lower in my own mind and Andrew Lytle even higher when he favored Madison Jones. That's how complicated what you're talking about is. It's not only rebelling against your creative writing teacher, it's the effect of knowing the teacher does not regard your talent as being great enough.

But to answer your question. In all my teaching years, even when I was using the conventional workshop method most teachers use, and I haven't used it for twenty years—and for thirty years I did—I know for a fact that I have taught creative writing. What I have taught is the techniques of fiction, the very thing we were talking about with Faulkner, his innovative art. If you look at my book *Revising Fiction*, I researched the revising process of great writers like Faulkner and Hemingway, in terms of style, point of view, description, and narrative. Whether or not they used the same terms that I do, they employed a technique of fiction in their revisions. It was a recognizable artistic decision in every case, for the sake of creating a better work of fiction.

I tell my class: You're used to the workshop method where people sit around and give opinions. Opinions will teach you nothing. I want to free you from opinions, so that your authority becomes the art of fiction, not the opinions of fellow writers and your teacher. Ask yourself: how good is this draft that I'm doing? If you apply some of the same principles, some of the same aesthetic techniques that the

great writers—right on up to 1980 (which is when my book was published)—that I got from them—Wright Morris, for instance—you will improve what you have written. Whether you have talent or not, I can still teach you the techniques of fiction. I can't teach you talent, but I can teach you the art of fiction.

People talk to me about my story, "The Day the Flowers Came," and wonder where that came from. How the hell could you come up with that story? Did it really happen to you? My answer is, 'Yes, in my imagination.' You take what you have and you subject it to what you know and you improve it. Intuitively, you can write a novel, even a great one, Dostoevsky did. D. H. Lawrence said, "I have no idea of what I'm doing. I wish I understood the art of fiction." Joyce Carol Oates, Dreiser, Dostoevsky, Lawrence—when I read them, I cringe, but I still think their overall effect is powerful. But you can't teach a young writer those things about Lawrence that make him effective in spite of his defective art.

Parrill: Are you saying that Dostoevsky didn't know what he was doing?

Madden: I'm saying that he said he would have been a better writer if he had. When I read those writers, I cringe more often than I praise them, but I think they're among a selective few who affect us through raw power more than through art. Thomas Wolfe didn't know what the hell he was doing, but he was getting better when he died, and he even vowed to F. Scott Fitzgerald and Sherwood Anderson that he would learn, and that a greater command of the art of fiction would make the difference.

Parrill: I'm not so sure. I think that anyone—you, me, other writers—would rewrite the writers you mentioned at our peril. Their faults are so bound up with their virtues that they are inseparable. There are a thousand ways to improve *Moby Dick*, but it wouldn't

be *Moby Dick*. And anybody could improve Thomas Wolfe, but it wouldn't be Thomas Wolfe. Thomas Wolfe could certainly improve Thomas Wolfe—and was beginning to when he died—but I'm not sure we could.

Madden: But if they revised to make their writing as good as we are reading it to be, doesn't it follow that further, but more knowledgeable, revision might well make it better? Would a badly written sentence made better become a flaw in a Lawrence novel that is awkward though powerful in some transient way? Can one reread *Women in Love*? (I stopped forcing myself and quit halfway through) as one rereads *The Sound and the Fury*? Well, maybe "one," maybe more than "one."

Parrill: I suppose brevity has its uses, but they are certainly limited.

Madden: I am not talking about brevity, as reading, even skimming, *Revising Fiction* again will remind you, old friend.

Parrill: Dickens was a great writer, but he was also a great editor. He usually edited other people's writing by addition. He would take an absolutely flat passage and make it instantly come alive by adding three or four sentences.

Madden: Your question also included the question of whether I've turned out any good writers. I know that there are many students who know and who have told me that their work is better than it would have been without my approach, even when it was still the old workshop approach. Of course, I teach undergraduates almost exclusively, by choice. Jim Wilcox, Jim Bennett, and Moira Crone teach fiction to graduate students. Their writing and teaching approaches totally differ from my own. They are far more similar to each other than I am to them.

Back for a moment to writers who make an immediate but transitory impact without great artistic achievement. I can't understand how Joyce Carol Oates could write in the same way so many novels; changing subject matter or genres is not fundamental change in terms of art. I was blown away by her first novel, which I thought was very promising, in spite of the relative artlessness of it.

Parrill: I reviewed one of her early novels very favorably mainly because I thought she was going to improve, but I doubt that she ever did. I thought the book was unformed.

Madden: In my *Poetic Image in Six Genres*, in a collection of my reviews of her early books I wrote that I thought she had a powerful imagination, but that I did not think she was an artist who was going to grow. I wrote that I had stopped reading her because I had had it. And that was very early, 1969. I saw her at MLA [Modern Language Association conference] and she stopped me—she's tall and thin—and said, "*But* David, I'm very serious and I try to be as artistic as I can." I heard her give a speech one time, and she braced her knee on a chair and did this young girl thing, but if you listened to what she had to say, it was brilliant and had an edge to it. She wrote somewhere that David Madden reminds her of C. W. Moss in *Bonnie and Clyde*. [Laughs] That hurts my feelings. That's vicious. I said to her biographer that if I wanted to be mean, I would say she looks like Shelley Duvall as Olive Oyl, and he quoted me, and her tone is not quite friendly. She can be a little vindictive, but our world of polite relationships among writers would be unbearably bland without Joyce Carol Oates.

Parrill: You don't fall into any of the main schools of criticism today. You're not a close reader, for example.

MADDEN: I'm not a close reader? Maybe I don't understand that phrase the way you do. If you go to *Poetic Image in Six Genres*, you will find my essay on Bergman's *The Virgin Spring*—that's in your area of interest—in which I wrote the first frame-by-frame analysis of an entire movie ever written. I think you'd really like that essay.

PARRILL: I would have to do some research before I would believe that.

MADDEN: This came out in 1969 and film criticism was still pretty much in its infancy.

PARRILL: Well, I've been reading film criticism back into the teens and before, and Maxim Gorky in 1898 gave what is essentially a frame-by-frame criticism of a Lumiệre film of a train coming into a station.

MADDEN: Not the same thing. And I have done detailed readings of Wright Morris and James M. Cain, among others.

Let's reach back to your creative writing question—whether it can be taught and whether any of my students became successful writers. In my first year of teaching at LSU, I taught a fiction writer and a poet who have become successful—to take two examples, two genres—and who have become very successful teachers of creative writing. They tell me often what they learned and how they teach what they learned from me, combined, of course, with very imaginative ways of teaching of their own. Allen Wier, the author of *Tehano*, published a few years ago, met his wife the poet Dara Wier—a major poet now—in my class. *Tehano* is a true masterpiece, really great. His descriptions of Indians, their speech, their attitudes, the feel for them—really great. In our department, something must be happening in the effort to teach creative writing over the past twenty years of the MFA program because our students have published seventy novels in the past twenty years.

Parrill: Would you say something about style? I'm not sure I know what it is, but I think I recognize it. Does *Tehano* have style?

Madden: The raw material—narrative and characters—is well-researched and well-imagined. But it is the style that makes it work, makes it a work of art, line by line. The diction, phrasing, syntax are very consciously and carefully wrought. The reader is startled often by the fresh stylistics without feeling that the novel is sustained only on the style, because the story is complex and very well-paced.

Parrill: Isn't it true that [one of] the most important things many of the writers you name provide is historical context? Most will be basically forgotten except for a revival now and then?

Madden: Art relies for its lasting effects in no way upon historical context, as readers of Jane Austen and Emily Dickinson will testify. I'm deep into the world of Balzac's ninety-seven novels of the Human Comedy project and I don't give a damn—I never do—about the fact that it is steeped in history of his times. And to be forgotten is to not to prove a work is not a work of art. It proves rather that readers have forgotten, or never been taught, how to read first for artistry simultaneously with character and story. I am eager to add that students testify that the stories I collected in my textbook back in 1974 do not suffer from the passing of decades before they were even born.

Parrill: Since the reader is not likely to see them for some time, could you tell us something about the series of novels about London Bridge you've been working on for twenty years off and on.

