Shannon Ravenel

AN INTERVIEW

by Lacy Crawford

Shannon Ravenel was born and raised in Charleston, South Carolina. After graduating from Hollins College, she moved to New York City to begin a publishing career that would lead to a thirteen-year run as editor of the Best American Short Stories series and to founding, with Louis Rubin, Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. Under her own imprint at Algonquin, Ravenel nurtures and advances the work of writers from the American South. She lives with her husband, Dale Purves, in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Shannon Ravenel began our interview full of apologies: she had been stuck in a book-launch meeting at Algonquin, so she was a few minutes late, and she had wanted to pick me up at the airport, so she felt she'd been terribly rude; at the very least, she said, let me take you to lunch. Her Southern accent was beguiling, the way Southern accents are. She was beautifully dressed and gracious and completely disarming. We lunched at a chic hotel restaurant in Chapel Hill—two glasses of wine, a chocolate dessert—and returned to the house she shares with her husband, Dale, to get down to the business of talking books.

Ravenel's long and distinguished career as an editor and publisher emerged slowly in conversation, as if it would be slightly improper to discuss professional ambition too directly. But the furnishings of her house gave ample evidence of her work: behind the living room furniture, a wall crammed with books; on the coffee tables, week upon week of *New Yorker* magazines stacked evenly. Behind the door and against a chair, tote bags stuffed with manuscripts. As the editor of the Best American Short Stories series from 1977 to 1990, Ravenel likely read more short fiction than did anyone else during the time of the

American short story renaissance engendered by Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, and a handful of others. Ravenel, as the editor responsible for selecting 120 finalists from among all the stories printed in every literary magazine each year, played a powerful if discreet role in the development of the short story in American literary culture.

Yet her legacy as an editor lies equally in her devotion to writing from the South, though she's loath to generalize about what constitutes Southern writing, except perhaps to say that one knows it when one sees it. She and Louis Rubin co-founded Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill as a house committed to the development of Southern writers. The press is renowned for the care with which it treats its authors and has published a wide range of Southern talent, notably Larry Brown, Lee Smith, Jill McCorkle, and Robert Morgan. Ravenel, now well into her sixties, handed off the reins of Best American Short Stories and another series, *New Stories from the South*, but continues to work with writers who have published with Algonquin for years.

Looking back over her life, Ravenel speaks as often about her family as she does about her work, testifying to the varying pressures on a Southern woman trying to break into a largely male, largely New York–focused industry in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. We sat for the interview at an old wooden table in her kitchen. The refrigerator was covered with photographs of her two daughters and grandson. The fireplace was lit. The ancient and sweet golden retriever begged for cookies, the black-and-white cat moved across the countertops, the teakettle whistled, the phone rang, some housepainters tromped through, needing direction. She spoke modestly about her accomplishments as an editor and publisher, saying simply that she did what she loved.

LACY CRAWFORD

You started your publishing career in New York City, as so many people do, but you were a girl from the South at a time when not many women were working as editors. How did you come to want to be in publishing?

SHANNON RAVENEL

I grew up in Charleston, South Carolina, which is a very conservative place; not at all serious, or rather, not bookish: when I was young, at least, everybody had to be an Episcopalian, and every young woman had to make her debut. Few women from Charleston went to college, because it just wasn't done. They went to junior colleges or went abroad for a couple of years.

I was the only child of older parents. My father had gone to college but didn't finish—he wasn't interested in that sort of learning, I guess—and my mother had quit college after two years because she just hated it. We had no money, but we had

this good Southern name, Ravenel. I grew up reading. I had very, very bad eyes and was told that I shouldn't read too much, but I did anyway. Certainly I was unclear what sort of life I would make for myself, but I had this feeling that the typical life of a young woman in Charleston wasn't for me.

I got a scholarship to Hollins College, a quite respectable women's liberal arts college, so I went. And I loved it. The second year I was there, the scholar and writer Louis Rubin was hired to take over the English Department. He immediately began offering courses that were really exciting to me, seminar courses on Southern literature, writing workshops. He introduced himself to me as a fellow Charlestonian the very first week of registration. We've been friends ever since. He's been a major force in my life.

About that time, I went to see the movie *The Best of Everything,* which came out in 1959. It was a movie about publishing in New York City—you know, the little girl graduates from Smith, puts on her white gloves, and leaves her home in Westchester County with $5, and by the end of the week she's Joan Crawford's secretary at a huge publishing company, and then, of course, she discovers a writer and hits the big time. It gave me a direction I thought I might want to go in, so when I graduated from Hollins, I went to New York to see if I could get a job in publishing.

CRAWFORD

And was it just like the movie?

RAVENEL

Well, no. My cousin Frances and I lived in an apartment with three other girls—there were five of us in this two-bedroom apartment; we thought it was huge. Frances was one of the girls who instead of going to college had gone off to Europe to get polished, and she didn't care what job she had, so when she landed one at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, she told the personnel guy she felt bad because I so wanted to be in publishing and I couldn't find a job. He told her to send me over. And I was hired as an assistant to the publicity and marketing people in the schoolbooks department. I wrote direct-mail copy to teachers about books like *Modern Biology, Modern Chemistry, Modern Physics,* a whole series of them. My best task was to make a brochure about little reading books for kids.

