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Mary Lee Settle

An Interview with Jane Hill

Mary Lee Settle, who died from lung cancer on September 27, 2005, at the age of eighty-seven in Ivy, Virginia, was the author of fifteen novels and four memoirs, including Blood Tie *(1977), which received the National Book Award for Fiction, the monumental* Beulah Quintet*, five interconnected novels that trace the history of her native West Virginia from Puritan England to the present, and* Choices *(1995), the text that occasioned my talk with the author when she visited my home in Marietta, Georgia, after appearing at the annual convention of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association to read from the just-published work.*

Because the interview, which has never been published, captures Settle at her intellectual and personal best—her passion, her humor, her feisty willingness to say exactly what she means, and because the interview's moment coincides so nicely with the advent of Five Points*, I can think of no more appropriate place to honor both Mary Lee Settle's long and distinguished career and the journal's distinguished first decade. Since* Choices *is the work that generated our discussion, the idea of choices serves as a recurring motif in our conversation, a fitting unifier for a tribute to this writer who so lived and worked according to her own choices.*

Hill: The first thing I wanted you to talk about if you would is one of the most wonderful images in *Choices*, of wanting to tell the story of the person not in the picture, of the "other" people. When I was in school we were taught two theories of history: the cyclical theory and the great-man theory. But perhaps "the other person in the picture" is something of an alternate to those?

Settle That's a wonderful idea. Yes.

Hill: The history you are writing—not just in *Choices*, but in some ways in all the books—is in many ways the history of the other people in the picture.

Settle Exactly right. That's why I said you understood my work so well. Remember, right from *Prisons* on, it's about nameless people who thought they failed. And they haven't failed. The irony, of course, is that

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from book to book people don't know the influence of the past upon them and how the failures of the past are the taken-for-granted successes of the present.

Johnny and Thankful [from *Prisons*] think they have failed, but out of them, out of the world in which they lived and the choices that they made, comes the land hunger that is Virginia. We move toward some kind of democracy. And remember that "democratic" was a pejorative term in the seventeenth century. Of course, it still is in the twentieth century to some people.

Hill: If we think about that impulse to tell the story of the people not in the picture beginning in *Prisons*, then it explains in some ways why your work must reiterate, why it is necessary to go back and circle—

Settle: —the same story, over and over again.

Hill: Yes. In your mind, does this become a particular aesthetic challenge, to make new the same story again and again because the reader—and by this I don't mean the individual reader but the culture as a kind of collective reader—hasn't "gotten it"?

Settle: Well, don't forget it's a double failure. I don't exist in that time; I exist in the results of that time. So going back to that time, and trying but failing to make myself contemporary with the time, which has to do always with the language, it becomes not an aesthetic choice but a gut choice. The aesthetic choice comes later in rewrite.

Hill: I thought that was a very honest thing you have said about your writing process: that the first draft—if it is going to come—is probably going to come fairly quickly. And then the work, the really hard work, comes after that.

Settle: That's right. The gut work is exhausting. But the hard mental work comes later. You become your critic. Not to make it prettier or to make it this or to make it that. The goal is to make it truer—do I really mean that? Does it really tell? Does the word say, *convey*, what I want it to convey?

Hill: You have also spoken about the movement from concept to specific. You've said you begin conscious of the concept, but that almost

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immediately becomes subconscious or unconscious.

Settle: As soon as you begin to get an image.

Hill: So an image is the first step toward the specific?

Settle: Yes.

Hill: And that's the level you must be working at consciously until almost the very end when you then evaluate whether you've been true to that original concept?

Settle: That's right. But you don't work consciously in the concept. You work consciously in the details.

Hill: Yes. So this is what is interesting to me. What then is the role of research here? Your writing obviously requires a different step in the process than does that of writers who don't have your conscientious attention to the history.

Settle: Often the concept is a question. I'll tell you about it in *Prisons* because that's the most obvious one. When I looked back on the quintet [Settle's *Beulah Quintet*, considered by many to be her masterwork], it started with the awful reception of *Fight Night on a Sweet Saturday*. I realized that I had failed. But I had not failed in the way that the critics thought I had.

I had failed because I had thought it began in our American psychic history, began with the land hunger. Then I kept thinking, but where did we get this land hunger? Where did we get the language? That was conceptual. I began reading history to find out where we got the language.