Madden: One of them is the building of the bridge, *London Bridge Rising*, the decline of the bridge, *London Bridge is Falling Down*, a meshing of the two, *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*, a book of poetry *London Bridge Nocturnes*, which derives from the Poet, who is a character in the novel, and *Memoir of a Year on London Bridge*,

the original, surreal version which I wrote every night. Every night for a year, before I went to bed, I went into my study, shut the door, and for ten minutes to twenty minutes, I wrote in a kind of flood whatever entered my head about London Bridge, about which I was reading in only one book, by Gordon Home, written in the 1930s, called simply *Old London Bridge*, which I got from Cottonwood Books here in Baton Rouge. It is the best of the thousand research books—very few on the bridge itself—which I eventually looked at. I eventually went to London and I went to Guildhall and the National Library and they didn't have any more information than that one book. That first version is very surrealistic. I wanted to publish it as a memoir which reflected my wild and strange responses to London Bridge, to the voices that spoke to me from there every night, late.

So then, I've got five books, and the agent is only presenting one, *London Bridge Is Falling Down,* because she doesn't think they are going to go as a trilogy or a quartet or a quintet, and she is not having too good a success with that one.

Parrill: I'm sure that all of the people interested in your work would like to know what themes and interests *London Bridge* has in common with all your other works.

Madden: To some degree, usually a great degree, and from the first short story and novel onward, the supremacy of the imagination actively at work in the world has been the common element, out of the effect on me of my grandmother's storytelling, radio drama, movies—more than the printed word until I was about thirteen. I sensed and finally profoundly know that imagination drives the creation of all the arts and its felt presence lures the listener, viewer, reader, not first of all story or character, and that it is the art of the form that makes it live and breathe forever. I became aware of the power of the imagination in the writing of stories in which characters told stories,

creating what I call the pleasure-dome effect upon the listener, a zoning out of all but the force of imagination, alive in the voice, as demonstrated in *Pleasure-Dome* and in the short story "The Singer" and in "No Trace," but most consciously and deliberately in the London Bridge novels and with greater, more sustained intensity in my novel coming out next spring, *Abducted by Circumstance*. What anyone imagines is more powerful on that day than what is really happening. The unimagined life is not worth living.

Parrill: Is it possible that one of your problems throughout your career has been that you don't fall into any acceptable category which a so-called "research university" is likely to accept and thus you don't get the appreciation which you would reasonably be expected to get?

Madden: The more I do in various genres and various ventures—such as the US Civil War Center—the more forcibly I am aware of the fact of what you pose in that question, but that happens mainly within any given arena, such as the English Department at LSU, but not English departments that pay me to give readings or lectures mainly because of that productivity in many genres. My own department is only faintly aware, and seem unimpressed when they are aware, of my many critical essays and books on a vast range of subjects and authors, American and European. I published a book of essays when I was thirty-five and another a few years ago, with university presses, something most scholars cannot do. No LSU colleague has published more than I have and if quantity is a dime a dozen, it is true that no one has taken any of my criticism to task on any level. I have always been more naively puzzled than rampantly resentful. And I do it all out of pure interest and love of doing, not for promotion, which has come from the novels. Beyond LSU, consider that the editors of good publications have published all the poems I have sent out, but no editor will publish a book of my poems, partly

because I am a novelist, partly because no two poems are similar—too much damned variety, no single voice, no connective theme, etc. All that is, of course, in my own head, but then I live in my head.

Parrill: My final question is one that I know that everyone who is as familiar with your works as I am would like to ask. Do you think you would have done better to concentrate on one thing?

Madden: That's an extremely appropriate question for me, as what I just said suggests. About thirty years ago, a friend of mine at a party, Jim Harris—is this his name?—standing right over there by the stairs, asked me, sotto voce: "David, why do you get involved in the Civil War Center, textbooks, and all like that? You're a very talented novelist and you're squandering your talent. Let somebody else do that. Anybody can do that. Why don't you do what only *you* can do?" That's one way of asking your question, isn't it? My answer was probably lame then. It is probably not as lame now since I have more years to look back on what I've done. In one article I wrote thirty years ago, I said, I have five books in progress of different kinds on my desk, a novel, a textbook, a nonfiction book, a book of criticism, and a play. This is my usual way of working. So, from then on I resolved to have only one book on my desk at a time. And I have failed miserably to do that.

Even when I am writing on *London Bridge*, which I was doing when you showed up, I can point out five books, or five projects on my huge L & N Railroad desk. So, my answer is that, even to the textbooks, I bring the same creative spirit and energy, the same seriousness, the same innovative interdisciplinary temperament—the same "myriad mindedness," which is a phrase a lady from Venice applied to Faulkner in Paris, the year of his Centennial—to everything I do, whether textbooks, Civil War Center, being chair of the Louisiana Abraham Lincoln Bicentennial Commission, on which I asked to

serve, or creating a residential hospice after the death of my brother, whose picture I just pointed out to you. My little brother, John, a loveable character in *Bijou*, *Brothers in Confidence*, and *Pleasure-Dome*, died in our hometown, Knoxville, in a residential hospice, a very fine facility, totally unlike a hospital, making the six weeks I spent, every day, by his bed bearable. I came back resolved to create a residential hospice facility here because we don't have one here. Now we have one completed I had nothing to do with—Catholic, like the one my brother was in—and another which will be much better—we've bought the land but haven't started the building. Meanwhile, we have "The Butterfly Wing" in a very fine nursing home complex.

I bring to all those types of things, projects, the same creative energy—a single flow of creative energy—that I bring to my books. So that I don't feel what you're feeling and what many other of my friends are feeling, that I'm sort of wasting my time instead of going into another novel or what have you. Here, at the age of seventy-five, I look at the fact that I have published nine novels, two books of stories, finished a quintet, *London Bridge in Plague and Fir*e, and am about to have published by the University of Tennessee Press my novel, *Abducted by Circumstance*, and a book of my Civil War essays, *Touching the Web of the Civil War*, and finally my first book of poetry, with an introduction by George Garrett, and a book of interviews—including yours, early and late, with your permission—which I consider part of my publications. I'm part author and so are you.

I've published nine novels with none of them being called bad, and only one or two of them being criticized negatively. I've also published fifteen textbooks, two volumes of short stories, and about eighty stories which have not been collected. Many of them will be collected in yet another new book. I've had many plays and opera libretti done and many serious book reviews, critical articles and critical books—fifty books all together. Many of my textbooks have

been imitated, such as *A Pocket Full of Stories*. I don't know if there is a word to characterize me in response to your question—but there must be a word. A word that is not silly, not stupid, not irreverent, not insulting—a word that would be absolutely appropriate. But then, what kind of a question, with that record, which compares well with my contemporaries, is it finally?

Don't Write—Revise (And Break Rules)

Susan K. Perry, 2010

Writing rules are a good starting point. But only a starting point. Take, for example, a novel I just read, *Abducted by Circumstance*, by David Madden. The author of award-winning novels and short stories since 1961, Madden also created the undergraduate creative writing program at Louisiana State University in 1968.

In our recent e-mail interview, I told Madden I was surprised that he'd "gotten away with" a book in which a main event is a kidnapping and probable murder that contains almost no salaciousness, and in which nearly every dramatic event takes place in the protagonist's mind. Plus we never find out what really happened, and the book is quirkily short. Madden told me that, indeed, the novel was rejected right and left.

"My agent got extremely positive reports from many New York editors," Madden explained, "but they all had faith—which I do not share—in the general reader's inability to *collaborate* with authors such as myself."

Editors responded in the same hesitant way, said Madden, to some of his previous books, including *The Suicide's Wife*, (related to but not a prequel to *Abducted*) and *Sharpshooter*, as well as to his next novel, *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*.

"But no reader of any of those novels and no reviews supported the editors' fears," he told me. "My not telling what happened to

Glenda [the kidnapped woman] stresses the overriding importance of what happens in [the narrator] Carol's imagination."

Writing Process

PERRY: Did the book "fall together" this way from the very first, or did it evolve for you? And how different was this book's genesis for you compared to the others?

