The David and Barbara Pryor Center
for
Arkansas Oral and Visual History

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Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Donald "Skip" Hays

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 11, 2011

Fayetteville, Arkansas

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Objective

Oral history is a collection of an individual's memories and opinions. As such, it is subject to the innate fallibility of memory and is susceptible to inaccuracy. All researchers using these interviews should be aware of this reality and are encouraged to seek corroborating documentation when using any oral history interview.

The Pryor Center's objective is to collect audio and video recordings of interviews along with scanned images of family photographs and documents. These donated materials are carefully preserved, catalogued, and deposited in the Special Collections Department, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville. The transcripts, audio files, video highlight clips, and photographs are made available on the Pryor Center Web site at https://pryorcenter.uark.edu/about.php. The Pryor Center recommends that researchers utilize the audio recordings and highlight clips, in addition to the transcripts, to enhance their connection with the interviewee.

Transcript Methodology

The Pryor Center recognizes that we cannot reproduce the spoken word in a written document; however, we strive to produce a transcript that represents the characteristics and unique qualities of the interviewee's speech pattern, style of speech, regional dialect, and personality. For the first twenty minutes of the interview, we attempt to transcribe verbatim all words and utterances that are spoken, such as uhs and ahs, false starts, and repetitions. Some of these elements are omitted after the first twenty minutes to improve readability.

The Pryor Center transcripts are prepared utilizing the *University of Arkansas Style Manual* for proper names, titles, and terms specific to the university. For all other style elements, we refer to the *Pryor Center Style Manual*, which is based primarily on *The Chicago Manual of Style 16th Edition*. We employ the following guidelines for consistency and readability:

- Em dashes separate repeated/false starts and incomplete/ redirected sentences.
- Ellipses indicate the interruption of one speaker by another.
- Italics identify foreign words or terms and words emphasized by the speaker.
- Question marks enclose proper nouns for which we cannot verify the spelling and words that we cannot understand with certainty.

- Brackets enclose
  - italicized annotations of nonverbal sounds, such as laughter, and audible sounds, such as a doorbell ringing;
  - annotations for clarification and identification; and
  - standard English spelling of informal words.
- Commas are used in a conventional manner where possible to aid in readability.

Citation Information

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Scott Lunsford interviewed Skip Hays on June 11, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews took place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Okay, Skip. I'm Scott Lunsford. Uh—we're with the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral [*camera clicks*] and Visual History. Um—we go all over the state interviewing people . . .

Skip Hays: Mh-hmm. [*Camera clicks*]

SL: . . . getting their life stories. These series—this series of interviews that we're doing here these past couple of days are part of the Bill Harrison project.

SH: Uh-huh.

SL: Uh—this was—uh—Laurie Harrison's idea—uh—to come here and do this on this eleventh day of June in the year 2011. We are at Laurie's—Harrison's residence here in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Uh—these are high-definition recordings. You will get a transcript of this interview. You'll get a DVD of the raw footage of this interview, and I'll ask you to read the interview, look at the DVD. If there is anything that is wrong in our transcript, I'll ask you to correct or clarify. If there's something in there, in either the video or the transcript, that you're not happy with or

that you don't want the rest of the world to see, we will redact it.

SH: All right.

[00:01:10] SL: And once you're satisfied with the content and the nature of this interview, we will then post it . . .

SH: Mh-hmm.

SL: . . . on our website—Pryor Center website. And you can Google Pryor Center, and you can get to it.

SH: Uh-huh.

SL: The—um—we'll probably just do segments—clips—what we call highlight clips . . .

SH: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . videowise. But we will post the entire transcript and the entire audio. Both of those will be downloadable.

SH: Uh-huh.

SL: And we will encourage researchers—uh—Arkansas historians, students of Arkansas history, both in public schools and higher education, to use this material for educational purposes. Uh—we will archive this forever. We'll preserve this. Uh—a copy of it—um—a DVD copy of this material will reside in the Special Collections Department in Mullins Library here at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville campus. If you're okay with all of that, we'll keep going, and you just need to tell me that you're okay

with it.

SH: Oh, I'm—I'm okay. I'm fine with it.

[00:02:15] SL: [*Claps hands*] All right, excellent. Do you—let me give you a—I think you've got a little bit of perspiration . . .

SH: I'm sweaty, yes.

