

Interview with Mike Henson
Stenger's Bar and Grill, Cincinnati, OH

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Interviewer: Chris Green

Works in Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel:

Vol 1. "Joe"

Vol 3. "Winter Morning D. C." and "What They'll Do for You"

Green: So where are you from?

Henson: I'm from Sidney, Ohio. Sidney is north of Dayton and it's not in the Appalachian territory at all, but my grandparents were from, originally my grandfather was from Mississippi and my grandmother from Texas and they homesteaded in Oklahoma then moved up here. So it wasn't directly Appalachian, but the culture was, played the same music, spoke the same way, had the same kind of family network. When I moved here to college I got in touch with the Appalachian community which brought back a lot of things that I had repressed as far as my own upbringing, because you learn in a small mid-western town that being a hillbilly is not O.K.

Green: What did the kids say about you?

Henson: Well, it's not real clear in my mind. I remember saying things like "purty near" and getting bopped for that, but Midwest small towns are kind of, they've got an unique accent of their own. But my mother was a school teacher from New England and what I learned from my grand parents she would make me unlearn pretty quick. So I learned pretty well quickly how to shift back and forth, and it has been useful, certainly don't get very far in college if you speak the way my grand parents spoke though it was fine for them.

Green: You learned a new language: collegese.

Henson: Collegese, ya. My grand mother spent thirty years in Ohio still speaking, still having "idears" about things.

Green: Did they ever have any problems with people?

Henson: I was a little young then, my grand mother died when I was nine, my grand father moved back to Mississippi and died when I was twelve. So what I have isn't so much data as impressions. My grand father was a folk musician, played the mandolin, played the guitar, did the old Bob Dylan thing, playing the harmonica and guitar at the same thing. Sang those old things like "Casey Jones", "Down in the Valley", "Darla Della Grey" and things like that.

Green: So did you hang out with musicians then when you were little?

Henson: My father was very musical, my grand father quit by the time I was coming up. My father loved to sing, he was part of the church choir and peck ups (?), so there was a lot of music around. It wasn't necessarily mountain music. I later hung out with a lot of Appalachian mountain musicians. I don't know if you've seen Small Room with Trouble on My Mind, but it's about friends here in this neighborhood who were bluegrass musicians; so I absorbed most of that from them and got pretty involved with the bluegrass scene at one

time. Picked up a lot of stuff from that, let it run. Took about a year to write.

Green: Just the one story or the entire collection?

Henson: The story. You could call it a novella.

Green: When you sat down to write it did you have in mind the different styles you would incorporate into it?

Henson: I just started out and wrote, something I do when I get stuck is switch styles or points of view. So whatever felt right I would do it. I was working, raising a bunch of kids, and being involved in a lot of political stuff, so it was difficult to sit down for eight hours a day and maintain a narrative line. I knew when I started to write it that I would have difficulty doing that so I deliberately tried to develop a style that would allow me to get as much as possible into a small of space as possible. So I tried to learn to write in a very dense and symbolic way, because knew I wasn't to have that loose Tolstoyian line just because I wasn't going to have the leisurely Tolstoyian life, it's not that it was leisurely, he worked pretty hard: he was cushioned from having to make a living.

Green: He was able to section himself off, but you have to find a half hour here, a half hour there. When you hooked up with the blue grass community here, was that when you met with the writers from down in Whitesburg and area?

Henson: Well, that was two different tracks. See, I was a worker for the Urban Appalachian Council. In 1968 I started working in this neighborhood here.

Green: Did you live around here?

Henson: I did. I don't any more I live about a mile away now, but I lived about five blocks away from here for fifteen years. So I did community organizing, doing basic programs, educational programs in the inner city mostly with Appalachian people. And through that I got involved with some of these folks who were real rooted in Blue Grass music, not that I got to any know any professionals, just got to know the grass roots working people who played the music probably as well as some of the professionals but just never made that break with trying to make a living at it. That is what I was really interested in, not so much the professionals' names, but where the music came from, where its roots were in every day life.

That's where culture comes from and that's what I wanted to get in touch with. So in the process of setting up some cultural programs I met these folks and met a lot of different kinds of folks. I met an old black man who had been a coal miner in West Virginia and had marched with Mother Jones and had fought in the battle of Blair Mountain. These streets were full of people who had grown up in Harlan and remembered having their homes shot at and hiding under the bed from the gun thugs. Just full of all that. I absorbed all of that and tried to put as much of it as I could into some kind of living document. Kind of honorific document, Ransacked is really structured as a tragedy while "Small Room" is a ballad. So you have small stanzaic sections--you look at the way a ballad tells a story, it's very compressed and makes leaps and there's a lot of symbolic operatives in their, I tried to use that.

