Thomas King and
Adam O'Connor Rodriguez

A Conversation with Louis B. Jones
April 8, 2005

Amy Tan has said that Louis B. Jones possesses, "one of the best minds of our generation." This is high praise, but Jones is certainly a writer of uncommon skill and care, for whom the importance of writing lies in the everyday practice of art rather than the relentless pursuit of fame. He states that he wants "to write well, and as a consequence of having a readership, go through the publishing machine—which is not very good for human nature." As the following conversation makes clear, for Mr. Jones writing fiction is the best way to discover truth in our lives. Despite his gimlet focus on healthy writing communities, he has published three acclaimed novels: Ordinary Money *(1990),* Particles and Luck *(1995), and the 1997 Los Angeles Times Best Book of the Year,* California's Over.

Mr. Jones lives with his wife and family in Nevada City, California, where he serves as co-director of the Writers Workshop at the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, during which notable poets and writers from around the country gather to teach and write. He was kind enough to spend an afternoon with us at the Palm Court Grill in downtown Spokane.

Adam O'Connor Rodriguez

Do you write exclusively in the novel form?

Louis B. Jones

I want to develop my short story skills. Look at what writers do with just a little tableau of events. What you can make out of circumstances is beautiful. I'm writing short stories right now, but even those go long, Alice Munro-length. I'm disinclined toward such an extremely concentrated artistic form that's so crystalline. I'm just too used to getting below the surface of things. My narrative point of view is always deep, close, inside the complexity of people's minds. Once I get into that point of view, it's hard for me to pull back.

O'Connor Rodriguez

What about a book like *California's Over*, which goes into many points of view?

Jones

I'm inside Wendy Farmican's head, way close, for so much of that book—how she feels fat, what she wants, etc. I love being inside people's heads; that's where I'm comfortable. I'm especially fascinated by how we know things we don't know, that we're driven by motives; there are layers to our personalities, we actually have awarenesses we're not aware we have on a conscious level. To be able to portray that in fiction is really hard. To be able to show "This is what's driving the character," that's the aspect of psychology I'm interested in.

Thomas King

And in *California's Over*, you do that with a variety of characters—

Jones

I hope I do it with all the work. I remember loving it—as an example—that Holden Caulfield was sweeter and more trusting than he thought. He wasn't as cynical as he'd hoped; there was more forgiveness in the world. And that was a first-person unreliable narrator, so while he would be bragging about his sensibilities, complaining about how malicious the world is—about how there are no authentic human beings out there—behind that you can see that the world is warmer, and he is a warmer person than he realizes, so when he goes back home, the resolution of that conflict is that we know him better than he knows himself. I guess that's a model for me. I use third person, but it's a third that's so close, so adaptive to the delusions and quirks of my characters,that it works almost like first person. When you're inside of Wendy as a child, her misapprehensions about her world are as if she's a first-person narrator.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Do you feel you do a similar thing with the adult Baelthon in *California's Over*?

Jones

Yes. He's a first-person narrator. The book starts out in his perspec-

tive, then suddenly develops an omniscient narrator. When we reach Wendy in the basement, looking for her father's ashes, the first-person narrator, Baelthon, is floored by how attractive she is to him, then the narration follows her up the corridor and moves into her third-person point of view. It's a little like walking through the wall or into the fifth dimension. Most people don't notice that. The first-person switches to third.

King

As a reader, it is hard to notice the shift. How did you achieve that seamlessness?

Jones

I think I was fortunate in two ways. One is that I was able to have the main character confess, on the page before, that this was going to be the woman of his life, that this was his obsession. That licenses him to follow her, gives him enough knowledge to almost know what she did in the minutes after she met him. In practical terms, because she might have told him a year later, it becomes part of their myth. I also did it with enough force that it's like hitting warp speed in your spaceship. If you don't ask permission, just do it without any fuss, it can work. But it was interesting to me technically, too. I was writing a book, fishing around.

King

Did that come naturally to you, or was it the product of revision?

Jones

It came naturally. It just happened, so I let it continue to happen. What I thought was the big experiment in that book was the flash-forwards. I thought, Can I have a story where readers will know how things will turn out in thirty years, then flash back and forth and back and forth, where sometimes you're in 1970 and sometimes you're in 2000? Will foreknowledge ruin or enhance the narration of a present-time moment or a past-time moment? I hate flashbacks; I think you should avoid them at all costs, unless there is an urgent appetite to find out something from the past that will directly affect the present narration. But I used flashbacks anyway, devising that every time I went back into a flashback the reader would think, "Oh, good—we can finally see what happened," and not, "Okay, I guess I'll keep reading." I think plot is a huge, important technical aspect.

King

To what extent do you structure your plot beforehand?

