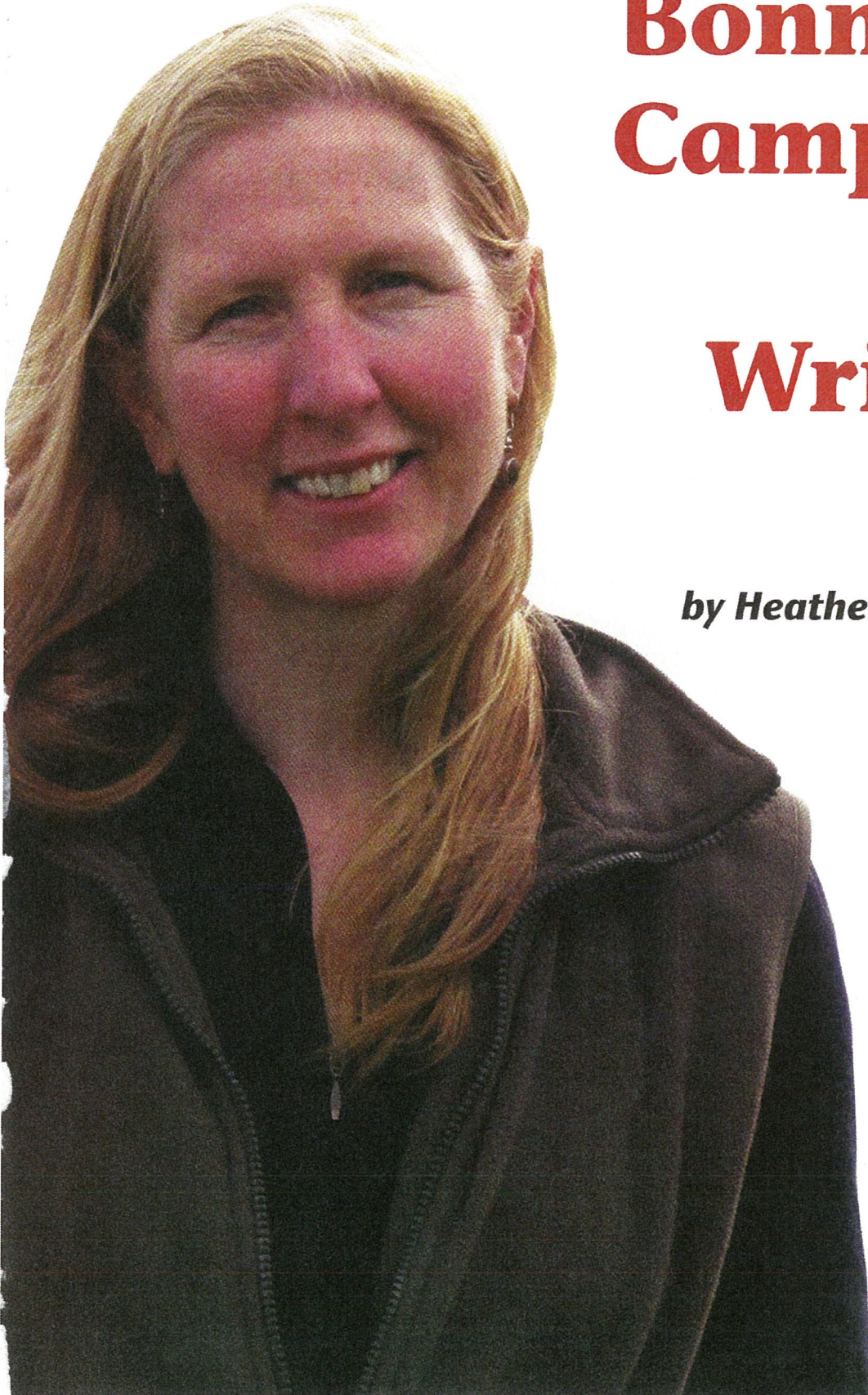


Bonnie Jo Campbell on Writing

by Heather Sappenfield

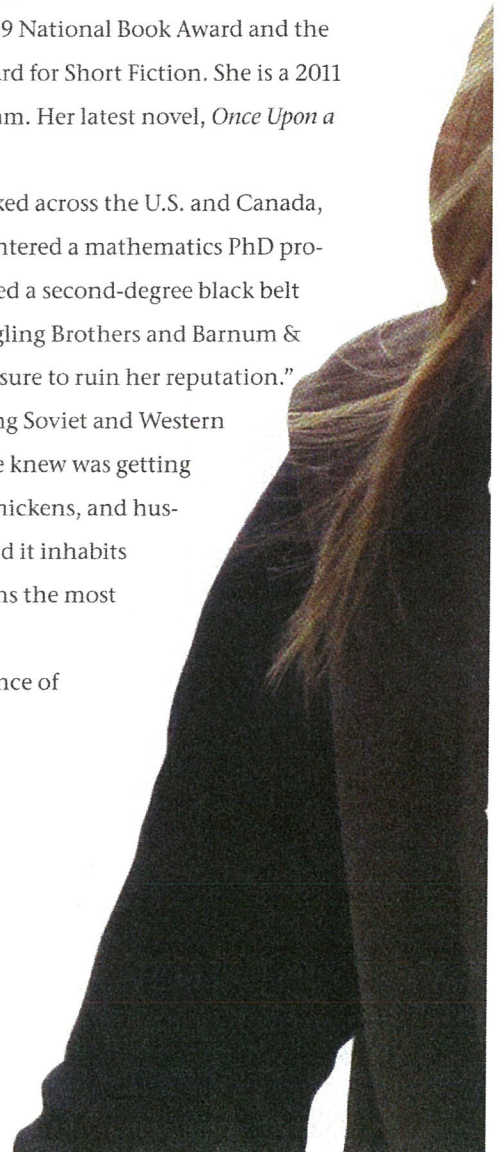


Not for the Faint of Heart:

Before Bonnie Jo Campbell even finished her MFA at Western Michigan University, her writing had received recognition as runner-ups for *The Atlantic* Student Writing Contest and for the *Playboy* College Fiction Contest. Her first story collection, *Women and Other Animals*, won the 1998 AWP Award Series in Short Fiction. Her second collection, *American Salvage*, was a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award and the National Book Critic's Circle Award. It also won the *Foreword* Book of the Year Award for Short Fiction. She is a 2011 Guggenheim Fellow, and she teaches in Pacific University's MFA in Writing Program. Her latest novel, *Once Upon a River*, is a prequel to her first novel, *Q Road*, and has received rave reviews.

Campbell loves risks and adventures. She has biked over the Swiss Alps, hitchhiked across the U.S. and Canada, castrated pigs, wrassled donkeys, and fought setting hens for their eggs. She also entered a mathematics PhD program, but she dropped out halfway through in order to pursue writing. She's earned a second-degree black belt in Kouburyu Kobudo, an Okinawan weapons art. She sold snow cones for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus and spent a lot of time in the "animal car," where she says "a gal was sure to ruin her reputation." She has smuggled foreign currency into Eastern Europe back when the line splitting Soviet and Western Europe was called the *Iron Curtain*, and she even got married, though everyone she knew was getting divorced. Twenty-four years later, she is still married and lives with her donkeys, chickens, and husband outside Kalamazoo, Michigan. Campbell was born and raised in this area, and it inhabits her fiction. Despite all these adventures and awards, Campbell feels writing remains the most daunting thing she's done.

This interview is an edited version of a live interview conducted before an audience of Pacific University Low Residency MFA students in June 2011.



Heather Sappenfield: Your first writing course. You were an unsuspecting, bright-eyed undergraduate at the University of Chicago. Your instructor said your writing “epitomized everything that was wrong with writing today.” Can you elaborate on this?

Bonnie Jo Campbell: For the longest time, I couldn’t remember the guy’s name, and now I’ve just learned that he’s dying, so I feel bad that I’ve been using him as an example of bad teaching for years without giving him a chance to defend himself. No doubt I had written something dumb, maybe something action packed, but he was mean to make such a pronouncement to the whole class about the first fiction I’d ever attempted. After grad-

