Bill Smith: Good morning and welcome to the hour long Internet Talk Show with Russell Banks. We’re at the Center for Instructional Innovation here on the campus of Western Washington University, and Russell Banks is on campus this week as a speaker for Western’s distinguished lecture series, sponsored by the Western Foundation. My name is Bill Smith, and I’m an English professor here at Western Washington University. I’d like to invite you to submit online questions to professor Banks during the next hour.

By way of introduction I’m going to avoid some of the things that are already listed on our website and get to some of the important things. Russell Banks is a poet, lecturer, essayist, editor, fiction writer, screen writer, independent film maker and producer, social critic, political activist and world citizen. He has written 14 books, among them ten novels, four collections of short stories, and last night we heard a chapter from a new novel that he is writing about a woman who is returning to Liberia. Two of his novels, Affliction and The Sweet Hereafter, have been made into very successful films. He has a recent screen play based on Jack Kerouac’s On the Road, which will be produced by Francis Ford Coppola and directed by Joel Shumaker. He’s won a host of awards, and once again if you’ll look at our website they will be listed. The most prestigious is the nomination for the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1998 his Sweet Hereafter was selected as the first book for one city, by the Washington Center for the Book at the Seattle Public Library; that meant that everybody in Seattle, Washington, was reading his book, and over 5,000 people sported lapel pins that said “I’m reading Russell Banks.” In 1978 he retired as the Howard G. B. Clark ’21 University Professor in the Humanities at Princeton, and since his retirement he seems to be moving quite fast, he doesn’t stay put. He’s joined the editorial staff of Daedalus, which is the publication of the American Academy of Artists and Scientists. He was one of 53 prominent Americans, among them Martin Luther King Jr., III, Noam Chomsky, Gloria Steinem, and Edward Said, who issued a statement “Not in Our Name,” which called to the people of the U.S. to resist the policies and overall political direction that have emerged since September 11, 2001, and which pose grave dangers to the people of the world. He is currently President of the Cities of Asylum, formed by the International Parliament of Writers, an international collective of poets and storytellers that offers protection to writers. Last year, as part of this delegation, he toured the Palestinian and Israeli territories at the request of the Palestinian Poet Mahmoud Darwish, and saw first hand the horrible effects of protracted warfare on both Palestinians and Israelis. Past Presidents of this organization have included Salman Rushdie, Vaclav Havel, Wole Soyinka, and now Russell Banks. Good morning, and welcome to Western Washington University.

Russell Banks: Well thank you. That’s quite a list you’ve got there, when you put it together all in one place; I don’t often see it like that.

Bill Smith: It’s very impressive, and many of these things have occurred since 1998.

Russell Banks: When I stopped teaching it opened up everything. It had two big effects; one was it gave me control of my calendar. I wasn’t organizing my life around an academic calendar anymore. It also gave me
more hours in the day, as you know if you teach, and you do. And so rather than filling them with sleep or watching baseball on television, I got more involved in film and more politically active.

Bill Smith: I’d like to use your comment on political activism as a segue into our first question. The Patriot Act seems in many ways a cousin to the Fugitive Slave Act.

Russell Banks: That’s interesting—I hadn’t quite made that connection—but you are quite right. There are a lot of connections.

Bill Smith: And I was wondering in what way might the Patriot Act be defining your writing and your life, and how problematic is it to designate a City of Asylum in a country that has the Patriot Act?

Russell Banks: Let me try the first part of the question, because the analogy is very interesting. I know quite a bit about the FSA because of the research I ended up doing for the novel *Cloudsplitter*, and the effect of that was to create a sense of alarm that somehow the republic had been lost. That thing we treasure the most and in a sense take for granted, The Republic, had been taken away from us. And I think that some of the implications of the Patriot Act were that it caused a similar alarm amongst many of us that The Republic, which we thing of as unshakable, immovable, irretrievable, had been stolen from us while we were asleep. And it was a wake up call, as the Fugitive Slave Act was a wake up call to the Abolitionist Movement and radicalized some of the Abolitionists. In some ways the Patriot Act has radicalized, has alarmed, and then activated not just the left, but it’s an unusual and in some ways unprecedented coalition between the Right and the Left. I find for the first time in my life William Safire and myself agreeing on something. Those of us who love The Republic—and it’s being sneaked away in the night—so the similarities are really quite real.

