

## Mark Steadman's Comedy of Ethos

*Mark Steadman's first three books have established him as a writer well worth reading and studying. Most recently, Steadman has written an exciting novel published last autumn entitled *Angel Child* which he discusses in this interview. He is a serious teller of tales with a flair for comedy—high, low and in-between.*

*This is a particularly busy time for Steadman. Peachtree Press in Atlanta is reissuing his McAfee County in a volume entitled 3 by 3, Masterworks of the Southern Gothic. 3 by 3 gathers stories of three Southern authors—Steadman, Doris Betts and Shirley Ann Grau—prefaced by an introduction written by Louis Simpson, the distinguished LSU poet and editor of *The Southern Review*.*

*Angel Child, the aforementioned book; McAfee County: A Chronicle, his short story collection; and A Lion's Share, his first novel, take painful expeditions to the dark side of the human heart. The author sets all his books chiefly to a small swath of soil in southeastern Georgia. The Statesboro, Georgia, native works at writer-in-residence duties at Clemson University, as he has done since 1957. He is a quiet, youthful-looking man with a deadly sense of humor and considerable personal charm, both qualities which have found their way into his prose style. Steadman is only of average size and has undergone a bypass operation, but something about him tells you that his surface humor goes only so far; try his patience at your own risk. His wife, the former Jo Anderson, is a sparkling Southern beauty whose charm and energy make her the center of attraction at any party she attends. The couple has three grown sons who've left the family nest.*

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NUWER: Tell me about *Angel Child* in your own words.

STEADMAN: Quickly, this is about the way *Angel Child* goes; Langston James McHenry is the father of the family I deal with. He and [his wife] Cowie have two sons. The first, Halstead, is pretty ugly, like his momma and daddy. Then they have a second son, Gabriel, who is a beautiful child. The story is about Langston James's reaction to this and his accommodation to it. He lives in a grotesque and ugly world, and is comfortable with it. Gabriel is a jarring note for him. He feels about the child the way whole and healthy parents might feel about a badly deformed offspring. Eventually he makes his peace with the situation, but a series of events brings back the feeling of discomfort. At the end he

almost mutilates Gabriel to bring him into accord with his view of the world. I couldn't let him go through with it, but he comes close. Actually, this is a revised version of a short story I wrote about twenty-five years ago. I started to rewrite it, and it kept expanding on me. It's a serious story, but [it] has to have comic elements, of course. The characters are going to be hard for average people to identify with, so I think the commercial possibilities are definitely limited. Still, you gotta do what you gotta do.

NUWER: *Angel Child* is a wonderful book. Why the decision to go with Peachtree rather than a large publisher [Holt, Rinehart and Winston] such as you had with your first book?

STEADMAN: I think the proper answer is that, from my point of view, Peachtree is a wonderful publishing company. I like the people I'm dealing with there, and I like the fact that it's a regional house. Atlanta is home to me. I graduated from high school there, went to college there, got my first job there. When I call on the telephone, the accents I hear sound right. I know those people and they know me. Which is not to be taken as a putdown of Holt, Rinehart and Winston. I'll always be grateful that they published my first two books. And Tom Wallace, my editor there, was as kind and sensitive a man as I could have asked for. But Tom isn't there anymore. And it's been more than ten years since my last novel came out. So a new start seems like a good idea.

NUWER: I don't think the commercial possibilities of *Angel Child* are at all limited. What plans do you and Peachtree have to promote the book?

STEADMAN: I haven't talked to Chuck about the details, but I'm confident that they will do their best—which seems to be pretty good. They keep their titles in print—a very nice feature if you ask me. Given enough time, *Angel Child* may find a respectable readership, but my past experience inclines me to be modest in my expectations. This whole business of publishing is pretty much a crap shoot. So much depends on what's happening when the book comes out—the kind of books that are coming out at the same time, the particular aversions and phobias of the people who get the review copies, what side of the bed they got up on the morning the mail came in—that sort of thing. Fortunately, I take a long view of the whole proposition. Flannery O'Connor once said that she would trade ten readers today for one reader ten years from now, and that she would trade ten readers ten years from now for one reader a hundred years from now. *That's* the way to look at it. I'm mostly just thankful there are people who will take the expense of printing my things off my hands. I couldn't afford it myself. (By the way, I'm constantly amazed at what a good critic Flannery O'Conner was. She has such trenchant things to say about the process that I'm amazed she could write *stories* at all.)

NUWER: Is there any truth to Jo Steadman's kidding that you've done a powerful lot of writing about people in her family?

