

**Chad Berry: When I was first reading, when I first began, I got to a point and I thought, “Why not just a novel?”**

Linda Tate: Well, you know, that’s a point that I got to as well. In fact, when I first started writing it, I thought it *would* be fiction. And I would go back and forth – nonfiction or fiction? But a lot of the power in the book, if you will, comes from the fact that this is a true story. So many of the things in the book, I think, would seem maybe over the top in fiction. The amazing journey that I went on, I think, has more power as nonfiction. It also speaks on a lot of levels to history and the past and what we can know and what we can’t know. Helen Lewis was really helpful to me in this regard when I was initially working on the book and thinking that it was going to be fiction. She said, “Oh, no, no. This is family and cultural history told in a narrative form.” And that really helped me understand the book very differently.

**It really is peripatetic – I mean this journey. What truth did you discover on that journey? And my follow-up question would be what truths might readers discover?**

Well, I certainly discovered that the past is complex. I certainly discovered that human beings are complex. When you look at a character like Fannie, you learn that no human being is completely evil or completely good at the same time. So human beings are complex mixtures. The past, I think, is also really complex and hard to get at. Near the end of the epilogue, I say that for a long time I held back from writing the story because I thought that I couldn’t tell the story, that it would be impossible to discover all of the truth, which gets back to the fiction/nonfiction thing. But then I realized that the story *is* about the fragmentary nature of our relationship to the past and how very, very hard it is

to piece that together. But I really believe that we can't move forward in our own lives, in the future, until we've somehow looked at that past and come to terms with it.

**As an historian, I believe in the moral imperative of history. In the past we discover, we're able to clarify our options in the present and the future by looking into the past. You're talking a lot about the past versus history. We can never know the past. But the story we tell about the past becomes history.**

That's very interesting.

**And that seems like one of the truths that you discovered. We can never know the past. I tell students that if I ask you to write an account of 24 hours yesterday in your life, you could really never do it. Even that little 24-hour thing is impossible. So because that would be so daunting, what you could do is write a story about the past and the story is history.**

Right. If you think of history as a story, of course, that's what I'm doing in the book – trying to put a narrative around the bare bones sort of materials I was able to find. I was able to find *a lot*, but of course this is where I would differ from the formal scholarly historian in that I took a lot of imaginative leaps to try to imagine what the narrative frame would be for everything and to fill in the story.

**And most people would not have found as much as you did.**

I think you could safely say that I was a little obsessive.

**You think?!**

(Laughs) Oh, I could tell you stories!

**What truths might readers discover then? The basis for my question is some people might have written this and locked it away.**

Right.

**But you published it.**

Right.

**You had to believe at some point that your truth might be revelatory for readers.**

I like to think that other people seeing the struggle would identify or perhaps it would prompt people to think about their own journey and their own past. I like to think there's something that the reader gains.

**It reminds me of, I think, Churchill saying, "When you're going through hell, don't stop."**

Right.

**You never stopped. And I think in some way your story is, maybe the truth is, you kept going. And I think maybe if I were to think about it, maybe that's the truth that others might see as well.**

There can be something healing and redemptive about going back to the past no matter how painful it is.

**Talk about healing.**

Well, I can talk about healing primarily for myself – and I don't want to give anything of the book away – but I would say healing for my Uncle Henry as well who joined me on the journey. I'll just say that discoveries and connections that we made along the way helped us make sense out of a lot of things that had happened to us in our childhoods and throughout our lives, and certainly it brought us very close together, so very healing in that sense. For me, I think you definitely get this from the book. My life on the surface was very successful, but in my own personal experience of my life it was very unsettled,

and I didn't quite know why. The journey forced me to constantly confront all the things that had happened. Sometimes that was extraordinarily hard. As you said, I did persist. But I would sometimes take long breaks from the project because it was just so intense. But I made it through. I think the image at the end of the book, I hope, the reader sees that as very joyful and redemptive, that I have found my own place in the world.

**The sunshine after rain?**

Oh, yeah. Sunshine after rain.

**I love that. It was very joyful.**

I hope the reader sees the ending as joyful. You know, I needed to go through all of that journey to get to where I am now.

**But you never stopped. And again that goes back to that Churchill quote.**

In reality, I did stop periodically. The book really became a frame for doing all this work, both the external work of researching and writing a book and the internal work of coming to terms with my family story. And sometimes I would just set the book aside. I think at one point I set it aside for a year or two while I just tried to live my life, but it would always call me back. And I did finally bring it to fruition.

