

INTERVIEW: FROM ROUGH STRING TO METROLINER

Bangtail Press: You've been writing about the East, and specifically about Washington and New York, since the mid-1970s. That's a long time to gain insight and perspective. How have you seen the East change?

Toby Thompson: Through a re-gentrification of every major city on the Eastern Seaboard—most especially Washington and New York. I was conceived in New York City, during World War II, but was born in Washington. I am in fact a fourth-generation Washingtonian. The inner city in my youth was populated largely by African Americans. Other ethnic groups—Chinese, Greeks, and to an extent Italians—worked and were segregated in specific neighborhoods. Middle-class whites lived in the northwest quadrant of the city. A comparable division of neighborhoods could be seen in Manhattan. Blacks in Harlem, Chinese in Chinatown, Italians in Little Italy and Greenwich Village. Now upper and middle-class whites occupy every available foot of real estate in both cities..

BP: If you had to find large themes in your work, if you were asked to take a big-picture perspective in describing what you do, how would you start?

TT: I'd start with the city. In my previous collection, *Riding the Rough String*, I wrote about contemporary interlopers to the American West. But I am probably more interested in Eastern themes—that is, my generation's move from the city to the suburbs in late 1940s and early 1950s. That was my experience: first from New York City, then from Washington, D.C. That move effected huge changes in our culture. Gone was a sense of community that even the rowdiest urban neighborhoods possessed, to be supplanted by the empty lawns of tract houses and sidewalks devoid of pedestrians. It was lonely, and that loneliness was capitalized upon by '50s television shows, performed live from New York. In fact I'm a child of '50s television; my uncle was a writer/producer for *Your Hit Parade*. It was a top-ten-hits show—a predecessor to MTV—and its message was “there's nothing happenin' in the suburbs, baby—it's happenin' downtown.” We've seen a repopulation of inner cities over the past forty years, largely due to baby boomer interest and, it's my belief shows like *Saturday Night Live*. *Your Hit Parade* was broadcast live each Saturday from the same NBC studio as *SNL*. I was present many times.

BP: How does suburban angst factor into your interest in urban resettlement?

TT: Let me backtrack to *Riding the Rough String*. When I first experienced life in Montana, I realized that I'd been hungry for neighborhood, for community. A town like Livingston (pop. 7,380) where I own a house, is like a big city neighborhood—say Murray Hill in New York, or North Beach in San Francisco. People stroll the sidewalks, say hello, know your name. And they watch out for one other. As my generation retreated from the horrors of Vietnam, it homesteaded not only the cities' ravaged cores but the American West. Both derived from frontier impulses.

BP: *Riding the Rough String* and *Metroliner* have impressive developmental arcs. They are part memoir, part biography, part “novels” of ideas. Seeing their pieces side by side, collected in two places, have you learned anything new about the totality of your work?

TT: Only that the generational angle remains sharp. Baby boomers were raised with a mythic conception of the East’s inner cities and of the Rocky Mountain West. We saw them on Saturday night or early morning TV, read about them in magazines or comic books, and saw them in movies. Our heroes were gangsters and cowfolk. We dressed like them, wanted to be them. A major theme in both books’ pieces is how my generation realized its dream of experiencing first the American West, living there psychically or geographically, then repopulated Eastern cities.

BP: Many of your pieces in both books concern writers. Is that an accident?

TT: No. Many authors were smitten as children by myths of both the East and the West. But how to repopulate them? Expensive and/or remote, writing was one way to survive. You might create your books, articles or screenplays without taking a real job, and you could do so in an extremely loose manner. I started profiling writers because A: I was interested in their work, and B: because I wished to see how their lives embraced East and West. A hymn we sang at St. Albans—a school I profiled in *Metroliner*—was titled “In Christ There is No East or West.” I’m not a Christian, though I was raised to be one. But as a writer, the sentiment stuck. If there was neither East nor West, there was Bohemia. Which one could afford. In *Rough String*, my long piece about Thomas McGuane and Livingston during the manic 1970s is case in point. The huge profile of Gary Snyder is another. Snyder did it on a subsistence basis, with a community of activists and writers accompanying him. Norman Mailer, whom I profiled in *Metroliner*, occupied loft space on the Lower East Side during the early 1950s. Hoodlums broke up a party of his there and struck him on the head with a hammer.

BP: You’ve interviewed some of the biggest literary names of our time. Which were your favorites?

TT: In *Metroliner*, there was the consummate literary dandy, Tom Wolfe—a Southerner who moved to New York and became its voice during the 1960s. His obsession with his outlier status, and the concept of status in general, is one we shared. Another was Mailer, my literary hero for decades. I’d met him on the street at the time of my profile of Wolfe in *Vanity Fair*. I caught him on 57th Street, leaving the subway. He said he’d been reading my piece on his trip uptown. That thrilled me. Later I thought that perhaps I’d given Norman short shrift. When his novel *Harlot’s Ghost* approached publication, I lobbied hard with Tina Brown to profile him. I wanted to compose a major piece. She acquiesced, and not only did I get extraordinary length, but wrung some of the most insightful comments from Mailer that I’ve read, thumb wrestled with him at an Actor’s Studio Party, hung out at his Brooklyn Heights apartment, and danced with his young wife at both the Hard Rock Café and a Random House party at the Rainbow Room. In Washington and later New York, I toured cafes and quarters with Carl Bernstein, a journalistic icon not only to me but to my generation. We shared a moment if not an evening with Prince at the nightclub, Nell’s, and with other stars at Indochine and the Canal Bar. Carl

enjoys celebrity, but he with Bob Woodward owns a secure place in American history as one of two journalists to have brought down a president. I likewise profiled Donald E. Graham, not a writer but a publisher and CEO of the Washington Post Company. The son of Katharine Graham, he has had as fascinating a life as the legends he's employed—including Bob Woodward, Ben Bradlee, and for a time Carl Bernstein. My interviews with him are the most intimate he's granted.

