



A conversation with novelist Amy Greene

During her visit in July 2011 to the Clarksville Writers Conference, Tennessee novelist Amy Greene sat down with Tennessee Literary Project intern Derrick Hill to answer a few questions.

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Derrick Hill: How have you enjoyed the conference thus far? I guess this morning was your first taste.

Amy Greene: Yeah, actually this is the first thing I've done today. I haven't gotten to listen to anybody or go to any workshops yet, but I really love the people and the audience and I could tell they were engaged. They were a really good audience.

DJ: You did the young writers' conference last night?

AG: Yeah, last night I did the Tennessee young writers and that was really fun too.

DH: Were they pretty responsive?

AG: They absolutely were. I think I had this misconception before I started talking to students because back in April I traveled with Lacy Cook, who is in charge of the Tennessee young writers' workshop, for a week visiting East Tennessee schools, high schools. I just had this misconception that they wouldn't pay attention or they wouldn't be interested, and they were some of the best audiences I've ever had. I think it's because it's exciting for them. They aren't jaded yet and so things are a bigger deal to them. Last night was like that. Some of my best audiences are students and they had a lot of great questions.

DH: You've been on a book tour for your novel *Bloodroot*. How was the tour?

AG: It was my first time on a plane, ever. I have spent a lot of time sheltered and so my very first trip was a two-month book tour—first plane ride, first trip to California. I went to San Francisco and toured the Bay Area. One of the most gratifying things about that trip was to see how people outside of Appalachia and outside of the region were responding to *Bloodroot*. It had just come out at that time and I didn't know before *Bloodroot* if people would get it because I was writing about home and about the holler. It still surprises me in a way. I think that, hopefully, what it says is that there is something universal at the heart of the story that people can relate to, no matter where they are from. It is even being published in Italy and Turkey. I always wonder how they translate words like "haint" and "ort" and all that. It's a good thing because it says there is something more. It transcends geography.

DH: Have you noticed that people notice things in your novel or notice connections that you hadn't previously been aware of?

AG: Absolutely, that's one of the great things. I've also done a lot of book club meetings—people invite me to come to the book clubs and discuss *Bloodroot*. I always come away with some kind of enlightenment about my own book, which is an interesting experience. You always think about what the writer is giving the reader, but since *Bloodroot* was published and I started talking to readers, I think also about what the

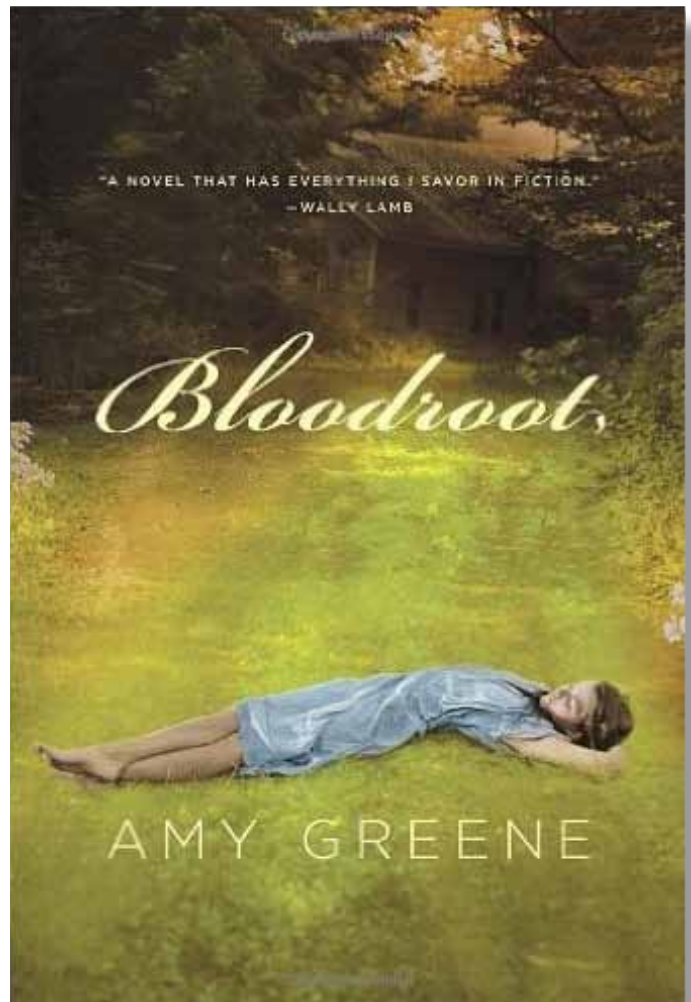
reader gives the writer when you have those conversations. I think those things are in the book that readers point out and see whether you realize it or not, whether you intended it or not. It's just great to see what they are getting out of it. Maybe your subconscious goes to work a little bit because one of the things that has been really interesting that people have brought up is that *Bloodroot* is a lot like *Wuthering Heights*. That is something that has come out in book clubs and in reviews. I didn't have *Wuthering Heights* in mind, or anything like that, but I can so see where that comparison comes from. That's one of my all time favorite books and I've really been interested in those kinds of themes and that dark romance, and how a woman get into a relationship like that and what's it all about. So, definitely, those things are present and I think maybe because what goes in comes out in one way or another. The things that you love and that are a part of you are going to show up on the page. You can't help but be influenced by what you've read and how you've lived, and a little bit of autobiography goes in there every time, I think.