Most ballad singers were people who worked to make a living and the ballad leads out of the life they were living. That's what I was trying to do, that's what I was forced to do in creating that struggle. It's all gone now, but all the neighborhood bars around here, many of them, would have a blue grass group on Friday and Saturday night, a lot of groups came through here. The Stanley Brothers came through here, in different bars, a lot of other groups.

Green: When did you move to Cincinnati?

Henson: '65. Came to go to college in Xavier University. Dick¹ and I were room mates. I'm not sure how he hooked up to the Southern Appalachian Writers' Co-operative, but I hooked up through him. Went down eight or ten years ago now to a conference. We met up in Lexington and my first SAWC trip I rode in Gurney Norman's VW bus which I thought was a great experience and a great privilege. I've make I don't know how many conferences since then, this must of been ten years ago. I met Pauletta, because the little shop I was operating for the Urban Appalachian Council, we were trying to do Appalachian cultural programs and I heard about these folks down in Beckley WVA who were doing Appalachian poetry and I figured out a way to bring them town. I got Xavier university to pay their way up to do a poetry reading up there and then sponsored a poetry reading in my center.

Green: What kind of center was it?

Henson: It was called the Heritage Room. It was sponsored by the Urban Appalachian Council, just a little store front center about four blocks from here. Serve the neighborhood by way of cultural programs, educational programs, community organizing, human services.

Green: What kind of response did you get from people to the poetry? It's not normally what people would go and see.

Henson: It wasn't like we got every body from the neighborhood in there, I can't even remember now what exactly we did. I may even have some old photographs. I think it was real important for them, I got some life long friendships out of it.

Green: When you first went into college did you go in as some one who was interested in writing?

Henson: I was more interested at that time in Journalism, I wanted to be a newspaper writer. It was actually by living with Dick that I began to think that I could write, and so I don't recall that I had any inclinations that I could do literature, could do stories. I wanted to do journalism and I wanted to change the world through that, and I still do. I write for a group called The Guardian and its and independent radical news weekly out of New York City, they had a special earth-day issue and I had an article there on Toxins in Appalachian and had a review published in there. So I have journalism as kind of a side line. But I got side tracked when I was in college to doing more social work kinds of things, that's what I do today. I'm a drug and alcohol

1. Richard Hague, see other interview.

counselor in a low income Appalachian neighborhood along the river called the East End. So it didn't occur to me, people from Sidney, Ohio don't usually think of themselves as doing such things. In fact, I told my dad that I wanted to be a writer and he said you had to be born to be a writer. So it took a while to develop that notion. Now, it's to the point that I can't function with out it, I don't have to write every day--I can't write every day--but I have to know I'm on something or else I get real hard to live with.

Green: What are you working on now?

Henson: Well, about three different things, I've got a short story which is set in this neighborhood. I've got a novel which is partially set in this neighborhood but it's also set in Colorado, which I was only in for a week when I was thirteen, and in San Fransico which I have only been in for an hour and half in my life. We're doing some heavy reliance on impressions from T.V. and making it up. I'm about a hundred pages into that novel but I'm sort of stuck so I set it on the self for a while, then I started working on this story but then I got stuck on it so I finally decided to start another project which is the first major prose work I've ever done. I'm doing a book on poverty and chemical dependency.

Green: The two seem to go hand in hand.

Henson: Well, not if you talk to most chemical dependency professionals or deal with training that most chemical dependency professionals get. Its mostly designed to work with the middle class well to do client. So I'm trying to address the particular issues that poor people face in treatment, when they can get it.

Green: It sounds like a really worth while effort.

Henson: Let's see if I can get it done, let's see if we can get someone to publish it. I don't know. I don't have a publisher. So there are three different writing projects going on. I've got a novel finished called And We are not Saved which is only partly set here, I only have one chapter which has anything to do with Cincinnati. It deals with three people moving to Chicago from Appalachia, so it's at a publisher right now. Actually, it's not at a publisher, the publisher just called me and said they lost it.

Green: They lost it? File 13 strikes again.

Henson: Ya, something like that. So they've asked me to send another copy.

Green: But they were definitely interesting in publishing it?

Henson: No, they haven't said that. The lost it while they were considering it, they've had it since July and somewhere between July and now they lost it and are just now realizing that it's missing. Everybody denies ever having seen it except I have documents saying that they had knowledge that they did receive it. Minor problems.

