

THE ART OF FICTION NO. 62

ERSKINE CALDWELL

Wearing the black socks by which he had said we would recognize him, Erskine Caldwell called for us at a motel in Scottsdale, Arizona. A large-boned six-footer who, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, once played professional football, Caldwell's hair, which in earlier times earned him the nickname "Red," is now predominantly white; his eyes are an arresting pale blue. On the drive to his Spanish-style, single-story home at the foot of a desert mountain, he remarked precisely each traffic light, turn, and landmark so we could get out there on our own.

On the first afternoon we met with Mr. Caldwell in his red-carpeted study for exactly two hours. "I believe in rules," he declared, "and you said you wanted to go for two hours." The most prominent feature of Caldwell's study is his large wooden writing table, faced away from the window, and its view of the backyard pool. Under the table, just a dunk shot away from the portable typewriter, rests a washtub-sized wooden wastebasket. An exercise bicycle, which Erskine says belongs to his wife Virginia, and she says belongs to him, occupies a corner of the room. Above it the wall is lined with Hogarth prints, purchased in London "when you could still buy them pretty cheap." In a bookcase

along the opposite wall is a well-stocked library of dictionaries (he prefers the “old” *Webster’s Collegiate* for its etymologies) and books on the English language. We did not notice that the bookshelves contained anything written by him.

With more than eighty million books sold to readers in nearly forty different languages, Erskine Caldwell is one of the most widely read literary figures of the twentieth century. His novel *God’s Little Acre* has alone sold over fourteen million copies. His books have been made into three movies and three plays; the stage adaptation of *Tobacco Road* made American theater history when it ran for seven and a half years on Broadway. A versatile and prolific writer, Caldwell is the author of almost sixty books, including novels, short-story collections, autobiographical volumes, interpretive travel books, children’s books, and photo-essay volumes (such as the recently reissued *You Have Seen Their Faces*) done in collaboration with the photographer Margaret Bourke-White.

In addition to *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God’s Little Acre* (1933), Caldwell’s most celebrated novels are *Journeyman* (1935), *Trouble in July* (1940), and *Tragic Ground* (1944), all of which portray an impoverished, early-century, rural South that is both homeland and wasteland for its troubled and sometimes grotesque inhabitants. In a different genre and a different vein, *Georgia Boy* (1943), his genial short-story cycle about a small-town family enlivened by the antics of a quixotic father, is in many ways his best book and perhaps an American masterpiece. Caldwell’s latest books are a reissuing of his seventy-five story collection, *Jackpot*, in a Franklin Library limited edition (1980), and the autobiographical “A Year of Living,” now in progress.

Erskine Caldwell was born in Coweta County, Georgia, in either 1902 or 1903; there is no accurate record of his birth. He spent his early years living with his parents in a household that moved frequently among the Southern states. On various occasions he attended Erskine College, the University of Virginia, and the University of Pennsylvania, but did not earn a college degree. Following brief stints at a variety of jobs and a term as a reporter

for the *Atlanta Journal*, he moved in 1926 to an old farmhouse in Mount Vernon, Maine; there during the next seven years he served his literary apprenticeship. A thirteen-year marriage to Helen Lannigan ended in 1938. From 1939 to 1942 he was married to Margaret Bourke-White, and from 1942 to 1956 to June Johnson. He is the father of four children, from his first and third marriages. Since 1957 he has been married to his present wife, Virginia Moffett Caldwell, an accomplished artist who has illustrated several of his books.

The first interview session began rather stiffly. Caldwell's manner was formal as he addressed our questions carefully, in a firm voice still slightly tinged by a Southern accent. He speaks slowly and deliberately, pausing to formulate his replies and select the precise word he desires. His language, in general, is exact without sounding purposely elevated; and he uses an occasional slang term such as *chap* or *punk* as effective seasoning. Seated behind his writing desk, ever now and then he toyed with the typewriter carriage as we talked.

—*Elizabeth Pell Broadwell, Ronald Wesley Hoag, 1982*

INTERVIEWER

Mr. Caldwell, what first interested you in becoming a writer?

ERSKINE CALDWELL

Well, I was not a writer to begin with; I was a listener. In those early decades of the century, reading and writing were not common experiences. Oral storytelling was the basis of fiction. You learned by listening around the store, around the gin, the icehouse, the wood yard, or wherever people congregated and had nothing to do. You would listen for the extraordinary, the unusual; the people knew how to tell stories orally in such a way that they could make the smallest incident, the most far-fetched idea, into something

extraordinarily interesting. It could be just a rooster crowing at a certain time of night or morning. It's a mysterious thing. Many Southern writers must have learned the art of storytelling from listening to oral tales. I did. It gave me the knowledge that the simplest incident can make a story.

INTERVIEWER

How do you go about transforming such a simple incident into a story?

CALDWELL

You get a kind of fever, I suppose, mentally and emotionally, that lifts you up and carries you away. You have to sustain this energy you've gotten to write your story. By the time you've finished, all your energy, your passion, is spent. You've been drained of everything.

INTERVIEWER

Is this passion something that comes in a flash?