The second part of your question is in regards to the Cities of Asylum Project. It involves creating and maintaining Cities of Asylum in Western Europe primarily, and increasingly here in the United States, cities where a writer who is under threat, physical threat, or otherwise censorship and condemnation, can live and can safely work without interruption, intrusion, or controls, with the city sort of putting its walls around them, protecting them. At this point in the United States that isn’t really a problem overtly, but covertly it is, and I’ll tell you how. We basically vet the writers, and what were doing is validating. Our membership is made up of writers from all over the world who can validate that this is a real writer and she or he is in real trouble and needs to get out of China or Turkey or Congo or Sierra Leone or wherever. That they are going to be killed or jailed or controlled in some way. We do it without regard to the writer’s political beliefs, religious beliefs, language or ethnic group, or anything else. It’s the fact that she’s a writer and a valid writer—that’s all we care about. But I found that many communities here in the United States were very upset about the possibility that they might get a Palestinian writer. And since the program on a local level is run and funded and supported by local institutions, universities, by the political administration in the city, and by philanthropists and corporations, they form a coalition to provide housing and the living stipend for the writer. This could be a very tricky issue here in the United States. The Palestinian issue was a very specific one, but I could see it happening in other areas. But it really isn’t because of the Patriot Act itself, it grows out a climate of fear generally since 911, which has been parlayed by the Bush administration into a sort of systematic takeover, really. Rather than comforting people and making people feel strong, I think this administration has alarmed people and frightened people and made them feel weak and easily threatened. It’s hard for a city like Albany, New York, being threatened by a Palestinian writer in their midst, but that was the case. We had to pull out of negotiations with them because we couldn’t vet the writer’s politics. We couldn’t bring them any assurance that they were going to be Pro-Israeli.

I don’t know! I’m not going to quiz a writer on his or her politics before they are worth saving. It’s a tough climate to try and put a program like this into place. On the other hand, I think it’s very important to do. We
run a great risk of isolating ourselves, and the presence of writers from other parts of the world in communities is very important. Bellingham for instance, you could bring a writer from China or North Korea and have that person as part of the community, them to bring their history on your context here, is a positive thing, at least it should be and I think that American culture runs the risk of isolating itself even more than it has in the past. This is a way to break that down, to internationalize our perspective, realize that we are not the only people on the planet.

**Bill Smith:** I read an essay you wrote recently for *Esquire* called “The House of Slaves” and you wrote about standing on the threshold of the House of Slaves on the West African Island of Goree in which you said “I leave us at that gate, because I’m an American storyteller, and it’s there, at the doorway to the House of Slaves, that our story begins,” and I was wondering in what way has your understanding of an American racialized society shaped your writing?

**Russell Banks:** I do believe that the history of race in America is a central history and that it’s our master story. American history doesn’t begin at Plymouth Rock, and it doesn’t begin when Columbus landed in the Caribbean. It really begins when the first slaves were offloaded in Virginia in 1620. It’s with the collision of races, Africans and Europeans, colliding on the American continent. Our history begins there and the continuing story runs right to today and into our future. And I believe that deeply. Why do I believe that, when I’m a white boy from New England? Partly because of my personal experience, traveling into the South in my teens to Florida in an era when it was so transparently obvious that we are a racialized society in an inescapable way. Then being in North Carolina in the 1960s at the height of the civil rights movement, being involved there. And then traveling and living in the Caribbean, so my personal experience has made me aware of this. American literary history seems to compulsively tell and retell this story. That has informed me—but at the same time once informed, once you open a door you walk through it and your life changes; you’re in another room and you do tend to see the world through that lens as it were.

