"We can only discover the universal through the very specific. I think that my "intense attachment" is a great part of why my books are being read, but also the fact that I am able to look at it without rose-colored glasses and just present what it is. Also, I think my books are universal at their most basic. They're about family and friendship, the two most universal things there are."

Silas House is the author of the novels Clay's Quilt (2001), A Parchment of Leaves (2002), and The Coal Tattoo (released September 2004). His first two books quickly became favorites of book clubs across the nation and his third already has a remarkable buzz and excellent advance reviews. His work is known for his lyrical and poignant explorations of human nature and the natural world. He has received numerous prizes including the James Still Award for Special Achievement from the Fellowship of Southern Writers, the Chaffin Award for Literature, the Kentucky Novel of the Year, and two ForeWord Magazine Bronze Awards for Best Literary Novel. House is a professor at Eastern Kentucky University and Spalding University’s MFA in Writing program.

Aurora: How do you find time to write with teaching, family, and things like book tours taking up a substantial part of your life? Are there any rituals you practice? Do you follow a set schedule for writing/reading like, say Stephen King? What kind of discipline is important for a writer to be effective?

House: For me, the writing process is 90% in my head. Only about 10% of the whole process actually involves sitting down and putting it on paper. I write in my head while I'm driving to class, or to book events, or waiting for my daughters to be let out of school. Basically, I'm writing all the time. I had to learn how to do that because I've been working since I was 15 years old and always had to balance writing with my "real" life. The main ritual I practice is to always be on the lookout for inspiration, to always eavesdrop and observe the world, and always be thinking about my writing. I don't follow any kind of set schedule but do set firm deadlines for myself. I'm working on a new novel right now and have set the deadline of September 1, 2005 for it to be completed. I'm hoping to meet that goal.

Aurora: How much control is a writer supposed to have? In other words, when I write, I notice that there is a difference in the end result of my writing and the concept contained in my head. I expect to write A, but B comes out in the end. How important is this control? And does it come
with time and practice? Can you write exactly what you intend to without it being heavy-handed?

House: The major thing that every writer has to learn is to give up control. You won't be a good writer until you completely surrender to the characters and the story. In many ways I think a writer is just a receiver for all these stories that are floating around in the air. When I tried to completely control my characters, they never came to life. On the other hand, I always have some notion of what I want to do in a story, but if you're not onto something special then the characters just won't come when invited. You really have to care about what you're writing, have to have passion about it in order for it to be good.

Aurora: What do you feel is the role of the writer in today's society? What do writers contribute? And more specifically, what is the job of the novelist?

House: I really believe that all writers are activists in their own way. In my own writing, I want to do several things: first and foremost, I want to tell a good story. I think that people crave stories to be told to them. In the last fifty years or so there's been a movement toward stylistic writing, writing that is clever and constructed. But really all people want is a good yarn. Many readers also want beautiful language. Those are the two things I always want to provide. But I also want my writing to have a positive effect on the world. I want it to DO something. My first book dealt with cycles of violence, the goodness of a created family. My second novel dealt with forgiveness and I wanted it to remind people that forgiveness and kindness can go a long way. My third book was a meditation on sibling relationships and the love of a place. These might seem like small, normal things, but they are things that people need to be constantly reminded about. No matter that lots of people don't read nowadays, writers are still looked to as voices of reason, as people who should remind us of what is truly important. The job of a novelist is to do all of these things, but mostly to provide a story that will resonate with reader. A good novel should touch or change a reader.

Aurora: Your writing is strongly regional. Has keeping your stories almost hermetically-sealed in Appalachia, are you able, through your writing, to gain a new perspective on Kentuckians/Kentucky? Are you able to detach yourself from the fabric of Kentucky or is this intense attachment what makes your writing so accessible and successful?

House: I've always felt like an outsider, so it's very easy for me to detach myself from the place I love so much and look at it with a critical eye. I feel like an outsider from my own family, from my own place, although I also feel an overwhelming connection to both those entities. And the best writing is always regional. We can only discover the universal through the very specific. I think that my "intense attachment" is a great part of why my books are being read, but also the fact that I am able to look at it without rose-colored glasses and just present what it is. Also, I think my books are universal at their most basic. They're about family and friendship, the two most universal things there are.