Jones

About half and half. I have a general idea of where the arc is going to land. But it's much better waking up not knowing. That's what gets me out of bed at 3:00 in the morning—knowing I have to jump up and figure out what to say instead of following some outline.

King

Any examples of fortunate surprise?

Jones

My first novel, *Ordinary Money*, is about not just counterfeit money, but a *perfect* counterfeit that creates a kind of metaphysical and moral dilemma. I have these teenage girls who are my main characters in a suburban mall, and on about page twenty, they go to Shakey's Pizza and they're talking about some boy, and giving each other fashion advice, and one says to the other, "You need new earrings." And the other girl says, "Yeah, but this ear is latex." She had birth defects. That was a case where I was tired of myself by page twenty, and I wanted to make something bizarre happen. So I thought, I'm going to give her a rubber ear, implanted by cosmetic surgery, because she was missing an ear at birth. It turned out to be really useful and interesting, because it gave her emotional and psychological trouble that pertained to what was going on in the book. It was a big, ninety degree turn that paid off. I discovered it on the page and it tied the whole book together in a way.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Do you feel your work is character driven, even though your plots are so intricate?

Jones

Characters decide the story. You know those books about how to write, with the chapters on plot, setting, language—all the elements. I think character is the one that drives all the others. You can think it's about language or think it's about theme, but each element has to consult character to find out what happens next. Even down to how a sentence is put together. It's an old-fashioned point of view to believe that; I'm completely saturated with the postmoderns, moderns, with declarations

like "The character is dead" and so on. I take a great deal of interest in such attitudes, but I can't *use* them upon my own workbench. I'm kind of a fuddy-duddy.

O'Connor Rodriguez

You have said in other interviews that you don't care if your work is discovered until after you're dead—

Jones

That's a nice, cute way to think about it. But the whole *business* of writing is death-oriented. You put words on the page, and then you're absent. Your true reader, your soulmate, your true love finds you, and you're absent. They'll be in some armchair in Florida or Texas or New Jersey, crack your book at some bookstore, and they're your person.

King

Did you start writing with that ideal?

Jones

No, I think it's grown on me. Any time writers are in a situation where they're talking about their book, they should just say "Read the book." I hope it doesn't sound affected to say this—but I truly believe that I don't need to meet Jane Austen, but, boy did she make my life better. I learned how to live by reading dead authors. I don't need to meet Marcel Proust, either. He might turn out to disappoint me. But his books are great.

King

I know you're working on a novel right now. What do you hope for the future of your publishing career?

Jones

I don't know. I'm so hypocritical. Where does my hypocrisy lie? I want to have a great career, but I don't want a great career. I want to write well, and as a consequence of having a readership, go through the publishing machine—which however is not very good for human nature. Fortunately, unlike actors and musicians, we don't necessarily have to go through it. Actors and musicians have to suffer the exultations and degradations of that completely phony world to practice their art, and they have to personally be there. It helps if you're like Charles Dickens,

always going along pumping yourself. That's probably good for your career. But you can also be like Franz Kafka. Or Jane Austen: she didn't need a great public life.

King

You've said part of the allure of writing for you is the ability to join the conversation of literature, to add to the body of life-changing fiction. At this point in your career, with several acclaimed novels and many years of writing experience, where do you see yourself in that ongoing conversation?

Jones

I think where I got that idea is from Mortimer Adler's "Great Books of the Western World" series, published by University of Chicago Press. It's like the canon of all the great books, with uniform bindings—Plato and Aristotle, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, you know. And the introduction that Adler made to the series was titled "The Great Conversation." I grew up with these volumes in my middle-class, middle-western house, with the gold foil letters on their spines. Plato. Dante. The great conversation. That's where the metaphor comes from. I don't know if my books have a place in that conversation.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Do you think MFA programs help writers get there?

Jones

Yes, I think so. They provide somewhere for writers to be for a couple years. They shake them up. So I think they're great. I was thirty-something when I went to one, and I had written three unpublished novels. Because I was always outside the publishing mainstream, always taking terrible risks. Walking straight off the trail.

King

Do you want to find a readership for those earlier novels?

Jones

I suppose so. I sure don't make judgments as to whether a book is good or bad based on publication. That doesn't make sense. Some of the greatest books in the world are really bad books. Like *Moby-Dick*. *Ulysses*. *Remembrance of Things Past*. They're obsessed, peculiar books.

On the other hand, a bunch of really mediocre books are sleek pieces of craft. It's not even the interesting question to me, whether a book is good or bad. Just whether it's necessary.

King

You say there's a strong presence of the author in your books; what do you think is the role of a writer's morality in his or her work?