I don’t think I began to pull it together in a conscious literary way until the late 70s and I was in my late 30s and I wrote a book called *The Book of Jamaica*. It’s really about a white man, not unlike myself, white middleclass intellectual, going to Jamaica and him trying to bring his liberal understanding of race there, and trying to bring it to bear on the world of race and the history that surrounded him. And I think at that point I realized that this was a story I wanted to participate in telling. It was a very basic story and I wanted to find a way that I could participate in that tradition of storytelling. And as my life has gone on, each book has informed the next one and taught me something I didn’t know before I wrote it, and created in many ways the ground on which the following book would stand. And so it’s an interactive process I think for any writer; what you write changes your own life and your own consciousness in a way that informs the next book that you write, which presumably changes your consciousness yet again, and so it’s an ongoing dialectical process.

**Bill Smith:** One more question and once again this is moving towards craft. In an essay on Continental drift Kathy Moses writes “Banks is one of the few U.S. authors whose fiction overtly addresses the white imagination, the Black Other, and construction of white identity.” I was wondering about your character’s quest for agency and the construction of the “Black Other.” I was wondering about your character’s quest for agency and the construction of the “Black Other.” For example, there are scenes where you have Bones resembling a very small version of “I Man,” Owen Brown dreaming that he’s a black man, and Bob Dubois falling in love with Margarete admits that she makes him pay attention to the black side of himself.

**Russell Banks:** Well I think it’s a very powerful white fantasy and I think it is a fantasy. It’s power that gets built into the culture in many ways, and I think that in those instances you cite, what I was trying to dramatize there was the workings of that fantasy even in the most sympathetic minds and lives. These are not racist characters by any means. To various degrees they are conscious of race. Bob Dubois is conscious of it in a way that is more plebian, and less sophisticated than Bones is. Even though Bones is a 14-year-old boy, he is...
a boy of the 90s and he’s also a completely different construct than Bob Dubois. Bob Dubois’ attitudes have been shaped much more by popular media than Bones’ have. But they are both projecting their own fantasies about race onto “The Other” and “Blackness.” And they are both appropriating, and they both come to no good. As a result it fails; finally the other barks back and reclaims him or herself. So I was just really trying to dramatize that projection in some way, find the imagery, to articulate it.

Bill Smith: This is just in recently. “Which of your books was the most difficult to write and why?”

Russell Banks: Gee, they all seem pretty difficult. And there are different reasons for each. I think Affliction was difficult to write because of the material in it, which was drawn from my father’s life, my grandfather’s life, and my life. It was also material about which I was very conflicted—it involved alcoholism and violence and men attempting to avoid that trap, and none the less sliding into it. I was attempting to make that conflict tragic, because that’s how I perceive it. And yet it was very close to my own personal history and it was difficult for those reasons. Cloudsplitter, on the other hand, was very difficult for technical reasons in attempting to structure in a suspenseful narrative a mass of historical material, which on the table is just inert, but I couldn’t do without it and abandon it. I had to make the story up out of that material and use it. It was a very difficult process, and after about three years work I was about four or five hundred pages into it. After several drafts it ended up an eleven hundred page manuscript, so I was about half way into it when, in despair I stopped and started writing Rule of the Bone. So I spent a year and a half having abandoned, well not really abandoned, but I put it aside and wrote Rule of the Bone. I came back to it with my mind freshened. And I could see the material more clearly and what the solutions were, and was able to plunge ahead and finish it up. In that case it was dealing with that mass of material.

The book I have been working on off and on for the last five years now is the novel that I read from last night. It had its own specific problems for me. It was trying to deal with material that is exotic in a sense. It’s West Africa—it’s Liberia—it’s extreme poverty and violence. A lot of history is unfamiliar, it’s barely familiar to me, and I’ve done a lot of research on it. And it’s unfamiliar to anyone who chooses to read the book. How do you deal with material that is that exotic and make it seem familiar without lecturing? I don’t have to reinvent the wheel every time I write a novel. There are other novels out there that I can look at and say, “Well, how did Graham Green do this?” Because he has certainly dealt with a lot of material that his readers weren’t familiar with at the time. Whether it’s Haiti or Havana or Vietnam or West Africa, or in his case Sierra Leone. And he managed to make it very familiar very quickly without misrepresenting it at the same time. I learned to look to tradition and look at what others have done in the past.