**Linda, what about reconciliation?**

I think, again, with my Uncle Henry I've been able to maybe frame a more positive relationship with that side of my family and that provides some reconciliation and some of those connections. Another way to think about it is as forgiveness. I quote Dorothy Allison near the end of the book: "Telling the story all the way through is an act of love" – and I think it's an act of forgiveness. It's a very distant act of forgiveness for my father, but it's probably as close as I'm going to get to reconciliation with that.

**As I was reading, I was thinking about justice and I was thinking about Desmond Tutu. And I was going to ask you about restorative justice.**

In what way?

**Well, my other question is did you ever want it to be retributive?**

No, no, no. I was really clear. I struggled a lot not wanting it to be a book motivated by revenge.

**It could have been though.**

It could have been. It definitely could have been. I hope it doesn't come across that way because it was more me trying to understand what had happened. I suppose one could see it the other way because my father has passed away and he's not here to tell his side of the story.

**But it's *never* retributive. I mean, I think that's one of the reasons for my question and one of the reasons for the beauty of the book. It seems like it is restorative.**

Yeah. Because there are also special moments between us that I remember as a child.

You know, you see the little girl struggling to understand that relationship and, of course, it's a very confusing relationship. I like to think it's honest and reflective and, as you said, restorative.

**Tell me about all of this relentless searching that you did.**

Well, it *was* relentless. As I said earlier, one could call it obsessive. I tell a little bit in the book about stumbling across records and so on. But I told just a tiny, tiny, little portion of all the work that went into the book. I mention in the "References and Acknowledgments" all the cemeteries and libraries and archives I went to. But for about a three-year period, I was just *immersed* in trying to figure out all the pieces. Particularly

the two summers that I lived at the farm in western Kentucky, if I came across a lead, I would throw an overnight bag in the car, and I would just take off to a public library across the state and get a motel room and spend the night and work there until I felt like I had either gotten what I wanted or exhausted all the possibilities there.

One of the richest places I spent time was the Kentucky State Archives, which is an amazing facility. I think I spent – when I was on the Rockefeller Fellowship in Huntington and Frankfort wasn't too far away – I think I was there every day for about a three-week period. The boxes of documents that they have – how they kept court cases at least in the county where I was doing research, Trigg County – the boxes are just full of handwritten court cases. That's what the court recorder was doing – just handwriting out the testimony and so on. And they're not microfilmed – it's the actual pieces of paper and they're not really catalogued in any kind of systematic way. Each one is just sort of rolled up and bound with a rubber band. I went through every box of material that they had from Trigg County, and it took me about three weeks to get through it. I had to open each one and see what it was about. I was able to find some things that were extremely helpful to me. I found some court cases about domestic violence that were not about my family but were about other families. It was really interesting to see the language of the witnesses and how they described what was happening in their homes. That gave me a lot of information about some of the things that were happening but more than that how people talked about those experiences and the language that they used. So that became part of how Louisiana told her story.

I also came across this amazing diary of an elderly woman in Trigg County who was living just a few miles from my family. We would say now she was the victim of

elder abuse. Her son was really abusive and would come to her house and after he left she would write out her experience. But she clearly didn't have any paper and so – you know how banks will give you calendars and people who are advertising will give you little advertising documents – any kind of scrap of paper she could find she was writing her experience in the margins, on the back. And this entire diary had been entered in as a piece of evidence in this court case. I photocopied all 200 pages and read it from start to finish. That gave me a sense again of how somebody might talk about those experiences.

I kept looking, and there were several cases involving my great-great-grandfather George. And that was amazing to me. First of all, because I could reconstruct part of his character. I could actually see the crimes that he was charged with and why he was in court. In particular, I forget now exactly what the words were but brandishing a concealed weapon and he kept getting the charge reduced. And then the long legal case that he had with Charley Blossus over whose land the timber had been on. But I was also able to see on those court documents the names of the men who had been called to testify in those cases. And they would have had to travel a long distance from their farms along Laura Furnace Creek to Cadiz, Kentucky, which meant getting over the river and would have really meant quite a haul. One of the days that they had to testify was Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup>, in September. You think about September and that time of the year and what it means to farmers and what a sacrifice that would be having to make that journey. And I don't know why I really sort of enjoy these kinds of things, but because these are actual pieces of paper that have the actual writing, my great-great-grandfather had to make his mark. He clearly didn't read and write, but he had to make his X. And it was his actual X

on the actual piece of paper that he set his hand to. That kind of thing just gives me chills. So I loved that.

