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Exile Talks to Reginald McKnight

Reginald McKnight is the author of the short story collections Moustapha's Eclipse, The Kind of Light That Shines on Texas, White Boys *and the novel* I Get on the Bus. *He is best known for his short fiction and has been awarded an O. Henry Award, the Pushcart Prize, the Drue Heinz Literary Prize, the PEN Hemingway Special Citation, a Whiting Writer's Award and an NEA fellowship. He currently teaches at the University of Maryland. McKnight recently delivered a reading at Denison and two* Exile *staffers were granted a rather long and rather wonderful conversation.*

Exile: You mentioned before that writers are not merely individuals; they are more like compilations of different writers, and you focused on the legacy of writing. Could you talk a little more about that?

McKnight: Nothing is done in a vacuum, particularly with this art form. I think it is possible for there to be painters who are native painters, sculptors, singers: people who sort of rise out of the sea on a halfshell with very little formal study and almost no formal tutoring or teaching. With writing it depends upon mimesis; you have to read in order to write. Writing is perhaps the most tenuous art form in a certain sense because it is wholly dependent upon what surrounds you, what you have read; you could read your work aloud, particularly if you are a poet or a playwright, and your words can be interpreted, but, for the writer of prose, reading always has to be part of the practice. I shudder at those writers who say—and a lot of my students will say this—"I really don't like to read that much. I like to write." It drives me crazy, and I don't know how to ameliorate that. Usually, it turns out that most people aren't serious in the long run and give up. Why do they give up? Because they are not fueling themselves. Fuel is what proceeds us. It's literature. As I said in class earlier today, I don't recommend anyone being too selective, especially when you're beginning. You should read everything available, everything—that includes poetry, prose, as well as drama, that includes newspaper editorials—everything because each different genre, each different category or type of prose writing is talking about the dynamics of rhythm, which is very important. It helps develop the ear to be exposed to different forms of verbal expression.

Exile: You just mentioned rhythm, and this may seem a little silly, but how important is music to you?

McKnight: It's real important. I remember when I was working on my novel *Get on the Bus* I listened to this one tape over and over again because it had the kind of mood and rhythm I was trying to establish in the book. When I was about three-quarters of the way through the final draft the tape burned—it got caught up in the tape player. I was so pissed off. I tore the thing out of the cassette case and threw it on the floor. But I ran to the nearest record store and bought another one. I had to order it, so I had to wait two weeks before I could write again. So, yes, rhythm is extremely important. I always teach my students that lan-

guage is music; therefore, you have to learn the delicacies and intricacies of grammar and mechanics. You have to learn how to use semicolons as opposed to colons because they are the rest stops, the pauses, which are akin to musical notes. Consequently, in every short story or chapter I evaluate I mark those things. Some of my students complain because I mark everything I can, but the reason is that every piece should have a particular rhythm. Everybody's speech does. The human voice is a musical instrument. Very much so. I remember once teaching a class and saying similar things, and this one young woman said, "All this stuff you're saying about voice, about music, doesn't really matter for my generation because everybody I know speaks the same way." I said, "Listen to people. You're not listening to people." How is it that you can recognize a friend's voice in a crowd? Because it's the expression, not just the tone, but the rhythm and the rhyme of the speech. She looked really skeptical. She crossed her arms and said, "I don't think so. I think all my friends speak the same way." So I said, "I tell you what. Tape record them, and then transcribe the sentences, and then tell me if they all speak the same way." She tried it. She came up to me two days later and said, "You were right about it. Everybody does speak differently." Frankly, it's not an issue for every writer, though. There are certain writers who write terrific novels but who have absolutely no ear. Stephen Crane wasn't a great prose stylist but his novels are terrific. Balzac—same sort of problems. But rhythm is most important to the short story writer because our genre is somewhat closer to poetry than it is to the straight, prose novelistic manner.

Exile: Along with American language and culture, how much to you draw upon African cultures and your experiences in Africa in your work?

McKnight: Enormously. It's hard to articulate the exact extent because I think real influence is almost unreal, like the subconscious. You don't go out and say, "I'm going to go to Italy for six months and get some experience," because it's hard to know what experiences will be conducive to good writing, great writing. There are those students who go out and work in canneries in Alaska because they wanted that experience, when really it's right in your own back yard. The important thing is the attention to detail. The nuance of human life which has to be captured with the writer's eye. You don't have to go out and do exciting things.

