

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

>> This is Cheryl Cannady at the Library of Congress. Late September will mark the 11th year that booklovers of all ages have gathered in Washington, D.C. to celebrate the written word at the Library of Congress National Book Festival. The Festival will be two days this year; Saturday, September 24, 10 AM to 5:30 PM and Sunday, September 25, 1 PM to 5:30 PM. Free and open to the public, the Festival will take place between 9th and 14th Streets on the National Mall, rain or shine. For more details, visit www.loc.gov/bookfest. And now, it is my pleasure to introduce Russell Banks, whose latest book is titled "Lost Memory of Skin". Mr. Banks is a two time Pulitzer Prize finalist and past President of the International Parliament of Writers. Mr. Banks, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Well, thank you for having me.

>> You've tackled difficult subjects in your novels; family violence, teen runaways, race relations among them. An in your new book, "Lost Memory of Skin", you spotlight another controversial aspect of society. What motivates you to take on these tough subjects?

>> I guess that's a good question; one that's difficult for me to answer. I think, I write fiction primarily to try to understand what would be otherwise not, would be otherwise, a mystery to me. Would not be understandable, and the process of writing fiction in a way allows me to penetrate that mystery. I think that in this case, I was trying to understand something, which is very difficult for most of to have any insight into, and that's basically pedophilia, sex offenders, and the world, psychological and social, that surrounds them. It's controversial, and even in some ways, a taboo subject, but it is also for me, and I think for most of us, a mysterious subject. The process of writing fiction, I guess because of its requirements really of honesty and clarity, have led me to be able to understand what in many ways in my day to day life and normally, I could not understand.

>> How has your writing changed your perspective about your life?

>> Well, it, I think has brought me deeper and broader understanding of people who are not like myself; either racially or in terms of gender or economically or psychologically and so forth. So, in that sense, it's expanded my imagination, and at the same time, expanded my ethical center. I speak strictly for myself. I don't know how it affects my readers. That's something else altogether. But, in answer to your question, really that is how I think over the years, and now I've been doing it for almost half a century, I think that's been the affect on me.

>> You said that your role as a story teller versus a messenger, delivering a good story with vivid characters. However, your books always seem to carry a message; even if it's not intentional.

>> Well, you know, I don't have an ideology or political agenda that I'm driven by or that I'm certainly referring to in my writing, in my fiction. But, inevitably, how I position myself and have come to

understand the world, inevitably, that's going to come across, and my affection for the underdog, for the loser, for the outsider, the marginalized, is bound to come through in some way or other. But, that's not really a message, that's just the quality of the writer's imagination. I think we take that from every writer; from every work of literature from, you know, from Homer on down to today. Whatever the writer's sensibility is is going to be present in every sentence, in every detail, and every line of dialogue that the writer puts down.

>> How do you bring such humanity to your characters and actually insight into the human condition?

>> Well, I guess I have to keep my eyes open and on those people who are normally invisible to the rest of us. And, I have to keep my ears open and listen to those who are normally not heard. I mean, it's kind of a willed and disciplined act, but an absolutely necessary one, I think, for myself and I think for any writer. I'm not speaking as if I'm the only one by any means. I think any writer worth his or her, worth our time; any writer worth our attention is going to have to function that way in the world. And we sometimes, I'm sure, to casual observers, need to be narcissistic, self-absorbed, and uncaring, but in fact really every writer I know, practically, is quite different from that. Is in fact, a compassionate, attentive, listening person.

>> Well, let's talk about your new book, "Lost Memory of Skin".

>> Well, the title, I think, I'm trying to point to a zone; a gray zone, that's come to exist between fantasy and reality in our erotic life. And, it seems that over the last 25 years or more with the rise of the internet and the digitalization of the erotic, it's become increasing present in our lives, this gray zone. And it as if we've lost contact with human tactile reality. We've digitalized our erotic lives. And coinciding with that is the rise of addiction to pornography and I think also, the rise of pedophilia and sexual exploitation. Because, it's the line that used to exist rather clearly between fantasy and reality; is very fuzzy now. In fact, it doesn't seem, in many ways, to exist at all. So, I think that's what drew me to it. And then there's the kind of social reality as well. I live half the year in Miami, and a few years ago, you may recall, there was a realization that living below the Tuttle Causeway that connects the mainland to Miami Beach was a colony of convicted sex offenders, who had served their time and been released, but who were required by the terms of their parole to never live within 2500 feet of where a child might gather; at school, or a playground, or anything like that. Consequently, there was no place for them to live in the City, so they were being dumped by the City, by the legal authorities, under this causeway. And, I just started reflecting. I could see if from the terrace of my apartment in Miami Beach, and I could look out and see this causeway. And, that came to act, to seem as a kind of emblem almost for this whole dilemma, this whole problem; the legal aspects of it, the psychological, social, and sexual aspects of it. The economic aspects of it. So, the story really grows out of the presence of this colony of men, and in particular, one young man living there; trapped there, a colony of pariahs. And so the story I'm telling is really this kid's story; this young man's story.