At that time Holt, Rinehart and Winston was a new conglomerate, and Robert Frost was published by Holt. In 1960, the year he read the inaugural poem, he came by the Madison Avenue office, and I happened to be in the elevator with him. I was just blown away, and when we stepped off the elevator, I said, Mr. Frost, I want to say how exciting it is to see you. I'm a big fan of your poetry. And he said, Could you show me the way to the men's room, please, Miss?

CRAWFORD

And did you?

RAVENEL

I did. I showed him the way.

CRAWFORD

How did you graduate from tasks like that to editing?

RAVENEL

It took a while. The mailroom guys at Holt found out I liked to read, and they would slip me trade books when they came back in the mail. I read everything I could get my hands on. But I was making $70 a week, and I just couldn't survive. I had a college roommate who had moved to Boston, and I knew there were publishing houses there, so I packed up and left New York.

Louis Rubin has always been very good about helping students find jobs. He had a friend at the *Boston Globe* who interviewed me and offered me a job as a reporter. I'd been editor of the literary magazine at Hollins, and I'd written a lot of short stories, but I didn't really know what it would mean to be a reporter for the *Globe*. The next day, I went to interview at Houghton Mifflin, and they offered me a job as a secretary in the trade editorial department. Of course, I knew, from *The Best of Everything,* what it would be like to be in editorial, so I turned down the reporting job and became a secretary. I worked for a fabulous group of people: Dorothy de Santillana, the senior editor, Jacques de Spoelberch, who's now an agent, and Anne Barrett, who was Tolkien's editor. In 1961 secretaries took dictation, and since I had learned to do this at Hollins, I took dictation for all their editorial reports and letters and heard them talking on the phone with authors and other editors, and I was fascinated by what they were doing. I realized that it was what I wanted to do. So after working as a secretary for about two years, I asked if it would be okay if I read some of the slush pile. They said, Secretaries don't do that. So I asked if I could read manuscripts at night. And they said, Okay, okay. I took them home, and I read as many as I could and wrote little reports for practice. There were also all these literary magazines in the offices—back then the publishers subscribed to all of them—that nobody seemed to read. They were just piled up on a table in a hall, and I wondered what they were all about. So I began reading those, too. A couple of strong stories caught my eye, and I suggested that Dorothy take a look at them. When she published one of the writers I had found, the book got a Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship and became a Book-of-the-Month-Club selection—a much bigger deal then than now. I think I practically burst my buttons with pride.

I did more and more reading of the slush pile, and when I discovered a wonderful young black writer named Robert Boles, they actually let me edit his manuscript, even though I hadn't been given even a reader's job. He published two novels (*The People One Knows*, 1964; and *Curling*, 1968) at Houghton Mifflin.

One day Dorothy got a phone call from an editor at another house. I heard her saying, Well, I really don't know if I can think of anybody who would have time to do reading for

you—I raised my hand, and Dorothy said, Oh, well, actually, there is a young woman here. So I got a nice after-hours job reading for Beacon Press. It was all nonfiction in those days. They offered me a job, but I really wanted to be working on fiction, so I told Houghton Mifflin that I had been offered this job but that I'd rather stay and be a fiction editor. They told me that secretaries didn't become editors; it just didn't happen. So I told them I was leaving. They called me that night and said, You know what? You can be a reader. I was twenty-five. They made me work part-time as a secretary and part-time as a reader, but I was willing. Fiction had a big pull on me.

The Houghton Mifflin editorial offices were wonderful; I look back with real longing at those days. They published famous people, and the writers were in and out of the office all the time. Alfred Knopf would stop in to see his friends when he was in town. We called everybody Mister and Missus, there were no first names, except for the secretaries, of course. And I got really hooked on the little literary magazines and did turn up a couple of people whom they published successfully.

Martha Foley was editor of the Best American Short Stories, a job she did on contract and had done for many, many years. She needed a new in-house editor who would have the boring job of seeing all the work through to print, which wasn't a boring job to me at all. The in-house editor was the person who took care of all the details. If Martha needed help getting permission to reprint a story, for example, I took care of it, and I presented the book at the sales conference every year. And I wrote the selling copy, the book jackets and catalog copy and all that, and because I was reading these little literary magazines just for the hell of it, I sent Martha suggestions. She did *not* like it. She let it be known that she wanted no help from the likes of me or anybody else; she was very jealous of her book. I've come to understand what an impudent upstart I was. It was her baby.

CRAWFORD

At what point did the house give you your own writers?