Revolutions and pondering paradigm shifts, I became especially interested in the philosophy of science. When I finished my degree, I was planning on returning to my hometown and opening up a philosophy shop, maybe in the abandoned bait shop where we kids used to sell night crawlers—that was my first job, digging up night crawlers and selling them to the shop for a few pennies. The building was for sale, and the front window looked out onto the Kalamazoo River. The view would’ve been nice, but it just didn’t work out, so I followed the next logical path, and I rode my bicycle from Kalamazoo to Boston.

Sappenfield: What would you sell in a philosophy shop?

C was a super-serious school, and most students spent most of their time alone studying in their rooms, and the only people who socialized were the mathematicians. They had a weekly math tea that my boyfriend Walter invited me to. In my eyes, the math folks were the coolest on campus. Also, I have often felt kind of stupid, and I thought that studying mathematics would make me smart.

Sappenfield: For eight years you wrote nonfiction. How did that help your writing?

Campbell: Writing personal essays was a great exercise for me. In a fictional story there are about a zillion variables. In nonfiction there are

...awareness of my audience improved my writing. I’m still trying to write something that interests readers. That boarding house was really something.

uating, I gave up on writing fiction for about eight years. But like every funky cloud a writer finds herself under, this had a silver lining. Instead of writing fiction, I wrote a lot of nonfiction, and that was how I really figured out how to write fiction.

Sappenfield: Have you seen him since then?

Campbell: Nope. I hope he’s resting comfortably, reflecting upon a rich life.

Sappenfield: What ended up being your undergraduate degree?

Campbell: I got a degree in philosophy, which was, at U of C, more or less a pre-law degree. For me it was a great area of study. After reading Thomas Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific*

Campbell: Puzzles. Thoughts. Approaches. Ways of thinking. Temporary tattoos. Later, I did start a company called Bonnie Jo Enterprises, and my darling Christopher and I created items to sell. Our Nixon notepads were very popular, featuring four different iconic images of the ex-president. We also made Mao Christmas cards that said things like “Merry Christmas: Reactionaries Are Paper Tigers.”

