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## CONVERSATIONS

### 'MY HISTORY IS A TILE IN A MOSAIC': AN INTERVIEW WITH JIM CULLEN

CASSANDRA LEE ATHERTON

*JIM CULLEN was born in Queens, New York, and attended public schools on Long Island. He received his B.A. in English from Tufts University, and his A.M. and Ph.D. degrees in American Civilization from Brown University. He has taught at a number of colleges and universities, including Harvard and Brown. He is currently a teacher, and serves on the Board of the Trustees, at the Ethical Culture Fieldston School in New York City. Jim is married to historian Lyde Cullen Sizer and has four children.*

CONTEXT: Dr Glenn Moore co-ordinates the subject 'Searching for the American Dream' at The University of Melbourne. For the last nine years he has taken second and third year history students to Boston, New York and Washington, D.C to explore the philosophy of genius loci. Dr Moore gets students to work in food banks, visit homeless shelters, museums and organizes an array of guest speakers with experts such as Boston public defender, Denise Regan, Neera Tanden, Hillary Clinton's campaign manager and Alec Ross, vice president of One Economy. As the leading expert on the American Dream, with the publication of so many books in American history such as: *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea that Shaped a Nation*, *Born in the U.S.A.: Bruce Springsteen and the American Tradition* and *Restless in the Promised Land: Catholics and the American Dream*, Jim Cullen has spoken to the students for the last five years. I interviewed him prior to his recent discussion with the students in New York on 5 July 2006 at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

CA: Do you think teaching makes you a better writer?

JC: I think it does. It is an important reality check in two ways. The first is that you have a sample audience on which to plan an idea and secondly it's a way of getting ideas from people. And I, as a high school teacher with students, do not have a lot of experience working with writers, I show them a lot of my own work; I circulate my work. A lot of my work in recent years has increasingly been focused on students as an audience, not necessarily writing text books but thinking about a younger generation of people; how they're inclined to think about things and how one might best address them. The last couple of books I have done in particular have been generated as books in which I have thought about adolescents and young adults as my primary audience.

CA: Can you tell me a little bit about American students and teaching?

JC: I've taught undergraduates, I've taught graduate students, I've taught adult students and I've taught high school students. In one sense there is no difference, the real difference is the content level and that you teach differently to a beginner than you do to someone who is immersed in a discourse. But there is a particular dimension, I think, in talking to younger people in that first of all you are typically introducing them to all kinds of things, not just the subject. For example, when I am talking about westward expansion of the United States I often talk about real estate business and I realise that many of these people have never owned a property before and what it means to have a mortgage and to pay things off and so you have to think about those kinds of life skill elementary lessons in order to understand the context. The other thing, of course, is the dimension of memory, what these people know or don't know. I am very aware that the students I'm going to be teaching in the fall were born circa 1990 i.e. after the Berlin wall came down which is a reasonably shocking sort of framework with which to work and of course you have to talk to people differently. I am finishing a project where I start with Thomas Jefferson and I end with George Bush. With Jefferson, of course, you have to provide all kinds of background information, with Bush it would be deadly to provide all kinds of background information. People don't need to know about war on terror or the war in Iraq, they know that all too well, so the act of calibration is such an important part of teaching and such an important part of writing.

CA: I know at The University of Melbourne Dr Glenn Moore told me that it can be strange teaching students in the History department about 9/11 and asking them what they were doing when the two towers collapsed, much like people used to ask what people were doing when JFK was shot, because students now would have been very young and probably sleeping and so it doesn't have the same impact. Do you teach about 9/11?

JC: I do and of course I teach in New York City where it happened. I teach students whose families were touched by it and I teach at a school where people were lost. That adds a very powerful dimension to things, so much so that I've had to walk a line, even making sure I talk to a kid and let him know 'Hey, we're going to talk about this thing, you might not want to be here.' Interestingly enough, in the case I'm thinking of, the student was quite interested in staying and quite vocal about it but that's not something you can take for granted so there are sensitivities that you have to take into account there. Part of the problem with 9/11 and part of the problem of history generally is to make people think hard about the ways in which the

past both is and isn't like the present. And I think that the instinct that a lot of people have, which is not a bad instinct, and in many cases it is a correct instinct to say that this is just like what happened before, this is just like Pearl Harbour, this is just like the cold war but in fact it's not and appreciating those differences is often a part of what historical judgement is about as much as it is trying to get people to forge connections. That, I find, is a big part of my job as a writer and a teacher to sort of complicate texture, to make people aware of the ways things are not alike as well as they are alike.