So I would say it was an enormous experience, but it wasn't anything like I thought it would be. The first two weeks I contracted malaria—cerebral malaria which is deadly and very painful. I wasn't looking for that. I was just hoping for some nice walks on the beaches and that sort of thing. One thing I learned was the nuance of gesture, blocking. When I refer to blocking I mean the special kinds of descriptions connected to dialogue. "'I love you,' she said" is fine depending on the context. "'I love you,' she said, jingling the keys in her pocket, looking out the window" speaks volumes. I didn't speak the language well when I first got there...so everything was reduced to gestures for me. I was at the level of a two-year-old child who can't speak any language fluently. So I communicated and received information by reading people's faces and hands. One of my first encounters with an individual, only hours after arriving, was with a pickpocket who wasn't very good. The reason he wasn't very effective with me is because I watched everything he did. I watched his body movements instead of listening to his words which he used to distract. Prestegitation—that

is, magic tricks—always include a story which distracts. While magicians are doing things with their hands and telling this story, they are also doing things with their eyes and mouths. They're distracting people from their hands, so they can conceal the object they've been manipulating. There's a certain age of kid with which it won't work at all—those kids who don't understand narrative well—and three- or five-year-olds are very good at just saying, "It's behind his coat. It's in his sleeve," because they can pick up that thing very well because language means very little to them. I've had 15 years now to process all that stuff in Africa, and I'm still discovering every moment what I learned there.

Exile: I know that only some of your work is autobiographical, but how much of it has to do with memory, little bits that you remember? How much do you use in your work?

McKnight: It's hard to say in terms of percentages. Hard to say. Memory is very slippery. I have a usually reliable long-term memory and—thanks to some indiscretions in the 70's—not such a great a short-term memory, but I do remember things that friends who have experienced the same things have forgotten completely. The important thing is not to remember things specifically but to remember them in kind, in category, to have the right instinct and intuition about human nature. Those things come from the gut more than from the mind. There are things I experienced in Africa that seem incredible to me now. A lot of people will talk about my novel not knowing that the most of protean stuff, the customary stuff, the normative stuff I entirely made up. some of the more fantastical and surreal and bizarre things actually happened. Reviewers, however, have read it the opposite way. "Why didn't you just write about this peace corps volunteer who just had a specific experience without all this spiritual, metaphysical crap," they frequently asked. Charles Johnson, I remember, came down real hard on me for that sort of thing. If I ever meet with the guy I will either punch him in the nose or sit down and talk with him and tell him about some of these experiences which he thought were wholly made up.

If you're a realist you want readers to have the sense that there is an actual life that is taking place there on the page. I am a little annoyed by people who insist there are certain passages that correspond directly to life. Reviewers have an annoying tendency to do that—all the time people will speculate and return to your history. People were certain that I was a peace corps volunteer, and I was not. I knew peace corps volunteers. You're like the movie version of Dr. Frankenstein. You get the spleen from this body, and the heart from that one, and you stitch it all together. And it walks and talks and crushes people's skulls. The idea is to do a kind a surgery, a kind of grafting, and you want to do it as seamlessly as possible—yet I don't understand why things that are true people don't believe. There's this story I tell people all the time, with respect to this.

When I was a kid in Louisiana, I got into a shoving match with a couple of boys, and then two or three more come dashing across the playground to help them—as if they needed help, as if I'm this powerful warrior—I was just one kid. So I'm being chased by five or six boys, and the teacher, of course, blows her whistle at me, telling me to stop running. I stopped, and a kid tripped and ran smack into me—his face hit my back, and his whole face kind of slid down my butt. It occurred in early adolescence, and you're often in the process of losing your teeth in that stage. He lost two of them in my back pocket—they were ripped out of his mouth. And I didn't know this for sometime. He's rolling around the

ground, bleeding from the mouth and nose. Everyone was terribly alarmed. They thought I had turned around and punched him, so I was taken to the office and was dressed-down by the vice-principal—who in those days was the enforcer and still is probably. I'm trying to explain to him what had happened to him. "You see he hit me like this, and then I felt this little lump in my back pocket." My fingers touched his teeth in my backpocket, and I was like, "Jesus, his teeth are in my back pocket." I didn't say this to the vice-principal of course because he would have thought I had taken them as trophies. It was kind of gross having these two funky, yellow-green teeth in my back pocket. They stayed there all day long, and I felt them all day long, like they were burning a hole in my ass. As soon as I got home, I took them out and put them on the windowsill and just stared at them thinking, "No one is going to believe this. No one will." The poor kid never found out what had happened to his teeth. I never told him. I threw them out eventually. They were gross. You really can't put that short of thing in a short story, can you? No one would believe it, yet if you make stuff up, lie your ass off, people believe it.