STEADMAN: I think maybe I'd better not fool around with that one too much. I've used people in *both* of our families—some aspects of them anyway. Always with love, I hope—though they might not see it that way. Using family and friends in your writing just has to be a dead loss. I've got one friend in particular who keeps asking—for a while he hinted, but now he's asking—that I put him into one of my stories. I'm not going to do it because he'll just hate me for it. I know he will. We never see people the way they want to see themselves. There is this idea that the writer is granting some kind of immortality to his subject—but if that's true (and in my particular case, the risk doesn't seem all that great), then the liability is greater than ever.

NUWER: Any temptation to take Gabriel in his teens or twenties and fashion a future novel or short story about him?

STEADMAN: Not much. I may go back to that part of the country—and to the kinds of characters you find there—for a setting. Probably will since that's what I know best. But the story seems pretty much complete to me now. Gabriel is mostly a passive figure. The story belongs to Langston James, and at this time I don't have anything else to say about him. But as to the limitations caused by his IQ, well, those wouldn't bother me. One of the best novels I know is *Debby* [*The Goblins Must Go Barefoot*] by Max Steele, and the main character there is retarded. I rather like dumb characters. Not all characters have to evoke Ronald Colman.

NUWER: Slap me alongside the face if I'm way off base, but is there any possibility that you cast *Angel Child* as an allegory? In particular, the journey across Georgia to the ocean.

STEADMAN: Slapping upside the head isn't really my style, but I'd say that there wasn't much in the way of conscious symbolism in the book at all. I hope it will resonate some, but to my way of thinking, the best way to ruin a novel is to think of it in allegorical terms. All fiction has to be symbolic, of course. But thinking about it and putting it in on purpose—that's a very bad idea. Lots of things happen on the road in American literature—on sea journeys too, come to think of it. That's all part of the built-in mobility, which seems to be a fact of life in this country—Huck and Jim down the river, and Ismael out into the Pacific. Still if any critics want to see it that way, I'll be glad to take the credit. I like to think of myself as deep.

NUWER: Finally, at novel's end, would you say [in Robert Penn Warren's words] that Langston James was moving toward virtue or away from it?

STEADMAN: Towards virtue, I hope. *Not* cutting Gabriel is better than doing it would be. That seems pretty self evident. I didn't think about the ending very much, just sort of felt my way into it until it seemed right. But now that I do think about it, I wonder how many people are going to be puzzled by it, or find it unsatisfying. All I can say is that it feels right to me, or did until the question came up. Anyway, it's done now, and I have to trust my intuition about it. That's one of the disadvantages of being an English teacher. You want to revise everything into the ground. You know, make it perfect. That's a lifework. There has to come a day when you just let go of it and promise yourself you'll do better next time.

NUWER: There is a great beauty in the brotherhood of L. J. and Bodine. Did you have a so-called social purpose in writing the book?

STEADMAN: I hate to admit that kind of thing, but I guess I did. If you're Southern, you need to deal with the way the races have gotten along. At least I think you do. It seems to come up a good bit in the stories I have to tell. But the trick is not to go off the deep end in apologizing for the kind of Steppin' Fetchit stereotypes we had forty years ago. It's a huge temptation to go in for atonement in a big way. But finally *Superfly* is about as offensive to me as all the "watermelon"—"feets-don't-fail-me-now" business of the good old days. The way whites treated blacks in Georgia thirty years ago is just a specific instance of a very general problem—the more or less shitty way people tend to treat anybody who is different from the way they are. James Alan McPherson presents more real characters than just about any writer I know, and he certainly makes a statement in doing that. I'd like to do it as well as he does. But I don't have an ax to grind. This happens to be something I recognize and am concerned about, so there isn't any way I could keep it out of my writing.

NUWER: I about gagged in the scene when I learned that Bodine's son was nailed to a stump. I take it that something similar actually happened in real life. Yes?

STEADMAN: I'm sure it did. Lots of times. And worse too. That particular incident comes from a story I heard—which may or may not be a true one. It's just about impossible to imagine the kinds of things that took place at lynchings. For one thing, the common picture we have—of a hanging—isn't typical. Burning alive is. How do people do things like that? I don't know. I couldn't imagine Auschwitz either. Or the witch burnings of the Middle Ages. But they happened. And the way people really behave—the terrible things they are capable of—that's something we need to be reminded of. But we also need to be reminded of the wonderfully kind things people are capable of as well.

