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

University of Arkansas
1 East Center Street
Fayetteville, AR 72701
(479) 575-6829

Arkansas Memories Project

Bill Harrison Surprise Interviews

Paul Williams

Interviewed by Scott Lunsford

June 10, 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. 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 Paul Williams on June 10, 2011, in Fayetteville, Arkansas. This series of interviews takes place during a birthday celebration for William Harrison.

[00:00:00]

Scott Lunsford: Uh—Paul—uh—I'm gonna take care of some business here. My name's Scott Lunsford. You are Paul Williams. We are the Pryor Center—uh—for Arkansas Oral and Visual History. And we're here working on the Bill Harrison project. We've already interviewed Bill a few months ago with—um—Roy Reed, and it was a great interview.

Paul Williams: Mh-hmm.

SL: And—um—Laurie's—uh—idea was to gather up former students and colleagues and—uh—have a gathering—uh—to surprise Bill, and—uh—we got a call with the idea of maybe interviewing some of you guys and gals, and so that's why we're here. And what will happen is that—uh—um—this stuff will be preserved forever—uh—by the Pryor Center, and—um—uh—copies of it will also be available at the Special Collections Department in Mullins Library at the University of Arkansas. Uh—we will—uh—select—uh—highlights—video highlights from this interview and post them on the web. Uh—the—uh—transcription and the audio of

this entire interview will be available on the web. Uh—you will be given a chance to redact anything that you are not comfortable with . . .

PW: Mh-hmm.

[00:01:18] SL: . . . in this interview. We're not here to catch anybody [*PW laughs*] or to put stuff out there they don't want out there. Uh—I will encourage you to, you know, uh—uh—tell the stories that—that you want to tell. And—uh—don't let me try to drag something out of you you don't wanna talk about. Um—so there are no really wrong answers here. You can talk about whatever you wanna talk about. Um—after—uh—you've had a chance to review the transcript, and we'll try and—we'll send you a rough—just the raw footage of your interview. And after you've looked and read and you're happy with it and happy with any changes that we perform, then we'll put this stuff out there on the web, and it'll be available to everybody. And we'll be encouraging documentarians, researchers—uh—students of Arkansas history, both in the public schools and—and—uh—higher education. Uh—we just really wanna make these stories available to everybody. And if you're comfortable with all of that, then we'll just keep going with this recording.

PW: Let's just keep going.

SL: Okay. That's a great answer. Thank you, Paul. Uh—so we start with—uh—your full name and where and when you were born.

PW: Paul Howard Williams, and I was born November 2, 1947, in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

[00:02:41] SL: Oh, you're pretty close. Um—so what were your mom and father's names?

PW: Uh—Bill Williams and Betty Williams.

SL: And her maiden name was . . .

PW: Fulbright.

SL: Fulbright. No relation to the . . .

PW: Very distant.

SL: Very distant.

PW: Yeah.

SL: Okay. Um—and what did they do for a living?

PW: Uh—my father was a microbiologist. Uh—my mother—uh—was for the most part a homemaker, although for fifteen or sixteen years she managed a—uh—Blue Chip Stamp redemption center. [*Laughs*]

SL: Wow, Blue Chip Stamps. That's like Green Stamps?

PW: Like Green Stamps, yeah. Yeah.

SL: So your father was a microbiologist. So there was some—uh—academia—uh—in your home growing up, I guess.

PW: Some of my earliest memories are of Fayetteville, where my father went to graduate school.

SL: Oh, okay. So you're kind of a legacy, then.

PW: After a fashion, yeah.

SL: Yeah. Um—so you were born in Tahlequah, but were you raised there, or were you raised . . .

PW: No, no, my father was going to college there.

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: And then after that, he came to Fayetteville to—uh—go to graduate school.

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: Uh—he was one of the first two—uh—graduates in—uh—in the graduate school—in microbiology—uh—bacteriology, they called it then.

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: Yeah.

[00:04:10] SL: Good. Well, where did you—so did—you grew up in Fayetteville.

