

# Writing Literary History . . . *The Promised Land*, and *The Big Test*, an interview with author Nicholas Lemann

by Norman Sims  
© Copyright Norman Sims 2011

*Literary Journalism Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2011, pps. 9–31.

In a wide-ranging interview, Nicholas Lemann, dean and Henry R. Luce professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in New York City, talks with Norman Sims about the many influences on his literary histories, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (1991), and *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy* (1999). But in this instance, literary history does not refer to histories of literary movements, as often conceived in the literature academy. Instead, the discussion hearkens back to an earlier tradition when the writing of history was considered a literary endeavor, as reflected, for example, in Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion*, or Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. It is a tradition alive and well today practiced mostly by journalists who seek the story or narrative in historical events.

—*The editors.*

The distinguished literary journalist Nicholas Lemann grew up in New Orleans. He studied American history and literature and was president of the *Harvard Crimson* newspaper. He graduated from Harvard University in 1976. He has worked as managing editor of *The Washington Monthly*, executive editor of *Texas Monthly*, staff reporter at *The Washington Post*, and national correspondent for *The Atlantic Monthly*. He has been a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1999. Many of his articles in *Texas Monthly*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *The New Yorker* are considered literary journalism.

In addition to *The Promised Land* and *The Big Test*, Lemann is the author of *Redemption: The Last Battle of the Civil War* (2006), and *Out of the Forties* (1983), which can also be labeled literary histories.

As a teenager, he read *The New Yorker*, but he was more engaged by reading Willie Morris's *Harper's*, early *Rolling Stone* and *New York Magazine*, and Harold Hayes's *Esquire*. "What entranced me about New Journalism was that you could produce in journalism work that had the advantages of literature, including a voice that wasn't the neutral voice of newspaper journalism, the ability to get into the complexities of character and society, an ability to make narrative moves in journalism—to have a beginning, middle, and an end. That was what it promised to me. You could do more as a journalist and get closer to what literature could do," he told me in a 2004 interview.

*The Promised Land* begins at a moment that would amplify the twentieth century Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North: the invention in 1944 of the mechanical cotton picker. The device effectively ended the sharecropper system that kept black farmers in a feudal arrangement. Many migrated north by routes such as the Illinois Central railroad out of Louisiana and Mississippi and arrived in northern urban centers such as Chicago. The migration peaked in the fifties and then declined after five or six million people had made the move. Lemann follows his central characters from the Delta town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, to Chicago. Into the story of their families and lives, Lemann blends an analytical narrative of the poverty and race legislation enacted by the administrations of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, among others, and its impact on such notorious Chicago ghetto projects as the Robert Taylor Homes and the Cabrini-Green complex. At the end of the story, some of the migrants return to Clarksdale, which had been transformed in the intervening years.

Our most recent interview was conducted Jan. 12, 2011, in the dean's office at the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism.

[**Note:** Ellipses (...) indicate a pause in speech, not omitted words.]

—*Norman Sims*

**Norman Sims:** I've been writing about literary journalists who do history, and their personal connections to their subjects. You're one of those writers.

**Nicholas Lemann:** If I could just digress a little bit on that. There are obviously a lot of journalists who do this superbly well. There's a short-form training one could do—we do this somewhat here—for journalists who want to write history. Most

journalists have only a hazy sense of how to do a literature review, how to locate archival material, and how to actually enter and work in an archive. It's really basic stuff to any academic. Just to teach it at a superficial level is a big step forward for a lot of journalists who do this kind of work.

**Sims:** And I think it's so time-consuming that it puts them off when they do go to those archives and discover all the material.

**Lemann:** Well, yes... I love doing it and a lot of journalists who do this kind of work like working in archives. And then there's some who just don't know how to get there. Some of this work is embarrassing because they're unaware of stuff that's obvious to any historian who works in the field. Anyhow, that's my little pitch about it.

### **Growing Up in New Orleans**

**Sims:** Some of my questions deal with that. I want to ask you about your personal connections to the Great Migration. You grew up in New Orleans then you moved north to Harvard. When you think about your life, growing up, how did you perceive of blacks in New Orleans? How did you perceive of race relations? Was there a transformative moment?

**Lemann:** Well, I wouldn't say there was a transformative moment. I really didn't know anything specifically about the Great Migration. In fact, I don't think I'd ever heard of it growing up.

**Sims:** Right. I grew up in central Illinois in the fifties and sixties. The Illinois Central railroad ran right through my town and I knew nothing about the migration.

**Lemann:** I was born about three or four months after the Brown decision came down. [*Brown vs. Board of Education*] August 1954. I think the decision came down in May 1954. Even before that, everything in New Orleans—today, and certainly when I was growing up—was about race relations. That was the defining issue in the South. Some would say in the

nation. Certainly in New Orleans when I was growing up. You couldn't not be supremely aware of race as an issue. There wasn't a moment when suddenly I realized it was an issue because it was everywhere, all the time, everything.

**Sims:** So it was like knowing the weather was hot.

**Lemann:** Yes. Add to that my timing in life. I grew up in a time of some change in race relations. There was this issue and it was in play the whole time I was growing up.

But I want to say, New Orleans in particular has somewhat complicated race relations. There wasn't the same level of hyper-segregation at that time. White and black people, in very ritualized and caste-driven ways, had a great deal of contact, even intimate contact. They lived in very separate worlds with a lot of rules. As a white person, the black world was kind of a mystery. You really didn't know what was going on inside of it. People had all these fantastic suppositions about it but they didn't really know and the many black people we were in touch with every day weren't going to tell us because the interaction was so ritualized. So it was hovering in the background of everything.

