Motive Is Everything

A Conversation With Artist, Writer, Publisher, Sportsman, Gourmet Chef & Restaurateur Russell Chatham

By John A. Murray

Russell Chatham was born in San Francisco on October 27, 1939, the grandson of California artist Gottardo Piazzoni (1872-1945). One of Chatham's strongest memories of boyhood is the family ranch in Carmel Valley, where summers were spent. The ranch, founded by his great-grandfather in 1860, took in much of the southern slope of Mt. Toro in Monterey County. It was here—among the oak woodlands, lupine meadows, and steelhead streams—that Chatham began to absorb his first impressions of nature. Soon he began to paint plein air. Like his grandfather, Chatham would develop a tonal style and focus primarily, and in often stunning ways, upon pastoral and wild landscapes.

A Partial Russell Chatham Book List

Dark Waters (Clark City Press, 1990)

Silent Seasons: Twenty-One Fishing Stories (Clark City Press, 1988)

The Bright Country: A Fisherman's Return to Trout, Wild Water, and Himself (Simon & Schuster, 1993)

The Earth is Enough: Growing Up in a World of Fly Fishing, Trout & Old Men (Pruett Publishing, 1996)

In 1972, Chatham moved to Montana. He has maintained his primary residence in the Missouri headwaters ever since. Chatham, like that other great western artist Georgia O'Keeffe, received public recognition relatively late in life. As with O'Keeffe, there is a distinctive maturity and gravitas about Chatham's work. Chatham's is a large, knowing spirit that has been purified by struggle, humbled by adversity, and enlarged by long seasons spent in solitude close to nature. His work is suffused with a deep appreciation for the beauty and power of the western landscape. He avoids the narrative tendancy of Charles Russell and Frederick Remington, and also disdains to work with the superficial clichés of mountain and ranching country or of the Pacific Coast, as is seen so often with more commercial artists. One senses throughout his work, and especially on meeting him in person, a van Gogh-like understanding of the oneness of humanity and nature.

Chatham has devoted his life to capturing the essence of western places that are dear to his heart. He has had more than 400 one-man shows, and his paintings have been exhibited in major museums across the United States, Europe, and Asia. He is regarded as one of the world's foremost lithographers; his paintings have appeared on the covers of books by Jim Harrison and Rick Bass; and his work is owned by such collectors as Jack Nicholson, Harrison Ford, Robert Redford, Warren Beatty, Peter Fonda, Don Henley, and Tom Brokaw. No other American artist in the contemporary era has been more successful at craft or career. Chatham's popularity, and ultimate legacy, is intimately related to the western landscape that his paintings so richly explore and express.

Meaningful art requires a true culture within a society ruled by an abiding love, understanding, and respect for tradition, combined with a desire to add to and enhance that tradition.

Although most know Chatham as a painter and lithographer, he is also a successful writer, publisher, and restaurateur. His publishing company, Clark City Press, which was active in the early 1990s, has now been revivified and will begin publishing a list of his own and other titles in 2003. For readers and for writers, this is welcome news.

The Bloomsbury Review: *Tell us a little about your life; where you grew up, your family, and how and when you began painting.*

Russell Chatham: I was born in San Francisco in 1939, and lived there until 1949 when we moved across the bay to Marin County, where I lived until moving to Montana in 1972. On my father's side, which was as English as you can get, as in William Pitt, the Earl of Chatham, they were businessmen mostly, although one of my father's brothers, Carroll, was a famous chemist who discovered how to grow gemstones in the laboratory. He once told me that if what he did was pure chemistry, everyone would be doing it, and that what he did was mostly of an artistic nature. My father was a true artist, I think, as he loved poetry and literature and could draw as well as anyone I've ever known. Unfortunately, his spirit was crushed early on by his robber-baron father, and he died of alcoholism, far too young, and without ever answering the call.