CALDWELL

No. Things that come in a flash you have to hold suspect. If you rely upon a dream, you're going to be fooled. In the course of writing your story, you have to follow in sequence what your thoughts are.

INTERVIEWER

But your thoughts have to start somewhere.

CALDWELL

Well, you have an idea to start with, otherwise you wouldn't sit down at your typewriter. Whatever this idea is, that's the solid thing you want to work with. You can't wait for inspiration because it may never come.

INTERVIEWER

Where do you get that first idea?

CALDWELL

You see a school bus going along out there and you wonder where it's heading. Then you imagine a school, and a teacher. Well, who is this teacher? What is she like? Does she lead an interesting life? Then you recall some of the teachers that you had in the past. So it keeps on going and going.

INTERVIEWER

You mention recalling teachers you had known. Would this experience be important?

CALDWELL

Yes. Experience combined with imagination. You have to use your imagination to invent something better than life because life itself is dull and prosaic.

INTERVIEWER

Would this inventing give you your plot?

CALDWELL

No. I'm not interested in plots. I'm interested only in the characterization of people and what they do. I understand you can buy a pamphlet called *The Seven Basic Plots of Fiction*. A plot is applicable to what's done in a mystery story, where the author knows in the beginning how it's going to end. I never know how anything is going to end. All I ever know is the first line, the first sentence, the first page. The work terminates itself with dictation from me. Signs and portents indicate in some manner that a conclusion is just around the corner.

INTERVIEWER

Would this be true of your short stories as well as your novels?

CALDWELL

Both are just a series of events and a cast of people that grow by themselves. I don't manufacture tapestries. I let the people say or do what's going to happen next.

INTERVIEWER

Then your characters control you?

CALDWELL

Completely. These are all entirely new people and that means they're unpredictable. You see, just like a child has to start from infancy to become a man, the character has to develop. You have a vision of some sort, maybe an insight into his appearance, but if you're true to what you're doing, he's telling you what his action's going to be and why he did it. If you let a person grow like that, little by little, you will have a character that is believable and maybe memorable to the reader.

INTERVIEWER

But you must have some influence over your characters.

CALDWELL

I have no influence over them. I'm only an observer, recording. The story is always being told by the characters themselves. In fact, I'm often critical, or maybe ashamed, of what some of them say and do—their profanity or their immorality. But I have no control over it.

INTERVIEWER

But you do at least understand their motivations?

CALDWELL

I'm not an oracle by any means. I'm often at a loss to explain the desires and the motivations of my people. You'll have to find your explanation in them. They're their own creations.

INTERVIEWER

Among your characters do you have any favorites?

CALDWELL

No, because I don't know that any of them are beloved in that sense. Some of them are reprehensible.

INTERVIEWER

Which are your favorites among your novels, short stories, and books of nonfiction?

CALDWELL

Well, if you have to pin a person down, I would say that I like *In Search of Bisco* in nonfiction, *Georgia Boy* among short stories, and *God's Little Acre* in the novel form. Those three strike me as being acceptable.

INTERVIEWER

In *God's Little Acre*, is Ty Ty Walden's persistence in mining for gold on his land his faith or his folly?

CALDWELL

It's a quirk of nature. There are people who get these tics. One person might get an idea to raise spotted pigs for no good reason at all. It will ruin his family life because the pigpens make a big smell right next to his house. His wife divorces him and so on. Now whether Ty Ty Walden got his tic through a dream or whether his father imbued him with it, somehow he got the idea that the land he owned had gold in it. In North Georgia, at a place called Dahlonega, they mined gold and minted gold coins. Well, that may have influenced him. Anyway, he was imbued with the idea that he had gold deposits and that all he had to do was dig until he could find them. Nothing would stop him.

INTERVIEWER

Do Ty Ty's manipulations of *God's Little Acre* itself indicate his hypocrisy?

CALDWELL

I think you would have to blame the author for that; I wouldn't blame Ty Ty. That was a literary movement to give variety, to give change, to have something happen in this story.

INTERVIEWER

Would you admit to there being symbolism in your books?

CALDWELL

No, not a bit. I wouldn't know how to inject it, and I would probably abhor it if I found it. I think the whole object in the search for symbolism in English and creative-writing courses is just to instigate a thought process in the students. The thinking is what really counts in the end, I guess; even an average student can find symbolism because you can't prove or disprove it.

INTERVIEWER

Well, in your short story "The Growing Season," if Fiddler isn't a symbol, who or what is he? Will you tell us?

CALDWELL

Nope.

INTERVIEWER

Does it matter?

CALDWELL

It matters to the extent that it interests me to write that way. I know who Fiddler is, or at least I think I do. I can't be positive because it can go two ways. I won't even tell you what the two

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THE SHIRT OF TWO COLORS

All was in readiness at last and thirty-year-old Mark Stoneman, sending two weeks of his summer ~~summer~~ vacation from his position as a teller in a bank in the downtown financial district of the city, now felt quietly confident as he sat in the gray dimness of nightfall and thought about the next morning's intense program. ^{careful} During the past two weeks of ~~his~~ planning and detailed calculations, ^{in a} he had spent the daylight hours in the rented room across the street from one of the bank's eastside branches and going out only for hasty meals ^{at} ~~in the dimness of~~ night so as not likely to be recognized. And now as he sat looking out the window his ^{diligently} ~~carefully~~ rehearsed plan of action was so reassuring to him that he frequently smiled with the ⁺ ~~certainty~~ of success.