Bill Smith: In what ways have some of your characters compelled you to write about them?

Russell Banks: Voice. I can bring it all down to that. For instance, Bone in Rule of the Bone. I wasn’t going to write that as a novel. First of all, I thought I was writing this other novel, Cloudsplitter, and I was just going to take a break and write a short story about a kid who screws up and ends up homeless, does the thing that any kid might do, steals his grandmother’s coins and sells them to buy pot, but his whole life comes undone as a result of that. I just wanted to write a short story about that. But his voice so engaged my ear, I didn’t want to light-book it—I wanted to keep hearing him talk. The same thing happened with Cloudsplitter, with the voice of Owen Brown. Once I heard that voice, that kept me going. It wasn’t really the story of John Brown, although that’s certainly important to me. It wasn’t the character in the round, Owen Brown, the son of John Brown. It was really his voice—I wanted to keep hearing his voice. The same thing happened with the story I was reading last night—with the novel—Hannah Musgrave—her voice is what compels me, more than any other aspect of character, I think, because a lot of my characters aren’t that much fun to hang around with, you know.
**Bill Smith:** As you said there…

**Russell Banks:** Another bummer from Banks. That actually was from a review I think, it was a review from when *Affliction* was published, he began his review saying, “Another bummer from Banks.” But after the movie was made I think it was *Entertainment Weekly* or one of those magazines was reviewing the movie and they said “This movie is so depressing that Paul Schrader and Russell Banks should never be allowed to work together again.”

**Bill Smith:** How do you develop metaphors? At what point in your creative process do you work on them, and what do you want readers to understand when you use them?

**Russell Banks:** Well you know, what I think has to be first understood is that when you are writing a novel, just as when writing a poem, you are really writing for yourself; and it’s a process of discovery. So it isn’t as though you have a box of metaphors beside you like raisins you’re going to put into the bread or the cake and insert them. You discover them; you don’t even know they are there, until you are at work and they start to reveal themselves in the process. And then you see them, and you say “Gee that’s a metaphor for something else. That’s a larger thing than I thought it was; I thought it was just a detail. It’s larger—then you chase it, you pursue it to see what its implications are for yourself. I’m not inserting this for a reader, it’s not going to be on the exam. I’m not putting it in for a reader to say “Aha!” I’m putting it in so I can say “Aha!” And I’m not putting it in—I’m discovering it, I’m unearthing it. That’s how it feels. And I think that is basically the case—metaphors emerge out of the text and the writer glimpses it, takes it out and brushes the dust off, and starts to dig around the way an archeologist would. You see a tablet and you start digging it out to see what that tablet has written on it.

**Bill Smith:** I’m getting into Russell Banks’ mind. Joan Didion once wrote, “Writers are always selling someone out.” How do you feel about this quote in terms of your own work?

**Russell Banks:** She may be speaking more for herself than she is for the rest of us. I’m not exactly sure what she meant by that, but she primarily writes non-fiction, although she certainly writes fiction. And I think she might be speaking more of her non-fiction writing and what non-fiction writers tend to do is reject the received truths and investigate the world without the blinders. Inevitably you end up selling out someone. You’ll end up selling out whoever tried to impose upon you the received truth. But on a personal level now I feel quite the opposite in fact. I feel that most of the writers, all the writers that I admire and try to emulate are writers that celebrate people who have already been sold out or betrayed. I feel a much stronger sense of kinship and faithfulness and loyalty to people who have been sold out who have been betrayed or abandoned or overlooked. So for me the whole process is the opposite of what Didion is describing. I don’t take any particular glee or delight in betrayal at all. If it happens in the course of writing a novel that I do end up betraying somebody, well I can’t really imagine it. It’s not really my intention at all or my desire in any way.

**Bill Smith:** This is actually a question from Kate Trueblood; well it’s actually one that Kate started. You’ve written shared readings with friends—William Matthews, Charles Simic, Michael Ondaatje. How important have literary friendships been to you as a writer?