Sappenfield: Obviously you were drawn to writing, so why did you pursue a PhD in mathematics?

Campbell: There are quite a few mathematicians in my family. Euler’s identity, or $e^{i\pi} + 1 = 0$, a surprising and almost mystical equation, is carved into my grandpa’s tombstone. U of

slightly fewer, since the truth gives us a jumping-off point. Instead of making up stories, I sought out interesting goings-on around me. For my monthly essay, I became something like a reporter or commentator, a student of life—nowadays my newsletter would probably have been a blog rather than pages I photocopied at Copy Cop. Once I wrote about the difficulties of buying size-twelve women’s shoes, and another time I wrote about joining the National Railroad Passenger Association. The newsletter also included the work of others, people who wrote to me or submitted essays.

I was living near Harvard Square with my cousins in a big boarding house, and I mailed my monthly newsletter to my far-flung friends and family. I was aware of what they would enjoy reading, and what would

bore them, and I desperately did not want to bore them. This awareness of my audience improved my writing. I'm still trying to write something that interests readers. That boarding house was really something. We had a Buddhist in the attic, a communist down the hall, and a guy in the basement who fed the cats and was very serious about recycling food tins and newspapers.

Sappenfield: How did you end up pursuing your MFA, and did that instructor's words haunt you?

Campbell: I had moved back to Kalamazoo to study mathematics in a serious way, and I confessed to Arthur White, my PhD advisor, that proving theorems was making me cry at night. He remarked that my proofs had been turning into stories, and he suggested I take a writing class. I finished up my master's degree in mathematics

and then headed to the fleshly side of campus. He calls me one of his successes because he got me where I needed to go.

Sappenfield: When you started your MFA, what was your writing like? Did you have any bad or quirky habits that you had to get rid of?

Campbell: Luckily, I was thirty-five and had learned a few things before I went in the MFA program. One was that you don't have to be brilliant to write. You just have to work really, really hard, and you can work to erase all evidence of your quirks and bad habits. For someone from my neck of the woods, that's a great relief. We see brilliance as fleeting if not illusory, while a strong back is something you can rely upon. (And yes, I do write with my whole body.) As it turns out, you can write stories that are smarter than you are, because you only need

to have your super-smart insight for one moment. Now that I'm forty-eight, I know to write down my insights immediately, because even the most intriguing thoughts come and go on their own terms. Another thing I had discovered before joining the MFA program was that I was patient enough to work on the same story for a long time, years in fact, without becoming bored.

Sappenfield: I've heard that Robert Frost had one of those moments of brilliance, and he was so desperate to write it down, that he scribbled it on the bottom of his shoe. What do you do when you have those moments?

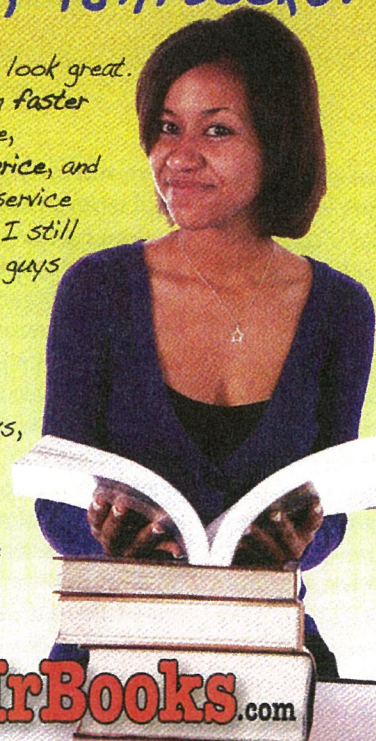
Campbell: I carry my hardcover Standard Diary Daily Reminder with me at all times, except when I've misplaced it. Or a bar napkin will work, and I write things on my hand. In fact, I'm looking at my hand and I've

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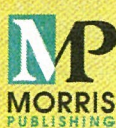
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got something written right now, something that came to me while I was biking, but I can't read it. Maybe it says "Madison." Generally, though, I've trained my body and mind to bring me insights in the morning, when I'm sitting down and writing, seven days a week. Other people, poets especially, get brilliant ideas continually, and they write them into their lovely little Moleskines. Maybe that's the difference between poets and fiction writers. Maybe a lot of us fiction writers have our creative lives more regimented. Of course that's a gross generalization, and I disapprove of such a broad claim, even as I stand by it.

for the sort of literary magazines published by universities, the kinds of magazines their professors are being published in. That right there shows how tough a business writing is—immediately students are in competition with their professors.

A lot of writers use the marketplace to decide whether their stories are publishable, by sending out work to be judged by magazine editors or screeners, but for those of us who benefit from the advice of our fellow writers, it's probably wiser to allow our friends and writing colleagues to help us figure out whether a piece is finished or not, thus saving us some grief and postage. Early on I was fortunate enough to have teachers and

confident in my work once I got published. No, not really.

