CHAPTER 1

Introduction

When I was a kid, somebody gave me a new typewriter and I figured I ought to use it. I started to write to pen pals from around the country, but very quickly I ran out of things to say, so I started to make things up, to lie to these people about my life—how I was hunting alligators and things like that. It was just fun to tell stories.

In a 1989 article on “The Image of the Cajun in Literature,” Marcia Gaudet explains,

Major American writers from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow to Ernest Gaines have written about Louisiana Cajuns. The images of Cajuns range from the quiet, pastoral view found in Longfellow’s Evangeline, to the lazy, stupid, naïve, happy Cajun of later writers, and, more recently, the violent, threatening, racist Cajun. In fact, while writers have produced a variety of stereotypical Cajuns that range from the totally inaccurate to the somewhat narrow, one-dimensional image, there has not yet been an accurate portrayal of the Cajun people or their culture by a major American literary figure.

Beginning with Longfellow’s Evangeline (1847), the Acadians in Louisiana have usually been portrayed by writers who lacked any real knowledge or understanding of the people or the culture.1

Longfellow, Gaudet notes, “had never been to Louisiana” (86) and “never pretended his account was based on fact,” yet “his
depiction of the Acadians as a simple, pastoral people formed the core for the popular image of Louisiana Acadians in the nineteenth century” (77). In the twentieth century, the image of the Cajun changed. In particular, Cajuns appear as “violent, dangerous, [and] bigoted,” usually “from the perspective of the black man” (85). The best-known writer to provide this perspective is Louisiana’s Ernest J. Gaines, whose Cajun characters are part of “a segregated society during a time of crisis.” Gaudet points out that Gaines “never pretends to be showing the Cajun from the perspective of an ‘insider’ in the Cajun culture, [for] he never shows the Cajun from the Cajun point of view” (86). As James H. Dormon had already observed in his 1983 book *The People Called Cajuns*, Cajuns “rarely speak for themselves” in the various sources that reference them—historical, biographical, or literary—that is, until Louisiana’s Tim Gautreaux began publishing his stories. Gautreaux’s name reflects his ethnicity—he is a descendant of the French Acadians who settled in southern Louisiana after the British drove them out of Nova Scotia in the eighteenth century—and in his fiction the reader finds the Cajun perspective written from a Cajun perspective.

In spite of Gautreaux’s significant role in adding this previously seldom heard voice to southern and American literature, the author resists such labels as “southern writer” or “Cajun writer.” And certainly his fiction is not limited to the perspective of Acadian descendants—or even southerners: the two main characters of his second novel, *The Clearing*, are from Pennsylvania. While the main characters of his other two novels, *The Next Step in the Dance* and *The Missing*, are Acadians, the characters in his short stories are more likely to have working-class backgrounds than to be identified as specifically Cajun. His protagonists are predominantly white, blue-collar, south Louisiana
men, ranging in age from the twenty-something men of his novels to the numerous grandfathers in his stories. It is the Louisiana white working man’s story that Gautreaux tells—or rather the various stories of blue-collar workers, a voice fairly new to southern literature in general, offered by other writers of Gautreaux’s generation (such writers as Mississippi’s Larry Brown and South Carolina’s Dorothy Allison), all countering or deconstructing the poor white and “white trash” stereotypes of their writing predecessors from wealthier and more educated heritages. Echoing Arthur Miller’s defense of Willy Loman as an appropriate source of tragedy, Gautreaux defends his focus on “blue-collar subjects” in his fiction when he says, “An uneducated, poor person still has a significant life.”

Born on October 19, 1947, in Morgan City, Louisiana, Timothy Martin Gautreaux is the son of a tugboat captain and the grandson of a steamboat chief engineer. Other men in his family worked for the railroad and offshore on oil rigs. Many men in his family enjoyed storytelling, so it is not surprising that Gautreaux wound up a master of the short story genre. He attributes the moral vision of his fiction to growing up in the 1950s:

Whatever comes out on the page is just who I am. I don’t consciously have designs on readers as far as trying to convince them that one thing is right and another wrong. My narratives support what I feel to be true. You know, there’s one thing about the old days, the fifties, when everybody believed in two or three things, two or three systems of belief and not unlimited roll your own philosophy—which is what we have today. There was a sense that everybody was on the same page. That’s the era I was raised in. You didn’t cheat people, you didn’t lie, and you didn’t hit anybody over the head, unless they deserved it. Also, you
observed the finer rituals. You went to church; you were responsible for your mistakes; you owned up to them. If you did something bad, you didn’t blow it off, you felt guilty about it, and tried to make amends. That’s something I think a Muslim can relate to, a Jew, a Christian—just that sense of responsibility. I create characters who resemble folks I grew up with, responsible people. I think a lot of readers like that.6

Gautreaux’s responsible people differ significantly from the anti-heroes of much of contemporary fiction, and his moral vision offers a more optimistic perception of people who will, more often than not, choose to do the right thing. Though somewhat nostalgic for the shared communal values he remembers from the 1950s, Gautreaux is neither sentimental nor idealistic. He is simply not cynical, and he likes the people and places he writes about.

