

Clark Blaise: *The Interviews*, J.R. (Tim) Struthers, editor. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2016.

reviewed by David Vermette

A book of interviews is a meta product. It is only as engaging as the interviewee, and deeply dependent upon the interlocutors to cultivate a dialogue worth reading as an independent work. These interviews with author Clark Blaise, eighteen conversations with various interviewers over a forty-year span, welcome readers into the workshop of a master craftsman. This book is a collection of dialogues where writerly writers and literati talk about writing, an exercise that might interest only the cognoscenti but for the striking portrait of the artist it draws.

The Blaise who emerges from *The Interviews* is a man not so much immersed as enmeshed in his art. Blaise studied writing formally. He served a long apprenticeship and created acclaimed work of superb precision especially in the short story genre. He became a teacher of writing and a global herdsman of scribes as Director of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa.

But long before all that, as these interviews reveal, Blaise was an “anchor baby,” born in North Dakota in 1940, during the period when Canada was fighting WWII—but the U.S. was not. Blaise’s parents, his English-Canadian mother and French-Canadian father, saw American citizenship as a survival strategy for their only child, as Britain and its empire fought a Nazi regime that happened to be winning the war. Blaise’s peripatetic childhood took him from an old Dixie portion of Florida, to the broad Prairies of Manitoba, to the steel town of Pittsburgh, to urban Cincinnati, foregrounding the quandary about identity: the query “*Who am I?*” Blaise’s *mode de vie* continued into adulthood to bear a resemblance to the *voyageur* rather than the *habitant* archetype of his father’s people, and this tendency toward mobility kept the identity question in the air.

Was he a Canadian who mixed the lines of the French and the English, *les deux peuples fondateurs*? Was he a Canadian-American or an American-Canadian? A cosmopolitan, with an international marriage, but equally at home in Iowa City? A Southern writer who penned Pittsburgh stories?

He was all of that, of course. This legion within himself, expressing itself in the variety of *mise-en-scènes*, concerns, and techniques of his work, is a facet of what he terms “border consciousness.” The border as grand metaphor. The border is, by definition, the liminal, the marginal, the line waiting for someone to cross it. Borders are locations, geographic or psychological, where different languages, worldviews, and (even) empires bump up against one another with untimely, unpredictable consequences. In isolated moments and episodes, these collisions appear as coincidence or as accident, and in several of the interviews Blaise speaks to the stochastic forces in the worlds he creates. But Blaise’s work

does not impose a bland order upon these forces; his work acknowledges chaos and forms a relationship with it.

Blaise's connections to the Franco-American community speak to the theme of border consciousness. His Franco-American connection is through his father, who vehemently rejected the Catholic faith, a pillar of French-Canadian identity in his day, and became a traveling salesman living for extended periods in the USA. Blaise's French-Canadian connections are to Montreal, a place where he lived for an extended, productive period of his life. It was his father who did a stint working in the New England mills as child labor. Sadly, Blaise has not (yet) published the full-blown New England Franco-American novel that he researched diligently and which he discusses in several of the interviews, although his short story *The Kerouac Who Never Was* is set in this milieu. Blaise claims that for a span measured in years he read little else but research on Franco-American New England.

In conversation, Blaise comes across as generous but not ingratiating. *Bon mots* fly off like sparks, while entire aesthetics of fiction writing are compressed into brief formulae or abbreviated in a single reference to an author. Blaise, the teacher, demonstrates a firm command of the literature and how to unwrap it. Peering deeper, he gives the impression of someone who experienced a period of intense suffering that was endured in silence long ago. "*Cunning, exile and silence*," are the strategies Blaise says his fictional characters rely upon, and in this typically epigrammatic utterance, the author, as conscious or unwitting biographer, peeks out from behind the curtain.

One quibble: editor Tim Struthers places at the opening of the book one of his own conversations with Blaise that begins with a lengthy anecdote from the interviewer that occupies the better part of five pages. This seems an odd editorial choice. It is a long wait before patient readers hear from the subject of the book. If the interviews were arranged in chronological order, and Struthers' interview, one among several of his own in the book, were the first in that order, then the editor's decision might follow, but the interviews are not so arranged.

The earliest of these collected interviews dates to the 1970s when neither Blaise nor anyone else could know that the questions about identity raised by his life and work would become a central concern of the early twenty-first century. For his nuanced and complex understanding of these questions alone, expressed without fashionable jargon or moral preening, this collection rewards attention. Professional or aspiring writers—concerned with the details of the craft of writing and the life of the writer—will find in these pages an author operating at a very high level of mastery of his materials and his resources.