>> You easily juxtapose humor with serious and painful situations in your books.

>> I'm glad you said that, because I'm hearing myself describe this book, and it sounds awfully grim, and I like the fact that there are parts of it that are pretty funny.

>> Well, how do you successfully develop your comic sensibility?

>> Oh, I don't know, I think that most people actually, if you listen to Americans, are very funny in a very particular way, and I love to listen and try to play it into my fiction. I mean this kid was leading a squalid and terrible life on the one hand. On the other hand, he had a witty angle on everything, an irreverent and intelligent, if not educated, but nonetheless, sly look at the world. And, he's looking at it from the very bottom practically, but he sees much in it in the way he expresses it. It turns out to be fairly funny at times, and even absurd and lively.

>> Several of your books have been made into movies. What is about your stories that resonate with filmmakers?

>> It's hard to say. I've been very fortunate. I've had very good filmmakers work on two of the novels, and I'm working with two others right now on two more. And, they're really extraordinary directors. I think, when I began writing at first, I wanted to be an artist; a visual artist, and I sort of entered writing fiction with my eyes open, seeing things. I mean, almost literally, and as I evolved as a writer, I realized gradually that I really wanted to see what I was writing as I wrote. If I can't see it, then I realize there must be something wrong in the way I'm writing and what I'm writing, so I think my works are, as novels go, highly visible, and I think when moviemakers, when directors, screenwriters, producers, and so forth read the novels, they can see the movie somewhere in it. I don't write for the movies, and I don't compose the novels or structure the novels after the conventions of film in anyway whatsoever. And, it's the last thing in my mind when I'm working. But, I do know that I'm writing in order to see as I write.

>> With the growth of E-books and closing of bookstores, how do you see technology changing the selling and writing of books?

>> It's not clear how much it actually changes the writing yet. It's clearly altered, and will continue to alter in an increasing way, the delivery of the story. I mean, the technology primarily is a delivery system. A book is a technology. Now, we have digital delivery system. Whether it will really alter how we tell our stories or not, isn't really clear. I expect there will be a kind of speeding up of narrative; less leisurely exposition and description and so forth. But, that's something that's been going on for the last what, century and a half, two centuries. When you pick up a Victorian novel or pick up Dickens or Flaubert, and there's a kind of leisure and digressiveness to it that today, readers would be much too impatient to put up with. We want to get on with it, and it's what Elmore Leonard says; never write the parts that readers skip. And, I think we'll find more and more of that speeding up

of narrative. I don't particularly mind it, and I don't think it's especially threatening; shouldn't anyhow to a storyteller. It's just a slight modification and gradual evolution of the means and ways of telling stories.

>> The theme of this year's festival is celebrate the joys of reading aloud. What is your most memorable storytelling experience, either as a child or as an adult?

>> My most memory story telling out loud is what you're asking, correct?

>> That's right.

>> Well, actually, I can tell you one; my family didn't read aloud as I was growing up. We weren't a bookish family by any means, and so I don't remember anyone reading aloud to me as a child. But, I did read aloud to my own children, and I remember reading to my three youngest girls; I have four girls. And, the three younger ones, we were all living together in Jamaica, and they ranged in age then from about six to 12, and I decided it was time that they read the bible. They were being raised in a nonreligious home. My wife, their mother, was Jewish, and I was raised Protestant Congregationalist, but we were both very, very lapsed. And, so my kids really didn't have much religious education. So, I started reading the Old Testament to them from the very beginning, and it was a thrilling experience for me. I'm not religious, as I said, and I wasn't raising them to be religious. But here were the greatest stories ever told in the West certainly altogether piled one on top of the other. And, as I read the bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, even the begats and begats and begats, those long catalogs. I watched these three little girls become entranced and just thrilled with the stories, because they are great, great stories, and I think if I'd given them the text and said read the bible, read this book by next Sunday or whatever, and had them do that, they wouldn't have. Or, if they did, they wouldn't have been very excited about it, and they would have just done it, because they were supposed to. But, having it read aloud like that, had an entirely different effect on them. And I think today, I mean, they're all grown women now, and I think, I've talked to them about it, they all remember it very clearly as an important literary experience.

>> Well, thank you very much, Mr. Banks for being with us today.

>> Well, thank you for having me here. I've enjoyed it.

>> I'd like to remind the listeners that Russell Banks will appear on Saturday, September 24 in the Fiction and Mystery Pavilion at the National Book Festival on the National Mall. Mr. Banks, thank you again.

>> Thank you again.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.