Before I began to read, I thought of this in terms of "I wonder if"—I wonder if we have gone through a revolutionary time that resulted in dictatorship. Long before the French. Long before the Russians. So I began to examine Cromwellian England. But I didn't have the event. And that's when I went to Burford that weekend and literally walked into the event.

Hill: So you matched concept to specific?

Settle: I matched concept to research. The specific had not come yet. It was a detective job. Why were those two chosen to be shot? I could understand Cornett Thompson. He was a rabble rouser. But why those two other ranks, two corporals? Then I had to go into the whole structure of the Parliamentary army. I began to see exactly what happened in the French Revolution, what happened in the Russian Revolution. The comrade speakers were gotten rid of, and the word "agitator," I found, that had turned into a pejorative term—outside agitator—that we still use, was actually an elected office among the other ranks in the Parliamentary army. So I realized if the elected agitators had been the ones that wrote the letter, I could perhaps find the letter, which I did.

Then I could begin to see what Corporal Church and Corporal Perkins must have been like. And then it deepened and deepened until I went and lived in the house in Burford where they were hidden. I mean they weren't hidden, but they are now!

Hill: Yes, they are there forever because you put them there.

Settle: It's like what's-his-name said about Emma Goldman. Did she ever meet J. P. Morgan? Then he said, well, she has now.

Hill: Having read in other interviews and articles about your research for *Prisons* and realizing that you experienced much of it without taking notes—

Settle: Actually that was in the research for *O Beulah Land*. I learned in *O Beulah Land* not to take notes, but to create a memory.

Hill: Isn't that very much in keeping with that conscious moving to unconscious? If you take notes, it will ever be conscious, will it not? It will move directly from the text you are reading to the text you are creating and won't ever have been processed.

Settle: That's right. It won't ever have gone through the dream state.

Hill: So are you not then really talking about a different method of research than most people would acknowledge publicly anyway? Your method seems somehow to force you to make the material your own.

Settle: That's right. It forces me into the time. That's the reason that in *Prisons*, in *O Beulah Land*, in *Know Nothing* I did no research whatsoever beyond the final day in each of those stories.

Hill: Beyond the last day of the plot of your stories?

Settle: Yes, because the language changes.

Hill: As well, I suppose, because if you research past that point you cannot help developing an ironic perspective that a person of the time could not possibly have.

Settle: That's it. The ironic perspective has to come from you. And from the reader.

Hill: Some critics have classified *The Clamshell* as a juvenile novel.

Settle: [Laughing] That's funny. It's late.

Hill: That's just one example of how your work seems to demand a certain informed participation by the reader to work. Thus, just because *The Clamshell* is about a young woman who goes off to college, it must be a book young readers would like: such thinking represents an uninformed participation. It lacks proper responsibility for the ironic perspective that must come in part from the reading act.

Settle: That's right. I demand irony from my reader. You know more than the people in the books know. I mean that's the old thing of *The Good Soldier*—although I think that was very consciously aesthetic. In my case, it wasn't. I distrust aesthetics.

Hill: You've written often from outside the academy—

Settle: Always. [Laughing]

Hill: Yes—and the academy doesn't, in some ways, know what to do with your books.

Settle: [Laughing]

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Hill: Thus, your work exists almost discrete from the academy but ironically has within it so many of the things that the academy is trying to accomplish: an integration of disciplines, an active participation with the creation of texts, all sorts of very contemporary things that the academy is working toward. Your books provide opportunity to do these very things. Does it come from this conscious rejection of aesthetics that the academy doesn't know what to do with you?

Settle: No! It comes from them. I cannot be categorized. Make a southern novelist out of me and suddenly you have to read *Prisons*. Or *Celebration*. Or *Blood Ties*. Make an international novelist out of me, and along comes *O Beulah Land* or [my character] Mrs. Hightower, who says, "I don know what you talkin' 'bout, honey."

Hill: What's your best guess about why the academy must categorize to understand?

