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Katina Strauch

Against the Grain, kstrauch@comcast.net

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ATG Interviews Bret Lott

Writer and Professor — College of Charleston

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*) Photo courtesy of Michael Heagerty/Villard

I interviewed Bret Lott over lunch one day. It was truly delightful. I had trouble even finding time to eat and I had a tape recorder going! I have known Bret Lott a long time, but it's something how we learn so much about each other just by listening. — KS

ATG: I am going to start off with a question that everyone wants me to ask you. How are you able to balance writing with teaching?

BL: I am able to compartmentalize things real well. It's just something that I've done all along. I started in graduate school setting up my writing time. My specific writing schedule is every morning — it's kind of a sacred time and afternoons and evenings are teaching and grading papers. So there's no real secret to it, other than the notion of discipline.

ATG: For how many hours do you write?

BL: I start the earliest I can get going. It changes with the age of the kids. We've been home-schooling the kids for the last three years and so they have been in the house the whole time. Generally speaking, about 8:00 AM is when I start until about noon. 1:00, 2:00. I teach on Tuesdays and Thursdays so oftentimes Tuesday or Thursday mornings will be given over to grading papers and prepping for class. Then I come to school and have my classes. When I'm between books, I'm a lot more haphazard. Once I'm really into the heart of a book, sometimes I write all day long.

ATG: How many books have you published?

BL: *The Hunt Club* is number eight. I try to do a book every year and a half or so. Actually, the first one came out ten years ago — 1987. I don't know what else to do. It may sound weird, but I don't know why it takes some writers longer to write. I think once you start, you should stay focused on the writing. I don't see spending five years on a 300 page book. I would lose my momentum and get bored with the book. That may sound arrogant and I really don't mean it to be. It's just my experience and I can't understand someone else's experience.

ATG: I understand from lots of sources that you are a fantastic teacher.

BL: I don't know — who told you that?

ATG: It wasn't just one person. It was a lot of people. It seems to be generally recognized.

BL: I like to teach. The things that I do, that I teach my students, are the things that I have to do myself. I like to teach because — this may sound canned — the stuff that I teach my students is stuff that I have to learn myself. As a writer, you have to be able to describe the way something looks, the way someone walks across a room, how somebody holds a cup of

coffee, how does he hold a cigarette. That's no different than when a sophomore or junior comes to me in the beginning creative writing class. What I'm teaching them is the stuff that I'm going home and trying to practice. It makes me invigorated because I get to talk about what I'm trying to do. It's like a fisherman who teaches people how to tie knots. It's practice for him to be tying knots while teaching.

ATG: Tell us about how you come up for an idea for a book. You've done a very broad range of books on different geographical regions, different types of books. How does it come about?

BL: I deal with a visual first. I see something and want to find out more about it. I just see something happen ... or a place. I like to use real places in my books. I don't know how to invent places. I always think place is very, very important — where things occur -- and so I've used real places that I've been to and been intrigued by. Oftentimes that will be just the beginning in wanting to write about a place. When I visited Reed's Beach, there was a story there. My in-laws and by wife and I — I was still in grad school and we were down in New Jersey — I went to U Mass — and we were always really broke so we went down to New Jersey to her parents and just pretty much lived off them for pretty much every weekend. We'd do our laundry and everything down there. So we drove around one time to South Jersey, down by Cape May ... So we're driving around New Jersey and we came to this little strip of homes that look like Pawley's Island used to be before Hurricane Hugo — arrogantly shabby — and this strip of homes called Reed's Beach — maybe 30 little houses right on the Delaware and I was very intrigued by it. It was very haunting and very beautiful and that place stuck with me for about ten years. I was writing other

books and I would just zoom back there and then I decided to use it for *Reed's Beach* and it ended up being called *Reed's Beach*. There's other stuff to it. I had written a little short, short story — 250 word story — that was in my first story collection. It was about the death of a child and I was happy with how it worked into 250 words. And then I wrote *Jewel* and once *Jewel* was over I was so haunted by this little 250 word story and I was so haunted by this landscape down there in New Jersey that it occurred to me I could write the story using that landscape about this circumstance.

ATG: So your ideas take time to develop.