On my mother's side they were Swiss Italian and French. The Piazzonis came to America shortly after the Gold Rush, and settled in the Carmel Valley on land that is still in our family. My mother's father, Gottardo, was one of the finest painters ever. I spent summers at the ranch in the Chupinas Canyon on the west slope of Mt. Toro. My mother's sister Mireille, and her husband Phil, were both artists, and they started their son Tom and me painting at an early age. Quite fortunately, as I reflect back, there was no electricity, phone, radio, or television, and so we learned to amuse ourselves by using our imaginations. I was a skinny, shy, often terrified, lonely kid, and I spent all my school years alone with my sketchbox and fishing pole. Little did I suspect the Hollywood ending that would produce.

TBR: *What is your home like in Montana?*

RC: Since moving here 32 years ago, my home has been a century-old homestead at the eastern edge of the Absaroka Beartooth Wilderness. I've always regarded it as something of a hideout, a home away from home, headquarters in exile, as

it were. My real home is in California, or was until the hideous hordes overran it like a billion fire ants on a dead horse. This is probably going to seem pretty peculiar, but since leaving the one I grew up in, my home has been wherever I pile my clothes at night, as if I belong nowhere and everywhere at the same time. I've felt completely at home in a mansion, in a bullet hole-ridden, rat- infested ghetto tenement, and in everything in between. For the past few years, my clothes have been piled, or in this case laid out fairly neatly, in a lovely, well-cared-for bungalow set in a beautiful garden, the creator of which I'm deeply in love with. But I am, after all, still a guest, and as such may be shown to the door anytime, though I hope that day never comes. I still maintain emotional ties to the Deep Creek house, even though I haven't lived in it, at least not full-time, for 25 years. My daughter, Lea, lives there now.

TBR: *What is your life like on a daily basis?*

RC: I've spent much of my life confused and screwing around. Now, and I mean just this year, I feel like I'm starting to bring things into focus, in order to be able to really do something interesting and good. They say the journey is everything, but for me, that millisecond when the fish grabs the fly is why you endure the journey. Every day I practice one or more of my professions or avocations. Variously, I paint, write, do lithography, design and publish books, fish, hunt, give direction to my restaurant, and try to pay close attention to my relationship with Liz. Done properly, all these things are full-time jobs, even the fishing and hunting, so the claim could be fairly made, I suppose, that I'm a mile wide and an inch deep. But I've been around the world at least a dozen times, and have never seen any contemporary painting or printmaking any better, or even as good as what I do. As a writer, my accomplishments are extremely modest. However, I'm probably in the top 1 percent in the genre in which I've chosen to work. I believe the books now in production at Clark City Press will be among the finest trade editions ever made. As far as the restaurant is concerned, its operating principles are as clean and quality-oriented as possible. I stand perfectly humbled before restaurants like Babbo, Chez Panisse, or Topolobampo, but we share the same playing field. And I believe Liz and I share something few people are lucky enough to experience. All through school—I never made it to college—every teacher I had wrote the same thing on my report card: not working up to capacity. My grade average was about a D, and I was no stranger to the F mark. Maybe I'm just trying to reach that capacity all those teachers were talking about.

TBR: *What's this? You have a restaurant?*

RC: I do. And if it sounds crazy, that's because it is. About eight or nine years ago I was just fed up with not having anything really nice in this little town I live in. I've been interested in food and cooking for 40 years or so, and have literally dozens of friends in the business, so I decided to try it. My idea was to create a focal point for sociability, a place that was handsome, casually elegant, clean, and which served well-thought-out, beautifully prepared and served food, and do it as if the establishment was in a big city, with big-city competition. It's been quite a roller-coaster ride, for sure, but we just celebrated our seventh birthday, which in that hideous business is no small feat, especially in an area like ours which is sparsely populated and generally quite poor.