Jones

Morality? I'm so morally decrepit myself, I hope that doesn't get into my books. [Laughs.] I think I'm very present. You know when you look at a Vincent van Gogh painting, the first thing you're looking at is some mad guy's brush strokes, his color choices, but there's more than that. You look through that, and you see how it feels to be on the Paris street or out in the farmlands on a cloudy day. The brushstrokes are there, so you have to pay attention to them, but I hope that in my writing you can look through them. I'm a little bit of a "lay it on heavy" writer, so there are a lot of brush strokes, a lot of language. Sometimes the metaphor, or the long sentence that has a lot of grammatical stuff going on, might be hard to follow if your momentum is not there. So that's the sense in which I'm present in my writing. Customarily you want the writing to be a clear window that the reader can look right through, but when you read one of my books, there's all of this "writing." It is my hope, that like the work of an impressionist painter, you can see through the brush strokes, and you can actually get the feeling for Wendy, and Peter, and Baelthon, and that whole bunch of people. It's back to the character. Character, character, character.

O'Connor Rodriguez

But it seems like you tightly edit your lines—

Jones

There is a lot happening in those sentences. Something I've been told is that my writing tends to slow the eye. I write assuming people will read each word. To me that's what the medium is.

King

In *Particles and Luck*, the protagonist is a fortunate young physicist—fortunate being a word you use to describe him on the first page—whose early success thrusts him into the vanguard of his field.

How comfortable were you entering the field of physics in the novel? How much research did the book require?

JONES

I remember liking a book called *Cosmic Code* by Heinz R. Pagels, but just go to any bookstore and look on the physics shelf. They have all these wonderful, attractive titles, and they explain how bizarre the world we live in is, what it's made of, these little clouds of thought. Physicists are truly having to become religious—or at least metaphysical—because it's so bizarre, what they're getting down to. You know, the question, "What are things made of?" is kind of an emergency for some people. So, I just read a lot on that subject. And I had taken a lot of calculus when I was in the university, so I was able to follow certain parts of it. There's a crucial thing called Bell's Theorem that depends upon an equation that I was—rather closely—able to follow mathematically.

KING

After you finish a draft of a novel, do you check it against sources?

JONES

I guess it varies from book to book. *Ordinary Money* had a good amount of research in it, because I had to find out how both counterfeit and real money were made. So I went to the mint in Washington, DC. I also researched the Secret Service, which is the law enforcement branch assigned to protecting the image and value of paper money. And I made up a lot. You can make up research. I simply sketched the world according to a whim, then found something out in the world that corroborated—isn't that the purpose of research anyway? *Particles and Luck* was incredibly research-oriented; in fact, it's an interesting book because it tries to be about something other than fiction. It's trying to be about what things are made of and I think it's one of the reasons some critics, whom I agree with, think of it as a failure as a novel; or, not a failure, but it's trying to do something novels shouldn't do. *The Washington Post* guy said that, Jonathan Yardley, who has loved everything else I wrote. And he's right. It's an odd book.

O'CONNOR RODRIGUEZ

What do you mean, "What a novel shouldn't do?"

Jones

Well, in the end, *Particles and Luck* is partly about what things are made of, instead of whether Mark Perdue's marriage will return to solid ground. I mean, it's a book about marriage and fidelity, but it's also a book about atoms and electrons. You have to pay attention to the science if you read it. I think that disagreed with Yardley. And I understand. But as I said, a book's defects—as with Proust, or Walt Whitman, or name anybody—you have to *use* your defects. And *Particles and Luck* was a book that was born the way it was born.

King

The narration of *Particles and Luck* is so different from the more sprawling *California's Over* because the action takes place during the course of one twenty-four hour period. What were the benefits and limitations of that structure?

Jones

I think readers enjoy the cozy sense of being inside a set time. It makes the reader feel very much at home. But perhaps the limitation—the danger that it creates for its author—is that I thought I had a plot structure because I had the day. But I really didn't. What's at stake is Mark Perdue's fidelity. He's been married for three weeks, his secretary kisses him, and he has this kind of longing. You know he's not going to act on the longing; he's kind of like Holden Caulfield in that way. You know he's not going to do it, but you can play with the expectation. And also what's at stake is his relationship with his neighbor, Roger Hoberman. He's kind of a hapless character. Maybe the book is about two men, two different approaches. Roger is not as pretentious as Mark Perdue; he's a more grateful guy. In a way, you'd want Roger for a friend, and not my main character, Mark Perdue. Anyway, so the book does have a plot, in the sense that those problems are resolved, but I might have fallen into the trap of thinking that I had a plot because I had a time structure. A single day. Time structure is not a plot. To have a bunch of things happen in a series is not a plot; there has to be moral cause and resolve.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Do you think *California's Over* comes to a resolution at the end?

Jones

I like novels that end in sleep. So, when Wendy is able to roll over

and go to sleep, and Steve is pleased with that, it seems to mean that after all these years they have something like a marriage. That after all the betrayal and disloyalty and remorse, she's come to see him again and she's gone to sleep. That means that, after thirty years, they'll still be married. Sleep is a form of faith.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Does *California's Over* mirror how life still is in some of those northern California towns?