Exile: Several of your stories, "Homunculus" and "Soul Food," for example, can be fitted into certain genres—fantasy, science fiction, horror. What are your thoughts on genre?

McKnight: I was really delighted that "Homunculus" was in 1993's *Best Fantasy and Sci-fi and Horror*, published by St. March. "Soul Food" was anthologized in something called *Rocky Mountain Horror* or something about horror stories set in Colorado—go figure, who's going to buy this book? But it was an anthology of horror stories.

I think we get far too snooty in the academy about genre, and it annoys me greatly. It's the same sort of consciousness that spurns segregation and apartheid, those sorts of things. There can be good and bad literature in every genre, and there is. I'm not going to name names, at least as bad writers are concerned, but you can't tell me that Ursula K. LeGuin's *Left Hand of Darkness* is not a very powerful and great novel and piece of writing. You can call it fantasy, you can call it science fiction, whatever you want. Margaret Attwood's *Handmaid's Tale* you can call sci-fi, speculative fiction—what it is, is a great piece of work, a great piece of literature. You can call Cormac McCarthey's *Blood on the Radiator* a cowboy book if you want to, but it's really not—it's just a magical piece of literature. There are books that are written for the express purpose of making a living, and not much of the person's heart is in it. That bothers me, yet I feel that what we consider bad and what we consider good is not necessarily so. I'm not going to say that James Joyce is a hack and that in the next 40 years he will be revealed as a hack. I think people who say that are dead wrong. If you read Ulysses you'll see what effect it has had on everything that has come after—the writing of Faulkner, Nathaniel West, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Edith Wharton—and they in turn have affected the following generations. I think sometimes you have to assess great work by what effect it has had on works that have followed. That's a little harder to do because there are so many different strings of influence. You can spend an entire lifetime trying to familiarize yourself with the literature in a single nation in Africa, for example. You couldn't really read and know every work by Nigerian writers or South African writers or really try to. So I believe, for a writer of fiction, a real writer of fiction, or a playwright, it's good to read a bit of everything, to be as catholic in your approach to reading as possible. Sometimes you'll want to narrow down on one writer. For example,

there was a period when I was reading a lot of Nadine Gordimer's work because I love her short stories—stories no one else is seemingly able to write with such subtly and grace. I didn't try to crib from her in any specific way, just immersing myself in her work changed my work on a subconscious level. Granted, there are times where you'll read a passage over and over just to figure out how someone does something, and that has value. That passage has that perfect distillation of expression you're looking for. *(Pause.)* Have either of you read Neil Gaiman? I mentioned him in class earlier today.

Exile: *The Sandman* series? He writes comic books.

McKnight: He's brilliant. He really is, but here in the U.S., you know, we look aslant at people who read comics, so-called graphic novels because they have pictures; pictures are for idiots, you know. They're for people who can't order their own food in restaurants. That's far from true. Gaiman's quite a poet. He's quite a good writer. There are other comic series I read, one called *Preacher*, and some of them are pretty violent and use far too many curse words—imagine me saying they use far too many curse words—but on the whole it's a fascinating genre. I'd love to write a script for one of those things someday.

Exile: I'm glad you mentioned that. I still read comic books and feel like I have to keep them in my desk drawers. There's a kind of intellectual shame attached to them, but they seem, to me at least, to be a kind of American mythology.

McKnight: Yes, certainly. You'll see people in Japan on subways reading comics all the time. They're businessmen; guys who pull down three million yen a year will read comics. That's the difference in one culture to the next. We tend to make them very anti-intellectual. Parents will always decry their children's interest in these books, but they don't know what they're missing, as far as I'm concerned. Granted, some of that stuff is pretty lurid and in poor taste. I grew up in the Silver Age era—*Batman*, *Superman*, *Green Lantern*—which was really watered down. There were standards. They were fun but they weren't what I'd considered fine art like these later things are because they take risks. All the risk was gleaned out of the Silver Age stuff. There was a time when you couldn't show the word "pee" in a comic or a certain kind of violence—you couldn't show a police man being shot. It was a time when truth, justice and the American way continually had to be espoused, and comic books became a kind of pamphlet rather than a work of art. When anything is reduced to a tract for political reasons, then artistic potential is sapped. I also think if anything is written purely for lucre, purely as an economic gesture, then it's hard to call it art. But I don't want to get into aesthetics. That would take forever.

Exile: Since we are on this comic tangent, I would just like to ask quickly what your views are on other mass media forms, like TV and film, which involve writing?