P
 Too long. Will want to mark 2/10 of this

At exactly three minutes past ten o'clock the next morning, Mark was prepared to walk in a casual manner across the street to the bank and then quickly slip a bearded mask over his clean-shaven face while going to the nearest teller's window. There he would demand in an altered voice that all the currency in the cash drawer be put into his cloth bag. That accomplished, he would then back out of the bank, quickly remove the mask, and sprint across the street to the rear of the apartment building where he would hastily change his reversible shirt from the blue side to the yellow side. After that moment, he would get on his bicycle and calmly pedal away from the scene with the money bag carried out of sight, together with the bearded mask, in a paper sack.

A manuscript page from Erskine Caldwell's short story "The Shirt of Two Colors."

ways are; that would help give it away. But, no, I guess it doesn't matter in the end. The speculation is what really counts.

INTERVIEWER

You've listed your favorites among your own books. What have you admired by other writers?

CALDWELL

I haven't read enough to know.

INTERVIEWER

Do you expect us to believe that?

CALDWELL

I don't make a pretense of that at all. Oh, I used to read the Sears and Roebuck catalog, every year when it came out. But I learned early in life that you can be a reader or a writer. I decided to be a writer.

INTERVIEWER

So you weren't influenced by any other writers?

CALDWELL

Influence is a very tenuous matter. I try to avoid it in every respect. I don't want to be influenced by anybody. If I were being influenced by Shakespeare or Poe, let's say, I would be second-rate at it. An imitation is always going to produce something not as good as the original. The original, to me, is the only thing that counts.

INTERVIEWER

How do you feel about your many imitators over the years, such as those satirized by James Thurber in "Bateman Comes Home"?

CALDWELL

Well, satire is a very legitimate field. I think you should accept satirization easily, without being affronted by it. But imitation seems to me to be a very low-down form of writing. Hemingway had a great influence on fiction, and while in general that was all to the good, he also had hundreds of outright imitators; I doubt that any of them could do what he did as well as he could.

INTERVIEWER

Like Hemingway, you also worked on a newspaper early in your career. Did this experience help teach you to write?

CALDWELL

Yes. It was really good training because it compelled me to write something every day whether I felt like it or not. So in that way even writing obituaries helps fiction writing.

INTERVIEWER

Was it working at a newspaper that got you in the habit of composing at the typewriter?

CALDWELL

No. You might think so, but it didn't happen that way. My father had one of those great big old-fashioned Underwoods, and the first thing I ever wrote was on that typewriter. Since then I've always had to see what I'm working on right here before me.

INTERVIEWER

Writing for a newspaper is a kind of on-the-job training. Did you also have any formal instruction in writing, perhaps at the various colleges you attended?

CALDWELL

My most rewarding course at three different colleges was a graduate course in composition at the University of Virginia. It was

conducted by a chap by the name of Atcheson Hench. I was only a freshman or a sophomore at the time, but I signed myself right in anyway. Life was too short to have to wait for four years. Hench let us write whatever we wanted to—poetry, short stories, nonfiction—and then everybody else would comment upon it. Hench wouldn't break my work down sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph. He left everything alone, which was very satisfactory to me. At the end of the course, he told me, "I had heard that you were not qualified for this course, but I watched you and I was satisfied. So, a lot of good luck to you."

INTERVIEWER

Was this an early version of the creative-writing courses that are so popular in colleges today?

CALDWELL

No. It was not called creative writing; it was called English composition. I fell out with the process when they invented the term "creative writing." To me there is no such thing as creative writing. It's either good writing, whatever the subject, or it's not creative.

INTERVIEWER

Does this mean that you don't distinguish between fiction and nonfiction?

CALDWELL

That's right. It's not what you write, it's how you write it. Whether you want to base a work on facts or on imagination does not really matter. You can be a good writer in either field, or both. The use of words is what makes writing, and in the end it's how well you do it that's going to count. Nonfiction can be just as appealing in a literary sense as a novel can be.

INTERVIEWER

You said that Hench's was a composition course. Did you take any literature courses in college?

CALDWELL

Well, I tried one English course and dropped out of it because the professor spent his whole time talking about Henry James or somebody of that caliber who was way beyond my comprehension. I also showed up for a graduate course called *A Study of Wordsworth*. I remember that I'd been there for about half a term, I guess, when the dean called me up to his office. He said, "I've received a question from the professor who's conducting the Wordsworth course. He wants to know how in the world you got into his class." I had told the professor that I didn't like either Wordsworth or his poetry, so he complained to the dean. Anyway, I would say those were typical of my experiences with English courses in college. I think the problem was that my interest then had nothing to do with Wordsworth or Henry James but rather with the construction of a short story that had never been written before and that I wanted to write.