**Sims:** In 1970, I met a guy who taught at Tulane University. He said that New Orleans was more tropical in its race relations than it was Southern. The surrounding areas of Louisiana and Mississippi had oppressive Southern racial relationships, but New Orleans was more like what you'd find in the Caribbean.

**Lemann:** I don't really buy that. There's a new John Guare play, *A Free Man of Color*, that deals with that idea. But I think, after many years of thinking about it, that it's a fantasy that white people have in New Orleans. The city is closer in a number of ways to Caribbean culture than [North] American culture, but that's different from saying race relations are Caribbean. Because that implies, for example, that you don't have the "one drop" rule, that you have a series of racial categories and distinct means of treatment. That was not true in the New Orleans I grew up in. Yes, there was a light-skinned black elite but for legal purposes they were black.

In fact, one of the first stories I ever did as a journalist at the alt[ernative] weekly, now departed, where I started working—this was probably in '73 when I did this story. There was somebody working in city hall as the race classifier. It was a lady who had an office. She would reclassify people racially, usually from white to black, if she could discover that they were one thirty-second Negro. It was the “one drop” rule. There was a little group of lawyers who would represent people in her office. It was usually in connection with divorce cases where one spouse would leave the other and the other would be pissed off. So they would go to this office and say, “I want my ex reclassified as Negro” because if you look in the records you’ll find whatever. So that’s not very Caribbean.

Even the Caribbean is not that free and easy, either. There’s some way in which New Orleans lives between the culture of North America, the culture of the South, and the culture of the Caribbean. OK. But the color line was the color line.

**Sims:** What about in your personal situation with your family? What were the attitudes floating through your family?

**Lemann:** Well, very, very, very complicated. Because it’s an all-pervasive issue, it’s complicated. It’s complicated on the black side and it’s complicated on the white side. So I’m speaking in shorthand.

My family owned and still owns a plantation in Louisiana. It still operates a plantation outside of a town called Donaldsonville. [Near the Mississippi River between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.] I would say my dad’s attitude, if I had to characterize it in a thumbnail way, would be straight out of Eugene Genovese—paternalism with all the good and bad. You never would hear him saying something “racist.” But there was paternalism. It was fond, but clearly every reference to race was infused with the idea that there was an ordering. There was supposed to be a benign, feudal relationship. That was him.

My mother was from New Jersey. She was more of a standard-issue Northern liberal. How did this manifest itself? When they first moved to New Orleans, my mother decided that they were going to live in an integrated neighborhood and

create an alternate culture to New Orleans. The problem with that is New Orleans has a lot of neighborhoods that look to a Northerner like integrated neighborhoods, but they're really not because the black sections descended from slave quarters. There will be a big house for a white person and a little house for a black person right next to it. So my parents bought a big corner lot with an old, sort of white-elephant house on it on a corner in what read to my mother as an integrated neighborhood. It was on the borderline between a white neighborhood and a black neighborhood in the patchwork pattern of New Orleans. They tore down the house and divided it into four lots. They sold the other three lots, by design, to professors at Tulane because they wanted us to grow up surrounded by academics. All the families put up mid-century modern houses. We lived in this little compound of four houses, us, three academics around us—all of them were deans, I would note, if you're wondering why I'm doing what I'm doing now—and we were in a supposedly integrated neighborhood, which wasn't really integrated. There was some sort of glancing contact. There was a black church on the corner.

The other thing my mother did was insist... In the deep South then, everybody who was white had black servants. Even postal carriers had black servants. My mother had the idea that she would hire as household help students who were from Xavier and Dillard, the historically black universities in New Orleans. She wanted me to be exposed to educated black people who were like us. We always had a few people like that floating through the house. Many of them, as I remember, were involved peripherally in aspects of the Civil Rights Movement. Several of them worked in the community action program and other War on Poverty programs. That was a window into that world.

**Sims:** Did you go to high school in New Orleans?

**Lemann:** I should say my high school, which was a progressive private school, by charter was segregated. They changed the charter when I was in maybe eleventh grade to take out that it was for whites only. But that was pretty late in the game.

**Sims:** There were probably no blacks there by the time you graduated.

**Lemann:** They took a couple of black students in elementary school. But in my class, everybody was white.

**Sims:** So you came to Harvard, which must have been a very different atmosphere. When did you enter Harvard?

**Lemann:** Fall of 1972.

**Sims:** OK, was it all that different?

**Lemann:** The first thing I would say is the Harvard admissions officer who had New Orleans in his portfolio was black. A man named David Evans, who I'm still in touch with, and he's still an admissions officer at Harvard. My parents were Harvard graduates who met at Harvard. David Evans to my memory and knowledge was the first African American to sit at our dinner table. The other thing I remember is when the party was held in the summer of '72 for the people from New Orleans who had been admitted to Harvard, it was roughly speaking two whites and eight blacks. Interaction with Harvard, even from a distance, was a way of integrating my world.

**Sims:** Was Harvard trying to increase its black population back then?

**Lemann:** Oh, yes. There's a book by a sociologist or political scientist named Robert Klitgaard called *Choosing Elites* [Basic Books, 1985] about Harvard admissions during that period. The trend line is that all these schools, Harvard and Yale at least, had a big spike in the late sixties and early seventies. My class was probably more black than five years after me because they retreated somewhat from that. I got there in the middle of a big push to increase the percent of black students. Harvard had a bigger black population by far than my high school, which was zero. It had a noticeable black population. It had a black studies department. As has been noted by many, the black and white

students were ultimately somewhat separate. But nonetheless, it was by far the most integrated atmosphere I'd ever seen.