MADDEN: Carol and the way she responds came to me immediately, more fully alive in a moment than any of my other characters. Characters come to me in stories and novels much in the same way, either as characters suddenly appearing or the concept demanding their appearance (as it was with Willis Carr in *Sharpshooter*) or the story itself reaching out to take their hands and pull them in (as with most of the characters in *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*). They quickly come alive and stay alive throughout the writing, and some, for many years beyond.

PERRY: In all the years you've been writing, how has the process changed for you?

MADDEN: The changes aren't dramatic. Inspired by the method of Georges Simenon, the French psychological crime novelist, which was that he wrote each of his 250 novels in eleven days, I wrote *Pleasure-Dome*, early version, in eleven days, and *The Suicide's Wife* in nineteen days and *Abducted by Circumstance* in twenty-one days, but I devoted from six to fifteen years to *Cassandra Singing*, *Bijou*, *Sharpshooter*, and *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*. You can imagine that the simple matter of time spent writing and rewriting suggests a process that is basically the same but produced through different expenditures of energy.

I don't write, I revise, and that takes time, unless, suddenly, I can do it at great speed, and ironically, the novels written swiftly are more coherent works of art. That also explains the brevity. *Bijou* is almost seven hundred pages long and so is not a work of art, but it was a great success with readers, who said, however, typically, "I didn't want it to end, but it was too long."

PERRY: Do you find it easier to block out distractions, set aside time, get into a writing mood/mode when you want to?

MADDEN: Not really, because it is I who am the source of distractions (teaching, writing nonfiction, essays, speeches, reviews, textbooks), and I am always in the mood and I am always in the mode, always eager to write, never having had to chop a writer's block. I have put it this way: Everything I am and do in my life is immersed in a single, uninterrupted flow of creative energy.

PERRY: Does the cancer subplot have any personal relevance for you?

MADDEN: My wife had breast cancer many years ago and she worked for the YWCA conducting early breast cancer detection programs for low-income women, and my best friend died of liver cancer, and members of my family have suffered the pain of cancer, but I simply wanted Carol to have her own rape (cancer as rapist) and death threat, without overstressing it and therefore distracting from the plight she imagines for Glenda. And she feels a sisterhood with Glenda, who has had cancer, and empathy for her husband who is dying of cancer. I am an activist in a number of causes, and I helped get a residential hospice started in Baton Rouge, inspired by sitting at my dying brother's bedside each day for six weeks.

Artistic Choices

Perry: Why did you choose the frigid north as a setting?

Madden: My earlier novel *The Suicide's Wife* begins in an empty house in The Thousand Islands of New York, which I had only glimpsed from the International Bridge going over into Canada in 1964. The image of it stirs my imagination. Intuitively, I felt that exotic place of thousands of separate islands would enhance my rendering of Carol's life and her act of compassion—the sense of her isolation from others in an isolated place, and her imagining Glenda and the abductor isolated from others, seeking places of isolation. I'm not, by the way from Louisiana, my home for forty-three years, but East Tennessee, which gets as cold as or colder than Black Mountain, North Carolina, where I now live.

Perry: Writing from a woman's viewpoint so naturally, did you at any point have to ask anyone, "What would a woman do or say here?"

Madden: Hell, no, because I am temperamentally suited to live out my long-held conviction that a writer ought to be able to imagine any kind of person. I believe in the supremacy of the imagination. So when women, my wife first, of course, tell me that Ann, from whose very intimate point of view I render *The Suicide's Wife* is very convincing, I am very pleased, and when the first reader of *Abducted by Circumstance*, a woman, tells me she felt as if it were written by a woman, I feel that my imagination and my art have succeeded hand in hand.

Perry: Have you been called an "empath," as Carol is by her father late in the book?

Madden: Yes, often, but not necessarily that word. Once a famous authority on warlocks called me a "warlock" and warned me to

be very careful in ways I use the power. Well, if a warlock can be benevolent and empathetic in imagination and in action, I may be a warlock. I prefer "empath," especially now that I have created one in Carol. A close friend visited me in my mountain town a few days ago and made a point of saying why he and others we know miss me. "David, you are one of those rare people who actually listen to people." I am very moved by that. My wife not so deeply.

Perry: Your religious faith makes a slight appearance in the book. Anything to add on that?

Madden: I never impose my Methodist Christianity on anyone and I never theme-monger my various other convictions in my writing, not even in my nonfiction. Looking back, though, I feel it is there, even in what I wrote, and in my life, during the fifty years of my agnosticism (I became a Christian fifteen years ago). I am a New Testament Christian exclusively, and the Holy Spirit dwells within my spirit, so Carol's calling a few times on the Holy Spirit arises from her role as empath.

I realized only last week that *The Beautiful Greed*, written when I was an agnostic, is a parable of the parable of the Good Samaritan. I became a Christian midway in the fifteen years I worked on *London Bridge in Plague and Fire* [started twenty-two years ago] and so I am aware that in that book, I was always moving my villain toward his thirty seconds of "salvation" after he calls on Christ, before he falls impaled upon a pike on the roof of the Great Gate on London Bridge.

Awesome Output, No Writer's Block: How?

Susan K. Perry, 2013

For the past fifty-five years, David Madden has been writing novels, short stories, poems, and nonfiction. And he hasn't run out of ideas and projects yet. His latest novel is *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*, which he's been writing and revising for more than two decades, between other work.

Madden's mind is lit by a kind of awe-inspiring creative flame. I've interviewed him before. This time we focused on both the new book and his creative process, and he was remarkably frank about both the ups and downs of a long career in many genres.

The Q & A

Perry: David, this new novel, *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*, is a much more complex work than the one we talked about before, *Abducted by Circumstance*. I can't imagine how you kept all that research and all those disparate elements in your mind. You've said elsewhere that you wrote "ten huge drafts." Can you describe that lengthy process for us?

Madden: Around 1995, for a year, just before going to bed, I locked myself in my study, as if in my subconscious, and for ten to twenty minutes each night, I read a few passages in *Old London Bridge* by Gordon Home, full of old prints of the construction of the bridge in

1177 to 1209 and its changes over the centuries, and, stimulated by the facts, I wrote as if in a trance, almost literally listening to voices of the architect and of folks who lived in shops and houses on the bridge. Often they spoke surrealistically, so I ended up with 250 handwritten pages of surrealistic passages, from which I intended to derive guidance in writing the epic of the building and history of the bridge. But I submitted the surreal version to Random House, and it was rejected.

While later writing the novel itself I included poems as written by a poet who lived on the sixth floor of the famous Nonesuch House on the bridge. I also submitted without success a collection of those poems, called *London Bridge Nocturnes*. The first draft of the novel ran five hundred pages. Then I decided to write a whole novel only about the building of the bridge. Then I conceived a quartet consisting of *London Bridge Rising*, *London Bridge Is Falling Down*, a meshing of those two as *London Bridge in Plague and Fire*, and *London Bridge Nocturnes*, well aware it would never get published. Each of the three novel versions went through two or three major revisions.

I kept all their disparate elements clearly in mind because that's how my mind normally works. I am, in a sense, myriad minded.

Perry: The "feel" of the book, its language and dialogues, suits the long-ago eras you're writing about. How did you get that to work?

Madden: I gathered and read about one thousand books of and about the twelfth and the seventeenth centuries, and soon felt an affinity for the language and dialogue. Some of it, in tone and syntax, is somewhat made up, imagined. From start to finish, the language felt natural to me, rather than a conscious striving to get it to work.

Perry: Was it ever a challenge to know when to veer off the historical record? Did the historical record ever feel confining, or did it offer you the leeway you needed to tell a good story?

MADDEN: The wild freedom of the surrealistic sensibility enabled me to move without challenge back and forth at great ease from the vast array of actual history to imaginative elaboration and deliberate distortion of history. I reveled in the historical record as readily as in my bizarre subconscious, so that the "leeway" lay in the mingling and meshing of the two.

PERRY: Were there surprises for you during the writing of this book and getting it published?

MADDEN: The flow of creative energy, especially in moments of revision, just naturally gives rise frequently to surprise. When I reread each draft, I was continually surprised, wondering how and when I wrote a particular word, phrase, paragraph, or episode. When a new idea for a major revision in structure or in expanding a character wells up out of my subconscious, I experience surprise.