SL: . . . on your cheek. Yeah.

Trey Marley: And that's a—that's a fresh towel right there if you need to grab that . . .

SL: Yeah, if you need . . .

TM: . . . at any point.

SH: Yeah, I'll do that.

SL: Okay, good.

SH: I may need to do that everyone once in a while.

SL: That's all right. That's okay. There's really no—uh—there's nothing that you can do here that's wrong, so . . .

SH: All right.

SL: [*Laughs*] Um—Skip, I have to—uh—tell you—um—uh—well, first of all, let's do this. We always ask the interviewee to give their full name . . .

SH: Uh-huh.

SL: . . . and when and where they were born . . .

SH: Okay.

SL: . . . so . . .

SH: Well, my name is—uh—Donald Hays. Uh—I've been called Skip Hays all my life. I was born in—uh—Jacksonville, Florida, in—uh—1947.

SL: And your mother and father's names?

SH: My father's name was Donald Hays also. He was called Bus Hays. And my mother's name was Mary Hays.

SL: And her maiden name?

SH: Mary Slaven.

SL: *S-L-A-V-E-N*?

SH: And that was my—that's my middle name. My middle name is Donald—my middle name—my name is Donald Slaven Hays. The middle name comes from my mother.

SL: Okay, that's good. What did your—uh—mother and father do for a living?

[00:03:26] SH: My father was twenty years in the US Navy. He retired in, I believe, in 1955. Uh—so I was born in Florida on a naval base there. He was—my brother—I have one brother. He was born in—uh—Panama at the—at a naval base in Panama. Went to first grade in Naples, Italy. And then my mother and my brother and I came back to Arkansas. My mother and father are originally from Arkansas. We stayed there a year or two, I

can't remember, until my dad retired. And then he came back and bought a fa—farm in the Ozarks about [*inhales*] eight or ten miles north of Van Buren, way out in the country. So I grew up there, and I went to Van Buren schools—public schools.

[00:04:08] SL: Excellent. Uh—so—um—um—when was it that you were born again? I'm sorry.

SH: Nineteen forty-seven.

SL: [Nineteen] forty-seven. So—uh—Van Buren public schools?

SH: My—went to Van Buren High School. Went to a little country school called Rena School. When—I went to junior high and high school in Van Buren.

SL: So tell me about . . .

SH: Graduat—graduated Van Buren in 1965. Went to what was then Southern State College on a baseball scholarship and—and graduated from there in [19]69 in Magnolia. It's now Southern Arkansas University.

SL: Magnolia.

SH: Yeah.

SL: Um—so—uh—what did you major in in Magnolia?

SH: English.

SL: English, so . . .

SH: Started off in math and then went to premed, and I just [*sighs*]

made all—made—all the decisions I made were [*sighs*] based on bad premises. [*SL laughs*] Got to be an English major because they didn't take attendance quite as regularly and the classes could meet in the afternoon and that sort of thing, but—yeah. [*SL laughs*] But I—but I got a B.A. in English down there.

[00:05:18] SL: And—uh—so after you graduated—uh—from there, what did you do?

SH: I was a—a—this was—uh—1969, 1970. Vietnam War was going on. Uh—I was a draft resister. I ended up being a conscientious objector, and I did—I'm tryin' to remember the years. They granted my CO after considerable—I thought I was gonna go to jail. But anyway, I did—I worked two years as a psychiatric aide at the University of Arkansas Medical Center doing my alternative service for that. We—so we lived in Little Rock for two or three years. Then we came back to Northwest Arkansas. Lived in—on the Arkansas—on the Arkansas River Valley in a little town named Kibler. Now, I—I had a—I worked as—I was a social worker for two or three years. My wife's been a schoolteacher for thirty-eight years. Just retired last—just day before yesterday. And—uh—she—but she taught school. I worked as a social worker, and I tried to write for a while. Had a—I had a bunch of jobs. For—for a period of about fifteen or

