The rest of the interview follows with Gordon Johnston about his new collection of short stories, *Seven Islands of the Ocmulgee: River Stories*.

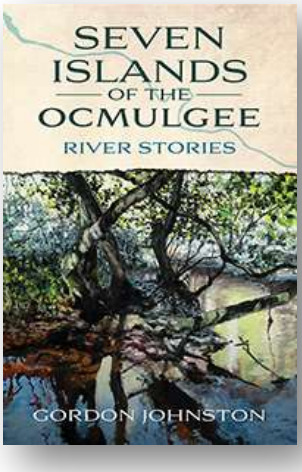

Photo of author by John Legg

RS: Were both of your parents from the South?

GJ: My father was from Rock Hill, South Carolina. That was a mill city, the mill-town part of Rock Hill that he grew up in. His father worked in a bleachery there attached to a mill.

But although he grew up in Rock Hill, my father as a boy had a milk cow. His family had a triple lot, and they grew a huge garden. It was a small farm in the city, basically. They raised their own apples, they canned, and had chickens. My dad was a city kid in name only.

My mother grew up outside Charlotte (N.C.). The farm she grew up on in Mecklenburg County – I think it's within the city limits of Charlotte now. Both my parents were familiar with feeding and plucking chickens and gathering eggs and that kind of thing.

In Warner Robins, we had a huge garden at our house, and we also had a truck garden out in what was then the country, in Bonaire. Our land had a pond on it. I was definitely conscious of coming from country people. I've always been most comfortable with people who are involved in the landscape, raising a lot of what they eat, doing the canning and pickling.

RS: There usually is a lot at stake in the interactions that these characters have with one another, and with the river. Is that on-target, or do you see it differently?

GJ: I do think there is a lot at stake in most of these stories. The title of the book is a reference to the Seven Islands section of the Ocmulgee, which is on the northern part of the river.

That reach of the river is really interesting. I don't know how they counted the islands when they named it – if you count everything up there, there's a couple dozen, if you only count the major ones, there's three or four – but they call it the Seven Islands section.

The seven stories in the book – each story is a kind of island. You've got an individual person who is a bit isolated, maybe a little cut off from the world, each with a different way they see the river. The island motif accentuated that sense that those narrators, they're all in crisis in some way – not always a dreadful crisis.

Peavey in "The Only Place to Start From" is a grocery store manager; how big of a crisis is it to have one of your shopping carts sunk down in the river? (laughing). *He* thinks it's a crisis.

As he meets a strange boy and starts to interact with him, it's gradually dawning on Peavey that there are moments of initiation in the world that are important to younger people. There is such a thing as a crisis of identity.

Peavey ends up in a place in the story where he's started stepping away from himself and trying to understand this kid, who isn't Muscogee, but who is sort of playing at being Muscogee. This young person clearly needs a boost into adulthood, and he's reaching for something ceremonial, something with a touch of myth in it, that his own capitalist-centered culture can't give him.

I don't think Peavey understands all that at the end of the story, but he moves from that sense of solving his own minor problem, through a process, coming to sense John Mark's problems. And all the stories in the book, to some extent, are about that – seeing in larger terms, beyond your own self.

In "Seven Islands," when Rea finds the kid on the river, she has to make decisions. She's got her own personal sense of crisis, but then she finds Sam, who has problems he can't handle, and his problems become hers. They also give her an unexpected means of coming to terms with her father's memory.

So, I do think there's a good bit at stake in each of the stories.

RS: In that first story with Peavey, can you say more about what the character of John Mark is seeking, and his ethnicity?

GJ: The story is not as specific as it could be about his ethnicity. I wanted to leave that a little ambiguous, partly because the whole story is filtered through Peavey's perspective. And Peavey is not so sure how to understand John Mark or what to make of him.

Peavey wants to believe the boy is Native. And then of course, when [Peavey] slips through the fence and he's in the housing project next door, that kind of changes his perspective on it.

The boy is not Native. I didn't see him as Native. I saw him as wishing to be. The books he's kind of borrowed – he's read as much of the record of the people who lived at the Ocmulgee Mounds as he can. Lacking a deep root and a sense of personal family history himself, he's just sort of glommed on to that history that he's read about.