Because I was convinced as I wrote them that several of my novels, including this one, would never get published, I was not surprised that the many editors who rejected them declared that they were "very fine, brilliant, but won't sell, being inaccessible to the general reader." I was surprised not only when each of them was finally accepted but that readers found them accessible and, after some adjustment to their strangenesses, very enjoyable.

PERRY: Would you like to say something about the psychology of your books, and about what you like to write best, psychologically deep fiction or plot-driven fiction? Both, I figure.

MADDEN: Of course you are right, for most of my twelve novels—psychological and plot-driven, sometimes both at once, *London Bridge in Plague and Fire* being less plot-driven than complexly psychological. The novel before this one, *Abducted by Circumstance*, was deeply, uniquely psychological, confined to the mind and compassionate

imagination of a woman. In the current book, I delve into the mental processes of six very different characters, while simultaneously involving them in actions that are psychologically revealing.

As Wright Morris said, "The drama of narrative event interests me far less than the drama of human consciousness," which is, of course, a fitful mirroring of the subconscious.

PERRY: This book exemplifies so much about the creative process and the uses of the imagination. Are you aware of that while you're writing or does that stuff just find its way into your fiction "naturally"?

MADDEN: *Naturally* is the key word in my response because the subject of all my writing in all genres is implicitly the nature of imagination and its effect upon my reader, as my attentive collaborator. And it is the techniques of art that facilitate that effect, the experience that the reader has, emotionally, imaginatively, and intellectually, a trinity.

PERRY: What role does poetry play in this book, and in your life?

MADDEN: In a book about my writings, *David Madden: A Writer for All Genres*, George Garrett makes a case for my poetry, stressing its variety of subject and technique, citing my unpublished collection *Venice Is Sinking* as example. Those two elements help explain why I can't get that volume published, while continuing to publish each poem I write. I imagine poets, who recommend poetry manuscripts, much prefer to publish poets, especially emerging ones, unless the novelist-poet has a close friend involved in publishing poetry. More than novelists, poets network tightly. I am very happy that readers over the past fifty-five years have always declared, "Your style is so poetic!"

PERRY: Are there still stories you'd like to write? How do you stay motivated?

MADDEN: In a vital sense, my whole life, in my many roles as father, husband, teacher, activist, writer is one unbroken motivation to create, in one way, one genre or another, always reaching, never stumbling over writer's block. At seventy-nine, I like being able to answer that I am currently deep into seven books simultaneously, and screenwriting. Two nonfiction titles are suggestive: *My Intellectual Life in the Army*, a memoir, and *Myriadmindedness*, a revolutionary method of feeling, imagining, and thinking.

PERRY: I'm busy myself finishing up details for the publication of my own first novel, *Kylie's Heel*. After so many revisions, I'm very pleased that I won't have to immerse myself in it again. Do you ever feel that way once you've sent a final draft off to your publisher, that, oh goody, I get to move on to something new?

MADDEN: I never tire of revision, the vein system of the living organism of a fictive body, and so I am never glad to relinquish a novel to a publisher. But, yes, that act ignites a fiery desire to finish one of the several works in progress, the one that leaps up out of the file cabinet and seizes me by the throat.

Appendix

Here we present an alternative version of the first interview in this volume, Greg Spaid's 1967 interview with David Madden in Athens, Ohio. We received the copy presented earlier in this volume from Madden. Later on, after getting in touch with Spaid through Madden, we sent a copy of Madden's version of the interview to Spaid and received the following e-mail from him on August 17, 2010:

> Dear James,
>
> Sorry I've been slow to respond. I've been away from e-mail for the past two weeks in Montana.
>
> Earlier today I wrote to David to tell him I could not find a copy of the interview. But I kept digging, and now I've found it. The good news is that it should be able to fill in the material you are missing around page 9. The bad news is, perhaps, that there is quite a bit of discrepancy between the version of the interview you sent to me and my original transcript—beginning with the date. The interview was actually conducted on December 9, 1967, at David's home in Athens, Ohio. Your copy of the interview starts and ends at a place different from mine. Yours has different versions of the questions. And on and on. At this point, so far removed, it may be impossible to

determine which version is closest to the actual interview. If we had the tape (my guess is that it was reel to reel at that time) that would be clarifying. In his comment before the interview, David refers to listening to the tape. Perhaps he has it. He may also have arranged to have the tape transcribed, and that transcription may be different from mine. Who knows?

James, how would you like to proceed? If you want it, I would be happy to mail you a photocopy of my version of the interview. I have to warn you, it's very good evidence of what a terrible proofreader I am.

Let me clarify a couple of other things. The other person in the room when I did the interview was a friend of mine, Brad Story. It was Brad who came on the motorcycle, not me. Brad is now a successful sculptor. The editor of /Hika/, referred to by David as Epstein, is the writer Daniel Mark Epstein, who is also a friend.

I was a painter when the interview was conducted, but now it would probably be better to refer to me as an artist who works in photography and mixed media. I also served as the provost of Kenyon College for six years—something rare for an artist, I think.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Best,
Greg

Spaid sent us a hard copy of his version of the interview, which we reproduce here so that readers of this volume can get as clear a picture as possible of what the young writer David Madden was like in 1967.

The following interview was conducted on December 9, 1967, at the home of Jerry David Madden, which stands relatively alone in the hills surrounding Athens, Ohio. With a prevalent southern Appalachian accent, Madden gave long-winded and often highly excited answers, while his wife, Robbie, washed dishes in the kitchen and Blake (no doubt the name is fully intended to carry literary significance), his nine-year-old son, sat nearby and made a concerted effort not to disturb his father.

SPAID: These questions are pointed to the development of a young writer, the sweat and the satisfaction that is involved. To begin, when did you begin to write?

MADDEN: I remember pretty clearly that it was in about the fifth grade. The first inspiration for creativity was my grandmother's storytelling, as I remember, so that I told stories verbally to audiences of various kinds—brothers and sisters, school audiences, and so on—for many years before I even wrote a word. And during this time in grammar school I don't think I ever really read a book or many stories except what the teacher stood over me insisting that I read, so that all of the influences were [in] the nature of a grandmother. And then the movies, seeing the movies at about three or four a week and sometimes seeing them three or four times over in the neighborhood theaters, and using the movies as a kind of babysitter while my mother worked during the depression. I began to think in terms of characters and stories in terms of the movies or the cinema. So the first time I really wrote anything down was in the fifth grade after seeing *Frenchman's Creek*, a Technicolor movie with Joan Fontaine about sword fighting, and I called it "Blue Waters." I'm trying to understand why I made that significant leap from storytelling,

because, you understand, as I would tell stories, I would act them out in many ways, at least with my voice as much as I could, or if it was in the dark, in bed or something. For instance, I was in an orphanage for a while when I was in the third grade, and in the dark, kids would slip over to my bed after lights were out to hear a story. Now the content of these stories wasn't really a content similar to my grandmother's as they were [in content] similar to the movies. So I would tell stories about Straight-hair and Fatsey, which was my version of Laurel and Hardy, or tell about Zorro, Buck Jones, and these movie characters. And very often I would put in the background music—like with Buck Jones, the scene would come to an end, there'd be a chase or something like that, and [loudly makes sound of the "William Tell Overture"] and all that kind of stuff. Now if it were on a front steps, or walking along, sometimes we would hop freights out to the swimming hole, out in the country, and walking along the railroad I remember they would ask me to tell a story. As we walked along, I would act these things out. I don't really understand why I really made that leap from the verbal thing before an audience, loving the effect on an audience, to putting words on a paper, which is very cold comparatively, and you never see your audience.

Spaid: You said one time that you would write stories during lectures and English class. Did you show these stories you wrote to anyone?