BL: They sort of develop while I'm writing them too. That was the hard thing about *The Hunt Club* because it had to have a plot. The thing about a mystery is it's got to have a plot and I had never really worked with that before. Before, I just embarked on a kind of premise of a novel to see where it went, character development — but in a mystery, the plot has to be in place. So that was one of the meanest things I've had to wrestle with.

ATG: I'm looking forward to reading *The Hunt Club* because I love mysteries.

BL: I do too. *Reed's Beach* is a real sad book. I don't think of it as being depressing. It's redemptive by the end of it. But I finished it and I thought, "Man, I want to write something fun." And I thought I love mysteries — I love **Tony Hillerman**, he's one of my favorite writers — he really uses landscape in his books. Have you read his stuff? He's terrific. He writes in the southwest. He uses the landscape of Arizona and New Mexico and Hopi and Navajo Indian reservations. I love landscape and I thought I have never written a book about this incredible place. And yet, I love the landscape down here so that's really key to the whole book is the land. I'm sure it's the starting point for a book that's very visual. I tell that to students all the time — the book is primarily a visual experience. You have to get somebody to see these things happening. That's what I try to do.

ATG: Tell us about your different publishers.

BL: That's a long and sordid story. I made a big mistake. When I was with **Viking** for my first three books and they made an offer on my fourth book. My agent and I wanted more money like you're supposed to want. And **Simon and Schuster Pocket Books**, a couple of years before they started out were hardback pocketbooks — this is back in like 1990 — and they wanted to spruce up their line with some literary stuff. And so they started buying some literary novels and their offer was three times what Viking offered. It was like there was no choice — a no brainer. *Jewel* came out and did well and it got all kinds of press and every-

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thing but then they bought *Reed's Beach* which didn't do well at all. Looking back on my life ... I don't regret having written it ... but at the same time I think "who would want to read a book about the death of a child and the mother and father, husband/wife, trying to deal with it." There's a place for that but ... But Pocket was happy, they were okay with that. So then they bought my next two books, the story collection and my memoir. They accepted them, I got all my money, and then my editor at Pocket, who is the one who bought *Jewel* and *Reed's Beach*, went on maternity leave and while she was on maternity leave the publisher, **Irwin Applebaum** of Pocket Books, went over to **Bantam** and they promoted someone to take over to become the publisher at Pocket Books. The new publisher was somebody from marketing, a person who had never edited a book in her life. So while my editor was on maternity leave, she came and took one look at the sales of *Reed's Beach* and said, We're going to cut our losses and send these books back. We don't want to publish these books — the next two books — because obviously he's not a worthy writer and doesn't sell enough copies so we'll give those new ones back. They said, "you can keep the money," which was fine with me, but it was quite a blow because the books were slated, they were on the calendar.

ATG: What two books were those?

BL: That was *How to Get Home* which was published last summer with **John F. Blair** and

also *Fathers, Sons and Brothers* that **Harcourt Brace** did — summer 1996 the stories came out, and then the summer of 1997 the memoir came out. Things worked out but it's been kind of scattershot. I don't really have a publisher. I do right now with **Villard**. They're publishing *The Hunt Club*. They wanted to publish it under a pseudonym because it's a real departure.

ATG: Because you were moving genres sort of: ...

BL: Exactly. They bought it and they were very excited about it and then they found out who the author was, and they were very excited about that because it kind of validated the fact that they had bought an unknown writer and then all of a sudden — Oh, we know who he is so we really are good editors because we can spot him. But then they presented it to the sales department, the national sales directors, with the pen name and they told them who it was and they said, Let's use his name because it's a really good name. So it turned out that they wanted to use my name so it all worked out. I like being with Villard. They're terrific; so far they've been great — great editorially and great production. I love how it looks. It's just come out in March.

ATG: Tell us more.