So, he's trying to build something like the Green Corn ceremony fire that the Muscogee people used to build at the Ocmulgee mounds, and that archaeologists and historians think goes back to Mississippian mound-building culture.

John Mark is not Muscogee. I do hope that comes across in the story.

At one point, the superintendent of the park tells Peavey fairly directly that the boy would like to be Muscogee or Mississippian, but he isn't. And the lifeways that John Mark is practicing are not contemporary Muscogee traditions. He imitates what he's read in the books by Charles Hudson and others that he's taken from the bookshop at the park.

RS: Even so, it seems like a respectful, authentic connection he's seeking to that culture.

GJ: I hope it is. I don't think Peavey has loads of respect for the Native, because he doesn't understand what he's looking at when he's at the park. But he does have sympathy with the boy – with John Mark's wish to connect to a sustained, place-based human history.

I think a lot of the reverence that I feel for the riverscape around the Ocmulgee Mounds kind of filters through John Mark.

You know, it's a dicey thing to write about the history of the people who were forcibly removed from the place. I'm painfully conscious of being one of the "English" who benefitted from Muscogee dispossession. I wanted to be respectful of that dispossession and suggest the power that old Native culture had to ground a life and center it. I'll let readers decide whether I've been respectful enough.

Most of the book's characters, in coming to the river, expect one thing, and discover something else. I don't think John Mark is alone in having that desire for a longer human history to connect to than the one he's culturally entitled to.

Rea feels the same way in "Seven Islands." Rea's father, with his pawnshop, the way he reads the journals from the de Soto expedition, his fondness for the river and his vulnerability to

artifacts that come out of it – he is both mesmerized by the place and awed by ongoing human subsistence in it. Rea struggles with how alcohol can drown her father's ability to parent her, but not his awe for the human history of the Ocmulgee.

Throughout the stories, people come *back* to the river; they sense a deeper history there, a deeper natural and ecological history, a human history that reaches back before their own. They feel small against the backdrop of that history, but it's a pleasing smallness, a reassuring smallness rather than one that is intimidating. I hope that comes across in most of the stories.

RS: In "Skin Trade," with Merlinda coming back to Macon to sell her aunt's house, how do you see the river figuring in that story?

GJ: That's the oldest of the stories in the book. I had written a draft of that story in the 1990s, when I was just starting to write seriously. I was never completely pleased with it. I came back to that story as I was trying to finish *Seven Islands of the Ocmulgee*, when I was a little stuck trying to figure out the final arrangement of the stories.

The book, in draft, was a collection of more stories. Once I took a couple out, I began to see which ones were essential. But a collection of the "essentials" was too short, so I went back to that Merlinda story, and realized what was really missing from that story was Merlinda's repressed positive memories of Macon, all of which connected to the Ocmulgee.

In the story, as a teenager, Merlinda pretty much has to get out of town. She's being victimized, she's on the brink of being abused sexually by a stepbrother. Her mother clearly is not going to protect her from that.

She ends up escaping Macon as a runaway. She's glad she's gotten away from it, all those years she spends in Chicago. But when she comes back, after unexpectedly inheriting her aunt's house, she finds she has these liminal positive memories of the place, of the levee that her aunt's property backs up to.

She remembers being in the Ocmulgee, swimming around off a sandbar not too far from her aunt's house. The river and her aunt's place kind of redeem her memory of Macon. For the first time, she feels she has a home to return to, and she's not expecting that.

That dawns on her the more time she spends in town. When she's posing for that art class, the sunlight coming through those glass walls, the rainstorms – there's a deeper memory of the place

that comes back to her. It's a memory from before she got the scars that made her leave in the first place.

The imagery is of the water cycle – water moving in its journey from sea to raincloud to runoff to river and back to sea. Macon ends up being the place Merlinda was taken up from and that she finally falls back home to.

In the last story in the book, "Going to Water on Wise Creek," the phrase "going to water" is a reference to a Native tradition of every morning getting up and doing a sort of communal cleansing at the river. I think that idea of going to water permeates the whole book.

