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An Introduction to Russell Banks: A Brief Biography

For Russell Banks, writing has been a means to make my life coherent to myself.

Born in March 1940, Banks grew up in New Hampshire, and believes that it gave him an exaggerated sense of place, where the winters were endless, the soil barren, and the houses falling down. His working-class family was headed by an abusive and alcoholic father a character type that would reappear frequently in Banks's work. Banks and his father had a difficult relationship, and his father deserted the family when Banks was 12 years old.

Banks received a full academic scholarship to Colgate University in 1958. He left after a short time with the intention of going to Cuba to join Fidel Castro's guerrilla fighters but never got farther south than Florida. By his early twenties, Banks was married and the father of a daughter. He found himself echoing in his own family life the destructive patterns that his father had modeled during Banks's childhood.

After his marriage ended in 1962, Banks moved to Boston and then back to New Hampshire, where he worked as a pipe fitter and plumber until he entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he majored in 19th century literature and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1967. During his years at UNC, Banks expressed his political beliefs by being one of the founders of the Students for a Democratic Society chapter at the college. He was also jailed several times for his political activity. Banks believes that these experiences planted the seed for his novel, *Cloudsplitter*, about the radical abolitionist John Brown.

Banks also helped found a small publishing house and magazine, both called Lillabulero, which published Banks's first two books of poetry. During this time, Banks published short stories that focused on class conflict and social issues in America. One of these stories was included in *Best American Short Stories, 1971*, and in 1974, he was awarded the Fels Award for Fiction. During this time, he published his third volume of poetry, *Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter*.

Banks returned to New Hampshire after college and taught at Emerson College and the University of New Hampshire. In 1975, he published his first novel, *Family Life*, a tale of an unhappy, sexually misguided king and queen. The poor reviews the novel garnered would have deterred many a writer from continuing with his craft. However, Banks, undaunted, continued to write, and soon after produced *Searching for Survivors*, a collection of short stories that won him the O. Henry Memorial Award for short fiction.

Banks's work frequently explores the psyches of working-class people trapped in mundane lives, the ideas of conflict and contrast in the lives of men and women, and the confrontations that can occur between people of different race and economic status. His 1978 novel, *Hamilton Stark*, was an early effort by Banks to tell a story through shifting points of view.

Banks received a Guggenheim Fellowship and spent a year and a half on the island of Jamaica. His experiences there led to his writing of *The Book of Jamaica*, a novel published in 1980, which received generally positive reviews.

The technique Banks used in *Hamilton Stark* contrasting and intersecting lives is very evident in his 1985 novel, *Continental Drift*. This somewhat autobiographical tale of a man who escapes New Hampshire for Florida, only to find that money and family problems follow him, is another example of a story told from two points of view. (One of the two characters involved is Vanise Dorsinville, a Haitian woman, and Banks himself admitted to having some misgivings about the ability of a white male to portray a black woman's thoughts.) *Continental Drift* was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, and it won the John Dos Passos Award and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award.

Following *Continental Drift*, Banks published a collection, *Success Stories*, in 1986, and a novel, *Affliction*, in 1989. In *Affliction*, Banks returned to his early themes of family violence and abusive parents. Like *Continental Drift* and *Affliction*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, the novel Banks published in 1991, was inspired by a newspaper article about an event that occurred in a small town. Again making use of the tech-

nique of shifting viewpoints, *The Sweet Hereafter* explores the effects of a school bus accident on the lives of the residents of Sam Dent, a small town in upstate New York.

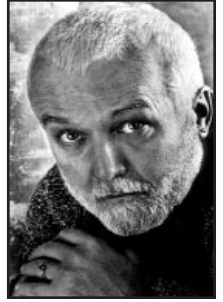
Banks published *Rule of the Bone* in 1995, a novel about a teenager who leaves his dysfunctional family and searches for appropriate role models, finding one, finally, in I-Man, a Rastafarian from Jamaica.

In 1998, Banks published *Cloudsplitter*, a novel about the abolitionist John Brown. Although at first glance this may seem to be a total departure from his standard themes, it actually fits quite well in Banks's canon. It is told by Brown's son, Owen, who looks back from old age on his life with his family, amid the upheavals of the 19th century, and tries to justify his own life in the face of his desire to die. The dynamics of father and son are not so different from Banks's own life or the relationship between Chappie (in *Rule of the Bone*) and his abusive, difficult stepfather.

