

"CITIZENS WHO OBSERVE"
 A Conversation
 With Fred Chappell

BORN IN THE MOUNTAINS

of Canton, North Carolina, to parents who were teachers, Fred Chappell became interested in writing at an early age, publishing his first work, science fiction stories, before he graduated from high school. He has published over twenty-five volumes of stories, novels, essays, and poetry. Known initially as a novelist and short story writer, Chappell published his first book, *It Is Time, Lord*, in 1964, the year he received his MA degree from Duke University. The following year he joined the Department of English at UNC-Greensboro where he has taught creative writing to date.

After the publication of almost a dozen volumes of poetry, including his epic *Midquest*, Chappell received the Bollingen Prize in Poetry from Yale University in 1985. That year he published *I Am One of You Forever*, the first of a tetralogy of novels he planned to write, to be set in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina. Two years later, in 1987, St. Martin's Press published *The Fred Chappell Reader*, which was followed in 1989 with the publication of the second volume of the tetralogy, *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*. During an informal chat session at Methodist College in the fall of 1997, Chappell said that the third novel, *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You*, published in 1996, was his favorite of the four. He is currently at work on the last novel in the series, entitled *Look Back All the Green Valley*. (Editor's note: See the excerpt from this novel in this issue.)

In addition to the prestigious Bollingen Prize, Chappell has won the Aiken Taylor Prize for his poetry, and he was recently named poet laureate of North Carolina. His other awards and honors include the Sir Walter Raleigh Prize, the North Carolina Medal in Literature, a Rockefeller Grant, the Award in Literature from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, and for his novel *Dagon* Chappell won the French Academy's Best Foreign Novel Prize. Appreciated by readers all over the world, Chappell's works have been translated into many foreign languages, including Finnish, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, and Farsi.

Chappell's facility with language, his gift of discovering the *mot juste*, the depth of his perception, and the breadth and depth of his astounding knowledge have made him legendary among those who know him and his writing. Throughout his prolific career, grateful students have continued to come and go, and Chappell has tirelessly and generously continued to read manuscript after manuscript for them and countless

by Sally Sullivan

An excerpt from this interview with Chappell has been available since April, 1995, in Sally Sullivan's online collection *Writing Fiction and Poetry: Essays by Twelve North Carolina Writers*. (C&M Online Media: Boson Books. www.cmonline.com/boson/sullivan.html)

other writers who have sent their work to him for review. Because of Chappell's renown as a teacher of creative writing and because of his commitment to both writing and teaching, the following interview, which took place on June 22, 1991, on the porch of Fred and Susan Chappell's guest house behind their home in Greensboro, focuses on both of these "vocations" of Chappell's. His many readers will be forever grateful for his remarkable art, and those of us fortunate enough to have known Chappell personally will be forever in his debt – for his talent as a teacher, and, most of all, for himself, our loving and beloved "ole Fred."

Because the creative process is so mysterious and individual, can you really teach creative writing, and if so, what do you teach?

It seems to me that we do know a great deal about the creative process in specific instances: we have the notebooks of mathematicians, scientists, and writers, and we can tell pretty well how they got from one step to the other. We also have a great many autobiographies of these kinds of people, but the trouble is, as you say, it's really hard to generalize away from any specific project or any specific person to a large number of people. My professor of creative writing, whom I never studied with formally, was Dr. William Blackburn at Duke, who claimed, I think wisely, that writing cannot be taught because good writing depends upon emotion and you can't teach emotion. But I think most writers and most people who teach writing are agreed that what you can teach is how *not* to write. You point out specific errors time and time again until it becomes a kind of a drill process for the student; the student learns that there are certain things you don't bother to do, that there are other ways that are more efficient to do certain things. One of the first things you say is don't use passive voice; put it in active. Also try to find words that are close to the language your characters would use, but that are not colloquial or slang, and try to use vivid words that are more interesting. Don't say "cut," say "slash." In other words, what you're teaching is a kind of glorified freshman composition. No matter what kind of criticism you undertake, that's basically what you're doing.

Even though Blackburn said that you can't really teach writing because you can't teach emotion, what did you learn from him about writing?

That's easy enough. If you want to read what he was like, Bill Styron, in a book called *This Quiet Dust*, has a good essay on Dr. Blackburn.¹ It's not wonderful, exactly, because it's too brief; he needed more scope. My impression of Blackburn, what he taught me, was absolute integrity of purpose. That is, whatever you're doing, you always give it your whole shot: you give it everything you got and you don't hold back, and you don't complain, and you don't whine, you just go ahead and do it; but he considered writing the most important thing in the world. My temperament doesn't allow me to consider writing the most important thing in the world. But I do think it is extremely important, *one* of the most important things in the world, and the respect that he brought to it I try to bring to it every day of my life.

He never said this, by the way. He just embodied it, the way great teachers do. The best teaching Professor Blackburn ever did was simply

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¹ Styron, William. "This Quiet Dust" and Other Writings. New York: Random, 1982.