NUWER: You never do judge your characters, do you? They come on stage. They act. They leave the stage. There are no moral judgements

against Langston James, for example, when he almost butchers Gabriel at the end of the novel.

STEADMAN: I'm sure there is an implied judgement, but generally I don't think that's the function of writers. You know—Pointing the Way. Certainly it shouldn't be a major concern, or a conscious one. Well, you can't keep moral judgements out in any event, so I don't think it's much of an issue. I guess I think some things are just so simple or basic that they don't need any explanation. I agree with John Gardner that fiction has to deal with moral values. And any story that's worth a damn takes a stand on the difference between what's right and what's wrong. I mean, what the hell else is there to write about? To my way of thinking, minimalist detachment is a dead end. Finally your average reader doesn't give all that much of a shit about the poetic subtleties of the language or the attenuated sensibilities of the author. I'm convinced of that. What they want is that something happens to characters they can recognize as real in some dimension—not realistic characters necessarily, which is something else. But they have to care about them—one way or the other. As a writer, I love language, and of course I want to show off my sensibilities. And that's all right. There just has to be more to it than that. I hope nobody will take it too unkindly if I say that I want to reach the average reader. Of course I want to reach the unaverage reader as well. But what really makes my day is to have some student say to me, "I don't read very much, but I really liked your book." I realize there is a problem here, because people who don't read very much also don't buy books very much. The strategy is terrible, but you have to go where your inclination leads you.

NUWER: Your book is set almost 30 years ago. Are the problems of these characters the same problems of people living today?

STEADMAN: Well, the race problem isn't what it used to be. Not even in Georgia. Maybe intolerance isn't as open as it once was. But it certainly hasn't evaporated. There's plenty of fury abroad in the world yet. Back in the sixties and seventies there was a lot of talk about LOVE—with big letters. But it seemed to me even then that there was a lot of hate pushing that word around. I kept thinking about the nihilist character in Albert Camus' play *The Just Assassins*. Can't remember his name—but he says something like "We have to teach people to love each other. We *have* to do it—even if we have to kill every goddamn one of them." It's a hell of an equation. Kindness is better. That's one of the things I like about Pat Conroy's books. There's lots of kindness in them. Of course he's a good story teller as well, and I like that too.

NUWER: Your book is short, but it's certainly long enough to test Langston James. His test was interrupted at the end though, wasn't it, when his wife barged into the room?

STEADMAN: I think I answered that one earlier when I said that the



ending felt right to me. If Cowie hadn't appeared. Well, I don't think he would have gone through with it in any case. But you never know. He's a pretty desperate son of a bitch at that point. The thing is, I don't think I could have gone through with it—couldn't write that scene of him cutting on Gabriel. It had to end where it did.

**NUWER:** You seem to think that luck plays an important role in life. At least that's what I read into *Angel Child*. Your reaction to that statement?

**STEADMAN:** Absolutely. Plenty of people take credit for things that just drop into their laps—and other people get blamed and suffer for the same kinds of things. As a writer, I can see that a deterministic view of the world is too limiting, and people do have choices. There isn't much drama without choice. Both count. Hell, I don't know which is more important. I was raised a Presbyterian and that's a hard thing to shake off. If I was a little more like Flannery O'Connor, I'd say that most of what happens to us is bestowed. But I don't think in those terms very much anymore.

**NUWER:** At first Bodine seemed like he was going to be nothing but a minstrel character, but the reader certainly [as did L. J.] learned quite a

bit about him after his death. I think this is a bit of a controversial device. I expect some reviewers will love, and some will hate it.

STEADMAN: I'd like to please everybody, but I have to tell my story the way it seems right to me. The idea there is that we lived close to each other—blacks and whites—without really knowing who we were. It's surprising that could happen. And is happening still. Friendships can come into being between people who are essentially strangers. Bodine really was Langston James's friend, whether he knew those things about him or not. In any event, he *knew* Bodine.

I didn't think of that as controversial. Seemed to me that's just the way it would be. But I find that I often have my stories explained to me by people who are better critics than I am. That's not a joke. It really happens. I don't worry about it too much. I've frequently said (John Gardner said it too) that I don't know what I'm writing about until I've done it. Now I'll have to add that apparently I sometimes don't know even *after* I've done it. But I'm not going to worry about that very much either.

Does that remark tend to negate the whole idea of this interview? Maybe I'd better quit while I'm ahead. If I still am.

NUWER: The *Dictionary of Literary Biography* mentions that you are working on a book tentatively called *The Broken Door: An Autobiographical Fiction*. What is the status of that project?

