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1 In fall 2014, Ecco, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, released a selection of short stories by Ron Rash, who is advertised on the cover as the “bestselling author of Serena.” The book is entitled Something Rich and Strange, echoing the title of a story first published in Shade 2004 and reprinted as part of Nothing Gold Can Stay—a Shakespearian title that, while evoking transformation and change, is full of promises and carefully avoids elucidating its object. A novelist and a poet, Ron Rash is also the author of five short story collections that were published over the now twenty years of his career as a published writer: his first collection, The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth, appeared in 1994; his latest, Nothing Gold Can Stay, in 2013. In the meantime, Rash has been the recipient of prestigious awards such as the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, the O. Henry Prize (which he obtained twice) and the Sherwood Anderson Prize. He was also twice a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. Ecco published his sixth novel, Above the Waterfall, in September 2015.

2 The publication of Something Rich and Strange, a volume of selected stories seemed to be the perfect moment to ask Ron Rash about his perception of the short story—a genre he holds in high regard; about his practice as a short fiction writer; about the writers that he likes and that may have inspired him; about his personal stylistic and aesthetic choices, the narrative constraints he imposes upon himself and his recurring motifs, let alone obsessions, as a fiction writer.

3 Something Rich and Strange is made of thirty-four short stories, most of which were previously published both individually and in one of Rash’s five earlier collections (three had never been collected before). As such, it is representative of Rash’s art as a short fiction writer and of its evolution. As Janet Maslin put it in her New York Times review of the volume, “as with great music, it would be a mistake not to revisit this material because you’ve experienced it once.” While showing great variety in form, plot,
atmosphere, time and characterization, and demonstrating Rash’s experimentation with viewpoint and focalization, the stories collected in *Something Rich and Strange* present an extraordinary unity, part of which is certainly due to the writer’s exceptionally vivid sense of place, most of which derives from the sheer power of his signature.

Ron Rash, who is remarkably generous with his time and quite eager to talk about literature in general and to comment on his own personal choices as a writer, agreed to answer my questions about his poetics as a short story writer. Our conversation took place over the phone in early June 2015.

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Frédérique Spill: Thank you, Ron, for accepting to talk about your practice as a short story writer. *Something Rich and Strange* was published just a few weeks after *The Ron Rash Reader* appeared. Last time, I asked you how you felt as a writer whose novels were adapted by movie writers. Now I’m asking you: how does it feel to be an anthologized writer?

Ron Rash: I believe “anthologized” may not be the best word. In the United States, it usually refers to being put into a magazine or, say, a textbook. I know the term was used in *The New York Times* review of the volume, but “collected works” is probably a better phrase in this case, the implication being that you’re starting to see someone’s life’s work as a whole. Anyway, it is a little bit unsettling because you get the sense that people already put you in the past.

FS: *Incandescences*, the French translation of *Burning Bright*, was published in France last April and received extremely enthusiastic reviews. What will be the next Ron Rash book made available to the French readership?

RR: It will be my second novel, *Saints at the River*.

FS: The French term *nouvelle*, which designates the short story as a genre, also refers to the announcement of a usually recent piece of news to somebody that has not heard about it. By extension, the word *nouvelle* also designates the information heard about the situation of a person one has not seen recently. I think this somehow sheds light on the essence and art of the short story: etymologically related to news and to a sense of novelty, can the short story be regarded as a way for a writer to let his readers know about a little known aspect of the world he experiences?

RR: I think of the short story as a dispatch. That’s the most concise thing I can say. But, along those lines, I think that because of its brevity and the way a story—a good story, at least—pulls us into it, there is a sense of urgency, the sense that something needs to be conveyed with a degree of quickness. Henry James said of Tolstoy’s novels that they were “loose baggy monsters.” To me, the novel is a more leisurely form, for both reader and writer.

FS: What’s your idea of the perfect short story? Is there an example that immediately comes to your mind?