Another sort of favorite moment was being in the Tennessee State Archives in Nashville. I was looking for the marriage certificate for my grandmother's first marriage. I was searching, searching, searching through all the microfilms and finally got to her marriage certificate. But what was fascinating to me and absolutely thrilling was that the marriage certificate was there, but on top of the marriage certificate somebody had placed the note that her mother Cordelia had written to give permission for her to be married. She was 15, so she was underage and needed a parent's permission.

**You speak about that in the book.**

Well, that actual note that her mother wrote was placed on top of the marriage certificate and then that's what the person took a picture of. So I was actually able to see my great-grandmother's handwriting. Where her father George could not read or write, Cordelia had beautiful handwriting. I had seen in another document that I had come across that as a young married woman she had continued to attend the school. So this told me a lot about her and her interest in learning. I just love that. I loved seeing that. I loved seeing her handwriting. It's to me a way that your ancestors are speaking across time.

**Talk about Appalachia and its connection to the book.**

Well, it's interesting because, of course, the book is set primarily in western Kentucky and Tennessee. And I think that most people would not see that as part of Appalachia, but I saw so many connections and parallels. Certainly, when I set off on the journey, I set off in the Smoky Mountains, thinking that that's where my family was from, and of course I was misguided. I was following the wrong maps and was still trying to find the place on



the journey. But as I did the research, I discovered, that my ancestors were originally from Jackson County, Tennessee – again, maybe not strictly Appalachia but certainly much closer to it – and from northern Alabama. Then as they migrated to the land between the rivers, I think they really retained a lot of the folkways and the culture, probably a lot of the language patterns from Appalachia. And to me, when I visit with people who still are living just outside the Land Between the Lakes, you still hear a lot of the same dialect patterns and as I said folkways – really, really close-knit families and communities. I think also one of the things that the land between the rivers/Land Between the Lakes shares with Appalachia is this incredible sense of having your homeplace taken from you. In Awiakta’s book, *Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom*, she talks about the TVA damming Tellico. She compares it to the Trail of Tears and says the story is the same but the names have changed. So this story of displacement from the homeplace is a story that gets told again and again in Appalachia, and it’s definitely the same story there in the land between the rivers.

**Which is a really wonderful area.**

It *is* a wonderful area. But I guess it’s sad to me because I know all of this – I’ve talked with so many people now, and they still, forty years later, feel *deep* sorrow over having that land and those homes taken from them. So it is a beautiful recreation area now, but I think the vast majority of people go there and have their weekend or their vacation and have no idea all of the homes and the lives that were so richly present there.

**I like the way you set it up sort of as land beyond the mainstream.**

Oh, yeah.

**I think that’s another connection with Appalachia.**

Very much so. It was really perceived as a wild place –  
– **that needed to be tamed or civilized.**

Yes. I don't think I emphasize this very much – I mention it – but it was the source of a lot of the moonshine for Chicago. During Prohibition, the land between the rivers provided a lot of the whiskey. That – and it was generally such an isolated area. It was hard to get into and hard to get out of. During the Civil War, there was a lot of activity with nightriders and guerrilla forces. You know, it was always an “other” place, and it definitely shares that with Appalachia, with pockets of Appalachia.

**Yeah, absolutely. Most people would have ended the story on page 12.**

What happens on page 12?

**Let me open it up. Let's see, page 12. You say, “Rather than the exotic place I'd imagined, the family past was just a tributary of the Mississippi, the same river that had flowed through my childhood. Looking back at my time on Mount Le Conte, I felt foolish. There I'd been tramping around mountains that didn't have a thing to do with my family. I'd only been making believe I was reconnecting with the spirit of my ancestors. Surely my father had known how far off the mark I had been, but he'd never said a thing. He'd let me go on and on making a fool of myself.”**

So you think most people would have it ended it there?

**That's what I wrote in the margin.**

Would've ended their journey there?

**Would've stopped.**

Well, I am relentless. (Laughter)

**Yeah. That might be the great answer.**

Yeah, and I had to be relentless to figure it all out. But then because I had gone and spent time in the Smokies, I thought I was having this big reconnection with my family, the whole thing. But I was driven not so much to have an exotic past but to know *what* the past was. Then when I met Henry or reconnected with Henry, Henry actually had some tangible answers. He had just fragmentary pieces, but he had some pieces and he was willing to share them. Well, that's what I was after. Another moment at which you might think the book would end is much later in the book, but in terms of my life it happened a few years after that. My brother and I drove down to see if we could find our grandparents' graves. And we did find where they were buried, but there really are no markers there, and it's really just grass. There's no there there. As I say in the book, if you go somewhere and there's nothing there, did you go somewhere?