twenty years, I had every job you can think of. My father, who I loved a lot, used to kid me. He'd say because I didn't have—I didn't have a steady job, you know, a job that lasted more than a couple years, until I started teaching up here. But my father used to say I was the only—he once described me as the only man he knew who retired the first twenty years of his adult life. [*Laughter*] Yeah. But we lived down in Winfrey Valley, which is just below—uh—Mount Gaylor down in that valley, for—my wife and I lived for about five or six years. [00:06:59] Had three terrible winters down there, and then she came home one day and said, "I don't know about you. You can do whatever you want to. You can stay here. But I'm gonna move to Fayetteville." And then at that—at that point, I applied to the writing program here—this would have been about [19]79—[19]78—and got accepted. I didn't really know what I was doing about it by applying to the writing programs, but I got accepted, so we moved up here. And so from [19]78—[19]79 to [19]83, I was a graduate student in the M.F.A. fiction program here. I had Bill and Jim. Bill—Bill Harrison and Jim Whitehead and John Clellon Holmes were my teachers. And I sold my first novel, *The Dixie Association*, during my last year as a student here in [19]83, [19]84.

SL: What did you . . .

SH: [Nineteen] eighty-three.

TM: Can we dab the sweat just a little bit? Just the . . .

SH: What?

TM: Can we hit the sweat just a little bit?

SH: I get—where?

TM: Uh—just kind of . . .

SH: Everywhere?

TM: . . . yeah, the fore—forehead, a little bit all over . . .

SH: All right.

TM: . . . cheek. Thank you.

SH: You got it?

TM: Yep.

SL: Yep.

SH: That all right?

SL: Yeah. So . . .

SH: Uh-huh.

[00:08:06] SL: . . . what did you—uh—what work did you submit to get accepted?

SH: I had a—uh—I—I—I had a couple of short stories I submitted, but most—and a long excerpt—excerpt of a novel that I'll never show anybody again, but it was a—I wrote a six-hundred-page

novel about conquistadors. [*Laughs*] Ponce de León was the main character. God knows why I did that, but that's what I sent 'em. Sent 'em I don't know how many pages of that and a short story, I think. And—uh—I drove up here and put the—put the—put the submission material in Bill or somebody's mailbox. I can't remember Bill or Jim or Miller. And it turned out to be the last day you could apply. I didn't know any of that. But then I got accepted, and it was, as I said, you know what, it—uh—it was the smartest thing I ever did. Bill—Bill and Jim were great teachers. And—uh—and—and in very different ways. But they were great. And so was John Holmes. And I had Miller for a couple of classes. He was a good—really good teacher for poetry. Uh—Bill, as you probably heard, was the perfect workshop teacher for me. But he was—you had to be tough. You had to be thick-skinned in Bill's workshop. He would say things like, "I'd rather—I'd rather—I would have cut my hand off before I'd writ—write—before I would have written this sentence." Or he would say, "I didn't finish reading this story. They don't print money fast enough to get me to read this all the way to the end" and—uh—[*SL laughs*] well, he's tellin' us this, and he was a great editor—is still a great editor of—uh—show you—uh—jus—jus—show—teaching you and showing you where

a story should start, how to do a scene, how to cut things out, you know, all the things I needed to learn are ma—many of the things I needed to learn he taught me really quickly. And he was exactly the kind of teacher I needed. No crap. Straight to the point. When he needed to be really hard on you, he was hard on you. When he—and he could praise you when you deserved it. But he made you—he made you—uh—work hard to get that prize. [00:10:11] Jim in the classroom—Bill was a—Bill was a great workshop teacher. Jim—I took a class from Jim as I was writing this novel—baseball novel narrated by a smart redneck. [*SL laughs*] I took a class from Jim called—uh—called Form and Theory of Poetry, a required class. And—uh—after I'd—after I'd been in there, I don't know, a few weeks, I went in to tell him I was gonna drop it. That I was writin' this novel and my—my redneck character was speaking entirely in iambic pentameter. We had to write all these poems in iambic pentameter. We had to write line after line after line, hundred lines of blank writes. Hundred lines of closed couplets. Hundred lines of all kinds of sonnets and all that, so I—I tried to drop the course and—uh—great big man. He had me out in the hallway, you know. After ten or fifteen minutes I was thankin' him for lettin' me stay in. I just—"Okay, I'll stay. Thank you." And—