Settle: Laziness. And it has always been true—the aesthetic categorizing. Remember, nobody remembers who Lockhart was. Everybody remembers who Keats and Emily Brontë were though. It was Lockhart who rejected both of them. Nobody remembers who Margaret Fuller was, for god's sake, big, boring woman. But everyone remembers the embarrassed man standing at the door hoping for her attention. His name was Herman Melville, and he was writing "Bartleby the Scrivener," for god's sake, which told more than anybody except Poe about the time.

Hill: When Melinda [the protagonist in *Choices*] goes to Kentucky, she must learn that there is always a right side and a wrong side but also that there is always corruption on both sides.

Settle: That's all through the book. It runs right through the whole thing.

Hill: Yes, in every situation that she faces.

Settle: I just realized that that same situation exactly exists in *Prisons*.

Hill: Exactly the question I wanted to pursue. Even in that very early novel you are exploring the "right" side as a complicated and ambiguous place. There is never, for your characters, it seems, any easy comfort even

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after they have made their right choice.

Could you extrapolate that into what you perceive to be the current situation of publishing and the academy in terms of that whole right side–wrong side dynamic?

Once you get on the right side in these worlds, do you find out the same thing that Johnny Church or Melinda has to find out?

Settle: Oh my god. That it's complicated. That the choice is personal. That the acts are personal. And that you have to realize that it is a perfect example of the academic right side being wrong in its rejection of Eurocentric culture. You don't reject one culture in order to take on another.

I keep running into this. I was on a panel the other day about Americans living abroad. It soon turned into American, British, and French films. Nobody recognized that the biggest film industry in the world is in India. That Turkey makes its own films. China makes its own films.

You don't know who Nâzim Hikmet was. He was Turkish, one of the great modern poets, who had a whole history of choices in his time. Of course, he was the perfect example of what we are talking about: those people who were dedicated Communists and then found out that Communism had already failed. It was heartbreaking for them. They didn't find it out till very late.

Hill: The debate in the academy about the rejection of Eurocentric culture is another of those issues that your work seems to foreshadow in some interesting ways. Even to provide some answers to.

Settle: I hope so. That's why it's called *Blood Ties* [the title of Settle's National Book Award-winning novel]. If you're going to drown, you are going to drown exactly like everybody else in the world.

Hill: The same person who can write *O Beulah Land* and be a "southern novelist" is also the person who can write this book [*Blood Ties*] and connect the cultures.

Settle: And it's not an aesthetic connection. I just know.

Hill: It's again that gut connection that you are talking about. Is that experiential? Intuitive? How come you know that? And so many novelists don't?

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Settle: I have to think.

How long have I known it?

I think the Second World War, being of another rank in that war, that was explosive, that was crossing a Rubicon. Or the River Styx. I cannot ever again think of one small corner of culture as being the center of culture. I can't do it. I know better. If I try to do it, I remember WAAFs, I remember people who . . . WAAFs saying, "We'd like to be friends with you but we can't because you are so different. You brush your teeth twice a day."

This is centro-centric. There must be a word. Egocentric is personal. Geocentric is what I mean. I know this is not true.

Hill: What is the reason, at least for people of my generation whose war was a different war—the Vietnam War, that our image of World War II is the exact opposite? It's what you see at the VFW and what you saw in all those veterans they interviewed when Clinton was running for office and they all agreed he wasn't qualified. How come so many people came out of the World War II experience with conclusions the exact opposite of yours?

Settle: I wasn't in the American forces.

Hill: I know. But why did so many Americans who went to Europe and Japan come back more nationalistic, more convinced that our culture was the center?

Settle: Because they were never really there. They were there under a false situation. They didn't live there. They were the visitors to a war. And when they went back to their PX, they were in America. They didn't know the language.

Hill: So they packed America and took it with them.

Settle: Exactly.

Hill: Whereas you packed your things and moved into this other world.

Settle: Yes. You see us doing it as a choice all the time. We look for—except I don't like to generalize: there are tourists who look for whatever is American no matter where they are. But when I travel it is the same attempt at something that is bound always to be a failure. That is to live

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there. If you are only there for a week, try to go there and live. Go to the same restaurants [as the native citizens]. Go to the market and buy food.

American soldiers never had a chance to do that. Few of them did.

Hill: They were really not away from home then, just in a different place. Do you think that being a woman and perceiving this phenomenon is any different than being male and perceiving it? In a sense, you were leaving behind a cultural role in addition to your nationality.