**Sims:** How did you react to that personally?

**Lemann:** I don't remember reacting in any sort of big dramatic way. I was always intensely interested in race relations. I don't remember becoming more interested when I got to Harvard. Although I do remember thinking, "Well, oh, this is an issue here, too." The time I was in college was the birth moment of neo-conservatism. There were certain people that I knew at Harvard who were operating off this narrative of: "We used to live in an Edenic world with integration and Dr. King's dream and now it's been ruined by affirmative action and black studies." That just didn't map out to my experience at all. I had friends who were disillusioned by what was going on racially, but that wasn't where I was.

**Sims:** Were you aware of the racial conflict in places like Cambridge?

**Lemann:** Oh, yes. I mean I was the editor of the *Harvard Crimson*. We covered all that stuff constantly. Racial issues were a staple of the *Crimson's* coverage, both at Harvard and in covering Boston and Cambridge. It was during busing. It was everywhere.

**Sims:** Let's come back to this because I've got several other questions. So, you've written about [post-Civil War] Reconstruction, the SAT test or intelligence testing, the Great Migration, and you did the book *Out of the Forties* from the Standard Oil photographs. I'm trying to conceive of a narrative arc in your life that includes all of these books.

**Lemann:** Oh, they all have to do with my life. *Out of the Forties* a little less so, but the big three last books all map onto my life very directly. They're all substantially about race. *Redemption* I think of as a prequel to *The Promised Land* essentially. It grew out of something that I came across in the research for *The Promised Land* that I mentioned very briefly in passing. It's essentially an answer to the question: "Why did there have to be a Civil Rights movement at all, when all the rights that the Civil Rights movement fought for existed in 1870?" Certainly for whites in the South, Reconstruction is



always hovering in the background of everything, even now, and certainly when I was growing up.

**Sims:** What about going to Harvard? Did you get into Harvard because of test scores or because of family background?

**Lemann:** I would say three things. One never knows.

**Sims:** It probably didn't hurt that your parents had gone there.

**Lemann:** Oh, no, it certainly didn't. I had three things going for me. One, I was a plausibly good applicant. Two, my parents—well, thirty or forty of my relatives have Harvard degrees. A lot of my relatives have Harvard degrees. My parents met in a Harvard classroom. So I'm sure that had a lot to do with it. And then finally, being from Louisiana I was a sort of diversity candidate.

**Sims:** Did you also have good scores on the SAT or ACT test?

**Lemann:** Yes.

**Sims:** So you're more in Bill Bradley's world than in George Bush's?

**Lemann:** Yes. On the meritocracy, first of all that book [*The Big Test*] is very substantially about race, about the conflict between test scores supposedly creating a paradise of equal opportunity, and race butting up against each other.

**Sims:** I thought one of the most interesting sections of the book was about the creation of the Asian American.

**Lemann:** But where that book comes from is like the African American world. It comes from curiosity as much as experience. I've never written about the world I grew up in, per se. It's kind of the Edmund Wilson "The Wound and the Bow" theory [in which writers find indirect, thematic means of using their childhood experiences, rather than being straightforwardly autobiographical]. It's interesting because I grew up in an atmosphere that was very intellectual and bookish but I didn't know any writers. However, if you cut to now, it's a family of writers. I'm an author, my sister's an author, my wife's an author, my ex-wife's an author, my step-mother is an author, my quasi-cousin or younger-brother Michael Lewis is an author, et cetera. In a stereotyped way, the

female writers tend to write more personal stuff and the male writers tend to extrapolate from our lives and pick another subject to write about.

Meritocracy was a big issue in the culture of my family. And it was certainly a huge issue in the culture of Harvard when I went there. It was just always around in the world I was in.

In addition, significantly, I wasn't all the way in it. That gives me some perspective. Because I grew up in a sort of feudal society in New Orleans, I think I could see it more clearly as an alternate system than people who inhabited the meritocracy entirely.

**Sims:** You were on the cusp of that because your parents and everyone had gone to Harvard and done well—you could see the value in that kind of admissions. I guess you were describing Yale in *The Big Test* and the way the younger George Bush benefited from family connections. You also mentioned that was how FDR went to college. It's not an utterly failed system. It's a system that produced a lot of good brains.

**Lemann:** My frustration with that book is it's really not a book about college admissions and SATs and who gets into college. It uses that as the occasion to talk about something bigger. But when you write about that subject, it's very hard to get the world to see what it's really about.

Having said that, the construct that all these Ivy League schools used to be entirely populated by incompetent frat boy types, and that they are now utterly populated by people who deserve to be there, is way too simple. As you just said, in the old, supposedly unmeritocratic days, they were drawing from a very narrow catchment area but, A., they were fantastically competitive internally, and, B., they produced everybody from FDR to T.S. Eliot. It wasn't as if every single graduate was some guy swilling cocktails at the country club in a John O'Hara novel. There's a tremendous level of self-congratulation and unself-awareness inside today's meritocratic culture.

**Sims:** So this arc that I imagine is one where there are connections to the books that you've done. I was imagining a

general topical connection to something such as social history. I sense a quest in these books where you're getting a piece of various things but there may be a quest for a larger subject. Is there a quest? Is it social history? Or, now that you've mentioned the stereotypical "women go for more personal things" while men deflect onto other things, is there a quest perhaps to write about the world you grew up in?