uh—but that turned out to be the single best classroom course I've ever had. He was—he was absolutely brilliant. Cared about—so much about poetry, and—uh—I never—I never thought I'd ever end up being a professor or teacher, but since I did, it—that class turned out to be really valuable for me. And so he was—Bill—I can't imagine, for me anyway, there being a better workshop teacher, and Jim was the best classroom teacher. I can't imagine there being anybody on earth was better than him. That cared more and knew more about the subject than he did. A passionate teacher. So I was really lucky. [*Inhales*] And John Holmes was just—he was—he was—uh—John Holmes was the man who—uh—the—the—he was friends with Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and all the beats—but he—the—the term "beat generation" is—is—is his term. [00:11:50] He wrote a novel called *Go*, and in that novel a couple characters walk out of a bar, I think, in New York, and one of them says, "We're beat. We're a beat generation," and that's the first time the term was used. He was such a sweet man. And—and also, in his way, a really good teacher. So I had no idea, you know. I had heard that—you know, I'm from Arkansas, and I'd heard that they had a good writing program. I had no idea how good it was. They were really good. The

students were good. The teaching was—these guys were great teachers. Uh—good writers and great teachers is a—a—a—a—a statewide treasure. It's still a good program, and they started it from nothing, Bill and Jim. And—uh—now, to teaching here, I—after I graduated, I opened a bookstore on Block Street right above Hugo's, and that was there for several years, and then I just got tired of that. Didn't make a lot of money at it either. Got tired of it, and I—uh—and I had a son—my wife and I have a son, and at some point I decided I needed to get—get a real job. [00:12:54] So I—they'd hired me up here to teach as an adjunct when—when Bill was on leave a couple of times, I filled in for him. Then I decided—well, I guess it was [19]88 or [19]89—I decided to apply for teaching jobs, creative writing jobs, at writing schools, and I—and so I taught a year at—uh—got a job at Southern Illinois, and I taught there for—I believe it was a year, and really liked it. There's not much to be said for Carbondale, but I liked the people I taught with. Richard Russo and the poet Rodney Jones—they were really nice. And I thought—I assumed I would be there for a while. But then the job opened here. Uh—and—uh—Jim and Bill asked me to apply for it, and I applied and eventually got the job, so I've been teaching here full time since 1989, I think it was—[19]89 or

[19]90. So twenty-one or two years I've been teaching here. And that's been a really rewarding experience. So I—so I got a lot of the students that you have interviewed, like—uh—Steve Yarbrough and I were students together. He came a year or two after I did. But . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

SH: . . . we overlapped. [00:14:00] Tom Franklin was—uh—Bill's student and Jim's student but also my students. A lot of people out here were—you know, had both. [*Laughter in background*] I've been their teacher too. And—uh—it's been great. And it's—it's kind of, well, not—without the [*unclear words*], but these—part of the experience of going to the Arkansas program was—were these parties. I mean, they—Bill and Jim and John and Miller, but especially Bill and Jim, just opened their houses to us. We got to know them not just as teachers but as, you know, fellow writers and human beings. We got to know all their good—all their good qualities and all their flaws, and they were just so generous with all of us. It was wonderful experience. And it still is. And it's still—you know, Jim's dead. Miller's old and—uh—still writing poems, but I don't see him much, but I see Bill—have lunch with Bill fairly frequently, and we've become really good friends. I became really good friends with Jim too.

So it's one of the great privileges of my life—is that—that habit. I've become very close friends with lots of my students. And I'm still friends with some of the people I was students with here. And then with Bill, especially. It's been a wonderful experience.

SL: So—um . . .

TM: He'll need to grab the towel . . .

SH: Yep.

TM: . . . if you won't mind.

SH: Thank you. I just . . .

TM: Any—any time you want to, you can grab it.

SH: . . . I just gotta remember.

TM: Yeah.

SH: Anytime I feel the sweat, I should wipe it off, yeah. Okay.

[00:15:18] SL: Um—when you got here—I mean, had you been to Fayetteville . . .

SH: Oh yeah.

SL: . . . before?

SH: I'd been to Fayetteville. I'd been to Fayetteville. I had an uncle who live up here, so I—I drove up—I drove up Old 71 when it wasn't—when I was a little bitty boy when it wasn't entirely paved, yeah.

SL: Yeah.