After attending parochial schools for his elementary and secondary education, Gautreaux went to Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, from which he graduated in 1969 with a major in English. One of his professors there entered some poems Gautreaux had written in a Southern Literary Festival contest held in Knoxville, Tennessee. Keynote speaker James Dickey read the winning poems, among them Gautreaux’s, and invited Gautreaux into the Ph.D. program at the University of South Carolina, where Dickey was then teaching. Gautreaux’s dissertation was a volume of poetry called “Night-Wide River” (1972).

According to Gautreaux these few years living outside of Louisiana while in graduate school taught him “how different Louisiana was, south Louisiana in particular, from the rest of the country . . . the food . . . the religion . . . the politics . . . attitudes,”
which remind the reader that the South is not monolithic—perhaps a reason to resist, as he does, a label such as “southern writer.” In Columbia, South Carolina, Gautreaux’s understanding of his own culture really began: “At that point it began to be clear to me what being Cajun was. . . . It had to do with attitudes, the value of food, the value of religion, and things of that nature. And it’s sort of an attitude about life. The attitude that though people think they’re better than you, you know different” (Hebert-Leiter, 70). Gautreaux’s appreciation of his culture and his understanding that sometimes you have to leave a place in order to reach such an appreciation would influence his novel *The Next Step in the Dance*.

After receiving his doctorate, Gautreaux returned to Louisiana in 1972 to teach at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, a town east of Baton Rouge and about sixty miles northwest of New Orleans. His new wife, Winborne Howell, a North Carolina native he had met in graduate school, accompanied him. She had completed a master’s degree program at South Carolina and accepted a job teaching at Southeastern. Five years after moving back to Louisiana, Gautreaux applied for a seat in a fiction-writing class taught by Walker Percy at Loyola University in New Orleans. Percy selected Gautreaux in addition to other writers, such as future novelist Valerie Martin and future *Time* magazine managing editor Walter Isaacson, who would go on to have successful careers, and from this experience on, Gautreaux wrote fiction.

With the heavy teaching load of a small state institution, along with raising two sons (Robert and Thomas) and maintaining interests beyond academia (Gautreaux continued to enjoy his various hobbies), it took him a while (well into his forties) to surface on readers’ radar, but Percy’s apparent recognition of
talent was well deserved: after a couple of early publications in small literary magazines, Gautreaux’s stories were accepted by such premier venues as the Atlantic Monthly, Harper’s, and GQ, and from these publications they were selected for the anthologies The Best American Short Stories, New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best, and the O. Henry Awards’ Prize Stories. His stories also attracted the attention of fiction writer Barry Hannah, who invited Gautreaux to be the 1996 John and Renée Grisham Southern Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi, which would give him a respite from his usual teaching load long enough to allow him to finish his first published novel.

Gautreaux’s first book, a collection of twelve stories, was published by St. Martin’s Press in 1996, just a year before the writer’s fiftieth birthday. Same Place, Same Things was blurbed by fellow Louisiana writers James Lee Burke, Robert Olen Butler, Andre Dubus, and Shirley Ann Grau and then picked up for review by the New York Times. Calling it “a terrific debut collection,” Kirkus Reviews noted the writer’s “sympathetic understanding of working-class sensibilities” and compared Gautreaux to Flannery O’Connor. The Catholic magazine Commonweal praised the collection’s stories for providing a “welcome relief from the blandness of McWorld; they bring reassuring evidence of the continuing existence of places away from the big place where, increasingly, we all live.” And the reviewer for the North American Review remarked upon Gautreaux’s character development, noting that the author “knows how to get out of a story’s way and just let the characters do what they need to do. . . . These characters move through the world compelled by important motive. The characterizations are swift and precise, rooted in gesture, speech and action.”
Gautreaux’s second book, the novel *The Next Step in the Dance* (Picador, 1998), was also reviewed in the *New York Times*, and the reviewer remarked upon the author’s “poetic mix of colorful detail and rapid-paced suspense” as well as “his keen ear for Cajun dialect.” Writing for the *Missouri Review*, John Tait also admired Gautreaux’s “unmatched ear for the speech of rural Louisiana” as well as his talent for writing about machines: “Here is a writer who can make the refitting of an engine as compelling as another author’s love or death scene.” This reviewer, however, also found that the novel “suffers from a lack of urgency and momentum” and “overstays its welcome,” not recognizing, it seems, what a Louisiana reviewer understood about the importance of this book: Susan Larson wrote in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* that the 1980s setting, “a time of great trauma for this state[,] . . . certainly deserved a literary piece to memorialize it.” In her review Larson quotes the author, reminding us of Louisiana’s “diversity of cultures and values,” which inevitably will change as Louisiana becomes part of the McWorld that the reviewer of *Same Place, Same Things* discovered was absent from Gautreaux’s stories. But Gautreaux also reassures his readers in his comments to Larson that “Louisiana’s not going to stop being a good place to write about. It’s going to be hard to exhaust this state because it’s so rich,” and certainly with this novel and a collection of stories, he was not finished mining material for fiction.