Sappenfield: When you won the AWP Award for your first collection, *Women and Other Animals*, your acceptance rate for your stories was two percent. What happened to your acceptance rate after that?

Campbell: It's funny how after you win an award, everyone says, *Of course you won! Your work is obviously winning work.* Well, it wasn't obvious at all, or at least it wasn't obvious to the judge of the contest I didn't win the month before. For example, I sent my story collection *American Salvage* to a dozen publishers or contests before it was accepted by Wayne State University

Maybe a lot of us fiction writers have our creative lives more regimented. Of course that's a gross generalization, and I disapprove of such a broad claim, even as I stand by it.

Sappenfield: When did you have the breakthrough that you knew you were writing at a publishable level? What made it happen, and did it give you confidence?

Campbell: Well, I'm as uncertain as I ever have been about a new story. So I don't advise people to wait around for a breakthrough. My students often ask whether their work is publishable yet. And I tell them that all thoughtful writing is publishable somewhere. There are so many opportunities to publish nowadays, especially online and in small-circulation print magazines, so if you are feeling a need to get published—and it's a perfectly reasonable desire—you can probably get published. What my students mean to ask is whether their work is ready

friends who let me know when they thought a particular story was ready. Over time I have gradually learned to see my own work as others see it, and I've become a better judge of the readiness of a story.

At first I didn't know much about the magazines to which I was submitting, so I had to learn as I went along. We all need to develop a sense of what's being published where in the world, and at the same time, we need to be getting to know our own writing better, to better gauge where our stories, poems, and essays fit into the publications that exist. Some new writers are fortunate enough to have a great sense of their own work, but most of us have to struggle, puzzle, and gamble. You asked if I became

Press, and from those other publishers, I received mostly form-letter rejections for the collection.

After winning the AWP award, I wrote to *Michigan Quarterly Review*, where the extraordinary editor Laurence Goldstein had recently given me one of those nice personal rejections that we writers value as much as an acceptance, and I said that the book had just won the award, and I offered to let him look at all the remaining unpublished stories—there were six of them, I think. He picked one. I did that with other magazines until all but one of the stories were accepted. Indeed, winning a prize gives you advantages, and so I advise everyone to win a prize. By the way, the one story that nobody would publish,

"The Perfect Lawn," in which a teenage boy ends up fooling around with his girlfriend's mother, is one of the best stories in the collection. There can be a variety of reasons that a story doesn't find a home in a magazine.

Sappenfield: Now that you have all those accolades, are you ever afraid that a bad story of yours could get published?

Campbell: Sure, I am. So I will work hard to make sure that doesn't happen by being a realistic reader of my own work, and I will trust the honesty of my friends and the genius of literary editors to save me from such a terrible fate.

Sappenfield: You wrote your debut novel next, *Q Road*, and then your second story collection, *American Salvage*, yet I read you were considering setting writing aside as a profession.

Campbell: A few years ago, I was taking stock. I'd had a book win an award. I'd had a novel published by a big publisher, and while the reviews were good, it hadn't sold well. My agent had read some of the stories from *American Salvage* and a draft of *Once Upon a River*, and her response was that I should find a new agent. It seemed I might be of more use to the community as a math teacher than as a writer. I'm a good math teacher, especially for the kids who have trouble with the subject. I could have helped the writing community by getting future English majors through their algebra and trigonometry.

Sappenfield: *American Salvage* ended up being your big book. I read you never expected that. That you called it your "sentimental piece."

Campbell: I didn't expect *American Salvage* to get much attention. Each story in that collection is connected to a real-life incident. Some of them were inspired by family stories and neighborhood folklore, while others were inspired by local tragedies, and

all of them are close to my heart. My best pal, Heidi Bell, edited the book. The cover photo is taken by a friend, Mary Whalen. I had a book release party at my local watering hole, Bell's Brewery. What a nice surprise it was that people in my hometown liked the book, and then when people beyond the community liked it, well, that was just fine. The initial print run was about 1,200.

Sappenfield: Can you speak to the double-edged reward of a book doing so well?


Campbell: There's nothing double-edged about it, no dark cloud. It's all silver lining when a book does well. Sometimes, when writers get popular for a while, they get busy, and they don't have time to write, but that problem is worse when a person is not having success—having to make a living can steal away writing time like

nothing else, and not having success can make you question your commitment to the craft. That said, when a book receives a lot of attention, it can be unsettling, even when most of the attention is praise, because something that used to feel private (one's work and one's life as it intersects with the work) is now public and open to scrutiny. When you have some success, then there are more people, more strangers, becoming involved in your writing. And change of any kind can be hard for some of us. By some of us, I mean myself.

I do have different worries now than I had a few years ago. It won't be fun to hear people say that *Once Upon a River* isn't as good as *American Salvage*. A writer worth her salt always wants to write something different, and nobody can predict what stories will be well received.