That tradition is in the background of a lot of the stories. Merlinda goes by these two different names because she's a call girl. She's "Vanessa" professionally, and then she's Merlinda back in Macon. As the story progresses, she's increasingly Merlinda and less often Vanessa, kind of coming back to her original self, to her original wellspring.

In coming back to the river, she remembers her cousin Odis with his homemade plywood boat, poling around on the river, picking the blackberries, watching the deer from a distance. It's almost like she's washing some of the years off, washing off some of the grimier parts of her experience in Chicago, and, before that, in Macon, kind of washing that away.

Cleansing happens in several of the stories. Rea goes to the river to relieve herself of some of the guilt of losing her father's pawn shop. She fills in as a kind of protecter for the boy, partly out of a sense that she hasn't risen to the task of saving her dad's pawnshop, and partly out of a consciousness that maybe she could be something of the parent, for a few minutes or an afternoon, that her father wasn't.

You can see how that ties in to "going to water," to rinsing away your regrets, the past, coming clean to a new day.

RS: Do you believe that rivers have real power to do things like wash away, restore, rejuvenate, redeem? Is it all symbolic, or can it be real within a person?

GJ: I think it's both. One of the early stories is a story of river baptism, "Burying Ground." The term "burying ground" sounds like a name for a cemetery, but that title is a reference to the African American tradition of the baptismal grounds where you're buried in the water and you're raised out of it, to kind of walk in newness of life. That's what baptism is in that tradition.

There's a lot of southern symbolic tradition in river baptisms. There's the old idea that your sins won't be washed away unless you're baptized in water with a current. That was kind of a commonplace among the old Baptists. They stuck with the tradition for a long time. It was symbolic, but there were physical conditions that had to be present for the sacrament to be valid. There's not a lot of river baptism going on now – not much sense of sacredness abiding in an actual physical place. It's entirely symbolic now, and an indoor ceremony.

Yesterday, I was on the Ocmulgee up above Highway 83 for a little while in the morning. I paddled upstream with a friend of mine, and we got to a little rock shelf along the right bank. We paddled and fished a little bit. We caught a few yellowbellies (perch).

But then we pulled up on that little shelf, and I got in the river for the first time this year. It's cool water in May. That sensation of floating, being held up, and that sensation you have on a river with a decent current that you have to hold on to something, or you're gonna drift away – there is an active agency that water has.

When it's water on a sunny day like yesterday, it does seem to me that there's something real in it – that sense of buoyancy, that sense of lightness, being held by the current. It's a welcome sensation to me. And I think the characters in some of those stories feel that, too.

When we think of a transformation in our lives, we really want to detect that transformation physically, with our senses. As much as we want to feel it in an interior way, we need outward signs, too, bodily signs. I think rivers can really deliver these signs.

You know, the birds nesting under the eaves of the Highway 83 bridge that I saw yesterday, those bank swallows that build those mud nests up under the eaves – they raise their kids in those little bottles of mud. The nests are underneath the roadbed, but they're high over the river – lowly and raised up at the same time. You can stand on the bridge and watch birds fly below your feet, up- and downstream, feeding their chicks.

It's strange and beautiful, with all the wildlife along rivers, the transparency of the river when it's been a while since it has rained – a clean, quick clarity. The way the river accepts all these other currents into its larger body. There's a reason that rivers have such mythical power to us.

RS: What about "A Ferry and Four Keeper Holes"? You could say it's probably the strangest chapter. What's going on there?

GJ: That was one of the harder stories to put together. I had several very short stories that I really enjoyed, partly because the characters and action in them surprised me. I tried placing these short pieces at intervals between longer stories, sort of like shallow, active shoals between the deeper, wider bends of those longer narratives, but that didn't work well rhythmically.

One day, I took all those shorter pieces out and put them together in one stack. And then it occurred to me that maybe that's what they were trying to be, maybe those shorter pieces were trying to coalesce into a single whole. So, I rearranged them until I found a pattern that I liked.

That piece about the ferry – I had read a lot about de Soto's jaunt through Georgia. He came through here around Easter time, showed up at the Lamar Mounds, the most recently built mounds in the Ocmulgee complex.