**Russell Banks:** Oh, that’s a good question. Crucial, to my education, crucial in terms of support, encouragement at particular periods in my life, especially when I was young. You know there is a period in your life, almost every writer goes through it, when you perceive that your apprenticeship is about over, you’ve reached a level of competence, you’re not learning as fast as you used to. The learning curve has started to level out a little bit. And you’re pretty good, you’re not lying to yourself when you read about work that’s being celebrated and published around and you say, well actually “I’m as good as that, I’m working on that level now.” So
your apprenticeship has come to a close or it is coming to a close. And then there follows about ten more years where nobody cares, you’re not improving very much. You’re not finding a way to get your work into the world, and you’re making a living doing something else. Your spouse is wondering if you’re ever going to do anything useful, and the kids are wondering why you’re so distracted all the time. And that’s the period when friendships from other writers I think mean the most in terms of support. The earlier period they mean the most in terms of learning and teaching, and writing is something really writers teach each other—dead writers and living writers. But you also need your peers, you need those young writers who are at the same place in their lives and work and who are sharing with you a social and historical context, and are dealing with some of the same material that surrounds you. So the teaching process is very important in that earlier stage. But I think in that second hard ten years, for most writers—some writers manage to skip through it, but very few—for some that ten years seem never to end. That support is incredibly important. “Don’t worry. You’ve got it; you’re fine; it’ll come your way.”

I remember very clearly in my late twenties, early thirties just saying, “You know, I’m really I think as good as most of this stuff. I’m able to do this. It’s not, it doesn’t seem any longer that I am working in a foreign language. I now seem to be working in my own language. What’s going on? Am I crazy?” And then my friends would say “No, you’re not. You’re OK. And if you just stay on doing what you’re doing, it’ll come your way.” And it’s true, it does. And I think now in this stage of my life it’s a different kind of thing, a different kind of use of friendship to provide a different kind of value in my life than it used to. Now there’s a sense of history that we share. And that’s very helpful as you get older to keep each others’ memories alive. So that you say “Am I crazy or was it different in 1964?” “Am I crazy or did something happen in 1980 when Reagan came in?” “Was the Vietnam war really as bad as I remember it?” It’s this sort of thing, where you are validating your memories and you are creating for yourself a sharper and more plausible sense of history, as enough time has accumulated. You work together in that, it’s a collaboration.

I think that Kate’s question is really an interesting one because it points to the fact that writing, any art really, is a collaborative process. We tend, I think, to emphasize too much in our culture and in our Western literary history the individual—the individual artist, the maker, without acknowledging what a collaborative process it is from the very beginning. From when you first pick up a book that is so exciting to you, you want to write one yourself. That’s a collaboration between the writer of that book who may be generations dead and this young kid who just got so excited over Ernest Hemingway’s stories that he wants to write some himself. And the workshop process here that Universities have embraced is a collaborative process. And it goes on. I may work alone in my little room most of the time but the fact is that there are a lot of other people involved in the process.

Bill Smith: Conversely you’re talking on the other end of it, but you’ve spent a lot of time mentoring people, and getting young aspiring writers really started. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Russell Banks: Well, yeah, in different contexts, certainly in the classroom, I taught for many years and usually taught writing, sometimes taught literature and related courses. And so I ended up at both at graduate level both at Columbia University and NYU teaching young writers and then undergraduates more often than not over the years at Princeton and Sarah Lawrence. So in that sense, yes. And then those relationships continue, among your students who actually do become writers, are connected to you inevitably. The way it is in any profession, if you are a teacher and you have a few go into your profession, you stay connected to them. You have to write them letters of recommendation after all, and then you find out you have to write blurbs for their first novel, and you have to write letters that nominate them for prizes. So there is this sense of continuing, but it’s payback time really for me. I had figures in my life who played that role when I was in my twenties and on who helped me open doors and encouraged and validated my work when I needed it, older

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writers, and it meant an awful lot to me. So now I am in that position and I feel obliged to do the same—and do.

Bill Smith: Another question just came in, and that is, “What beyond the classroom, what advice do you have for starting writers?