INTERVIEWER

Did any of your college studies other than English interest you or help shape your writing?

CALDWELL

Yes. Sociology and economics. I studied them because they are the basis of life. But I did not have what you'd call an intellectual interest in them as subjects. They were just a point of departure.

INTERVIEWER

A point of departure?

CALDWELL

I wanted to understand what life was, and why, so that I

could write about it. But what I was writing in fiction was based much more on seeing life in action than on theory. For example, I really learned about economics by working in the basement of a ten-cent store in Wilkes-Barre and delivering milk in Washington at three o'clock every morning. And I learned about the hardships people were enduring by observing these things.

INTERVIEWER

Yet some readers argue that your books present a distorted, rather than a realistic, view of the South. For example, they say that you exaggerated the plight of the Jeeter Lester family in *Tobacco Road*.

CALDWELL

Many Southern people are not sympathetic at all to the story or to the condition of these people. They had not observed the extreme poverty, or, if they had, they paid no attention to it. When it was said to exist, they denied it immediately. Well, that's their privilege. But when I was living in Georgia with my parents, there were three or four different families from outside Wrens that would come in almost periodically, early in the morning. They would sit on our porch, begging for something to eat. From grandmothers to infants in arms, they would sit there all morning long, with somebody holding out his hand all of the time, moaning a little. So these things did exist. And I was always short tempered with people who said they did not.

INTERVIEWER

What about editors? Did they ask you to delete or change anything?

CALDWELL

I've never encountered any situation where the publisher or editor has said, This has to come out. In fact, they never change

anything I write. At the beginning of my career Max Perkins, who was an editor at Scribner's, encouraged me to keep my attitude toward the integrity of writing. Since then I've never wanted anybody to tell me to change anything or to take anything out. And no one ever has.

INTERVIEWER

Do you consider yourself unusually fortunate in having been left alone?

CALDWELL

Yes, but after what Perkins told me I thought I deserved it, so I was not abashed at all. I had no doubts that I could handle it. I've never doubted that I can write what I want to write and do it the way I want to do it.

INTERVIEWER

So no one advises you about your writing?

CALDWELL

Well, I don't pretend to be infallible. When Virginia began helping me as an editorial assistant, I had to browbeat her to find some fault, to find what might be wrong with this particular word or that sentence. Victor Weybright, my publisher at New American Library, had cautioned her not to change anything I had written. So I had to educate her to be critical of my work, and now she's very strict with me.

INTERVIEWER

Do you need isolation in order to write?

CALDWELL

I do like privacy. In the old days in New York you could rent a room very cheaply, and I wrote several books in rented rooms because I had no distractions whatsoever. I could put a typewriter

on the bed, sit opposite it in a chair, and write that way all day and night if I wanted to.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever have to overcome inertia to get yourself writing in the morning?

CALDWELL

No, I wouldn't say so at all. Now, I might have the feeling coming in here that I don't know what I'm going to do. I might be worried about that. But I'll come in anyway and sit here until something happens. You see, it's something I wanted to do to begin with and so I'll still have that urge to see it through. I guess that talent is just a part of being a writer. You've got to have desire in order to make it all work.

INTERVIEWER

Have you ever had any long dry spells?

CALDWELL

No. You can always write something. You write limericks. You write a love letter. You do something to get you in the habit of writing again, to bring back the desire.

INTERVIEWER

Do you do much revising as you go along?

CALDWELL

I always have the biggest wastepaper basket in town, and it's full at the end of the day. I write three or four lines, don't like it, and in it goes. I found out early in life that there is no such thing as perfection or even close to perfection. Consequently, I discard constantly and try to do better with the next revision.

INTERVIEWER

What is a good day's production for you then?

CALDWELL

Oh, I might have two or three pages worth keeping at the end of the day. And that's a lot, you know; three pages is a lot. I probably write forty or forty-five total to get those three I can keep. And it is not unusual to sit at a typewriter all day and end up with nothing. But if you get up, you know you'll have nothing.

INTERVIEWER

Is there much revising left to do after you've completed a draft in this manner?

CALDWELL

Normally, yes. Now with *God's Little Acre* I dropped the sheets on the floor as I went and didn't pick them up until I had finished. Then I put them together and that was the book. No revision. But usually when a book is finished, I rewrite the whole thing anywhere from six to a dozen times because I'm never satisfied.

INTERVIEWER

Do you add much in these subsequent drafts?

CALDWELL

No. I might insert a description of a house or something, but you can overdo revisions. You can have too much fat and spoil what you should have lean. You have to know when to quit.

INTERVIEWER

Do you read your books after they're published?

CALDWELL

No. I open the books to see how the type looks. But once I've finished, I'm done.

INTERVIEWER

Which of your books was the most difficult to write?

CALDWELL

When you're young everything is easy, everything is smooth, everything you write is great. Every young writer feels that way. You don't have that backward look at it, that self-criticism. You have no judgment. But as you grow older, every book becomes a little more difficult because you're more critical of what you're doing. You reach the point where you know something is wrong but you're incapable of making it any better. So I would say the most recent two or three novels were probably the most difficult in that sense. The older writer is the one who has all the great trouble.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think your writing has changed over the years?