PW: No—uh [*laughs*]—as soon as he finished graduate school, he took a job—uh—with the government, and—uh—we moved to the Pine Bluff Army Arsenal.

SL: Wow.

PW: We did not live in Pine Bluff. We lived on the—uh—military base. Uh—after that, he went to California and worked for—uh—Gallo wines for a few years.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And then came back to Oklahoma—uh—where he worked for the state for the medical school and the state health department, and finally—uh—took a job—uh—with Pfizer, the drug company Pfizer.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And Pfizer at that time had a small diagnostic laboratory in Springdale that was a free service to the poultry industry with the expectations, of course, they would buy Pfizer products. So I did my last two years of high school in Springdale. I went into the service after—uh—high school. My father was transferred, but I still had residency in Arkansas. So when I got out of the service, this—this is where I came to go to undergraduate school.

[00:05:17] SL: So Springdale in nineteen—what—[19]65?

PW: That was when I graduated. Mh-hmm.

SL: Um—uh—maybe you should tell me a little bit about Springdale—goin' to Springdale High School—graduating there. What was—what was Springdale like now? I mean, not now, but

what was it like back then?

PW: Uh—at that time, the population was about fifteen thousand.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And it was—um—it was a town dominated by—uh—Tyson and—uh—uh—what was it—uh—Jones Truck Lines . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . and a couple of other—uh—poultry-related businesses.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Uh—also—um—oh, gee—there's another truck line that did frozen foods. Uh—I'm blanking on the name of it right now. It'll come to me in a minute. Um—but those were the major industries . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: . . . uh—in Springdale at that time. And small school. Uh—we lived—uh—in the country, actually. My father bought some—uh—property—uh—near where Beaver Lake is now, in Nob Hill.

SL: Okay.

[00:06:26] PW: And so I had—uh—some country friends . . .

SL: Yeah.

PW: . . . and I had some townie friends.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Uh—I played a little bit of sports, but I was a very mediocre

athlete. And—uh—the second year I was there, I got into—uh—speech, debate, drama and—uh—wrote the first things I ever wrote. Uh—some oratory for these . . .

SL: Sure..

PW: . . . forensic debate tournaments and—uh—tried my hand at some one-act plays and things like that.

SL: And did that kinda stick with you, you think?

PW: I didn't think much of it at the time.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Uh—after graduation, I—I briefly attended the university, but I didn't have—uh—anything I was really that interested in.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: No particular direction, so I joined the service.

[00:07:15] SL: Which service?

PW: Uh—the Marine Corps.

SL: Marine Corps.

PW: Um—and after—uh—that—after the Marine Corps—I got out in 1968—I came back to Fayetteville, as I said, to—uh—to go to school because that was where I had residency.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And I met—uh—Bob Ward—uh—here. Bob was then in the graduate program in creative writing, and it was—uh—through

him that I met Bill Harrison. So I—I knew Bill socially long before I had him as a professor.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Um—in fact [*laughs*], I rather naively—uh—well, let me backtrack just a moment. I was—uh—living on Markham Hill . . .

SL: Okay.

PW: . . . uh—in one of the old cabins up there.

SL: Yes.

PW: And I had—uh—dropped out of school because I didn't—uh—didn't have a major—didn't know what I wanted to do, and I was just using up my GI Bill. So I said . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . "Well, I'll take some time off to think about this."

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:08:11] PW: What I realized was that most of the people I liked—most of the people I liked being around—were writers and artists. I didn't have any particular talent—uh—in the visual arts, but I'd always liked language.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: I borrowed a typewriter from a fellow who lived across the field from me who—uh—was—uh—in the M.F.A. poetry program—Jack Butler was his name.

SL: Yes, Jack Butler.

PW: And—uh . . .

SL: "No deposit, no return."

PW: . . . on that—on that typewriter I typed out a short story, and I had the very bad luck to have it published.

SL: [*Laughs*] Uh-oh.

PW: Uh—I thought, "This is easy." [*Laughs*] Of course, it was only six or seven years before I got another one published.

SL: Right.