Madden: I showed the teacher. I started showing them, and the teacher was pretty receptive. But then after her, all of them were hostile. Let me back up, though, and make sure I make this statement. I think what made me write a story about a movie, put it down into words, is that I had seen the movie about Chopin and got the whole idea of the artist's life, and realized that since I wasn't a musician that the storyteller and writer would have a similarly exciting life! If I wanted to have the life of the writer, I would have to write rather

than tell the stories. That may have entered into it. This is a mystery that I can't solve right now but that I'm sort of working with in my book *Bijou*. This is one of the reasons why I'm pouring everything out subjectively, without much criticism, and without much critical thinking. I hope someday this will slip out, you see. But I think I had reached the point where I could imagine a reader sitting down and having this one-to-one relationship with my voice as it came through in the choice of words and so on. And this was the similarity to the dramatic immediacy of storytelling that I was, in a sense, giving up in going to writing but that maybe I still thought I could keep in a way. Now to go on to what you're saying about showing the stories and writing in class. All through junior high school and English classes, and other classes too, I wrote furiously all day long from the beginning of school to the end of school because none of the courses interested me. The stories I wrote were like movie scenarios, in that I wrote the very basic story outline with all kinds of flamboyant characters similar to what I had seen in the movies. So that some of the stories took place on the sea, some on the desert, some in medieval France, after Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. Now in the meantime I still wasn't reading any books. I didn't read a book until I was about in the eighth grade or ninth grade, and it was *God's Little Acre* by Erskine Caldwell. That's the first time I really read a book through. So I never got any of the classics or anything, didn't have any love of poetry or any of that stuff. Well, the teachers would take up these stories when they caught me at it, you see, and they would rip them up in front of my eyes. I've got in there now in my files—I've kept all of these things that I could—stories that the last page of which is missing, which means that they just assumed that I was only writing on one page. They wouldn't imagine me writing ten pages. They would rip up that one page I was writing on, and the story drops off. So I developed this hostility toward school and

teachers, this idea that they were hostile to creativity and to writing, and self-expression of any sort. And this helped to aggravate a natural rebellious attitude. But, you talk about the sweat and all that that goes into it, I very early enjoyed the real physical exhaustion involved in writing, because I'd really get very, very tired but race right on, many, many, many words just pouring out onto the page.

Spaid: Did you save your first story?

Madden: The first story, "Blue Waters," after *Frenchman's Creek*, I gave to one of the girls I was in love with. I've been in love with girls romantically in a big, full serious sense ever since I was in the second grade, and so I gave it to this girl. And when I went back this summer to try to recapture a few things for this new novel, *Bijou*, I tried to look up that girl to get back "Blue Waters," and she had moved away. The second story was about Chopin. I've got three versions of a story about Chopin copied off the movie *Song to Remember*. So the first one is about pure adventure, which is kind of a link with the days when I told stories about adventure. The second one was a real move into the realm of the life of the artist. And then the next one, the one that I took to Atlanta in my pocket, the first one that ever got typed up and got ready to send off, you see, was a version of *Our Vines Have Tender Grapes* with Brooks Jenkins and Margaret O'Brien. It fitted none of these categories of adventure or life of the artist; it was an interest in people for their own sake. And these elements are all still in my writing. Sometimes I still like to write about the romantic life of an artist and then real people like the people in Eastern Kentucky. The stuff I'm doing right now still has all these elements in it but more sophisticated.

Spaid: If movies were your first influence, when did you first feel any influence from reading?

MADDEN: That came at about the eighth grade, and that's when you could see, if you look through my stuff, you could see imitations of Hemingway. I have the aura of movies.

SPAID: At one time a couple years ago, you said that you thought the majority of major American writers were either Jewish or from the South. Do you feel any kinship with the literary tradition of the South?

MADDEN: Very much, very much. Not as strong as the Jews feel for Jewish literature. I think you'll find if you really listen to Jewish novelists writing about literature or commenting on it that they're really very, very rabid about this, even if they're Jews. Even those people who have liberated themselves from American Jewry and European Jewry, those writers are always mentioning other Jewish writers. Like today I got a letter from Leslie Fiedler from London responding to my request to write an essay in this *American Dream and Nightmare* volume that I'm getting together, and he said, well, I don't have time to do it, but your book must have an essay on Sidney So and So (which is the pen name, of course, as you must know, of So and So) and So and So (a guy I've never heard of). Some obscure little article called "The Power of the Torah," or something like that. Here he is plugging away for Jewish writers. I don't go that far. I would plug Jewish writers as well as southern writers, non-Jewish, nonsouthern writers. But there is a very definite feeling for southern writers, and at one time, they were the great writers we had: Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Penn Warren. All of the great names of American literature at one time were these boys. Just as in the previous generation it was midwesterners. And today the greatest writers are Jewish writers: Bellow and so on.

SPAID: *Cassandra Singing* and "The Singer" are both set in the Appalachian Mountains. I wonder, do you feel an influence from that region or the mountains?

MADDEN: I guess I've always loved the mountains because in Knoxville I could see them in the distance. And then I read Wolfe, and he talked about how the mountains enringed Asheville and suggested the world beyond. And this was a commanding image in my life. And then when I actually came to live in the mountains in Boone, North Carolina, it really sunk into me. And then when I went to Eastern Kentucky, I got tremendously excited about the area. It appealed to me; the landscape, the look of the area had a powerful effect upon my imagination. I had this great desire just to describe the landscape, but I can't do that, naturally; it has to be kind of a story and more to it. "The Singer" grew out of two inspirations. First, I wanted just to describe the landscape. And the other was that I wanted to tell the simple little story of a singer who feels she has a call [to sing] for Jesus. I put the two together, because I met the girl, the singer, the real-life prototype, in the bluegrass flatland. Well, when I got the idea of putting the two together, I had a combination that was really powerful for me. And also the mountains have an association with the whole Byronic, romantic tradition that I still am affected by, the idea of man standing on a mountain top rather than grubbing in the sand. Now this locale saved me in *Cassandra Singing* because one of the things that messed me up about that novel was that I'm trying to tell about Knoxville, my childhood hometown, and I would even create whole scenes to take place on a certain street corner that I wanted to get into the novel and kind of immortalize. At one time, this novel [was] fourteen hundred pages long. When it was rejected by Random House, I cut five hundred pages in one day. I was able to do that because I would take chapters that were obviously written for the purpose of taking place in the bus terminal or for the purpose of taking place in some other place. And this section that's in *Knight Magazine* was written simply to take place in the bus terminal and in an old boathouse on the Tennessee River. Well, I decided to shift

the whole novel to Harlan, Kentucky, to the mountains of Eastern Kentucky. As soon as I did that, then I was excited about the landscape, but I could control it because I didn't have an emotional, nostalgic investment in it.

SPAID: Do you read Wolfe to look at his mistakes since his problems seem to be the same as yours?

MADDEN: I can't read him anymore. I still love him. See, he was very real to me as a kid; he was my hero in the realest sense. He was real as you are sitting right there. I mean he used to walk down the street with me and sit on the streetcar. I used to make pilgrimages to Asheville. And he was really a real person. Loved him. But the strange thing was that I never really read one of his books all the way through because there was a long time when I didn't have a very long attention span in my writing or in my reading. I would read with great enthusiasm, but then some other book would attract my attention. But then there are always these mystical unread books that were great to me, and I had a feeling that I don't want to read them, I don't want to finish them because they'll be all over. I want to leave them alive so that I can come back to them anytime. *Look Homeward, Angel* is the only one I've ever read all the way through, and the others I've dipped through. And when I went back to Knoxville to reexperience Bijou Theatre and the world of Knoxville around the Bijou Theatre this summer, I took along on my first train trip in a long time out of Cincinnati to Knoxville, a copy of *Of Time and the River,* which opens with a big, long thing about trains.

SPAID: I know that you have had a pretty sporadic formal education, but do you feel that your formal education has prepared you to write?

MADDEN: Well, I don't think you have to have a formal education to write; although if you have a formal education you'll probably write

different things. James Joyce's formal education is reflected very definitely in what he writes; it is marked by his formal education. Ernest Hemingway didn't go beyond high school, and you can see that in his writing. There is certainly no learning reflected there. And the kind of education I've had, I think, has not been bad for the kind of writing that I do. Although, since I do literary writing, since I do criticism, you might think the kind of education I have had would make that kind of writing difficult. And in a way maybe it has, because I wrote 800 pages on Wright Morris when all that was needed was 150; then I spent two or three years cutting it down. Maybe if I had had the right kind of formal education in literary criticism—at Harvard or someplace where some teacher taught the techniques of scholarship and all that kind of stuff—maybe I could have shortcut that, but on the other hand, I might have developed a distaste for literary criticism altogether and not written a word. So I think it really hasn't affected [me] one way or the other.