In May 1995, Banks sent a small shock wave through the world of independent booksellers, proclaiming at the annual meeting of Barnes & Noble that he has turned most of his personal patronage of bookstores from independents to the mega-chain stores. He praised Barnes & Noble for its selection, which he claimed smaller stores could not offer, and predicted a future in which independent book stores no longer existed. An angry reaction by independent booksellers drew a palliative response from Banks. He explained that his concerns, such as the future of small presses and the threat of censorship, were precisely the same as many independents' priorities, and that he repeatedly brought these issues to the attention of Barnes & Noble.

Banks has been married four times, and has fathered four daughters. He is currently married to the poet Chase Twitchell, and they divide their time between two homes, one in Princeton, New Jersey, and the other in upstate New York, where Banks does his writing in a renovated sugar-house. He was involved in the film adaptations of his novels *Affliction* and *The Sweet Hereafter*. Shooting of Banks's own film adaptation of *Continental Drift*, to be directed by Agnieszka Holland, is scheduled to begin soon. He also wrote the text for a book of photographs by Arturo Patten, and has worked on the libretto for an opera.

A Conversation with Russell Banks



Q: You've said you came up with the idea of *The Sweet Hereafter* after reading about a school bus accident. What did you see in that article that gave you the idea for the larger themes in your book?

A: It wasn't an article about an accident so much as about the aftermath of the accident. And I think that's what engaged my imagination from the start. A reporter went to this small Mexican American town in south Texas a year after the accident and talked to the surviving families. And the town had more or less come apart for various reasons. But one of the reasons was that they had gotten all entangled in litigation and had lost their sense of community. I think that attracted me more than any other aspect of it because school bus accidents are, in a sense, I guess, endemic. I mean, they're all over the country. If you think about how many thousands and thousands of school buses are going out every morning, inevitably there's going to be an accident.

Q: One of the themes that holds together *The Sweet Hereafter* is the sense of after a tragic accident like this bus accident, there is the impulse to find a guilty party, punish them, and get some compensation for this terrible thing that happened. But then the other argument is, well, some things are just an accident. There is no guilty party. This just happened, and you have to live with it. I'm wondering how that theme resonates in your life?

A: I suppose it does. The question of blame and causality is a central one in the book. And it certainly is in my own personal life. I've been touched by that question more than touched by it occasionally driven by it, obsessed by it, maybe. Most specifically and I should say this is the underlying inspiration for the novel my youngest brother was killed in a train accident when he was 17. And it was an inexplicable event. It was a mystery, finally.

On two counts, I suppose, it had a deep impact on me. It was 30 years ago now, but one way it fixed in my mind and lasted those 30 years is the way in which my mother responded to that. My mother is now in her eighties, and this event occurred over 30 years ago, but she still sees her life as bifurcated, as being in two parts before and after the accident. She has never recovered, really. Her timeline has never recovered.

So I saw that up close. I was a sibling and so it didn't have the same impact on me. But the other way in which it had a huge and lasting impact on me is simply insofar as it forced me to live on with a mystery, and a mystery having to do with causality. I think this is something that we, as Americans particularly, are extremely reluctant to do to live with a mystery, to live without an explanation.

Q: Was there ever a lawsuit in the case of your brother?

A: Well, the opportunity for one was there, but no, there wasn't.

Q: You once said that it seems like it's the hardest thing in the world to become an adult who is not the same adult as your parents were. You're a father of four daughters. And I bet, as a parent, you're amazed how different they are from you, right?

A: Yeah, although I'm astonished how alike they are, too, and how like each other and how like me in some ways. For instance, last Christmas, we all quietly, one by one, privately confessed to each other that we had all voted for Ralph Nader, and I thought this was quite remarkable. I don't know if I've done something right or done something wrong, but they had all, each of them, cast their vote, or thrown their vote away perhaps, the same way. That's kind of telling, something going on there.

Q: Do you feel that as a son your parents had this control over you or over your identity that as a father, you don't feel you have over your own children?

A: No. I think for better or ill, parents have such a powerful imprinting effect on children the first few years of their lives that it becomes the forces against which they have to contend the rest of their lives our lives you know, for our own fate to create our fate.

Q: As you get older, does your father s grip on your memory and his abuse toward your mother and you, does that loosen its grip as you get older?

A: I think that the neurotic aspects of it perhaps loosen and fall away. One hopes anyhow. I am now less in a reactive mode to my father s character than I was when I was younger, and I think the degree to which I ve come to understand him and see the world through his eyes has loosened the grip, if you want, or softened me.

Q: You mean by writing about characters like him in fiction?

