

# TWISTING THE RADIO DIAL

AN INTERVIEW WITH RON RASH

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Forrest Anderson

Ron Rash has written three books of poetry—*Raising the Dead* (2002), *Among the Believers* (2000), and *Eureka Mill* (1998)—two collections of short stories—*Casualties* (2000) and *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina* (1994)—and three novels—*The World Made Straight* (2006), *Saints at the River* (2004), and *One Foot in Eden* (2002).

Rash grew up in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, in the southern Appalachians where his family has lived since the mid-1700s. He graduated from Gardner-Webb University and Clemson University. For 17 years, he taught English at Tri-County Technical College before being named the Parris Distinguished Professor in Appalachian Cultural Studies at Western Carolina University in 2002.

Named by *storySouth* as “one of the hardest working writers in America today,” Rash has received numerous awards and honors, including the James Still Award from the Fellowship of Southern Writers (2005), the Southern Book Critics Circle Novel of the Year (2007), and a writing fellowship from the National Endowments of the Arts (2006). His short story “Speckle Trout” won the 2005 O’Henry Prize and became the inspiration for his novel *The World Made Straight*.

I recently had the opportunity to interview Rash on the telephone. Through a cheap speakerphone from Radio Shack, we discussed the migration of farmers to cotton mills, distance running, ancestry, and storytelling.

## I.

*I've always been haunted by manmade lakes  
because I always wondered who lived there,  
what was lost when this lake came about.*

**FA:** Ron, when I first met you in South Carolina, you came to Columbia to do a poetry reading with Nikki Finney, which was right around the time *Raising the Dead* was published in 2002. I knew you first as a poet, and I wanted to start our conversation by talking about your poetry and early work. You mentioned at that reading that you didn't really start writing until your late 20s. Why such a late start?

**RR:** Well, I was trying to write, but mainly what I was doing was preparing to write. I was reading a lot, an immense amount. I was writing some, but I was really more of a dilettante. It wasn't until I got into my late 20s that I really got serious about writing. And, for whatever reason, I think I was just ready. There are certain writers who write very early on, for instance Keats and Faulkner. Some writers go slower, and I'm one of the slower ones so I got off to a late start. I was almost 28 before I wrote anything that was even remotely good.

**FA:** Was it during this time when you started working on the poems that became *Eureka Mill* and the stories for *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Other Stories from Cliffside, North Carolina*?

**RR:** Yeah. I think the first story was "My Father's Cadillacs," which is in *The Night the New Jesus*. I pretty much simultaneously started writing short stories and poems. And I've found that short stories are much closer to poems than short stories are to novels. I think because in a really good short story every word counts. With a novel, you can ramble and be sloppy at times, meander. But with poems and short stories there's an incredible tightness. Also, I think what happens a lot of times with stories is you get resonance, certain images return. A great example of that is when you look at "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and how... The Misfit's never quite out of the story... there's this kind of return to things that are set up. I mean structurally.

**FA:** *Eureka Mill* focuses on your family's move from the farms of North Carolina to the mills of South Carolina. Can you tell me a little

about that story and how you worked it into your poems?

**RR:** The people that migrated from Appalachia—particularly in the early 20th century—tended to migrate either north to the coalmining region or to the automobile factories to work or they sometimes migrated east and south to work in the cotton mills. My family tended to migrate into the cotton mills. They were just one of the many, and that was one reason I thought the material was interesting. It transcended a single family and was pretty indicative of a whole movement of people.

**FA:** Was your family used to help focus the larger scale of the book?

**RR:** Yeah. I did a lot of research for that book on mill life so in a sense it's more than just a family history, but there is family history.

**FA:** The people in *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth* populate the foothills of the mountains. Towns, in my mind, that are similar to Morganton, Tryon, and your hometown, Boiling Springs. How come both your first book of poems and your first collection of short stories occur outside of the North Carolina Mountains—the region of the rest of your work?