TBR: *You are an avid fisherman. Do you have any favorite places, either in the U.S. or abroad?*

RC: I've fished obsessively since I was 10, so much so that the habit has become like breathing or a heartbeat. Scarcely an hour of the day passes when I don't swim in anticipation or memories. I don't fish as often today, partly because there are so many other things I love to do just as much, and partly because the places that filled my soul early on have been used as nuclear test sites. Years ago, I fished full-time, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, including Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter days. I very much doubt there is anyone who's put in more hours on the business end of a fishing pole or caught more fish than I have. I can think of a couple of people who are dead, but I can't think of anyone living. My two favorite places to fish are the Russian River, and Papermill Creek at the head of Tomales Bay, both of which are just north of San Francisco. Sadly, the enemy that is us has rendered the fish in these locales virtually extinct, which makes fishing there anymore a far too Zen-like experience for me. I ran from the scene of the crime to Montana because it was beautiful, cheap, and I thought well hidden for the duration. It's still beautiful, but trout fishing doesn't work for me. I dearly loved it as a young boy, but a driver's license changed that, allowing me to see if I could hold my own alongside the boys at Singley Pool on the Eel River. I need cool air, cold water, salmon, sea trout, and an ocean nearby. Twenty inches can never be 20 pounds, even if you use a matchstick and sewing thread. I'm an action junkie, so in the last 30 years I've turned to the four corners of the earth: Alaska, Canada, the Northwest Territories, Iceland, South America, Mother Russia, and New Zealand, not in any particular order.

TBR: *You do lots of philanthropic work. Over the years you've helped* The Bloomsbury Review, *The Nature Conservancy, and many others too numerous to mention.*

RC: First of all, it should be made clear that I'm not a wealthy person; in fact I usually have little money at my disposal after supporting myself and my family. What I do is make as much of my work as possible available to others to sell, with them keeping all the money. Since I'm fairly visible at home, I receive charity requests on a daily basis, so I've had to decide which ones to respond to. Mostly, it's come down to health care and education for children. For example, I gave several lithographs to the Northern Cheyenne to help with a children's care center. How could I not? To me it's a piece of paper with a picture on it; to them it could be hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars. I feel very fortunate to be able to enjoy the nice life I do, so anytime I can help somebody else, I'm going to do it.

TBR: *Is your art gallery in Livingston now called Legends Fine Art?*

RC: Yes. The location on Main Street is the same. I didn't have the wherewithal to operate an art gallery, so I leased the

space to Janie Camp and her partner Penny Ronning. They show a number of different artists and represent my work as well, which has been a good thing.

TBR: *You did quite a bit of writing earlier about fishing and such ...*

RC: I actually made my living as a writer from the late sixties through the early eighties. I turned to writing because I couldn't sell my paintings, the fact being they weren't good enough. I wrote a lot of stuff during those 15 or so years, but I lost my market because what I liked to do, which was tell stories rather than explain how to bait hooks, was unsuitable for the mainstream hunting and fishing magazines, and the others were disappearing or else changing their formats. This caused me to reconsider more seriously what I was going to do in painting. At that time, when I was in my early 40s, I hadn't really come to grips with creating well-thought-out easel paintings, particularly the larger ones. Most of my life I painted outside sitting on the ground, which certainly was valuable. But no matter how you look at it, it's still sketching, and I certainly didn't want to be a sketch artist all my life. This was 20 years before the so-called plein-air fad swept the West like a grass fire, leaving in its wake groups of coffee klatchers with absurd, sentimental names. I also needed to figure out how my work was going to pay for itself, because if I didn't, I wasn't going to be able to do it anymore, because even a simple life like I wanted was starting to cost a small fortune. That's where the study of lithography came in, because I needed something which could generate income through the efforts of others, something which was still wholly valid as original art.

TBR: *Which do you most prefer, lithography or painting?*

RC: The sensibility of the two disciplines is basically the same; only the tools and processes differ. I believe I was born to be a painter, and now, after 55 years of doing it without a break, it is as natural to me as the other involuntary reflexes like blinking my eyes. Through time and effort, lithography has also achieved a natural feel and become part of who I am. If I had to choose between them, I'd have to pick painting. Fortunately, there are no art police around here, so I intend to continue with both.