RAVENEL

There was a very demanding author in the house, Jonathan Kozol, who had published a novel with George Starbuck as his editor. George had left Houghton Mifflin just before Kozol decided that he wanted to write a nonfiction book about his experience teaching in the Boston public school system. There were two young male editors who might have expected to be given the book, because the young men always got first choice. One of them was assigned to be Jonathan's editor, but they just couldn't work well together. So I got the book, *Death at an Early Age*. Jonathan's experience had been as a teaching assistant to a tough, old-fashioned teacher who was using corporal punishment in the classroom and who also was openly prejudiced against black kids. This was 1964. The lawyers who read the book

said that to avoid libel, Jonathan would have to make the "reading teacher," as she was known, into three people. Jonathan felt he couldn't do that. So I said, I'll do it. Let me try it. It was easy. At least, *I* thought it was easy. I was young, and it just didn't seem daunting at all, and Jonathan was okay with it when I finished. Nobody at Houghton Mifflin was terribly interested in that book, but I was—I thought, before it was published, that it was a moving and important book and, in fact, for once in my life, I was right. It turned out to be a very big book: it won the National Book Award. So people sat up and asked me, Why did I think that book was going to be big? And I said, it's because I'm a Southern "bleeding heart" (what my father always called me) and sensitive to this issue. The business of beating black children in the classroom was a story whose time had come; it had to be addressed. And then I—I even *got* a secretary. I started going down to New York City to meet agents, to introduce myself, to work on bringing in my own writers. Houghton Mifflin had never had a Southern person in the house. They told me I should go on a tour of the South and pick up some Southern writers. I had no idea how to do that, and I didn't think such a tour made much sense, so I called Louis and said, I have no idea what the hell I'm gonna do. Louis set the whole thing up for me: I visited a lot of his friends who were teaching writing in the South—at Johns Hopkins, at Hollins, at Duke and the University of North Carolina. I don't think I brought in any authors that way, but I met a lot of people. One of those people was Robert Morgan, who at that time was a student at UNC writing poetry. I didn't have a huge list at Houghton Mifflin, but I took on books that other editors didn't want. I was learning everything I could, especially from the two women, Dorothy de Santillana and Anne Barrett. Dorothy worked with David Halberstam, with Willie Morris, with Ross Lockridge Jr. (who wrote *The Raintree Country),* with Jerzy Kosinski *(The Painted Bird)*—she had wonderful authors and was passionate about her work—she was a direct descendant of John Hancock, you never forgot it! She was full of fun. She ate a lot, drank a lot, had fabulous parties at her house on the north shore with people like Halberstam and Morris, and Alberto Moravia, who came over from Italy along with Umberto, the pretender to the Italian throne, to visit Giorgio, Dorothy's husband. She loved to tell people she'd "caught" my Southern accent. And then there was Anne Barrett, who was skinny, proper, a dyed-in-the-wool liberal who worked with Kenneth Galbraith and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., but who had acquired the U.S. rights to Tolkien's books for Houghton Mifflin. To this day they're living off Tolkien. She was interested in mystery writers, too. Both Dorothy and Anne had been hired during World War II when all the men had gone off to be in the army. Dorothy had been made editor in chief, but was demoted when the men got back from the war. Anyway, I was watching these two older women work on a whole panoply of trade categories—it was totally thrilling to me. I don't know why exactly . . . for a lot of reasons, probably.

CRAWFORD

Well, it was your calling.

RAVENEL

It must have been. I sure made a lot of aggressive moves to stay there.

CRAWFORD

It doesn't sound like you were that aggressive.

RAVENEL

I don't know. When I was offered the job at Beacon Press, and I went back to Houghton Mifflin with my ultimatum, a woman (the daughter of a *very* famous critic) who was also an editor there wrote a note to a colleague in which she described how Miss Ravenel was "pushing her little magnolia cart." *She* thought I was aggressive. I don't remember how I came to see that note, but it shocked me; I was amazed, and my feelings were hurt. I hadn't thought of myself that way. I guess people—women—just didn't do things so blatantly. At about the time I was leaving Houghton Mifflin, there was another woman only a bit older than I was who had been *hired* as an editor, which was unusual. If I had been pushing my magnolia cart, she was driving a steam shovel! Somehow she got the guys to tell her how much money they were making and was "shocked" (she wasn't surprised in the least) by how much more they made. The excuse, of course, was that men had to support families. Neither of the two editors in question was married. But they *might* get married, and *then* they'd need it . . . so the steam-shovel editor threatened suit, and all the women there received retroactive equal pay. But by that time I had resigned to have a baby.

CRAWFORD

I imagine that was a difficult decision to make, to give up the editorial position you had fought so hard to attain.

RAVENEL

At every step of my career, I was thinking, Yes, this is great, but I just want to be married, I just want to have somebody else's name, I just want to have a baby and stay home for the rest of my life. I did get married, but I kept my job. At that time, however, Houghton Mifflin made you *resign* when you were seven months pregnant. That was the rule, and I was very much a part of that culture. So at seven months I went home, and it was like a wonderful long vacation—I read and read, all published fiction that I hadn't had time to read while I was working. Then I had my perfectly wonderful baby. With a baby, you can't read anymore. Talk about shock!