BP: How about authors in *Riding the Rough String*?

TT: James Lee Burke was particularly insightful, and I got to play country guitar with him. Gretel Ehrlich was determined in her remarks and purposeful in her life; she has been struck twice by lightning, and I hiked through a thunderstorm with her. Tim Cahill is the architect of contemporary adventure writing, and his thoughts on risk and why we seek it are riveting. Peter Fonda, if only for his work in *Easy Rider*, is etched into film history, and I got him out on a motorcycle—perhaps the first journalist to have done so. Thomas McGuane may be the most brilliant writer I've met, and as a Middle Westerner the life he's created for himself in Montana is exemplary. To have partied with him, Hunter Thompson and Jimmy Buffett in the same summer is memorable. The godfather of Western writers, William Kittredge, was a rancher before he became a writer, and as the eldest of this bunch, is suffused with wit and wisdom. Robert Redford is Robert Redford: a cinematic legend. And his filming of *A River Runs through It* in 1991, which I track in "A Private River," changed Montana as forcefully as had cable television. *River* did it through the fly fisherman invasion, which amped up gentrification and its attendant woes. Gary Snyder, whose voice and determination Jack Kerouac captured in his 1958 novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is larger than life. To have slept and hung out at his Sierra Nevada home, to say nothing of having hiked with him, were unique experiences. And he taught me Zen meditation.

BP: Gary Snyder taught you to meditate?

TT: Yes indeed. He'd built a zendo at Kitkitdizze, his mountain retreat, and a meditation group—Ring of Bone—practices there. I wanted to sit with them. One afternoon Gary took me to the zendo, perched beside me on a cushion, taught me the rudiments of posture and breathing, and schooled me in what to expect during the three-hour ritual. I have those instructions on tape.

BP: Many of the figures you profile here had difficult childhoods. You seem drawn to these types.

TT: My childhood was thorny, to say the least. Graham's, Bernstein's, Mailer's and the television legend Jackie Gleason's were as well. Gleason's father abandoned his family when Gleason was nine; just disappeared. Gary Snyder's childhood was abusive; he describes his mother as having had a temperament that was "almost multiple personality." He survived her beatings and other mistreatments in a remarkable way. He's a testament to the introspection and hard work necessary to repair character flaws. He's described Zen as "the crispest example of the 'self-help' branch of Mahayana Buddhism." And self-help is of course a boomer preoccupation, though it's always been with us. Gretel Ehrlich expresses this in the quote I use

for the epigraph of my book: “Riding the rough string ... you get bucked off and you get back on. You understand what you did to make the horse scared. And you don’t become a victim.” Mailer escaped, and often embraced his demons through physical confrontation. He was obsessed with violence, the result of and the indulgence of that duality of selves which he saw as cleaving us all. It’s his “Heisenberg Principle,” to reference *Breaking Bad*.

BP: You say your childhood was thorny. Yet here you skim over the elements of abuse you describe in your St. Albans piece. Has the Sandusky child-abuse scandal at Penn State affected you? That was an event reported worldwide. You’ve taught there for 28 years, yet you haven’t mentioned it.

TT: Again, to paraphrase Mailer, it would take a novel to respond adequately. In fact, I’ve written such a novel—about a family member who at age 50 killed himself in suicide pact with a 16-year-old girl. This after an affair that began when the girl was 15.

BP: Your current family?

TT: No, a cousin thrice removed. He was an artist, a clubman, and had served with Teddy Roosevelt’s Rough Riders in Cuba. The deaths happened in 1920.

BP: You fail to comment upon Sandusky.

TT: To do so would be to explicate all that’s wrong with the contemporary university: its deification of sports figures who earn more than its presidents; its reliance upon the huge revenues that football teams earn, and the unspoken mandate to avoid scandal at all costs.

BP: Well then, how have you balanced writing with teaching?

TT: Gingerly. Both activities, if pursued enthusiastically, exhaust the same area of the brain. One must steal from Peter to pay Paul.

BP: What would you hope students take from your classes?

TT: That writing as a profession is honorable. And that if worked at doggedly, can provide not just a comfortable living but a ticket to ride.

BP: What’s next for you?

TT: Revisions of the novel I mentioned. And the publication of a long nonfiction book about the New York office of the FBI, focused on a particular agent there.

BP: Why the FBI, and why this agent?

TT: I touch upon my interest in the Bureau in Metroliner’s “Sessions at the Gate,” a piece about Director William Sessions’ dismissal by President Clinton in 1993, and in my long profile of

Carl Bernstein, "Loyalties." For my generation, the FBI under J. Edgar Hoover was a principal villain in our lives. As to my supervisory agent (a good guy), like most spies, he had a brace of contradictory personalities. Mailer says in *Metroliner's* profile, "Artists, and extraordinary men and women have dramatically different [personalities] ... so do the feebleminded, the addictive, and the psychotic." Mailer adds that this notion "could prove the first reliable psychological theory to explain how spies are able to live with the tension of their incredible life situations." My FBI agent's life was spent as an artist, a spy, a novelist of undercover scenarios and often their protagonist. His life epitomized the remainder of what I'd like to say about New York. As Kurt Vonnegut's epigraph to *Metroliner* states, "I went to New York City to be born again." That's true for my FBI agent, and it's true for my generation.