CA: Kenneth T. Jackson has stated that history is in trouble because in secondary schools in America, teachers are employed to teach social studies and may not have studied history and that is detrimental to fostering a love of history. Is this an accurate picture of secondary school teachers in America? In Australia in some states we have the study of SOSE in secondary schools, which couples geography with history, asking the teacher to diversify their specialist area. Is this a good idea?

JC: I'm sure there is some truth to what Jackson is saying and clearly people who teach social studies, per se, don't have quite the same commitment as an historian, they can't. But of course their problems are much bigger than the vicissitudes of a particularly visionary discourse, as often or not they are worried about their class size, they're worried about attendance, they're worried about disciplinary problems, they're worried about all kinds of things whether they want to be or not. In some ways professors like Kenneth Jackson, for whom I have enormous regard, really are in an ivory tower. Especially at a place like Columbia because of course in a lot of colleges and universities many of these issues pertain as well. In my mind the challenges of teaching history well have less to do with the integrity of the historical enterprise, less about the quality of archival research and the tenor of the sources and the kinds of skills frankly that a lot of academic historians have lost sight of: story telling; organising information in a compelling way; bringing some of the arts of theatre as well as the arts of history to bear on a room. Those things are as likely as not to make the experience of learning memorable for people, as it is the unteachable quality of the historical arguments.

CA: How do you find time to write with the demands of teaching?

JC: I wish I had a good answer for you, it's a good question. For example, the book I am just finishing I was really supposed to be working on over the summer and I really ended up working on it over the course of the school year which a lot of people don't do and I see this less in a boasting way, in fact I have real questions about myself and you can talk to my wife and

children about the costs of doing this. I really don't want to toot my own horn here because I am not entirely sure it is a great thing and actually, in some sense, that really brings me to the heart of the answer which is that I think a lot of us, certainly to myself, it doesn't come from some sort of rational place, even some sort of career place, it's an itch that you cure by scratching a pen. It's something that you are compelled to do. I don't think there is any other reason to do it, I was going to say any other good reason to do it, I'm not sure my reasoning is altogether good.

CA: With the style and the flow and the way your books are accessible to a wide range of people, have you ever thought of writing fiction.

JC: I've tried, I've tried and I know that there are some people who really can do both but I do have this idea that they really are separate enterprises and that they require different skill sets. For example the American historian David Potter has said that there are two paths for historians — there are lumpers and there are splitters. I'm a lumper myself and my wife is a splitter, that's why I think it works. I have this idea of fiction writers, I don't know if that taxonomy works, but the point is that they have a different DNA I think, a different way of approaching things, and in my limited experience in dealing with people who I really think of as artists, they have what seems to be a kind of healthy scepticism about the kind of analytic tools that a non-fiction writer brings to bear. I think they are afraid it is going to complicate or conflict with their methodology, in fact even a word like 'methodology' probably gives some fiction writers the freaks. I have tried to do it and of course I really do believe that history is finally an imaginative act but I guess I have too much respect for fiction writers to think that I ever could be one.

CA: You often concentrate on people in American history like Bruce Springsteen and, in the chapter from your new book, Ronald Reagan. Is it through people rather than through periods of time that we learn about history?

JC: Well, you know, history in the last 30 years in the United States has been about process, not people, and there's some very, very good reasons for that. But it's hard to tell a good story about a process, it's possible to do and there are people who have done it, but again if you are talking with a bunch of sixteen year olds, industrialisation and any kind of 'tion' word... you're going to have to look at getting it out of the gate to begin with, but if you can hang it on something, even an object like the Erie canal, you're going to get a hell of a lot more mileage than you are talking about the state of the economy and the legislative structure of the New York assembly that might make that possible. Instead you've got to work, I think, with a figure

like DeWitt Clinton who of course is not going to give you the whole story, you're going to distort the story by hanging it on such a person. But there is no sort of pure place from which to tell any story anyway so if you accept that at the outset and you have some sort of commitment to the truth, a commitment which may be moral as much as it is factual, you just have to do the best you can with what you've got to work with and what you have to work with is as often as not an audience as it is a subject.

CA: How else do you make students interested in the past? I've heard that you use pop culture and film.