Spaid: Do you feel that the formal education has hampered your creative impulse?

Madden: Oh no. Not the formal education that I have had, because for one thing, I didn't go straight through. I kept dropping out to go to the merchant marines and all that sort of thing.

Spaid: Do you find any merit in college creative writing classes and writer workshops?

Madden: I used to wonder about that, especially when I first started teaching it myself. I wondered why I was teaching it since I, as a student, had never believed in taking it. I took one course in playwriting with Hazel Strayer at Iowa State Teachers College, mainly, I think, just because I didn't want to be burdened with other kinds of courses. I could at least use that time to write, and I was writing

anyway; I didn't need a course to do that. And I don't think that did me much good. And then I went out to San Francisco State College to study with Walter Van Tilburg Clark. And again I did that because I wanted to get a master's so I could teach, but I didn't want to get a master's in formal criticism. I thought, well hell, I'm writing this novel so why not get the master's on the basis of writing rather than criticism. As a student, I didn't take courses because I really believed they were particularly good—and actually the ones I had weren't too good. Clark was a great man but not a great teacher of writing. He talked about stories in a wonderful way that was helpful. But then John Gassner, who was a great figure in drama at Yale Drama School, his classes were kind of a farce, although I was very generous in my attitude toward him. In other words, I didn't make fun of him, or I didn't knock him the way a lot of the other students did, because he'd go to sleep while you're reading your play and wake up and make all kinds of erudite remarks about your play. But now as far as teaching goes, I found, after about seven or eight years of teaching, that there really definitely are things that you can teach. People who really want to learn and who really intend to become writers and who are actively engaged in writing—there are things that you can definitely teach them. But the most important things they bring with them to class. But now at Kenyon, or at the University of Louisville, and here, I've had very dramatic examples of guys who could come in with stories that were almost completely wrong in every sense, but by the way they were wrong, you could tell the person had talent. And I would point out these very simple fundamental things that were wrong—like the language was maybe Victorian, pseudoliterary language when they were talking about bumps on the road or something—just point out to them how ridiculous this is and how far removed from their own thoughts and feelings this language was. We'd get a dramatic change early in the course, so that by the end

of the course they had completely thrown off ten or fifteen identifiable characteristics that were ruining their writing ability. And then they would begin to develop on their own. But the guys who don't need these courses and who seem to benefit so little from them are guys who are writing a little or a lot and who have an attitude about their writing that makes it impossible to teach them anything. That is, they think, well, I know I've got talent and I'm expressing my own subjective life—their own soul, their own emotions—I want to write honestly about my own emotions, and therefore it will be good. You know it's about me, and I'm being honest about me. These people you can't teach anything to because there are no general concepts—I don't want to say rule[s]—that pertain to autobiography. And the people like that who get into courses are very disruptive because they expect to find a parallel to the spontaneous excitement they get out of masturbating. But I'm not going to masturbate them or anybody else; and they wonder why they're not having an orgasm. It's because they're not home masturbating, which is where they should be. Now, I'm exaggerating because those very same guys can become good writers on their own. In fact, I was that kind of writer myself. And that's why I wouldn't take a course in the first place, which makes me wonder why in the hell that kind of writer does take a course.

Spaid: What type of criticism has been especially helpful to you as a developing writer?

Madden: Well, I did read a lot of criticism. I guess the most helpful thing was reading other writers because, I think, before taking a course, and especially during a course, the most important thing you can do while you're trying to learn—consciously, deliberately learn how to write—is to read as a writer, which is really very different from reading in an English class and writing critical papers; there is a whole different kind of orientation. And it's a technique

that sometimes you need a teacher, who is probably also a writer, to teach you. But then, to point to one piece of criticism that has been extremely important to me, an article by Mark Schorer called "Technique as Discovery." This has been one of the most important critical works I've read, in which he makes the point that it is the technique that you decide upon for your work that enables you to discover the deeper meanings in the work.

SPAID: Has there been any personal criticism of your work that has been especially helpful?

MADDEN: Yes. Yes. I'm glad you asked that. Way back there when I was about in the eleventh grade after having no teachers in high school, except one teacher in junior high, who read my stuff and commented on it critically, somebody told me about a guy named C. P. Lee at the University of Tennessee who would read stuff. I contacted C. P. Lee first. He sat right where you're sitting a couple of months ago, after I hadn't seen him for years, and told the story of how this young kid called him up on the phone and said, I want to bring you a few stories; somebody said that you read them. And he said, I went to the door, and the door opened on a deep stairway, and he said, I looked out (C. P. Lee is tall), I didn't see anybody, and I started to shut the door. Then I looked down, and I saw a stack of papers, and then I looked and looked and looked, and there was a guy, a little kid, under this big stack of paper. And he said there were twenty or thirty short stories there, and he very calmly and coolly turned them over to me and asked me to comment in great detail on every one of them. So he sat down with me and went over, I think in pretty much detail, those stories, and did to me what I was telling you it was possible to do with these special cases. He said this is wrong, this is wrong, this is wrong. And it's such a fundamental thing that, if your attitude is right, you could see it, you could laugh

at it, you could go on from there and be glad you found out it was wrong. You see, wrong because you did it in the story, not wrong in the abstract because, hell, there's the story and it's not working—it's all wrong in the story; it's not a matter of abstract rules. And one of these things, to give you an illustration, that he did—a beautiful story of mine, that I'd still like to publish, that I did when I was sixteen, called "Seven Frozen Starlings," about a little girl named Rosemary, [who] has a harelip, and she has a feeling for the birds and, you know, all that kind of stuff. And seven starlings get frozen on a telephone wire in a snowstorm. She comes along, and little snotty-nosed boys are throwing rocks at the starlings and knocking them off the wires. And she takes the starlings away with her, and then the next day she puts the starlings on the little boys' desks at school to shock them into an awareness of the awful thing they've done. Well anyway, at one point I said, "Rosemary's eyes were like purple plums." And C. P. Lee said something like "Shit" in his Oxford, rather effeminate voice—he's from Arkansas—he says, "Oh Jerry, that's just plain shit" [in effeminate accent]. And I said, "What do you mean? That's a great line, that's poetic, my god, man, how can you say such a thing about my beautiful writing?" But the way he said it, something about the way he said it just made me see that, after all, it was shit. I began to laugh at it. From then on, whenever he came to a similar passage of my work, he'd say there's that goddamn purple plum again, or something like that, you see. In a way, I've kind of adopted that technique as being natural to me and my personality with my students. So that I try, even in freshman English when we're talking in conference, I try to get the student to laugh at it with me as though he is stepping back from it as I am. I like him; I have nothing against him; I just hate what he's done, and we're standing back from it together laughing; and this enables him to go on. Well, then Robert Daniel came along after this, and he had a very different approach. Where

C. P. Lee would say, that's really great, if it was, or it's shit, if it's shit, Daniel would try very carefully to get everything in perspective, and he's very sparing with praise. I got very little praise out of him, but when I got it, I could really believe it. So those two kinds of criticism from people, I have had from the beginning.

SPAID: To this point, you have just written stories. When did you start thinking about writing a book?

MADDEN: Well, actually in the seventh grade I had eighty pages of a novel that I just didn't finish, and two or three of them by the ninth grade. The first novel I wrote was called "Nymphs in the Wilderness," and it was almost written for Gold Medal Pocket Books. It was about a nymphomaniac and a young guy down in the slums who was conning her out of her money by being her lover. And that book I just sent out today to Greenleaf Classics, which is a skin sort of publication. But it is kind of a good book. C. P. Lee, as a matter of fact, remembers very vividly that book as [a] very wonderful, melodramatic, romantic, exotic, weird, bizarre book. But it does have those elements that might make somebody want to publish it. It will be under a different name, Jack Travis, or something, you see.

SPAID: Before you sent this out, did you revamp it?