A: Yes, exactly. Writing *Affliction* with Wade Whitehouse, and dealing with Wade Whitehouse, gave me a kind of mercy and certainly forgiveness and understanding of my father that if I had just turned my back on him and walked away and acted bruised and hurt the rest of my life, I never would have obtained.

Q: Much of your fiction is about conflict in contemporary working class families. Your new novel, *Cloudsplitter*, is based on the life of the militant abolitionist, John Brown. Tell us more about John Brown s place in history.

A: He was a man who began as an idealist and political activist in the 1830s and 1940s in the abolitionist movement and very quickly became aggressively involved in the abolitionist movement. Once one of the most radical white abolitionists, associated with Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and others involved in the Underground Railroad in Ohio and in upstate New York, and then got involved in the Kansas conflict in the middle 1850s to fight the expansion of slavery into the West in a kind of guerrilla war, and then his activities culminated in what turned out to be the disastrous raid on Harper s Ferry, Virginia (then Virginia, now

West Virginia), in which he and his small party of 20 men were either executed afterwards or killed on the spot and with only a couple of men escaping.

Q: What were they trying to do at Harper s Ferry?

A: It s been claimed by many, and I think assumed by most, that what he was trying to do was incite a slave insurrection across the South. But my opinion, and that of some historians, is that what he was trying to do was to begin a long, drawn-out guer-rilla war that would eventually make the price of slavery so high that it would fall, as he said, like a ripe fruit from a tree.

Q: The book is told from the point of view of Brown s son Owen, the only son who survived the raid on Harper s Ferry. What interested you in John Brown s story and the story of John Brown s son?

A: For me, personally, Brown was a figure in the 1960s, when I was in college in the South at Chapel Hill and was politically active in the civil rights movement and in the anti-war movement. He was an emblem in a way an icon, whose picture was often on the wall of a college student in that era, or an SDS office or something, alongside Jimi Hendrix and Ch Guevara.

Q: Because he was seen as like a guerrilla leader?

A: Yeah, and a man who appealed to higher law and was willing to put his life on the line for it. And also because of the specific political cause he was associated with, which was abolitionism, and in the era of the civil rights movement, that was something with which we identified. And he was also associated for me, as a writer, a college student of literature, with the figures that meant the most to me at that time, and to some degree still do, which is the writers of the New England Renaissance Emerson, Thoreau, the transcendentalists, and so on because he was personally associated with them, and they were his supporters, many of them.

But then he faded from my imagination as the 1960s sort of faded from my imagination, and time went by. About 10 years ago, my wife and I bought a house in upstate New York in the Adirondacks, which was intended to be a summer home and has now become sort of a year-round home.

And it turned out, to my astonishment, that John Brown's body lay moldering down the road a ways, right there in North Elba, New York, along with the bodies of 11 others in his party from Harper's Ferry. Men who were killed there or executed afterwards and whose bodies were reinterred in upstate New York.

His farmhouse is there. He lived there for the longest period that he lived anywhere in his life. And so, he became a kind of physical reality a ghostly and a physical reality as well as a literary and political reality for me.

Q: Have you reached a personal conclusion about whether John Brown was sane?

A: Was sane or insane? I think by the end he was, I suppose one could say, insane, although not out of touch with reality. I think he was driven insane, however. What the book tries to dramatize is a march from idealism to terrorism and martyrdom. The circumstances he encountered, I think, created a sense of frustration and helplessness that was so deep in his bones that I suppose by conventional standards, maybe even clinical standards, we might say he was insane. But yet it's to me a perfectly understandable and comprehensible kind of insanity.

Q: In many ways, your novel *Cloudsplitter* is not just a historical novel, it's a novel about a father and son. And father-son relationships have always been your territory as a writer. Particularly the relationships between fathers who are violent and abusive within the family, and their relationship to their sons. Is there a connection between the kind of political violence you're writing about in *Cloudsplitter* and the more kind of emotional, family abuse-type violence that you've written about in the past?

A: Well, I think so. I think that in some ways, this book is a further test for me of my notions and understanding and belief of violence, especially within the family, but also in the larger society as well. What John Brown elects to do and how he justifies himself is that he's committing the lesser violence in order to stop the greater violence, which is what we're doing every day in national policy and foreign policy, and what any terrorist does to rationalize.

I wanted to tell the story of a son who believes in his father's righteousness and his father's principles, but who for that, or maybe because of that, belief places himself in a position to suffer enormously for it.