[00:08:51] PW: But—uh—then I said, "All right, I'll change my major to English," and did. And then I ran into Bill—uh—at a bar and said, "Bill, I'd like to be in your writing program" [*laughs*] or "in your workshop." And he said—uh—"Have you ever taken any writing courses?" I said, "No." He said, "Maybe you should [*laughs*] think about that." And I did. I took undergraduate writing courses, and by the time I was a senior in college—uh—and I—I'd won a couple of contests—writing contests—uh—Bill let me into—as an undergraduate—into the writing workshop.

SL: Okay.

PW: So I had a semester in the writing workshop as an undergraduate. Uh—after that, I went with my then wife to North Carolina, where she was a graduate student at Duke.

Uh—after we broke up, I came back to Fayetteville and worked for a year in the building trades . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . and then reapplied to graduate school and was accepted. Uh—but I was accepted—uh—provisioning—provisionally—uh—and the—uh—because—uh—Bill and Jim didn't feel like my portfolio, which might've gotten me into the program a few years before, was really strong enough, because they had better writers. So as a provisional student, I continued to write—uh—entered—uh—the—uh—graduate competitions—graduate school competitions—and won one of the big prizes. And they said, "All right, you're in."

SL: Cool. You worked it. You earned it.

PW: Uh—well, I suppose. I was—uh—I—I—I came across a story that I said, "I can—I can make this work. I can make this a real story, not just an anecdote."

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And—uh—it worked out.

[00:10:42] SL: So—um—tryin' to think—your first—the first time that you met Bill was in a bar.

PW: No, I think it was probably at a graduate student party.

SL: Okay.

PW: Uh—as I say, I had gotten to know him socially . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: . . . uh—through Bob Ward, and I'd met some of the other people who were also—uh—in the writing program.

[00:11:03] SL: M'kay. Um—Whitehead?

PW: Yes, I knew Jim—uh—and Bill both socially before—uh—I was ever a student of theirs.

SL: So how did—how did you work your way into—uh—the—the—a—student parties? Uh—I mean, they were pretty much—uh—you know . . .

PW: Well, as I say, I—I knew Bob very well. He was—uh—he was playing with a band called the Bridge.

SL: Yes.

PW: And I had a—a tiny little house with a tiny little basement, just big enough to get four musicians and a trap set in.

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: And they used to rehearse down there.

SL: Okay.

PW: Uh—and—uh—I played some basketball with him and some others.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: This sort of thing. So I—I simply knew a lot of these guys, and

when it rolled around—uh—a party, and they'd just say, "Well, hey, come on over."

SL: There you were.

PW: Yeah.

SL: Surrounded by a bunch of writer types.

PW: Exactly.

[00:12:02] SL: I see. Well, so—uh—what was your first—uh—impression of Bill?

PW: My very first impression of Bill. Hmm. I remember certainly he had a keen and very individual sense of humor. Uh—and Bill—he was seldom—he was never cruel to anyone, but he had a biting wit.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Uh—and I very quickly figured out he was not somebody you wanted to bandy words with lightly, because he had a bigger arsenal than you did. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah.

SL: And that was true of Whitehead too, wasn't it?

PW: Oh, very much so. Of course—uh—Jim was a—a larger character in every sense—uh—both physically and just in his presence. Uh—Bill was—uh—slyer, but he was also—uh—I—I soon found

out, very, very competitive. Whitehead dislocated Bill's shoulder one time in a flag football game [*laughter*] because Bill foolishly just dug in against this fellow who was forty, fifty pounds bigger than he was and had played football. [*Laughter*] And—uh—they—they cracked heads, and Bill came up with [*laughs*] one dangling. Uh—I used to play a lot of tennis with Bill . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . uh—later, when in—in graduate school, after I took up the game. And—uh—he was a very good tennis player—uh—he—uh—who always kept great good humor on the court except when he was playing mixed doubles [*laughs*] with his wife. They'd get angry at each other. [*Laughs*] We used to joke that—uh—what you'd always hear when the Harrisons were playing mixed doubles was, "Damn it, sweetheart!" [*Laughter*]

SL: Out of both of 'em, huh?