He raised a cross on one of the Lamar mounds, and he sort of lectured the people about Christianity and did what he always did – demanded food and porters.

Rangel was a member of the de Soto expedition. You can find his name in the D'Elvas narrative of the expedition. Rangel died when he fell off his horse into Echeconnee Creek, which is a tributary of the Ocmulgee. He was wearing his armor and couldn't stand back up. It's not a very deep creek and the current isn't very strong, but the banks are steep, and his armor was heavy.

By the time the expedition realized that he was missing, he had drowned. There's an account of this in the de Soto expedition chronicles. There's not much about Rangel – nothing about him playing the guitar.

But he came to me in some bad dreams after I had been thinking about de Soto's atrocities, his use of these incredible dogs that were trained to run down and dismember people. They were a weapon of war – Spanish mastiffs that could weight more than two hundred pounds. He used them in a really fear inspiring way against the native peoples.

There aren't any of those dogs in the story; there's only that ghostly figure who rises out of the river and is returned to it only to rise out of it again. But in the back of my mind, I think Rangel in that ghost story is paying for the sins of the expedition he was part of.

He's a bit of a monster among other monsters and ghosts in that cycle of stories. Rivers always have their ghost stories and monster stories. The Muscogee told tales of the water panther and the flying, snake-like *uktena*.

If you talk to locals from these communities along the river, you might hear a story of a headless woman who haunts the river-left bank above where the mill used to be in the Seven Islands section. So, I wanted to weave at least a few ghostly stories into the fabric of the book. It seemed untrue to the folklife of the Ocmulgee not to.

The collection also needed a ferry story, because there were a lot of ferries on the Ocmulgee; even up to the 1950s and 60s, there were still ferries delivering cars from bank to bank, before all the bridges got built. Communities and stories coalesced around these crossing points.

A ferry goes back and forth in a steady recurrence, and the mini-stories that make up that larger story are about recurrences to some extent, too. And they're about transitions, moments of passage between one state or attitude and another.

RS: You mentioned "recur" or "recurrence," which I guess has the same root as "current."

GJ: I hadn't thought of that before I used the word. That's right. You know, a "keeper hole" is a place on the river where it goes over a drop, and if the current is fast enough and there's enough water, it forms a circular current there. It's also known as a hydraulic or souse hole.

In whitewater canoeing and kayaking, you do not want to get stuck in a keeper hole. It will catch your boat; it will force it under. The boat will come back up, and the current will catch it and force it under again. You're like a sock in a washing machine. It's a dangerous place on a river.

The keeper holes in "A Ferry and Four Keeper Holes" were moments in the characters' lives where they enter these recurrences, or they're kind of stuck in a recurrence.

The character Tell, the sniper who comes back from the war and just kind of sits there on the river at the place where the Towaliga and the Ocmulgee meet, with his boat just turning there where the currents join, he's sort of caught in his experience as a sniper and trying to come to terms with that, so he can move forward with his life.

But really, he's right back where he started out before he went to the war. He's finding it really difficult to break free of his past. So, there is that kind of recurrence, that kind of keeper hole.

Overall, I do hope the stories get across how much varied human experience there is of the river; it doesn't play this role for everybody, but there are folks who have got the watershed in their bloodstream, more or less; they *have* to do something about the Ocmulgee.

RS: What discoveries did you have in writing about the river, human nature, yourself?

GJ: Writing fiction is kind of a strange thing. What I do is get up early, and I have these voices in my mind, and I just listen and kind of transcribe. On a good day, that's how it happens.

It's not always so simple. Sometimes you have to work at it. But on a good day, you listen, and you get down all you can.

The more you get down, the more clearly you start to understand the characters. You start hearing them more precisely. They speak for themselves. They start to act for themselves and to do these interesting and unexpected things.

One of the thrills about writing, to me, is that you don't know what's going to happen. To some extent, you can try to plan. But I've always found in my fiction writing that the more I try to outline a story and decide what I'm going to make happen next, the less likely that is to actually happen. You know, the best-laid plans… (laughing).

The story seems to have a will of its own, an urge and a current of its own. You just end up following that. That's where a lot of the discoveries come in, the surprises that the story brings.

