

## In Step with Indiana Authors... Featuring an Interview with Scott Russell Sanders

By: Jacob Eubanks

**S**cott Russell Sanders is a Distinguished Professor of English at Indiana University and the award winning author of over twenty books. Scott's work has received support from numerous sources including the National Endowment for the Arts, The Lilly Endowment, The Indiana Arts Commission and The Guggenheim Memorial.

Scott was born in 1945 in Memphis, Tennessee. In 1951, his family moved to a military arsenal in Ohio for several years before his family moved to a nearby farm. He was raised by a working father and a stay-at-home mom and he has two siblings: an older sister and a younger brother. Scott attributes much to his mother, who well into her eighties painted, taught dance and aerobic classes, and was an avid reader and gardener. In 1963, Scott graduated from high school in Ohio and was accepted into Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. Scott set out to study physics at Brown, but by his 1967 graduation, he had switched to English. In 1967 he married his wife Ruth and the couple traveled to Cambridge, England where Scott would continue his studies. Scott received his Ph.D. in English from Cambridge in 1971. In the summer of 1971, Scott accepted a teaching position at Indiana University in Bloomington, where he continues to teach and write today.

Scott Russell Sanders has established himself as one of the most accessible writers of essays and short stories and he has written several novels and children's books. Scott's work often touches on interrelated themes such as the importance of place to human beings, the degradation of the natural world, the challenges of life, and the complex inner workings of family. He has received numerous awards and honors including: the Lannan Literary Award, the Associated Writing Programs Award in Creative Nonfiction, the Great Lakes Book Award, the Kenyon Review Literary Award, and the John Burroughs Essay Award. In 2006 his spiritual mem-

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oir, *A Private History of Awe*, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and he was named one of five inaugural recipients of the Indiana Humanities Award. The Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature recently named him the 2009 winner of the Mark Twain Award. Past recipients include such notable authors as Toni Morrison, Ray Bradbury and Gwendolyn Brooks. Scott's most recent work, *A Conversationist Manifesto*, was released in May 2009 by Indiana University Press.

I recently conducted the following interview with Scott Russell Sanders. The questions I posed are in bold-faced type and are followed by his responses.

**When did you know you wanted to be a writer?**

Like most children who love to read, I sometimes dreamed of writing books of my own when I grew up. But mainly I dreamed of becoming a scientist, so I could learn how the universe works. That vision guided me until midway through my college years, when, for a number of reasons, I turned away from the study of physics and took up the study of literature. Reading modern fiction—William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Flannery O'Connor, D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, E. M. Forster, Joseph Conrad—made me want to try my hand at making stories. I wanted to summon up whole worlds and dive into the minds of characters the way those writers did.

**What is your method and approach to writing?**

I never took any creative writing classes, so I had no idea how to proceed, except by imitating the work of writers whom I admired. Although that's a slow method, it has served me well, because it taught me to read carefully and observe closely, and it helped me avoid the formulas that are often taught in writing workshops. When I started out, I didn't know any writers, or even any aspiring

writers, so I worked in isolation. The only person I ever showed my fiction to was my wife, and she is still my first reader. Today, even though I know a good many writers, I don't like to impose on them, so I rarely send my work to them before I submit it to an editor. When I began writing seriously, I fell into the habit of rising early in the morning to work, the way a farmer rises early to care for animals or to cultivate the land. I also formed the habit of continually revising, sentence by sentence, as I compose a work, instead of waiting to revise until I've finished a complete draft. This, too, makes for slow going, but I need to feel a rightness of sound and rhythm and voice in my prose, line by line, in order to proceed through a piece.

**Were there ever any experiences, writing mentors or inspirational people who encouraged your writing or your becoming a writer?**

I've written in several of my books—especially in *The Country of Language* and *A Private History of Awe*—about people and experiences that have inspired me. My mother was an avid reader; she was fascinated by words; she was endlessly curious. And she encouraged all of those passions in me. Although my father was not much interested in books, he was a great natural storyteller. At the country high school I attended, I had the good fortune of taking several courses from a teacher named Eugene Fahnert who conveyed a relish for literature, and who recognized promise in my apprentice writings. In college I had another influential teacher, a mathematician and philosopher named George Morgan, who opened my mind to the larger questions about human existence, and who persuaded me to think matters through for myself rather than to accept prepackaged ideas. And of course I've been influenced by nearly every book I've ever read. If I had to name a handful of the most influential writers, I would mention Thoreau, Whitman, Thomas Merton, Wallace Stegner, and Wendell Berry.

**You studied physics and english at Brown University. English has played a large role in your life and writing, but has your education in physics played a similar role?**

My formal study of physics, along with my continued reading in fields such as biology, ecology, and

cosmology, gave me an appreciation for the way science works, and for the story of the universe revealed by science. This universe story, which is constantly being revised and refined as we gain new insights, seems to me the greatest collaborative achievement of humankind. At the same time, I realize that crucial dimensions of our experience—including the arts, consciousness, and the elusive realm of spirit—do not lend themselves to scientific understanding. So while I honor science, and follow the latest discoveries with an amateur's passion, I also believe that we need other modes of knowledge, such as literature, if we are to fully understand our lives.