Q: Tell me what it was like for you to read the Bible so often and so carefully, and also about the impact that it had on your language. Because you're writing this novel *Cloud-splitter* in period language, and it's also the period language of people who have been very immersed in the Bible, so the Bible has to wear off on the language that you're using in the novel.

A: Yes, the language in the book is very important to me and because it's an attempt by me, at late 20th century, to imitate a kind of secular American prose of the mid-19th century or vernacular American prose, not literary or public prose, which I think is actually the purest and most beautiful prose Americans have ever written, in those letters and diaries and journals that were kept by mid-19th century Americans.

It just got into my ears really, and I felt for much of the book that I was in a sense taking dictation, and once I was in it, once I had the voice, the problem for me then was not to speak through Owen Brown, but to position myself as a listener if I could.

Q: I'm always so mystified when a writer says that he felt like he was taking dictation. I have no idea what that would feel like. Is it usually that way when you're writing, or is it the

rare occurrence where it's just coming to you?

A: No, it's come to be more the case for me as the years have gone on. I'm not sure, maybe it's just that I go to that channel so often that I can get it more easily, but certainly like with *Rule of the Bone*, it was a 14-year-old, 1990s mall rat, and his voice came to me pretty much the same way. And I just felt as though I was taking dictation.

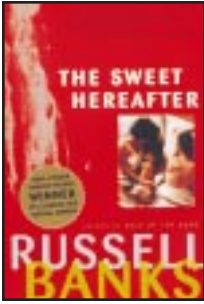
Part of it comes from immersing yourself in the world and identifying with the emotional life of the character to such a degree that the voice seems to grow straight out of that.

Q: It's so interesting that you are writing this new novel and these long, ornate kind of sentences out of the period of the 19th century, compared to *Rule of the Bone*, which is about a teenage kid who's got tattoos and so on and listens to heavy metal and is talking in a completely different style, and you get both of them pretty good.

A: Well, it was odd that it worked out, because I wrote *Rule of the Bone* halfway through *Cloudsplitter*. I'd been working on this book for about three years and had gotten rather bogged down by it. I mean, living with John Brown day in and day out was hard enough for his sons, it's particularly hard for a late 20th century novelist. The material had massed up and it was very difficult for me to find my way through it.

So I started hearing this kid's story in my ears and took a year and a half off and wrote *Rule of the Bone* and then came back to *Cloudsplitter*, feeling refreshed and, you know, it's like having a weekend away, and then came back to John Brown and Owen Brown and was able to see my way clearly through to the end of it.

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The Sweet Hereafter

How does the title fit the story? What is the sweet hereafter in this book?

Billy Ansel says, A town that loses its children loses its meaning. What do children mean to a town? Did the town of Sam Dent lose its meaning?

Why did Banks give the setting of this novel the human name of Sam Dent?

Can you always find a reason for accidents, as Stephens says? Is it better or more productive to search for a reason than to give up and live with the ambiguity?

Are the characters in this book with their dark secrets realistic townspeople? Which of them will survive this crisis?

What was Banks's motivation in writing this novel?

Discuss the different ways people in the story deal with their own grief and feelings of guilt. What other ways do people handle these emotions?

Would this story affect parents of older children, or grown children, differently than those with younger children? Why?

Who is the main character in the story? What are the advantages of hearing the story told from several points of view? Is there another viewpoint you wish you had been able to hear?

What is your reaction to the lawyer, Mitchell Stephens? Do you think his losing his daughter to drug addiction is the same as the loss suffered by the parents of Sam Dent?

Why did Nichole lie about Dolores speeding when the accident happened?

If Nichole had not stopped the litigation, what do you think the outcome would have been? Would the parents have been more satisfied? Is it better to sue for damages when there is, or might be, just cause?

How does a community absorb or adjust to a tragedy like the bus accident? Do you think the town of Sam Dent will survive? What kind of community overcomes its tragedies?

What is the significance of the demolition derby, starring Boomer, at the end of the book?

What makes this story so compelling? What is it about a tragedy that attracts our interest?

Other books that explore how a tragedy, such as the disappearance or death of a child, affects the survivors:

Christopher Bohjalian, *Past the Bleachers*

Rosellen Brown, *Before and After*

Frederick Busch, *Girls*

Jane Hamilton, *A Map of the World*

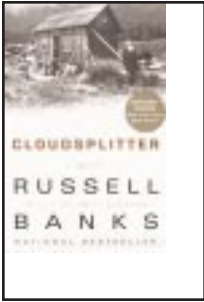
Jacquelyn Mitchard, *The Deep End of the Ocean*

Lynne Sharon Schwartz, *Disturbances in the Field*

Other books with multiple narrators:

Stephen Dixon, *Interstate*

T. Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*



Cloudsplitter

What images came to mind when you read about the mountain called Cloudsplitter? How does the term apply to John Brown?