If you had asked me before I started working on the book whether I'd attempt to write a story involving an African American baptism, I would have said, "Absolutely not. That's not my tradition. That's not my story to tell."

And yet, as I was working on the book and doing research, I found these accounts of oral traditions about baptisms on the river. I was really drawn to them.

Writing the book let me – not *enter* that experience – but *observe* really closely that experience as it unfolded in the accounts that I had read. Scenes came to mind, vividly. Those were some delightful surprises, and really humbling.

Or writing about Merlinda in "Skin Trade" – I'm obviously not a female, and I've never been a call girl…

RS: I'll take your word for it.

GJ: These experiences that are pretty far afield of my own – I think all of us sometimes in our lives have the desire to live another life. Not just because we want to get away from our own, but because we'd like to know what the experience of living is like for someone different from ourselves. To gain some depth of field in human experience.

Some of the stories came to me in such a way that I felt that kind of experience was being offered to me, an experience utterly "other" from my own. I really appreciated those surprises.

The fiction/non-fiction piece at the end of the book, "Going to Water on Wise Creek," that reads like an essay – until I wrote that, I don't think I fully understood the gravitational pull that the river had for me. Writing in third person to describe how I got on the river in the first place gave me a kind of critical distance. It helped me understand a little better why the river has such a power over me, and why it's such a draw for me.

RS: “Second Sight” is another story where things get kind of weird, in an interesting way. I had a sense of the river taking away from people at times, along with the positive impacts that the river can have.

GJ: I think you’re exactly right. One of the things that story had to work out for me was that the river gives, and often in this collection, it is giving. But it takes away, too.

Any time you put your keel to a current, you are taking a considerable chance. You’re giving yourself up to that flow, to whatever log jam you’re gonna run into, or whatever cottonmouth moccasin, or whoever might be hanging out under the bridge just downstream. Many of the excitements of a river are dangers.

In that story, the kayaker is on the water just for pleasure. Then he encounters one of these dangers. He whacks his head, and it alters the way he sees, in such a way that he is losing depth perception, and he’s seeing everything in a sort of monochromatic black and white.

He can’t read the river well. And he’s kind of beside himself, losing that sense that we rely on the most and that we probably take for granted more than any of our other senses – the sense of sight.

I wanted to be true to that kayaker’s experience of it. That was a strange story. That story came to me exactly the way it’s written. I didn’t add characters or subtract characters. It was one of the quickest stories to write; it felt real, and it felt right.

The mysterious help the kayaker gets – maybe he’s being mystically helped, or maybe his head just has long enough to adjust and recover. There’s a sense of mystery in the story that I enjoyed. There was as much a sense of mystery in the writing of it, as there probably is in reading it.

The woman there under the bridge, fishing – she’s a figure that I’ve seen often on rivers and bodies of water since I was a kid. But she takes on a kind of prominence there because of the urgency of the situation. She’s a pretty ordinary person in most of what she does and says, and yet, because of the situation the kayaker is in, she takes on a kind of mystical significance. I wasn’t trying to write it that way. But reading the story after it had cooled off a little bit, that’s how it struck me.

RS: She's a person whom people would underestimate, not see any potential for specialness. But it's there in her, a kind of power that people wouldn't expect. Is that right?

GJ: I think so. She's interesting because she is also grounded there. He's a kayaker. Kayakers get on the river, and they go fast. They're "boofing" and surfing and finding exciting waves. Their sense of the whole river is usually kind of limited to the thrill they're looking for from a given rapid.

But the woman projects this sense that she's there often, drawing sustenance from the water. She *knows* the place. Her sense of the place informs the advice she gives him. She gives that simple, grounded sense of the place that they're both in, but that is much more present to her than to him.

RS: The concluding story you mentioned, "Going to Water on Wise Creek," struck me as maybe the most autobiographical piece in the book.

GJ: You're correct that it's the most autobiographical piece. It's the last piece, and in some ways, it serves as a kind of afterword.

There isn't a lot of autobiographical content in the other stories. But what gave rise to the book were my first-hand experiences on the Ocmulgee.

