

Darin Jensen

Interview with Thomas Fox Averill

Thomas Fox Averill is the writer-in-residence and a professor of English at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas, where he teaches courses in Kansas Literature and creative writing. His publications include a novel called *Secrets of the Tsil Café* (Penguin-Putnam, 2001), two short story collections, *Passes at the Moon* (Woodley Press, 1985) and *Seeing Mona Naked* (Watermark Press, 1989). His next novel, as yet untitled, is forthcoming from Penguin-Putnam in late 2002 or early 2003. He has been a radio commentator on KANU for twelve years and some of those commentaries are collected in *Oleander's Guide to Kansas: How You Know When You're Here* (Wichita Eagle Books, 1996). He is also the editor of *What Kansas Means to Me: Twentieth-century Writers on the Sunflower State* (University Press of Kansas, 1990).

Thomas Fox Averill and I sat down at a table in his home in Topeka on a bright day in February. Over coffee and blueberry muffins we had a chance to talk about his work and the thoughts behind that work. Below is an excerpt from that conversation.

DJ: I was reading on the website that you had gone in and prepared dinner for your friends on your fiftieth birthday. You prepared dishes from your recent novel, *Secrets of the Tsil Café*: green chile potato soup and the recipes didn't sound like Kansas food. I have this German Nebraska background, very meat and potatoes.

TFA: *In the Tsil Café*, the cook, Robert Hingler, refuses to cook with anything except ingredients that existed in the western hemisphere before Columbus. That makes it a pre-Columbian restaurant in its ingredients—it's an invented cuisine, an invented culture. No single culture would have combined yellow potatoes, green chile, shaved turkey liver, and turkey broth. But all of those things were indigenous to the New World. So its New World food cooked New Mexico style. Robert's goal is to introduce Kansas City to the taste of the Americas before Columbus and particularly to chilés: *Secrets of the Tsil Café* actually starts with a menu. The first thing you see in it is the menu. Then you get into the guts of the book, the copyright pages, the dedication pages. The menu serves in some way as a table of contents. There are twenty-six recipes printed in the book, most of them from that menu, though not all of them. There are also footnotes to many of the New World ingredients—if you're interested in the origins of maple as a sweetener, you can read the footnotes. It's sort of a multimedia book. (Laughs) You can read it, you can cook it.

DJ: What is the importance of food in your novel? You talk about pleasure; do you think it's a representation of pleasure? Food is important in a lot of novels, and poetry too. I wonder what is the

connection between human and food.

TFA: In some ways, *The Tsil Cafe* was, if not easy to write, at least full of the many possibilities that presented themselves to me, because food is such a ubiquitous metaphor in language and in human life, from the land of milk and honey to mother's milk. Milk and honey are the only two foods that are naturally produced to be food; everything else is corrupted. We have to kill something to get it. Everything from that to the way food is involved with the sacred, with initiations, with death and funeral banquets, with contests and challenges, with sophistication and innocence. It's like the innocence of Adam and Eve before they ate the fruit of knowledge. It's just so ubiquitous that you have to find which way you want to go. It's a rich metaphor for almost anything. Probably the only other subject that is so metaphorical is sex, and for the same reason. It involves all parts of the life cycle. It uses all the senses: touch, taste, sight, smell, hearing.

DJ: You could even modify it, so there's just sex, food, and death. You could go that far, almost.

TFA: And, of course, sex and food are the only two things we really need to keep surviving as people. As his father Robert says to my narrator, Wes Hingler, "Everything else is Just talk. Interesting talk, but it's just talk. I wanted to write a book that not only used food as a metaphor, because that's easy to do—the whole "you are what you eat"—but in which people's interactions were almost food-like. The characters are all in some way reminiscent of some food. The father's association with peppers. The mother's association with the pungencies of garlic and onions and cheeses. She's from an Old World background, so I've got the Old World as opposed to the New World. And Wes grows up between them. He becomes the tomato, because it moderates and enhances both the New World and the Old, and he moderates between and enhances two parents. The last section of the book is prefaced with this: "You have young traditions and old ones, New world and old, you are both a vegetable and a fruit, a goerbetween worlds. You are various, negotiable, capable of thickening, a good base for sauces, a fine garnish for salads. You are bright as blood, big as a heart. You are sweet and acidic."

That is Wes's character as he becomes the one who goes between his parents and also becomes himself. I'm trying not to just use food as a metaphor. Wes is not just LIKE a tomato, he IS the tomato, this wonderful thing that nobody knows quite what it is—fruit or a vegetable, to be eaten raw or cooked.

DJ: How long did it take you to write this?