How did John Brown come to associate himself with the African American people? Why did he have his particular sense of justice?

Discuss John Brown's image of himself as Abraham, Moses, Gideon, and Job. Who did other people see in him? Why does Owen continually refer to the Abraham/Isaac Bible story when talking about himself and his father?

Why are both Owen and Fred troubled and guilty about their sexuality, when their older brothers do not seem to struggle in this way? Why can't Owen grow up?

Does Owen really take on his father's perspective and become one with him in his mission, as he claims? Does the Old Man really understand Owen when he talks about his own mother's death, when he is tender with Owen after Lyman's death, and when Owen has the spiritual experience in the Boston church?

Why did John Brown's family and followers have trouble functioning in his absence? Chapter 14 illustrates this well: The farm is in disrepair, the whites abandon the underground railroad work, both Susan and Mary deliver stillborn babies, and Owen and Lyman fight (see also Chapter 17).

Why does Owen develop a habit of lying, as he admits from the start (pages 46-47)? Is his entire revelation a lie? Is history truly shaped

strictly by the needs of those who wish to receive it, as Owen avers on page 620, or is it shaped more by the historian, or narrator?

Was Lyman's death an accident? What are the implications of Owen's attraction/aversion to Susan and Lyman? What was it that Lyman sensed had gone wrong in Owen?

In his Author's Note, Banks includes a disclaimer about the historical accuracy of *Cloudsplitter*. Do you think you have a clearer understanding of the real John Brown and the issues of his time after reading this book? What is the main purpose of historical fiction? How important is factual accuracy?

How would the Civil War have been different if the incidents at Osawatimie and Harper's Ferry hadn't taken place? Why didn't the slaves and freedmen join Brown's group at Harper's Ferry as he had planned and encouraged them to?

We could slay a few men now, men who were guilty, perhaps if only by association, and save millions of innocents later. That's how terror, in the hands of the righteous, works. (Owen, page 607) Is terrorism ever justified? Were the cold-blooded killings of the pro-slavers on the Pottawatomie acts of righteous vengeance (pages 608-611)?

What effect do you think Brown's treatise called *Sambo's Mistakes* (pages 117-121) had on the African American people of his time? On the whites who heard or read it? What did he mean when he said, "Racialism infects everybody's ears—Negro ears as much as white's?"

Is racial consciousness, as coined by John Brown, the same thing as our concept of racism? Do you agree with Owen's analysis of the effects of race consciousness on pages 181 and 423?

In Chapter 7 (pages 219-220), Owen has a dream about his sisters and himself as their father. In the dream, the girls are lashed to a pole like witches, wailing in sorrow, and he is circling them. What is the significance of the dream? What does it mean, and why is it included?

in this part of the story?

Why does Banks intermittently stop the flow of the story to give the reader a glimpse of the present day Owen? What is the effect on the reader of the first-person narrative?

What is the significance of Owen's meeting on the sea journey, with Sarah Peabody, the young pregnant woman who commits suicide? For Owen's interpretation, see pages 351-352.

How can Owen and his brothers love and admire their violent, contradictory, dictatorial father? Why do they follow him into his doomed schemes?

Was John Brown truly what he thought himself to be: the Lord's chosen one who would lead people out of slavery?

What is the real reason Owen decides to end his life at the story's close?

Also set during the Civil War period with an equally strong narrative voice:

Charles Frazier, *Cold Mountain*

Set in pre-Civil War Kansas:

Jane Smiley, *The All True-Adventures of Lidie Newton*

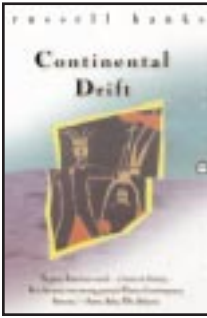
Another good evocation of time and place:

Patricia Anthony, *Flanders*

Biographies of John Brown:

Stephen Oates, *Our Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln, John Brown, and the Civil War Era*

Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr*



Continental Drift

By the end of the novel, what are your feelings about Bob Dubois? Sympathy? Pity? Dislike? Have your feelings changed during the course of the novel? What about Vanise? How do you feel about her?

What motivates Bob to cheat on his wife?

Explore the idea of continental drift as it applies to the characters in the story. Who, or what, shifts?

