

An Interview with H. E. Francis Author of *I'll Never Leave You*

Winner of the G. S. Sharat Chandra Prize for Short Fiction
Selected by Diane Glancy

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Interviewed by J. J. Cantrell
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Photo by N.L. Romero

Q: Did you have a collective theme in mind before you wrote the stories in *I'll Never Leave You*?

A: I don't think that way. I'm very intuitive and have a certain empathy with characters, which evokes the action, and I try to follow them, trying to depict their inner lives, that "invisible country" that tempts me into them. There is so much in the well of us, and I try to follow it into that sometimes forbidden territory that many of us do not want to venture into, where sometimes deep sufferings *may* lead us ultimately to the most rewarding moments of our lives, to revelations of the self or shifting and evasive selves or the unself in us. I am more concerned at the time of writing with the underlying motion of the experience; a real experience will always suggest where the motion leads us, to what ambiguities—not obscurities, but meaningful ambiguities.

Q: In the story "Boulders," you chose to eliminate quotation marks and most dialogue attributions. As a reader, I felt much closer to the story, like I was in the room listening to these intimate conversations. Why did you decide to write the dialogue in this manner?

A: Many writers eliminate and vary punctuation—this is common. Each story demands its own total form. I feel that, in a strange way, a story "demands," dictates its experience. I don't think it out ahead. I am so involved with the characters that I have to wait for the first line, usually have to hear the rhythm, and when I do, I can go on. Otherwise, I am stymied. I have to go on then and let the story fulfill itself, which means the experience undertaken determines what it will become—story, novella, novel. For a rather extreme case of lack of punctuation (apart from the segments of, say, Faulkner), one must look at the Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago and the really extreme case of the Portuguese writer Antonio Lobo Antunes.

Q: The story "The Private Lives of Children" breaks from the conventional rules of form. What was your intention in formatting the story this way?

A: Do you really think the format unusual? Stories of inner (this is no stream-of-consciousness technique, though it may deceive an inexperienced reader) revelations—thoughts, feelings, rendering memories—abound. I suppose at the moment it was the only way that spoke to me of handling much material in the minimum form to suggest more than I could say objectively about aspects of

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the character of each and their involvements with one another and yet give a collective portrait of their childhood together in the family.

Q: *Kirkus Reviews* writes about your ability to take risks—and succeed—in this book. What stylistic choices do you consider risky? When you were writing these stories, was “risk” a consideration in their development?

A: No. In fiction, I think it happens that the nature of what captures me challenges me sometimes to go far and to keep going further into the nature of personality. Readers and critics (Oates, *Kirkus*, Hawkes) have noted that (and a world of readers shy away from that!) I was never aware of any risk; the attraction is natural to me; but critics and readers have understood it. But it *is* there, and in the novel I am just polishing, the lead character, a mercenary, is challenged by, and challenges himself to, is dedicated to, risk; and that action takes him to previously undiscovered areas of the self opened up to him, though it leaves him on the continued path to discovery, knowing, going beyond to further knowing.

Q: You have translated a significant number of works by Spanish-language writers. How do you decide what piece of work or writer you want to translate?

A: I translate only a few writers—because they are the finest Argentine writers of their generation (Antonio Di Benedetto, Daniel Moyano, Juan José Hernández, and the younger Norberto Luis Romero—and, as homage to his greatness, a story by the great Uruguayan, Juan Carlos Onetti, who had his professional English translators). I don’t translate a writer because he is a friend, but because I believe in the nature and quality of his work. I became friends of all of them and maintained a closeness to Di Benedetto and Moyano when they were exiled to Spain under the dictatorship of Videla.

Q: Given that you split your time between Alabama and Spain, how does that cultural dichotomy influence your writing?

A: That is somewhat difficult to objectify as a good part of it is a kind of deep subliminal association with the Spanish personality, the Spain I have known for years, and the language. Some, I am sure, is unconscious; but I am aware of having absorbed certain rhythms of speech, of sentence structure, of habits of intimate daily living, usually when I read over what I have done; and there is—inevitably, of course—the absorption over the years of the ambience, the life, the language as subject matter (always a risk!). I suppose this goes back a long way. I took a double major at the university. I had great exiled Spanish teachers, notably Antonio Sánchez-Barbudo and the Nobel candidate Arturo Brea. I ventured into a thesis at Oxford University, England, on a student Fulbright. I taught off and on over seven years on three Fulbright and one university grant to Argentina, adopted a son there, and have eight grandchildren and several great-grandchildren. Part of the joy of translating is that it keeps me in one of my other countries, fosters closeness, nostalgia, and keeps them and Argentina constantly alive in me—and so, too, keeps Spain and the language alive in me. After so many years, it is natural for me to feel at home in Spain and here because I come and go so frequently. As a non-nationalist, I don’t think I belong to any nation, but to the human tide. The same process of absorbing places where they live, as writers do after a period, always has happened during my fifty years in the South—like ivy, after slow starts, our roots shoot out and grip down. The only comment on my work which actually gave me a moment of pride was that of an Argentine critic who wrote that Francis’s stories set in Argentina seem to have been written by an Argentine.

Q: As a prolific writer, how do you find time to read and whom are you reading now?

A: I am an insane reader—and re-reader. I have just finished McCullough's *John Adams*, Joyce Carol Oates's *I am no one you know*, Alvaro Mutis's trilogy *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero*, Coim Toibin's *The Master*, Anthony Doerr's *about grace*. The new Franklin's and Clinton's lives are waiting. According to mood, I re-venture Proust, Kafka, always my adored Henry James, Conrad, the few prime stories of Hemingway, always what I like to associate with my New England mood, Hawthorne, over and over both Patrick White and Thomas Bernhard, some Virginia Woolf, much Lawrence, frequently Milton (*Paradise Lost* a passion with me for its language and perceptions), certain obsessions such as Euripides' *Medea*, *Macbeth*, *Lear*, not to mention a host of poets, on and on. I can read so much because I am supremely disciplined (a credit and a discredit!) and gratefully suffer from the teachings of my grandfather, who reminded with the old Protestant adage: Work for the day is coming when no man can work. I took, take, it much to heart (but don't be deceived, I am of no faith).

Q: Diane Glancy, who selected your book for the Chandra Prize, wrote that she liked “the solid stories... and the more experimental ‘turned loose’ writing that marbles the collection.” How do you feel your writing has evolved over the years?

A: My language has always been naturally somewhat poetic—I have had to work very hard to curb that impulse when it was misleading, misapplied, not appropriate. There has always been a certain “peripheral” effect in my work (something “ephemeral” critics have called it with a certain praise). I have maintained that, but I hope I have turned it into a rich suggestiveness. I have also absorbed foreign idioms and their rhythms into my own English rhythms, though that may really be evident, and justly so, more to the writer. Of course, my ventures make sometimes extreme, sometimes absurd (risky) situations turn into an emotive reality, accepted through *knowing*.

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Q: What would you like readers, and writers, to garner from this book?

A: I hope any good or great literature will, even if it is only during the reading, remind a reader of his own humanity. For a writer? There is always the evocation of someone immersed in common challenges to render the fictional life with all his honesty. That achievement is enough to give fever and inspire.