**Spirituality and the human connection to place are a constant theme in your work. Your book, *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, examines the need for a rich spiritual connection to place. Where does your motivation come from and why do you choose to write upon such themes?**

I've written about the value of commitment to place, in *Staying Put* and elsewhere, because I see how much damage results from our incessant mobility. The pressure of casual, constant motion tears families apart, erodes communities, and devastates landscapes. If you live in place with affection and deep knowledge, you're woven into a natural as well as a human fabric, and you can help care for that fabric. By contrast, a person who lacks any long-term connection to place, who drifts about looking for thrills or bigger paychecks or fancier scenery, is likely to be a parasite rather than a steward.

**You've written over twenty books in a broad juxtaposition of writing formats and styles. Although you are well known for your novels, collections of stories and works of personal non-fiction, it's interesting that you've also written several children's books. How did you become interested in writing a children's book?**

I began writing for children at the invitation of an editor who had read *Wilderness Plots*, one of my collections of tales for adults. In response to his invitation, I wrote *Hear the Wind Blow*, made up of stories inspired by classic American folksongs, such as "John Henry" and "Yankee Doodle."



Next, I wrote a series of five books about life on the American frontier, focusing on the region I know best, the Ohio Valley. The first two books in that series, *Aurora Means Dawn* and *Warm as Wool*, were adapted from tales in *Wilderness Plots*. After falling out of print, all three of those titles have recently been reprinted by the Wooster Book Company. I had to abandon the historical tales after my editor repeatedly switched publishing houses. So I began working with a new editor at National Geographic, on a series of books about children exploring nature. I had to abandon that series after the first two titles appeared—*Meeting Trees* and *Crawdad Creek*—because once more my editor moved on. Eventually I grew weary of following editors as they played musical chairs among publishers, and I gave up writing for children.

### **What have libraries meant to you in your life?**

My mother read aloud to me when I was a child, even after I learned to read at the age of four from my older sister. We owned few books ourselves—a dictionary, several Bibles, an encyclopedia, some Reader's Digest condensed novels—but my mother took us every week to the nearest public library, and I always came home with a stack. The library was my doorway to the great world. I pored over maps there, leafed through magazines, and read hundreds upon hundreds of books, from all fields and ages and regions. It always seemed to me a miracle that so much knowledge had been gathered into a single building, and that it had been made available to me, or to anybody, free of charge. When I went off to college and began using a library that housed millions of volumes, I realized how small that local library actually was; and yet in my memory it still seems huge. I've spent the past three decades teaching at Indiana University, which possesses one of the nations—indeed one of the worlds—great research libraries. And the university's Lilly Library houses countless treasures, including literary manuscripts, first editions, puzzles, illustrations, and other rarities. Entering any of these libraries, I feel myself a part of the age-old human endeavor to learn from the past, add new discoveries, and pass on knowledge to the future.

**You have a book due out in 2009, *A Conservationist Manifesto*. As most of our readers are librarians across the state of Indiana, could you please**

### **tell us a little bit about this exciting new work?**

In America today, merchants and mass media, politicians and pundits, agree in defining us as consumers, as if the purpose of life were to devour the world rather than to savor and preserve it. What I propose instead is that we imagine ourselves as conservers, as stewards of the earth's bounty and beauty. However appealing consumerism may be to our egos, and however profitable it may be for business, it's ruinous for our planet, our communities, and our souls. The book argues that a conservation ethic is crucial to addressing such current concerns as the disruption of global climate, the tattering of the ozone layer, the clear-cutting of forests, the poisoning of lakes by acid rain, the collapse of ocean fisheries, the extinction of species, the looming shortages of oil and fresh water, and the spread of famine and epidemic disease. In *A Conservationist Manifesto*, I seek to extend into our own time the tradition of thought we associate with such visionaries as Rachel Carson, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, and Henry David Thoreau. I also seek to honor and uphold the heritage of restraint we can trace back through the frugal habits of the Depression and wartime rationing, through agrarian thrift and frontier ingenuity and the prudent advice of Poor Richard's Almanack; back through the Quakers and Puritans, with their emphasis on material simplicity; and even farther back to the indigenous people who inhabited this continent before it was called America. I want to show that the practice of conservation is our wisest and surest way of caring for our neighbors, for this marvelous planet, and for future generations.

### **Biography: Jacob Eubanks**

Jacob Eubanks is a Reference & Instruction Librarian at Indiana State University's Cunningham Library. Jacob holds a Master of Library Science from Emporia State University and Bachelor degrees in English Literature and Theatre & Film from the University of Kansas. You can reach Jacob at [jeubanks1@isugw.indstate.edu](mailto:jeubanks1@isugw.indstate.edu).