[00:15:34] SH: Yeah. It was that long ago, yeah. But I had an uncle that—that was a schoolteacher up here. Joe Slaven, now dead. But we used to come up, I don't know, maybe once a year or somethin', and see him. And then that—and then I played high school football and basketball and baseball, and we played—when I was in high school the—the—[*sighs*] our district—our football district was Fayetteville, Springdale, Van Buren, Rogers, Bentonville. Bentonville later—it's strange to say, but Bentonville was at that time too small to be in that district at the—at first. But yeah, so I came up here playing ball a lot. And I—yeah, I was up here. And I knew something about the university, but I'd never attended it. I'd been to football games and stuff like that, but I never came here to school. And I had no idea how good—I just knew there was a writing program. I had no idea how good it was at that time. At the time, I believe—you can ask Bill—but I believe—I believe Arkansas was either the third or the—it's either the third or the fifth creative writing—graduate creative writing program in the United States. When I was here, there were—there was—there were nineteen total. Now there's, like, hundreds of them. And ours is—this is still one of the best. But I had no idea how good it was. And I had—I always liked coming to Fayetteville, yeah.

And I—you know, and my—my wife came up here. We lived up here a year. She came up here and finished her degree here in the—[19]70, [19]71, somethin' like that. She got a history degree and then took that teaching block that you could do back then and got her—got certified to teach . . .

SL: Yeah.

SH: . . . public school. And—uh—yeah.

[00:17:12] SL: But you had—you had not met Bill or Jim or . . .

SH: Never seen 'em.

SL: . . . John.

SH: [*TM coughs*] I had read their books. I had actually read—uh—*Joiner*, and I'd read—uh—two or three of Bill's book at the time, I guess. Yeah, two or three. So I knew who they were, and I'd read their books, and then when I—and when I got accepted, I read the rest of the books Bill had published up to then, and I read some of Miller's poems. Then I read—I had not read Jim's poetry. But then when I knew I was coming up here, I bought his—I believe he had two books of poems. And then I read—I read those—but I'd read his novel, *Joiner*. And I'd read—uh—Bill's novels.

SL: Well, when you met these guys—uh—did your—uh—preconceived notions of how they were from their works—did

that match the images in your first impressions?

[00:17:57] SH: I gue—I gue—I didn't know what—I didn't know quite what to expect. I think Jim did 'cause he was so big and he—he seemed like a big ol' lineman to me and—and—and he always—that was always part of his personality. Uh—it took me a little while to realize—I—um—partly, I don't know, arrogance on my part. Took me a little while to realize how smart he was. Uh—and then Bill—they were so different. Uh—Bill was—Bill was always charming and witty and quick, and Jim was—not that he wasn't funny sometimes, but he was serious. He—if—if you could say Bill's light, Jim was heavy. And I'm not just talkin' about weight.

SL: Yeah.

SH: And Bill was quick and witty and charming, and Jim was really—sometimes you could feel almost oppressively serious. Now, when I got to know him, I loved that. But it was—it was hard to have a light conversation with Jim, even after I got to be friends with him. Everything is—as he said, we were gonna talk about art and life and God. That's—you know, that's what he considered a—a fun evening.

SL: Well . . .

SH: And he wanted it to be passionate talk, so—and Bill—you know,

they just—it was a different kind of intelligence. Different kind of men. Ah—different kind of teachers. They were as different as teachers and as men as two people could be and still be—both of 'em be good at their job. It's different, and it—it's—it's not possible that—two people coulda had different attitudes, different methods—more different attitudes than they did. They were as different—one of the great things about this program at the—at that time was that the teachers were so different. You learned different lessons in different ways from each of them.

[00:19:29] SL: Well, someone commented earlier that if they had been the same, you wouldn't need one of 'em.

SH: You wouldn't need 'em, no.

SL: Yeah.

SH: That's right. He we—he we—and—uh—and John was never—uh—Jim—in the workshop, sometimes Jim could be so wrong about a story that you just couldn't believe it, but if you paid attention—if you paid attention, he might say the one—he might say the one thing you needed to hear that nobody else would see. And he would take—he—and Jim tended to want everything to be longer in the story. Jim—Bill always wanted everything to be short, tight, sleek. Jim wanted things to be—obviously, I—there's a—there's a student who's here, I think—and—uh—I

think he's here tonight, named Kevin Stewart, and I was directing his thesis one time. And—um—and it was—and so I was directing his thesis—um—and Bill and Jim were both on the committee. And usually with everybody but Jim, the—uh—thesis director does almost all the work. You get—you get—you help the student get the—uh—thesis into shape, and then he will show the thesis to the other members of the—uh . . .

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:34] SL: Committee.