McKnight: The good, the bad, and the ugly. There's some really great stuff out there. As I said in class earlier today, you should not try to predict what will be considered a great work

40 or 50 years from now. I know that if I'm around 40 or 50 years from now I know what I'll be reading, personally; however, as a society, we can't predict great works. I know that if I stayed at Carnegie Mellon one more year I would have taught a course on serious comics, but I went to a place that was a good deal more conservative and abandoned the idea. I love movies. I watch a lot of them. Tell me if this is true, but I have the suspicion that people of your generation find it much harder to watch black-and-white films than people in my generation. Am I wrong in that?

Exile: I don't think so. I love them
Exile: He's a film major. He doesn't count. He's not real.

McKnight: They are wonderful, but I guess I'm a victim of my generation. I don't care for many silent movies. I find them a little hard to watch. There are some which I think are really great—*Metropolis*, *Greed*—the odd few—but they're not something I typically watch. Even Chaplin. I've watched a couple of his movies and that's about it.

Someone asked me my favorite movie once, and I was surprised I said, *Jacob's Ladder*. It just came out, and I think it is a wonderful movie, partly because it is both heartening and disturbing at the same time and because it deals with a generation with which I'm familiar—the Vietnam era. There's a truthfulness to it and a risk to it that I don't see in a lot of movies. There are a lot of phony risks, like showing two people humping in a car, but that's not a risk—there's a whole genre of porn movies where you'll see that. As far as TV goes, I like *The Simpsons* and *Seinfield*. There's not much more I watch. I'll watch the occasional baseball game. I try to keep current on everything so I know what my students are talking about. But there's a lot I can't take. I don't have the usual contempt that writers have for the mass media because I'm really surprised that people are still reading books despite all kinds of distractions, all kinds of ways to not read books in this world. Books can have nothing to do with your life. I'm perfectly delighted when I walk into a *Barnes and Noble*—as scurrilous at that institution may be—and just see people buying books and reading books. It's wonderful.

Exile: I just saw *Full Metal Jacket* for the first time the night after reading your story "Boot." I was wondering if you saw the film and if you see any similarities between the two?

McKnight: I thought the first half was the most accurate depiction of boot camp I have seen on film. The rest of it was real filmy; it was art. It made war into art, which I don't know why people are so tempted to do. I'm not sure whether art and war should not share the same space. War is absolutely confusing and terribly ugly—there's not a pretty thing about it. I think sometimes people have to write about these things—that's why I like Tim O'Brien's "The Things They Carried," that sort of thing. I could see why someone would want to express that verbally, but why people who never experienced combat would want to express it, I don't know. Kubrick is a great director; there's no question about it, and he really understands boot camp. He gets it down to a certain degree. There's a scene which is chillingly like something that happened in my company in basic training, where a kid blows his brains out.

Rifle training is the most dangerous part of boot camp for everybody, for the recruits, for the drill instructors. They make sure as strongly as they can to inculcate you, to make you to be as disciplined as possible, before they put live weapons into your hands. Yet every so often, a kid will stick a barrel in his mouth and blow the back of his head open, and I remember the DI marching us by the area where a kid had done it outside the barracks. He marched us to the side of the barrack, made us do a right face, and look at the mess on the wall—all the bits of brain and hair and all that stuff. He said, "Take a look, a good long look, privates. Take a real good, long look and keep saying to yourself, 'It ain't that fucking bad.'" He made us go left face and marched us to the firing lines.

It's really hard to capture that stuff on film since so much of it happens in the mind. As I write in "Boot," they keep you off-balance on purpose. The idea in the first three or four weeks is to strip you of your personality as much as they can, as effectively as they can. They know how to do it. They're better at it than the movies. They're better at it than anyone I know. They've done it for over 200 years. What the screenplay beautifully captures is that they don't want you to be automatons—they're not asking you to be robots—but highly-disciplined individuals. Maybe the Army wants you to be one way or the other, but the Marine Corps, at least as I understood it even as a young recruit, wanted you to be a trained killer—very disciplined but still with a little feistiness and fight, cockiness, so you can go to some foreign land and get your ass shot to pieces. Kubrick does a good job of that. He really does. The other half of the film I really didn't care for. It's still an effective movie. It's still good art. His job is to recreate reality; it's just that I wonder what has always fascinated directors about war so much. There are so many other things you could film. I guess it's really glamorous when you get down to it. For some bizarre reason. Great stories, however, happen in the most common places.

—Paul Durica '00 and Alison Stine '00