TFA: From the time I conceived it to the time I had a draft that my agent started showing around took about a year. But I had been researching those foods, and cooking with those foods, for years. I became interested in the foodstuffs of the New World in 1992—ten years ago—because that was the five-hundredth anniversary of the Columbus voyage. And everyone was celebrating Columbus. I thought, "The heck with him—he was a European who stumbled onto a very rich place." And what's left? They took all the gold, they ruined the pyramids, they don't use the calendars, the religions are gone except for in very remote parts. But the food is everywhere. That centuries-long relationship people have with a grass in order to cultivate it into corn, is to me an amazing human interaction with the environment. And so many things that we eat now, that we take for granted, the Europeans had never seen before. They had never tasted avocado or pineapples or green beans or strawberries or chocolate or vanilla or peanuts or potatoes or tomatoes. So I've researched and cooked with New world ingredients for a time, and created my character, Robert Hingler, and his

recipes over the years since 1992. I still have a section of the kitchen cabinet for my New World foods. Also during this time I wrote long letters to a food friend of mine. So, *Secrets of the Tsil Café* had a long germination. Also, I've written some short stories that have to do with food.

DJ: When you write, you have this amazing sense of place that I've discovered in other books, but I don't know that there are other American books I've discovered this in. Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has an amazing sense of place for India. What is it about place that is so important in your work? These stories in Kansas, there are amazing places in them. Something about that is very important in your work. I was just wondering what that is, or what is important about place to you?

TFA: It goes beyond setting, I think. The need in the fiction writer to create a setting is one thing. But the interplay in people between the mind and the environment interests me. I've been loyal to this particular place for a long time. Place moves from geography outside the mind to geography inside the brain. That's happened to me. Cartographers have studied the human ability to hold a place in their minds. For me, that place is Kansas, probably because of my long tenure here. Everywhere I look, or travel, I have a memory. When that happens, who you are becomes physically as well as mentally oriented. I feel that way about Kansas. And I know other people who seem to— like William Stafford in his poetry, and Steven Hind, a Kansas poet who writes a lot about the Flint Hills. These people can't separate experience from place. Or idea from place. Or history from place. Like one poem Stafford enjoyed reading aloud. "This is the hand," and he would hold up his hand. "This is the hand that touched the water," and he talks about being bitten by a muskrat, which may or may not have ever happened. But still, he was telling us how he carried around places and experiences in his physical self. That's the interplay I'm fascinated by, probably because I've been in a single place for so long, and read Kansas literature for a long time. I'm actually finding now that in the novels—for example, *The Tsil Café* is not so much geographically centered— but it, and my town of Glasgow, Kansas, certainly are fully created places, with all the attributes I'm talking about.

DJ: How would you define regional literature, then?

TFA: Regional literature is American Literature. Think of Hawthorne's obsession with the place, culture and history of Puritan New England. And he captures it well. When I read his work in high school and college, the place seemed abstract. But then I went back East, and visited all the places, including the Custom House, and the House of the Seven Gables. Hawthorne, Twain, Faulkner, Kate Chopin, Steinbeck, Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway: all very interested in place, and its effect on human perception, possibility, and so on. Now, regional literature seems to be anything not set in New York. But that's a more recent trend. It's all about population. In the late nineteenth century, 75% of Americans lived in the country, or in towns of less than 2,000. By the 1920s, a majority of Americans lived in urban areas. That's exactly when you see the propaganda wars begin. Sinclair Lewis, with *Main Street*, sounds the call, and all kinds of writers jump on the American small town, and the sterility and lack of culture in the heartland. Or, as happens these days, they romanticized the farm and the small town as the land of heart. Now, we are just a monstrous flat place, or a place for the country to be nostalgic about. Now, demographers tell us, 75% of all Americans live an hour's drive from a coast. They think Kansas is flat, and dull. But the ocean is just as flat as the prairie. Like I do, I suppose, those who live an hour's drive from the coast celebrate their landscape. There are just fewer of us in this landscape.

DJ: You do radio commentaries, too. How did you get started?

TFA: The radio station put out a call for Kansas Day commentaries. I had created the Oleander character for a possible book, and then I didn't do anything with that. But I had this voice, this old farmer who knew Kansas backward and forward, and who didn't always like the way things were going, culturally, and in the legislature and the education system. So I thought I could use this voice to comment on the state. KANU, at the University of Kansas, accepted one of them, and I said, "I can do some more of these". And they said, "Go ahead." And Mr. Oleander took off; I was doing commentaries about once a month for the first year. People really responded to them—I had more requests to come and speak—and more than from all my short stories. Four minutes on the radio beat out having a short story published in *Kansas Quarterly* or someplace. In terms of the Kansas thing, I guess if I have any agenda it's in my feeling that we've lost some of our populist experimental selves, and bought into the negativity that surrounds us—in terms of popular culture. People don't know the rich history of the state, and all of the social experimentation, both positive and negative, and all of the wild people who came here, were attracted to it, because of the populist experimental mentality. My desire is to give some practical history lessons, and always to comment on the present in terms of the past. The Oleander character is able to do that. Plus, comment on the country versus the city, which mirrors the past versus the present; and farming versus industry, you know, agri-business versus agriculture. So I get all these nice contrasts going for me and when I get an idea and work it out, it may be something fairly simple, but it's something that only Oleander would think of, and nobody else would say.

DJ: And all of this is related to your interest in Kansas and its literature?