RR: I would say Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” and probably Eudora Welty’s “A Worn Path.” Joyce’s “The Dead” shouldn’t be perfect when you look at it technically, but somehow it still is. And I’m pretty sure that if I could read Chekov in Russian I would probably find a couple there.
FS: It seems to me that you have quite a lot in common with one of America's first and most eminent short story writers (who like you, was also a poet and like you was from the South): Edgar Allan Poe. Are you still a reader of Poe? Do you have a favorite Poe story?

RR: Poe was certainly one of the first “adult” writers that I read as a child—probably the first, actually. Those stories had a huge impact on me. I suspect my love of the short story started right there with his stories. I read Poe and Twain about the same time, together with Jack London’s stories. With Poe, there was always a sense that much more was going on than what I could understand as a child. What I’ve come to realize—and this is part of what I sensed early on—is Poe’s understanding that what’s inside the mind is often just as terrifying as what is outside of it. My favorite Poe story is “The Fall of the House of Usher,” it is certainly the story that best illustrates his whole philosophy of writing. Just think about the great opening lines… There’s so much going on in that story, things that I cannot articulate but feel their presence.

FS: Poe was also a remarkable essayist. Do you feel, together with him, that it is important that your reader should read a story of yours—any story—“at one sitting” for it to achieve its full effect?

RR: Yes, I think that is the ideal way to read a short story. If we’re talking of a really well-done short story, interrupting one’s reading would be the same as reading a poem and stopping halfway.

FS: You obviously pay extreme attention to your openings. Do you consider, along with Poe, that a story’s first sentence is a decisive step in how you build up an atmosphere? Do you always write a short story’s first sentence first?

RR: Rarely. My stories start with an image and that image could end up anywhere. For instance in Serena the initial image was that of Serena on horseback and Pemberton watching her. That’s the image that first came to me but it’s in the middle of the novel. In the case of my short story entitled “The Ascent,” the story really started when I had an image of the child discovering the plane. But that’s not in the first sentence. First sentences are crucial, and I usually spend more time on them. Very often, the story will go through several drafts before I decide on what I feel is a good opening line.

FS: Do you read literary theory? At some point in your writing career, has the reading of literary theory been useful to you?

RR: In my late twenties and early thirties I did, particularly Derrida, Eagleton, De Man, Foucault and Lacan; but then I realized that to be a good writer I needed to forget every bit of it, and I pretty much have.

FS: Commenting on Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio, Irish writer Frank O’Connor once wrote: “the Americans have handled the short story so wonderfully that one can say that it is a national art form,” words that have been made much of. According to you, why have American writers always been so keen on writing short stories? Do you think that the short story as a genre says something about American experience and identity?

RR: That’s an interesting question. Part of it may be the Americans’ sense that Europe had done such daunting work in the epic, lyric poetry, drama and the novel, so we wanted to do something that hadn’t been done that well. That might be an aspect of it. Perhaps it may also be that the oral tradition, with its particular American voice, influenced some of the best early stories, writers such as Mark Twain or Bret Harte. Another thing that has kept the form so viable is that in the first part of the twentieth century writers such as
Fitzgerald or Faulkner or Hemingway could make more money selling a couple of stories than publishing a novel. There was a real market for short stories in the United States with popular magazines. I’m not sure that European countries did that. So that certainly had to be an incentive for some writers. I know when Faulkner or Fitzgerald needed money that they would write stories.

23 FS: Most of the American fiction writers you admire write (or wrote) short stories alongside novels, with the notable exception of Cormac McCarthy? How do you personally understand this choice?

24 RR: Did you know that early in his career McCarthy wrote two short stories and never wanted them republished? I think it is just that, for whatever reason as a writer, he made that decision. I’m not sure why but I don’t think we can quibble about it because he has certainly done very well with the novel. But it is interesting because so many American writers do both.

