

# Conversation with Lowell Mick White

by N.E.



## **Most of the stories in this collection are set in Austin. How come?**

I lived in Austin for about 25 years: it's a city that has been a huge part of my life. And I think that length of residency gives a depth of emotion in my writing about Austin—at least for me, if not for my readers. I write about other places and times and things, of course, but the stories in *Long Time Ago Good* come together unified by that depth of place.

## **Are you expressing some sort of weird golden nostalgia?**

Well, no, not really. The past is gone—which is, by-and-large, a good thing. Still, every middle-aged person is encumbered with a sense of loss, I think, the sad distance between the person you are and the person you were. The Austin I moved to in 1978 was a wonderful place, but at that time I was meeting people who were telling me that I should have been there in 1963 or whatever, that I'd missed all the good times. The city's changed dramatically—drastically—since 1978, but young people moving here today are still going to have their share of youthful fun adventures. And thirty years from now they'll probably feel loss, too: "Long time ago good. Now no good."

## **That's a line from Hemingway. An influence?**

Of course! What writer hasn't been influenced by Hemingway—for good or for evil? Flannery O'Connor and John Cheever also lurk around my subconscious....

## **You teach creative writing—**

You were a student of mine!

## **I was a student of yours. Does teaching writing have an influence on your writing?**

Sure. Makes me more conscious of structure and form and anything else I'm trying to get students to pay attention to. Recently, because of my writerly focus on place, I've been trying to get students to draw their writing from place—any place—from their bodies, their hometowns, their dorm rooms. Yet students often have a hard time writing about places they are familiar with, because they don't value those places—they don't hear anything important about those places, they don't see them on TV, they haven't read anything about them—

### **Judging from some of my classmates, they haven't read anything much—**

Many of them, no, sadly...but I try to get them to recognize the preciousness of their personal experience of place—as well as the preciousness of their personal experience, period. It's something they'll always have....

### **There are a lot of pets in your stories: dogs, cats....**

I like critters—I like stories with critters. Most people share their lives with animals, so to write stories with animals in them is a stab at verisimilitude ...You'll also notice that the people in my stories have jobs. People spend the best parts of their lives at work, even if—or maybe even especially if—they hate their jobs.

### **That's depressing!**

To a young person facing a grim 40 years of drudgery and torture, I suppose it is. But then you can always go home to your pets, and that's happy!

### **Back to place: it seems that many of the stories in this collection express the inevitability of becoming part of one's place, taking on the characteristics, for good or bad. Is this different for Texas than for other states?**

In any place, in any person, there's going to be a tension between assimilation and resistance. Surely this tension isn't as severe for someone moving from one part of the US to another as it would be for someone, for example, moving to the US from another culture, but it's there. I remember back in 1981 an Austin cop yelling at my roommate, claiming that he was one of those damn Yankees that were ruining the city—and the thing was, the cop was right! All those people flooding into Austin back then did indeed change the city. At the same time, the city changed the new people—I know, because I was one of them. I was changed. There's a never-ending dynamic of change and creation going on that's both exciting and appalling...There are more sushi restaurants in Austin than barbecue places. How'd that happen?

### **Your story “Brindled Pit Bull” is a reflection of this, I guess, with the juxtaposition of the distasteful redneck Texans with Marla, the computer professional.**

Marla's problem is that she thinks she's superior to the rednecks—not that she's ever met any, she just knows they're out there somewhere in the Texas night—and yet she's as big a racist as any of them, and perhaps more dangerous, since she occupies a superior social and economic position. Marla's a difficult character, and maybe I made a mistake in opening the collection with her story. Something happens to her, though, by the end.

### **Everything's important....**

Exactly! We try to capture our world and put it on a page, or something ambitious and profound like that....