**Right.**

Well, I think I went somewhere. What I discovered was that the place didn't matter so much and certainly having a marker didn't matter so much. It was the process of uncovering the story and finding out all the things that had happened.

**And that's why Eddy's [Edwina Pendarvis's] epigraph is so nice: "...all our old homes are gone / until we come calling."**

Isn't that a wonderful, wonderful line?

**I have to say I read the first sentence about a dozen times: "Grandma Fannie died when I was five, but now I get word that she is still alive." How long did it take you to write that? I mean, it's beautiful. It rhymes. It's intriguing. I thought I had read something incorrectly.**

Well, the opening of the book is the part that I rewrote the most. It was originally a poem, and I had this poem about the dream because I just felt strongly that that's where the book needed to start. And because it was a dream, a poem seemed to be the best form for that. I worked on that poem for years. Then the editors at the publisher said a poem was the last thing I needed to start the book with, that it would be an obstacle to the reader. Finally I decided to try rewriting it as prose. That was a struggle because it had lived for me for so long as a poem. I wanted to keep some of the dreamlike quality, some of that surreal quality, but also not make it an obstacle for the reader to get into the book. I think I pulled it off, but I did rework that section absolutely more than any other section in the book.

**I have a question about your father's line on page 7: "It doesn't matter where you're from. It's where you are now that counts, what you make of yourself today. That's what you need to focus on. Forget about the past."**

Right.

**Maybe why the book became so important.**

Yeah. He really, really believed that, and on some level I can understand his point of view and I can understand that that was how he survived what he needed to survive. That was his coping mechanism. But not for me.

**But the reader doesn't know that then. There are so many things that you very intentionally and deliberately offer to the reader in this book. So I think the structure of the book is really pretty amazing. It reminds me of Ron Rash's *One Foot in Eden*. There's a story there, but you're not going to get the whole story all at once. And you don't give the reader the story all at once. Here we begin starting out**

**revering someone like Fannie so much. Then later in the novel we discover that she has clay feet.**

Right. To say the very least. The structure was hard-won as well. I knew that I wanted to have three different narrators, but in the very first version, my story was all in one section at the end of the book. So the whole thing came out chronologically rather than with a frame. I would have flashbacks. I would be an adult, and I would have a flashback to a childhood memory. Well, it just didn't work. But it took me a long time to figure out how to start it with a little bit of myself as an adult and then to go back to Louisiana and then to do my childhood and then to do Fannie. What I hope is that it feels very multilayered.

**It sure does.**

And that as you're reading you keep discovering all these connections and resonances, all these patterns that keep repeating without me necessarily having to say, "And thus, dear reader, I hope you see the connection."

**Yes. And it leads to a couple of gasps by the reader. In the author's note, you are intentional enough to say this is your telling of your family tale and you italicize "your." Do you want to talk about that?**

It *is* my telling. It has to do with this thing that we said near the beginning, that you can't know the past, as you said. I was able to find pieces of it, fragments, and I was able to find those in different ways. Then through acts of the imagination, I think about what stories might likely have gone with those facts. But that leap of the imagination is my own. And so other people in the family might tell the story differently or might see it differently. When we were having the family reunion, I had a table with a lot of genealogical information. I had books about Cherokees, and I had Loren Katz's book,

*Black Indians*. This one distant relative kept coming up to the table and picking up the books about the Cherokees and the Black Indians and she'd say, "What are these books doing at *our* family reunion?" And she came up and asked me that three separate times. She insisted that she had never heard anything about having *any* Native American ancestry, and *certainly* she was not going to tolerate the idea that there could be any African ancestry. She just absolutely was very angry that I would suggest that there was any multiracial aspect to our family history. Other people would come up and were so glad that I had those books and were really interested in looking through them and had heard things in the family and had had secrets whispered to them and so on. People have different experiences of the past and would tell the story different ways, but this is *my* telling. My father probably would have told the story very differently – well, he wouldn't have told the story – but he would've told it very differently. Even some of the things that I remember differ from how my mother remembers particular stories or how Henry remembers particular things. But, you know, that is what it is.