25 FS: Do you really “hate” writing novels (this is something I’ve heard you say before)?

26 RR: I do for the most part. What is very hard for me with the novel is that once I’ve started I cannot get it out of my head. It’s very difficult for me to stop thinking about it and I find that very wearying at times. Wine helps, of course... I love novels when they’re done; there’s such a great feeling of accomplishment, to hold the book in my hand and think—in these pages I have created a whole world. But very often they’re very draining physically; they’re exhausting. Obviously, when the writing is going well, it can be wonderful, but there are so many days when it is not. With short stories it usually takes two weeks to get a very good draft that I can start tinkering with. It is that feeling of being able to dive in and get something done that I don’t get with novels. What I hate most with novels is first drafts. If I can get that done, then I get to the point when I can really start to work with the language, and that makes it somewhat less tedious.

27 FS: Can short story writing be considered a more light-hearted venture?

28 RR: I don’t think that it is more light-hearted, except in the sense that the length is such that I know I can go into this very intense writing period for two weeks and pretty much come out with something I’ll be able to let go of.

29 FS: In his study of the short story, The Lonely Voice, Frank O’Connor suggests that the short story enjoys greater freedom than the novel, which, he writes, “is bound to be a process of identification between the reader and the character.” According to him, it is this greater freedom that allows for the appearance of “the Little Man” in fiction and the surfacing of what he calls “a submerged population group” that would not be granted right of residence in fiction if not for the short story. Are your characters somehow part of that submerged population?

30 RR: I have not thought of it that way, but I find it an intriguing idea that it might be so. I certainly know of many writers who seem to find characters such as that that we might not see in their novels. That’s something I have never really thought about.

31 FS: Still with Frank O’Connor in mind, would you agree to say that short story writing allows for a greater sense of wreckage than the novel because it is not concerned with being a good, long-term companion for the reader?

32 RR: I like his idea; there’s certainly something to it. Once again the duration of a short story—ten or fifteen pages—can take a reader into the darkest places and not break that darkness in the way Shakespeare in Macbeth has the knocking at the gate scene to inject
some humor, or the way McCarthy tends to have humor even in his darkest novels. In a story the readers can go into darkness and at least know they’ll be out of it in about thirty minutes! It is an interesting idea, but, again, something I’d rather realize on a less conscious level.

FS: As a writer coming from the South of the United States, you inhabit the same territory as Southern ladies that were extremely perceptive about short fiction writing. Reading Eudora Welty’s essays on writing is a very humbling experience for critics. When she writes: “To me as a story writer, generalizations about writing come tardily and uneasily, and I would limit them, if I were wise, by saying that any conclusions I feel confidence in are stuck to the particular story, part of the animal,” she cunningly challenges the relevance of interviews like this one. A similar lesson emerges from Flannery O’Connor words: “Story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is.” This basically means that no additional words are needed beyond the limits of the short story, and brings me to tell you again how grateful I am that you accepted to answer my questions. I’m fully aware that some questions should probably not be brought to you and that it is for the reader to try and find answers.

RR: I will say this: both O’Connor and Welty spoke at times about their fiction and made some comments that I have found helpful and that have enriched my reading of their work. Sometimes a little input from the writer can be useful to the reader. Yet I do believe that once the story is out there the writer has no more right to say what it means than the reader. What O’Connor has to say about her work is just like reading another critic who might make me think of a story in a slightly different, and maybe deeper, way than I have on my own. I might disagree with her, but I might still find her view interesting.

FS: Eudora Welty concludes one of her well-known essays on writing with the following remark: “a story’s emphasis may fall on any of the things that make it up—on characters, on plot, on its physical or moral world, in sensory or symbolic form.” She thus inventories the components of the short story, suggesting that “the making of the written story” is merely a matter of emphasis. I have a clue what your answer will be; and I also know that I probably shouldn’t be asking you this, but I’ll do it anyway: is there a list of necessary ingredients entering the composition of a Ron Rash story?

RR: You already know the answer. I mean this in the kindest of ways, but I just cannot think like that. I think if I did, my writing would become stilted and artificial. This is the way I feel as a writer: it is not so much that I create a story but that it is something found. It really feels like that and the more I write the more mysterious it is. I don’t know where the stories come from; I don’t know why an image gets into my head. It just happens. There’s something inexplicable about it, but I’m comfortable with that.