DH: From what I gather, your first drafts are stream of consciousness style where you just grab a notebook and spill your guts.

AG: Absolutely, I do. I think that's one of the things I always like to tell aspiring writers, that the important thing is just to get it out and get it onto paper. Don't get hung up on details or trying to make it perfect. Nobody ever has to see it if you don't like it. It's about experimenting and being comfortable with that first draft. I was speaking in Jefferson City and a student asked, "How do you come up with names for characters? I'm stuck because I can't come up with the names." I think that's an excuse people use to procrastinate. Put in a placeholder. You can put in any word in place of a name. You can come back. Don't make those excuses and try to be perfect with it. Just get it out. That's my philosophy.

DH: Has the success of *Bloodroot* and how people have interpreted your writing had any influence on how you write now?

AG: It hasn't, because, for me, writing—



especially those first drafts that you just kind of get out—is intensely personal. It's the one thing that's always been me and mine and has only to do with me and had been with me my whole life. I really do kind of think of it as a calling. So, even though with a second book there are pressures, I don't think about the pressures to live up to *Bloodroot*. I think about it when I'm not writing, but writing is still the thing that saves me even from the pressures and the publishing world and the fear of criticism. I can still retreat into the writing, thankfully. I did worry about that. I wondered what it would be like to write the second book and would I feel self conscious as I was writing, but thankfully, I was able to push everything else aside and really just write that first draft.

DH: Reading those Amazon reviews is really brave, I must say.

AG: Oh yeah. I Google myself frequently too, I can't help it. I can't resist. At first, when

I got that very first review it was crushing. It was like being stabbed in the chest. I think it was on “Good Reads,” and someone gave me one star. I was, “Oh snap, this is not right.” I crawled into bed and was like, “I suck!” and hated myself for a day, but at this point I still look because I’m interested, but I don’t feel that sting anymore with the negative reviews, because I’ve seen the response and it’s been more positive than negative. So, I’m not affected by negative reviews any more, but definitely in the beginning it would shake my confidence for days—just one negative thing. I think that’s something you get used to, just like everything else. Like speaking, for instance; I was terrified before I went on the book tour. Why does this have to be part of the experience? Why can’t I just write and live in a hole and just be in my cave all the time. I call my book tour a “trial by fire” because every night I was speaking in a different bookstore, sometimes twice a day. I had to be on TV and I had to be on the radio live. I don’t get nervous anymore. I think you get adrenaline before you speak, but that was another part of the process I got used to and I found out I could adapt. I didn’t know before if I would be able to do that part of it.

DH: Was *Bloodroot* your first attempt to write a novel?

AG: It wasn’t my first attempt to write a novel. It was the first publishable novel. In my basement I have these Rubbermaid boxes full of the old attempts going way back. I really did start writing as soon as I learned to read and write. So I have this history of old stories, and right before I wrote *Bloodroot*—something that was really important—I had been working on this novel that will never see the light of day. But I think an important part of being able to write *Bloodroot* was realizing that the other one wasn’t working and it wasn’t anything that was ever going to go anywhere or be publishable. And, of course, when I first realized that, it was a bad moment and it was disappointing, but I think it meant I had grown enough to see and assess my own work and see that it wasn’t going anywhere. So, almost immediately after I had that sort of epiphany and realized I didn’t want to be writing that novel anymore, I moved on

and started *Bloodroot*. I think all those pages and novel attempts were not in vain. They were all part of the process of coming to a point where I could write something publishable.

DH: The setting in the novel seems to become its own character. Is that something that progressed naturally or was intentional?

AG: I hadn’t really intended that. It happened naturally. It started to become sort of a love letter to home and the beauty that I was so lucky to have grown up surrounded by. I think I probably would have been a writer no matter where I was born, but I certainly would have been a different writer. The landscape has influenced so much of who I am as a human being and as a writer. So, it wasn’t anything I intended, and the whole book was written in that kind of experimental way, just seeing what happened, and that was another part of it. The land did start to become another character in the story and sort of a major driving force because of how it shaped the characters’ lives too.