MADDEN: Yes. I rewrote it a little bit. Then the next book I wrote, the first full length novel that I ever wrote, was *The Beautiful Greed*. And the way that came about was I wrote a long short story for Walter Van Tilburg Clark's class, almost like meeting an assignment because the story was due. But that was all right; hell, I'm always so full of stories, you know, and it just happened that this was the one. It was called "The Naked Ambassador" because old Perone [the real life prototype for the character Franco in *The Beautiful Greed*] was naked with his briefcase at one point, or something like that. And he

[Clark] said that it really needed to be expanded a little. And I was working on *Cassandra Singing* and wanted that to be my master's thesis. He said I don't think you can finish it the way it ought to be done; why not turn this long story into a novel and let that be your thesis? Which I did in about a month. And then with a little bit more rewriting, it was accepted about two years later. So that's actually the first novel I did. And then I've written two novels in twelve days apiece. One was a lyrical, satirical, southern, detective novel, *Hair of the Dog*, just anthologized in *Adam*, which I wrote in eleven days. And the other was a serious novel which I wrote in the same place, Boone, North Carolina, in the mountains in a remote farmhouse, called "Something Mourns," about the effect of a legend about Jessie James on some people living in Blowing Rock, North Carolina. And that's a serious novel that I really want to get published someday. Both of them were the exact same circumstances. I'd been working on the Wright Morris book and *Cassandra Singing* simultaneously, twelve hours a day almost every single day all summer long; and I had twelve days left before I had to get back to Centre College one year, so I did *Hair of the Dog*, and the next year I had the exact same thing, so I did "Something Mourns." So I have completed the *Hair of the Dog*, "Something Mourns," *Cassandra Singing*—after all these years—*Making Out*, which is the new name of "Nymphs in the Wilderness," and *The Beautiful Greed*. I've only written five novels.

Spaid: Are the ideas for these things just floating around in your head, or do you write these things down?

Madden: You mean like an outline or something?

Spaid: Yes.

Madden: I used to do an outline pretty carefully, but I don't do too much of that anymore. I have a note that I write down when I first

think of the idea, and then I file it away and come across it every once in a while and get reinvigorated about it. But these ideas are all floating around all the time. Right now, I have about ten ideas that keep rotating like constellations, and every once in a while, one will swim into my ken and kind of light up, and I'll think about it. Then one day I'll sit down and really work on one of them, you see. But the Cassandra thing has taken so much time—it might be interesting to you to know that that began as a little short story, which I never finished. A play contest came up at the University of Tennessee, which, by the way, Robert Daniel won, defeating one of my plays. And so I wrote a one-act play version. Then the critics and a lot of other people, including C. P. Lee, said that this really should be a longer play or a novel. So I simultaneously began to work on it as a novel. And this I've done several times.

Spaid: You said that autobiography was a problem for you in *The Beautiful Greed* and some of the other things you have written. Has there been anything you have written that is in no way autobiographical?

Madden: Yes. Well, you mean in no obvious way. Well, actually most of the things in a way. You see, *Cassandra Singing* is not autobiographical. The autobiographical problem is Knoxville, the locale, which is an indirect reflection of me. But where I think the danger comes mainly is when you're talking about yourself as a person in a narrative. And I think Knoxville is the only locale that will ever pose that problem because it is so much a part of myself. So as long as the locale isn't Knoxville, locale has never been a problem. But anytime I'm a figure myself in a work there are usually problems. Now there is nothing of me in *Cassandra Singing*, although there is a model of my daddy in there, maybe a little of my mother. There is absolutely none of me in *Hair of the Dog*, and only a tiny bit of a character

something like me in "Something Mourns." And in *Bijou* there is the problem really because I've got Knoxville and myself. Now through *Cassandra Singing* I know what the locale of Knoxville can do to me, so early, when I first began to write this *Bijou,* I decide, my god, we're never going to leave the theater. If Knoxville enters in, it's going to be by evocation. Well, then I sat down and let everything out; I've now got twenty pages in which I describe every street in Knoxville, every hill, every building, the river. It's interesting, though; here I think it's going to work because I talk about the different theaters in Knoxville, and really there were a hell of a lot of them at that time. There were thirty theaters including neighborhood theaters and main theaters. So I am talking about Knoxville in relation to each theater, with two theaters being the major ones, one the Broadway Theatre at about five miles separated from the Bijou Theatre at the other end of Knoxville. So that is what I mean by conception. There is an organizational plan. And the technique will act as agent of discovery for me, you see. Let me mention this novella about this autobiographical thing. "Traveling," which is coming out in the *Southern Review* this spring (you talk about southern writers, by the way, this is a special issue on southern writers, and this novella is going to be the featured piece in it). This is about my brothers who were kind of con men, you know, bad check artists, and so on, spent a lot of time in prison. Well, they've led fascinating, fascinating lives, and one's younger, one's older, two or three year's difference each way. So as I was growing up and staying in school, finishing school, then even going on to college, these guys were having all these adventures and this wild life, always out there.

Spaid: The same relation as Cassandra to Lone.

Madden: Right. Right. Yeah, that's good, man. I never thought of that. Right. So that *Cassandra Singing* is autobiographical, only in

the conceptual sense. These guys' lives are so fascinating, and one incident in particular is so fascinating that I always wanted to write about it. And that was after my year at San Francisco. I was getting *The Beautiful Greed* in final condition, still working on *Cassandra*, and living in a big mansion by the river in Knoxville, big fancy mansion. It's on a postcard as one of the most beautiful mansions in Knoxville, the home of the symphony conductor, who was sort of my benefactor, sort of raised me culturally from the time I was about fifteen. So that it was a great setup to really write and everything. And my brother gets out of federal prison—the younger brother—and the Georgia Bureau of Investigation picks him up and extradites him. They're going to put him on the chain gang, and he's in a state of mental exhaustion and serious [physical] condition. And so I know that if he gets on the chain gang he'll die, you know—do something wild and they'll kill him. So I went across the Smoky Mountains from Knoxville about four or five times in the rain and everything to go to this little town in Georgia called Clarksville to get my brother off the chain gang. This involved quite a bit of conning in a person-to-person way. I had to persuade people that he passed the checks on to drop charges so that I could get him off. I had to persuade the judge to be favorable. I had to persuade the prosecutor, who, by the way, John, my brother, who was in the county jail there, had already persuaded. In other words, the prosecutor was on John's side, which gives you an example of what a con man he is. And why was John in there in the first place? Why did he go to the federal prison where he served three years and was released and then picked up and extradited to Georgia? Because my older brother—who was a con man, and who told John how to pass the checks, had taught him the techniques—betrayed him and turned him over the FBI. Now get this, this is an illustration of why I don't think it's good to copy exactly. That story is interesting enough in itself to have almost saved a girl's

sanity in New York one time. This actress friend, Collin Wilcox, who you've seen on TV sometimes without really knowing her name, I had told her that story a couple of days after it happened for about four hours, every detail of it; and I told it in a big burst of about four hours, acting it all out the way I do. And, god, she really loved it, you know, she really loved it. I had a great time telling the story, imitating everybody, and so on. Well, about two years later in New York, she asked me to tell it again to a friend from upstairs. And the next day she told me a story. I had wondered about the girl—the girl wasn't as responsive as most people had been to the story—and I thought she didn't like me because I was being so outgoing about the whole thing, pulling out all the stops. And so she told me the next day, she said you saved that girl's life. I said what do you mean? She says well she had just been raped about an hour before you started telling that story, and she desperately needed something to take her mind off of it. I brought her down and deliberately had you tell the story. And it did the trick: she got over her incipient hysteria. So as a writer—that was about seven years ago—as a writer I thought to myself, well god, this is so good, this is so right. But I just don't believe that to tell a fascinating story is enough; it has to have some shape and meaning. Now the way it really was, I was the hero; I got him off the chain gang; and I did it by really conning those people, not out of their money or anything, but just playing on their emotions, and so on, and so on. My brother, Dickie, was in prison all this time. OK. When it came to making something meaningful out of this while retaining the richness, I changed a lot of things around. For instance, I became a rather bungling writer who tried to con these people but couldn't. I conned them as a character, I conned them by telling them stories—but not about my brother. The hero of the piece was my older brother, who was not in prison in the story, but who shows up at the last minute with a grand, complicated con-man maneuver, pretending to

be a lawyer from Florida, and so on, springs my brother in front of my very eyes after I have spoiled the whole thing through ineptitude. So I come out looking sort of like the villain. Now what makes this meaningful is that the story turns out to be about the artist as con man and the con man as artist. And the point is that in life Dickie and John are the con man as artists, you see what I mean, and I am the artist as con man, only in the telling of the story. I'm the artist as con man because I con you into listening to me and to giving three or four hours of your life and into believing in my characters. And now the form and the shape and construction of the story illustrate this. It's not just the theme that you get at the end, but the whole structure of the story is the statement that I just made. You get what I mean?