FS: I guess this is the kind of question your students keep asking you in your creative writing classes.

RR: Yes, and I keep telling them that’s why art is not like a McDonald’s hamburger: it can’t be made the same every time.

FS: Welty particularly praises the value of atmosphere in a story, which, she writes, “may not be the least of its glories, and ... may give a first impression that will prove contrary to what lies under it.” What I understand is that, when writing this, Welty readily admits she is likely to make use of irony or to generate false expectations in the first stages of her stories, which is probably a characteristic she shares with Flannery...
O’Connor.
My impression is that you do not work that way at all: on the contrary, it seems to me
that you put every possible effort in a story’s opening paragraph for it to convey the right
impression. Consequently, your opening paragraphs can often retrospectively be
regarded as condensed versions—fraught with hints and veiled announcements—of what
follows. But I think the initial atmospheres you create early on remain consistently true
to themselves until the end of your stories. Am I right?
RR: That’s a tough one. I think one of the things I’m trying to establish is a tone and I
suppose this is what we’re talking about to a degree, right? What I want to do is put that
reader as deep into the world of the story as possible and keep the reader there to the
conclusion. I suspect that’s what you’re saying and in that sense I am often in Poe’s camp
regarding the “single effect” a story can accomplish.
FS: I guess this was a way for me to suggest that though your stories are certainly full of
small and large-scale surprises, my feeling is that, unlike O’Connor or Welty, you are not
such a fervent practitioner of ironical twists (there are exceptions though, I do not want
to oversimplify things: “A Servant of History” certainly is an ironical story). My
impression is that most of the time in your stories, surprises and revelations are more
likely to be found in small details: the repetition of a word—“map,” “haversack,”
“mother,” “lost”—that gradually acquires the density of a metaphor, a close-up on a
hand, or the deceptive vision of a falling star.
RR: Well, this is probably where critics make that decision better. But I do hope
everything in a short story I write brings the reader deeper into the story and that
includes even the smallest details, which will resonate throughout the story and, often,
help foster certain visual rhythms in the story.
FS: Flannery O’Connor envisions writing as an organic process, in a way that is extremely
resonant with how you write stories, with an unflagging awareness of nature. Here is her
definition: “I’ll call anything a story in which specific characters and events influence
each other to form a meaningful narrative. […] Technique in the minds of many is
something rigid, something like a formula that you impose on the material; but in the
best stories it is something organic, something that grows out of the material, and this
being the case, it is different for every story of any account that has ever been written.”
This perfectly applies to your writing, doesn’t it?
RR: Yes, definitely. The story comes, it grows; the writer does not know where it is going.
This is something I have said in previous interviews: sometimes the worst thing a writer
can have is an idea. I’m not going to write a story in which this happens. The way I work, I
have no ideas. I’m quite willing to wander, sometimes for pages, not knowing where this
is going and how things are going to come together, and I’m ok there. The story keeps
growing. There often will be places where I take wrong turns. With Above the Waterfall, I
pretty much had to scratch that whole novel and start over again. I still had the image
and I still had the characters, but it just wasn’t working so I had to go another way. This
happened with a lot of my novels. It happened with The Cove: I had to get rid of some
characters that were major. But once again, that’s ok; that is just part of the wandering,
the patience and the willingness to maybe write three hundred pages that I’ll have to
throw away.
FS: So writing is made of subtractions as much as it consists of additions?
RR: Yes, absolutely. I do a lot of drafts—I tend to do fourteen, fifteen drafts. And when I talk about a draft at that level, I’m talking about looking at every syllable carefully.

FS: Are there fewer drafts in the composition of short stories than in the case of novels?

RR: No.

FS: Let’s return to your current news: did you take part in the selection of stories making up Something Rich and Strange? In any event, how do you feel about the choices that were made and the stories that were left aside?