**RR:** I grew up in the foothills. I wanted to capture that world and write about it. Then, I just kind of moved deeper into that area that I felt was really my true spirit country, the place where almost all my relatives lived. In a way, it's almost like I wanted to address the foothills first and then move deeper into my family's history and the region that I was most taken with and most identified with.

**FA:** *Among the Believers* is the first book that takes place in the mountains. The title seems ambivalent. Is this a sign of your hesitancy to write about your ancestors' mountains?

**RR:** Not as much that as a sense of being in some ways part of them and then not being part of them. Being outside and inside simultaneously.

**FA:** In the short story collection *Casualties*, a number of the stories are told from the perspective of a young narrator. I'm thinking of

“Chemistry” and “My Father Like A River,” which are stories where a father takes his son back to his native mountains. Was this a way for you to feel more comfortable writing about the mountains?

**RR:** You know I haven’t thought of it this way, but now that we’re talking about it... It is almost like I just gradually moved into that territory—maybe a little tentatively at first—but moving deeper and deeper into it with each book.

**FA:** In *Among the Believers* you started writing your poems in Welsh verse. How did you come across this form of poetry?

**RR:** My ancestry, at least on my father’s side, is Welsh so I had an interest there, but I’ve always been interested in poets who were very sound-intense. Hopkins. Thomas. And those poets are both influenced greatly by traditional Welsh poetics. In Welsh poetry sound is as important as sense. I’ve always been drawn to sound. You might argue a little bit of it’s genetic, but also it’s just the poets that I’ve tended to admire are poets who are very interested in sound. Traditional Welsh poetics is very sound-intense. It’s a seven-syllable line and it also tends to have internal rhyming.

**FA:** You said something interesting there. You said your interest in sound might be genetic. Didn’t Welsh people settle in the North Carolina Mountains?

**RR:** Yes, they did. I think we tend to think only Scots-Irish, but obviously there were early settlers from Germany, Wales, and other countries as well.

**FA:** The Welsh verse you picked up. Is other traditional Appalachian poetry in Welsh verse?

**RR:** Not that I know of.

**FA:** I was wondering if maybe the Welsh verse was a way to reclaim your ancestry or your family tradition or even the cadence of your grandparents’ voices?

**RR:** Well, I think what it did for me... I tend to be a narrative poet and there's a danger when you're a narrative poet that you just end up writing chopped up anecdotes, stories with line breaks. What I wanted was something to intensify my lines, and that form did it for me.

**FA:** Do you find yourself doing that in your fiction, too, paying attention to the rhythm of the line?

**RR:** I do to a lesser degree, but I'm very interested in how something sounds and rhythms. My hope is that I've brought what I've learned from poetry—at least some of it—into my fiction.

**FA:** Let me ask you again about your poetry. Your interest in narrative poems continued into *Raising the Dead*, which tells the story of Duke Power flooding the Jocassee Valley and displacing hundreds of people from their homes. Can you tell me a little bit about the premise for the book and how you stumbled across the idea?

**RR:** I've always been haunted by manmade lakes because I always wondered who lived there, what was lost when this lake came about—whether it's Santee Cooper or Jocassee—and that idea of a lost world. There's a kind of horrific finality to a place that has been completely flooded, not even place names survive. And that particular valley, Jocassee, many people say it was the most beautiful in South Carolina. What I wanted to do was to try to resurrect it, at least imaginatively, to remind people what had been lost.

**FA:** Is that a personal draw to family and traditions lost like in *Eureka Mill*?

**RR:** Well, this was less personal in the sense that I didn't have any family in Jocassee Valley. To me, it worked because those lakes represent a broader annihilation of a culture, particularly the Appalachian culture.

## II.

*It just kind of gave me this moment where words seemed like they were magical—almost like they were fluttering around and changing places. That idea of language kind of being this magical thing has stayed with me all my life.*

**FA:** You went to Gardner-Webb University on a track scholarship. What event did you run there?

**RR:** 800 meters.

**FA:** Is it true you held some school records?

**RR:** No big records. I ran a 1:53. That was my best time. I did pretty well.

**FA:** You mentioned to me once that you have a certain theory, which is that people who excelled in running make good writers. I think Ron Carlson used to be a big-time runner.