CALDWELL

Yes. Your attitudes and your style do change, in a progressive way, as you grow older. Whether there's improvement or not, at least there is change. Otherwise you'd be writing the same all the way through your career. You'd be writing Hardy Boys books or something. But when each work is a separate entity, there will be flux and change as you go.

INTERVIEWER

As you look back upon your career, do you see it in terms of discernible stages?

CALDWELL

Well, I suppose so. The first stage, of course, was learning how to write, which took eight or ten years during the twenties. Then after that was a period when I was able to make money by writing in a subsidiary way, in Hollywood and so forth. My most productive period was probably from 1950 to 1975. During that time I

had the desire, the opportunity, and the material so I did not let up. From 1975 until the present has been my least productive period. You might say I've been recovering from the excesses of life. Now I'm back to normal, I hope.

INTERVIEWER

Out of this long career, you say you spent almost the first decade learning how to write. Were you also publishing during this period?

CALDWELL

The only way you can learn how to write is by writing; but, yes, when you've written something, you do want to get it published. When I started writing, the little magazines would publish some of what I wrote, and that gave me the impetus to keep on writing. They paid no money, but because I was supporting myself in Maine, raising my own food, I was willing to stay with it for years and years if necessary until something happened. My first short story was published in the little magazine *transition* in Paris.

INTERVIEWER

We've read that you devoted a year of your apprenticeship in Maine to writing poetry.

CALDWELL

I think every writer has to go through the phase of writing poetry. That's almost mandatory. The lucky people, in my opinion, are those who overcome it and start writing fiction instead.

INTERVIEWER

You gave it up entirely then?

CALDWELL

Oh, sure, I learned my lesson. What gave me the courage to forget about poetry was a chap by the name of Louis Untermeyer.

I had such admiration for him that I sent him some of my poems. He wrote to me and said that every young man is entitled to write poetry, but the sooner he gives it up, the better he's going to be as a man. So I took his advice.

INTERVIEWER

He cured you?

CALDWELL

Yes. And many years later when Untermeyer edited some children's books, he asked me to submit a book for his series. "I know you're out of poetry now," he said, "so perhaps you can write a good child's story."

INTERVIEWER

And did you write one for him?

CALDWELL

I did. *The Deer at our House*.

INTERVIEWER

Did you ever publish any of your poetry, either before or after Untermeyer gave you his advice?

CALDWELL

No, but someone else once tried to. Just before Bourke-White died, a researcher visited her at the house we used to have in Darien, Connecticut. The two of them found some of my poetry stashed away under a window seat. This researcher threatened to publish it without my permission, but I told him he was going to get sued and arrested and maybe shot. Anyway, he's quieted down now and hasn't done anything about it.

INTERVIEWER

Besides poetry, your apprentice period produced your first

extended fiction, *The Bastard* and *Poor Fool*. How do you now regard these early novelettes?

CALDWELL

As experimental, preliminary, amateurish, but I think necessary to make the transition from a brief short story to a novel. They were basically imaginary—an attempt to find out how to present imaginative ideas realistically. I am much in favor of what I did, but I would not do it now. You have to go through that stage just as much as you have to go through the poetry stage and get rid of it.

INTERVIEWER

An early apprenticeship work that is rather poetic is *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*. How does it strike you today?

CALDWELL

It too was experimental, a little bit self-conscious maybe. It served its purpose at the time, but it was not traditional enough. It was not in the great tradition of fiction.

INTERVIEWER

A recent French-English edition of *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, published by Galerie Maeght, was lavishly illustrated by Alexander Calder. How did this collaborative effort come about?

CALDWELL

Well, Marcel Duhamel, who was my translator for many years, got together with Virginia in Paris one night and they decided to get this book done in an illustrated limited edition. Duhamel said, "Picasso will do it!" You see, Picasso was his neighbor at Antibes and he knew him very well. When I was visiting Duhamel, I met Picasso down on the beach one night and went to his house. We did not have a common language and about all we could do was smile, nod, and improvise gestures. During the hour,

we had several drinks and passed comments via Marcel's interpretations. Picasso's parting handshake was warm and intensely firm and clinging. Anyway, Picasso put the book on his schedule but died before he got to it. Duhamel did not get discouraged, though. He just said, "Sandy Calder can do it just as well as Picasso or better. I'll get him!" And he did.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned a period after your apprenticeship in which you made money, in a subsidiary way, from your writing. Would you explain what you meant by this?

CALDWELL

I was in a high salary bracket in Hollywood off and on, and I also had an interest in the Broadway production of *Tobacco Road*, which ran for seven or eight years.

INTERVIEWER

What did you think of Jack Kirkland's dramatization of *Tobacco Road*?

CALDWELL

I would say that Kirkland's version is true and authentic for dramatic purposes. By that I mean he had to manipulate the story to create dramatic highlights for the stage. I had great admiration for Henry Hull, the actor who first played Jeeter Lester, because he played the part straight. But I objected to the actors after Hull who portrayed Lester, both on Broadway and in the touring companies, because they played principally to get laughs. Now Kirkland didn't like this either, but the producer was happy with the big box office and his authority was almost final.