RR: I did. The reason why “Speckled Trout” was left out, and actually there were two or three other stories I wanted to put in, is that my former publisher only allowed me to take, I think it was, four stories from Chemistry. I kept “Speckled Trout” out because of the novel. There is a story called “Overtime” about basketball that I really wish I could have put in there and a couple more.

FS: The title that was picked up for the book is that of a short story previously printed in Nothing Gold Can Stay. A very beautiful title, it conjures up Ariel’s song in Act I, scene 2 of The Tempest. Did you suggest that title?

RR: Yes, I did. To me, this is a crucial passage in the way I read Shakespeare. What Ariel is talking about is the death of the father in the story, but when she says he undergoes “a sea-change into something rich and strange,” it is as if in some way he was not really dead, only transformed. There is a kind of magic that transforms an event that would normally be thought of as tragic into something beautiful and strange. It just struck me that that’s what art does. If my work does what I want it to do, it very often is very dark; it deals with the tragic elements of life, and yet at the same time, I hope, on one level, through language perhaps, such stories allow the reader to feel something beautiful too. What I’m ultimately aiming for is the sublime.

FS: Talking about Something Rich and Strange you said it pretty much captures your “life’s work” as a short story writer. Rereading your stories in this new configuration—i.e. separated from their initial ensembles—was a startling experience for me, especially because at first sight the order in which the stories appear is quite disorienting for one that is used to your collections. In this new selection the original collections appear to be dismantled while stories from various sources intersect in new combinations, more or less disregarding their original publication dates. For instance, your earlier stories—those that were published in The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth and Casualties—appear at the end of the volume, in the vicinity of uncollected stories. Was there a guiding principle that presided over the selection?

RR: Yes, I hope there was. I made the choice of putting some of the strongest stories early on, but I also wanted to have the reader feel adrift through time, even unsure at first if the story was contemporary or any time back in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet I also love the notion of time being a kind of geography. One aspect tied to this is that a dozen or so of the stories take place on the same three-mile stretch of a road in Watauga County, the road where my Grandparents lived, and where I spent large portions of my summers and holidays. I wanted the comic stories to be interspersed to give the reader—and this is something we talked about earlier—a chance to come out of the darkness for a little while.

FS: Do you generally think of your short stories as individual artifacts or as part and parcel of a collection?
RR: That was another thing: I wanted to highlight each story more individually in *Something Rich and Strange*, but when I write a book such as *Burning Bright* or *Nothing Gold Can Stay* I’m very conscious of how those stories play off each other. I want them to be woven together for a singular effect. In these two books more particularly, I wanted the movement, the way you read the stories, the order, to add, I hope, another level—almost like listening to a CD by a really good band, where the sum is more than the parts. To me, *Something Rich and Strange* is in some ways artificial since I’m taking these stories out of books that I consciously put together. There were stories for instance that I could have put in *Burning Bright* because they were good stories, but they didn’t fit the effect I wanted in that particular book.

FS: Still talking about *Burning Bright*, did you know that you were writing a book from the start?

RR: I had a sense of it. I think that book is probably my favorite if I had to pick a book of stories. Once I had got a few stories, I got the sense that they might interrelate and I believe that probably shaped the stories that came afterwards to me on some level. But it wasn’t like I said I was going to write fifteen stories and publish them together. I just kept working until I felt I had something that could work as a single piece.

FS: Should the fact that “Hard Time” appears in the first position both in *Burning Bright* and in *Something Rich and Strange* be considered significant?

RR: Yes, it is. I think what I wanted with that story is to plunge the reader as quickly as possible into my world. That’s because that story is so short. I hope this is a story that resonates all the way through the collection. To me, it’s really almost like planting a flag in the ground: this is my world; you’re in it now.

FS: So, on a different level, this echoes what you’re trying to do with opening sentences.

RR: Yes, exactly.

FS: Is “Hard Time” your favorite Ron Rash story?