**RR:** And George Singleton.

**FA:** Why do you think running is such good preparation for writing?

**RR:** It teaches discipline. I think with running, particularly distance running, you're having to push yourself. It tends to attract people who are already pretty obsessive. You have to be kind of driven to want to run, to be any good at it. I think all those elements, working in solitude, going out for those long runs by yourself—at least that's the way I trained—I think all those things are very similar to what we do as writers.

**FA:** Another sort of preparation you had for the writing life was to have the good fortune to be living near Clemson, South Carolina, at the same time as George Singleton and Dale Ray Phillips. Can you tell me about that time?

**RR:** We know each other. George was living about 20 miles away, but he would come over a lot. Dale, George, and I on Friday afternoons

would go out together and talk literature. That was a good time, just being around each other made us all want to write more and better.

**FA:** Is it fun to look back on this time and see that all three of you have become successful?

**RR:** Yeah. They're just great friendships. I think that's the best thing. It was just kind of a nice dynamic. We all write differently. We would talk about what we were reading, more than what we were writing. We'd teach each other. Dale would mention maybe a short story I hadn't read. George might the next time. I might mention something to them. It was a good time.

**FA:** I'm curious about the time in your life when you started to break into the literary world. You started out winning a number of awards—the Academy of American Poets Prize in 1986, the General Electric Foundation Award for Younger Writers in 1987, an NEA Poetry Fellowship in 1994, the Sherwood Anderson Prize in 1996. How important were these prizes to you in the development of your career?

**RR:** They were a good affirmation. I never took a creative writing class when I was in college or graduate school. I didn't get an MFA. I had a straight MA. I think I really never had much outside confirmation or encouragement that I was doing anything well the way you might get in an MFA program. I wasn't even letting people know. My brother didn't even know I was writing. Those awards at least gave me a sense that maybe I'm doing okay, maybe I might finally get to where I can write a few things that might be decent. At the same time I knew once I got into my late 20s, I was going to write anyway. I don't think anything could have stopped me. And I think sometimes there's a danger in wanting to get patted on the shoulder. We can't count on that. We just have to keep writing and do the best we can.

**FA:** Your first two collections of stories were published on the Bench Press out of Beaufort, South Carolina, and your first novel *One Foot in Eden* won the 2002 Novello Literary Award. I've heard that major publishers accepted *One Foot in Eden*, but you declined to publish with them.

**RR:** I would say a noted publisher. They wanted me to make it into a

single point of view, and I felt like that would ruin the book so I just declined to change it.

**FA:** In some ways, you really had to hustle your own books in the beginning. What did that do for you as a writer?

**RR:** I didn't really worry too much about it. The books were out there. I didn't really try to promote them much. My goal was to keep writing and try to make each book better. I was glad to have the books published even though the publishers were small. It was just something slow. I was sending work out to journals. I think the way my career has gone has been pretty typical. George and Dale Ray, for instance, I think all three of us have followed the same trajectory. Publishing in journals, getting small notice, and finally finding somebody in New York who was interested.

**FA:** How did you come into contact with Lee Smith, Robert Morgan, and Anthony Hecht? How important were these people in your development as a writer?

**RR:** Morgan, Smith, and Hecht had read my work and liked it. They were kind enough to let me know that and they let other people know it. That was their generosity. Also, all three of those writers inspired me by their example. By that I mean the writing always came first for those writers. They weren't big self-promoters. They just did their work as well as they could.

**FA:** Were these people your writing program? Your affirmation?

**RR:** They gave me that affirmation which was important. That was great because those are writers that I admired. What can be better than to have people whose work you admire find some merit in your work?

**FA:** Do you have people now who you trust to read your work?

**RR:** My brother. He's my first editor, and he's excellent because he's tough and honest.

**FA:** He didn't even know you were writing at first.

**RR:** Right. He's very smart, a lot smarter than I am. Not only is he a good editor, but he knows what I'm trying to do. And he also, as I say, spots when I'm being lazy.