Why does Banks focus, for so long, on descriptions of the environment?

What makes the working class and the poverty-stricken different from those who have more money, in their search for meaning and fulfillment? Can people who are financially well off truly experience the frustration and hopelessness that Bob does?

How could Bob have bettered himself? Could he have gone back to his old life and made it work when he realized that Eddie's scheme enriched only Eddie?

Why does Bob have such a hard time distinguishing right from wrong? Do most people have this problem? What do most people base their morality on?

Which people in the story survive, and why? What do Bob, Honduras, Eddie, Avery, and Vanise have in common? What ensures their failure? What does survival mean?

How do you interpret the drawing at the beginning of each chapter?

What conclusions did you draw from the scenes in which voodoo rites were depicted? Is it important to fully understand these elements

of the story? Why does Banks include them?

Are some people just lucky and others unlucky? (See the chapter Selling Out.) Can people control their own destiny?

All the characters in this novel seem to be self-absorbed and self-serving. Even when they are helping others, they are selfishly looking after their own interests. What does this suggest about Banks's world view? What is your perspective on motivation and social interaction?

The Haitian concept of feeding the Loas, or propitiating the gods, is central to Vanise's survival. Some sort of evil seems to also infiltrate Bob's life. Do you believe in evil? How can one overcome the evil one sees in one's life?

Does Banks do a good job of bringing together the two story lines?

Why does Bob keep the money at the very end? Is there a moral to this novel? What do you think Banks means to tell the reader about human nature and character?

In the chapter Making a Killing, Bob meditates on the difference between hunters and fishermen, declaring himself to be the latter. Do you think this is true, based on Bob's actions and thoughts? What does this suggest about his potential for success?

After meeting Ted Williams, Bob closes his eyes again and rests, like an animal momentarily hidden from its pursuers. What did Banks intend to say about Bob's life in writing this scene?

Was Bob murdered, or was it a carefully orchestrated suicide?

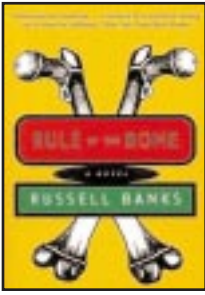
Is there a solution to Bob and Elaine's problems that they didn't try? Would returning to New Hampshire have been the solution to Bob and Elaine's problems?

The gritty style of *Continental Drift* can also be found in:

Larry Brown, *Joe*

Harry Crews, *Scar Lover*

Richard Price, *Clockers* and *Freedomland*



Rule of the Bone

Why does Chappie have trouble knowing right from wrong? How does the line between right and wrong move with one's experience? What does power have to do with morality and ethics?

Banks includes the twins, Richard and James, from *The Sweet Hereafter*, and Captain Avery from *Continental Drift*, along with the derelict bus from the accident in *The Sweet Hereafter*. Why do authors sometimes tie their works together like this?

What is the significance of the derelict school bus that Bone uses as his squat? What images come to mind when you think of a school bus? How did healing come to Bone there?

Why didn't Bone tell his mother about the abuse inflicted by her husband, Bone's stepfather? Would it have made a difference in Bone's life if he had been able to do so?

What were the changing points in Bone's life as shown in the story? How did they propel him toward the next location or experience? What was Bone's biggest motivator throughout his life? Is this true of most people?

How does Bone's dream/vision in the cave in Chapter 18 (Bone Goes Native) help him discover the true meaning of his life and who he has become? Why did I-Man initiate this experience for Bone?

Once Bone meets up with his real father, why do you think Banks decided not to have them live happily ever after together?

Bone chooses to love three people and they all die. What does he

learn from them and by caring about them? Why were their deaths important to the story?

What could drive parents to reject their child? At what age is a child responsible for his own actions? Is it ever acceptable to send a child out of the home? Why didn't Bone have Bone reconcile with his mother?

Discuss the role of the women characters, including Bone's mother and Evening Star, in Bone's life.

According to Bone, there's a line you can cross that leads to a life of crime, and you can never go back across that line. Where was the line in his life? Is there a line like this in everyone's life?

Toward the end of the story, when Bone exacts revenge on his father, Paul Dorset, he makes a distinction between crime and evil, or sin. Explain what he means. Do you make these same distinctions?

Banks has said that the voice of this 14-year-old mall rat came to him and he felt as though he was taking dictation. Was his portrayal of Bone believable?

What is the rule of the bone? What does the crossed bones tattoo signify to Bone? To others?

What will happen to Bone in his new life at the end of the story? To the other characters?