When my daughter was six weeks old, I called Dorothy and said, I'm dying, and she told me I could come back in and read for them two days a week. It saved my sanity. A year later, my husband, Dale, won a research fellowship in England, and we moved to London.

CRAWFORD

Were you able to find work in publishing there?

RAVENEL

I did. I got lucky: We met an American woman who worked in publishing, and through that connection I was hired by Macmillan to read American manuscripts for them. They were looking to publish books that were already out in the States, and I hated everything they gave me to read. It was all schmaltzy, mass-market fiction, which I guess was their sensibility—but it was not mine. So they fired me. From then on I did what other tag-along wives did in London—I rode the Tube, I took a cooking class at Le Cordon Bleu, I chatted with other moms at the park. At the end of his two-year fellowship, Dale took a job at Washington University Medical School in St. Louis. He had offers in several cities, but Wash U. was the place he chose. There was nothing in the way of book publishing in St. Louis. Nothing.

CRAWFORD

So you started over again.

RAVENEL

Yes. We moved to a house in University City, where all the Wash U. families lived, with our three-year-old and an au pair we'd brought from England because I was sure I'd get a job. But I couldn't find one. Not even as a receptionist in a doctor's office: everybody looked at my résumé and said, You would hate it here. So there I was, in St. Louis, with a baby and an au pair, and no job.

CRAWFORD

How did you find your way back to editing?

RAVENEL

I took on whatever jobs I could find. I wrote articles for the Missouri Botanical Garden's newsletter. When the staff of the St. Louis Post Dispatch went on strike, a strike paper started up in its place, and I wrote articles for that. I interviewed the writer Stanley Elkin for that paper—he told me I had to have read every one of his books before I could come talk to him. So I did. I loved Stanley and all his books.

There was another little paper that was founded on the model of the *New York Review of Books*—an idealistic journal, to say the least. It didn't pay, but the founder was smart, and while it lasted, I wrote profiles and reviews for them. Eventually a friend got me a job teaching creative writing at the University of Missouri at St. Louis—adult extension classes, for the most part—and that was a lot of fun; I had some students who were very strongly motivated to write, and a few of them ended up publishing. The university eventually dropped the course, but my students formed a little writing corps and asked me to meet with them once a month, so our group continued.

Through a colleague of my husband's, I managed to find editing work at a medical journal. It was boring, but it taught me a lot about the process of publishing. I didn't understand the articles at all, so instead of editing I was forced to do all the work of organization and deadline meeting, which turned out to be valuable skills to learn. While I was doing that I also had my second daughter. Alas, the au pair had long since gone home to London.

But I did, finally, find a job to love in St. Louis. The head of psychiatry at the university was a truly remarkable man named Eli Robins, and as it turned out, he needed a ghostwriter. He was one of the first psychiatrists working from a biological basis, an anti-Freudian, and he had completed a lot of interesting studies in his time as chairman, but he hadn't had the time to write them up. He was especially interested in depression and alcoholism, and how those two illnesses interact. And he was very, very interested in suicide. So we wrote a bunch of papers on depression and alcoholism and a book on suicide.

CRAWFORD

That's cheery.

RAVENEL

Oh, it was totally involving and fascinating. I guess I am a bit of a ghoul. Eli had, in an icebox, the brains of everyone in St. Louis County who had committed suicide in one year's time. I never actually saw them, but I know his secretary was always worried that the power to the icebox would fail. Eli and his collaborators had interviewed everybody close to the suicide victims and tried to diagnose the victims psychiatrically. Almost all of them, perhaps not surprisingly, were depressed. The two of us wrote a really good, important book called *The Final Months,* which was published by Oxford University Press, and which contributed a great deal to the study of suicide.

CRAWFORD

My next question is obvious, I think. You became an expert in depression, alcoholism, and suicide. And subsequently you made a living working with writers, who tend to be—

RAVENEL

Depressed. Alcoholic. Sometimes suicidal. Yes. And I've worked with very gifted writers who were both disabled and enabled by these diseases. Eli thought that a lot of alcoholism was the gun by self-medication; the long, slow suicide. Larry Brown struggled with alcoholism. Lewis Nordan, who I think is the most brilliant and original writer I've worked with, was completely disabled by alcoholism for well over a decade until he quit drinking. Sometimes it seems as if they're *all* depressed. Except for Lee Smith, who is just the healthiest, most extraordinary person. But even she says that she would be in her grave were it not for writing, that it's her saving.

CRAWFORD

It is surprising, I think, that so many writers who struggle with depression find solace in writing—are, as you suggest, even enabled by it. I would think that in writing, you open yourself up to the self, and that's not where the depressive or the alcoholic goes for rest.