INTERVIEWER

What about the movie version of *Tobacco Road*? Did you like it?

CALDWELL

Not particularly, no. It had good actors, good actresses, a good screenwriter, and John Ford directing. It had everything in its favor. But then Darryl Zanuck came along and wanted a happy ending. So the characters go off to the poorhouse singing a folk song.

INTERVIEWER

Did Zanuck's interference surprise you?

CALDWELL

Not really. Movies were made pretty much under a studio formula. My agent told me that the movie of my novel *Claudelle Inglish* was so poor that I shouldn't even bother to see it. So I didn't.

INTERVIEWER

What about the film of *God's Little Acre*? Were you any more satisfied with it?

CALDWELL

Yes, because it was done independently, without any studio control. The studios were very union bound and might have toned down the part about the mill strike. Of course, I didn't have much to do with it except as an advisor here and there, but the freedom of an independent production was very interesting to me. At least nobody ordered a happy ending put on it.

INTERVIEWER

You say you advised the producers of *God's Little Acre*. Did you ever take a more direct part in translating your books into movies or plays?

CALDWELL

Well, *Journeyman* had a disastrous career for several weeks on Broadway. Then I came along and tried to doctor the script. I

didn't succeed, though, and the whole thing eventually flopped. I never felt qualified as a dramatist because I had no training.

INTERVIEWER

So you never attempted to write a complete play?

CALDWELL

Oh, one of my misfortunes in life was that I wrote a musical for Broadway. About Mexican politicians. The principal actor, or singer, was to portray the president of Mexico. But this touched on a lot of toes in the State Department. Somebody there thought it might cause a diplomatic rub if we showed the president of Mexico chasing girls around the adobe walls and singing. So it never got produced. I don't think it was a very good musical anyway.

INTERVIEWER

Did you give it a title?

CALDWELL

Sure, sure. "The Strong Man of Maxcatan." The script is in the Dartmouth College Archives, so maybe someday it'll get resurrected.

INTERVIEWER

Were any of the movies you worked on in Hollywood particularly interesting to you?

CALDWELL

Not especially. My early writing there was for a series of shorts called *Crime Does Not Pay*. Then I worked on *Mission to Moscow*, which was a propaganda film. The studio wanted me for it because of my experiences in the Soviet Union during the war. But I did not like the propaganda angle. After some preliminary writing on it, I asked to be relieved.

INTERVIEWER

You said earlier that you need privacy when you write. Did working in a studio environment present any difficulties for you?

CALDWELL

Yes. For one thing, in the old days in Hollywood you couldn't be a writer unless you could dictate your story to a secretary, and I never could dictate to anybody. So I had to go home at night to write where nobody could see me. I used to write in secret.

INTERVIEWER

Did your Hollywood experiences help your fiction writing?

CALDWELL

Not a bit. It was just a waste of time. It's impossible to write your fiction and work in the studio at the same time. I wasn't doing anything except hackwork for five or six years. But, I needed the money and the longer you stay, the more they pay you.

INTERVIEWER

How did you finally get out?

CALDWELL

Saved enough so I could quit. In 1950 I quit cold and I haven't been back since.

INTERVIEWER

Were you happy to get back to your fiction after the Hollywood years?

CALDWELL

Very happy. After that deadly period I spent the next twenty-five years trying to catch up, to write what I had not had the opportunity to do. From 1950 to 1975 I probably wrote more stories, more novels, and more books of nonfiction than in any other period.

INTERVIEWER

Which did you prefer, writing short stories or writing novels?

CALDWELL

To me short-story writing is the essence of writing. I think a writer should always write short stories before he tries to write a novel. You have better control because a short story is concentrated into a small area. You also have better range because a short story can be anywhere from one to fifty pages long. You can mold it much better than you can a novel. A novel is a great, expansive thing. You can't make a change at one point without affecting something another fifty pages away.

INTERVIEWER

But your short-story production seems to have tapered off during the fifties.

CALDWELL

Well, you're always going to like short-story writing better than novel writing. But once you accomplish the short-story form, you're really stuck with it. So I wrote a hundred and fifty and quit. Of course, a hundred and fifty were probably only half of what got written. The other half I threw into the wastebasket.

INTERVIEWER

We have read that two of your novels, "The Bogus Ones" and "Autumn Hill," were never published. Do you have many other unpublished manuscripts?

CALDWELL

No, they go in the wastebasket. The two novels you mention are the only ones I can recall that I completed but never published. And they were not good enough to be published.

INTERVIEWER

You said that your most productive period ended in 1975. What caused this?

CALDWELL

The past five years have been sort of a fallow period because I did too much traveling, going to Europe twice a year and so forth. And I also took two years out to have cancer operations on my lungs. I almost killed myself smoking cigarettes.

INTERVIEWER

I notice you haven't smoked during this interview. Did you quit completely?