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Sappenfield: Do you read your reviews?

Campbell: Probably I shouldn't, but I do, and I'm like a chef peeking from the kitchen to the dining room, hoping all the diners finish up happy, and when I learn, through a bad review, that I've disappointed a reader, I'm very sad.

Sappenfield: How did you get nominated and selected as a finalist for the NBA and NBCC Awards?

Campbell: Publishers nominate the books, and there is an inner circle of judges, different ones each year, who choose the finalists in each category as well as the winner.

but I'm starting to realize that I'm going to have to decline some offers if I'm to preserve any writing space for myself. I keep up two blogs, one of which is just a schedule of my literary events, and I do miss updating my third blog, called *The Screen Porch Literary Blog*, on which I used to file a report anytime I sat with one or more other writers on my screen porch in Kalamazoo.

Both of my story collections are published with university presses, which don't generally have big promotional budgets, and so I've always promoted my books myself, however I could. Now that W.W. Norton is publishing my book, I have lots of support, but an author always has to

help for making sure your book isn't overlooked for consideration, but I have to assume that judges choose the books they love. Recently some books by brilliant, but lesser-known authors have been winning the big contests, including Jaimy Gordon for *Lord of Misrule* for the National Book Award and Paul Harding for *Tinkers* for the Pulitzer, both published by tiny presses.

That said, being involved in the literary world and being familiar to other writers, however that happens, can help garner you invitations for reading and teaching opportunities, as well as invitations to send work to magazines. But we've all got to expect our work to be judged on its merits,

...when a book receives a lot of attention, it can be unsettling, even when most of the attention is praise, because something that used to feel private... is now public and open to scrutiny.

Sappenfield: You keep a daunting appearance schedule. You teach not only in Pacific University's MFA program, but also at workshops. You maintain relationships with editors, publicists, writers, libraries, booksellers, writing conference organizers. You maintain three blogs. Were you this busy before the awards, and can you discuss what the career of writer means to you?

Campbell: Because I don't teach full time, I have more flexibility than many writers do. And as long as my darling Christopher can get us health insurance through his job, I'll keep this schedule. Until this year, I have generally said yes to all opportunities,

do what she can to help. Writers who are so inclined can now create a literary presence in the world even before they have a book, by blogging, tweeting, publishing book reviews, sharing their work online. And all that stuff is fun besides.

Sappenfield: Do you feel your involvement in so many different things has helped you in winning any of these awards?

Campbell: Gosh, I don't think so. In all but the biggest contests (NBA, NBCC, Pulitzer, etc.), work is presented to judges anonymously, and judges of most contests are disallowed from considering the work of folks they know. Probably name recognition can

not on how entertaining we are or how much someone enjoyed our review of *Infinite Jest*. For example, I had a leg up in sending work to the *Southern Review*, because I knew the editor Jeanne Leiby, RIP, had liked some of my work in the past and would look at it fairly quickly. In the end, she rejected more stories than she accepted, but it was nice knowing that she would always take a look at them.

So networking is all good, but I'd say that the people who will make the biggest difference in your writing career are the people you work with on a regular basis. The most important people in my writing life have always been my writing friends, because they help me make my work better

before it ever goes out into the world. I advise my students that if they meet someone in a workshop who seems an excellent, sympathetic critic of their work, it is a good idea to befriend that person and to make that person cookies or socks and to cast magical spells in order to lure him or her into their own literary circles.

Sappenfield: When you are at your computer at home, do you ever feel desperate, even at this stage in your career?

Campbell: Desperate about the human race, yes. Occasionally crippled by insecurity at the thought of writing, yes, but once I sit down to write, I just get to work, and my table, chair, window with view of woods, and circus posters create a nice place to spend time. When I'm focusing on the fictional predicaments I've created, I can take a break from the great anxiety I feel about politics and other real-life troubles. And I love to be alone for hours at a stretch. When I don't get time to write, when I'm away from home or socializing too much, I do become a little desperate. At the ten-day Pacific University residencies, I listen to the smart craft talks given by other faculty members, and I think, *That's what I have to do. I haven't been writing the right way at all. As soon as I get home I need to make some serious changes in my writing process.* But once I'm alone with my own stories, everything is fine.

It takes me a long time, usually years, to finish something, even a short story. I worked on the story "Bringing Belle Home" from *American Salvage* off and on for over twenty years. If I feel restless about finishing something, I remind myself that Flannery O'Connor only wrote a couple dozen fabulous stories and two novels, and her work matters very much in the world. I have a lot of friends who have kids or who work long hours, people who struggle to find time to write, and I tell them: if you finish one

good story or a couple of poems a year, you can be a part of the literary scene. Students, too, have their anxieties; one of my goals as a teacher of writing is to help alleviate the desperation students sometimes feel.

Sappenfield: How long did it take you to write *Once Upon a River*?