Russell Banks: It’s really hard to break it down into a couple of pithy sentences. I remember this conversation came up once I was sitting in a room on a couch like this with Toni Morrison and Toni said “Get a day job.” And that’s as far as she would go. So I’ll quote that and say “Yeah. First of all get a day job.” And I think she’s right of course. But get a day job that gives as much control of your time as possible, which is why I went into teaching, because you still put in your 40 or 48 hours a week but you can spread them out differently and you can organize them in such a way that you’re free to write while your mind is still sharp. It makes it possible. And then you have what someone else, I think Bill Matthews once said “The three main reasons for teaching are June, July, and August”—from a writer’s point of view. So that was my day job for many years for that reason.

But on a more serious note, one thing I have told young writers, is to separate from the very beginning their career and their work. Put them on separate tracks in your mind and in your life and concentrate on the one you can control and that’s the work. That’s the only one you can control. You can’t control your career. If you try to control your career, you’re gonna screw up your work. Your work is going to suffer for it. You’ll bend the work to the needs of the career cause that’s the only thing you have, is your work. You can’t control anybody else in the world. And keep them on completely separate tracks and let the career take care of itself, because it will or it won’t but you can’t do anything about it one way or the other. I think that is very important to know and keep in mind at all times, let it ride, let it ride, let it ride. And I can’t stress that enough, because if you don’t concentrate entirely on the work, then you’re abandoning the very thing you came here to do; you didn’t come here to have a career. I didn’t become a writer because I wanted to be a writer. I became a writer because I wanted to write. And it is very important to keep that in mind, and I think it’s very easy to forget it in the world. I mean publishers would like you to forget it. They’d like you to concentrate on your career. Your readers would like you to forget it. They’d like you to concentrate on your career. Your readers would like you to concentrate on your career—they would like you to do the same thing again that you did last time that was so pleasing. Critics and reviewers would like you to concentrate on your career. Sometimes your spouse would like you to concentrate on your career a little more. But you can’t. You’ve got to just do the work.

Bill Smith: A couple of questions relating to your screenwriting career, or work. What has surprised you about the process of writing fiction as compared to the process of writing screen plays? Have you had any of these epiphanies where you see one is informing the other?

Russell Banks: You know I really can’t say that they inform each other. They are so different one from the other. It’s as if I had taken up potting or graphic arts in some way. It’s that different from fiction writing. Language is at some level useful and it’s part of the material of screen writing. You are working with language if writing a screen play but you’re not writing something that lives in language, you’re writing directions. It’s like you are writing a recipe or a menu or making a blueprint for a building. Yes, you’re writing dialogue, but it’s just dialogue. And it’s dialogue that is going to end up in some actor’s body, and that’s going to change it. So an actor’s intonation and voice is going to alter it, an actor’s emotional life is going to change that dialogue. What you’ve done is just given some stage direction to an actor. You can write a line and say “Darling, will you open the door, please?” and it’s on the page: “Darling, will you open the door, please?” but an actor will take that line and say “Will you open the door, please, darling?” and just shift a word in it because it comes out more naturally that way, but then it’s a whole different line. And your happy little line is gone. And also just inflect it differently and then the meaning and everything has changed. Anyhow the
point is that screen writing, even though it does use language as novel writing does, it uses it for very different purposes; and structure is the dominant element in screen writing, and its collaborative. You’re working with other people. You might write the first draft of a screenplay but then eight people will send you eight pages of notes and then you have to go then back and write in the light of those notes. You’re working with people, you’re not working alone. I really like that it’s like putting a building up, you’ve got all kinds of people with all kinds of specialties.