TBR: *You mentioned you've done some of your finest work in recent years.*

RC: I think so. I hope so. Theoretically, we learn as we grow older. Sometimes, though, I'm reminded of a line from Melville that roughly says that the universe is one large practical joke, the wit thereof Man but dimly perceives. I paint more slowly now than ever, and choose my motifs with more care, and it takes me much longer now to accomplish things. Is this progress? Art is not democratic, nor does the Muse reward simple diligence. I just believe I'm improving because I hope I am.

TBR: *Who among American and European artists do you consider as being in your constellation? Who do you respect?*

RC: In many ways, that's an odd question because I don't know where I fit, or even if I do anywhere. I feel quite insignificant in the big picture, and so if you ask me to compare myself to Corot or Rousseau, I don't know what to say. There is much to admire in those artists, and I do that, but I'm busy finding my own way, carrying them with me in an emotional and mental backpack. Much of what I love I certainly couldn't and wouldn't emulate, Shang bronzes for instance, or Etruscan pottery, or Persian architecture. And even with modern painters such as Goya or Millet, it would not occur to me to try and emulate them per se. It's the core sensibility I look for, and the craft. In the Hermitage at St. Petersburg, there is a painting by Veronese which is perhaps the most stunning work I have ever stood before, and under penalty of death I don't think I could copy it even if given 10 years. To play the silly game of What If, if I had to listen to only one composer the rest of my life, my first choice would be Mozart, my second Beethoven, and for my first choice of a painter, it would be my grandfather, and my second Vermeer.

TBR: *I've got a book here showing the Hermitage collection, and I'm curious about the painting you just mentioned.*

RC: What you're going to find out when you look it up is that it isn't going to make much of an impression on you—at least it didn't on me—which brings us to a problem, which is that we all rely heavily on reproductions, and the best of them only represent a miniscule replica of the original. This Veronese is huge, and it just rivets you to the spot. I mean it's just really, really something.

TBR: *So it's like looking at* Guernica *on a postcard?*

RC: Exactly. What's the point?

TBR: *Looking at the landscape art of the western United States, what do you see? Who stands out?*

RC: I should probably dodge this question because of some advice my mother gave me, but instead I'll just be frank. It seems to me the spectrum runs from the inane to the unspeakable, all of it governed by every conceivable form of sly, clever, dishonest, corrupt, shallow, pandering, idiotic, and disagreeable form of fiscal chicanery one can imagine.

Meaningful art requires a true culture within a society ruled by an abiding love, understanding, and respect for tradition, combined with a desire to add to and enhance that tradition. We have no culture—sloth and a commitment to mediocrity don't count—and our society is so fragmented and free-floating, the only possible art is one of anarchy because there is no common ground. Therefore, there is no chance of shared meaning, because anarchy leads to chaos. I periodically scan every goofy art rag that comes out, from the so-called avante garde *Artforum* to the reactionary *American Artist*, and it's clear each fragment assumes it holds the high ground. So you have the cowboy, Indian, and mountain-man people; the fish, game, and bird people; the still life people, the seascape people, the plein-air landscape people, the grandiose landscape people, the watercolor people, the pastel people, the society portrait people; and last but not least, the American Art for American Museums people, whose specialties are vomiting and defecating in public. I think every bit of this assumed high ground is nothing more than a sea full of ice floes with summer on the way.

When I want something with substance, I turn to the Navajos, for instance, looking at their relationship to the land,

their history, and their ancestors, and at how their work reflects all these things through well-studied craft. It makes sense to them, and it makes sense to me.

And just so I can't be accused of absolute nihilism, there is one living artist I know and whom I admire very much. His name is Art Hansen. He lives on a small farm with his wife on Vashon Island, in Washington's Puget Sound. I might add that I don't know many people who call themselves artists, and among those few who do, well, never mind. In the arts I prefer to know poets, authors, and musicians. I travel a great deal, and always have an eye out for something contemporary that feels real and important, but thus far the disappointment has been overwhelming. I only hope and pray there are people out there I know nothing about, and I'm certain there are.