Green: Typical.

Henson: It's been rejected by eight agents, two publishers.

Green: Have you had much problems in finding a home for work before? You were with West End Press for Ransacked and Small Room with Trouble on My Mind, what happened with that connection?

Henson: West End does a good job with what they do, but they're real limited. It's a one man operation, he's got some helpers but basically he's one person doing it. He's a professor at the University of New Mexico, so he's got a full time job and now a family. So as far as promoting the book he's real limited. West End is only now beginning to get some recognition, primarily for its multi-cultural poetry series. But to promote a novel, get it reviewed, and keep the thing alive, you can't do it.

I believe I'm writing things that are high quality and also remarkable. So I decided to try to really market it rather than stick with West End, and I got a lot of support from John Crawford the publisher at West End Press on that. He's really helped me a lot on it. We'll see. You've been able to see some really high quality literature that really says something get published and get mass distribution here recently--Toni Morrison and Lois Murdrick(?)--who I think write as well as anyone has in American Literature. And I just decided not to be self limiting any more.

I happen to believe I am the best white male writing of fiction working today, and I just need to keep pushing until somebody takes it. I'd also like to make some money doing it, not because I don't make a descent living but if I could earn some money writing then I'd have more time to write. I'd like to see a situation where I do counseling part time and I'd do writing part time. I like doing what I'm doing.

Green: What kind of importance have the connections with SAWC and the other people who you met down in that realm in individuals had for you as a person who is writing and trying to keep belief in your self going?

Henson: Well, it has helped a lot. It's a pretty inclusive kind of group, a kind of permanent kind of group. It's hard to put a finger on the kind of support that you get, but there's a kind of spiritual uplift every fall, now that I'm going down there. I missed it a few falls, I was going through divorce and didn't have any money and week ends were the only times I was getting my kids and stuff. So I really felt the hole, that sort of thing where you've got an amputation and you can still feel you leg crawl, feel the absence of it. So these last couple of years, even though I've had to take Jamie which limits my participation having a small child with me, but it's meant a lot to me to do that.

Writers unlike musicians or actors operate pretty much in isolation, it's very difficult to write anything by committee. We set up a kind of sub-group here for a while. We didn't plan for it to be Appalachian but it just so happened that everybody was either Appalachian or Southern in it. It was real important in helping me finish And We are not Saved we'd meet once a month and talk about what we were working on, it wasn't so much a work shop group as a support group. "Boy this is really frustrating to write, I just can't get this solved, I don't know where I am going here". We just sort of picked each other up. Several important things came out of that. There is a woman named Air Lee Strange(?) who's here from the Appalachian section of Alabama. She came up with a really deep radio drama out of that, she brought it to the group.

This year I'm one of the coordinators and we're looking at trying to really bring in some new writers, bring in some younger writers, which is maybe something you can help us with. We've noticed that we got that first

generation and now we're starting to become the older writers and we're not getting any of these writers in their 20's, coming out of the colleges, out of the writers' programs so we're going to try to do some outreach this year to get some younger folks to take an interest, and not just make it an old boys club. Make it something that is going to last a while.

Green: What kind of projects are in store here?

Henson: One thing we came up with, and I don't know if we'll get this pulled off or not, is that we want to do a writers' colony in Highlander's center in which people who are interested in some sort of socially conscious writing, writing that will invoke some kind of social change can spend a week just writing. And that will be the week just preceding the yearly conference. That is something we've never tried. We've got a committee that is supposed to be working on that, I don't know what they are doing, but I hope to hear back from them soon.

The other project is trying to do some recruiting among the students, student writers or people we haven't been able to touch. We'd like to get some minority writers in. We're talking about some area readings, and we're talking about an issue of Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel devoted to censored works. Writings from the mountains that have been censored.

Green: Do you feel like you've ever been censored?

Henson: Not direct censorship, though it's really hard to say. You know, if you're getting this rejection slip and its just comments, is it censorship, no its just a blank rejection slip. You don't know what lies behind it, you don't know if its some how the politics rather than the literary quality is what's causing it to get kicked back. I'm sure that the fact that I write about lonely people in poor neighborhoods and that I try not to write about some kind of learning kind of paternalism that is current among writing about poor people, I try to write about them as if they were real people. I'm sure I have been censored that way.

But the kind of thing that I've felt most clearly has been the kind of silence with which my work has met, and until a few years ago I never had any thing in any of the local papers about my writing.