**Lemann:** It's complicated. I don't think of it as a quest to write about the world I grew up in. I have regular discussions with a lot of people, including my wife, about whether I should write explicitly about the world I grew up in. It's interesting, Michael Lewis, who is certainly a prolific writer, much more than me, has several times sat down and tried to write about New Orleans, and not done it. It's hard. Our reasons are somewhat different. He has on a couple of occasions moved back to New Orleans to write about New Orleans but decided not to.

**Sims:** Is it possible to write about New Orleans if you're not black?

**Lemann:** Oh, yes, sure. Of course. Yes! That would be like saying, "Is it possible to write about New York if you're not white?" It's a city populated by different groups.

My reasons for not wanting to write about it are somewhat off that map. If I were writing something memoiristic, I wouldn't say, "Here is my memoir of growing up in black New Orleans." There's a big shelf of books about New Orleans by white writers that are very good. It would be hard to write a great book about New Orleans that pretends that race doesn't exist. But I can't imagine how you'd do that. The idea that you have to be black to write about New Orleans, I would reject.

New Orleans is what, about 42 percent white? The idea that in any location if you belong to the 42 percent part of the population, you "can't write about it" is untrue on its face.

**Sims:** I was just thinking that after Hurricane Katrina and the focus primarily on what happens to the black community and the underclass in New Orleans, that's where all the heat is.

**Lemann:** The conversation about me is a different conversation. A nutshell version: Where I really come from is 1 percent of New Orleans: Jewish. If I were to write about my own experience, and this is what the constant conversations are about with my wife, it would be about Jewish New Orleans. Which I might do sometime, but the truth is if I did so, it would make my Dad unbelievably uncomfortable. I don't want to inflict that on him.

**Sims:** There have been some books about being Jewish in the South.

**Lemann:** And I think I've read them all.

**Sims:** It seems a very complicated, isolated...

**Lemann:** Very complicated, but I wouldn't say so isolated. Anyway, that's different.

So what do I think of myself as doing? I don't think of myself as doing history or doing social history or whatever. I would like to think that if you had to categorize my books that they are a blend of social history and intellectual history with some element of conventional political history. It's more following my interests. Compared to most of my friends who are nonfiction writers, I tend to start with a theme and then find a story that expresses the theme. Most of my friends start with a story and weave the theme into the story.

### **Start With A Theme And Then Find A Story**

**Sims:** I know you did that with the meritocracy. You were working on the meritocracy for a long time, and then the book comes out about the Big Test. You found the story but first you had the meritocracy. Did that work with *The Promised Land*?

**Lemann:** *The Promised Land* had a long gestation period. It really started in 1980 when I was a reporter for the *Washington Post*. Ronald Reagan was running for president. There was a whole debate about welfare. Reagan himself had criticized welfare throughout his career. So I did a series for the *Post* on the welfare system through the lens of one welfare mother, a

woman in Philadelphia named Mary Manley. I spent quite a good deal of time in Philadelphia—she lived in north Philadelphia. I wrote a series that came out during the campaign. It was meant to be: “How well does the system match the Reagan rhetoric about welfare?”

This gets into a lot of issues. I’ve been interested in developing curriculum here about framing. In framing the story the way I did, I was in a sense buying into a conservative or Washington or white perspective, or policy wonk perspective, in assuming that when you went to an inner-city ghetto neighborhood you were seeing the welfare system at work.

It’s funny. I found this consistently happened to me as a reporter for the *Washington Post*. It had a big effect on me and it’s part of why I left the *Washington Post*. I spent hours and hours and hours with Mary Manley, who was a migrant herself from Virginia, and I asked her all these questions about the welfare system. I went with her to the welfare office. But I always had a nagging sense that I was forcing her into a Procrustean bed because I was operating on this assumption that her life was about welfare. But it wasn’t about welfare. When I finished the story, which I was proud of and all that, I had the feeling I’d done the wrong story. I didn’t frame it as black migration, although that was in my mind. I had a very uncomfortable feeling for a reporter. She always wanted to think of her life as the life of a migrant. And I always wanted to make her think of herself as a welfare mother, which she was. It was an uncomfortable feeling of making her talk about what I wanted her to talk about instead of what she wanted to talk about.

I thought this is really an amazing story because if you go to a place like north Philadelphia, first it’s an all-white neighborhood. In five minutes [snaps his fingers], it becomes an all-black neighborhood. Then in five more minutes [snap], it becomes a depopulated, all poor-black neighborhood. From being an all-black but multi-class and very tightly populated neighborhood, the middle class folks all move out. At the same time, you have all these people moving up from the South. There’s a lot going on demographically and therefore politically. *That’s* the story.

Then in '83 I went to work for the *Atlantic Monthly* and I immediately pitched my editor, Bill Whitworth, on this idea. At that time, the idea was: "Where did the ghetto come from?" How did this happen over this huge series of changes? This was at the height of the underclass debate, now long forgotten but it was a big thing when it was going on in the eighties and nineties. So I was going to write about the ghetto and the underclass and how it happened. Bill wanted me to pick a different site. He was the one who suggested Chicago. In retrospect, I consider that an inspired suggestion.

I started visiting Chicago all the time, just talking to people. I wrote a long piece in *The Atlantic* called "The Origins of the Underclass" [June 1986]. Out of that, I signed a book contract. But it was only after I had signed the book contract that I decided to frame it as a story of migration. That was in '86.