TBR: *Do you have any aesthetic or practical suggestions for someone just starting to paint?*

RC: First of all, I'd strongly advise determining if this is something they only think they want to do, or if it's something deep-seated and primal that they have to do to be whole. Know what you're getting into. The number of people in America today who understand painting is about the same as the number of condors living in California. If there are choices, something some people have and some don't, these should be carefully examined. Motive is everything, and this might be the most critical sentence in this interview. Honest introspection is imperative, and if there is found to be a desire to receive applause, win prizes or awards, get invited to fancy parties, or cash fat checks, then painting will be a waste of time and there will be no Life in Art.

There may be someplace where you can still get a serious, formal art education, but I don't have a clue where that would be. So keep about the same distance from colleges, universities, and art schools as you would a forest of *Amanita muscaria*. Instead, draw, paint, read, and travel simultaneously. This will actually lead somewhere, and at the same time be far cheaper than a fraudulent education. Early on, drawing is more important than painting, and if you're traveling it's more easily mobile. Drawing is the basis for everything in the visual arts. It develops wordless thinking, hand-eye coordination, and builds confidence. Art is mostly craft, and so a certain element of speed is necessary. As Delacroix commented, "If you can't draw a man's portrait starting as he jumps off a cliff, and be done by the time he hits the ground, you can't draw." Gain access to live nude models, and insist on 5, 10, 20, and 30 second poses.

Choose your heroes carefully, identifying those who were truly great and whose sensibilities you can relate to. Be contemptuous of notions like the one which holds that a drunk who routinely peed his pants while splashing paint all over the floor 50 years ago is an old master. Go back as far as you can in your discipline, remembering that very nearly 100 percent of everything produced in the arts in your time is pure shit. Never compare yourself to your contemporaries, but do mercilessly critique them, if only to yourself. Beware of all labels and *isms*, tonalism, for example. There are no great paintings done in bright colors in the conventional sense of that term. As Camille Pissarro noted, "All painting is a matter of grays." If you doubt this, study Goya, Rembrandt, da Vinci, and Titian, to mention only four. To see the exception, study Vermeer, and even he practices restraint to the point of pathos.

Be a seeker of truth and beauty. Never be impressed by the price of anything. There are a few rich people who are smart and nice, but generally speaking, associate with the wealthy at your own risk. Read as much good, classic literature and poetry as you can. You need to be fluent in the world of verbal ideas and concepts to enhance and balance the essentially nonverbal ones you use in your work. Most writers, by the way, do not really believe in the specificity of the nonverbal language. You must. Along with literature, read biographies and autobiographies and don't stick just to the visual arts. Include them all. This is to learn how others handled their journey, bearing in mind you can't emulate someone else's. Travel serves to inform us of the enormity of the world, and lets us see and experience things we might never have known existed. This helps us have a sense of humility, which I believe is very important.

TBR: *I think that is essential to being a great artist. You need the "negative capability" Shakespeare used to get inside a songbird.*

RC: All genuine art grows outward from the heart and is a matter of sensations. Art inspired primarily by the intellect may induce awe, excitement, or even laughter, but never tears, and there is no great art without tears.

Never forget you are a sworn enemy of the state, and all manifestations of the establishment, whether political, social, or pseudo-intellectual, are there for you to practice your place kicking. Arm yourself with a stout heart and sturdy boots. Those in positions of power are almost universally charlatans, knaves, liars, frauds, or flat-out criminals. As a hopeful but still naïve young artist, you may assume, as I once did, that surely somewhere in the world of art, including the museums, there would be intelligent people who understand the difference between feces and brown shoe polish, but you will eventually be disabused of this idea once you are able to see through the omnipresent smokescreen and recognize the huge, poisonous grease slick of cheese-ball capitalists and bureaucrats looking for nothing more than a fast buck or job security.

Never lose sight of the fact a gallery is a store and nothing more. If you have to use one, make sure the proprietor is good at keeping his store in order, is capable of selling his wares effectively, and pays his bills on time. And cross-check your self esteem. No one is doing you a favor by displaying your work for sale. Watch your back. The art world breeds con artists like stagnant water breeds mosquitoes. And the higher the table stakes, the more you will require the services of Batman or The Men in Black.