Settle: Indeed I was.

Hill: Certainly having been brought up in the South as a female, you were leaving behind—

Settle: Well, Sweetbriar and all that.

I never heard the word *hero* used. You did your job. I loathe that thing of American heroes. Nobody I knew ever thought of themselves as American heroes. They did their jobs and often it was pretty nasty. There are, I think, more people than you give credit for that are like me.

Hill: The other people who are not in the picture.

Settle: Yeah, a lot more.

Hill: In a sense when you told your story in *All the Brave Promises*, it's not just your story, but the story of all the others not usually in the picture.

Settle: Absolutely. I got a letter from General Gavin, saying he thought this was the best book he'd read about war.

Hill: The scene in *Choice*s in which the neighborhood [in London] is bombed perhaps underscores some of the differences between an American sensibility and a European one. [Note that this interview was conducted prior to 9/11.] Most Americans cannot imagine the experience described in that scene, though we have discussed, driving through Atlanta, that much of what you see here did not exist prior to Sherman.

Settle: You have hit the essential difference. Having that experience, you

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can never take your existence for granted again. I'll tell you another place in *Choices* where that's brought out. When Ty and Melinda come back from war, into a pre-war world, I have them be quite conscious of things not lasting. I think that image of Ty's bending over the rose that has survived is perhaps corny, but it is true. That makes it wonderful, doesn't it?

Hill: Do you think that that sense that we can never assume permanence, never take for granted that anything will always be here, be this way—

Settle: How can you if you know anything about history?

Hill: Then does that raise the stakes for you as an artist?

Settle: How do you mean?

Hill: The impulse as an artist is, in fact, to make something that will last. Does that job become more intimidating when you have internalized—

Settle: I see what you mean, but I just don't think in terms of lasting. I can't. I mean the only thing I can think of is that if there are thirty or forty thousand copies of a book, it is going to be hard to get rid of all of them. [Laughing]

Hill: [Laughing] So mass production is the answer.

Having had that experience [of the war], do you find that it permeates everything you write, whether it is overtly present as subject matter or not?

Settle: Well, it does. After all, it has destroyed and put together again . . .

Hill: Another pretty obvious metaphor for art perhaps?

Settle: That's right. Remember when Melinda goes with Maria [in *Choices*]. In a way, *Choices* is the culmination of all of this. Some jackass said, "She's written this before." I thought, "You fool. Of course, I've written it before."

Hill: But it occurred to me what a better reader for the other books

someone coming to your work for the first time might be if she or he read *Choices* first. That reader might be, through that experience, conditioned to that necessary irony we were discussing earlier and therefore a more informed and prepared reader for the earlier work. Because Melinda's life coincides so well with various historical moments and settings that you have worked with before, *Choices* very nicely picks up your major themes and tropes. But its essentially linear narrative, with which more readers are comfortable, may prepare a better reader for subsequent encounters with novels that are structurally somewhat more complex, such a *Blood Ties* or *Celebration*.

In a way *Choices* can function almost like a handbook to the fiction of Mary Lee Settle.

Settle: That's very interesting. That linear comfort can be deceptive though, right?

Hill: Of course. But what was taken by the reviewer as a point of criticism—that you had written this before—could just as easily have been seen as an act of illumination.

Settle: Or direction. When people recognize something, maybe they don't like it. It's only one little person who was a right-wing columnist anyway.

Hill: You have used the analogy of women throwing birth control pills to Irish women in the airport to explain your relationship with your reader. First of all, this is just a great image, in and of itself. But to me this suggests that you see your work as being thrown directly to your readers—over the heads of the publishing industry, the academy, all these forces that try perhaps to intercede. As author, you throw your work directly to the reader—over the heads of these "authority" figures—and thereby achieve a kind of direct engagement that they seek to prohibit.

Settle: That's right.

Hill: But if you follow that analogy—and this is what I've been thinking a lot about—that makes the books the birth control pills. What does that mean then the reader needs books for?

Settle: [Laughing] Like birth control?

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I don't think it will make a damn bit of difference to the reader without it. I just think a good book enhances life. Maybe people don't want to be enhanced. Mankind cannot stand very much reality.

Hill:: How would you describe your typical reader? Or do you not conceptualize such a person, a typical reader?