Campbell: There are a couple of answers to that question. Maybe I've been working on it since 1996, because there's a little piece of the novel that came from a story I wrote in my very first workshop at Western Michi-

gan University. Or maybe it's been more like five or six years. I began to write this novel in earnest when I realized I had the same character in two of my short stories, the one from *Women and Other Animals* called "The Fishing Dog" and another, "Family Reunion," which appeared in *American Salvage*. Both of the stories were long finished when I realized there was a possible narrative arc that could join them.

Sappenfield: When you finish the draft of a novel, what do you do with it?



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Campbell: The smart thing to do with a novel is *put it aside*. Don't do anything with it for a month. When you go back and read it again, it's likely that you'll see it needs more work. My students often ask me how they will know when a story is finished. The answer is, *You usually don't know*. But what you can do for sure is *everything you can do*. You keep working on a piece until you can't work on it anymore, and then you take a break. And after a break, after a month of leaving the story in the drawer, if you still feel there's nothing more you can do to

first draft. The further along a story is, the more likely that being hit by a car will not result in a complete loss of face. As a teenage girl, when I used to fantasize about death, the main thing was that I wanted to be a beautiful corpse. Now I hope that whenever I die, those pages on my desk will be a beautiful book. Oh, and I worry about my donkeys, as well, Jack and Don Quixote; I worry that when I'm gone, nobody will properly spoil them.

Sappenfield: How do you recognize the line between revision and fretting?

Campbell: You're asking me whether I really hang out with the kind of people I portray in my stories. Well, sure. Most of the people I portray are decent folks, coping as best they can in challenging circumstances. And some of my family and friends can be outrageous and occasionally even dangerous, but I won't let that get in the way of learning something from them, say, how to skin a deer in a new way. I also hang out with respectable citizens who compost and recycle on principle, rather than because it saves them money on garbage service. For

For subject matter, I guess I'm more attracted to folks who are anachronistic or on the fringe, or to those who are struggling for their survival in some way. I'm interested in writing about situations that feel desperate...

improve it, then send it out. If you've got an agent, great. If you don't, then share it with friends, with fellow writers, with workshop mates. You'll get some input, and you'll often find there's more work you can do. I asked my W.W. Norton editor if anyone had ever submitted to her a finished book that did not need any more work, and she assured me no one ever had.

Sappenfield: First draft or revision, which gives you more pleasure?

Campbell: Revision. No question. I enjoy inventing stories, but that part is never as pleasurable as the work of making them better and finally getting them right. Anne Lamott makes a joke about how after you write your first draft, you don't dare leave the house because you're afraid you'll get hit by a car, and someone will come into your place and find that lousy

Campbell: Fretting is a part of revision. I'm still fretting about *Once Upon a River*. As I flip through pages to choose a section to read aloud at a bookstore, I think, *This could have gone through one more edit*. I guess there's a point when a book is done enough for general consumption, but I've already started a list of things I'd like to tweak for the paperback.

Sappenfield: Your writing has a rural sensibility. Beyond that, your characters are people on the fringes of even this rural place, yet you say that you like to write about your Michigan "tribe." How much of your characters and your settings are inspired by things or people you know? In this latest book, you are skinning rabbits, deer, catfish, and muskrats; shooting off body parts.

subject matter, I guess I'm more attracted to folks who are anachronistic or on the fringe, or to those who are struggling for their survival in some way. I'm interested in writing about situations that feel desperate, troubles for which there are no easy remedies, in other words, problems that need worrying about.

Sappenfield: So your characters do come from real life?

Campbell: The characters and situations portrayed in my short stories often do come out of real life, though the progression of events is all made up. My novels, on the other hand, generally consist of characters who are invented with only a nod to actual people I've known. I'm not sure why there turns out to be such a difference. Maybe because in writing a novel there's so much more architect-

ture involved, so many more connections that have to be made that it's hard to mold any element from real life into a usable shape. For both short stories and novels, I start from an obsession about some trouble, usually related to something I've observed and ruminated upon. A writer's ability to be obsessed by an idea, a vision, a person, or a situation, may well determine whether she can stick with a story long enough to develop its full richness and complexity.

Sappenfield: Your stories come from real life, your novel from your imagination, yet your new novel incorporates two of your short stories. Can you speak to the process of transforming those original short stories into novel form?

Campbell: A lot of us finish a short story and assume we're done with the material, only to discover later there's a longer journey ahead for the characters. When I saw that those two stories I wrote featured the same young woman, I realized I had another story to tell. "Family Reunion" was the only story I've written where I knew I had nailed the ending, with a rape victim shooting her attacker in just the right place, nonfatally. Maybe it was too perfect an ending, so I couldn't let it alone. In real life, once a gal does that to a guy, something else is bound to happen.

Sappenfield: My question lies, though, in what specific craft things you did to make those stories work in the novel.