It got reframed from being a welfare story to being a ghetto underclass story to being a migration story. The work on *The Atlantic* stories was helpful, but essentially I started over again.

### **How Do You Combine Narrative And Analysis?**

**Sims:** Were you working full-time on the book for those last four years or so?

**Lemann:** My life was complicated. I was officially a full-time employee of *The Atlantic* and I was writing pieces for *The Atlantic*, partly pieces of the book, particularly the middle Washington section.

**Sims:** So you were able to write the middle section on Washington, which was more of a standard political history of the policy debate?

**Lemann:** I want to push back a little on that, but I'll get to that in a minute.

The logistics in my life were I was living in New York in Pelham working at home. I had the advantage that no one was

seeing what I was doing all day. Whitworth was very interested in the book. I was doing some stuff for the book and other stuff to feed the *Atlantic* beast. Though I was working on the book a lot, I was never able to say, “This is all I’m doing in life.”

**Sims:** What were you going to say about the Washington section?

**Lemann:** To my mind it was more conceptually important than you’re making it sound. Even though I had dropped the construct about making this about welfare and social policy, nonetheless welfare and social policy are always around this set of topics—race and poverty. When I read other journalists’ work on this, either they’d say, “I’m just not going to talk about that stuff at all. I’m just going to take you inside the lives of the characters and that’s all we’re up to.” Or they would say, “We’re going to have a narrative about the characters and then there’s going to be either a foreword or an afterword where I discuss the policy issues in a completely different voice.” An essayistic voice.

What was very important to me and continues to be—it’s the great cause of my career—is in a craft sense, how do you combine narrative and analysis? And not have them separated. It was very important to me to find a way to deal with those themes without breaking out of the construct that this was a big, sweeping narrative history. I was very proud of myself for having found a way to do that. Yes, the scene shifts to Washington but it’s very carefully linked back into Chicago and Mississippi. I want to give you the experience as you’re reading that you’re reading a book about people acting in history. Rather than, the story now stops and we’re going to switch gears and talk about the implications of this in a completely different voice.

Now my editor, Elizabeth Sifton [at Knopf], as in *The Big Test*, sort of forced me at gunpoint to write an afterword, which I did. And I guess I’m glad I did. But it was really, really important to me to find... First of all, I think it was a good story that hadn’t been told very much and it does fit into the other material. But also, it was very important to find a way to put it all under the roof of narrative rather than separating it.

**Sims:** And I think you achieved that. You're telling the story of the people who were creating those policies.

I'm just not that familiar with the history of those Washington policies, so I don't know the difference between what you were doing and what other people were doing. But when you got to the Chicago history, I thought that was brilliant. I grew up in Illinois and went to school in Chicago for a while. Some of the professors I had at the University of Illinois in Urbana were actually Chicago newspapermen. I had heard the stories. This is in the late nineteen-sixties. I'd heard those same stories from them. They had a kind of insider's knowledge. And then you come along and you tell exactly the same story. I thought, "This is insider political history in Chicago." My assumption was that unless you're part of the news culture or the political culture of the time, it was very difficult to see that history.

**Lemann:** I'm flattered that you would say that, but I'm a reporter, so you know, I just got the story. I thought the Washington material was more original than the Chicago material, in the sense that I had stuff that nobody else had. I had more access to the major participants. But anyway, I'm flattered to hear you say that.

### **Casting the Book**

**Sims:** So you're writing this as narrative. What are the biggest challenges in writing narrative about a social migration that involves millions of people?

**Lemann:** Many challenges, obviously. Anybody who tries to do this is just taking a cut at something. There are a couple of issues.

One challenge is putting all the pieces together—making a book that starts in rural Mississippi in the nineteen-forties and winds its way to Chicago and Washington and back to Chicago and so on without it seeming like a pastiche of unrelated material. It's not so visible, what a challenge it is.



Another challenge is finding people who make interesting characters, who go where you want them to go.

Another issue is, do you try to pick statistically typical characters or do you try to pick people who have had unusually interesting lives but are not statistically typical? That's a constant issue in journalism of this kind.

**Sims:** How do you feel you handled that?

**Lemann:** The main character, Ruby [Haynes, *née* Daniels], many have said that it's a fundamental flaw of the book to hold her up as a representative migrant because she's not. I would come back and say I didn't say she was the representative migrant. My own view is it's fine to pick an unrepresentative character as long as you get the context right and make it clear that you're not saying this is what the whole experience was like.

There was a long, long, long process of what I would call casting the book, figuring out who the characters would be.

**Sims:** That issue of choosing characters to represent larger populations is of interest to me. It makes sense to pick representative characters but it also reduces their lives to something that is outside their understanding, and may be unfair. Ruby has a very interesting story and she ends up going back to Clarksdale, which is a nice thing. She turns out OK for this horrific experience. In fact, her children turn out less OK than she is, which follows the statistical pattern. She's close to representing the statistics but you never treat her as a representative. She's just Ruby. This is her life. You've got contrasts with people such as George Hicks. He has a similar background but he works for the Post Office and gets into the middle class. He has a different life. He doesn't move to the suburbs exactly but he does get outside the ghetto.

**Lemann:** There's a little more complexity there because the black population of a place like Chicago increased so quickly that the term "native born" usually means children of migrants. If you were being a social scientist you'd have a more complex picture of it. Nonetheless, I take the point.