STEADMAN: *The Broken Door* is holding at the moment. I got stuck and decided that I needed to back off for a while. The reason I got stuck, I think, is that I was too clear about what it meant or was going to mean. I wasn't letting the story develop itself but was trying to force it to go in a certain direction—examining racial attitudes. Maybe some writers can control what they do, but I'm not one of them. The best way for me to ruin a piece of writing is to make it conform to a preconception. In *On Moral Fiction*, John Gardner said something like this—that he found out what he was writing about as he wrote it. That, I think, is the way to do it. For me at least it is. I had stopped being pleased with the story and was taking on the task of informing the world. Bad news, buddy.

NUWER: *The Broken Door* was to be a novel that examined the racial attitudes of your father. What were his attitudes? How do they compare and contrast with your personal and fictive views?

STEADMAN: I'd say that my father was a racist. But I'd go further and say that just about everybody is. We just haven't gotten beyond that yet. Now let me explain what I mean. I mean that a racist is anyone who thinks in terms of *us* and *them*. You don't have to want to lynch anybody, or hate people, to be a racist. My father didn't advocate any of those. His time and place limited his attitudes (I think that is unavoidable), and he felt that blacks were inferior. But he was a kind man, and by the estimate of most people who knew him, he was also a

good man. So I started with that: a good man who was a racist—convinced of the inferiority of blacks. How could he be a good man and a racist at the same time? And how could I love someone like that? Well, I didn't have any choice about loving him; he was my father. And I also admired him. So I have this paradox. It's impossible to understand a paradox without approving it. And, anyway, the paradox goes on. But it attenuates. My sons are less racists than I am. Personally, I am a kind of reverse racist. I think that blacks are probably *better* than whites, on the whole. That's still a racist attitude, but an improvement, I think. I read all this Russian writing where suffering is the thing that purifies. And no group has suffered more than the blacks. So there is a kind of logical equation there that I have to acknowledge.

NUWER: Your short fiction, like Mark Twain's, is a nice blend of the comic with the serious, topped off with gothic elements and brooding pessimism for flavor. Would Huck Finn at age 40 or so feel at home in McAfee County?

STEADMAN: I think that Huck Finn would understand most of my characters. I'm not sure he'd be too comfortable there [in McAfee County]. But then he wasn't very comfortable in his mid-nineteenth century world, either. He'd probably understand McAfee County better than he would New York City.

NUWER: Have you always felt at home in the pages of Mark Twain's books?

STEADMAN: Yes, I've always felt at home in Mark Twain. Twain was the first writer I ever read. I went through his collected works when I was sixteen, just for the pleasure of it. I guess he is moral and trenchant and things like that, but I read him because he made me laugh.

NUWER: You hold a doctorate from Florida State University. Has all this book learning helped or hindered you as a fiction writer?

STEADMAN: There was a time when I felt that getting the Ph.D. would be the kiss of death to my writing. English teachers tend to develop standards that are impossibly high, and they decide that if they can't be another Dostoevsky, then they won't be anything. I really worried about it. But I had a family to support, and I couldn't get anything published, and I liked teaching, so I gritted my teeth and went ahead and finished my degree. I still think it was something I had to rise above. I hold a Ph.D. in American Literature, and I often think of it as evidence of a failure of nerve and a sign of weakness of character. With just a little more backbone, I would have been able to resist getting it. I would have written the *Big Book* instead. I once said that a teacher of literature who writes either has to have a tremendous ego or a bad memory. He should be able to rise above invidious comparisons or forget them altogether.



NUWER: You write fiction, but you also teach literature courses. Do you think those activities complement each other? Is the one good for the other?

STEADMAN: The acts of creation and scholarly criticism seem inimical to each other. And trying to do both leads to a schizophrenic disdain of one half of the self for the other half. After all, one has the problem of putting the thing together, while the other has the problem of taking the thing apart. But also the *whole* personality of the writer himself usually turns out to be disturbing.

Having a real writer around the English department is illusion-destroying. The profession of English teaching is sustained to some extent by turning your back on the reality of the writer. Since the *work* is what is dealt with anyway, *that* ends up certifying the writer, no matter how many wacky things he may have done in his life. But when the writer moves into the scene as a warm and present body, this whole order is reversed. "Ode to the West Wind" is one thing. The nut who wrote it is something else. And, very important, he is *somewhere* else. Very few English departments could survive a full week of Shelley in the flesh. And in truth, writers do seem to have bad habits—particularly when you put them up against the ideal of a smoothly running department of English—or even when you consider them in terms of well-bred, civilized behavior. They won't get to class on time (and indeed, won't get to class *at all* if you don't make an issue of it), are unclean in their personal habits, drink too much, pout when they are not the center of everyone's attention, and spend a lot of their time chasing coeds and the wives of assistant professors with carnal intent. Just having them around is an affront to the whole elevated idea of literature in the abstract.