Green: Are you talking about stuff that they'd rather have under the carpet? Stuff that people say--ya, but we don't talk about that.

Henson: I was nominated for a local award. One of the local papers has an award ceremony for local artists and one of the categories is literary. And I was nominated but didn't get it, and I had somebody who was on the inside of the process let me know that it was part of what led to that was the political and social implications of what I was writing. That it was not a comfortable thing. I don't know if anyone has ever taken my books out of the book store and burnt them¹.

Green: That's not the kind of censorship that we're fighting.

1. Work in third level of power control, hegemonic power levels, see Gaventa's definition.

Henson: But I'd almost rather they'd do that. I went out and bought a book by Solamom Rushdie just as an act of solidarity. Prior to all that I wasn't really aware of Solamom Rushdie as some one I wanted to read, now I've read his book and it's a pretty good book. It's almost simpler to fight that kind of censorship than to fight the silence. I don't know if you've ever read Tilly Olsen's book Silences? It's powerful, mostly directed to the silences directed to women, it's an extended essay on the many what that people are silenced and it refers to the none explicit manner.

Green: It seems as if a lot of the censorship which comes about, as you were saying, is an economic censorship. We don't have voices of numbers or individuals but rather voices of income. And that is represented in our government. What does Walden's Books put out on their selves? And the answer is something that their conception of the mall-goer would be interested in. I was reading a article about the production of minority literature and once it happened it really took off people were really interested in hearing about them¹. But the idea that the book sellers have is that people are not going to be interested in them.

Henson: I have found the same thing in terms of politics. People say, "Well, people just aren't really ready to hear this idea" and what they're really saying is that they are not ready to hear that idea. They don't trust people well enough to let the ideas be heard. There is pretty well documented evidence in ways that ideas are limited, I was reading a review of a book that analyzes the media and ways in which the media is very slanted and what gets considered legitimate and what's not considered legitimate. One of the things that it pointed out is that William F. Buckley has his own T.V. show in PBS but no left thinker has one. Alexander Cockburn, who is much less biased and clear of a writer than Buckley ever could be is never going to have his own show on PBS, or Gloria Steinam, but she might.

The personalities that appear as experts on MacNeil/Lehrer are generally always white males of moderate to right perspective, never to the left, never a feminist, or a black perspective.

Green: That's interesting. I was reading Gurney's interview with Lance Olsen in Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel and Lance was speaking about a lack of minority and feminists view points there, even though it is already speaking from a minority view point. Do you see that kind of struggle there? When a group of

1. Ishmael Reed, "The American Literary Scene as a White Settler's Fortress", from The Art of Literary Publishing. The Pushcart Book Press; Stamford, 1980. Pages 100- 106. I will quote extensively here: "A multi-cultural society where the cultural standards and tastes are dictated by one class--in this case a powerful white male class, is just as culturally under nourished as other societies where the tastes and standards are dictated by one class. Nicaragua under Somoza, Iran under different people"(101).

"In 1977 I introduced twenty multi-cultural magazines--Hispanic, Asian-American, Afro-American, and Euro-American--to a Sorbonne audience. It caused a sensation. Never before had the French audience experienced American literature in other than mono-cultural terms: white male writers" (105).

people are trying to come together in solidarity is there in not room for other voices? I would definitely call Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel politically radical like your own poem "Morning in Washington", the brown children drowning in the coffee cups. But there are other serious lacks, racial issues.

Henson: That's one of our goals, we want to get minority writers. There have been a lot of women involved in SAWC, but in all the years I can remember there has only ever been one black writer show up. And there are certainly a lot of black Appalachians. But, you know, Sand and Gravel, is not a journal a lot of people know about so the group of people who submit is relatively limited.

How do you get around that? I think you have to make some kind of conscious effort and do what you can. And just hope that you can get a response but keep on going. I think what is happening there is something that doesn't get done Harpers or Atlantic and I'm not sure what happens in Harpers or The Atlantic but I'm pretty sure its not what's happening in Pine Mountain Sand and Gravel. It certainly doesn't happen in the New Yorker, and that's were people get paid and if you can get paid you can get time off to get more writing.

Green: And the voice increases.

Henson: Right. Joyce Carol Oates is getting paid for doing what she does so she can do a lot more of it than Pauletta Hansel. And I think Joyce Carol Oates is saying some important and powerful things but she isn't saying the only things. It takes a certain amount of leisure to develop those skills and its also takes a certain amount of confidence and belief. I talked about how coming from Sidney, Ohio you don't really believe you can do things and that's really limiting.