RAVENEL

I think it might be an escape, in an odd way, from the side of themselves that's depressed. I think that many writers don't find themselves boiling with issues—the truly driven ones do, but many writers simply love writing so much that stories come to them in the process of doing the work. They write because they can't stop. When I was first at Houghton Mifflin, I thought I should be writing my own work—I was a pretty good story writer in college, and people pushed me in that direction. But I wasn't motivated to do it the way people who really write are. I didn't love doing it, I didn't need to do it to save myself. I never woke up in the morning wanting to write. I did—do—wake up wanting to read. I've known many writers who make life possible with the writing, and maybe the writing is made possible by the sensitivity that contributes to depression. Working on *The Final Months* was definitely enlightening.

CRAWFORD

And did it inform your later work with writers?

RAVENEL

Well, it certainly informed me. In Charleston, you never admitted that anything was wrong. And you certainly never went to a psychiatrist, because that was admitting weakness. That was about all I knew, except I did have a boyfriend in Boston who was in Freudian psychoanalysis when I met him. It was a concept he wasn't interested in describing. So working with Eli Robins I learned everything I'd never known about various kinds of mental illnesses, what people struggle with, and I guess what people write about, too.

CRAWFORD

The industry of publishing is fascinating because writing is an incredibly solitary vocation, so often marked by depression and pain. And the marketplace is inherently exhibitionist. And where those two worlds come together, there is this rapids. And it is the editor's job to guide the writer through that rapids.

RAVENEL

These days, we ask our writers to do the work in the marketplace, too, and it's tough. It is so tough for almost all of them. When I started out, in the '60s, you didn't have author tours anything like what you have now. I have met very few writers who enjoy the publicity work, and even those who are good at it, hate it. It goes completely against the grain. With most of them, we have to beg them to go read, to go sign books; we have to beg them to spend a string of nights in a string of cities. All the writers I know have interesting personalities, they're all quirky, and you do have to figure out how to get around those quirks. I am one editor who doesn't expect to extend the professional relationship into personal lives—mine or theirs. I guess I am at heart more of a solitary person myself.

CRAWFORD

You took over the Best American Short Stories series while you were still in St. Louis, fresh from the book on depression?

RAVENEL

Yes. Martha Foley, the series' longtime editor, had died in the midst of putting together the 1978 volume. It must have been the turn of the year. Martha was old, and she had been very ill, and it was several days before anyone could get into her house, and even after they did, there were irregularities with the estate. Linda Glick, who was at that time the managing editor at Houghton Mifflin, called me to say she'd recommended me as Martha's successor. When I was formally invited, I accepted happily, even though I was not to have the job Martha had. Houghton Mifflin had offered that job to Ted Solotaroff, but he said it was just too much work. They then made the marketing decision to bring in a guest editor every year, beginning with Ted, and asked me to be series editor.

I didn't have any of the magazines, and we couldn't get any of Martha's work out of her house. Fortunately the poet Mona Van Duyn and her husband, Jarvis Thurston, were living in St. Louis, and they had both been journal editors. I asked them what I should read, and they gave me a big, long list, and I spent morning, noon, and night for several months at the library at Wash U. reading journals.

It felt like I was settling for a lesser job—I had wanted to do it all, the way Martha had. Maybe that was why I made a few "executive" decisions right away.

First off, I would only consider stories written in English. I would not consider British stories. Canadian stories were okay, but nothing in translation—it was the Best *American* Short Stories. We would have only the list of one hundred notables, rather than the hundreds and hundreds of categorized and cited stories Martha had included at the back of every volume. I would give the guest editors 120 stories to choose from. They picked twenty, and the other one hundred went in the back. Houghton Mifflin said okay.

CRAWFORD

That's a huge amount of work, selecting those 120 stories.

RAVENEL

It was. The person whose final choices were closest to my heart was Anne Tyler, and that's why I asked her to edit these retrospective *New Stories from the South* volumes, a job she has graciously taken on. The most difficult guest editor was John Gardner [1982]. I sent him the 120 stories, and he called not me but the in-house editor in Boston and said, I can't stand any of these stories, I want to see all the magazines. This was February in St. Louis, and I happened to have a broken leg. I had to box up hundreds of literary magazines and drag them to the post office to ship to John Gardner. He ended up picking some stories I had sent to him, along with stories by people who had been his students, and people he knew.

CRAWFORD

Any other notable moments with difficult editors?

RAVENEL

Not too many. But I did encounter, over the years, a sort of New York bias. I was interested in trying to get some Southern stories into BASS, and it was hard; there was a real prejudice. The year John Updike was the editor, I chose a story by Lewis Nordan to send him. It was a story called "Fishing for Chickens." It's a satire, what I believe to be a brilliant Southern story. Updike called me and he said, Not only do I not like this story, but I do not want the title of it on your list of notable stories in the back. He didn't tell me why. I think he simply didn't get it; he didn't understand the satire.

CRAWFORD

Are you drawn to so-called Southern writing out of loyalty to your own geographic origin and home, or is there a certain sensibility to it that really appeals to you?