In 1999 St. Martin’s published a second volume of Gautreaux’s stories, *Welding with Children*, and the *New York Times Book Review* again picked it up for a lengthy and positive review, praising the author for his “cartograph[y in] mapping with affectionate but unflinching accuracy both the back roads
of Louisiana . . . and the distance between parents and children.”16 Reviewing this collection for the Hudson Review, Susan Balée calls Gautreaux “the master of the Cajun short story” and one of the three “best short story writers in America today”—praise that would certainly please a writer who resists regional labels.17 And reviewer Alan Heathcock lauded the author’s “invention of clever, out of the ordinary conflicts” and “his ability to render true the voice of his Louisiana working-class characters.” Heathcock summed up the collection by noting that “the stories are all about people who want to be good, who want to help others and end up helping themselves in the process. They are about redemption, with a tender sense of humor, as seen through the kind eyes of their author.”18

With three books in print, Gautreaux tackled a historical novel set in the 1920s, after World War I, dealing with a veteran suffering posttraumatic stress disorder, perhaps thus prompting the comparison of his second novel, The Clearing (Knopf, 2003), to Charles Frazier’s Civil War novel, Cold Mountain, in USA Today.19 The New Yorker responded to The Clearing by calling Gautreaux a “Bayou Conrad,”20 and several reviewers began to compare (and contrast) the author to Cormac McCarthy. Publishers Weekly suggests that The Clearing confirms the opinion that “Gautreaux is perhaps the most talented writer to come out of the South in recent years.”21 His growing reputation is reflected in the larger number of reviews of this novel in a broader spectrum of venues, from local papers to the Christian Science Monitor and the UK’s Guardian, as well as in the immediate and broad response to The Missing, another post–World War I novel published by Knopf in 2009. For both novels the author certainly did his homework, researching the place and the time for authentic details that would allow him to depict
realistically life in the 1920s in a Louisiana lumber mill town in *The Clearing* and on an entertainment steamboat going up and down the Mississippi in *The Missing*. As Alan Warner wrote in his review of *The Missing* for the *Guardian*, “Gautreaux’s historical fictions are structured like exquisite machinery.”22 Writing for the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, Doug Childers noted, too, that *The Missing*’s “anti-war sentiments and arguments for forgiveness over revenge will resonate for many contemporary readers.”23

Gautreaux may resist being called a southern or Cajun writer—believing as he does that *all* writers are regional writers, that writers just naturally set their work in the region they know best and write about the people around them—but he acknowledges without reservation how Catholicism influences his writing, remarking that “it’s impossible to write about South Louisiana culture without writing about the Catholic Church, because it permeates everything” (Masciere, 31). Unlike Flannery O’Connor, to whom he is most often compared by reviewers and the literary critics who are already analyzing his work, Gautreaux is surrounded by fellow Catholics in his native Louisiana, but like O’Connor, his characters are not all Catholic. They do all face some kind of moral dilemma and, reminiscent of O’Connor’s stories, often have the opportunity to choose grace, but they are more likely than the typical O’Connor character to accept the grace they are offered. Gautreaux’s moral vision is ultimately more optimistic than O’Connor’s. He often refers to his former teacher Walker Percy regarding writing about moral issues: “In Percy, I saw a writer who was experiencing his divine gift. His novels deal with moral issues, religious issues. That was very influential on me. . . . I don’t see fiction that does not have some kind of moral concern as being very interesting.”24
Another writer who has apparently influenced Gautreaux is fellow Louisianian Ernest Gaines. Gautreaux has pointed out how “Gaines created his entire fictional universe out of a single gravel lane in Point Coupée Parish” in spite of having left Louisiana as a teenager to live in California for much of his life. From this observation about Gaines’s body of work, Gautreaux discerned that “a writer . . . owns a certain literary territory. It’s the place of his birth, where he grew up, the language that he listened to, the values that were implied, and the everyday commerce of his life” (Hebert-Leiter, 66–67).