**On page 214, in a wonderfully written epilogue, you say: "As I worked, I was surrounded by history books and journal articles, photocopies of census records and court documents, old family photographs, audiotapes of oral history interviews and family visits, maps of every size and shape imaginable" – and then I love this part – "pottery shards and the rusted hub of an old wagon wheel, a jar of muscadine jam made by one of George and Louisiana's descendants, even the family recipe for cornbread that Fannie had written down so that my mother could learn to make it for my father." That's really great.**

That's what my office looked like.

**Linda, how did your conceptions of poverty and discrimination change as a result of your research and your creativity?**

I don't know if they changed. Appalachian literature is one of my areas of expertise, and I'd certainly read many novels and other works of literature that addressed poverty and discrimination. But perhaps through researching how that affected my own family and then so many families like them in that area and then having to figure out how to bring that to life, I experienced it differently. I don't want to say I experienced it less abstractly. It's still an intellectual and imaginative exercise. I myself have not experienced that kind of poverty and discrimination. But I had to really imagine what that would be like.

This is the kind of detail that I would uncover. I had come across the census records. The census records in the 19<sup>th</sup> century would tell you something about not just who lived in a household but what people actually did for a living. Louisiana was listed as a domestic servant. Well, I didn't think very much of that. To my mind, that was the kind of thing people did if they were poor. But then I was reading a book by Betty Joe Wallace, an historian at Austin Peay State University, about the land between the rivers, and she made the comment that no white women worked outside the home and certainly didn't work in other people's homes. That was something black women did. So that made me curious, and I ended up going through the census records again rather obsessively and discovered that Louisiana was the only white woman in that area who was working as a domestic servant. That told me something about how poor my family was. Even in an area that was poor, their level of poverty would have been just really stark and extreme.

**Yeah. Wow. On page 65, you write really powerfully, I think, in Louisiana's voice.**

**You know, family violence weaves through this story, and I guess my question is can**

**it be stopped? Is it nature? Is it nurture? What is going on? Is it poverty? Is it discrimination? Is it frustration?**

I think it's all those things. That's a big question of the book, right? The reader doesn't know until quite a ways into the book that I had my own experience with this. Of course, for me as it was unfolding the story for me unfolded in a different order than it does for the reader because I had my own childhood experiences. Then I learned about Louisiana and George. I guess before I learned about them, I learned some about Fannie. So it was all kind of confusing in a lot of ways. It was chaotic knowledge that I was gathering very quickly.

The past keeps repeating itself. How do you stop it? I like to think that facing up to it and being honest about it is one of the ways that you stop it, that as long as you're unconscious you keep repeating the past. You asked earlier about this being healing and redemptive and restorative, and I like to think this would be a step in the right direction in terms of *not* repeating some of those old patterns, that the book itself is a way of stopping the violence.

**Have we talked about feeling vulnerable by inserting yourself so much? It seems a little bit like *Stranger with a Camera*. Do you know that film? It's Liz [Elizabeth] Barrett's AppalShop film. It's a great film. Brilliant. Your book seems a little bit like *Stranger*.**

In what way?

**Because she inserts herself into the film. It almost seems like the difference between you and your father is you both had limbs that were broken, bones that were broken, and both of them were never properly set by an orthopedic surgeon. He was**



**just willing to live with the pain that comes from that, it seems like. But you were willing to have that bone rebroken, painful as that is, and then have it properly set. But to have it rebroken, you do it in such a public way. And that's vulnerable, and I just wondered about that.**

Well, it is very vulnerable. You know, I've had a lot of people who are close to me reading the book for the first time. The only people who had read the whole book up until this point who were close to me were my mother and my Uncle Henry because I wanted to make sure that they were comfortable with every bit of the book before I moved forward with it. And they were – they gave me their blessing. But other than that, my husband had read it, of course, but no one else had read it. I think that it has made me more nervous having people who know and love me read the book than actual strangers. Actual strangers don't know me, but I have felt vulnerable to the people in my life. But, boy, people have been so appreciative and complimentary. What I thought would be really off-putting, people have been deeply moved by. At least, that's what they have told me. My mother-in-law, for example, read the book. She is an historian, so she was really interested in it from that perspective. But I'm her daughter-in-law and she loves me and she was learning a lot of things about me that she hadn't known. She told me that the book was sometimes really painful to read but that she loved every minute of it and just thought it was a grand achievement. Now everybody knows everything – the whole story's out there.

**I don't know if I could've done that. It's really incredible. It really is a moving book.**