Settle: Max Steele's brother borrowed *O Beulah Land*, and somebody broke into his hotel room. The person stole the book and nothing else. [JH laughs] That's who I'm writing for—the kind who would want to read it enough to want to steal it.

Hill: [Laughing] That's a great story.

Settle: My readers think for themselves. They go find it. In the past. Now they are going to have a lot of help. At seventy-seven years old, I am entering the canon. I mean I've been there a long time, off and on, but this time it really is taking, you know, like a vaccination. I think this happens to every single writer. I talked about Melville. Emily Brontë. Keats. Hundreds of them. Not hundreds, but a lot of them who were simply rejected. Rejected by the critics. Or the academy. Because the world had not arrived at the place they had. We're avant-garde in the best possible way.

And you know what the avant-garde was called in the seventeenth century? The forlorn hope. Remember the Forlorns went first at Naisby? There's no better definition of a writer who is working on her own than both avant-garde and forlorn hope. Then gradually the army catches up with them. You can't expect people to catch up with you when they aren't ready.

Hill: How does it feel then to have the vaccination start to take? Do you start to move farther from the feeling that the work is yours?

Settle: I don't even think about it to tell you the truth. I honor and am grateful to my readers because Eliot said you make your own reading public. Boy, I sure have made my own. Now they get big enough so that it is not me that has to be recognized. It's them. They are big enough for recognition.

Hill: A colleague and I recently discussed this with students in a seminar

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we team-taught on canon formation, that once a critical mass of readership develops an author must be dealt with in ways no individual voice, no matter how powerful, can demand.

Settle: It has to be faced. You work to create it. You work and it is created.

You don't think I did this because I wanted to, do you? People are always saying, "If you just wrote a best seller and got some money . . ." to which I reply, "Look, if I had wanted to earn money on my back, I would have done it in a far more fascinating way." [Laughs]

"And less time-consuming."

Hill: When people ask me about your work, I often compare you to Faulkner, about whom I wrote my dissertation. No matter how my feelings about Faulkner change—and they do periodically—I always keep the conviction that for a human mind to have conceived of and held all the worlds that he captured on the page is a truly awesome thing. Even a tad scary. And the same can be said for you.

Settle: It was twenty-eight years of a sustained image. I look back on it and I wonder why I am still alive. I really do. I've always said the Bible is wrong in the story about building a tower without knowing the cost. If I had known the cost ahead of time, I never would have done this.

Hill: But having done it, can you envision having lived your life any other way? Despite the cost, the enormity of the effort, it has to have been very gratifying to have held this in your mind for those almost three decades and to have made these amazing objects—these books—from what was there. I see in *Choices* and even before it in the beautifully titled *Celebration*—in the beautiful closing scene of the moon landing—a kind of joy and lightness that suggests perhaps a change in tone or attitude?

Settle: Life itself is so miraculous. So miraculous. Just recognizing that does the job. All you have to do is to recognize it and write it down. That's what I meant when I responded to a woman who asked what I tell young writers. When I was at Bard, students would come to me with this kind of question. What do I do? What school do I go to for graduate school? That kind of thing.

I would say, "Do you have six hundred dollars?" They'd say no but they could get it. I'd say that the night before I had seen an ad on TV for

training for long-distance truck-driving. I realize, just now, telling this story that Melinda in *Choices* actually takes this advice! But, anyhow, I would tell them this and gone on to say that they should get a job after they completed this training. Their truck-driving job would pay them enough in one week to sustain them as writers the other three weeks of each month.

They went away very disappointed.

Hill: If life is so amazing, so miraculous that just that recognition is enough, how come most of the women you write about—I'm thinking here especially of the women in *The Killing Ground*—can't grasp this? How come they try so hard to convey a different attitude toward life and living?

Settle: This is the point I was trying to make: Forgive us for fighting not to see. This kid who was a bad soldier, bitter, an unemployed kid who decides he's going to be a big hero and blows up the building in Oklahoma City. If he'd realized what a little worm he was, he wouldn't have done that.

Father, forgive them for they know not what they do. That's what brings me back to the basics of Christianity. Of course it's also true in Islam and all religions that go beyond just daily survival.