I’m now doing some of that as a producer. I’m now one of those guys making those notes. In the case of *Cloudsplitter* I’m not doing the screenplay for that, but I am producing it with a couple of other people. I just had a long two-hour conference call yesterday with the writer about this. And one of the things that the other producers and I were trying to tell him was that he had too many scenes set in too many different places, and this was going to cost a lot of money. So we have to condense some of these sets, some of these locations. He had three different farms. He had a farm in Ohio, and then a farm in upstate New York, and then a farm in Iowa. We were saying, “Is there some way that we can either eliminate these scenes or condense them?” but we were thinking money, it’s going to cost more money. And so he says “Yeah, I can do that, sure.” So it’s that kind of a process, and to someone who thinks he or she is working alone and in control the way you are with a novel, that can be incredibly frustrating. But you accept the fact that this is a collaborative effort here. We’re putting on a play together in a sense. There is somebody really great at lighting, and there’s somebody really great at music, and there is somebody who is really great at cinematography, somebody else is able to put together the money package, somebody can direct it all, and there’s the writer who is providing a blueprint really.

**Bill Smith:** Was there a point in your career when you decided that you wanted to give producing and independent filmmaking a try and make that part of your own work? Was there a pivotal point?

**Russell Banks:** Yeah I think that it was. I was sort of passive about it and it was something that was happening outside of my ken, deliberately so. I kept it outside of my world, until the making of *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Affliction*. In both those cases the directors brought me into the process. Paul Schrader and Atom Egoyan are both very articulate, bright, imaginative film makers, but they are also very generous men who were happy to give me what amounted to a crash course in filmmaking because they were both happening at more or less the same time. They both involved me in the screen writing all the way through the entire process. I was in the editing room with both of them right to the end, even to the promotion, and they involved me, too, in the whole financing of the movies and how that happens, and casting. So I got very involved in the making of those movies and very engaged by that process and then when the films were made and I saw them I said they aren’t bad film—they are really kind of interesting in their own right, and the process is worth putting up with, it’s worth enduring, it’s so full of surprises. So that engaged me and then I had a point where right around that time my good friend and neighbor is William Kennedy, and he is somewhat older than I am, and he’s had more experience with filmmaking than I have over the years; and so he made it very clear to me, if you really care about what ends up on the screen then you’ve got to engage it really aggressively. You’ve got to insist on the screen play approval, director approval, and major casting approval. And the only way you’re going to get that is if you insist on being a producer. If you do insist on these things they are probably not going to buy your book, because they don’t want to give that away, to the writer especially. They don’t want to give that to anybody except themselves. But if you are in a position where you can demand that, then go for it. What you’re going to give up in the end is a lot of time. You’re going to have to be on the phone a lot, you’re going to have to travel a lot, and you’re really going to have to engage it. You can’t just do it for a day and then turn away from it. So you have to decide, and I decided yes, I do care what ends up on the screen. So I am going to go ahead and engage it. I was lucky enough after the making of those two films and the success of the novels over the last decade or so, I was able to insist on these approvals and playing this role in the making of the film that seemed like a positive thing to the development companies and to the people who were putting
up the money. So I was able to get that role, that role was available to me. Which it wouldn’t have been ten years ago, and certainly not when I was young.

Bill Smith: Several people have asked “What’s the status of On the Road …”

Russell Banks: Yeah that’s a good question. I wish I knew somebody who knew. It’s hard to say. I get calls all the time from journalists who ask that question because they heard that Brad Pitt was reading it, and last I heard was Johnny Depp. All the young actors want to play those roles and I think that they are the ones who are circulating these rumors themselves to try to make it come true. If enough people believe it then maybe it’ll happen. I was with an actor in New York about two weeks ago, a young good looking actor who I won’t name, but he said, “Tell me. Do I look like Kerouac” and I said “Yeah you do. You really do. You’re perfect.”

But I think what’s going to happen with that is that it will get made eventually, but Francis Coppola bought the film rights to On the Road in 1968 a year before Kerouac died, and he bought them outright, he didn’t buy an option, he bought them outright. So he owns them and no one else will be able to make that film but Francis, and he’s been obsessed with it all these years. My screen play is the fourth that I know he has commissioned and there may be others in there somewhere. And they were all from good screenwriters. Michael Heller was the first, Barry Gifford wrote one, and then Francis and his son Roman wrote one together, and then I wrote one. Mine is the most recent, and there is no reason for me not to think that he is going to commission another one two or three years from now. It’s a movie he has seen in his head. He’s dreamed about that movie, he’s obsessed over it all these years. And that’s kind of a bad thing in a way.