RAVENEL

That is an interesting question. All I can say is this: I think I developed a penchant for Southern writing when I was at Houghton Mifflin. I was the only Southerner in the place. My accent was so noticeable that everyone identified me as "the Southern girl." They assumed that because of my accent, I would be able to bring in some Southern writers, and because they had read Faulkner, they thought it would be good to have some more Southern literature. I became the authority on it more because of their definition of Southern writing than because of mine. I was really more interested in racial themes, books that wrestled with that subject.

CRAWFORD

Which some people might say is the Southern subject.

RAVENEL

Yes, right. I was young and impressionable and trying to formulate my own sense of myself and my work, and so I aligned myself with Southern writing. When I was at Houghton Mifflin, there was a writer from Mississippi named Berry Morgan who was finding a great deal of success. She published a few stories in *The New Yorker,* and Houghton Mifflin's New York editor said, Oh, my God, we've got to have Berry Morgan, it's the most wonderful Southern gothic work. They asked me to read her novel, and I wrote a report about how funny it was. It was also satirical and it was funny, and funny on purpose, but the people at Houghton Mifflin were quite taken aback. They didn't think it was funny at all! There is a certain cynicism, a certain dark humor, that attends the self-consciousness of many Southern writers, that I think you have to be Southern to fully appreciate. This is true of the writing of any group of people—of Jewish writing, of black writing, of Southern writing; there are jokes that only Jews or blacks or Southerners are going to really get. Very often people on the outside can appreciate the richness of the literature without understanding every nuance. I believe this dynamic is at work with a book like *Wolf Whistle* by Lewis Nordan. It's *my* favorite novel, but the references are so subtly cynical that I think only a Southerner would get the full sense of them. And this is a reason why we can't sell the book very well. We can't even describe it very well.

CRAWFORD

Would you identify a certain sense of humor as characteristic of the Southern tradition?

RAVENEL

I'm not sure there are lines of influence one can trace that clearly. You know what Flannery O'Connor said about Faulkner, that he was the Dixie Limited, roaring down the track:

> When there are many writers all employing the same idiom, all looking out on more or less the same social scene, the individual writer will have to be more careful that he isn't just doing badly what has already been done to completion. The presence alone of Faulkner in our midst makes a great difference in what the writer can and cannot permit himself to do. Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.

I don't think Flannery O'Connor learned much from Faulkner; I don't think Eudora Welty did, either. They were writing from their own brains and their own experience. I think that the focus on Southern literature has to do with the fact that people who are born in the South and raised in the South are very attached to the region, and they write about it, and then outsiders create an image of a great tradition. I think it's feeding itself in a funny way that is perhaps not organic; it might not be so easy to keep it going as the country melts into itself. I have always had the impression that Southern people really like to be identified as such, and that is why they hang onto their accents. But I think it's a sort of lingering regionalism that will go away. I base this on a very, very serious investigation I've done that has demonstrated that none of the children I know here in Chapel Hill have accents. People like Louis Rubin have gone to a lot of trouble to keep the tradition of Southern literature, or at least of Southern writers, going. He started Algonquin here in Chapel Hill with that purpose in mind. Then he went on to found the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

CRAWFORD

Tell me how Algonquin came to be.

RAVENEL

Louis went to the Modern Languages Association conference in New York City in December of 1981, and on the train back—he took the train whenever he could—he was thinking about all the people who had told him what a hard time the young writers were having if they didn't have agents or publishing contacts in New York, especially if they were young Southern writers. He knew this from his own students' experience, and on the train he decided he would start his own publishing company to publish the work of young Southern writers. I got a letter from him dated January 1, 1982, in which he laid out the idea and said, Just think about it. I wrote him right back. My aunt had recently died, and I had a small amount of money to contribute. So he put in $5,000, and I put in $5,000, and since that wasn't exactly going to cover our start-up costs, Louis and I went around and sold shares to people we knew and raised $50,000. It was gone in half a minute. Algonquin was

started as an author-positive house. We wanted to cherish people's careers. And we've been fortunate in that a good many of the writers we first published still publish with us. Clyde Edgerton, Julia Alvarez, Jill McCorkle, Lewis Nordan, Jim Grimsley, Robert Morgan, Carrie Brown, Suzanne Berne, and others. I think they might make more money elsewhere; some of them have been offered bigger money to move, and many have stayed with Algonquin. We try to make publication a nicer experience. Louis's goal was to make the house accessible; people don't have to submit through an agent, if they don't have one; it doesn't matter. From the very beginning we read the manuscripts in the order in which they came into the house, and we still try to do this—and for the most part, we do. One day early on one of our writers got a terrible review in the *New York Times*. On the day it came out Louis called the author and said, I just want you to know that we want your next book. But this style of publishing puts us in conflict sometimes with the business of publishing. We are down here without all the pressures of the New York City publishing world. I know that they pay prices for books that they cannot in a million years make back. The gamble that goes on in New York is just amazing, and I wonder how often it pans out.