SH: . . . committee, and they will make their suggestions, then you work on it. But you might as well—if Jim was gonna be on your committee, you might as well have him be director because he did the same thing the director did too. So I'm directing Kevin Stewart's thesis, and Jim is on the committee, and Bill's on the committee. So Kevin can tell the story too. But Kevin would come in to me, and he had this one story—as I said, Jim always wanted everything to be longer. And he would tell Kevin—he said, "This story needs"—and he would be absurdly precise about these kinda things, Jim would. He said, "This story is about forty pages long in manuscript." Jim would say, "This story needs to be a hundred and thirteen pages." [*SL laughs*] Just like that. He had no—not a hundred and fifteen, not a hundred and ten—

"It needs to be a hundred and thirteen pages." And I'd been telling Kevin it needed to be shorter and he had too many characters, it needed to be edited down, it needed to be tighter, and Bill, too, was telling him that when he saw it, and then—but Kevin just kept getting more and more confused. He was—you know, the—and the semester's going on, and he comes into my office one day, and we're talking about his thesis, and I said, "This story's still too long, Kevin." [00:21:40] And he just kinda threw his hands up in the air and said, "I don't know what to do." He said, "I show it to you, and you tell me it needs to be shorter, and then I go see Jim, and he says it needs to be three times as long. And I don't know what to do. I don't"—he said, "I don't know who I'm writing for." And I said—so I looked across—his—Jim's office was just across from mine, and I saw him sitting over in his office, and I said, "Well, Kevin, I'll go talk to him. I'll take care of this." So I go in, and I tell Jim—I said, "Kevin Stewart's standing right over there in my office, and we've got him confused." I said, "Maybe you're right, and maybe I'm right, but we've gotta stop this, and I'm directing his thesis, so he's writing for me. He's going to—and if he's writing to please either of us, it's gonna be me. And his story's gonna be shorter." And I said—and Jim said, "What are you talking

about?" I said, "Poor Kevin doesn't know who he's writing for, Jim. You've gotta stop." And Jim said—I'll never forget the line. Jim said, "Don't they know they're writing for God?" And I—you know, and I was irritated at it—I was irritated at him, but I'll never forget that line. What he's saying, obviously, is that they were writing for a higher judge than any of us. And he should take what I say and what Jim says and what Bill says and do whatever he wants to, but he's writing for posterity. He's writing whatever you—however you want to put it, but for God is the way Jim put it. And I told Kevin that, and I—but I went back and said that it's settled now, you're going to make it—it's gonna be shorter, but I told him the line too. [00:23:01] And—but that's they way—Jim took that work so seriously. And Bill did too, but he didn't—in a kinda odd way, he didn't always like to show it. You know, when he was workin' on a story, it was dead serious, and he didn't pull any punches. And he was great. As I said, he was exactly the kind of workshop teacher, editor, I needed, and lots of other people. But he was hard. He was—he didn't pull any punches at all. He would say—oh, I've told it—the lines, you know, "If you can't make an A in a workshop in Fayetteville, Arkansas, you need to buy a Dairy Queen." I mean [*SL laughs*], if you can't—"I'd rather write"—"I'd cut off my right

hand before I'd write this sentence." And he sometimes denies saying that, but I heard him say it. [00:23:46] He told us—one time he told it—I still use this when I'm teaching. A student in my workshop wrote what we would call an experimental story. It didn't really have a plot. It didn't have a narrative. It was just kind of pretty writing, trying to do something new. It's called—and there's stories like that that Bill likes, but generally he wants the story to have a story, to have a character you're interested in, and a plot, and a resolution, a beginning, a middle, and an end. So—but in workshop, we had this story. And Bill talked about the story just briefly, and then he says, "I wanna to tell you something." Right, this is like [19]92, [19]93. No, it wasn't. But it was when I was a student, so it was back in the early [19]80s. But he says—Bill said, "You can do this." He said, "But imagine it this way." He said, "You go to Razorback Stadium. Arkansas's playing Texas, right? Arkansas's gonna play Texas." See, there, back then, stadium didn't hold as many, but he said, "There's fifty thousand people there waiting to see this guy." And he said, "And you know, the band's been playing, the field's empty right now. Everybody's waiting for the game to start." And he said, "And you walk out to the fifty-yard line, the center of the field, the fifty-yard line." And he said,