CALDWELL

Oh, yes. About six years ago. My doctor at the Mayo Clinic told me I had to if I wanted to keep on living. So I crossed the street to a bar and ordered a drink. I had two cigarettes left in a pack, and I put both in my mouth and smoked them at the same time. I haven't had one since.

INTERVIEWER

Mrs. Caldwell said that you came close to doing a book on President Carter.

CALDWELL

What happened there was that just after Jimmy Carter was elected president, the people at Dodd, Mead wanted me to write a book about him and his hometown. It was supposed to be illustrated with photographs. But there was no great money involved—everything was more or less on “spec”—so I doubt that we could have gotten the kind of photography we wanted. The idea was interesting, I thought, but eventually it just evaporated.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think the Carter family's Southern folksiness is authentic?

CALDWELL

I think so. That ménage is fairly typical of others that I have known, particularly in Georgia. My feeling about them is that they're just average, down-home Southern people in many ways. They're very close-knit, very friendly, and very outspoken. I've known many men like Billy Carter who drink beer all day and ride around in a pickup truck. In fact, I'd probably rather do a book on Billy than on Jimmy. He's more of a character.

INTERVIEWER

Your new book, *A Year of Living*, has so far taken you a year and a half to write. Would you describe your daily writing schedule for that book?

CALDWELL

Well, for this particular book I got into the habit of working twice a day. I am here at the typewriter at six o'clock with the lights on every morning and work until ten or eleven o'clock. Then from four until seven I'll be back at it again.

INTERVIEWER

Did other books have different schedules?

CALDWELL

Yes, I used to have all kinds of schedules. Years ago, in the state of Maine, I chose to write my book on even days and work outside on odd days. When winter came, I shoveled snow and slept a little during the day, then stayed up all night to write. Another early method I used was to take a trip to write a short story. I'd ride a bus, from Boston to Cleveland maybe, and get off at night once in a while to write. I'd do a story that way in about a week's time. Then, for a while, I took the night boats

between Boston and New York. The Fall River line, the New Bedford line, the Cape Cod line, all going to New York at night. The rhythm of the water might have helped my sentence structure a little; at least I thought it did. Those were all early methods, or schedules, of writing. Everything since then has been a little bit different.

INTERVIEWER

Do you ever have several different writing projects going at the same time?

CALDWELL

No, only one thing at a time. And I stick with it for six months, eight months, nine months, whatever it takes.

INTERVIEWER

You have been an active writer now for almost sixty years. What motivates your continuous devotion?

CALDWELL

Well, some people are addicted to singing to themselves. It's the same way with writing, I suppose. I write because it makes me feel good.

INTERVIEWER

Do you worry about what the critics will say about a book?

CALDWELL

Not at all. A critic is an egotist. I am the judge, he says. He will wreck an author's work by tearing it apart and never getting it back together again. Of course, there are some good people in that field, but I just don't have much faith in what I call a critic. A critic is a superfluous commodity.

INTERVIEWER

Is there any particular audience whose attention you do appreciate?

CALDWELL

Well, in that sense you might say I write for the ordinary man in the street, the golden mean. If I'm appealing to that sort of person, I'm happy. For example, a couple of weeks ago Virginia and I were at the annual ceremonial of the American Academy and Institute in New York. Of course, the American Academy and Institute is a collection of very high-class intellectuals. Everybody's a big brain. On this particular occasion I was talking to Malcolm Cowley, I think, when a waiter came up with a tray of hors d'oeuvres. He was just a young punk, maybe a student at NYU working as a waiter. Anyway, he said, "Take one . . . Now shake hands with me. You're the one person here I want to shake hands with." So I shook hands with the guy and took another hors d'oeuvre.

INTERVIEWER

Why do you think your popularity as a writer has diminished until recently in this country but has remained steadfast abroad?

CALDWELL

Fiction in America changes almost from one day to the next. We are still a very volatile civilization, whereas in an older country there is very little change except in a political sense. In America, fiction reflects current lifestyles, economic conditions, wars, lots of things. The interests of American readers change with the times. Especially here, writing has to be contemporary. But I don't know that any writer anywhere should consider his work immortal.

INTERVIEWER

You don't sound very concerned with achieving a lasting popularity.

CALDWELL

I have never been interested in popularity because popularity doesn't mean much. To be popular you have to be exploited.

INTERVIEWER

What kinds of books are publishers exploiting today?

CALDWELL

Well, they've gone heavily into what they call the Big Book, something seven hundred to one thousand pages long. In recent years the American storyteller has been pretty well shunted aside by this blatant pressure to provide the best-seller. There is no imagination being applied anymore in a storytelling sense. And the best-seller itself is nothing more than a formula.

INTERVIEWER

Do you plan to write any more fiction?

CALDWELL

I've reached the point where I'm too critical of fiction right now. I'm too abashed by the trashiness of a lot of current fiction to enter into it. The great compendium of knowledge that goes into a James Michener book, *Centennial* for example, does not interest me. At present I don't see anything in between the trashy novel and the encyclopedic novel, so I'll wait it out. I think the novel's at a stage where something will surface between these two extremes. But what it will be, I don't know.

