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David Roche: Conversations with Russell Banks

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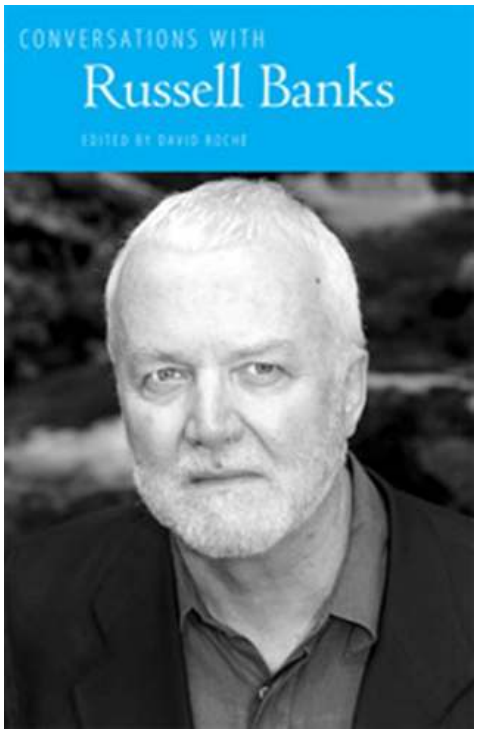

1 The volume of interviews with Russell Banks, edited by David Roche and published in the Literary Conversations Series by the University Press of Mississippi, allows us to listen to Banks's warm, generous, serious and funny voice over a period of more than thirty years. In his introduction, David Roche insists on how much Banks likes to talk with his reader, any reader ranging from the most academic interviewer to the eager student or the independent blogger. And indeed, his pleasure is quite perceptible from the very first interview (1976) to the last one in the volume, devoted to his recently published *The Reserve* (2008): Banks never dodges questions, he willingly develops his answers on any subject, takes time to consider his interviewer's point of view before agreeing or qualifying whatever opinion or interpretation is suggested, resorts to personal memories and autobiographical elements without indulging in easy self-mythology... The result is a long, fascinating conversation with surprinsingly few repetitions thanks to David's Roche editing work : his choice of interviews allows the reader to follow a certain number of themes as well as Banks's way of looking at them and using them in his long career—such as his going back and forth between short stories and novels, his interest in history and historical fictionalization, his conception of what the essence of US literature is, his teaching positions, his relationship to past and present writers, the importance of his social and family background and his use of autobiographical material... The last-but-one conversation of the volume, conducted by Roche himself in 2006, very pertinently brings Banks to look back on his work, thus casting a light both on his writing and on his metadiscourse.

2 Banks's famous historical novels (*Cloudspitter*, about John Brown, or *The Darling*, about the recent war in Liberia) are often mentioned as the works which definitely turned him into a political writer for a wide audience. And yet, in many ways, they can be seen as the most visible part of a work which is entirely committed to a much larger form of political writing which Banks dates back to the 19th century writers he keeps referring to: "American writers since Whitman and Twain have understood that they have to witness the suffering and to testify", he explains at one point. Although American writers have never enjoyed the intellectual status of their French counterparts, for instance, who can be openly linked to political parties and identified as *écrivains engagés*, he goes on, they nevertheless have kept "writing about public matters in their books. Racism, political corruption, police violence: Twain had been writing about those very subjects. Whitman wrote about it." (138) The names of Hawthorne and Melville also regularly pop up in Banks's conversation, who confesses as much returning to the 19th century as reading his contemporaries who share a similar "sense of history" (19): E. L. Doctorow, Thomas

Pynchon, John Edgar Wideman or Don DeLillo—writers "returning to the old obligations" of "witnessing and testifying".

3 Because he was born in 1940 and therefore reached what he calls his "socio-political maturity" (65) in the sixties, a period when he got involved in political activism, Banks is aware that he belongs to a generation of writers who shared, as young men, major socio-historical events and were marked by them. Although he now defines himself as only an occasional and ordinary militant, his whole work attempts at "pointing at and revealing pain". "I'm horrified by pain", he already confesses in one of his early interviews (16), and the sentence keeps echoing throughout the volume, as Banks discusses his texts with his successive interviewers. The success of *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*, both turned into acclaimed movies, is an occasion for him to expand on some of his most fragile and suffering characters, especially women and children for whom he tries to carefully figure out voices that allow him to "write as a listener and not a speaker." (84)

4 Perhaps it is because Banks is such a good listener that he is also such a good storyteller. In many conversations, he refers to sounds, silences, to music and melodies, either figuratively or metaphorically, to convey an idea. Explaining why he is, at the moment, more drawn to the novel than to short stories, he suggests, for instance, that he has become "less attracted to silence" and remarks: "Novels are a great lot of noise, you know" (8). When he recollects the week he spent with Jack Kerouac just two years before his death, he manages to sketch a quick and amazingly vivid portrait of a man destroyed by his excesses, and it is his voice that he describes best, this voice which had come to embody Kerouac's "lost soul": "And you could see why they called him Memory Babe: he would switch into long, beautiful twenty-minute recitations of Blake or the Upanishads or Hoagy Carmichael song lyrics. Then he would phase out and turn into an anti-Semitic, angry, fucked-up, tormented old drunk." (73) "It was incredibly jarring to see both sides of him, and to see his visible pain," he concludes (151).

5 Banks has a particular talent to use ordinary and yet powerful American symbols in his fiction, such as trailers or school buses. In *Trailerpark*, he focuses on those who are left stranded on the side of the same road, those who struggle in fragile shells that can no longer go anywhere. In a 1998 interview, he describes his collection of toy school buses from all over the world. The American, yellow school bus is at the heart of *The Sweet Hereafter*, of course, and its wrecked carcass is to be found again in *Bones*, where it has become a squat for homeless kids. "The school bus is a layered, multifaceted image", Banks analyzes. "It is instantly recognizable to every American. It is associated, at least for me, to the first time you give your children over to the state. From the child's point of view, it is the first time he leaves home and goes out into the larger world." (79) The first time children hit the road, so to speak— and see what happens in *The Sweet Hereafter*.

6 This volume, therefore, is full of fascinating passages for the researchers (Banks has taught literature and creative writing for a long time and, when interviewed by people who wish to develop such matters, goes into great detail about his writing experiments and choices) but also for those who have been reading him for more than three decades now and who wish to listen to a writer who remains convinced that, as a storyteller, he plays a "role in the process of teaching [his fellow men] over and over and over again what it is to be human." (70)