

ENGL 282  
Contemporary Southern Fiction  
Dr. Hammond  
Fall 2007  
Paper 1

## Short Paper

Your short paper in ENGL 282 will be approximately 1000-1500 words, or about four to six typewritten pages, due to be posted by class time on Tuesday, 23 October. This paper is a critical analysis, an exploration of a central question or thesis, supported by examples from the text. In your paper, you should choose one of the topics suggested below and develop this into a fully articulated thesis.

*Somehow Form a Family*, Tony Earley

1. What is the role of television in the essay “Somehow Form a Family”? In considering this question, look at the many places in the essay in which Earley references television. For instance, why would the narrator compare himself to Opie in the first line of the essay and particularly to the Opie of “the second or third season of the Andy Griffith Show” (1)? In the section of the essay detailing how his family watched television, what is the effect of integrating the discussion of the various television shows with the details about his family member’s lives (7-11)? What does references such as the one to Bounty as the “quicker picker upper” establish about the narrator (9)? In your paper, do not answer each of these questions individually, but find a unified and focused approach to addressing the basic question about television’s role in the essay.
2. In his essay “Shooting the Cat,” Earley writes “I go around telling anyone who will listen that I am from the country, but deep down I know it’s a lie. I grew up on Gilligan’s Island, in Mayberry, I’m not sure where. My family is from the country. They are waiting on the porch to see what I will do” (65). In *Somehow Form a Family*, how does Earley create a vision of the South in which he grew up as a place with both a distinct rural identity and at the same time, as a place that is becoming a part of the larger popular culture of the United States?
3. In the preface to the collection Earley explains that “the great irony of the personal essay is that the essayist attempts to illuminate universal human truths by talking about himself” (xx), and blurs the distinction between fiction and what he defines as creative non-fiction by explaining that “Memory and imagination seem to me the same human property, known by different names” (xviii). How is this different from your earlier understandings of non-fiction or fiction as a genre? In what ways does this seem different than fiction? One area you might focus on particularly in considering this question is role of the author in the book. Generally the author disappears into the background of the book (although certainly not always). Here Earley explains that he makes statements about what is profound by commenting on the personal in his own life. What is the role

of the author in this book? The following quote from an interview with Earley might be useful in considering this question.

I come from a family of storytellers and I've often been accused by people, you know, friends and my wife, that I tell stories, and I don't tell them accurately. They pull me aside and say, "That's not the way that that happened." But, it's a better story the way that I tell it. And if the person who's speaking to me about this is involved in the story, suddenly there are two people. There's the real person who was involved in the actual happening and then there's the character in the story that I'm telling, which is a representation of this other person. Suddenly there are these two distinct personalities, and because I'm the one who's making up the story, they're both very real to me, but it's kind of disconcerting to the person that I'm telling the story about. And just in thinking about those issues, over the years, I have become aware that somebody in a story, even in a non-fiction piece or a newspaper account, is in fact different, I mean just has to be, than the person that story is written about.

Goldstein, Bill. "Audio Interview: Tony Earley." *New York Times* 18 May 2000. Web. 20 Jan. 2005.

### *The Christmas Letters*, Lee Smith

1. In *The Christmas Letters*, Mary writes one letter describing her attempts to understand her sister Ruthie's job. Ruthie works for a fashion designer named Jay Moretz and answers Mary's question about what she does by saying that "she said she 'makes Jay Moretz possible.'" "In my own way," Mary continues, "I could identify with that" (57). How do the women in *The Christmas Letters* define their identities in their relationships to their families in a similar way?
2. The three narrators in *The Christmas Letters* essentially use the same form for each of their seasonal letters—a letter followed by a recipe. How do the recipes function in the novel? What relationships do the recipes establish between characters—and between the authors of the letters to their readers? Does every letter include recipes? If not, why not? Many of the recipes are not the author's—why do the writers choose to include other recipes than their own? As with the Earley questions, you do not need to address every one of these questions about the recipes, but instead need to come up with a unified and focused argument about the role of the recipes in the novel.