Work diligently with seriousness of purpose, but never take yourself seriously. There is no free lunch. Grants are nearly always an inside job, so to get one will require some time on your knees licking someone's hinder. Don't do it. Expect to be poor. Don't plan on it like some whining loser, but think about how you're going to survive it when it happens, as it has to pretty much every real artist in history. On the other hand, by

all means do not strive for wealth. It can happen and has to many, but it's a fluke, and as mysteriously as it arrived so will it disappear, and will not have had anything whatsoever to do with the value of art.

Learn where you came from, who you are, and where you are going. Travel in healthy and intelligent company. Immerse yourself in music. Enjoy good food and learn how to prepare it yourself. Take full responsibility for your own behavior. Live skillfully. And never watch television.

I wish someone had given me all this advice 40 or 50 years ago, but of course I wouldn't have understood it, nor paid the slightest bit of attention to it. Too bad we can't be born old and then grow younger so we could take advantage of our youth and really appreciate it.

TBR: *How would you describe your influence on the younger generation of aspiring artists?*

RC: Let's be clear about the fact I've never tried to cultivate a career in the ordinary sense. This means I have no international reputation to speak of, nor even one which extends to the East Coast of this country. I'm known in the western states, and that's about it. But there is really no place you can go to see my work, other than to a few galleries that sell the lithographs. This leaves a catalogue published 14 years ago called *One Hundred Paintings*, which is out of print by the way, which shows a small selection of work done between 1960 and 1990. A few people saw the actual exhibition at the Museum of the Rockies, but not many in relative terms.

So what I notice is that there seem to be a fair number of young artists copying certain aspects of what they think I do based upon what they saw in a book. The results of this are grim at best. I'm sorry to say it, but I'm afraid these people view me as being successful in a monetary sense, and think if they do something along the lines of what I do, they'll be able to sell it also. These people need to refer back to my earlier remark that motive is everything. Most of what I've done historically, and everything I've done for the last 14 years, is completely unknown. The work moves from my studio directly into someone's home without ever first being exhibited. It's the perfect scenario for me, but does nothing for scholarship.

TBR: *I see it as an essential job for Clark City Press to publish some more comprehensive books of your work. There's a whole universe of things you've done that people are eager to see.*

RC: I hope that's true, but who really knows until you try it. I have enough material for several books, and we're starting production now on three of them. But then after that's done, you still have the reproduction problem. What needs to happen is a meaningful retrospective which can be seen in several highly populated venues. I'm working on this now, but the time frame is 2008 and 2009, and I could be sipping claret on a cloud by that time.

TBR: *One thing I'm curious about is how the art has affected the writing and vice versa.*

RC: I think your personal sensibility informs you to some degree in all the arts, not just those you practice yourself. I refer to myself as a natural-born painter, but to me that doesn't preclude learning how to do something else, or even just studying something without practicing it. For instance, I've proven conclusively that I will never comprehend music theory, yet music is my favorite of the arts, and I've spent years listening to it and studying it in my own small way.

When I was young my favorite thing was reading, and I used to try and write little stories, silly stuff, nothing of the slightest interest or importance. For some reason, I got out of the habit of reading in my late teens, and that condition continued until the mid-sixties when I chanced to meet Tom McGuane and William Hjortsberg. We were all living in the town of Bolinas, on the northern California coast. I knew quite a few artists and musicians, but no writers, and suddenly the desire to read again was awakened, especially as I began to be introduced to some of their friends like Dan Gerber, Richard Brautigan, and Jim Harrison.

McGuane started writing some sporting articles for *Sports Illustrated,* which was a very diverse and interesting magazine in those days. And this somehow gave me the urge to write. I knew novels were far beyond what I could do, but I thought I could do something. Having fished with uncommon ferocity for so long, I figured I could write about that, especially since I'd just caught the world-record striped bass on a fly. Surely there was a story there, and there was. I sold several pieces to magazines like *Salt Water Sportsman*, *Field & Stream*, and so forth, and on the sixth or seventh try, got one accepted by *Sports Illustrated*. And suddenly I was making my living as a writer.

