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Conversation: Gumbo Stew, Cajun Country, and Cooking Up Southern Literature

ASW: First, thank you, Hardy, for taking the time to visit with Red Truck Review about your novel, [Every Bitter Thing](#), and your forthcoming memoir, *People of the Good God*. Both of these works share the commonality of exploring complex human communities that are tucked within American Southern culture. Both of these books reveal the diversity of Southern sub-cultures that make up the fabric of the “American South.” Are you motivated as a writer to show this diversity? Or, are you creating organically as you write, and realize after the fact that you are a chronicler of a diverse, contemporary South?

Very early in my work, my stories were set all over. Some were in the South, but I wasn’t consciously trying to write about the region or its people. Like many writers, when I began, I didn’t think my surroundings were worthy of “literature.” My mindset changed when in college I was introduced to writers such as Philip Roth, Bobbi Ann Mason, Ernest J. Gaines, Tim Gautreaux, and Dorothy Allison. After a couple of years of writing stories with generic settings and characters, I purposely began writing about Cajun characters. In those stories, I tried to capture an older time, late 19th and early 20th century; the Louisiana that I had heard about from my mother and romanticized in my mind. Because I was trying to capture characters and settings that I had not experienced or researched, the stories lacked development. The next stage in my development as a writer was using modern Southern settings and characters. Some were Cajun, but not all, and I began to use Southern settings outside of Louisiana. My novel [Every Bitter Thing](#) resulted from this stage of my writing.

In the last few years, my milieu has become more international. I have a flash fiction chapbook manuscript, *The Americanization of Li Ming*, set in Southeast Asia and each story contains a female protagonist. In one

of those stories I combine the South and Asia by having a Cajun character in Thailand, but the other stories do not have any Southern characters. *Every Bitter Thing* and *People of the Good God* were begun when I had lived primarily in the South, but since then, I lived a year in South Korea, and I currently live part of the time in Oklahoma and Thailand; as my experiences grow beyond the South, my writing moves beyond the South.

ASW: Wesley Royal Sr., the father in the novel, hopes to make pudgy adolescent Wesley Royal Jr. “into a man” by enrolling him in a tae kwon do class, and also attempts to mold his son to grow into an uncaring, boorish man. Could you tell us about a particular scene between father and son that especially resonates with you?

The scene in chapter six in which the father brings home the boxing gloves for his son to wear while punching the oak tree where the father’s pigeons roost. This scene resonates with me because all the members of the family are present: the father dominating the son, the son trying to figure out how to please his father, and the mother stepping in to protect the son. As with most things the father does, his gift of the boxing gloves seems well intended as well as his teaching the son how to use the jab to control his sparring opponents, but the father’s temper ruins what could have been a learning moment.

The fight scene in chapter 13 is important to the father/son relationship because here the son sees that his father’s bravado has teeth. And since the father constantly regales the son with stories from his past, having the son see his father act out the heroism/violence of his stories augments the son’s respect for his father. Wesley Jr. doesn’t respect his father’s bigotry, but after seeing his father defeat the tae kwon do instructor, he gains a new appreciation of his father as a protector.

ASW: This novel has often been classified as a “Coming of Age” novel. I have to disagree with this, somewhat, because your novel explores so much more. I find [Every Bitter Thing](#) a compelling novel that also explores female survival within a patriarchal household, which makes this novel very much a journey of female survival and strength. As a writer, did you have a prototype/s to model the mother in the novel after?

With the Royal family, I used my parents and myself as the models. My mother, like Raynell, was a buffer between me and my father, and their marriage was often abusive; primarily verbal, but at times violent. So while *Every Bitter Thing* focuses on the father/son relationship, Raynell is important in Wesley, Jr.’s life. She does what she can to protect her son from the father’s violence and provides a more steadying influence in the family. Yet I did not want her to be meek. She speaks her mind to her husband; Wesley Jr. even mentions that when her character is introduced in the book. Simultaneously, I didn’t want her to be a saint. In chapter nine, when Raynell and Wesley Jr. are alone she tells him that part of the reason she tolerates her husband’s abuse is because Wesley Sr. is a good provider. As with the cut-throat business-mind of Wesley Sr., I wanted to show that this mindset was not exclusive to the father.

ASW: Do you plan to have a sequel, or follow-up to this Southern Gothic novel? I heard Wesley Royal, Sr. may take a turn and try some religion?

I have a follow-up novel manuscript titled *Calming the Fire*. The novel is a dark comedy focused on family dynamics. As most of us know, family can bring out the best and worst in a person. Wesley, Sr. decides to join the Church of Latter-Day Saints to save his marriage to Raynell. In *Calming the Fire*, the reader meets the remaining living members of Wesley Sr.’s family: his hard-shell Baptist octogenarian mother and alcoholic sister. Wesley Sr.’s family and his sister’s family are summoned by the mother to her west Texas penthouse to discuss Wesley Sr.’s possible defection from the Baptist Church. Readers also meet Raynell’s