CRAWFORD

When I go into a large bookselling chain store, the books I see sit on shelves that were rented by the publishers of those books. Publishers are paying for a visual encounter that may or may not take. And if it's not an author I know, if I don't have a clear sense of the book's subject or style, I'm not likely to buy the book. Given the amount of material in print, how can a reader find the valuable work? Are there critics who can be trusted to light the way?

RAVENEL

Such a great question; you should write a book on it! I don't think you can trust anybody, really. All of us are hyping the books; everyone is hyping the books. And this is not what we used to do. There has always been a greater and greater amount of attention paid to the jacket cover—you try to make it as salable as possible. But the rest is just advertising. And do you trust advertisers?

CRAWFORD

No.

RAVENEL

No, you don't. We're not even supposed to.

CRAWFORD

The advertising role, it seems to me, used to be played by the independent bookseller, who knew her customers and recommended books specifically for them. Those booksellers are largely gone now.

RAVENEL

There are a few of them left. Every now and then I have the great pleasure of making contact with one of those people who hand-sells in an independent store. It makes an enormous difference. They don't hype; they read the books, and they love them or they don't. I'm thinking of one truly great bookseller in a store in Vermont called Northshire Books. When we at Algonquin have a book that we think is really good but might have a hard time selling, we'll call a list of booksellers and ask if they're interested in reading the galleys. And they almost always are. The bookseller in Vermont, Bob Gray, read the galleys of Ingrid Hill's first novel, *Ursula, Under,* went nuts for it, and sold two hundred copies in his store. But that sort of attention and skill is rare.

CRAWFORD

Do you have faith that a book will find its readership?

RAVENEL

No. I wish I did, but I'm pretty cynical. I think there are too many books; I know there are fewer readers. Many books go without finding their audience. The books that break out are usually the ones that are easier to read. It's true that if you publish somebody over a period of time, and you push the books in the right direction time after time, you can build reader recognition of a name. But publishers have to go to lengths to get it all just right—making several mock-ups of each new book, for instance, so we can hold them in our hands to see which size will sell best. The way a book looks and feels is said to make a tremendous difference.

CRAWFORD

I'm going to read from the introduction Joyce Carol Oates wrote for the Best American Short Stories when she edited the volume in 1979:

> Though much has been said about the state of contemporary fiction, as it is said routinely about the troubled state of contemporary politics, religion, morality, education, television, it seems to me self-evident that we are living in an era of particularly well-crafted creative work, whether fiction or poetry. I know that it is fashionable to lament the passing of a literate order. . . . Yet it has always seemed to me that such observations

> fail to take into consideration that the audience for serious literature at any given time has been fairly limited, and the audience for difficult literature has always been extremely limited.

This was 1979, over twenty-five years ago, but it might have been written today.

RAVENEL

There is a lot of frustration and disappointment in the reception of creative work. And with books, I agree, in some ways, things haven't changed; it has always been difficult. The first book I published, by my first author, Robert Boles, the writer I came across at Houghton Mifflin, was a beautiful book. Beautiful and timely, and there were all sorts of reasons why the book should have sold, but it flopped. I think we sold a thousand copies. I remember thinking, Oh, shit, this is terrible! I was such a neophyte. I went to complain to the sales director, Austin Olney, who later became president of Houghton Mifflin. And he said, Shannon, you have no clue how hard it is to sell books! That, he said, is a very quiet book. And that's what I have liked ever since: very quiet books. I think it's obvious that I do. I read to be inside the skins of people in interesting and difficult times and places. I'm interested in what it's like to be depressed, and what it's like to be poor and black, or—as is the character in a book I'm working on now—what it's like to be a child in a burn unit. My taste is frustrating me when it comes to sales. I can do a good job editing jolly books, and I know that's what most people want to read. But I can't help what I'm drawn to.

CRAWFORD

Over the years you have assembled a list that commands respect.

RAVENEL

Respect, yes, but not sales. And I think that what you want to do when you discover or you hit upon somebody—I don't like the word "discover," the writer was already doing good work long before you got there—is introduce the world to this very worthy work. Lewis Nordan is extraordinarily talented *and* funny, and thoughtful, and I cannot get the public to discover him. Though whole cities have read his novel *Wolf Whistle* as part of citywide reading events, and everybody who reads it is an immediate convert, we cannot sell it to the mass audience it deserves. I think part of the reason is that the general reading audience is becoming less and less astute.

CRAWFORD

What is the cause of that erosion?

RAVENEL

So many things, in every direction. I think the schools are in terrible trouble, we all know this. The study Dana Gioia did at the National Endowment of the Arts last year demonstrated that we are losing millions of literary readers in this country. I remember that my older daughter was assigned one novel her senior year in high school. One. And there's television, of course; the work on television is so bad it's numbing. So I think that if most of your entertainment comes from television, and you try to read literary work, there's going to be a terrible dissonance. Literature is more demanding, it functions on so many more levels, which is, of course, why it is so much more rewarding.