In a meaningful way, Ruby nominated herself as the main character. George didn't turn out to be as interesting a character as Ruby. For whatever reason, Ruby was more interesting to talk to for longer and was more cooperative. A lot of people were in and out of the book at different times who could have been characters. Ruby sort of popped out. A lot of the reason was just her. She was such a remarkable person for this kind of exercise, where you're not watching somebody live their life in real time. You're doing retrospect. She had an unbelievable memory. She could remember everything. She could remember every phone number she ever had in her life. Things like that that I can't remember. She'd had an unusually significant and interesting life. And she was unusually good for a person in her seventies with no formal education at just being able to sit down and tell it. Sort of like *All God's Dangers* or something—that book by Ted Rosengarten is like the world's longest oral history interview. It's about a guy who was an organizer of a black sharecroppers' union in the South in the thirties. Ruby just told the story, basically.

**Sims:** And it's so complicated that to me it gives a flavor of what life in the ghetto and the underclass and the projects in Chicago was like. Lots and lots of relatives and some of them getting in trouble, lots of pregnancies, moving from one place to another. I thought, given all the complications of life here, when does anyone have time to think about anything other than the immediate?

**Lemann:** On this issue, a couple things. First of all, there's a very similar issue with *The Big Test* because in effect the main character there is a woman named Molly Munger. In some ways, she's a lot like Ruby. She's a person who emerged from a casting process as the person who you couldn't avoid because she wanted to tell her story. The rap on her is the opposite of the rap on Ruby, which is she's the daughter of one of the richest people in the world. Several reviewers said, "How can you write a book about the meritocracy and make the main character this very wealthy person?" I guess I'd say, one, I never said she was representative, and two, at a subtler level, that's a lot of what the meritocracy is about. In effect, people

from privileged backgrounds getting unbelievably invested in how they perform in this system. When you go to Harvard, you're not finding a lot of poor people. You find upper middle-class people who think of themselves as self-made.

Just a quick story about Ruby. This is taking you through just a tiny bit of the unbelievable complications to get the characters right. In the first version in *The Atlantic*, I used a town called Canton, Mississippi. The way that happened was I was in Chicago. I landed at O'Hare, rented a car, and I was driving to my hotel and listening to a black radio station. They had a community announcement feature. They said, "The Canton, Mississippi, high school class of 1955 is planning its thirtieth reunion. Please call this number." I said, "Wait a minute. I'm in Chicago." So I pulled over to the side of the highway and scribbled down the number and called. I got to know and spend a lot of time with a group of people who were in the Canton, Mississippi, class of 1955. I wrote about them in the piece, went back to Canton, et cetera.

Then I decided, first of all, if you're going to do this book, you've got to write about the Delta, which Canton is not in. And, number two, I didn't make up my mind in advance about who the characters would be, but I wanted somebody in the mix who had been more in the ghetto. Not just all middle class people like George, which is essentially who I was meeting from Canton.

Then I started going to the Delta a lot, driving through it, deciding which town would be the source area for the migrants. I knew Chicago would be the destination. Looking for people in Chicago, looking for people in the Delta. I met a guy named Bennie Gooden, who just recently passed away. He's mentioned in the book. He ran all the public housing in Clarksdale. He got to like the idea of the book, so he sent out the word to all the public housing in Clarksdale that I could go and talk to anybody I wanted to. Senior citizen housing was especially good. Almost everybody had some direct connection to Chicago. I did these long days where I'd go to these housing developments and just interview twenty people in a day who would come through an office or a manager would send me to their apartments. These interviews were a little cut and dried.

I'd say, "Where were you then?" And then I'd do follow up in Chicago.

I met Ruby in one of those long days. We had a sort of OK interview. I then met Connie Daniels, her former daughter-in-law, in Chicago at the Robert Taylor Homes. I had a really good interview with her. I had some follow up questions and I called Ruby to ask her a few questions on the phone.

She said to me, "You know, you're really stupid. When you talk to me, you ask me stupid questions. You ask me all the wrong things. If you really want to know about me, you should come back down here and listen to me tell you about what I think is important in my life." I said, "OK, that sounds good." I basically got on the next plane, went to Clarksdale to her apartment, and I didn't ask questions. I just said, "OK, tell me." She talked for two or three days. That was the spine of that material in the book. That's why I say she was self-nominated as the central character.

**Sims:** When she said you were asking the wrong questions, the lights must have gone on.

**Lemann:** Exactly. It's all variations on the theme of history as an outsider versus history as an insider.

**Sims:** And also getting rid of the problem you had at the *Washington Post* of putting the story on top of the material.

**Lemann:** Yeah, framing, me framing it. The migration frame works better in many ways than the social policy frame.

### **The Way Literary Journalists Do History**

**Sims:** I copied one paragraph from your note on sources, the afterword, the last paragraph in the book actually. You said, "Most of the material in this book comes from my own interviews. Perhaps I'm displaying a reporter's bias here, but it seemed to me that as rich in information about the black migration and its consequences as the archives and published sources were, the memories of the people involved were even richer." [*The Promised Land*, p. 362]

I wrote that out because I see a difference in the way literary journalists do history from the way academic historians tend to do history. Michael Norman expressed it to me. He said historians don't necessarily trust live bodies. They prefer archival records. They consider the live bodies to be terribly messy and horrible to deal with. He said for reporters, the first place we go is to the live bodies because that's where the stories are. That paragraph you wrote seemed to be saying the same thing.

**Lemann:** What Michael says is true. You know, Columbia is the home of oral history. There are some historians who do interviewing. But most historians that I know mistrust interviews. I think it's important for journalists to be introduced to that mistrust because journalists tend to over-trust interviews and not exhibit any skepticism about it. I love to find a blend of archives and interviews.