INTERVIEWER

Could it be the journalistic novel, such as *In Cold Blood* and *The Executioner's Song*?

CALDWELL

In my opinion that will be a very short-lived pattern. I think it is an attempt to find what the next phase of the novel is going to

be. Of course, the Capote book was the first of that kind; then Mailer's came along. I've glanced at *The Executioner's Song* and parts of it seem to me to be purely extraneous to the story. The excerpts from newspapers, for example, are just a compendium of a lot of clippings. They had nothing to do with Mailer's writing at all. Well, to me that doesn't have much of a future.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think storytelling itself will come back?

CALDWELL

It will have to. It's inevitable that storytelling will come back because storytelling is the whole basis of fiction. That's where new ideas originate.

INTERVIEWER

Mark Twain was one of America's greatest storytellers. In an interview a number of years ago you said you hadn't read any of his work.

CALDWELL

I haven't yet. It's something to look forward to. I've heard so much about him.

INTERVIEWER

You said once that you admired Sherwood Anderson's short stories.

CALDWELL

Yes. In those days there were plenty of novels in existence but very few good short stories. What interested me about Sherwood Anderson were his short stories. I liked the brevity. I liked the way he presented his people. His style was lean. It was not cluttered up with superfluous adjectives and unnecessary paragraphs.

INTERVIEWER

You have often been compared to Faulkner. How do you feel about that comparison?

CALDWELL

I don't know, because I don't know anything about Faulkner's writing. I read one of his books, *As I Lay Dying*, which I thought was a very fine exercise in writing. But I read it only to find out what he was doing, and I don't know what he did before or since. I met Faulkner a couple of times, once in France and once in New York, but I was not well acquainted with him. The only subject of conversation with him that I can recall was the difficulty of talking to anyone in a foreign language when a person has the use of only his native language.

INTERVIEWER

Have there been any writers over the years with whom you have been well acquainted?

CALDWELL

Oh no. I don't mingle with other writers because it's a bad class of people. My friendships have always been with the young ladies of life.

INTERVIEWER

What have you got against other writers?

CALDWELL

They never talk about anything interesting, just about themselves and their work. The only writers I ever got along really well with were William Saroyan and a chap by the name of Pep West, Nathanael West. I knew him in New York and in Hollywood. These two were the only ones I had any great interest in knowing because they did not talk about their work all the time. They talked about cigars, anything.

INTERVIEWER

But surely you knew other writers?

CALDWELL

Oh, I've known a few more or less casually. I knew Sherwood Anderson fairly well. Once when he was in Arizona he spent a week with me in Tucson. I also got to know Steinbeck pretty well, in Mexico and again in New York. Aside from those people, I got to know Theodore Dreiser slightly. He was another slave in Hollywood when I was there. In fact, we both had the same agent. Then Sinclair Lewis used to stop at my house in Connecticut on his way to the country sometimes. But I would not say I ever had any deep friendships with other writers.

INTERVIEWER

Writers traditionally are notorious for having difficulty sustaining marriages. Is divorce an occupational hazard?

CALDWELL

Yes, and I'll tell you why. Whoever is not the writer in the family always gets the short end of the stick. That's because a writer has to be somewhat selfish. For example, I'm a retiring person in social life or in any other kind of life. I suppose you'd call me almost a recluse. I don't take days off. I work on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. Well, a woman can resent that, and eventually something is going to give somewhere along the way. Of course, once in a while there is a very even-spirited person who can take all this, and that's why some writers do stay married. But as a rule, no, they don't.

INTERVIEWER

Have you enjoyed your fame and fortune?

CALDWELL

Well, I'm happy to be able to live the kind of life that I've lived.

But early in life I had a difficult time. Step by step I acquired marriages, and after each of the first three I was divided up. I lost three good houses—one in Maine, one in Connecticut, and one in Tucson. But I'm much smarter now. I put everything in Virginia's name, so I can never lose it. The car, the house, everything's in her name. So now I'm safe.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have any superstitions about writing?

CALDWELL

I have a red rug in my room. Wherever I've lived in life, I've carried my red rug with me. I keep it in excellent shape. I have it vacuumed; I have it dry-cleaned. We are sitting on it now, in fact. Why is it here? We have a very good carpet underneath. But I've got a reason for wanting it here. It's part of my life. Back in the early days I had to live on cold and splintery floors. There was a hardwood floor in Maine that was especially cold because the room I worked in was unheated. Now, an unheated room in a New England winter is sort of a difficult dungeon. Then, in South Carolina, I was confined to write for a while in a rented room with a linoleum floor. The linoleum was cracked and it bristled with splinters. Anytime I didn't have my shoes on, I'd get a splinter in my foot. Well, as soon as I could afford to get a good rug, I bought my red one. And I decided then that I'd carry my red rug with me wherever I went.

INTERVIEWER

And your black socks? You said on the phone the other day that we would recognize you by them, and I notice you've worn black socks every day.

CALDWELL

On a Sunday I wear white socks. Thick white athletic socks for the outdoors. You should see me on a Sunday sometime.

