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An Interview with Alan Cheuse

by Tracey Donnelly

Tracey Donnelly sat down and talked with acclaimed author **Alan Cheuse**, also known as National Public Radio's longtime "Voice of Books."

Cheuse has written five novels, four collections of short fiction, and the memoir *Fall Out of Heaven*. As a book commentator, Cheuse is a regular contributor to National Public Radio's *All Things Considered*. His short fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Ploughshares*, *The Antioch Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, *The Idaho Review*, and *The Southern Review*, among other places. He teaches in the Writing Program at George Mason University and the Squaw Valley Community of Writers.

Donnelly is a painter, a poet, and a writer of fiction. She currently is exploring the artistic process and its product by interviewing artists about their work. She holds a B.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University and a M.F.A. in creative writing from George Mason University. She has studied at the Academie de Port-Royal in France. Donnelly currently works at the Corcoran Gallery of Art/College of Art and Design.

Tracey Donnelly: *The stories in Paradise, or Eat Your Face, like many others you have written, explore the relationship of people to place and to each other. In these novellas what are you saying about that relationship? How might they be different if you had begun working on them at an earlier time in your life?*

Alan Cheuse: Stories come when they come. I couldn't have written the title novella any time before my trip to Bali, for obvious reasons of content. As for questing, slightly disturbed female characters, I suppose I have written about them before this particular work.

The same goes for "Care", which is based largely on the life and death of a dear friend of mine, a Guatemalan Jewish writer who suffered a stroke, lapsed into a coma, and returned to consciousness transformed in a particular way.

This, and the third story, grow out of a California landscape, and, particularly, the third one takes on a character whose past ties him to the coastal region of central California. A different man and a different story might have arisen from the edge of one of the Great Lakes. So without articulating here at least any deeper theory about the links between character and setting (as, say, my dear late friend James D. Houston wrote about with such care and affection), I do certainly believe such a relationship exists.

Donnelly: *Modern artists often go against mainstream and expectation.*

Richard Diebenkorn, the painter, switched from abstraction to figuration and then back to abstraction at a time when contemporary artists simply wouldn't have made those changes. How have you moved towards or away from abstraction? How do you manage the urge or need to go against mainstream and expectation?

Chuse: From a technical stand-point, abstraction in contemporary literature has its roots in the language practices of Gertrude Stein, I think, not, as some might believe when they hear the word, in the medieval form of allegory. I have written at least one story that might stand as a fully articulated abstract-expressionist piece, or something close to it, the story of the friendship and kinship of Aaron Copland and Paul Bowles—"The Distinction Between Twilight and Crepuscule"—in the early 1990s...But that just seemed to me at the time to be the best way to tell the story—as does using the aphasia of the main character in the novella "Care" help, I hope, to move the story along. I have, as you put it, felt the need to go against the mainstream and expectation, but that always comes to the forefront of my mind after I finish a piece, never while I'm writing it. Nietzsche, I think, says every great writer believes he is a great realist. I'm just trying to write as realistically in my own way as I see it.

Donnelly: *Interesting boundaries are explored in these novellas. In the title story Paradise the idea of wanting to be close to family or wanting to go home is manifest in a young girl forming a relationship with a friend of her father's. What do you believe is happening to these characters? What is being revealed or reinforced in character perception?*

Chuse: What is happening to them? I can only defer to you, the reader, for your opinion. As I write them the characters simply do whatever it is appropriate, as I see it. Every character, like every human being, has a particular fingerprint, so that you take the same story and change the lead character, and you change at the every least the shading or emphases of the story, and at most bend the plot to a different will, or lack of will.

Donnelly: *The level of consciousness in your characters vary but in the character, Paul Brunce, it is very strong. As a writer he has an elevated sense of awareness for what is around him yet until this story he never wrote about the horrific elements surrounding his family's broken boundaries. What do you say about this?*

Chuse: Looking at him as a reader—Malamud used to say, "after I write the story I become just another reader"—I see that what he has over the years probably taken to be his artist's sense of proportionate distance has probably led him to keep his distance, shy away from, really, some serious business in his own life. As the story opens he has realized that he must take a look at it if he wants to see himself whole.

Donnelly: *How important is memory for you as an artist and an appreciator of art? How has using memory and experience changed for you as you*

have matured as an artist?