It is a fact that has been commented on by a good many people that meeting great writers always turns out to be a disappointment. You have the best of them in their writing. What you get in the flesh is mostly a dead loss. And if that is true for the great ones, it is going to be even more true of the lesser lights who adorn most departments of English. Having one with you on a permanent basis is apt to drive the most dedicated teacher of literature into the real estate business. For that reason a good solution would be to buy the body of a deceased writer, get it stuffed by a competent taxidermist, have it fashionably dressed, and then wheel it around to functions where it could preside like the bones of Jeremy Bentham at the meetings of the Board of Governors of London University. Since many English departments already take the view that the only good writer is a dead one anyway, such a plan ought to meet with general approval, and wouldn't upset the delicate balance of the infighting.

NUWER: Wonderfully put. Any temptation to write what's commonly called an academic novel?

STEADMAN: I don't have any desire to write an academic novel at this point. Maybe if I live long enough to get some distance on the material I might give it a try. I have the feeling that it might turn out to be

meanspirited, and I'd like to avoid that if possible.

NUWER: Novelists Barry Hannah and John Yount have both taught at Clemson. Do you have any vivid recollections of these two novelists to share?

STEADMAN: John Yount was here for one year, 1964-1965; Barry Hannah was here much longer, 1967-75. But I knew John better. We were closer in age (I am five years older), and were both starting out. John was the first actual writer I ever knew well. He was writing the first chapters of *Wolf at the Door* when he was here, and got a contract and an advance that year. I think it's fair to say that we were very good friends. He's been gone for twenty years now, but we still write a letter now and then. John is a very macho kind of fellow, very competitive and a great outdoorsman. He used to take me fishing with him so that he could catch two limits. Everything John did had a certain magnitude to it. . . a certain vigor. He was one of the best story tellers I've ever heard. There are plenty of John Yount stories still circulating, even after all this time, but I don't think that any one of them gives a complete idea of his character. Barry I knew less well. There was an eleven-year difference in our ages, and that may have had something to do with it. I remember Barry as a rather genteel young man, pretty straight, with a young family and a beautiful wife. The first story of his that I read was "Mother Rooney Unscrolls the Hurt," and I knew right away that it was the real thing. I still think Barry puts together some of the most glorious sentences I've ever read.

NUWER: Which other contemporary writers do you read for pleasure?

STEADMAN: A lot of James Allen McPherson and Doris Betts, if you mean living writers. Flannery O'Connor is a tough lady whom I admire greatly. I think a lot of Isaac Bashevis Singer. But I'm an English teacher after all, so I don't mind going to dead people either. I like Camus, Kafka, Celine, Dostoevsky, Henry Fielding, Mark Twain (of course), Chaucer, and the short stories of Chekhov best of all. Faulkner, though I don't particularly want to write like him; it's just unavoidable in a way. Erskine Caldwell—he can be taken much more seriously than a lot of people do take him. Eudora Welty has a range, of characters and tone, that any writer has to envy. Of the more recent writers, I think a lot of William Price Fox, Harry Crews, Lee Smith and Louise Shivers. Max Steele's *Debby* is a wonderful book, and I'd like to see him write more. Then I like Sherwood Anderson for his compassion and Ring Lardner for his dialogue. I especially like comic writers, like S.J. Perelman and Woody Allen. I also like spy stories, and John le Carre and Eric Ambler are as good as you can get in that category.

Margaret Drabble said she'd rather be at the end of a literary tradition that she admired, than in the vanguard of one she deplored. I go along with that. *The Sotweed Factor* was a splendid book, but the kind of intentional and interior things that [John] Barth has gotten into seem a good way to kill the novel permanently.

NUWER: In the end, despite a few laughs and a few drinks to anesthetize the pain, is the fictive world of Mark Steadman a rather dreary, grim place in which to live?

STEADMAN: Life seems grim to me. . .when I think about it. You know, back to zero [at death] for no reason except that you were born. But in spite of the ultimate dirty trick at the end, there are some interesting things going on in the meantime. As I said in *McAfee County*, the people there have their good times, too.

NUWER: There's a saying that a writer's vision, his particular quality of mind, is shaped by what happens to him before he is twenty-five. Is this true of you? How so, if so?