Hill: Your female characters could be divided into two categories, those such as Melinda in *Choices*, or Hannah in *The Killing Ground*, who devote their lives to seeing, and those such as the women in *The Killing Ground* who appear to devote their lives to the opposite, to not seeing. At the end of life, Melinda and Hannah and your other women like them have the accomplishment of a life actually lived. What do these other women have, the not-seers?

Settle: They turn blue and they don't have any flesh on them and they drive cars. They have lady farts when they shut the door. They have been entirely successful in their own way. They are dying. They have been dying since they were twenty-eight years old.

There are other choices, though. I have friends I have grown up with who have gone into politics. You don't have to write books, you know. One of my best friends, my cousin Martha, she's been in the West Virginia Senate. She went from Vassar and taught school. She didn't have to. Her father was a coal owner, and Martha's very much like me. I mean, we are

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of the same world of choices.

Hill: What's your conception of Henry James?

Settle: I don't like him.

Hill: Tell me why.

Settle: I can tell you very easily why. Because he saw the world from across the street. The only thing I like of him is "The Beast in the Jungle." I distrust women who like Henry James too much because they see themselves as diaphanous draperies and eyelashes. [JH laughs] My god, they don't shit, they don't have babies, they don't, you know, they're not alive!

Hill: One of the things that your fiction does very nicely is to fit into what I call the "stream of greatness" in the American novel: Hawthorne, James, Faulkner. At some point they deal with European settings as well as American settings. They take American characters to a higher level of complexity and understanding about life by moving them to Europe. Your work comes to illustrate the tradition of the American novel, and this seems underscored in *Choices*.

You must have had to answer the question of what you think about Faulkner hundreds of times.

Settle: His essential mistake is such a deep rift from me that I can't sympathize. I like some things. *The Reivers* and where they're all going somewhere in a wagon, I mean, some scenes. I really like some scenes. They're wonderful. But he never recognized one essential point about the South: that Sartoris on Sunday is Snopes on Monday. That they are the same man. That that split which is that stupid southern snobbery, that there are gentlemen and then there are others—

Hill: So from your perspective he couldn't have written that scene in *The Killing Ground* in which Johnny and Jake face each other through that window at the country club?

Settle: No, no, no. Where they reflect each other? No, he couldn't have. He didn't know.

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Hill: For him, that would have been a scene that would never have occurred.

Settle: He wouldn't have thought of it. You've got a Sartoris off like this and a Snopes off like that. This is ridiculous. I saw a wonderful example of it. I was in one of those weekend yammering sessions about religion with someone I had grown up with who was a coal owner. We were talking about the poor this and poor that, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Then Monday morning he went out and bought a piece of machinery that put five hundred people out of work: Sartoris on Sunday, some sort of cross between Scarlett O'Hara and Snopes on Monday.

Which, by the way, is why I think *Gone with the Wind* is a good book. The burning of Atlanta is marvelous in that book!

Hill: Is it then Faulkner's failure—as you see it—to perceive the relationship that links Sartoris on Sunday to Snopes on Monday that has ironically enshrined him as the southern writer? Does this failure make us comfortable with a certain veiled relationship to our reality?

Settle: We accept it. Yes.

I'll tell you a story.

When I was doing research for *The Scapegoat*, I went up Paint Creek and talked to a lot of coalminers. I said to one very old miner, "Was anybody shot when the Bull Moose Special came up the mountain?" He said, "You know, not but one person was shot. They was all drunk and the trestle was too high and they fired up on the hill. This is the true story.

But I did see one fellow shot. I was a little boy, setting out side the railroad track. There was some fellow setting there too. The train come up the river, and there was a"—what was the word he used? What's the old word for salesman?

Hill: Drummer?

Settle: That's it. There was a drummer aboard, standing on the end of the caboose. The drummer saw these fellows sitting beside the tracks and hollered out, "You rednecks, you rednecks." And this old coal miner I was talking to said, "That other fellow with me got so mad he just picked up his gun and shot that fellow right between the eyes."

He said, "You know, we don't like to be called rednecks."

I was in a forum sponsored by the *Nation*. They were talking about

prejudice and pejorative terms. I got mad. I got up and said, "You would never use the word nigger. You would never use the word sheeny. But how many of you liberals have used the word redneck in the last month? And I just sat down. There was dead silence in that room.