DH: You have a forthcoming novel. Can we expect the same structure as *Bloodroot*, as far as narrative style?

AG: No, this one is a lot different. It is still set in Appalachia, in the TN Valley in the Depression. I think one of the things that has made it really different is that *Bloodroot* began with the characters and started a sort of exploration of characters that led to a story. With this one I had a thought. I had an idea for once. I had this kind of question that occurred to me. In Morristown we have Cherokee Lake, and when the lake goes down you can see the tops of silos and the roads that are going down under the lake. So there is a town under there, and that’s true all over the Tennessee Valley because of the TVA. You have all these drowned towns and all this buried history, so I have been thinking, probably for a long time in the back of my mind, about this history that is lost. But at the same time, with the TVA there is no black and white because, on one hand, it is heart-breaking because these people lost their land and their history and heritage, but on the other hand, the TVA was a benefit to so many people and the quality of life improved so much

in the Tennessee Valley. Even I benefited from it because my grandfather was a subsistence farmer, and I grew up on that farm, but my parents worked at that factory that came along as a result of the TVA, so our lives were easier and better. There was that kind of backdrop and I had this thought, “What if a little girl were to go missing from a town” right before it was to be flooded? What would happen in that situation? I think because I had these questions I wanted to explore progress and whether progress is always a force for good, and then I had this idea about the little girl. I ended up writing it in a very different way; it’s a third person story. There is more than one point of view and I had to pull that camera back to get that bigger picture and to think about those bigger questions. I had to do more research this time too. It’s been a different experience, and harder, actually.

DH: Was the epilogue of *Bloodroot* where you knew the story was headed or was that how it naturally progressed?

AG: I really didn’t know. At some point I knew I wanted to write from John’s perspective for myself because I wanted to know him better and I wanted to make a more believable character, not just a cartoon villain. In the process of that kind of experimentation and exploring that character I realized I needed to include that in the book and it ended up being not just for me, I thought it was important for the reader in the end. So, I didn’t know when I set out because I didn’t set out with the end in mind. It felt right to me. It’s one of those things where people either loved that I did that or hated it. They either loved that John has a voice or they ask, “Why did you give him the last word?” But I felt that, because of what *Bloodroot* is about, which to me it’s about—and there’s even a glimmer of hope for him—that ability to overcome your circumstances and whatever you’ve inherited and whatever your baggage is. You can make your own destiny; even he had a little hope of redemption.

DH: I interviewed Kevin Wilson and he described his writing process like “Constructing a Christmas tree around an ornament,” because he gets this image and he has to build everything

to fit that first image. It seems like you share a similar process.

AG: I get that. Absolutely with *Bloodroot*, it really did start with an image of the characters and the striking woman and her twins. I did build the story out from an image because the characters I had seen in my mind intrigued me so much that I started trying to know them. I have another story in mind that will probably manifest somewhere: this image of a girl being carried down the road wrapped in a log chain—a dead girl. Somewhere, somehow, that is going to show up. So, I do have these striking images that definitely will spur a whole story. I heard Ron Rash talk about this too. He was driving down the road, looking into the mountains, and he had this image of this regal woman in a big horse, and that became Serena. I know it sounds sort of mystical and strange, but where does that come from? The subconscious, I guess.

DH: Ok, a couple of hypothetical questions for fun. Would you be willing to give up half your possessions—any randomly selected items—for a pill that would cause you to only require one hour of sleep per twenty-four hour period.

AG: No, I like to sleep. That is probably part of the reason I was late today. I love to sleep.

DH: When I interviewed Kevin Wilson he said he’d rather take a pill that would make you sleep for seventeen hours a day.

AG: Yeah, that’s it. What is that that killed Michael Jackson? Get on a drip. You can have that happen.

DH: For \$50,000 would you be willing to go three months without bathing or showering, and not be able to give anyone an explanation why?

AG: I would probably do that because I very rarely leave the house. Most of the time I’m just home in my cave and I’m in sweat pants ninety percent of my life. I think that would just be the next step really. That is probably in my future, no bathing. I’ll just have dreadlocks. Since that is probably in store for me anyway, I would probably do that.

DH: Are you reading anything right now?

AG: I always blank when people ask me this. I've gone back and re-read Stephen King's early books just for pleasure because when I was a teenager, even from the age of eleven on, which is probably why I'm so twisted, that was my reading material. I've read everything he ever wrote. I get nostalgic sometime and go back and read that stuff again.

DH: Have you read Stephen King's *On Writing*?

AG: I actually just read that too. I have some workshops that I'm going to be teaching and I think the two best books I've read about writing are *On Writing* by Stephen King and *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott. The Lamott book is probably even a little better. I'm reading both of those before I try and dive in and teach somebody something.