STEADMAN: So far everything I've written has come from things that happened to me before I was twenty-one. The thing I'm working on now is a little later: twenty-five. So the subject matter certainly goes back to the beginning. But I started writing when I was fifteen or so, and although I had a certain energy in that writing, it wasn't really ready to be published.

My first story got into print, *The Red Clay Reader*, when I was forty, and I think now that I needed to mellow out before I was really ready to say anything worthwhile. I don't know if that would suit every writer's talent, but I needed more disappointment than I'd had before the end of my thirties. I'm tempted to say that you need to be over thirty-five before you have experienced enough to temper you. But I rather think that's more self-justification than anything. I expect that every writer starts pretty early. Some get published while they're learning the art. Nothing wrong with that. . .though success can be hard to live with, at any age.

NUWER: The characters in your fiction seem to wish more for serenity than for achievement. John Curran, the protagonist of your novel, *A Lion's Share*, is the major exception, and his successes fall far short of his dreams. Do you see yourself in some ways as a writer who finds art in blue collar America?

STEADMAN: I think that I have a kind of affinity for people who do physical work. Maybe that's because I don't do it myself, except as a kind of hobby. (I dragooned my family into helping me build the house in which we live.) A person who is inarticulate has to act out his ideas, and I like dealing with characters like that. Action is more dramatic than talk. Also, rural people are likely to be more individualistic than people who live closer together. If you're isolated, you don't know what the rules are and more or less have to make them up as you go along. You're likely to be more original in that situation. Maybe I feel I need the distance on my material, and people like that are exotic to me, though I have plenty of relatives who fit into the class. Probably all of this is justification after the fact for my being able to deal with them better than other kinds of characters, but I feel that they need their stories told, too.

I am really democratic. Sometimes I feel that some reviewers don't like my stories because they don't like the kind of people in them. Or they [*do*] like them because they feel I'm making fun of them. Not true. I love my people, and I find them interesting. I take them seriously. The most hurtful comment I've heard about my writings is that I'm condescending to my characters. It may appear that way—I never know how well I'm controlling the attitude of my readers—but my intention was never to be anything but sympathetic.

NUWER: Are you convinced that your best work is ahead of you?

STEADMAN: If I didn't think my best work was ahead of me, I'd stop writing. I don't do it for the money. . . though I guess I'd have to admit that I do it for the *chance* of the money. If I wrote the perfect book, I'd certainly quit. That's what I'm trying to do, you see. But there's not much to worry about there. I can't imagine that there would never be room for improvement.

NUWER: Any temptation to write a potboiler for the commercial market?

STEADMAN: If I could figure out how to do it, I would certainly do it in a minute. It's not easy. If you're asking if I feel superior to that kind of thing, the answer is no. I like a good read myself.

NUWER: What, if anything, would you change about *A Lion's Share* if you had a chance to have one more go at this novel?

STEADMAN: I would make it longer. The typescript was eight hundred pages; I had to cut it by two hundred so that Holt, Rinehart & Winston could sell it for less than ten dollars. If it had cost more than that even my friends wouldn't have bought it, not if I went door-to-door with a gun in my hand. So, I would be cagier and divide *A Lion's Share* into three or four books. You live and learn.

NUWER: Ask yourself a troubling or incisive question about your work; then answer it.

STEADMAN: *McAfee County* was fun to write; now it seems more work than fun. Will I get back to the point where the process will be more joy than sweat? After the first book, you want to improve, but you can't always do that. I think I write better now than I did earlier, but the first draft is terribly hard to get out. Once I have something on paper, something I can become interested in, the rewriting is like a game. If I didn't enjoy *something* in the process, I would stop. But a time comes—maybe just a good word falls into place—and I start to get the high. I think that the way it happens now is more what writing is about, but I miss being able to do a complete short story in one sitting. The kinds of people I deal with best use a lot of obscenity and get themselves into

often bizarre situations. I am puritan enough to wonder if that is really all right. Could I really write comic stories without the naughty words?

NUWER: Tell me a thing or two about the art of fiction that you have learned is true after all these years of chasing the Muse's skirt.

STEADMAN: I don't know if there *are* any absolute truths about the art of writing fiction. The more of it I do, the less I feel I know what I'm doing. I suspect that a real genius would have virtually no idea—or he might have an idea, but no one else would ever see what it was. Conrad was right. Writing fiction is the art of making people see. It is also the art of making people feel. Making people think is all right, but only after you've made them do the other two.

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