Other coming-of-age novels:

J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*

Wallace Stegner, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*

Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Kaye Gibbons, *Ellen Foster*

Memoir:

Tobias Wolff, *This Boy's Life*

Tips for Book Discussions

Reading Critically

Books that make excellent choices for discussion groups have a good plot, well-drawn characters, and a polished style. These books usually present the author's view of an important truth and not infrequently send a message to the reader. Good books for discussion move the reader and stay in the mind long after the book is read and the discussion is over. These books can be read more than once, and each time we learn something new.

Reading for a book discussion whether you are the leader or simply a participant differs from reading purely for pleasure. As you read a book chosen for a discussion, ask questions and mark down important pages you might want to refer back to. Make notes like, *Is this significant?* or *Why does the author include this?* Making notes as you go slows down your reading but gives you a better sense of what the book is really about and saves you the time of searching out important passages later.

Obviously, asking questions as you go means you don't know the answer yet, and often you never do discover the answers. But during discussion of your questions, others may provide insight for you. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions because often the author is presenting difficult issues for that very purpose.

As with any skill, good literary consciousness grows with practice. You can never relax your vigilance because a good author uses every word to reveal something. Try to be aware of what the author is revealing about himself and what he wants you to learn about life from his perspective. Appreciate the artistic presentation and the entertainment value, but also reap the benefits of the experience the author is sharing.

As you read the four books of Russell Banks discussed in this toolbox, you will notice that the main characters are deeply depressed and share

similar problems. Why does Banks want to share this with us? Why does he delve into depression in so many forms? What is he showing us about life and about his life in particular? These are the kinds of questions that lead to in-depth conversations with your group and make the book meaningful and of lasting value.

Another way to analyze the important themes of a book is to consider what premise the author started with. You can imagine an author mulling over the beginnings of the story, asking himself, what if questions. In *Cloudsplitter*, one of Banks's what if questions is, What if Owen Brown had chosen to tell his father's story? Another might be, What if John Brown and his son Owen both secretly struggled with racism themselves? Think about which what ifs prompted the story.

When you meet the characters in the book, place yourself at the scene. Think of them as you do the people around you. Judge them. Think about their faults and their motives. What would it be like to interact with them? Listen to the tone and style of their dialogue for authenticity. Read portions aloud to get to know the characters and the author's style.

Sometimes an author uses the structure of the book to illustrate an important concept or to create a mood. Notice how the author structured the book. Are chapters prefaced by quotes? How do they apply to the content of the chapters? How many narrators tell the story? Who are they? How does the sequence of events unfold to create the mood of the story? Does it make sense?

Compare the book to others by the same author or to books by different authors that have a similar message or style. Often, as with Russell Banks, themes run through an author's works that are more fully realized by comparison. Comparing one author's work with another's can help you solidify your opinions, as well as define for you qualities you may otherwise miss.

The very best books are those that insinuate themselves into your

experience: They reveal an important truth or provide a profound sense of kinship between reader and writer. Searching for, identifying, and discussing these truths often make the book more important and more significant.

Asking questions, reading carefully, imagining yourself into the story, analyzing style and structure, and searching for personal meaning in a work of literature all enhance the work's value and the discussion potential for your group.

The Discussion

Come prepared with 10 to 15 open-ended questions. Questions that can be answered yes or no tend to cut off discussion.

Questions should be used to guide the discussion and keep it on track, but be ready to let the discussion flow naturally. You'll often find that the questions you've prepared will come up naturally as part of the discussion.

Remind participants that there are not necessarily any right answers to the questions posed.

Don't be afraid to criticize a book, but try to get the group to go beyond the "It just didn't appeal to me" statement. What was it about the book that made it unappealing? The style? The pacing? The characters? Has the author written other books that were better? Did it remind you of a book that you liked/disliked? Many times the best discussions are about books that the majority of the group disliked.

Try to keep a balance in the discussion between personal revelations and reactions and a response to the book itself. Every reader responds to a book in ways that are intimately tied to his/her background, upbringing, and world view. A book about a senseless murder will naturally strike some sort of chord in a reader whose mother was murdered. That's interesting, but what's more interesting is how the author chose to present the murder, or the author's attitude toward the

murderer and victim. It's often too easy to let a group drown in reminiscences — if that's what the whole group wants to do, that's fine, but keep in mind that it's not a book discussion.

