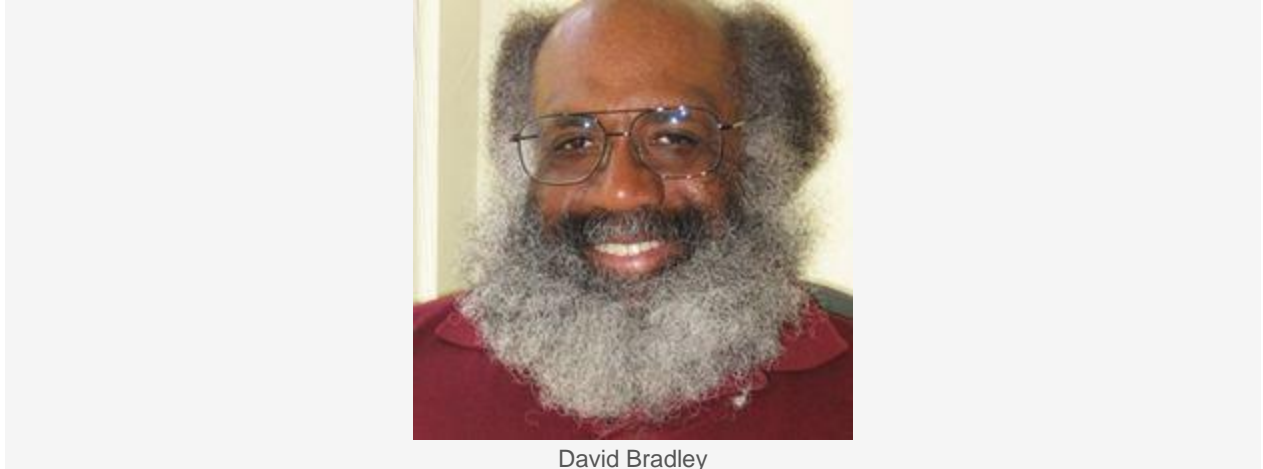


SOUTHERN LITERARY REVIEW

A Magazine for Literature of the American South

ALLEN MENDENHALL INTERVIEWS DAVID BRADLEY

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David Bradley

AM: Thanks for doing this interview on the occasion of the ebook release of your 1981 novel, *The Chaneyville Incident*. It's been 32 years since the novel was first published. Does it speak differently to today's audience than it did upon its initial release?

Thanks for the opportunity.

No writer really knows what a book, a novel, says to an audience. That's pretty much up to the audience. I would hope that there are a lot of things that were "news" in 1981, like a greater and more accurate sense of what slavery was all about, and what the Underground Railroad was all about, that are no longer surprising to as many readers. *The Chaneyville Incident* was shaped by a frustration with the assumptions and dominant theories of American History in the 1960s and 1970s—to put it simply, that black Americans had no history apart from the oppressions visited upon them by dominant American (which was to say, white) society—slavery, lynching, segregation, all sorts of racial discriminations.

At that time, most American historians, and the American History Establishment in general, approached the phenomena of racial oppression using as data only those documents—official records, minutes, laws, pamphlets, books, letters, personal diaries—created by white Americans who had promoted, countenanced, witnessed or opposed the oppressions. In terms of slavery, whether the author was a Southern plantation owner or a Northern abolitionist, what was "known" about slavery was what white Americans perceived and recorded—or wanted to perceive and record. But while historians gave great credence to these documents, the records and witnesses of the oppressed were ignored or dismissed as

“unreliable” or “unauthentic.” Historians knew a lot about what had been done and by whom it had been done and by whom it had been opposed, but they did not know—or often seemed not to care—what it felt like or even looked like from the perspective of the oppressed. The inner life of black Americans was...*terra incognita*.

The result was a lopsided sense American history in which black Americans appeared not as historical actors but as historical objects, without personal stories and everyday lives and behavior that were shaped by free will or personal failings. Which meant that the oppressed—slaves, mulatto children, lynching victims—were inevitably seen as stereotypes, and those stereotypes were passed into the larger culture in books, plays, eventually movies, radio and television. The general perception of black Americans was that they were and could be, at most, bit players in the American drama, with no lines to speak other than, “Yes, sir.”

This historical paradigm started to break down in the mid-1950s, in part because of more imaginative historical research, but also because images of black Americans who were definitely not bit players forced their way into the American Consciousness. Black Americans were suddenly *visible* not only as victims but as protestors. That visibility had a lot to do with television coverage, which put those images of black Americans in the homes of white Americans where an actual black American was unlikely to set foot, except, perhaps, as a servant.

We’ve just celebrated the Fiftieth Anniversary of the March on Washington, which, whatever else it did or didn’t do, made it absolutely impossible for white Americans to ignore the existence of black Americans. Which is not to say the stereotypes were dispelled; in terms of history and even in terms of current events the lives—not just the social conditions, but the inner emotional and spiritual lives—of black Americans were still *terra incognita* from the perspective of white America. But what was demonstrated powerfully on that day was that there was *something* there to know, that the people who lived there had thoughts and...well, dreams. Now, perhaps, it seems obvious. But in 1963, that a black man dreamed *anything* was news. A lot of White Americans hadn’t even thought about what black Americans dreamed.