PW: Yeah, or either.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:14:23] PW: Yeah. Uh—but—uh—he was—uh—he was—Bill was a teacher. I took up the game of tennis when I was thirty years old, and he was patient because he saw I was enthusiastic about

the game, and he'd give me pointers without—uh—being obnoxious about it—and much the same as a teacher of writing. Now, I—now, I had Bill for some other courses—uh—uh—as well. Uh—a [*cell phone dings*] Fellini seminar . . .

SL: Uh-huh.

PW: . . . that he team-taught—um—and—uh—one undergraduate course. I can't remember what it was. It may have been a creative writing course. I just don't recall. Um—but—uh—as I say, he—uh—he—he was never cruel to a student. He'd, you know, sometimes be very harsh—very candid.

SL: Mh-hmm.

[00:15:24] PW: And then sometimes he would simply say, "Well [*sighs*], this story ain't gonna make you any friends."

SL: Mmm.

PW: Or "You know, this'd be a better story if you'd just stop and remember what you know." Those were the kinds of things he would do and usually pretty oblique. Now, in a workshop situation, where we'd be looking at a story just line by line and—and scene by scene—terrific technician.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Uh—particularly in development of scene and choreographing scenes. It was not until years later I—uh—knew that Bill had a

background in theater—that he had acted and directed and . . .

SL: I didn't know that myself.

PW: Yeah. Um—in fact—uh—I believe he and Jim Whitehead—well, I don't know where they first met, but I—I remember—uh—his mentioning once that they really became close when Bill cast Jim in a play.

SL: Vanderbilt, I guess, huh?

PW: Mh-hmm. Yeah, Vandy. Uh . . .

[00:16:36] SL: Okay, I do—I kinda do remember that story.

PW: Yeah. Yeah. So—uh—I mean, and therefore, that made—it made Bill's approach to storytelling very different from Jim's, or very different from John Clellon Holmes, who was—ended up being actually my thesis advisor when I worked on my M.F.A. Uh—Jim—uh—was much more interested in orders of language. He was much more interested in the metaqualities of the fictions . . .

SL: Kay.

PW: . . . I think than Bill. Bill was very, very grounded in the kind of storytelling that is done scene by scene. And then what kind of connective tissue is gonna hold those scenes together.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: He used to say—and I—really a commonplace—that when you're

writing a story, every scene has to do three things at once. It has to further the storyline, it has to reveal the character, and it has to reinforce the themes. And this is like juggling three running chainsaws.

SL: [*Laughs*] Yeah.

PW: But as I say, his approach was rather oblique in that way, and he would just say, "This is what you need to do. Think about it in this way." So it—it was far less—I hesitate to use the word didactic, but let's say directed . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . in some ways than, say, Whitehead's approach. Uh—whereas, Jim would—uh—look at a story, and he'd say, "Well, you know, you've got—uh—you're—you're—you know what your theme is? Do you know—uh—what these images here are? Do you know how they relate to your theme?" Uh—and then he would tell you. [*Laughter*]

SL: Yeah.

[00:18:44] PW: These—these were all rhetorical questions. Uh—I was—I was always—I was always amazed at how often I would feel [*sighs*]—"I'm not getting enough from Bill. I want him to tell me more. I want him to be maybe a little more directive."

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: And then at the end of a semester, I would look back and say, "Hmm. You know, I'm—I'm—I'm doing things differently now. Where did that come from?" And it was almost a subliminal kind of suggestion, but he would say it often enough in enough different ways that it soaked in.

SL: Never really heard it, but it achieved the results.

PW: Yeah. Uh—and Bill—uh—has a friend, John Yount . . .

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: . . . who was here a couple of times as a writer.

SL: Mh-hmm.