Aurora: What made you want to teach at Eastern? How difficult is it to teach creative writing? Do you think people can learn to be great writers, or is this some kind of intrinsic ability, like musicality? How much of writing is natural?
House: I wanted to teach at Eastern because I think it serves the people I want to serve: mostly working-class people from the region. These are the students I can help the most and I want to be a part of the literary renaissance happening in the region. Teaching creative writing is the most difficult thing I've ever done... much harder than I had suspected. Because you simply can't teach people to be great writers. They either have it or they don't. I think writers are born that way and it can be encouraged, can be made better, but it can't be created in a classroom. The thing is, if you have 20 writing students and only five of them are natural-born writers, then that's five people you can help to bloom and find their way, and that's an amazing thing. Another reason it's so hard, frankly, is because the really bad writers are the ones who are never, ever going to listen to you. But those good writers DO listen, and when you get one of those, it makes everything else worthwhile.

Aurora: Growing up, most kids had dreams of being astronauts, firefighters, etc. Did you ever want to be something other than a writer and if so what? What would Silas House be doing now if his books had not been so successful?

House: When I was little I wanted to be a teacher. They were the people I always looked up to the most. I also wanted to be a country singer, though. I know that sounds crazy, but I did. I grew up worshipping musicians, but country music is all about flash and pomp nowadays. I mean, Kenny Chesney? Big and Rich? What the hell is that all about? I would not have fit in at all. I also dreamt of being a reporter. If my books weren't successful I would be incredibly miserable because writing is the only thing I ever loved doing. If my books hadn't been published, I'd probably still be a mail carrier. I have a family to support, and for six years I worked in the postal system completely hating it, but also understanding that I had responsibilities. And even though I hated it, there's a lot of satisfaction in coming in from a day of really hard work and knowing that you can support your children and give them what you want, so I would have probably ended up being happy, but not half as much as I am now.

Aurora: How long did it take you to get your first story published? How old were you when you became serious at the craft, when you realized you had talent?

House: My first story was published when I was ten, in the local newspaper. It was horrible. In the seventh grade I knew I wanted to be a writer. I knew that was what I was meant to do, and all through high school everyone knew that about me. My classmates were all very supportive of that, surprisingly enough. My first real story was published when I was a senior here at Eastern, in Appalachian Heritage magazine. I had so many rejections, though. I got rejected by every magazine there is, but I never gave up. I never took no for an answer, because I knew this was what I was meant to do. It's hard to explain.

Aurora: What do you do to warm-up before you begin writing? Is there anything you do to get your mind set on creating a story, or is it something that just "clicks" inside your head?

House: Not really. I'm just always writing. I get an idea and then I just open myself up to the characters and let it go from there. I do, however, listen to a lot of music to get into a particular mindset. My second book was set in the early 1900's, so all I listened to was old-time music. And my third novel is set from 1958-1969, so I listened to music from that period all the time. Right now I'm listening to lots of 70's music because the book I'm working on is set during
the summer of 1976. I also do some "method-writing." If a character of mine is a gardener, for example, then I become a gardener while I'm working on that book. I learn everything I can about gardening and raise a huge garden and become obsessed with it and consider that time planting tomatoes and peppers as "writing time." In that book set from 1912-1920, I lived as simply as I could. Unplugged all of our outdoor lights so I could experience darkness the way people during that time period had; walked just about everywhere I went; did just about everything the characters were doing.

Aurora: Suppose Hollywood were interested in the rights to one of your novels. What kind of reaction would the big-wig producers receive from you? What do you think authors that sell their work to Hollywood only to have it ruined are thinking? Is it just money?

House: Well, financial security definitely has something to do with it. I'm not going to lie about that. But also, it ensures that more people are going to read your story, and that's not just about money, but about the fact that you want to share your characters with as many people as possible. I'm a huge movie buff, so I would love to sit down in a theater and see my characters come to life that way on a big screen. But you're just setting yourself up for disappointment, really. Especially with a book set in Kentucky, because Hollywood is bound to get it wrong. So I'd be happy if a movie were to be made, but I'd also approach it with low expectations. And sometimes authors get very lucky. BIG FISH, for example, was a great film adaptation.

Aurora: What are you reading right now?

House: I'm reading LIFE OF PI by Yann Martel and think it's brilliant. I'm also reading WHERE THE LONG GRASS BENDS, by Neela Vaswani. It's one of the most beautiful books I've ever read and she's an emerging author that everyone should know about eventually. I'm also reading a lot of books about Vietnam and the Bicentennial Summer, since that's what my new novel is about.

Aurora: Music seems to hold together your novels. Neil Young seems to be a big influence, and happens to be a musician I hold in high regard. What does his music mean to you?