It has to do with the "us" and the "them." It's what I've said all the way through. Jake and Johnny [from *The Killing Ground*] are brothers.

Hill: What's the investment then of the women in maintaining the false distinction?

Settle: They don't keep it. They imitate the oppressor.

Hill: Yes, that's one of the most important themes of *The Killing Ground*, that deadly aping.

Settle: That's right. It goes on right through. Sal in *O Beulah Land*, your sort of provincial woman, is aping the English culture of class.

Hill: In *The Killing Ground* you have a scene in which Hannah goes back to a house that is important to her from her childhood, and the current resident lets her walk through the home. But you have the plot of the woman's soap opera intercut with Hannah's memories and emotions during the visit. Someone asked me about humor in your work, and I used that scene as an example of what I see as typical of your humor.

What's your sense of how big a role humor plays as you are telling your story?

Settle: Well, it had better play a lot. Mrs. Hightower in *Choices*, for example, is screamingly funny. A damned nuisance, let me tell you, what she says about the second sight.

Hill: Does that come again from your hearing the characters instead of from some aesthetic construct?

Settle: No, no. You don't impose. Never impose. Part of human character is whether you have a sense of humor or not. A character may not have a conscious sense of humor. You don't laugh at Mrs. Hightower. I never thought in terms of a comic character. There's no such thing. Anymore than there's a Snopes and a Sartoris that way.

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Hill: Talk to me a bit about your conception of the genre of the novel and then this subset of the novel, this box out of that, that people call the historical novel.

Settle: That's just silly because any novel written about the past is an historical novel in the terms of that definition. The only thing I might say is that a novel written about a time before the author's birth, for example, *The Red Badge of Courage*, becomes a historical novel in a slightly different way. Yet it is not called that. *War and Peace* is a historical novel.

Hill: If you had to name the American novelist that you see yourself coming out of the tradition of most clearly, who would you name?

Settle: Mark Twain.

Hill: Tell me about that.

Settle: Kenny and Betty Johnson asked me why no southern novel before the Civil Rights Movement has any black people in it other than the lovely wise Mammy figure sitting in the den. I even did that, as you know, in *The Kiss of Kin*. I made the same mistake that everybody else did. There are fine old black mammies, of course.

There are some other folks too, though.

Nobody remembers *Puddinhead Wilson*, an ironic novel about the culture one lives in, about forming one. I mean, my god, it's the anti-racist novel of all time.

Hill: I just got through teaching *Huckleberry Finn* to my sophomore American literature class.

Settle: There you are. Jim is a real human being, for the first time, a human being. People have no sense of going back behind the book in time and coming up toward it. That's where you know when a book is revolutionary. *The Confidence Man* is another perfect example of that. Early Dos Passos. And the Snopes-Sartoris character of all time is in Fitzgerald's great novel, is Gatsby. Gatsby is always behaving like both. He is both. And I think *Gatsby* is the best American novel of the twentieth century.

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Hill: Talk to me about women.

Settle: Women writers or women characters? Because I don't think of writers as men or women. In terms of characters I am interested in women, who, because of their culture, had to develop themselves through the men that they were in love with or knew or whatever.

Melinda [the protagonist of *Choices*], who has now become a legend of the Kreggs, the great Melinda, we saw her as a little girl, a poor relation, with no way out. Caught in that situation and not even having the language of a way out. This is how far we have come. We have the language of a way out. We have choices that she didn't have.

I think of Lily [in *The Scapegoat*] beginning to have choices, but of course she dies of them. Hannah [in *The Killing Ground*] certainly has choices, but with Melinda you get to see how the character grows.

Maybe the answer is to have a life of your own and share it, as Melinda does.

I've never liked being a writer very much, Jane. I don't like the life. I like my hard life. I don't like the literary life.

When *The Love Eaters* came out to all those good reviews, I was living in London already at work on *O Beulah Land*. Angus Wilson came up to me in the British Museum one day as I was working and said, "Oh, darling, isn't it marvelous? You won't have to do journalism anymore." That was how I was earning my living at the time. Angus went on describing my new life. He said, "You can do reviews, essays, you can have a whole life as a literary critic based on these reviews."

I looked up at him, and I said, "Angus, I don't want to write about it. I want to write it."