I've always felt I was using a different part of my brain for each discipline: painting, the wordless one coming from somewhere in the back, and writing, from somewhere behind my forehead.

TBR: *Well, that's where the two lobes are. The back is the visual lobe, and the front is cognition and thought.*

RC: Well, there you have it. I didn't know that medically. Pretty soon we'll be doctors! I think that one helps and complements the other. I've known a fair number of artists over the years who never expressed any interest in writing. But look what van Gogh left us, one of the most profound treatises ever about the human heart in conflict with itself, as Faulkner would have it. I say develop your brain as much as possible. It broadens and deepens everything. All art comes first from the heart, but the brain is the train that delivers it to the station.

TBR: *There's a metaphor that the mind is like a muscle, so it's important to keep it engaged.*

RC: Everyone has seen examples of a state of mind, positive or negative, affecting physical health. People have been diagnosed with terminal cancer, said no I don't think so, and gone on to live when medical science said they shouldn't have.

TBR: *Georgia O'Keeffe must've been nearly 100, legally blind, yet still working with clay, staying engaged with the universe, and keeping herself young at heart. She kept the child alive, that innocent, sweet part of us I think is so essential to the creative process.*

RC: Very important. Without vulnerability and innocence, things become cynical and hard, which ultimately disallows the kind of translation I look for in art, and that I hope to be

able to deliver. You can't afford to become bitter in any way, or else the world will no longer be able to flow through you.

TBR: *What is your assessment of the current state of the publishing world?*

RC: I can only answer within the context of what I see here in the United States. Mainstream publishing, in common with Hollywood by the way, is guided by people down on their knees grubbing for money like a beagle on speed after a gopher. I've read a few so-called best-sellers over the years and regretted it. Cleverness and ability become negatives when applied for the wrong reasons, and best-seller writers tend to ooze them like pus from a bad Hobo spider bite. And think of the truckloads of gold foil-stamped romance novels, which are less valuable than chewing gum stuck to your shoe. Then you have the diet, exercise, and psychobabble junk, which has by now achieved the status of 100 square miles of flotsam. In spite of this, New York sometimes drills one into the bull's-eye with something like Tom Robbins' *Fierce Invalids Home From Hot Climates*.

To find publishing the way book lovers and serious writers understand it, you need to ferret around in the back streets of the country, where you will find certain university presses holding their heads high, along with a number of small publishers both for and not for profit. Take a look at Copper Canyon's backlist, or the University of Chicago's, to name only two, the latter having published in 1995 Anthony Powell's masterpiece, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, something it's impossible to imagine a major American publishing house doing.

A couple of years ago, when I was working to reinvent Clark City Press, I went to the Book Expo in Chicago. I wandered in all wide-eyed and enthusiastic, looking forward to visiting with publishers, booksellers, and authors I knew and liked from years ago. But the balloons, strobe lights, and hucksters were like a cement pie in the face, and after less than half a day I ran for it with my tail between my legs.

TBR: *Could you tell us a little history of Clark City Press?*

RC: Basically, it started because I wanted to get several of my own books back into print, and I didn't want to do business in New York any longer. I wasn't interested in proving anything; I just wanted my books available in a format entirely of my own choosing. There was no business plan, no distribution plan, no nothing. Gradually, books by a few other authors joined mine, and within a couple of short years it was decided to try and see if a, quote unquote, normal publishing business could survive in a small town in Montana. Some financial backing was found, and a staff of six hired. The lesson learned was, you either have to remain tiny or be fairly large, and so the press closed down in 1993 after having published about 30 pretty interesting titles. The long and short of it is, to survive you need a strong, active backlist, and there wasn't enough time or money to create one.