"And you've got the loud speaker, microphone, and you announce to these fifty thousand fans," he said, "'Arkansas and Texas are not gonna play football today. Instead, I am going to juggle for you.'" And he said, "You can do that, but you had better be one hell of a juggler." [*Laughter*] [00:25:24] And I still use that. He'd tell—there's another version that Steve Yarbrough tells where he says, you know, "You go out, you walk out." It's during—Arkansas was gonna—it's when Nolan was coaching—Nolan Richardson was coaching the basketball team. We were national champions, and the Kentucky game was huge. And he says, "You walk out to the center court at Walton Arena, and you say, 'There's not—Arkansas's not gonna play Kentucky tonight.' You've got a violin." Said, "'Arkansas's not gonna play Kentucky tonight. Instead, I'm gonna play the Kreutzer Sonata.'" Said, "You can do that, but you better be a hell of a fiddler." Right? And I've always remembered that, and in terms of writing, it's true. If you're not going to tell a traditional story where you have an interesting character in an interesting situation and a story with a beginning, a middle, and a convincing resolution—you're not gonna do that, whatever you do had better be really something interesting. And I—and most of the time, it doesn't work. Anyway, he was a great teacher. Is

still—I still think of him as being—he's one of my best friends, but I still think of him as my teacher in a lot of ways.

[00:26:29] SL: Well, Skip, you're kind of a product of those three gentlemen coming out of . . .

SH: Right.

SL: . . . this program.

SH: Yeah.

SL: And you know, you did touch on the—on their personal attention. Don't you think that you and every student that's been through the program benefited from the line that was blurred from what was classroom and what was life? It was like . . .

SH: Yeah.

SL: . . . they were—it never really—the classroom never really ended, and the life never really left the classroom. It was like—they—it was too . . .

SH: No, we were—earlier this afternoon, several of mine and Bill's students, who were at my house and was just sittin' around the kitchen table. And one of them said—he said, "I learned as much here as I did anywhere else," he said, "at your house and at Bill's house and at Jim's house." Said, "This was so"—he said, "This was in a way the great gift you all gave to us." And to me.

They give—Bill and Jim and John gave that to me. They opened their lives, their doors, their lives to us, and we got to know them and this—and it was not just a teacher-student way. And the student said, "Sometimes it seemed like workshop and the classes were just some kind of little thing we had to do in between learning these life lessons with you guys at your house." 'Cause we had fun at these parties. But we talked about books and writings, and sometime as—writing as sometimes in as serious a way, or sometimes a more serious way, than we did even in workshop. So the ha—the door was open. I mean, Bill and Jim—you know, students get in trouble, they'd bail 'em out of jail. I have bailed students out of jail. I've had students come and live with me for the summer. They've taken care of—went to—I mean, it's a really closer—[00:28:15] That is what we can offer our students that I don't think any other program offers them. They get intense individual attention on their work. We take their work at least as serious as they do. Go over their stories line by line, over and over again, and we welcome them into our lives in a way that I don't think many professors do. But I also think it's the nature of what we're trying to teach. Trying to teach people how to tell stories about human beings, and I think you almost have to open yourself to

some extent as a human being to those students, so they need—so it's a, you know, not only an introduction to professional writing, it's an introduction to a way of living and being. And they gave that to me. I didn't—I wouldn't have thought that was possible, you know, in a teacher-student relationship until I got here. And it took me—I don't know, a semester or two before I realized it was happening. I just didn't believe it. You know, I was a little older. I'd been a conscientious objector. I'd been interrogated by the FBI. [00:29:16] These guys didn't intimidate me the way they did for some people, but then I realized, "Jesus, I've become part of their life. They've become—they're really important to me." I always had a—I always had a almost antagonistic attitude toward authority figures. And I realized that wasn't needed, especially Bill. About writing, I needed to hear what he had to say about my stories, about my novel. I needed his friendship. I needed him. You know, I needed a lot of what he had to offer. And he just sorta gave it to me unquestionably. He did not just to me, but to everybody, I guess. So generous in that way. And you know, obviously they were in charge in the classroom, but in the—in their homes at the parties and stuff, they were as vulnerable as any of the rest of us, and they—both of 'em—you know, it wasn't

like they didn't want—you know, you weren't supposed to argue with 'em. They wanted you—they wanted these, you know, intense discussions, and they wanted you to feel free. Now, somebody said, "You better know what you're sayin' if you're gonna argue with them. You better have some idea of what you're talking about, or you're gonna be left there with no clothes on and, you know [*SL laughs*], no skin either." But yeah, they invited that. It was great.