House: Well, you know, Neil Young can't sing. And he's not exactly a great guitar player either. But that's exactly what I love about him. He loves music and he has something to say and he just presents himself as he is and accepts his limitations and accepts that he has something to give and goes for it. His music is primal in a way, it's just bare bones emotions, and I have a very high respect for that acceptance he has of himself. I don't much like singers whose voices are "perfect" (i.e., suitable for mass consumption); I like a singer who reveals their soul when they open their mouth. Besides all that, his songwriting is just flat-out poetry.

Aurora: Kentucky basketball. What's your prediction on the upcoming season?

House: I used to be a fanatic for UK basketball but now I don't even know the players' names. In college I was lucky enough to have a box seat for four seasons and was just obsessed (my boss had bought the box but could never use it). But then I noticed all these people around me who treated it as some sort of religion and I became completely turned against it. I was
turned off by the politics of the sport, which may be small-minded of me, but I think our culture just puts too much emphasis on it.

_Aurora:_ Kentucky seems to produce an incredible number of artists. That is, musicians, writers, performers, etc. In fact, I read that Kentucky has the highest percentage of musicians than any other part of the United States. What makes us so creative?

_House:_ Because we're better than other people. No, I'm just messing around. I don't know. I think a lot of it has to do with our collective memories. There's just something in our DNA that makes us passionate about music, or storytelling, or religion, or what-have-you. I have a theory that people who have to defend where they're from will always be more creative than others, and I think that's definitely the case for Kentuckians.

_Aurora:_ Looking on Amazon.com, I've read reviews of your books by readers across the country. I was hard-pressed to find anything negative. What makes these books so enjoyable?

_House:_ It always makes me feel arrogant to answer questions like this, but I'll try. I think because--more than anything--there's a story there. It's not about stylitics or showing off or anything else, but simply about telling a story that will hopefully move people. When I write, I put everything into it. I leave my books emotionally spent. I think readers are aware of that, and they appreciate it when a writer puts his heart and soul on the page for everyone to see. And actually I don't feel completely responsible for my books. Often I feel as if they are given to me, sort of like a ghost has whispered the story into my ear. It's a strange thing. I never had a really bad review until my latest book, THE COAL TATTOO, and I knew when I was writing it that I would get some bad reviews. Overall, the reviews of it have been great, but a couple have just completely torn my book to pieces. The thing they're picking on is that it's "sentimental." I knew they'd think this because the characters are constantly telling each other "I love you" and they sacrifice their own happiness for each other, and things like that. But I think that's real life. Everyone I know tells each other they love one another. People really do that, so it seems unacceptable to me that people can't do that in books, too. It seems there's this movement for real literature to be dark, to be all gloom and doom, but I want my books to be shot through with light. Readers--maybe not reviewers, but readers--really relate to that. Because hope is the one thing that everybody has, that everybody desires until the very end. So the critics don't really matter to me. The only thing that matters is when a reader cares enough to plop down $24 and then take the time to write me a letter. I listen to what they say, but never the reviewers.

_Aurora:_ Is there anyone character in your books that is more based on you than anything? If I had to venture a guess, I might say Anneth, Clay's mother. How much of a stretch is that?

_House:_ Well, every single one of my characters has a bit of me in them. But I would have to say that Vine, the protagonist of my second novel, A PARCHMENT OF LEAVES, is most like me. That's strange because she's a Cherokee woman in the early 1900's, as far removed from me as any of my characters, gender- and time-wise. But she's an outsider, she's confused about her spirituality, she believes in herself, she is always questioning what the right thing to do is, she's simultaneously wild and calm. She longs for an understanding of her own heritage, and that's very much a part of me. I feel a very strong connection to her. And Clay (in CLAY'S QUILT) is pretty much me in my early to mid twenties. That book starts with Clay partying all the time,
living for the weekend, and through the course of the book he settles down, finds his place in the world. That completely follows my life during the time I was writing that book. Used to I wouldn't admit that book was autobiographical, but really, it is. And I'm like Anneth, too. I've always been a very "double" person. I'm a bit sacred and profane, a bit conservative and liberal, a bit wild and calm. I'm like her in many respects, but all of my main characters--Anneth, Vine, Clay--are that way.

Aurora: Lethargy or fear. What is the writer's biggest and most common foe?

House: For a long time my biggest foe as a writer was fear. It takes a long time to accept that you have to reveal so much about yourself on the page. But nowadays it's just being tired. At the beginning of this interview you asked me about how I found time to write. It's never a problem for me to find time to write because I'm always doing it in my head, but often I'm just tired. Book tour will absolutely kill you if you don't watch out. I feel blessed to be on a book tour, but at the same time, I miss sleeping in my own bed. I hate eating out all the time. I hate having to tell my daughters good night on the telephone. So I'm more emotionally tired than physically tired. And that's a hard thing for a writer.