Chuse: Memory, memory, memory. Everything is memory, memory holds together all the times that we experience as individuals and as generations and cultures and nations. Without memory we would have a discrete collection of markings on stone, on pottery, on papyrus, on pages, on screens. You might say Memory is God, recalling—using memory!—that the goddess who tells the Homeric poems through the means of the voices of the poet-recitators or chanters is called Mnemosyne or Memory, and that when the religion that gave her power faded away her name became the Greek noun for the process of memory.

So if I didn't use memory I could not make fiction or any other sort of narrative. You might even say, meditating on this question, that fiction becomes the memory of a time, of a generation, of an age, and if it is truly great, of a nation, a national culture. What is our memory as a nation of 19th century America? In large part, the fiction of Mark Twain, the poetry of Walt Whitman, among a few others. The work of Shakespeare is the great memory deposit of the high days of the English kings...

Without memory I am nothing but a literal creature of the immediate moment, as opposed to a man who grew up in the eastern United States, watery New Jersey, to be precise, went to school there, moved around, married, divorced, married, divorced, married, raised children, tried a lot of different jobs, finally got to writing seriously in his late thirties, and so forth. Jersey, water, travel, family, all make me think and feel the way I do.

How has memory changed for me? I remember a lot and what I don't remember I invent—which, I guess I've been saying, a form of memory.

Donnelly: *Good writing asks the reader to observe what is being described. It is as if the writer and the reader are both seeking something out and making discoveries. What do you consciously and deliberately employ to achieve this?*

Chuse: I write syllables, words, phrases, sentences on the page which, I presume, readers will read as a musician reads music as he or she plays it. In other words, the described lies in the description. Just as everything we see with our eyes in the world around us is made up not of the things themselves but of light reflected off them.

Donnelly: *How do you prompt readers to slow down and to look more closely at what is on the page? What sort of challenges are created by the modern world or rather what hinders or enables those effort?*

Chuse: Pace, as I just suggested, comes out of composing the words, sentences, etc. so they read at a certain rate. One writer's "He raised the cigarette to his lips, took a long drag, and blew out smoke an even rate of expulsion" is another's "He took a puff and blew smoke into the air"...

As for challenges for the writer created by the modern world, as opposed to

any other time in history? Different, and yet the same. The writer wants to reveal drama in the natural evolutionary boredom, or chaos (you choose which, or maybe it's both) of things.

Donnelly: *An abstract painter might deliberately subdue color or mute it so that it wouldn't become too seductive to the viewer, and that way he could avoid creating simply pleasing pictures. Do you find yourself tempted to seduce the reader with words? Do you find yourself deliberately opting for something better?*

Chuse: Hum my tune. Is that a seduction? Read my story, my novel...If you do that, is that a seduction? Well, then, if you are at the legal age or above, seduction is a good thing. Unless it's a bad book, in which case, you will, if you have good taste, feel bad about what you have let happen to yourself.

Donnelly: *If you were to link your stories to a filmmaker who would that be? Who do you envision being filmed?*

Chuse: Novels, big historical stories that they are, take a big director, Richard Attenborough-ish, that kind of vision. Stories—many good directors out there with fine talent for the fine-tuning most short stories require in film.

Donnelly: *Your stories seem to reveal much about you as a person. How do you feel about that? Generally, as a creative person, how does it feel to have your characters be naked out in front of the world?*

Chuse: I don't look at my work as if looking into a mirror, more like the mirror looking into me. I write, or have thus far, anything I need to in order to try and make things work, whether or not that's autobiographical or confessional, is what you seem to be suggesting, I don't really care.

The main task I always see before me, finding the character's main drive, his or her dramatic action, if you will, and then working with that to create a plot that fully reveals the inner chambers of character—made up, as with all of us, of desire, hope, longings true and false, truths, self-imposed lies and fantasies, great heart and poisoned hearts, all of this moving through time at the speed of appetite and aspiration.

Who are these people, these "characters"? Not mere composites, but the combination of what the writer knows, intuits, reads about, hears about, dreams about-- past lives, present histories, future hopes, all of them familiar and yet each, if the writer can make things good enough, distinct from all the others.

Donnelly: *What are the places in these novellas you felt particularly good*

about?

Chause: Getting the titles right. Everything flows for me after that.