RR: I don’t know. I’m really proud of “The Ascent;” I think that story does something interesting... I don’t know: it’s like having to pick a favorite child. I do think that “Hard Times” is one of my best stories. “The Ascent” is one of my favorite as well. There’s also a story that few readers talk about, “The Woman Who Believed in Jaguars”: that’s also a favorite.

FS: When dealing with tragic, often violent, denouements, your writing remains extremely subdued; it seems to me that when you write comedy, there is no stopping you: your words are prone to yield to all sorts of excesses and exaggerations. “The Night the New Jesus Fell to Earth,” “Love and Pain,” “Their Ancient, Glittering Eyes” and “Waiting for the End of the World,”—mostly 1st-person narratives, by the way—are hilarious examples of your talent as a writer of comic pieces, making your reader cry with laughter.

RR: That surprises people sometimes, that I’m able to write lighter works. The writers I admire the most have both a tragic and a comic vision of the world. I’ll continue to write comic stories. To do one well is in many ways just as challenging as a tragic story. I certainly enjoy the outrageousness and the sense of being a bit over-the-top. They are usually the most fun to write.

FS: So we can hope for more laughs?

RR: Yes, or at least I’ll try to make you laugh; that I promise you.
FS: “Chemistry,” after which your third collection of stories was titled, particularly well exemplifies the wide range of emotions you write with and provoke in your readers. My first reading some time ago chose to retain the comical image of the father opening the front door of his house in his scuba diving outfit; so when I read the story for the second time a couple of years later, the tragic denouement—an other instance of depression, another drowning—appeared all the more chilling to me. The more I read you, the more I believe that a part of your huge talent for storytelling specifically comes from this ability that you have to elicit such conflicting, mostly ambivalent, feelings with a single plot. I think that if your stories ring so true, it is because they are restlessly aware of the essential ambivalence of human nature and man’s motivations.

Welty considered Chekhov a writer of character, D. H. Lawrence a writer of “the world of the senses,” Hemingway a moralizing writer and Faulkner the writer of “an ever-present physical territory.” If I wanted to pigeonhole you the way Welty did with other (short story) writers, I would probably say you are a writer of ambivalence. How would that suit you?

RR: I hope I am. I think that’s probably where art should be. We've got politicians to give us simplifications. Faulkner said that the sole purpose of writing was to show “the human heart in conflict with itself.” I can’t disagree with that. An interesting question is whether one can be fully conscious without ambivalence.

FS: Thank you, Ron. Reading you is an inexhaustible source of wonder.

NOTES

2. McCarthy only published two short stories in early succession in 1959 and 1960, “Wake for Susan” and “A Drowning Incident” in *The Phoenix*, the literary supplement of the University of Tennessee’s student newspaper *Orange and White*. Since then he has, indeed, always adamantly refused their being republished.
3. This scene, which occurs in Act II, scene 3, of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, is a well-known example of comic relief.
4. “Speckled Trout,” a story that eventually developed into Rash’s third novel, *The World Made Straight*, received the 2005 O’Henry Award.
6. The phrase comes from Faulkner’s 1949 Nobel Prize for Literature Acceptance Speech.
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Frédérique Spill is Associate Professor of American literature; she teaches at the University of Picardy – Jules Verne in Amiens, France. She is the author of *L’Idiotie dans l’œuvre de William Faulkner* (Presses Universitaires de la Sorbonne-Nouvelle, 2009). She recently contributed to *Critical Insights: The Sound and the Fury* (Salem Press, 2014) and to *Faulkner at Fifty: Tutors and Tyros* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). She has also published articles in French and in English on Flannery O’Connor, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy, Robert Penn Warren, Jonathan Safran Foer, Nicole Krauss, Russell Banks and Willa Cather. For the past years her research and publications have mainly been focusing on the work of novelist, short story writer and poet Ron Rash. Her contributions to *Conversations with Ron Rash* (Mississippi UP) and to *Summoning the Dead: Critical Essays on Ron Rash* (U of South Carolina P) will be published in 2017. She is currently completing a monograph on Ron Rash’s work.