JC: In some sense that's how I began my work or career, you see I calculated that was the way 'in'. It still is. I'm going to be teaching 'The World Since 1940' this fall and I'm going to begin with a Bruce Springsteen song about a man at a checkpoint in Iraq seeing the car coming and not being sure whether it's a friend or a foe. And that kind of traumatic situation is a better way to begin than saying, 'In 1945 the world was divided between two great powers.' I feel that I use pop. culture not simply because it is a useful tactic but it also reflects my own personal and ideological commitments. I come out of a working class childhood. I did not have a lot of books around the house growing up, I had television shows, I had movies and that's how I initially made sense of the world. I'm not one of those people who doesn't let my children watch television. I think of that as an elitist position on some level even though I know television does things to your brain differently than reading does things to your brain - and not always good things, as someone who has a real commitment to the printed word. So the reason that I have worked a lot with popular culture reflects my background but it also reflects my belief in the best way to reach students and of course that's where I learn a lot too. I didn't know anything about hip hop for example until I met these students because I am the wrong size and colour and age.

CA: What responsibilities do you feel you have in regards to your students and the teaching of history?

JC: Well I'm very aware, especially at the school I teach at, that I am dealing with the next generation of American leadership and I'm hoping that they are going to be responsible, thoughtful people. And so in some sense the question is not so much my fidelity to the past but rather my fidelity as a teacher and what I might be able to give these people to equip them to become thoughtful, responsible people and how maybe by my doing well by them they can do well by others. As Thomas Jefferson says, the world is for the living, history is for the living too, for better or worse.

CA: You work at a school which seems very privileged. How do you feel about this given that the American Dream is built on the idea of the equality of education?

JC: Well that is a fair question and it is a question that would have to come up a lot for any person who wanted to do anything resembling a decent job, broadly construed. The school where I teach is certainly a place of privilege and has been for some time. It also has, like many elite schools in the United States, at the many levels a real commitment to diversity by providing opportunity. Sometimes this diversity, this opportunity, has a kind of manicured quality to it which doesn't always necessarily reflect the realities of American demography. In fact insofar as there is equality of opportunity in the United States anymore, and I really do think it is diminishing, education remains, I think, the principle avenue and I certainly teach more than a few people of modest backgrounds. And of course they're the people in some sense I have the greatest investment in, having come from such a background myself and of course we all have an investment, we all want to believe insofar as the enterprise we are engaged in has some sort of legitimacy. That said, rich people need help too and in some sense rich people need help so that they can help others. The fact that I teach at a school called The Ethical Culture Fieldston School sets us up for a lot of stickers, a lot of griping, a lot of accurate complaints of democracy. But without some faith in the validity in the enterprise you are doing then you can't really function and of course we all do really want to function.

CA: Was your dad a fireman? Does it give you more credibility to talk about working class issues?

JC: Well, the question of class is always a complicated one and how you define it and whether you can take the boy out of poverty or the poverty out of the boy and what not. I don't want to make any false claims from my own background. I never really had any privation to speak of. The principle form of privilege I enjoy is through education. I feel like one of the things I give my students, not so much what I get in return, but what I give them is my father's voice. They need to hear him and therefore I really sort of channel him regularly. They hear what a white, working class conservative has to say. They hear the not so nice things he said as well as the real challenges and the real questions he has for them. I think that this is probably one of the most important things I bring literally to the table at my school. Not my mastery of the subject, not my hoped for decency as a human being, my history, and that history is a tile in a mosaic that they are all going to build.

CA: Your books are so patriotic and get at the heart of America. This seems to be your quest. Have you ever thought of deviating from this topic of America?

JC: As I get older and as I hopefully learn a little bit more, in some ways I become more and more aware of the ways in which the United States is not in fact exceptional, that one can speak for example, although no-one ever does, of a Roman dream of citizenship and upward mobility which is not in the end that different from the American dream in terms of ethnic diversity, in terms of upward mobility, in terms of a sense of citizenship and so on. I am aware, of course, that there are real parallels to be made between, for example, the American experience and the Oceanic experience in terms of colonialism and even things like the ethnic composition and race relations and so on. This does intrigue me more and more as time goes on and I'm also more and more aware of the ways in which globalisation in a contemporary context both is and is not the same as Americanisation, and of course it is my fate to be born at a time of widely perceived American decline and the notion that something is going to follow perhaps inevitably makes one think about something that comes before.

CA: I read your article on Vietnam and making it relevant to students. It was a great article and two students discussed their reactions to the war. You mentioned Bruce Springsteen in the article and the 9/11 album. What do you think of it? Why is Bruce such an important person to you?