Sorry. Didn’t mean to give a history lecture. But part of the “mission” of the *Chaneyville Incident* (and also of my earlier novel *South Street*, although in a different way) was to present the inner lives of black Americans as they deal with those phenomena of oppression. To my mind the best way to reveal the interior lives of people is to let them talk while the reader listens. John Washington is a first-person narrator, but he doesn’t actually tell the story; it comes to him in bits and pieces, from documents and narratives and observations. One reason John is an historian is that he does research, which means he doesn’t talk; he listens to a lot of other people talk.

As an historian, John is outside the experience. But as a black American he is inside. He has been exempted from the most obvious oppressions—slavery, lynching, educational discrimination, employment discrimination, housing discrimination. He can live where he wants, love, even marry, whom he wants. But his personal narrative is not a discrete story; it is the culmination of a long line of narratives; his life the visible end of a sequence of oppressive experiences. And the question is, what is he going to do about it? Is he going to let the past destroy the possibilities of his present?

But to answer your question directly: If you'd asked me in 1981 or '82, I would have said I'd hope that by 2013 much of the historical information that I had to include so readers would understand what was going on would be common knowledge—for example, that “modern” American readers would understand that there was no such thing as “free territory” south of Canada, that the Ku Klux Klan and lynching were not purely Southern phenomena. And I would have hoped that a person like John Washington would be fundamentally less foreign—a black man with a Ph.D. in history who is a professor at a major university and who studies not slavery, per se, but international atrocities and who teaches courses not in “Afro-American History” but in the Civil War. I would have said I'd hope by now such things would be commonplace.

That doesn't seem to be the case. It seems the actual understanding of how race works in America hasn't progressed that far. The rhetoric has developed, that's for sure. The worst legal practices and social customs of the 1950s and 1960s have surely been altered. And I suppose that the presidency of Barack Obama does mean something—although in terms of culture, I don't know that it really means that much. But I don't think we Americans understand the mechanisms of our history better than we did in 1981, and we certainly don't understand each other any better. For example, racial incidents, especially those involving the police, are often presented as “isolated incidents.” White Americans tend to accept that characterization and to see the responses of black Americans as irrationally angry, even paranoid. But most black Americans do not accept that those incidents are isolated. They see them as connected to patterns that have been repeated time and again throughout American history. My point is not who's right and who's wrong; it's that white Americans tend not to understand why black Americans are reacting as they do because the white Americans are not aware of the history. Recently, I was speaking with a thirty-something white woman, born and raised in Chicago, about something...cultural. It turned out that she'd never heard of the Emmitt Till Case, despite the Chicago connection. She's not stupid, she's not racist, she's a good friend. She just... wasn't aware of a piece of history, which is itself connected to a lot of other pieces of history, that creates a cultural awareness that influences the social and political responses of black people in her city. Basically, she doesn't know where they're coming from.

So...I think the novel still has work to do. Because it talks about why black people do things that might seem...strange. Like killing their husbands...

AM: I would venture to guess that all writers have had the strange experience of rereading their work years later only to find that the prose seems to have been written by someone else, or at least is not so familiar that the eye runs over words because the mind knows what's coming next. Do you ever find yourself rereading the book and seeing in it a voice—or at least a turn of phrase—that no longer seems a product of your own mind?

No, because I don't reread the book. Never have read it. I've read sections from it to audiences, and I've had the eerie experience of hearing people talk about it. The last time was a class of graduate literature students who kept going on about the rape scene. I'm sitting there going to myself, “Did you write a rape scene? I don't remember a rape scene.” I had to go back and check. Turned out I remembered right. No

rape scene. A confession scene. But in general, I don't reread what I write once it's been published. Every time I do, I end up doing a new draft...even if it's too late.

AM: In 1988, Klaus Ensslen reviewed *The Chaneyville Incident* in *Callaloo* and claimed that you had “presented a narrative text in which authenticated historical material is so charged with the expressive claims of fiction as symbolic action that the book may today already claim a unique position within Afro-American fiction—a narrative tradition well-known for its concern with history.” This comment raises several questions, but I want to focus on its implied suggestion that you were doing something new based on something old—namely, on history itself. How do you think this suggestion stands up to the test of time? If I could add to that, how would you categorize the novel in light of what has come before and after it?

I didn't do anything new. Far from it. I learned how to do it by reading—studying, in fact—William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men* and Shirley Ann Grau's *The Keepers of the House*. Also Daniel DeFoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*. Also William Shakespeare's...

Don't get me wrong. I'm really happy with that “charged with the expressive claims of fiction as symbolic action.” That's what I was trying to do. But...I stole so many of the ideas and mechanisms. For John Washington and Judith Powell, read Quentin Compson and Shreve MacKenzie.

AM: So much has been said and written about the blurring of fact and fiction, not just in this novel but in all works of fiction, that I'm hesitant to ask for your take in such a brief interview—and no doubt you've been asked more times than you can remember—but *The Chaneyville Incident* seems to cry out for an explanation. There is always something to be said for a work of fiction that undertakes the subject of history, since the connection between those genres is not intuitive, and the complex interplay between fact and fiction seems so much more provocative and revealing and powerful in the context of race in this country. Can you speak to this aspect of the novel? It's such an interesting issue now as the novel itself becomes “canonized” as part of history.