BL: *The Hunt Club* was a lot of fun to write because of that plot. There were so many times I just had to sit down and draw maps. I had not done that before and I really had to remind myself who did what. The cool thing was there was an element of writing that was like the other books in that I really didn't know what was going to happen. In the other ones I

didn't know. I wanted to see where these things led to. I had an idea, a ballpark, of what things might happen. But in this one I really did not know who the murderer was until about three or four pages before it's revealed. It's from the point of view of a 15-year-old kid — he's telling the story. He lives up in North Charleston right under the Mark Clark Expressway. There are some houses there, at Rivers and Remount, down around that area. It's about this kid (Huger) whose uncle owns a hunt club down in Jacksonville. His uncle is blind and he's sort of the caretaker for his uncle, although he lives in North Charleston and goes to high school up there. His mom's divorced and she's a nurse at MUSC. But Huger gets out to the hunt club as often as possible to take care of his uncle. They find the body on the Saturday after Thanksgiving — it's a big hunt club day, a big hunting season ritual. They drop the hunters off at deerstands throughout the woods and Unc, his uncle, smells something and makes Huger stop the truck. They get out and find this dead body. It's one of the members of the Hunt Club. That's all I saw — this dead body and that was the visual. I saw this blind man and his nephew.

ATG: You hadn't actually observed anything like this?

BL: There is a hunt club out in that general area that is owned by a blind guy and I have been out there several times. I have a friend who's a member of that club. So that's the whole idea. The amazing thing about this guy is that he knows everything about this club. He was blinded in an accident years ago. But I'm just

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amazed that this guy is blind and yet he knew everybody in the club. He knew them by voice, he'd know your name and everything. He knew where everybody was on the stands and I just found that miraculous. And I thought, Wow, this would be a neat thing. Because it's from the point of view of the kid, he doesn't know, the uncle is the one who's trying to figure it out. The uncle is the one who knows more than everybody else.

ATG: He's sort of the detective?

BL: Yeah, but he's also implicated so he's got to try not to get apprehended but he's also trying to solve it. But the kid is the one whose point of view we see. It was a lot of fun because I was telling it from the point of view of the kid who doesn't know and so I didn't know. I had three or four different possibilities. I realized that about a mystery — you've got to have a bunch of possibilities and every one's got to be plausible until at the end when you realize who really did it.

ATG: So do you like to rewrite? Do you work on a computer?

BL: Yes, I do. The first few books I didn't — I wrote longhand. Then with *Jewel* — *Jewel* I knew was going to be this long saga so I taught myself to type at the computer. I still do. I'm revising all day. Some people like to just steam through a manuscript and then go back. I couldn't do that. I've got to have everything perfect.

ATG: You are really lucky to have all this time to write.

BL: I know. I am utterly blessed by this job. I've got a great job, teaching at the College. I work hard at doing that, but that's like the afternoon and evening. I have mornings totally free.

ATG: You have another teaching job, don't you? At Vermont College?

BL: Yes. There's an MFA program up there. It's a low residency program; I go up there in January for two weeks and in July for two weeks and I work with five graduate students.

ATG: Do you have time to look at other people's writing? I am sure that you get asked to look at manuscripts a lot.

BL: I get so many calls. Actually we have an unlisted phone number. We called it quits one night — Sunday night at 10:00 o'clock. I got a phone call from somebody in a bar here in town and they were talking about me, apparently a student or a former student. And this person at the bar calls up and asks will I read their novel, and I hear drinks clinking in the background. So I said that was it — I'm getting an unlisted phone number. But people still find you out. When they find you're at the College, they call the College number and I get a half dozen calls a week from people wanting me to ghost-write their great story.

Flannery O'Connor said this and it's just totally true — people want to have written. They don't want to do the work. And what I wind up dealing with is a lot of people who

want to have written. I'll help them write that book.

ATG: So how about libraries? Do libraries fit into your story at all, into your life?

BL: I love libraries. I tell people I really do. I gotta say this — I think books are vastly overpriced. People will come up and they'll say I'm going to buy your book. Some of them can afford it, but I just tell them to go to the library and check it out and read it before they go and buy it. We're big fans of our local library.

ATG: What do you think about what's going on in libraries now in terms of electronic information and paper versus print?

BL: There's a great book by **Sven Burkerts** called *The Gutenberg Elegies* and he says the book will not die. Electronic community and this sort of thing is really not the kind of community that people crave. People sit and do email and go to chat rooms. People think they're communing with people but they're not. People crave community; they crave people; people crave a book, holding an object, an artifact.

ATG: You have two boys. Do they read and visit libraries?

BL: They are 14 and 12 and they love books. We've been on the Internet for about a year and we're pretty sure we're going to quit. I don't see any real reason for it except for it being a lot quicker. Libraries have these things available, these resources. Staring at your computer monitor you lose all sorts of that tactile part of being a reader. Some of my most cherished things are books. How can you cherish those mini CD-ROMs we're going to get?