JC: Well, I think of Bruce Springsteen as someone who puts the best face on America, especially when the rest of the world has some serious questions about the United States. He embodies many of the values that all Americans I think honour: values like hard work, values like a commitment to family and friends that is as much about deeds as words; a love of country that recognises failure as well as honours success, these kinds of things. And I think that one of the things that Springsteen does very well is that he has a real sense of history and his music is quite resonant. I'm teaching a course to adults right now at an arts college and I'm going to give a class over to *The Rising*. Most people I will deal with are a little older and they really did live through 9/11, they also lived through a bunch of other things and so I think that even though many of these people who in some cases are a generation or two even older than Springsteen himself, I think there is an opportunity there to kind of cut across generations and I'll be interested to see to what degree that actually works.

CA: It will be interesting to see how familiar they are with the CD. I'm not sure how well it was received in America but it didn't really have a huge market in Australia, and you can understand why.



JC: Right, and in fact I don't think it was especially. It was Springsteen's first record with the E Street band for about twenty years. It charted relatively well but it was not a major record in terms of its commercial impact but I think Springsteen's influence now is a little bit more diffuse than that. I mean I was listening to a very popular radio show in the United States called *The Prairie Home Companion* which is all sort of old American music, sort of classic American, gospel and country music and sort of, I don't know what you call it, a hillbilly outfit doing a very obscure Springsteen song, actually from *Devils and Dust* but it sounded like it could have been recorded in the 1930s. So I think the Springsteen legacy may now be as an iconic figure. You know Woody Guthrie or Frank Sinatra without necessarily knowing their music, although some people certainly do, some people know virtually nothing but they know who those people are, they know what they stand for and I think that's probably where Springsteen is headed in terms of his iconography in American culture.

CA: Is reading under threat? Do students still read or is Play Station taking over?

JC: I'm sure that a lot of Greek poets were disappointed by the decline of the oral tradition and confused by people's new-fangled commitment to papyrus, I mean, media changed and all media has costs and benefits. There's no question, for example, that the students I teach have a much more sharply attuned visual sense than I do. I think their ability to decode a movie is much more natural and much less conscious than my own process was, so in that sense I don't want to be a nay-sayer or a Luddite. It is a loss and it is being lost and I think of reading like being in good physical shape, when you are in good shape; you don't break a sweat doing certain tasks. I mean I don't regard reading one hundred pages, I don't regard reading a book in a day or two to be a big deal. I've never regarded reading a book or two in a month or a summer as a big deal and you know, sometimes that's their loss as much as it is our loss. I am a child of the word and I will die a child of the word and I am grateful for what it has given me but I don't assume that everyone needs to be a child of the word to have a long and fruitful life. I've seen too many people who don't and haven't.

CA: Do you need an ego to stay in the publication industry. How do you deal with negative reviews and where do you get your strength from?

JC: Well, you know, I find that in order to write a book at all you certainly need the sustaining illusion that what you are doing is good and often I never feel better about anything I've written in the heated aftermath than in the middle of writing it. Later I'll rip it up or throw it out or more

affectionately say, 'that wasn't a bad piece of work', but I think in that moment you have to sort of believe in what you are doing and the other thing of course that you have to do, at least I have until this point, is believe that there is going to be another one, that if you don't get it right now maybe you'll get it right later and at some point you come up for air and you look back and you realise that you have produced a body of work and you can take comfort in that. You know you're not perfect and you know that even when you do good work it's not necessarily going to be recognised. You know, I think that it is difficult to believe that there is some kind of justice about all of this, people who write lousy books get recognised, people who write great books don't, we are never as good as we want to be, we are never as bad as we think. In the end it has to come from that internal place, that itch, that's the only thing that really will keep you going, I think.

CA: What are you working on now?

JC: I'm just finishing up a project with the working title of *Imperfect Persons, Impressive Acts* and it looks at ten presidents plus George Washington as a general in his case, who made mistakes, who either they miscalculated or their personalities got the better of them or they made a reasonable but wrong choice and then somehow went on to redeem themselves whether because life had a flip side which was a virtue or whether it was because they were able to suspend their impulses or whether because they just stuck things out. I start with Jefferson and I end with Clinton and have a little thing on Bush there and this goes back again to who I'm dealing with, who my audience is. I feel like there has been about a generation now of young people who have grown up with a sense of scepticism, no-one is taught about George Washington and the cherry tree and everyone is taught about George Washington the slave holder. I don't particularly wish to quibble with that except that the picture in both those cases is more complicated and I think the notion of providing realistic role models for people is one of those things that is useful whether you're sixteen or thirty-six or maybe even sixty-six. That's where this particular project came from. It should be out next Spring.

Jim is also working on an exhibition for the Smithsonian on the American Dream. I believe this will open some time late next year.