Campbell: Anyone who knows those stories will recognize their elements within the novel, but they work differently in the longer narrative. In a short story, you can have a few arrows pointing outside the narrative—the best stories do reach out to life beyond their borders—but mostly a short story works to achieve a unified effect, at least in Edgar Allen Poe's opinion. A novel can be a wilder beast, can

grow limbs that stretch away from its torso. In that sense, there's more freedom in a novel, but at the same time, there is a lot more connecting to be done among scenes, paragraphs, and sentences to make the thing feel complete and cohesive. Now that I've said this, I want to contradict myself by trying to write a successful short story that results in a nonunified effect.

In most novels, any given scene is proportionally a smaller bit of the whole than in a story, and yet the scene still needs to reflect all that's essential about the novel, must acknowledge the scenes that came before and lay groundwork for what comes after, while, hopefully, being compelling in its own right. To be honest, I don't know how anybody writes a novel. Or a short story for that matter.

In my own experience, the most surprising thing that happens in the translation from story to novel section is that I have to make situations less extreme. Some of my stranger and more intense short story elements feel artificial when carried into the novel. For example, in the story "Family Reunion," which inspired *Once Upon A River*, the protagonist is mute and has not spoken a word since she was molested by her uncle. When I tried that in the novel, where I've created a more comprehensive world in which Margo exists, it seemed unbelievable. How would she get away with not talking at school, for example, or in her 4-H shooting class? It made much more sense in the novel that she spoke rarely and reluctantly, and it turned out to be just as effective for conveying her rage and her sense of alienation.

Sappenfield: You have said that many of your situations and characters involve real-life situations close to home. How has your family and community reacted to your brutally honest portrayals of the area where you live?

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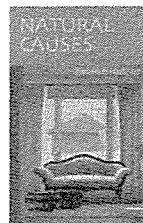
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Campbell: A woman from a local book club once suggested that *American Salvage* was bad PR for Kalamazoo, and I responded that Charles Dickens created bad PR for London, but that didn't seem to hurt the city. Most folks around here have liked my books and stories and haven't felt offended or threatened. Though my home region is teetering economically, its problems are similar to those that exist everywhere in America, and I don't see my portrayals of the area as particularly brutal. The characters in the first two stories of *American Salvage* include an upper-middle-class couple who has a weekend river cottage, a teenage honor student, a school custodian who likes wildlife and his wife who wants to live in the suburbs, as well as a meth addicted teen and a cranky old man who smokes too many cigarettes. Not such a dark cast of characters overall.

I do like presenting dilemmas my reader might not have considered, and in particular the dilemmas of poor and working class people. There's someone close to me on whom I based one of the most difficult stories in *American Salvage*. When I shared the story with him, his response was something like, *Wow, I didn't know you really understood the situation*. I work hard to depict situations in all their complexity, avoiding easy judgments about people, never letting my characters become caricatures, and so far that's served me well. Oh, but my mom complains sometimes. She is a tough, smart, practical, opinionated woman, and she always notices if I sneak a bit of her personality into one of my characters, say into a mother who harasses her daughter for refusing to eat meat. She reads all my stories, gives me some helpful advice, and suggests I write a murder mystery instead. Or something funny.

Sappenfield: Writing about sex is scary. You do it so well that reviewers slip in comments about how well you

write it. Do you have any guidelines when writing about sex?

Campbell: We all need help with sex. I mean, with sex scenes. I'm married twenty-four years now, and I hardly have sex with anybody, so it's fun to be involved in fictional relations. When I'm in bed with my characters, I really have to use my imagination, because I don't know what other people do together. My job as a writer involves listening to people, but when folks talk about sex, they often talk in clichés, or they express bravado, neither of which is helpful. Now you've got me thinking I ought to ask more people what they do in bed—except that then I'll have to listen to what they say.

There's no reason to include sex (or anything else) unless it moves the story along and develops the characters, but I'd suggest sex scenes are well suited for that work. When we're writing a story, we are often puzzling over what a character wants. Well, in a sex scene, we usually know what that character wants. Or if the character doesn't want the experience, that's interesting, too. Also, lovers can be in a sort of altered state, the way persons getting drunk can be altered. In a state of desire, people will say things they wouldn't otherwise say: they'll lie, exaggerate, beg. We all need ways of turning up the heat in our stories, and sex creates heat. Actually having sex is great, too, but writing about it, well, the possibilities are endless.

Sappenfield: That said, when you are reading through your sex scenes, what are the things that you watch for and you cut out, that you get rid of?

Campbell: Body parts. Lately I've been admiring those sex scenes in which there are no body parts mentioned and no sexual acts described, but somehow it's absolutely clear what is happening, and who, shall we say, is on top. There's one of those

scenes in *Beloved*. Jaimy Gordon's *Lord of Misrule* has one that's so good I shrieked while I read it. While we might make fun of movement in a romance when the camera pans away from the act by showing the metaphorical scene (waterfall, singing bird), literary writers will often just leave a blank spot in the narrative between before and after, leaving me wondering what just happened.

Sappenfield: *Women and Other Animals* was your book about women. *American Salvage* was your book about men. Bonnie Jo, look at these titles. The ladies have this fun, earthy message, and gosh, the guys? Were you aware of this?