TBR: *It's an adverse situation. I think macroeconomics are determinative right now, and it's been particularly difficult in the publishing world because the profit margin has always been so small.*

RC: That's right. You have to figure out how to survive, and we didn't. But it taught me a valuable lesson, which is that you have to understand yourself and be satisfied with that. Ezra Pound said, "The only thing that matters is what you love. Everything else is dross." I'm a small person on a small stage, and I'm just fine with that.

TBR: *Tell us about Clark City Press in 2003. Is it going to be visible at stores like The Tattered Cover, Elliot Bay, and Powell's? What will the operation be like?*

RC: Aside from being appropriately modest, it will operate largely outside the parameters which govern most other presses. There will be no publishing schedule, no marketing department, and no distributors or wholesalers. Books will be for sale only through our offices in Livingston, Montana, by phone, fax, regular mail, e-mail, or online at our website. And they will be for sale only to individuals and independent booksellers, never to chains or other entities having a corporate orientation. This eliminates the practices of discounting and remaindering. And all sales will be final, with a strict no-return policy. For readings and signings we will consign books, thus protecting the stores.

The motto of the press is "Quality and Integrity Without Compromise." We will focus on seriousness of content and production values, with emphasis on the arts and humanities. The goal is long-term intrinsic value. And there will be no blurbs used, a practice that has become a disgrace throughout the industry. If what I've just described seems like a perfect recipe for failure, maybe it is and maybe it isn't. I haven't seen any reliable crystal balls lying around lately. To me this isn't a game with Lord Abacus as the referee. This thing will be a reflection of my values and my life.

TBR: *There's such a community, such a constellation of writers in Montana. I really enjoyed the book you published called* The River We Carry With Us. *It has a wonderful collection of writers, people like Richard Hugo, Rick Bass, Annick Smith, Norman MacLean, David James Duncan, and Ian Frazier. It's very impressive.*

RC: It's a perfect example of a book that deserved to be published, that no one else would have done because it's never going to make any money. It gives a meaningful picture of an area of the country most people know nothing about, so in my view it was and remains a worthwhile project.

TBR: *Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions?*

RC: The answer to that could go on for hours, maybe even days, but I'll try and compress it for our purposes. In any conventional sense, I'm an entirely unambitious person when it comes to matters like having a career, making money, holding power, or behaving like most grownups in general. These kinds of things bore me to sleep. There's a price tag attached to this, naturally, one I've paid many times over, and which I'm certain I'll pay again. But the upside is worth it. I'll be 64 on October 27, and feel as though I'm just getting my bearings, that everything before this has happened in the on-deck circle, and now I'm on one knee, looking down the track, tying my shoes. In recent years I've managed to do some fairly decent paintings, and now maybe I have a shot at doing a few really good ones like I saw in my dreams 30 years ago. There

are so many books and stories rattling around in my head, I can't wait for them to tumble out. Then there are the several dozen books by others I'm itching to design and publish. After 23 years of practicing it intensely, I feel I know enough about lithography to take it out even further. The restaurant has been tweaked and massaged for eight difficult years, and it looks like it's finally headed uphill at an encouragingly sharp angle toward acknowledgment as one of the best in the country. I'd love to reimmerse myself in striped bass fishing, only this time on the East Coast, in waters I've read about all my life but have never seen. I want someday to bring an enormous king salmon to the beach, something as preposterous as an 80-pounder that took a beautiful little fly. I want to enjoy, respect, and love Isabel Maria Lourdes Blavatsky for the rest of my days. And finally, I would like to be happy, something which has eluded me all my life. ■

INTERVIEWER: **John A. Murray** has known Russell Chatham since 1991. Murray is the author or editor of more than 40 books. He recently completed the American West trilogy, the first volume of which was published last year (*Another Country*, Johnson). He is now writing the stories for the American East trilogy. In June he served as a keynote speaker for the Western Writer's Conference in Gunnison, Colorado. NOTE: This introduction is adapted from an essay on Russell Chatham in John Murray's book *Mythmakers of the West: Shaping America's Imagination* (Northland, 2002).