You didn't say this was supposed to be a short interview. And here I've been going on and on. Sorry. But...ask a novelist a question...

First of all, there's history and there's historiography. History is what happened. Historiography is what some author has written about it to try to report or explain or contextualize what happened. But what's written is never what happened. No historiographer, not even an eye-witness—maybe especially not an eye-witness—has all the facts. All historiographers have a point of view or acquire one in the course of research. Some historiographers flat-out lie, some are deluded or biased. Even the most responsible can't get it all right. It drives them crazy. That's why John Washington dreams about Historian's Heaven.

Novelists don't care if it's all right in terms of what happened. Some care less than others. My preference is to get as much right as I can, but that may be because I'm lazy—it's a lot easier to start with a template, like a town, or a cast of characters or an historical event—and invent within it, than start from scratch.

But I do think it's important that fiction that deals with "controversial" aspects of American history be able to withstand a certain kind of scrutiny, because there are so many Americans determined to disbelieve. But facts are hard to dismiss, and corroboration is important; people have made "pilgrimages" to Chaneyville, Pennsylvania to see the graveyard where the slaves are buried—I'm not sure why, except I guess it makes the novel seem more real to them, which is actually a strange thing to say about a novel. But if I'd made it up those people wouldn't have gotten what they wanted, maybe what they needed to make the fiction work for them.

You can understand why. Nobody *wants* to think about five thousand people showing up to see a black man tortured, hanged and burned. Nobody in their right mind *wants* to believe stuff like that. I don't myself. A lot of what I did in *The Chaneyville Incident* was actually avoidance of the worst and most complicated atrocities. Enough was enough. Atrocity was John Washington's thing. Not mine.

But what I learned (the hard way; well, actually, I learned from reading Richard Wright, but I came to believe it the hard way) is that when it comes to race in America, fiction is too easy to dismiss. Also, historical truth is sometimes so complicated and horrible that it gets in the way of the narrative; a lot of what I did in *The Chaneyville Incident* was to avoid the worst and most complicated atrocities. That's John Washington's thing. Not mine.

But since *The Chaneyville Incident*, most of what I've written has been creative non-fiction, because I got tired of people saying, "Well, that's just fiction. He made it up." The truth was, I toned it down, because history is often...unbelievable. Sometimes it's unbelievably funny. But some people say I have a sick sense of humor.

Last part of your question: I believe every work of literature is a part of a nation's cultural history. Somebody wrote it, and somebody—maybe not a lot of people, maybe not the college professors, but somebody—read it. Sometimes it had social impact, like *The Klansman* or *The Jungle* or *Native Son*. Sometimes the effect is more covert, as with *Stranger in a Strange Land* or *The Turner Diaries*. There's always a lot of important writing that isn't canonized.

AM: As a professor of creative writing, do you feel that there are certain things that cannot be taught? Is there any particular piece of advice—your "signature" piece of advice, let's call it—that you give students?

Quit. Seriously. I tell them to quit. If they can. And if they can, it's nothing to be ashamed of. But if they can't quit, and they don't care, they don't want to work, they just want to bang on the keyboard all day, I say welcome to the club...and don't blame it on me.

Actually, I think of myself less as a teacher (and certainly not a professor) of writing than as a coach. And as any coach will tell you, the one thing you can't create is desire. But given desire, there's almost nothing about writing that can't be learned. There is a lot that can't be taught, because it's based on personal vision. But there's a great deal that can be presented and, if properly presented, learned.

First lesson: sit alone in a room for a day and don't talk to anybody except yourself and people you are making up.

Second Lesson: Repeat.

Third Lesson: After five days, ask yourself if you're eager for day six.

AM: Are you working on any projects now that might interest readers of *Southern Literary Review*?

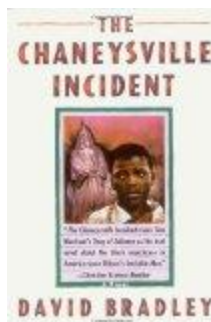
For many years I have been working on a book called *The Bondage Hypothesis: Meditations on Race, History and America*. I'm not sure it will interest anybody, frankly, but it might interest people who want to know why, although our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation dedicated to the proposition that all are created equal, eleven score and seventeen years later we still haven't gotten it right. Part of the reason—much of the reason—has to do with the historical process that inspired *The Chaneyville Incident*. I think it's almost finished. But I said that four years ago.

I've also returned to fiction. I'm working on a collection of stories set in what I call "the Town" in *The Chaneyville Incident*. Now it's called Raystown. One of the stories "You Remember the Pinmill" was published a year or so ago in *Narrative*. Which I like because it's (a) online and (b) free.

AM: Thanks so much for taking the time, David. It's been an honor.

Thank you, and not only for this interview. Your reviews are first rate, and I've picked up on a number of new-to-me writers from your website. Like I said, there's always a lot of important writing that isn't canonized. Thanks for clueing me in to some.

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