ATG: So you said you read **Tony Hillerman** — what other authors do you read?

BL: I read all kinds. My favorites are **Raymond Carver**, **Gabriel Garcia Marquez**, a woman named **Marilynne Robinson** who has only written one novel; it's called *House-keeping*. **Charles Baxter**. I really love **John Krackover** ... I think he's terrific ... *Into the Thin Air*, *Into the Wild* — they are beautiful books. What's exciting is that they're really well written books and they're bestsellers. You begin to lose faith when you see the best selling, the non-fiction list — *Men are from Mars*, *Women from Venus* — and that's the number one.

ATG: Are you a mid-list author?

BL: Yes, I am. I don't like it but I'd rather be a mid-list than a no-list author. I would love to be a bestseller. Not just for the money involved but for the idea that people are actually reading your book. My sales are mid-list sales. 10,000-20,000 a run per book. And those are the better selling of my books. So when you run into somebody who's read a book, I always wonder, do they know my mom or are they a student of mine. How could you have read one of my books?

ATG: Have you ever seen anybody reading one of your books — like on an airplane?

BL: Yes, I saw somebody reading one on an airplane one time. It was pretty darn exciting. I went to Chicago one time — I have a big readership in the mid-west. There's a **Borders** and a **Waterstones** right next to each other on the Miracle Mile and I was in Borders — I go

to check the shelf — and in Borders they had a copy of every one of my books in paperback. That was really cool. I was very excited. So then I went around the corner to Waterstones and they had a section — you know how they put the name on the shelf — Faulkner ... Hemingway ... LOTT! WOW!

ATG: Cool. So what are you working on now?

BL: I'm working on the sequel to *The Hunt Club*. They're good characters. This is a different kind of thing. In *The Hunt Club* murder has already happened — why did it happen? In the sequel something's going to happen and why is it going to happen? The cool thing about the sequel is that unlike any other book, I already know who these people are. I already wrote a book about these people so I don't have to sit and figure out who they are.

ATG: Do you talk to a lot of other writers?

BL: Yes, there's a little community. There's not many here in Charleston but there's a guy I teach with up in Vermont and we all live in the country ... and write. **Eleanor Lipman** is a very good friend of mine. She wrote *Isabel's Bed*, *The Way Men Act*. She has a book coming out in May from Random House called *The Inn at Lake Devine*. She's a comic writer — a sophisticated comic writer. **Andrea Barrett** is a very good friend. She won the **National Book Award** this year.

ATG: I wish I had the time to take a book once you've written it and absolutely throw it away and do it again because it's really hard to edit stuff, I think, because you never want to throw away your words so it's like you need to keep the idea but just put it down and not look at the first draft. Have a clean page and just start all over again.

BL: That's what Steinbeck did with the *Grapes of Wrath*. He wrote *Grapes of Wrath* in 100 days. There is a great book called *Working Days* — the journal that he kept when he wrote *Grapes of Wrath*. He had written a novel that had taken him over a year to write and just before that he threw the whole thing in the furnace, burned the manuscript and sat down and wrote the *Grapes of Wrath*. So if he got that kind of success out of it, it would be great to have a piece of life that you could commit to writing a book just to see ... a dress rehearsal for what's going to come next.

My first book I wrote on the back of trash paper my wife brought home from work — she was a secretary and brought home paper that was being thrown away. So on the back of each sheet of paper was other stuff, trash. I found it incredibly liberating because I knew in the back of my mind that if what I'm writing here doesn't work, this piece of paper was going to be trash anyway. It's not even a piece of pristine paper. So if it's not going to work ... no big deal. To me that's very liberating and I try to get my students to see that.

ATG: What else do you want to say? You're talking to librarians, publishers, and vendors.

BL: Make books cost less.

ATG: You have to tell publishers that.