Another characteristic of a writer’s literary territory is the point of view. As noted, Gautreaux writes primarily from the south Louisiana working-class man’s perspective. A few of his main characters have a little more education, and he has one Catholic priest protagonist (in “Good for the Soul”) and one Protestant minister protagonist (in “The Pine Oil Writers Conference”). For the most part in Gautreaux’s fiction, women play supporting roles as wives or serve in motivational roles, inspiring the male protagonists to action; occasionally they play the villain or at least are somewhat antagonistic toward the male leads. There are two female protagonists among the short stories’ main characters (in “Died and Gone to Vegas” and “Returnings”), and the first novel has two protagonists, a man and a woman.

Surprisingly, in spite of the Deep South setting of Gautreaux’s oeuvre, there are very few black characters, and only three who play major roles—the title character of “Deputy Sid’s Gift” and the housekeeper, May, and her son, Walter, in The Clearing—though the black musicians as a group do play an important role in The Missing. Thus, just as Ernest Gaines has written the stories of the African American man of Louisiana (even in his
Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, which is told from the perspective of an African American woman), indeed, just as Faulkner has told the story of the prototypical son of the southern aristocracy, so too does Gautreaux tell a story of the South, provide a voice of Louisiana. None of these writers (not even Faulkner) presumes to be telling the story of the South, and each of their voices, with all their distinct issues as well as areas of common interest, reminds us that there are numerous stories to cover when “tell[ing] about the South.” Tim Gautreaux’s voice, relatively new in the mix, allows a welcome expansion of our understanding of the variety of cultures that make up the South—indeed, that make up even the single state of Louisiana.

Historical novels (even Gautreaux’s first novel, set in the 1980s, might be considered such) and traditionally structured short stories give Gautreaux’s fiction a surprisingly fresh perspective beyond the new voice of the Cajun that he provides. He resists the experimental form so common in the work of some of his postmodern and contemporary peers: “I see the short story not primarily as an intellectual endeavor, but as a cultural artifact tightly bound with a necessary narrative structure” (Levasseur and Rabalais, 24). His stories break out of the blue-collar tradition that John Barth describes as “terse, oblique, realistic or hyperrealistic, slightly-plotted, extrospective, cool-surfaced” fiction labeled as “‘K-Mart realism,’ ‘hick chic,’ ‘Diet-Pepsi minimalism,’ and ‘post-Vietnam, post-literary, post-Postmodernist blue-collar new-early-Hemingwayism.’” Gautreaux’s fiction relies heavily on theme, characterization, and plot—that is, traditional storytelling elements that slow the reader down to a savoring pace. And Gautreaux prefers the voice of the uneducated speaker over the intellectual perspective, noting that “some intellectuals think too much and they like to strike poses of darkness
and brooding because they think that’s what they are supposed to do. . . . If you’re educated you’re supposed to be pessimistic. I’ve become very pessimistic and cynical about pessimists and cynics. That’s one reason I like blue-collar people. With all of their shortcomings and biases and pent-up angers, most of them understand the value of being good-natured and having a good time” (Levasseur and Rabalais, 31).

One might therefore contrast Gautreaux’s blue-collar characters with those of some of his southern contemporaries, whose darker vision of humanity seems to follow more in the tradition of Harry Crews than of Walker Percy. One might describe the plot of Larry Brown’s Joe, for example, in terms similar to a typical Gautreaux plot—the title character tries to make up for past mistakes with his own children by being a better role model to young Gary Jones—but in the Brown novel, Joe ultimately introduces the naturally responsible Gary to sex and alcohol, both of which have been sources of his own troubles. Certainly Joe’s good intentions and conscience distinguish him from Gary’s amoral father, but his more appealing example for the boy may be more corrupting to the young innocent. It is easy to reject a father who would sell a son and prostitute his daughters, not so easy to recognize the tragic flaws in the man who “heroically” kills your sister’s rapist. Matthew Guin’s description of the “deterministic poverty and social indifference” found in the fiction of Larry Brown, as well as Dorothy Allison and Harry Crews, simply does not apply to Tim Gautreaux. So even as Gautreaux adds to the body of literature being written about the blue-collar class in the South, he reminds us that no group is homogenous.

In tune with his blue-collar characters, Gautreaux knows (and loves) machines (which figure prominently throughout his
books) and views writing fiction in mechanical terms: “The thing about a properly designed mechanism is that there are no non-functioning parts. Everything has a purpose, every bit and tag, screw and eyelet. Good fiction’s the same way.”27 In the close readings of his individual stories and his novels in the following chapters, the reader will find that Tim Gautreaux’s “good fiction” does reflect this theory of writing.