**FA:** Did he do the artwork for *Casualties*?

**RR:** No. That was my father. My father sketched that. He's been dead a long time, but that was a sketch he made when he was young.

**FA:** Was he an artist?

**RR:** Yeah. He actually lived an interesting life. He was a high school dropout and was working at a cotton mill. Then, he went back and got a GED, went back again and got an undergraduate degree and later a masters and became a teacher. He was an art teacher, eventually.

**FA:** Did he give you an interest in painting?

**RR:** He did. I have no talent for it, just an interest in art and admiration for those who do it well.

**FA:** We were talking about discipline from running earlier. Maybe your discipline came from your father.

**RR:** What he did was incredible. I think his inspiration at how far he came, from where he came, has always inspired me.

**FA:** Your grandfather also inspired you. There's the story of him reading you *The Cat and the Hat*...

**RR:** My grandfather couldn't read or write. And when I was five years old, I asked him to read *The Cat in the Hat*, not knowing he couldn't read. He turned the pages and made up a story. It was a different story from the one my mother had read from the book, which was fascinating. But then, the next time I asked him to read it the story was different. The cat got into more trouble. It just kind of gave me this moment where words seemed like they were magical—almost like they were fluttering around and changing places. That idea of language kind of being this magical thing has stayed with me all my life.

III.

*Every novel I've written has either been a short story  
or poem at first, usually a poem.*

**FA:** Can we talk a little bit about your writing process? There's a debate that goes on between writers occasionally about whether it's better to write every day or write when you feel like you can. Are you a daily writer?

**RR:** Yeah. At the same time, every writer has to find what's right for him or her. For me, I like the idea of structure. Once again this kind of goes back to being an athlete, the idea that you do it every day. Obviously, they're going to be days when you don't write as well or you don't get as much done. At the same time, I think there's something important in trying to write six days a week as I do. Very often I'll come in not wanting to write, but if I just put a pen on paper something will come unexpectedly.

**FA:** Like in running, the days you don't want to go usually turn out to be your best days.

**RR:** Yeah. Sometimes you think you know you're not going to be able to write or run, but you may be fooling yourself.

**FA:** You live in South Carolina, but work in North Carolina. What are your days like?

**RR:** I teach in the afternoons so I tend to write most mornings. I write from 8:00 until 12:00, and then I take a break. I like to go exercise some, get lunch, come back and work maybe a little bit more. Sometimes when I'm writing a first draft, though, I'll go 10 hours a day.

**FA:** When you sit down to write or when you have that initial cusp of an idea, do you know if it's going to turn into a poem, a short story, or a novel?

**RR:** No, I never know. Every novel I've written has either been a short story or poem at first, usually a poem.

**FA:** Examples of that would be your poem “The Price” turning into the short story “My Father Like A River” or your O’Henry Award-winning story “Speckle Trout” becoming the novel *The World Made Straight*. Can you tell about the move from poems to short stories to novels?

**RR:** It’s almost like twisting a radio dial. You’re trying to find what comes in the clearest, the right frequency. You try one and can’t quite get it in or it doesn’t quite work. Then, you go on to the next one. Sometimes it might be a year or two later. The best example I know is with *One Foot in Eden*. I woke up one morning and had an image of a farmer standing in a field, his crops dying around him. I went in my office and wrote a 14-line poem. I knew that whatever that image was compelling me to say I hadn’t gotten it right. So then I wrote about a 15-page short story and that didn’t get it. Eventually, I realized that if I was going to tell this story I was going to have to write a novel.

**FA:** I’d heard that about *One Foot in Eden*. I believe the majority of your work is based in images. I’ve heard you talk about how your novel *Saints at the River* stemmed from the image of a child’s face looking up through water. At the South Carolina Book Festival, though, you mentioned that the novel really may have come from when your son was hit by a car.