### Comparative Analysis, *Somehow Form a Family* and *The Christmas Letters*

1. Mary, writing in *The Christmas Letters* about a family argument, writes "Families! You wonder how any of us survive them, don't you?" (53). Discuss how, in both Lee Smith's *The Christmas Letters* and Tony Earley's *Somehow Form a Family*, the traditional (and sometimes sentimental) notion of the southern family is complicated.

2. Storytelling is an important part of both Lee Smith's *The Christmas Letters* and Tony Earley's *Somehow Form a Family*. Included below are two quotations from interviews with both authors in which they discuss their families as influences on their writing. How do the authors of both books use storytelling as an important theme throughout their works, and does this relate to family in their books as well?

SMITH: I grew up in a family of world-class talkers. They were wonderful talkers and storytellers, both the women and the men. I was an only child, and so I heard all this adult conversation all the time. I was always taken where these wonderful stories were being told. So I really did grow up on stories. My mother was a wonderful storyteller, not just my daddy and all the men in the family who were known for it. And I read all the time. I was a compulsive reader. I think I went naturally from reading to writing little stories, quite often like the ones I was reading. You know, I'd read a horse book and I'd try to write a little horse story. It was a natural outgrowth of the reading.

McCord, Charline R. "Interview with Lee Smith: May 18, 1997. *The Mississippi Quarterly* 52.1 (Winter 1998): 89-119. Literature Resource Center. Web. 15 February 2005.

#### **Who and what are your influences?**

My wife has pointed out that everyone in my family knows how to tell a story. Apparently, this isn't true for all families. So I guess my family was my earliest and probably most profound influence. That I was able to write about the Depression without having to do a lot of research is because a large part of my family's story stockpile is about life during that time. I feel like I've almost lived in it myself. When my grandmother talks about the way things were, I can almost see it.

"Interview: Tony Earley." *Time Warner Bookmark*, n.d. Web. 15 February 2005.

If none of these topics appeal to you, you may propose a topic in writing; if you plan to propose a topic, you will need to write on *The Christmas Letters* and/or *Somehow Form a Family*. Proposals must be submitted by email no later than 3:00 p.m. on Thursday, October 11.

## **General Instructions and Research Information**

Your own interpretation is of primary importance in the paper, but you will also use at least one secondary source to back up your argument. But understand that you will use research materials only to back up your own interpretation of the work; in other words, it is important that you not write a paper reviewing the criticism of your text and author, but instead offer your own interpretation of the work. Your paper may include biographical material about the author if it is relevant to understanding the work, but the focus of the paper should be on a literary analysis of the text, not on the author's life. Many papers will include no biographical material at all, and that's just fine.

The best way to begin is to use the Medford Library Quick Links. I recommend starting with Literature Resource Center and then MLA. You might also find some valuable material in JSTOR as well, and three general academic databases that might be valuable are InfoTrac OneFile, WilsonWeb OmniFile, and Academic Search Premier. You may also use the Internet, but should document any sources from the Internet in the same way that you document other sources. Remember that you may look for information on your specific book, information on your author, or broader information about Southern literature or culture in your research. As always, try multiple keyword combinations for the best results.

Anytime you use source material in this class, you must correctly document your sources using MLA format. Your paper must include internal parenthetical citations and a bibliography. If you're unfamiliar with this documentation style, please see me after class or visit the Purdue University's OWL on research writing.

Your paper will be evaluated primarily on three areas: first, that your paper has a clear argument and carries that argument throughout the paper effectively; second, the paper's organization; and third, the quality of supportive evidence that you use to back up your argument (including paraphrases and direct quotations from the text(s) in question as well as your secondary sources). Other factors may also influence your grade, including correct grammar and usage. For more information about paper grading, see *Criteria for Evaluating Writing*. Finally, please see *Paper Guidelines* for general instructions on papers, as well as an example of a correctly formatted paper. Submit the paper in Blackboard in the Digital Drop Box by the due date on the syllabus.