PW: Visiting writer. Also a novelist. And—uh—Yount said to me once, and he said that he heard this from Bill. Bill said he heard it from Yount. [*Laughs*] He said, "On the piano you got the white keys and the black keys, and sometimes you gotta get in between 'em [*laughter*] to get the note you really want." And so it was that kind of—of criticism and encouragement, because it was criticism only—uh—in the sense of being analytical, not in the sense of being pejorative.

[End of verbatim transcription]

[00:20:24] SL: So you had this great—you had this desire to be in the writing program. And was it just because most of your friends that you were hangin' with were writers and artists, or

did you really feel like there was something about this program that was more than just a worthwhile thing for you? I mean, did you . . .

PW: Writing made sense to me.

SL: Yeah.

PW: It made sense to me. Other areas where I studied—math, sciences, history—and while I'd—I had some interest in some of those, particularly history. I toyed with the idea of majoring in history. But I got so much more satisfaction from reading fiction than I did reading history that I said, "There's something here, and I have a feeling I can do this." And once I got started, I didn't wanna stop.

SL: Well, there's always great truth in fiction. I mean, good fiction.

PW: The lie that tells the truth.

SL: Yes. Yeah.

PW: Yeah.

[00:21:45] SL: So was there ever a moment that you had with Bill—I mean, you talked about at the end of a semester looking back at the—where you started the semester and where you were in your craft and where you were at the end of the semester—but was there ever a time with Bill where he may have said somethin' to you that really caught you or really all of a sudden

the light went on or . . .

PW: Yes and no. One semester when I was in graduate school, I received a B in workshop. And I was stunned. I thought that I was doing every bit as well as I had the previous semester. And I went and asked Bill about it, and he said, "Yeah, you are. You should be better." [*SL laughs*] And it was a little way of giving me a little kick in the butt, sayin', "You can't rest on your laurels. You gotta do it every day, and you gotta get better every day." And that was a wake-up call.

[00:23:08] SL: Really, that's a—that can be applied across all disciplines, can't it?

PW: Yeah.

SL: That's good. That's almost a coach.

PW: A coach sometimes benches a good player because he's not giving it 100 percent.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah.

SL: So you probably have kept that with you, haven't you?

PW: I can't say that I've always applied it. [*Laughter*] But I can say I know it to be true.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yep.

[00:23:38] SL: So what kind of difference in your life did Bill and Jim and the writing program make for you?

PW: Well, a huge difference. I was not—when I started—when I said, "I'm going to be a writer," I was not well read and didn't know how to read very well. I mean, of course, I could read the words, but in terms of looking at a piece of fiction or a poem or a play and understanding what made it work—that I didn't have. And once I got to—once I decided I was going to be an English major and once I'd set my sights on being a writer, I became an English major because I decided I was going to be a writer. It simply made sense to me.

SL: Yeah.

PW: And I wanted to give myself the acid test, 'cause I knew my weaknesses. I looked at the course catalog, and I found a course—an English course—in which *Ulysses* was taught. I'd always been told that this was the most demanding novel in English. I hadn't heard of *Finnegans Wake* at the time. [*SL laughs*] So I jumped in and enrolled for the course. And sitting next to me was my high school English teacher, who was [*laughs*] coming back to get his Ph.D. [*laughter*], which really made me worry. But I learned more about how to read, and how to read for what Harold Bloom calls the difficult pleasures,

with Bill and Jim, where you learned how to read deeply. And this isn't a matter of looking for hidden meanings; it's looking for what's right there and learning how to see it. I suppose you could say I learned how to see literature and a little bit about what it was about. And of course, on a very practical side, I had a chance to learn all of the mistakes that young and/or poor writers make, 'cause I made 'em.

SL: You made 'em. [*Laughs*]

PW: I made 'em.

SL: You owned them.