Jones

It's kind of a novel about the bohemian trip, which kind of ends in suicide. In fact, I just started thinking about how I began writing this book right when Kurt Cobain shot himself. There was something about his suicide that really made me mad, got under my skin. I took it personally when Cobain shot himself. And that's what is really behind *California's Over*. There's this old house where Dad was the beatnik, it's holy to commit suicide, and the novel is about the children who have to continue living after that.

O'Connor Rodriguez

Some critics suggested you were condemning 1960s culture, but I didn't read the book that way.

Jones

There was a lot of narcissism then. But what I thought was wonderful was what they called the Beat movement. Hippies and that other crowd came later, but some of the original impulse behind that counterculture was to overcome pretentiousness. It became interested in Asian philosophy in a way that did not exist before. It embraced pacifism. It made friends with African-American culture and Latino culture, making the country a million times more interesting. It defied the social-class barriers that had been set up over time. But I think we are a better country now because of what they achieved. Now we go around with our backpacks and our Birkenstocks. There's a moment in *The Dharma Bums* where the Gary Snyder character goes into a bar and the Ginsberg character says, You've got to meet my friend Jaffy Ryder, he's great, he's a Buddhist, man, and look: he wears sandals and carries a rucksack. Fifty years later, everybody is wearing sandals, carrying a backpack, and studying Buddhism. Snyder walked into a North Beach

bar in 1945 or 1947 and met Kerouac, but he was the first, he was like the spore. On the whole, I think those are wonderful changes. The book *California's Over* is about a later, cracked-up period.

King

Your novels take place in a very specific region, in Terra Linda, California—how do you avoid the limitations of regionalism? How do you make sure that the book is about more than Terra Linda?

Jones

I guess it's a publishing business question, whether the book is going to be of interest to anybody in one region or another. In that little town of Terra Linda that I always write about, I think very few people read. So if I were just going to be The Terra Linda Writer I wouldn't sell any books. It's interesting, I'm not as big in California and the West as I am in New York and Chicago and Washington, DC. I am a Midwestern person who went out to California with a Midwesterner's stubborn skepticism, so I'll always be a little alien to that place. I think there are ironies in my books that most Californians don't get. For example, the movie business keeps working on *Ordinary Money*. *Ordinary Money* will always be under option, because everybody thought, "Oh, it's about counterfeit money, we could make a movie out of it." But Hollywood producers and directors really don't get the book. I think Californians don't see the irony of California civilization, whereas in New York they know. A lot of people want their books to be made into movies. That's a vanity fair, there. But it's a happy thing to just keep getting option checks every year and never have the movie made. You know who really did well with that? Evan S. Connell wrote *Mr. Bridge* and *Mrs. Bridge*. There was a movie made of those, I think it was called *Mr. & Mrs. Bridge*, with Paul Newman. The books are masterpieces of what is not said. The books are made up of all these short scenes, and what's partly great about the books is everything he doesn't say about the characters' lives. The author is so angry with the bourgeois civilization of Kansas City, where he grew up, and he knows it so well: the country clubs and the cars packed into garages. They're among the greatest books of our time. Those books went in and out of option for years. He got checks and checks and checks and finally Paul Newman made a not-very-good movie out of them. The movie was forgettable, but then he got a big pot of gold at the end, which is nice. The kind of guy I feel bad for is Thomas Berger, who wrote *Little Big Man*, a wonderful novel. They

made a very good movie out of it. So if they're going to make a movie out of your book, either they'll make a bad movie, so you'll have that kind of trouble, or they'll make a really good movie, and that will be a different kind of trouble: it somehow covers up what you did. *Little Big Man* was his best book, and it was a medium-sized hit in its time, but the movie was so good that it exploded the old book. I'm ambivalent about the movie business. I want to stay away from it. I'd like to get *money* from it, you know, but not ever have to work inside. It's a different world. It's all showbiz.

KING

You mentioned last night that you're reading a little less fiction these days. So I wonder: if you were starting your career today, would you still be drawn to being a novelist, or would you tend toward non-fiction?

JONES

I was drawn to writing because I wanted to study everything and know everything. I know it sounds naïve, but that's what I wanted to do. I think my instincts led me to believe that what truth there is, is in fiction. In psychology and sociology and even physics, which presumes so much objectivity, they run smack into subjectivity. The assumption of objectivity is one of the first things I dispensed with in my life. Somehow fiction, with its useful versions of reality, is the right risk to take. Whenever you read history you quickly realize that it's fiction. If you care, and look closely, it's all fiction. There's something about the world of writing novels that acknowledges subjectivity as an existential fact, and then transforms it into some truth about our lives. So in a way, I think fiction is the only thing.

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