One of the gifts you get from living in a middle or upper class circumstances is the belief that you can do certain things. I noticed that in my own life I was always wanted to do things like go off to California to live for a while but it just never occurred to me to actually plan to do it, I just couldn't think. I though further than most of my peers, they went 50 miles down the road to the nearest town to go to school where as I went a little further, I went 90 mile to go to college. And its partly in having a mother who's educated and had lived in other parts of the country and believing that I could such things. But I didn't believe much. My daughter just took off last year to go to California, she went as far as she could go and still be in the continental United States. She somehow received the belief she could do that, and a lot of us don't get that. A lot of us don't believe that we can be writers or play writes. So a lot of silence occurs that way, you don't need to silence somebody who never puts pen on paper. You don't need to silence somebody who never raises their voice.

Green: When you were working at the center were you encouraging people to have their hand at it?

Henson: Ya, it really didn't turn out much. It's really difficult to. . .I realize I was working at a much higher level than they were ready for. So what I do today is work on very basic things like let's stay sober and let's get alive. I would talk to kids about leadership, art, and other things too but really for a lot of these kids it's a lot to envision graduating from high school. Let's get through this hurtle first, and of course I work with kids

who are chemically dependent so the big thing there is lets keep your life from being more of a wreck than it all ready is and let's get sober. My goals are much more focused and limited. Their education is so bad--they haven't had the basics, they simply haven't had the basics. And I don't know who to blame for them not getting the basics because they certainly had the basics, some people who care but there are not just enough of them there. I've got kids who I work with that are fetal alcohol victims, they can't sit through a class with out exploding, how're you going to educate them, how are you going to get them to believe that they can successful?

Its a real struggle, all the things that we might want as radical democrats, we say we want these people to take their history in to their own hands and run it and that's nice, makes nice slogans at a rally but. . . Lack of education is a form of censorship, limits that are put on people's self-esteem is a form of censorship, economics, poverty is a form of censorship.

There is this little line that I like from Caesar Vallejo, the Peruvian poet, he said "I write for the illiterate." He said a number of things that were hard to figure out but obviously that's, I guess the term for that is an oxymoron. It sounds contradictory but I think there are two ways to understand it, one is that he writes in the name of the illiterate, in the name of those who can't speak for themselves, which is a pretty arrogant position. I've decided to do that, and that's kind of an arrogant decision to make so you have to counter it with a certain kind of humility and hope what you do is honorific rather than paternal or denigrating to the people you propose to establish a voice for.

Green: I can tell that from your writing because when I read Small Room I was reminded that my grandfather grew up in Covington and died from Alcoholism along, very much, those same sorts of struggles and lines. And I was very much struck, it seems as if your writing is doing that.

Henson: Good to hear. The other meaning of that phrase is that there is a day which the things we create today may be interpreted by a future generation as having been their history, their voice. And certainly for me, my grandparents were close to being illiterate and yet today when I read Faulkner I see some things which tell me where I came from. So the little grandchildren of the people who we SAWC are speaking for maybe they will say, that is us, that is where we came from, that is what we had to come through to get to where we are. It sounds like it's happened at least in one case, it's real neat to hear you say that. The first person ever to read Ransacked was a girl that I had tutored when she was ten and I met up with her about six years later when she was about 16, 17, 18, when Ransacked had finally got published and I spent a long time tutoring her, building up a real good relationship with her. Lost track of her except I knew that she had gone into prostitution and become a needle junky. And I saw her in one of her phases of recovery, I'm not sure where she is today, and gave her a copy of the book. She took it right over, ignoring the boy friend that she was with, to a corner and sat down with it, and you can't ask for better readers than that. I've been real appreciative with the academic readers but that one was real special.

Green: They're the ones who's it for.

Henson: If you can have somebody read it and say they like it or say that it speaks to them that's much more important than the academic.

I've had an art's council grant for a while, I normally have to work two jobs to survive, but I got an Ohio Art's Council grant which enabled me to buy

a computer and to quit my part time job. So I was able to use that time I normally work in a second job to write. That's how I finally finished And We are Not Saved, I hope you get to see that some day. Ransacked was conceived of as a tragedy, Small Room is a ballad, and this is an epic. Although, I guess once it gets printed it shrinks down quite a bit, it's 547 pages in manuscript now.

Green: How long was Ransacked in manuscript?

Henson: Only about 96 pages, so it actually got a little bigger.

(2230 Burnet Ave. Cincinnati Oh 45219)

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