Spaid: Yes. You're a con man if you can get the reader to envision those films in "The Singer."

Madden: Exactly. And this is what they tell me when I give a reading of that story. The most thrilling thing for anybody to tell me, two thrilling things, one is—and this is instructive, this is meaningful—one of the things they tell me is, "My god, I could see those images." Why is that thrilling? That means that my presence as those two characters—I'm there in the flesh as the two characters, especially Pete—the effect of my being there in the flesh is that they saw what wasn't there. But then the other thing that thrills me is when they say that Fred is the most wonderful character in the whole story. Fred himself, again, is not there physically. What I'm trying to get is to evoke the most important part of the story, evoke that. You use the visible, and the immediate, and the present, which is really secondary, in order to evoke the unstated, the unseen, which is the most important. That's what I mean by technique and control and conception, as opposed to pouring out your own personal subjective experience, which to me is neither here nor there. Hell, I don't want to

read about your subjective experiences; I can have my own goddamn subjective experiences. When I read a story or a work of art, I want the creator of that work of art to be a god who has me in his hand and who for the moment is in command, by god. I can give up my ego for the duration of a story. I don't have to see another damn image of myself in somebody else doing what I like to do, pouring out his soul. That's a phony kind of honesty. Like what was in the *Hika* that I just got the other day that Carl Thayler sent me. The introduction to that *Hika* by your friend whose work I like, Epstein, said: "One thing about the boys at Kenyon, they write with honesty." Horse shit. Who cares about honesty? What do you mean honesty? What's that got to do with any goddamn thing? He could have just as well said they write with fuck. No! They write with wonderful hypocrisy. It would make just as much meaning to me as honesty. And what does that mean? It means they're pouring out their souls, in some cases, and I'm just not interested. You see what I mean.

Spaid: It has often occurred to me that a writer like yourself who uses experience as raw material, even though he is looking for some guiding conception—but is there ever a time when you don't feel like a writer collecting material, when you just simply experience something? It seems to me that it's possible that a writer who is so keenly sensitive of experience is missing out on something because he is always thinking and collecting.

Madden: Right. You got on to a very important thing about writers, or about any creator. An artist, I think, as far as I know a writer—let's stick to writers and to me—I have observed this in myself, that I feel that I love people and want to help people; I don't want to hurt anybody. The effect I want to have upon a person I want to ultimately be good, even if I'm very brutally frank. Like for this guy I was telling you about who wrote these horrible poems. I told him, I said you

don't have a shred of talent. Well, I wanted that really not to be a heartbreaking statement, but to be somehow a liberating statement. Even though I think of myself in that way, as thinking about people, I've got to admit that I catch myself in the midst of a significant, meaningful experience looking at things with the detached, cold vision of a disembodied spectator at a distance from things. And actually in my teaching and in my life, somehow or other more than a lot of other writers, I think, I have found a way to maintain that distance, that double vision, even in life, because I can make fun of myself, or I can be egotistical for the fun of it, hoping to share it with you. I say and do a lot of things that could be construed to be stupidly, horribly egotistical. But the reason I can do that is because it's not me. I'm really standing over there with you watching what this guy is doing. I can talk about "The Singer," which is my best work, I think, and I can praise the hell out of it without being, in my mind, egotistical, because in a sense I'm really these two very different people. I'm just looking at the thing as a thing that's created, whether I had anything to do with it or not. You see what I mean.

Spaid: Does that bug you sometimes?

Madden: Sometimes it does, but because I'm able to do this double thing in personal relationships I feel less this isolation, this dehumanization, that I'm talking about. Because I know a lot of writers who are completely cut off in their life and in their work by this sense of distance; they can't participate in events in any way. Well, this is getting back to old Fitzgerald. Remember that "the test of a first-rate intelligence," that I used to spout off all the time pontifically, "is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." Well, I think that as far as I can consciously know, I can do that; in other words, I haven't been aware of being unable to do it and therefore getting sad about it or depressed.

Look at the personal lives of a lot of writers. Why are they so fucked up? I think it may be because this detachment that is so good for their writing makes living difficult, hell, makes it horribly disappointing and full of anxiety and so on. And I guess what I've been trying to do all my life is make this distance operate and function in life as in the literature. So that I'm not really depressed by it, I'm not really neurotic, I don't drink and all that to forget this dehumanized side of me. But it is true that writers are really kind of inhuman for that reason.

Spaid: As you were experiencing life in the merchant marines, were you all the time conscious that this would wind up in fiction; were you fictionalizing?

Madden: Not really, I don't think. Well, yes, I did realize it would be used. But actually I've never really gone out into an experience deliberately to collect material, nor have I entered into an experience with the idea that it would end up as writing. That's because I just had this general attitude that everything was going to end up as writing, so that one doesn't feel that separation, that deliberate consciousness of collecting material. Actually, I don't know too many writers who do that. I think that's an old-fashioned idea of a writer, like Twain or somebody who goes around collecting raw material background for novels, or some guy decided to write a novel, so he goes to Alaska, and he gets the background. It's an old-fashioned idea of a writer. I think a writer today just collects everything indiscriminately and uses what he wants to.

Spaid: Someone said that the real problem with modern writers is that it is difficult to write interesting fiction in an uninteresting world. This came up in Wright Morris's *The Territory Ahead*.

Madden: Well, I'm personally getting kind of sick of the anti-hero, the anti-novel, the anti-event; although Wright Morris is the master

of that sort of thing. He said in "The Letter to the Critic," which was to me—it was published in the *Massachusetts Review*—that the so-called dramatic event isn't the only kind of drama there is, that you can take the ordinary and cause some sort of revelation to take place by a sort of transformation; the imagination transforms the unfamiliar into something strange. And he's one of the few people who could do that; whereas, a lot of writers are presenting the dull and the anti-hero, and the anti-event, anti-novel kind of material just straight, as though they expect the reader to glory in it and get some excitement out of seeing the world the way he's been seeing the world every day of the last fifteen years or so. And at first, that was fresh and exciting in the hands of somebody like Samuel Beckett or in the hands of someone like Camus in *The Stranger*, where nothing happens for most of the book except for that melodramatic event in the middle. But somehow this fashion has thrown down very deep roots, and hundreds of novels are written out of this experience. And then there is the opposite, the completely bizarre, unbuttoned type of experience of Kerouac and a lot of the hippie novels and pop novels. But I'm still interested in real people and perhaps almost heroic people. I still think heroes are possible, or heroes momentarily. A lot of the old stories used to be about people who became heroes for the moment and then lapsed back. And I still think it's possible for people to be that way, and I kind of wanted Lone to be that way in *Cassandra Singing*, at least in the eyes of others, and then be aware of it and try to measure up and fail. But he used to get killed in a lot of the versions of the play and the novel, which was working out of the nihilistic, pessimistic attitude of the literature of the forties and fifties where everybody was coming to a bad end and everything was dark and dreary. But I believe that the writer should show the world that it's mysterious and wonderful, and one way to do that no matter what the material—anti-hero or what—is through conception and

technique, so that Flaubert can write about a dull woman in *Madame Bovary*, and it's the art of it that makes it so exciting. The error that a lot of these people make is they think that dullness itself presented as dullness is going to be interesting.

Spaid: You said something about love before and about presenting the world as being mysterious and interesting. And I wondered, when you're writing do you feel that it is an act of love?

Madden: Yes. Yes.