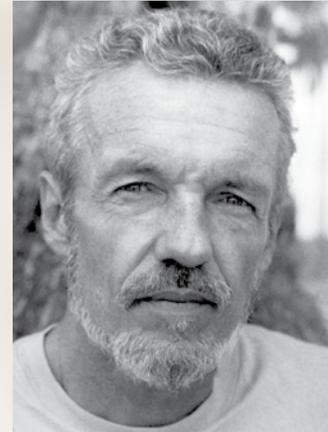


AN INTERVIEW WITH
Ian MacMillan

AUTHOR OF
Our People Stories

Interview by
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Our People has been described as stories that chronicle the lives of rural residents of upstate New York who lead hardscrabble lives. You grew up in upstate New York. Do you consider the characters in these stories your people and are you in these stories?

My family, including parents, myself and two brothers, moved to upstate New York after I turned 14, so those formative years after that were spent there. At the time (and to an extent now) those were my people. I was enough a part of their lives that their fortunes were mine. So a fairly high percentage of events and situations are 'autobiographical', although for me that constitutes mostly a source for further invention.

The central character in almost all of the stories in Our People is a young boy who shows grit in the face of tragedies such as parental beatings, the death of a parent, or abandonment and is forced to grow up before his childhood ends. Rich descriptions put the reader in that house, barn or ash grove. How would you characterize the struggles of your characters and are they unique to rural America?

The observation that most of the protagonists are teenage boys facing these problems is further indication of the autobiographical sources for these stories. My mother died up there when I was fourteen, and my father had to take a job working during the week in Syracuse, leaving us alone to cut logs and pulpwood for money, help out with friends on a farm down the dirt road, and so on. So we were largely 'unsupervised.' These and other events occurred that in effect forced the growing up process. I think that the experiences aren't 'unique' to rural America, but I think that in rural America, the isolation, and the physical pressures brought on by nature, the necessity to react to these pressures, and the necessity to make your

way largely by physical means, exaggerate the force of these experiences. If the nearest doctor is twelve miles away, an injury in midwinter, when only a tractor will get you out to a blacktop road, takes on a different tenor from in, say, suburbia.

Anecdote: I was fifteen, alone at the house, and became aware that our kitchen chimney was so hot that it seemed ready to melt – the heat from it ignited a parched strip of tape on the ceiling, so that a ball of blue flame made its way across the ceiling to the other side. It was creosote in the chimney on fire, hot as a kiln. I called the Edmeston fire department, probably fifteen or more miles away, and told them what the problem was. The answer? You're too far away—call if it gets any worse. As it turned out, a man carrying a rifle walked past the house on the dirt road, and I ran out and told him about it. His remedy—a log chain and a package of salt. He went up a ladder and dumped the salt into the chimney, then dangled the log chain in to break away the white-hot creosote. The salt snuffed the ignition, the log chain cleaned the chimney out, while below in the kitchen, I pulled the pieces out of the hole with a hoe and doused them with water. If that man hadn't been hunting that day (and anyone walking by was a rare occasion) the house would have burned.

One of the themes running through these stories is an attitude of mistrust in education or, alternatively, a belief that education is unnecessary. Could you comment on the part such attitudes play in the stories and the effect these attitudes have had on some of your main characters.

Many of these stories take place a decade or so after mid-century, but I think that the truth of this still holds. Generally, being strong and physically capable was more

important than being 'smart'. Academic intelligence came in a distant second, and I believe this was nearly universal in that area because 'intelligence' didn't have a use. Brawn and skill at tool-use did. My characters do experience steps in the direction of understanding the use of education, however. For the boys in "Outsider" and "The Proper Axis", for example, this recognition becomes important.

One of my favorite stories, "Fire Dance" includes what I consider the most tragic event in all the stories—a house fire that took the lives of two children—and the most funny—cows roaming through a supermarket and munching on the produce. Both events, although separated greatly in time, had a marked effect on Philip Longley, his wife, and their attitude toward Philip's father who tried desperately to rescue Philip's two siblings. Please talk about the process of creating this story with these two events and what this story says in terms of family relationships and the concept of home.

This story is more a product of the imagination than the others, because the protagonist is an adult, well educated and in ways separated from his origins. There was no such thing as a mall anywhere near where I grew up. In this updated rural world, civilization has appeared in the form of a mall, in ways pulling together the isolation he left and the civilization he is now a part of. He is looking back, doubtful about his sense of home, until an incident forces him to discover his own buried commitment to it and his father.

In "The Fence" Jay McGrath holds on to an electric fence with both hands to feel the surge. Jay also has to pull porcupine quills out of his dog's mouth. In another story, "Our People," Matt Colombo pulled his own tooth. What was your inspiration for these actions by Jay and Matt?

The source here is autobiographical. My best friend's father did the ball peen treatment on a dog and her pups. My friend and I and my brothers also had fun holding the electric fence and watching our muscles and blood veins surging with the beat, and I did have to pull porcupine quills from my dog's mouth, hundreds of them. She survived. Matt Colombo's pulling his own tooth is a short step from these 'real' events—the nearest dentist was too far away, and would cost too much money, so necessity tips the scale.

Almost half of the stories are written in the first person. When you conceive a story, what determines who will be the storyteller?

I always think third person first, because rich description is more natural in the third person, and the reader's orientation to character is more objective. If that stance seems to me flat, or if it seems that more can be revealed through the first person, I make that shift.

Two of these stories, "A Story of Water You Could Never Tell" and "The Red House" are not what I would consider traditional narratives. How would you describe the style of these two stories and what led you to write in this style?

"The Red House" was an experiment in the use of second person (you). It felt right, until I read some draft and saw the word 'you' too many times, so I began crossing them out, in effect crossing out subjects and verbs of a lot of sentences, which gave the narrative a kind of stream of consciousness quality. The result enhances the tangibility of the experience, I think, and "A Story of Water You Could Never Tell" was a further exercise in the use of this approach.

You have written a trilogy of novels about World War II and the Holocaust to wide acclaim. The horrors and atrocities of World War II and the Holocaust and boyhood in upstate New York are worlds apart. Are there any similarities in stories told in such vastly different circumstances?

Upstate New York and Middle Europe are worlds apart, but we are all human, with similar goals, fears, loyalties and so on. Many of the characters in those war novels are 'a little like me' as are the characters in *Our People*. When I take on a project that requires the kind of imaginative projection that those novels did, my safety net is always the understanding of what binds us all together: our humanity.

Some of your past jobs include roofer, cook, lifeguard, and attendant in a psychopathic hospital.

How have your experiences in such jobs influenced your writing?

When I left the area pictured in *Our People*, I still had a strange kind of rural hangover, so the jobs I took on were all very physical. A typical example would be that when I graduated from high school, the first job I took (and one I thought was right for me) was as a farmhand. It took me years to graduate further into jobs that involved using my head instead of my body. But this variety of jobs was a rich mine for me early on in my writing. Part of it was the work itself, and the more important part was getting to know and understand the people I worked with.

You have written short stories about Hawai'i where you have lived and taught at the University of Hawai'i for forty-two years. Is teaching or writing your first love or can they be separated? And what is your next writing project?

My first priority has always been writing. But teaching writing is close enough to writing itself that I ended up enjoying it a great deal, for 42 years. The usual assumption that it impedes the creative process is, for me, wrong. If anything it stimulates it. As for current projects, I am working on a three-novella book set in Hawai'i.

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