TFA: I've taught Kansas literature for years, I've written books set in Kansas for years, edited *What Kansas Means to Me*, I've done radio commentaries, I've written about Kansas, and I don't have any high claims for myself as someone who is altruistic, like, "This is what I want to do for Kansas." It's just what I'm interested in. I have had students tell me, and citizens of the state tell me, that the stuff that I do on the radio and in the classroom makes them feel better about being part of Kansas. And that makes me feel good.

DJ. Right.

TFA: I think it must be hard to live in a place that even you undervalue, in terms of almost everything about it. And I know people who do. They hate the food in the restaurants, they hate what they can't get in the grocery store, they hate the landscape, they hate the lack of movies or other culture, they hate the school systems, and I think, "That must be tough!"

DJ. Right. I teach Expository Writing, and it's a room full of fresh-faced, smart kids. It's amazing. I taught high school before this, and I can't believe the difference. But they're very introverted; they don't have a lot of confidence about them. Do you think that's a function of place, that they don't feel like they come from somewhere?

TFA: Yes. At Washburn we do a lot, especially in our Honors classes, that has to do with Kansas and place. A lot of our honors students are from small Kansas towns, and they've done very well in small

Kansas high schools. And we want them to know right away that they have as good an education in as good a place as anywhere else in the country. They come to us as really bright, smart, articulate—as much as anyone from a big city high school.

DJ: Probably even more than a big city high school.

TFA: Maybe more. I do like to see their attitude about their place change, individual by individual. But I also got into Kansas literature because I was a graduate student, and I was looking for a specialty area to teach in, and in the late sixties and early seventies grad students were desperate for something to study. All of the people in the canon had been done ad nauseum. What more could you write in a dissertation on William Faulkner by 1970?

DJ: Or Hemingway, or Fitzgerald, or any of them.

TFA: Exactly. Also, people at that time were discovering new voices that hadn't been studied before, which included regional voices, included women's voices, included black voices. Everyone was trying to expand the canon.

DJ: That's interesting, because I'm on the other side of that, where there's too much to study. No grad student knows where to begin.

TFA: Yes, you used to sit at a table and there was meat and potatoes and green beans, and you would eat them up. Now, to be a grad student is like going to an international buffet. It's like, "Where do I want to study? I don't know." But back then, I was reading a lot of Kansas literature because I was writing about Kansas, and my creative writing professor, Edgar Wolfe at KU, said, "You have to read some of these Kansas writers." I didn't know who they were. He gave me their books, and I read people like William Allen White, Paul Wellman, and John Ise. I realized that no one was reading these people. There was something nice about entering territory that no one else had claimed. Within five or six years of reading and writing about it, and teaching it, if people had questions they would come to me. I became the person who knew about Kansas writers. I collected as much as I could and I read as much as I could, voraciously, for years, trying to get up to speed.

I read a lot of work that no one would read or even want to read, like the work of historical novelist Margaret Hill McCarter. Best-selling novelist, but her novels are very romantic, idealized visions. But she was a very prominent woman, educated. She was the first woman ever to address a Republican National Convention. So, a significant person, not just a novelist. But that leads you to wonder about the fact that lots of women were not considered great novelists. Part of it is because they were pushed into the genres like historical romance. But I read all of her work, and everything William Allen White ever wrote, his fiction, things like that, and I learned a lot. I wasn't interested in claiming that this was great literature, but in making the claim that it tells us a lot about the place we're from. About our idealizations and our romances about ourselves. These are McCarter's themes: Bleeding Kansas, and pioneering and the Santa Fe Trail and education—she took them all on.

Anyway, I think there's a real advantage to getting a territory and making it your own. William Stafford has

a poem, "In Response to a Question." The first lines: "The earth says have a place, be what that place requires." Real simple. Find your place, and do what you can in that place. What you have to do in that place. Early on, I chose Kansas literature, and it has been great. I've read a lot of fine books, and through the Center for Kansas Studies at Washburn I've reprinted books that were out of print, that people had no idea existed. I've been able to teach those in my classes. Every once in a while we've been able to "discover" someone. My wife, Jeffrey Ann Goudie, in fact, became interested in a woman columnist, Edythe Squier Draper, who had a literary career in Southeast Kansas. Jeffrey did a long biographical essay after researching Draper's life and reading all her work. I was interested because Draper was an incredible short story writer in the twenties and thirties, then quit writing fiction to become a newspaper columnist for the last years of her life. Here at Washburn, we've reprinted Jeffrey's article as an introduction to six of Draper's stories, and I think they're just as good as stories being produced at the time by Sherwood Anderson and others of that generation. Very innovative in their technique, very forward looking in their focus on women and children and others in powerless situations.

So there are a lot of rewards to Kansas Literature. Whether I have a big agenda or not, I don't know. I like to do things because the activity is engaging—like writing. I feel better when I'm writing. I feel better when I'm reading. And my interest in Kansas has allowed me to be more published than if I were writing on William Butler Yeats or Nathaniel Hawthorne. I'm the one willing research and write it. I always advise people to find something that nobody else has charted out.