Part of what was on my mind when I wrote *The Promised Land* was, at least at that moment, almost all of the academic work on the migration focused on the World War One period and not the World War Two and after period that was much bigger. If you're interested in this issue and you're sitting in Chicago in the eighties, these people are there. I was amazed that historians were not going out and talking to them. They preferred to deal with archival material pertaining to people from the first phase of the migration who were dead. There wasn't a lot of work being done on the second, and largest, phase of the migration. Partly because most historians were so uncomfortable going out and doing interviews.

Now Bill Wilson [William Julius Wilson, a sociologist at the University of Chicago from 1972-1996 and now a University Professor at Harvard] had a lot of his crew of young sociologists out doing interviews but it wasn't about migration so much. It was more about social policy and economics.

**Sims:** The word narrative covers a lot of ground. How would you describe a difference in sensibility that you bring to this work from the kind of sensibility that might be brought by a historian?

**Lemann:** You mean an academic historian?

**Sims:** Yes, an academic.

**Lemann:** First of all, many academic historians have little interest or no interest in narrative as a form of professional practice. Read Hayden White: there are a lot of historians who are interested in narrative as a perilous thing whose perils one should expose as a historian. Actually writing narrative history in the upper echelons of the historical profession is coming back a little bit. But what gets you tenure at a major university history department, that's just not it. The career arc is that what gets you professional status as a historian is not political history, military history, biography, all the staples of the journalist-historian.

Most professional historians do not set themselves up as constructing book-length stories, and some historians would even see that as a thing to affirmatively avoid. They're very different worlds, academe and journalism.

Almost all journalists are looking for a story to tell when they do this kind of historical work.

**Sims:** I've been reading a couple books about the writing of history. Someone said writers of journalism who do history—and he mentioned Ida Tarbell—write well but they don't have the training of the academic historians, who tend to look down on them. The public has the opposite view. The public isn't generally interested in history at all, but when it is, the public wants it well written. I think that's true, and a lot of historians do appreciate narrative, and especially if they're in the public history movement and trying to connect. But when I was doing my masters, quantitative historians were coming in and they absolutely distrusted the narrative.

**Lemann:** I want to push back on a couple points about this. First of all, the public historian types, at least the ones I know, their interests are quite different from those of most history-writing journalists. The big fat middle of the journalistic history experience is presidential biography, military history, and that

kind of thing. The public historians have zero interest in that. They think of history writing as a kind of partnership between historians and ordinary people. They are coming out of social history. If you look at the bestseller lists, you don't see a lot of social history on there. Somebody I admire a great deal, Ron Chernow [author of *Alexander Hamilton*, *The House of Morgan*, and *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.*], would have absolutely nothing in common with a public historian. [Public historians] like Julie Ellison [author of *Emerson's Romantic Style*; *Delicate Subjects: Romanticism, Gender and the Ethics of Understanding*; and *Cato's Tears*] or David Scobey [director of the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships], or any of these folks. Or my teacher, Roy Rosenzweig, who's now gone [author of *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park* with Elizabeth Blackmar, and *The Presence of the Past* with David Thelen]. There's just zero overlap in interests because the public historians are onto a different project.

I also think that—I'll repeat what I said before—many journalists who write history would benefit from a little dose of understanding the academic critique of them, as being something other than pure jealousy or lack of interest in writing. In particular, most journalists who do this kind of presidential biography or military history, they are so into the “great man” theory of history that they don't even know there is one and there's been an argument about it for two hundred years. It is assumed that there are these towering figures and history moves because they move it. They tend to be not very good at context.

Academic historians are maybe too much the other way. Several of my friends who are professional historians or academic historians have said that George W. Bush convinced them that there is something to the great man theory of history, even if they don't think he is a great man. The Tolstoyan bias of academic historians [in *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy laid out a theory of history in which the main actors are merely unknowing objects of larger forces] is interesting to think about, and most journalists don't think about it enough.

The ability to exist in a community of peers, to know how to find the literature and react to it, the ability to work with original archival materials, all of those things are very valuable additions to the journalistic toolkit. Too many journalists who write history just say, “I don’t care about any of that stuff.” There’s something that can be gained in the interaction between the two sides.

**Sims:** I’ve read your book twice now, and I was impressed both times with the amount of research that went into it. You said you had four research assistants working on the book. They must have been piling up an incredible amount of information, which you were then synthesizing into the narrative. It had a very close feel to it. I could sense Lyndon Johnson’s situation and emotional state after Kennedy was killed and how he was going to move on his agenda. Johnson strikes me as an enormously interesting character—someone I hated in the 1960s because he was conducting a war, but I didn’t have an appreciation of the social changes that were happening as a direct result of the passage of a few pieces of legislation. It’s a tremendous story. It was all nicely told in a personal way.

Is there a secret to converting that pile of information into a narrative?

**Lemann:** First of all, with respect to the researchers and what they were doing: They were all part time. There wasn’t an army of researchers. They were working in sequence. I would have them compile secondary source background on various subtopics. All of the primary source material I did by myself—that is, every interview and all the archival work I did by myself. They were doing mini-literature reviews on topics.

Research and writing are very closely connected. I research thinking about what I want the finished written product to look like, and how each piece of research would fit into it. I look for things that support what I’m trying to do. There’s a dynamic interaction where I find a piece of research that would change either the concept or the form of the finished product, and then I adjust. I don’t just go get a mountain of material and then sit



down and say, “Now let’s start thinking about what the story looks like.” You have to do that while you’re working.