[00:26:09] PW: And now I can look at a short story by a student or by someone who is not an accomplished writer, and you see it within a sentence or two. And that knowledge—that ability that they taught me has been beyond price. Absolutely. And it—the thing is, it has informed all of my understanding about all kinds of writing. And I have to add to that that I learned more of the formal tropes of literature—particularly of poetry—studying with Miller Williams than from anyone. And I found—I saw ways that those things could be transposed into prose and how they could be used, and that was very helpful. But I've worked as a journalist—done magazine work and as a feature writer—all of those lessons were invaluable. How do you set a scene? How

do you create character? How do you establish an image pattern that reinforces the theme of this piece? All of those kinds of things. And for that matter, even in the classroom when I've taught, I shamelessly have pirated [*laughter*] almost whole lectures from Bill Harrison, Jim Whitehead, and Miller Williams.

[00:27:54] SL: Well, that's a great tradition, though.

PW: I—absolutely. [*SL laughs*] Why reinvent the wheel?

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah, they—those guys were very, very good. I mean, Whitehead took a great deal of pride in his teaching and was rewarded for it many times. Bill approached teaching a lot, and I—all right—I took a Fellini seminar once from him that he was team-teaching—oh, with a man in the Drama Department whose name I'm—is escaping me right now, but it'll come to me.

SL: Kimpel?

PW: No.

SL: No, not Kimpel. Well . . .

PW: It will come to me in a minute. But what Bill did . . .

SL: Gross. Roger Gross, maybe?

PW: No.

SL: No?

PW: Italian last name. This man had known Fellini.

SL: Yeah. Oh, I'll think of it in a minute.

PW: Yeah, it [*laughs*] will come to us . . .

SL: Yeah, okay.

PW: . . . in a moment

SL: Yeah.

[00:29:03] PW: What Bill tried to do in there—and he, by this time, was—as I say, he had background in theater—he was a—he had already written screenplays, so he knew the nuts and bolts of this stuff. He could do an exegesis frame by frame, I'm sure. But that was not his approach to teaching. In the case of Fellini, he stressed very much the visual qualities—the qualities of surprise and awe that Fellini strove for—even in his very, very earliest work. You know, he got his start doing these sort of like comic books, except instead of drawn cells, there would be photographs that'd be set up. He'd set up a photo, and so it was almost like doing a series of movies—a storyboard. And there would be captions and this sort of thing. And Fellini would set up just absolutely surreal images in there, and it was all just to get that visceral response when you [*PW gasps*] look at that totally unexpected. And that was what Bill tried to convey. Norman DeMarco was . . .

SL: That's correct. Thank you. Gosh!

PW: . . . the other guy. And whereas DeMarco focused a little bit more on Fellini's film biography—his film history—and on some of the technical aspects of how shots were framed, how . . .

SL: Sure.

PW: . . . scenes were managed—that kind of thing. So while Bill knew technically a lot about film, about fiction, his approach to teaching it shaded toward the subtle, the impressionistic, the nudging rather than the pushing. It is—and I will say this, that Bill had a terrific capacity for recognizing there are many ways to tell good stories. I—and I get the feeling, although I'm not closely involved with the university or with the writing program now, I still have friends who are on the faculty. [00:31:52] And I've talked to some students. I'm seeing a kind of homogeneity in the work coming out of those programs. I can almost spot a workshop story or a story that's been heavily workshopped because they tend toward "You know, you need to do this and this and this and this." And Bill never tried to get anyone to write a particular way. He might say—well, I think he tried to look for students' strengths and build on those without ever saying, "Oh, no, don't do that. Do this." He'd say, "Okay, well, you're doing that. Do that and this."

SL: Less a molding than an expanding.

PW: Yeah, yeah. He genuinely, I believe, had faith in the people that he brought into the writing program. He saw they had strengths, and he wanted to use those strengths as a foundation instead of just saying, "No, no, no, look—you're just word-drunk, and you're not paying attention to character. You're not paying attention to the story." He would say, "Oh, this is lush language. Let's see if we can use it in the service of something else."

[00:33:25] SL: That's good stuff. Any story—any other stories you wanna tell? I mean, you've . . .

PW: Yeah.

SL: . . . probably given the most definitive descriptions of classroom techniques and the way Bill worked with a student that we've gotten so far. We've gotten several stories. Are there any stories that you might be willing to let go of?