Ultimately, I just don't think people read as much. There's a lot more going on in our days, people living faster and harder; there's less leisure time.

CRAWFORD

You've spent a lifetime reading. What are your sacred books?

RAVENEL

Many of the books I loved when I was younger, I find disappointing when I reread them now: Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* was my favorite book in college, but it was a letdown to reread it. Two books I read when I was young that made a real impression on me I haven't reread, so they remain favorites: *From Here to Eternity*, and William Styron's *Lie Down in Darkness*. *From Here to Eternity* was the first thing I ever read that had any really good sex in it, and for some reason it dawned on me while I was reading it that the guy who wrote it was a living being. And I loved it. I read *Lie Down in Darkness* early in my college years, and the protagonist, Peyton, was in such an interesting situation—that's a voyeuristic book if I've ever read one. Peyton is a Southern girl, and I remember that she has an orgasm while she's having an internal medical exam. And I thought, golly, that's really secret. And I think that's why I read fiction—I want to know those secrets. Don't you?

CRAWFORD

Of course. Who are the younger writers you're reading now?

RAVENEL

Well, I love Steve Almond, whose short stories we've published. I like Julie Orringer's work; I think she's very good. Melanie Sumner is a very talented young woman. Bret Anthony Johnson. Stephanie Soileau. Rebecca Soppe, Tayari Jones. Tom Franklin. . . . Stop me!

CRAWFORD

As a publisher, what are you reading for now?

RAVENEL

Well—maybe I can answer this question another way. About two years ago I announced I wasn't going to take any new writers. But there is one book I've just bought because I couldn't help it. It's a novel by Lee Merrill Byrd whose story I included years ago in New Stories of the South. She has two children who were horribly burned. She sent me a set of stories a while ago that took as its subject burned children. I told her they should be a novel, and by God, she did it, she just sent me the most exquisite book told from the point of view of one little boy who is in a burn unit in a hospital in Texas. We have a great new editor at Algonquin who has a keen eye for commercial fiction. He read it, and he agreed with me that it is an exquisite book, but he told me that he hated reading it because he didn't want to be in that room with the boy in the Galveston burns hospital. I bought the book anyway. It's exquisite, it's powerful. We will balance out its publication in terms of sales. That's what you have to do: you publish some cookbooks, some gift books, some calendars, and one book like this.

CRAWFORD

I wonder what sense you have of the role you played at series editor of BASS. Your tenure as editor, from 1978 to 1990, coincided with a time that saw the short story rise to great prominence in American fiction, in part because it is the form of choice in creative writing workshops. It seems more accessible to young writers than the novel does, and it is perhaps easier to place a short story than to sell a novel. Having a story selected for BASS makes a huge difference in a young writer's career. Did you ever feel like you held the keys to the kingdom?

RAVENEL

Oh, God, no. I thought people felt sorry for me because I was named series editor rather than being put in charge of the entire process, as Martha Foley had been. No, I never thought of myself as playing a large role that way. But I did work very, very hard on that series.

CRAWFORD

You use luck to explain a lot of the success in your career. Is that Southern modesty speaking, or do you really feel you had so little hand in the turning points?

RAVENEL

I know I was lucky. I was lucky that Louis Rubin came to Hollins, and that he pointed me in the direction of publishing. I was lucky that I saw the movie *The Best of*

Everything when I did. I was lucky to meet Eli Robbins, and learn all that I learned about psychiatry. But you're making me think back a little bit, and I have to admit I was pushing and shoving.

CRAWFORD

It sounds to me like what you were displaying was what we now call business sense.

RAVENEL

I have a very good friend from Charleston who is years younger than I am. For a time she was publicity director at Algonquin, and when she was first there, she asked me what had made me so ambitious. I said, Me? But I guess I am; although I have always deceived myself into thinking that my ambitions are to be a good Cordon Bleu cook for my husband, and a good mama and grandmama . . .

CRAWFORD

How does your current imprint, Shannon Ravenel Books, fit into that domestic ambition?

RAVENEL

When my contract for Shannon Ravenel Books ran out recently, and I was asked if I wanted to renew, I told them I had a grandchild now, and . . . Does this sound familiar to you? I have always said, I have a husband, I have a baby, I don't want to work anymore. But I opted to stay on and not to take any new writers. I work only with writers from the past now, of which there are a good many.

CRAWFORD

To what do you ascribe that push and pull in you? What is that dance?

RAVENEL

The push and pull in me is that I'm lazy, and I like to linger over the paper as long as I want to in the morning, and not be in book launch meetings that last all day, and not be involved in office politics. That's why I'm better as an imprint—I can withdraw and buy the books that I want to buy, and the others worry about all the rest. And it's been great; I love it. The pull is, you know, baby Ian, my grandson, needs me to come visit . . . but I can't quite stop. I'm not sure I want to stop. I'm sixty-six years old and I'm supposed to be cutting back, but the truth is, the truth has always been, that I'm much more interested in struggling with somebody's manuscript than I am in cooking. N

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