Bill Smith: Because he is trying to mesh that.

Russell Banks: And it’s become nothing in reality will ever quite match that dream. So any screen play when he gets close to it he says “No. No. Johnny Depp, No, no, no.” That’s not what he is seeing. He’s actually seeing Jack Kerouac and Neil Cassidy, and they’re dead. It’s too late to cast them. So it’s a problem.

I hope it will be made for lots of reasons, and I hope that when they do they use my screen play, because I rather like it. I worked very hard on it. It was a tremendous experience for me. I loved working with Francis, who is a genius and a powerful person, and I learned a lot from him. And I loved revisiting the work of The Beat writers, who turn out to be more relevant in some ways today than they were in the 1950’s. And I loved revisiting that period of history, because On the Road we forget sometimes, is set in 1948, and it’s a real post war novel. It’s the end of innocence in America. It was published in ’58 but it was set right back there after the war. When two guys in T-Shirts can get in a fast car and drive across the country and they can really be doing something adventurous, smoke a little pot, sleep with girls, stuff like that, and it seems like a huge deal in Denver. Wow Denver! And that was a different America. I wrote it as a period piece, to me it was a historical novel. It’s something set almost 60 years ago, and it was a different America then. I tried to tell the story through that lens and see it through those eyes. Rather than see it as a story about adolescence, late adolescence, prolonged extended male adolescence, but rather really a story about the period in American history that is gone now.

Bill Smith: So to end this, is there more sort of abeyance to what we might call classic American myths and dreams in that period piece?

Russell Banks: Oh very much. That is what happens when you see it as a period piece—you begin to see what they are doing and who these characters are in a more classical way. And you see that there’s something closer here to Huck and Jim or Ishmael on a boat searching for a whale, than there is to Catcher in the Rye or any post modern popular novel about drugs, sex, and rock and roll. It’s really a classical novel, that’s why
the book is, it’s unique amongst American novels in that it is rediscovered by every new generation on their own. It was published in ’58 so there are at least three and four generations of readers, men and women alike, who have discovered that book for themselves. It wasn’t taught to them in high school the way Huckleberry Finn was or Catcher and the Rye. It was something they passed to each other. Only occasionally is it taught in classrooms and it’s usually taught to people who have already read it anyhow, and they are trying to put it in the ken and teach it in the classroom. So it’s a unique book in that regard. And we say why, what’s going on there that makes it so extraordinary? Well, it’s about the end of innocence, and most of the readers at that age are losing their innocence. They are finding out that the world is a really hostile, deceitful, difficult place out there and it’s not what you thought. Because that’s what happens in that story.

Bill Smith: Thank you, well we perhaps have time for one more question. I noticed that in your earlier career that Che Guevara played a big part.

Russell Banks: Yeah I wrote some stories.

Bill Smith: And Robert Niemi said that he played a talismanic role in a number of your early writings, and I was wondering—does Che still figure some way in your writing, and if not, who has replaced him? Is there a talismanic person or object?

Russell Banks: Well yeah, maybe John Brown replaced Che Guevara in my imagination.

Bill Smith: Oh yeah, OK.

Russell Banks: Che figures in some early short stories, as a romantic, really as an image to project onto it my own and anyone’s political romance, sociopolitical romance. He is a Robin Hood figure, but he also happens to be handsome and Christ-like, which helps. But I think that that was no longer a useful image, metaphor for me. And John Brown as a figure I think may have displaced him in many ways—although he is a darker figure and a more complex figure, historically, and is certainly less romantic. A major character in my current novel is Charles Taylor, the ex-president of Liberia, so I’ve really gotten dark. This is a real bummer from Banks.

Bill Smith: Well it’s something for us to look forward to. Unfortunately, our hour is just about over and we at Western Washington University and the Center for Instructional Innovation want to thank you for spending this morning with us, this hour with us. And Russell Banks—thank you very much for your conversation. It’s a joy, and I thank you.

Russell Banks: That was fun.

Bill Smith: That was really fun.