**Sims:** The mountain would be way too big.

**Lemann:** Yes, and you’d find that a lot of the material you had gathered couldn’t be used in the book. As you can tell from this whole conversation, there were a lot of false starts. A lot of stuff ended up on the cutting room floor. You can’t go do a bunch of interviewing and assume it will all fit together into a seamless book.

### **The Discourse in New York**

**Sims:** I wanted to ask in general if you had any literary models in mind when you were doing this? I know of several books about New York City and the underclass, some after 1991, by Ken Auletta, Susan Sheehan, and Adrian Nicole LeBlanc. Also, has there been any progress that you’ve seen in New York City on race relations in the last twenty years or so? Are the same patterns playing out here that played out in Chicago?

**Lemann:** Speaking anecdotally, not as someone who covers it, New York City is a race relations paradise compared to the Chicago I was writing about in this book. I tend to be an optimistic person. The discourse in New York is very minimally about race today. I’m not saying it’s not an issue, but when the discourse is minimally about race that’s really, really different from when [David] Dinkins [1990-1993] was mayor and when [Rudolph] Giuliani [1994-2001] was mayor and when [Ed] Koch [1978-1989] was mayor. The composition of the city is unbelievably multi-cultural with a remarkably low tension level. Crime is way down. In Harlem at least, there’s almost no block in all of Harlem that is anywhere in the range of the west side of Chicago when I was doing this book. There’s almost no abandoned housing. There’s almost no place where you feel like you wouldn’t walk there by yourself. It’s really different.

**Sims:** Has the middle class stayed in New York City in a way it didn't in Chicago?

**Lemann:** You know, Chicago has changed remarkably since I wrote the book. There's no more Robert Taylor Homes; there's no more Cabrini-Green. A lot of things have changed. I haven't worked here in New York as a reporter on race very much. I'm just giving you more of a resident's impressions. The gentrification story is much more powerful here. Harlem never entirely lost the middle class. Clearly the middle class, in fact the upper class, is back in Harlem, big time. If you look at the real estate ads, there are tons of million-dollar properties for sale in Harlem. If you go to Fort Greene in Brooklyn or even Bedford-Stuyvesant—really, if you have any picture that Bedford-Stuyvesant is a ghetto, you should go there. It's unbelievable how different it is.

**Sims:** So is this a reversal of what it's said was happening in the sixties, where blacks were expanding their territory and driving the whites out, or realtors were, and now it's wealth coming back in and driving poor people out?

**Lemann:** New York is somewhat atypical. That's one reason why I didn't write the book about New York. In New York, think about Bed-Stuy; I'm just going to use that as an example. Robert Kennedy highlighted it. It was the most famous ghetto neighborhood in New York. It would have followed the pattern up to a point, of being white, flipping, becoming black multi-class, then the middle-class left for Queens and points beyond, and it was a poor black neighborhood. But now, the first complication is immigration. It's not all black, and it's certainly not all African American black. It would be a lot of West Indians and Africans and so on. And then a lot of other ethnic groups, and then Buppies [Black Urban Professionals], and then Yuppies. They're all jostling and there's some gentrification. But you don't see a lot of abandoned housing in Bed-Stuy.

**Sims:** So, back to the literary influences. Did you have any literary influences?

**Lemann:** I guess if I had to mention a few things. . . . With Ken's [Auletta] book on the underclass, I liked it but I found it frustrating in two ways. One is he's encountering the people in a social service environment. It's set in some sort of social service delivery place. So the characters are at a remove. They're clients. You don't get a feeling of their homes and their lives, and as independent people. And the second is the one I mentioned, the policy stuff is kept for an afterword. Tony Lukas's book, *Common Ground*, was much on my mind. I was reading that. It came out right as I was working on this material. [Published in 1985] I'm a 98 percent admirer of the book. The 2 percent that I didn't admire was I thought that he had the narrative camera in so tight that there was very little way for him to discuss the larger issues. He tried to do it through the idea of salting in five profiles of people, which are very well written, but I wanted to find a way to say more analytically than he was able to in that book.

Beyond that, I grew up reading all the great New Journalism stuff, voraciously. I read all the standard Chicago literature. There were a lot of things I came across. A book I totally loved, number one on the list of things I didn't know about, was *Black Metropolis* by Sinclair Drake and Horace Cayton [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1945]. That's just a great book from the forties. It's a huge book about everything about black Chicago.

**Sims:** What else should I know about *The Promised Land*?

**Lemann:** Boy, I feel like I've covered the waterfront pretty well.

Methodologically, if you will, the question I spend my whole writing life struggling with is, "Can you successfully start with a theme and turn it into a narrative without sounding too schematic? Can it be made to live and breathe as a story? Within the story, can you use the narrative form in ways that let you be analytical?" I hope the answer is yes. But those are the kinds of things I worry about.

**Sims:** What's next? Do you have a new project?

**Lemann:** My situation now is that I cannot do this kind of work while doing this job [as dean]. *Redemption* is shorter. It's totally from archives because it's set in a time when everybody's dead. And I had finished all the research for that before I started this job. It still was a little hard to get the writing done.

I'm thinking, but it awaits my completing my tour of duty here. And then I hope to go back into the fray. I'm thinking about a couple things in a vague way. When I talk about books at this stage, it doesn't sound like a book even because, as I say, I start with a topic I'm interested in. Then I find the story inside of it.