BL: I know but I hope that librarians will

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rally around that flag. I think if there are complaints in the industry, if book sales are down, well, make them cost less. In my ten-year publishing life ... my first book when it came out was something like \$16.95 and my next one is going to be \$23 — that's a \$5-6 increase — like 30-40% increase in cost. The publishing industry can rationalize all those costs but you know the old story about conglomerates buying. The thing is there was a time when publishers still saw themselves as purveyors of our culture. They were advancing our culture. Very few publishers still see it that way. It's because they're owned by conglomerates by and large. There are certainly publishers that are exceptions to that rule and there certainly are editors within large publishing houses that are exceptions to that rule, but the time when an editor would swear allegiance to an author, no matter the sales, because they believed the author had something to say, have pretty much gone. 🐾

Book Pricing Update — Publishing Trends in Religion

by Tracy Thornton (Blackwell's)

Column Editor: **Charles Wittenberg**
(Blackwell's) <Charles.Wittenberg@Blackwell.com>

For most public and secular private university libraries, collecting in religion is a particular problem because budgets for these titles are small and publishing activity is high. Between 1980 and 1989, Blackwell's treated an average of 1,222 titles per year in religion on its North American Approval Plan. In the 1990s, that average rose by 20% to 1,522 per year. Non-Christian and non-Jewish religious works accounted for 11% of the titles treated in religion by 1997. But that 11% covers many different religions, and shows us some interesting trends in publishing.

In the last five years, university presses published between 20% and 24% of academic titles (in all subjects). For **non-Judeo-Christian religious works**, that percentage has been notably higher; however, university presses appear to be losing ground to trade publishers, particularly in certain areas of non-Judeo-Christian religious study. For example, in 1996, university presses were responsible for 46% of non-Judeo-Christian religious works. In 1997, that number fell to 36%. Areas of non-Judeo-Christian religious study that significantly contributed to the slide from 1996 to 1997 include coverage in **Islam** which dropped from 41% to 30%; coverage in **Buddhism**, which dropped from 31% to 26%; coverage in **African religions**, which dropped from 50% to 21%; and coverage in Asian philosophy generally (including **Taoism** and **Confucianism**), which dropped from 51% to 26%. Only coverage in **Hinduism** bucked this trend, with only a slight decrease from 55% to 52%.

Average list prices in religion in 1997 were held down by a larger number of introductory academic works, new translations of classic works, or comparative rather than intensely focused studies, often available only as lower-priced paperbacks. **Hinduism** other than yoga, **Confucianism**, and **African religions** have been somewhat insulated from this move to the mainstream, either due to the complexity of the philosophy or, in the case of African religion, general unfamiliarity.

Titles in **African religion**, comprising only 7% of the total non-Judeo-Christian titles, were the most expensive in 1997 with

an average list price of \$54.66. This is also a newer facet of religious studies scholarship, growing from only eight titles in 1996 to 19 last year, and including both indigenous and imported religions in its emphasis. Ten years ago, only five titles in African religion were treated, and all dealt only with native religions. **Taoism**, one of the most popularized religions in recent years, showed the least expensive titles with an average \$19.72 price tag for the 13 total titles. But titles in **Taoism's** counterpart in **Chinese religion** (the yang to the Tao's yin, so to speak), the decidedly non-popular **Confucianism**, had a higher average list price (\$31.98) and only one-third as many titles (4).

Islam was the subject of considerable interdisciplinary interest, with titles relating to everything from international relations to women's studies to science. It also accounted for the largest number of non-Judeo-Christian titles treated last year with 29%. Titles pertaining to **Sufism** accounted for 6% of the total titles in Islam, and tended to be less interdisciplinary (and less academic). The average list price for titles pertaining to Islam was \$46.72, a one-percent decrease from 1996.

Studies of **Hinduism** fell almost in the middle with a \$35.18 average list price. Titles relating to **Buddhism** saw a decrease in the average list price for titles about **Zen** (\$23.82 in 1996 to \$20.38 in 1997), constituting 24% of Buddhism; 71% of these titles were paperbacks. **Buddhism** was also a popular topic for comparative works (10%), particularly with **Christianity**.

Non-Judeo-Christian works are still a value for academic libraries, with consistently lower than average list prices. The total number of these kinds of titles has been growing steadily, and at a faster rate than other disciplines. This area of religious studies seems to have been influenced by the trend toward interdisciplinary approaches to education; university press plans may not provide the comprehensive coverage some libraries are accustomed to receiving in these areas as trade publishers are gaining ground, particularly in the area of **non-western religions**. 🐾