Before I started working on the book, I had paddled the whole river. I canoed it from up around Jackson, Georgia, all the way down to the Forks, where the Oconee and the Ocmulgee meet and make the Altamaha, and I'd paddled the Altamaha to Darien.

It just seemed to me that I had to include at the book's end a narrative of the journey that led up to the stories – especially how difficult that journey was to undertake when I did it. It was difficult to find the put-ins and take-outs, places where you could launch a canoe.

The upper Ocmulgee is beautiful and rocky, but you can't simply park along a Forest Service road and go get on the river, which has very steep wooded banks. It was a matter of finding places that had decent access; "Going to Water on Wise Creek" describes that search.

It also covers the sense in which, when you set off to float the river, you're going back in human time. You're stepping away from your civilized area and your nicely mowed lawns.

And you're risking those Forest Service roads, which, if there's been a recent rainstorm, may get you stuck up to your axles. The roads aren't mapped very well. Finding your way to the river by employing some old trial-and-error human exploration skills, instead of counting on your GPS – all those elements are operative in that piece.

RS: One of the lines in that story reads, "These misfortunes are rare, but when they happen they hurt for years." That experience of seeing a change to the natural environment that can "hurt for years" resonated with me. What do you mean in that passage?

GJ: Well, it's a reference to how suddenly and sort of drastically the landscape on that part of the Ocmulgee can change. The area in the story is mostly Oconee National Forest [that] borders the Ocmulgee.

There was a lot of timber harvesting that took place between the time I started going up there, and the time when I was making repeat trips. What was a shaded, dappled, beautiful road, where you often had to stop for turtles crossing the ruts on their nesting journeys – that beautiful canopy was all felled, in a matter of about a year or a year-and-a-half.

So, that's the pain that lasts – all those trees wiped out. Then you watch the scarified hillsides grow up in brush first, and then the process of succession takes place. It's growing back up now, slowly. That lost shade is one of the pains I had in mind.

Another is the difficulty of access; and this is an issue the national park would address. If there is a national park established along the Ocmulgee, access to the river will be pretty much guaranteed. (See my report on the proposed national park and preserve).

There were some places on the upper river that were ideal for launching, but they were private property at the time, and I always respected that. Even if it was a matter of just jogging my kayak across fifty yards of private property, if a place was posted, I stayed off it.

Some of those places that were posted have now opened up – Popper's Landing, for example. So, it's not only a matter of there being a pain of loss there. In some places, there's better access to the river now, and that's progress.

RS: I found that I wanted a lot of the stories to continue, to see what happens next with the characters. Why do you think the stories stop where they do?

GJ: I think it's really good news that you want to know more. Thanks for saying that.

Explaining why they end up where they do, that's very difficult. It's an intuitive kind of closure that comes about. That's one of the things I struggle with as a writer. It takes me many drafts to put together a short story, usually, and what changes most often is the ending.

There are exceptions to that. I talked about "Second Sight" and how quickly that story came to me. The ferry story about Rangel came to me pretty quickly. But each of the longer stories took the better part of a year to write, and rewrite.

With "The Only Place to Start From," I think that is mostly Peavey's story. When he no longer has that incredible shortness of patience with John Mark, when he has finally fully become present, he's completed the arc of change that started in the first scene.

He's a different person, his attitude is different. That just felt to me like the completion of that arc. Ironically, Peavey goes through as complete an initiation as John Mark– maybe even a more complete initiation.

At the end, we've come to the end of Peavey's start down a different road, maybe a road of broader empathy. He's relating better to John Mark; he's gotten outside himself a little bit. That was more or less why the story ended there – because his crossing was complete. He won't walk into his grocery store the same man he was when he walked out to recover his shopping cart.

In the baptismal story, "Burying Ground," it took a long time for the final image to come to me. A lot of different things happened at the end of that story. I tried a lot of different sequences of action at the end, most of them close-ups of the characters talking and struggling.

Then I wrote the scene from afar, with Tobit watching from a distance, and I just knew that was how the story had to culminate. I knew that's how it wanted to end.

Johnston near Forty-Acre Island on the northern Ocmulgee.