**RR:** That had happened six months earlier. My son had been hit by the car. He’s fine. I think what happened was the accident was the undercurrent. I didn’t realize until I pretty much finished that book that a lot of what I was writing about was my own fears as a parent. It’s almost like I had somehow not wanted to know that because it’s so obvious now. But the actual book started with the image of a child’s face looking up through water.

**FA:** Was there an image for *The World Made Straight*?

**RR:** A trout’s back wavering in fast water.

**FA:** Did you follow that image from poem to short story to novel?

**RR:** I guess so because I’d written a poem called “Speckle Trout” first and then the short story.

**FA:** This may have been one of the things you've brought from poetry to fiction writing.

**RR:** I feel like poetry's where it starts for me.

**FA:** Are you surprised by these changes in form?

**RR:** I'm always caught off guard. I never outline. I've never said, "You know here's a good idea for a novel." It's never worked that way for me, and not for a poem either. I might see something that's compelling, but usually it just happens. And I think probably that's not a bad thing.

**FA:** In *The World Made Straight*, the main character, Travis Shelton, becomes interested in the Civil War. This book seemed to require a lot of research, too. What sort of research do you undertake for your books?

**RR:** I do as much as I can. I love doing research. Several things can happen. One is that you'll find something utterly amazing that you might not have found otherwise that you can put into the book. For instance, doing research on the name Jocassee for *Raising the Dead*, I found out it means "place of the lost" in Cherokee. What could be more apt? So that can happen. Plus, I think it just gives you a familiarity with the world you're writing about. Very often for the reader to buy the big lie you have to get the small details right.

**FA:** Are there any dangers in research?

**RR:** Sometimes you can end up writing more of a history book. And sometimes you can see writers kind of stretching. You sense that okay this person's done research and wants to make sure we know it. I think you have to be careful about that. That you don't in a sense let the research overwhelm the story.

## IV.

*If my writing only has importance in what it says  
about the South, then it's not very good.*

**FA:** I'm a little wary about asking this next question, but I feel compelled since your last novel featured two characters—Travis Shelton and Leonard Shuler—who were almost obsessed with the Civil War. Do you ever consciously think about being a Southern writer?

**RR:** No. What makes this a complex situation is that it's almost damned if you do and damned if you don't. On one hand, I think the greatest literary tradition this country has had is Southern literature. I think more good writing has come out of the South than any other region. Yet, there's this kind of easy pigeonholing that's very often done—I think more outside the region than in—where you're labeled a Southern writer and the implication is that's all you are.

How often do you hear Phillip Roth described as a New Jersey writer? I think it's always seen or very often perceived as a limitation. If my writing only has importance in what it says about the South then it's not very good. It's just local color.

**FA:** In my experience (my small amount of experience), the only real benefit I've seen to being a writer from the South is that there's a camaraderie I feel with other writers from the region. We're more apt to congregate, talk literature, and give affirmation about each other's work.

**RR:** There does seem to be more of that. Yeah... I'm just becoming increasingly wary of how I think outsiders—as I say outside the South—have almost turned the term into a negative. And that's pretty hard to imagine. The best of Southern writing has always been universal—the region merely a starting point, not an ending point.

**FA:** I saw on Amazon.com that Picador has a book of stories *Chemistry and Other Stories* set to be released in April. Is this a reissue of some of the stories in *Casualties* and *The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth*?

**RR:** I think they're five older stories and seven new ones. One's "Speckle Trout," which led to *The World Made Straight*.

**FA:** Should we be looking for anything else from you?

**RR:** I have stories coming out in *Tin House* and *The Sewanee Review*. I just finished up a new novel. That's what I've been working on the last year and a half.

**FA:** Do you have a title for it?

**RR:** *Serena*. It's set in 1930 and deals with the fight between timber companies and people trying to create the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

**FA:** Have you read any good books lately?

**RR:** I think the best novel of our new century is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. Incredible. That's a great book. That's the best thing I've read.

**FA:** Thank you for your time.

**RR:** Thank you.