Donnelly: *The collection of three novellas in Paradise is like a show with in a show. It seems at times to be less about just wonderful stories and more about the wonderful creation of the stories, and about answering the generation out there wishing they could or would be good writers. What do you say?*

Chause: I can honestly say that I hadn't thought about them in that way, but as a reader I think every good work of fiction works in both of those ways.

Donnelly: *Your characters are often ones that are searching. They are sometimes searching for love and it goes horribly wrong, or to belong, or to understand their own universe and place in life. What is the role of sex in their searching?*

Chause: Sex, good, bad, or indifferent, or even absent (God help the person!) plays a large role in the overall balance of a personality moving through time. In a way we are instruments played upon by our own consciousness and will, and learning how to modulate in sex is an extremely important part of our little sonata of a life. Although some people choose not to play, and that says something about them as sexual creatures—sexual animals—as do those monkey-like personalities who spend most of their time pushing the sex button like gluttonous creatures in a sort of Dantesque cage.

But—what an admission I am about to make—the sexual desire isn't everything. Otherwise we'd just be monkeys or rutting hogs. As Georg Lukacs, the great 20th century Hungarian literary critic once wrote, what Adam did with Eve, what Cleopatra and Anthony did, what Romeo did with Juliet, that is biology. The context—historical, psychological, geographical, I believe he meant—makes each love affair different from every other.

So we write what we can imagine about people who love or long for love, people who quest for things impossible to hold on to, cash, fame, glory, even, or good people who try to live a simple life, doing the most good while doing the least harm—and place them, because of what and how we write—in a particular context. This tells us something about the writer, of course. But more important, it tells us something about people of our own time and how they might be related to those who came before, and portend who might come after.

Donnelly: *In the final novella, the protagonist says near the end of the story, "Life is pitiless, except where we extend ourselves toward it, and it's a myth that time can bring some healing power to bear on even the worst of wounds. The only remedy is to forget, but forgetting is a kind of murder, and so we hesitate too long for this sort of ease and release." This is a beautiful*

story and in many way profound and timeless. It must have felt pretty good to write that or even think it but did you feel that way at the time? Is this also an autobiographical belief?

Chuse: Thank you for describing it this way. It pleases me to hear it. But the feeling of “pretty goodness” extends for me throughout the composition of a story or novel, though, I suppose, just as we feel a crescendo rising at the end of a symphony it does anyone—even the writer—some good to enter into this process. But “autobiographical”? Did I think this before I wrote it? Remember E. M. Forster says, I never know what I think until I see what I say, or some such variation? If I thought that phrase you quoted, I wasn’t aware of it until I write it down.

Donnelly: *How does your work reflect your true self and your encounter with life questions?*

Chuse: It’s part of my self, but different from ideas we have or literal acts we perform. It’s a part that, one hopes, might last, even a little while, beyond the end of literal life. But, to be less profound, part of next year or the next decade, rather than just the moment at the end of a final revision. I think readers see this more clearly than writers. Readers come to recognize that experiences they undergo in imaginative works stay with them more vividly than some of their own experiences, and characters they live with in a novel or a story remain more vivid for them than most of the actual people they know, perhaps even more than some intimate family members. Emma Bovary, c’est Flaubert, but also c’est moi.

Donnelly: *You are in Hawaii right now, “under the Hawaiian skies,” as you put it, researching a new book yet probably not too far from a volcano. Will there be a primitive setting? Supernatural elements?*

Chuse: The Hawaii sequence is part of a longer narrative, but, yes, there is some ritual dancing up in the mountains and some artifacts—in this case, petroglyphs, carvings on stone—and the earth quavers for a brief while. And there is a lot of sky in this novel—the main character is a pilot-- and a lot of water, too, mostly ocean, which couldn’t be a more primitive element—water is best, the ode writer Pindar said in his Olympic poem—but water is everything else, too, at least, it’s also land, if we look at the great “prairie” chapter in Moby-Dick. Vive le Moby!

Tracey Donnelly is a painter, a poet, and a writer of fiction. She currently is exploring the artistic process and its product by interviewing artists about their work. She holds a B.F.A. from Virginia Commonwealth University and a M.F.A. in creative writing from George Mason University. She has studied at the Academie de Port-Royal in France. Donnelly currently works at the Corcoran Gallery of Art/College of Art and Design.

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