PW: I remember one time when Bill—he surprised me to the point it almost frightened me. We were playing tennis. Bill was a better tennis player than I was, but I was having a good day.

SL: Uh-oh.

PW: Yeah, I had put away some shots that normally were way out of my . . .

SL: Skill level.

PW: . . . skill level.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah. And [*SL laughs*] so at one point—and Bill was getting a little frustrated, and I had hit a short shot, and he came charging up there [*laughs*], racquet at the ready and with a snarl on his face—said, "Die, you son of a bitch!" [*Laughter*] I think he was talkin' to the ball.

SL: Uh-huh. [*Laughter*] That's good.

PW: But it was so out of character. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah. Well, that's that competitive edge . . .

PW: Yeah.

SL: . . . comin' out . . .

PW: Yeah.

[00:34:55] SL: . . . again. That's good. That's good. Well, what about—is there anything that you would want to—if you had a chance to say somethin' to Bill right now, what would you say?

PW: Thanks. And I can go ahead and say that word over and over and over and over, because I owe him a great deal. I realize that more now than I did, say, when I first graduated. But he's also been a terrific friend over the years, and this was another quality of Bill's. He made friendships among his students—just like Bob Ward—friendships that carry on to this day. He—he's seen me through some hard times. He never offered me any

Dutch uncle advice, but he let me know he was always there. If I was hittin' a rough patch—wanted to go have a cup of coffee or get a beer—sure. He was for that. And I knew that we had the kind of friendship that if I didn't see him for years and I showed up on his doorstep and was in need, "Come on in."

SL: That's good. You know, I'm sure that he values that, that he has folks like you that have those relationships where he can still be a part of your life.

[00:36:47] PW: Well, I also should mention that our friendship survived the fact that I was his employee for about a year and half also, when he and Merlee owned the House of Books on Dickson Street. And Henry Griffith was managing it, and I was in undergraduate school.

SL: Henry.

PW: And I worked there part time . . .

SL: Yeah.

PW: . . . for about a year and a half. And I don't think I was a bad employee. [*Laughter*] But I . . .

SL: You were not management class. [*Laughter*]

PW: But I was—no, I was not management material at that time [*laughter*] for sure.

SL: You were not climbing the corporate ladder.

PW: I was just wanting to make sure the till balanced. [*Laughs*]

[00:37:33] SL: Yes. Yeah, yeah. That's good. Well, that was a special—I guess the House of Books has its own set of stories, doesn't it?

PW: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Course, many of them involve Merlee. She was much more active in the store.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Much to Henry, the manager's, consternation [*laughs*] sometimes—would decide "We've got to rearrange everything in here." He said, "This isn't like furniture. We have thousands [*laughs*] and thousands of books, you know."

SL: That's funny.

PW: Yeah, it was—though, again, if relations ever were strained, it was like having a spat with a sibling or something, you know. Yes, you get really angry, and then you're over it.

SL: Yeah.

PW: Which was another life lesson—that it's perfectly all right to get angry with people you love. Just don't stay that way. There are better things and more important things to do.

SL: Don't waste your time.

PW: Don't waste your time with that. [*Laughs*]

SL: Yeah.

PW: Yeah.

[00:38:47] SL: That's good advice. Well, is there anything else you wanna say?

PW: [*Sighs*] No, not really. I mean, there probably is. [*Laughs*] I'll go home tonight and think of it.

SL: Well you know, we're gonna be here tomorrow, and you know, people are linin' up to . . .

PW: Yeah.

SL: But if something burning happens and you just gotta say somethin', why, just come to me and let me know.

PW: Well, this evening I'm sure I'll be talking to a lot of people, and that'll probably jog the memory.

SL: Yeah, yeah.

PW: And there may be something that comes up that's just too good.

SL: Yeah.

PW: And if so, I'll give a shout and see if you can work me back in.

SL: Okay. Sounds good.

PW: Great.

SL: Thank you, man.

PW: Thank you.

SL: It was good stuff.

[00:39:25 End of interview]

[Transcribed and edited by Pryor Center staff]