Campbell: A guy can have a thought in his head without worrying about twenty-seven things, including how his butt looks in his pants. While I write a lot about women and girls puzzling out difficult situations, if I'm going to write about a person with an all-consuming desire, I'll likely make it a man. I'm probably kidding myself. Men nowadays probably do worry about how their butts look in their pants, but this illusion of mine makes my job of writing them more fun. *American Salvage* is a harsher collection of tales, because many of them rose out of watching certain men in my community being chaffed or swamped or swallowed by the tough and confusing economic realities of the turn of this new century.

Sappenfield: What is your greatest writing fear?

Campbell: My first thought is that I shouldn't tell you, for fear of it coming true, but I've never been one to clam up. I fear having nothing to write about, but I guess I don't fear it all that much. It might come as a relief, at least for a while, because I'd catch up on my reading. And after that, who knows, I could teach some math or bike to Montreal or maybe open that philosophy shop along the

river. Okay, something worse than not writing. What if somebody, say, read what I wrote and then killed himself as a result? That would be the worst. Somebody said—maybe John Gardner—that a writer's only moral obligation is as follows: if a reader is

on the fence about killing himself or herself, if that reader is fifty-fifty on the issue and could go either way, maybe we writers have an obligation to help that reader of our work decide to live. I would like to be *pro-life* to that extent.

AWP

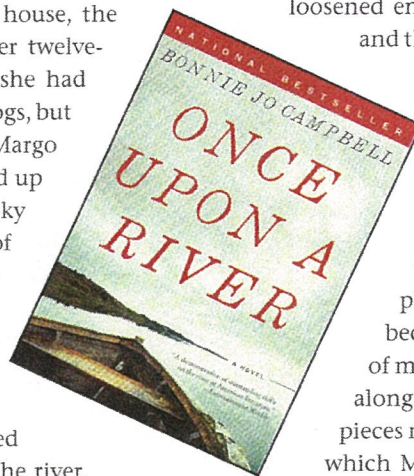
Heather Sappenfield's stories have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, won the Danahy Fiction Prize at the Tampa Review, and been Honorable Mention for the Bear Deluxe's Doug Fir Award and Gemini Magazine's Flash Fiction Contest. Her stories have also appeared in Meridian, So To Speak, and Shenandoah.

excerpt

from *Once Upon a River*

When Margo arrived at the marijuana house, the midnight crickets were screaming. On her twelve-hour, thirty-some-mile trip downstream she had passed swampy places croaking with bullfrogs, but here the tree frogs chirped like insects. Margo pulled her boat onto the sand and climbed up the bank. The place was overgrown, spooky in its neglect. The dock was pulled out of the water, and grass and weeds poked up through the slats. Plywood was nailed over several of the windows, and glass shards in the dirt reflected moonlight. Both doors had padlocks on them. She lit the kerosene lantern she'd swiped from Brian's cabin before heading down the river. She held the lantern up and read the signs posted on both doors: KEEP OUT NO TRESPASSING, with THIS MEANS YOU spray-painted beneath. Junior's pot leaf had been painted over. When neither of the uncovered windows would budge, she began to pry at one of the pieces of plywood.

Before coming down the river, she had hung around downstream from Michael's house for a few days, but did not see any police. She knew they would eventually find Paul, and they'd almost certainly investigate the cabin on stilts. She'd slipped inside the cabin to procure a few items for her journey: the lantern, a small folding military shovel that she was now using to pry at the plywood, a fishing pole, a bottle of bug dope, and a jug of water. She had wiped clean all the surfaces that might contain fingerprints, but if the police brought drug-sniffing dogs, they would smell her. She hoped that Michael had not contacted the authorities. She was sorry to have hurt him.



She worked at the quarter-inch plywood for a long time, pulling out one nail after another, until eventually it loosened enough that she could slip beneath it and through the empty window frame. She carried the lantern inside with her.

The kitchen area was the same as before, with candles melted onto the Formica tabletop. The mattress on which Junior and his friends used to sit to smoke pot in the main room had been replaced by a plaid fold-out couch. She peeked in the bedroom and found it a mess, with bits of mattress stuffing spread across the floor along with wood scraps. Only splintered pieces remained of the wooden bed frame on which Margo had first fooled around with a boy. She closed the door.

She searched the empty cupboards. Inside a bread box she found a boxed brownie mix, and in the drawer beneath the oven, a tin pie pan. She collected paper and wood in a bag to use for starting a fire and carried them outside through the window. She ventured a little downstream until she found the Slocums' garden. Margo knew that if she took vegetables, it was stealing, but she remembered how her father had done favors for the Slocums, once fixing a space heater that had gone out on a cold night, and she picked four tomatoes and a big handful of beans. She built a fire just upstream from where her boat was hidden. She stirred water into the brownie mix and balanced the pie tin of batter above the fire on three rocks, and while it cooked, she munched the raw vegetables. The brownies burned on the bottom, but still tasted sweet and good.

When her belly was full for the first time in days, she noticed the moon was full, too.

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