[00:30:25] SL: Well, you're kind of carrying that on, though, aren't you? I mean . . .

SH: I hope so. I mean, my students have been telling I have, and I'm pleased to hear that. I know it's hard for me to think of myself as being as good a teacher as Bill or Jim, but I think I've done a good job. And I think the program is carrying on. I know—I hope we get some money, and I—at some points I almost feel like fund-raising. I hope we get some money. I think the state, the university, everybody should support us. It's one of the best things in the state, that we have a first-rate creative writing program at—in Arkansas. And I, you know—and we need all the help we can get. It doesn't take much to keep a creative writing program going. You just need some good teachers, and you need to be able to recruit good students,

which means they need to have really good assistantships and some fellowships and stuff like that. And that's what we're fighting to do.

SL: Well, and . . .

SH: But the teaching here has always been at a very high level. Yeah. In this writing program, yeah.

SL: Another plank in this platform is all the folks that they bring in that the students get exposed to. Different . . .

SH: Yeah. Every . . .

SL: . . . writers, publishers, editors.

[00:31:35] SH: Right. Every workshop, like every semester and for the—we have one—we have one fiction workshop and one poetry workshop every semester—graduate. And we have a visiting writer who comes in for a week, gives a public reading, but he also—he or she also has a editorial conference with every student in the workshop. And I know Bill and Jim did this too, and so do I. They come in, and I tell 'em nothing. Even if they ask, I don't say, "So-and-so's the best writer in the workshop." I don't have prejudice. They get a completely open, you know, opinion. They just send the stories to these writers, and I schedule the conferences, and they have a—each of them. And it's—it was good for me. It's been—it's great for my students.

And most of the visiting writers do a great job. I can't say every single one does.

SL: Well, yeah.

SH: But most of 'em do. Yeah.

SL: Yeah. Well, even the ones that don't do a good job . . .

SH: You get to—at least you get to be . . .

SL: . . . they've at least experienced that.

SH: Yeah. You get . . .

SL: And they understand that there's gonna be . . .

[00:32:37] SH: You know, and pardon me, some writers are assholes. And it is good for students to—young student writers to realize that too. I mean, guys that—some men and some women who are really good writers are, as human beings, not particularly good human beings. And [*laughter*] it's important for students to real—you know, it is healthy for students to get over the kind of idealization that some of them have for writers that—and you know—but lots of 'em come in and do a really good job. Most of 'em come in and really do a really good job, and they have—and we always have a party for them. And they have—they tend to have a really good time with the students, and the students get to know them at least a little bit. And that's cool. That's one of the good things we've always done,

and they, Bill and Jim, started that. I guess they model—I think they do it at Iowa—and they both went to the University of Iowa writing program, and loosely, anyway, modeled this program after that.

SL: Took it a step up, probably.

SH: Well, it's much smaller . . .

SL: Little step further maybe.

SH: . . . it's much smaller, and the students get a lot more individual attention.

SL: Yeah.

[00:33:40] SH: Yeah. But yeah, in that way better. We don't—they have—Iowa writing program now is huge—well, I don't wanna talk about Iowa. This is still a really good program. We get lots of applicants. We get good students. They publish stories in really good journals, win contests, publish novels. Yeah, we have a student, recent graduate, graduated about three years ago, named Nic Pizzolatto, who's writing *The Killing* for HBO—I mean, for Showtime. And he's got a novel—I mean, our students are still—many of—quite a few of our students are still really successful. They're publishing books. So we're doing our work, right. Or either we're doing our work, or we're getting really good students, or both. And I'd like to think it's both,

yeah.

SL: It is.

SH: Yeah.

SL: It is. Skip, is there anything else you wanna—have to say about Bill or Jim and the program?

SH: Well, I just owe—I owe 'em both a lot. I'm sure as soon as I get up, I'll think of things I wish I'd said, but I got all kinds of stories that some I probably shouldn't tell. But not right now. I can't think of anything else.

SL: Okay.

SH: All right.

SL: I'll let you off the seat.

SH: Okay.

[00:34:39 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]