Some Suggestions for Participants

A good discussion depends partly on the skills we develop as participants. Here are some suggestions (based on the New York Public Library's book discussion program):

SPEAK UP! Group discussion is like a conversation; everyone takes part in it. Each speaker responds to what the person before him said. Nobody prepares speeches; there should be a spontaneous exchange of ideas and opinions. The discussion is your chance to say what you think.

LISTEN thoughtfully to others! Try to understand the other person's point of view; see what experience and thinking it developed from. Don't accept ideas that don't have a sound basis. Remember: There are several points of view possible on every question.

BE BRIEF! Share the discussion with others. Speak for only a few minutes at a time. Make your point in as few words as possible; it's more effective in a group discussion. Be ready to let someone else speak. A good discussion keeps everyone in the conversation.

SHARE YOUR VIEWPOINT AND EXPERIENCE! Don't expect to be called on to speak; enter into the discussion with your comment of agreement or disagreement. When you find yourself disagreeing with other people's interpretations or opinions, say so and tell why, in a friendly way. Considering all points of view is important to group discussions.

COME WITH YOUR OWN QUESTIONS IN MIND! As you read the selection, make note of the points on which you'd like to hear the comments of group members.

Annotated Bibliography of Works by Russell Banks

Poetry

Waiting to Freeze (Lillabulero Press, 1967)

30/6 (Lillabulero Press, 1969)

Snow: Meditations of a Cautious Man in Winter (Granite Press, 1974)

Fiction

Short stories

Searching for Survivors (Fiction Collective, 1975)

A collection of stories ranging from tales of Che Guevara's imagined appearance in New Hampshire and the Plaza Hotel, to a one-paragraph story detailing a man's awakening from a nap.

The New World (University of Illinois Press, 1978)

Many of the stories in this collection focus on a particular character and a defining event in that person's life.

Trailerpark (Houghton Mifflin, 1981)

Thirteen interwoven stories examine the lives of residents of the Granite State Trailerpark, located just outside Catamount, New Hampshire.

Success Stories (Harper & Row, 1986)

In each of the twelve stories in this ironically titled collection, the main character achieves success, only to find it is closely tied to an unforeseen defeat.

Novels

Family Life (Avon, 1975)

A sexually promiscuous and hopelessly dysfunctional family rapidly self-destructs.

Hamilton Stark (Houghton Mifflin, 1978)

Two people are trying to write a book about the misanthropic and possibly insane Hamilton Stark his own daughter and the narrator of *Hamilton Stark*.

The Book of Jamaica (Houghton Mifflin, 1980)

Themes that would become familiar in Banks's later works appear in this novel about a New England college professor who spends a year on the island of Jamaica and decides to live there permanently.

The Relation of My Imprisonment (Sun & Moon Press, 1984)

Set in the 17th century, the unnamed narrator describes his 12 years of imprisonment for the crime of building coffins.

Continental Drift (Harper & Row, 1985)

Two lives come together in this tale of oil-burner repairman Bob Dubois, who leaves New Hampshire for Florida in search of a better life for himself, and Vanise Dorsinville, who is attempting to reach the United States after fleeing political repression in Haiti. The two meet when Bob pilots a boat on which Vanise and other illegal aliens have bought passage to Florida. *Continental Drift* was a finalist for the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and received both the John Dos Passos Award and an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award for work of distinction.

Affliction (Harper & Row, 1989)

Rolfe Whitehouse tries to piece together the events surrounding the mysterious disappearance of Wade, his violent and unhappy older brother. *Affliction* was shortlisted for both the PEN/Faulkner Fiction Prize and the Irish International Prize. A film directed by Paul Schrader was released in 1999.

The Sweet Hereafter (HarperCollins, 1991)

Four narrators tell the story of a school bus accident on a snowy road, the resulting deaths of a town's children, and the varied ways the survivors cope with issues of acceptance and blame. *The Sweet Hereafter*, directed by Atom Egoyan (who also wrote the screenplay), was released in 1997.

Rule of the Bone (HarperCollins, 1995)

Fourteen-year-old Chappie runs away from an unhappy home, but discovers that life on the street is more fraught with danger than he could have imagined.

Cloudsplitter (HarperCollins, 1998)

Owen Brown, son of abolitionist and martyr John Brown, recounts the events leading up to the disastrous 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry, in which most of Brown's small group of 20 men were either killed on the spot or executed afterwards. The reclusive Owen tells the story of Brown's march from idealism to terrorism and martyrdom.

A Reading Group
Toolbox
for the Works of

Russell
Banks

The Sweet Hereafter

Cloudsplitter

Continental Drift

Rule of the Bone