

NAVIGATING THE OTHER '60S: THE PUBLISHING WORLD AND THE POST-SIXTY WRITER

(A Lightly Edited Transcription of a Panel Presented at the AWP Conference,
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*David Matlin, William O'Rourke,
Susan Blackwell Ramsey, and Valerie Sayers (in absentia)*

William O'Rourke: Hello, all of you. Thanks for coming. I am William O'Rourke. I will introduce myself after I introduce the two people to my right. This is "Navigating the Other 60's—The Publishing World and the Post-60 Writer," which I brought about as the moderator. But I will also begin and say a few things to set a context, more or less, for the remarks to come. And then after the three of us say what we are going to say, we'll respond to each other and then take questions from the audience. And the questions from the audience are important in this particular kind of setting, in so far as you might think from what I'm going to say—and the personnel sitting up here—that you're already victims of two kinds of bait and switch. I will first introduce Valerie Sayers who will come on in some virtual reality/theatrical presence in the person of Susan Ramsey, who is sitting at the end of the table, because Valerie Sayers had difficulties with the weather in South Bend, Indiana, where, in a sign of the times—and we'll probably get to this later—she is not only in the creative writing side of the Notre Dame English Department, but is also Chair of the entire English Department. But Valerie couldn't make it, though she had a prepared text, because Valerie is always prepared, and it was faxed out here and Susan Ramsey has agreed to read it.

Now, Susan Ramsey is no slouch. Valerie, if you happened to have seen her bio on the card announcing this panel—I'll just read what it says here: "Valerie Sayers is the author of six novels..." *Due East* being the first, and a while back that was made into a film that was released 7-8 years ago on Mother's Day, of all things. Valerie is part of the other 1% these days, meaning she is of the other 1% of fiction writers whose entire back list is in print, because Northwest University Press, another sign of the times, brought out her new novel, *The Powers*, which came out last year, and then this fall Northwestern brought out her back list. That's a rare distinction these days. It's not the same as being the 1% we all know about, alas, but nonetheless, it's still the 1%.

But, as I said, Susan Ramsey is no slouch. She won the *Prairie Schooner*

poetry prize a year ago for a volume called *A Mind Like This*. Susan is also a graduate of our Notre Dame MFA Program. Now I don't understand what control—it might be some psychic thing of the Midwest—we have over the *Prairie Schooner* prize. I don't know any of the people at Nebraska, but Susan won it two years ago. This year the winner was Orlando Menes, who is also at Notre Dame, the current director of our MFA program; so we exert some mysterious influence over Nebraska for some reason. Happy, happy am I that we exert influence over something. So, no Valerie, but we will have her words.

Sitting to my immediate right is David Matlin. David is any number of things: poet, non-fiction writer, fiction writer, novelist, short-story writer. His most recent book is *Up Fish Creek Road*. It's a collection of short stories that's just come out. (*Come right in, come right in, don't hesitate.*) A couple of years ago, he published a novel, the 2nd of a trilogy, called *Half-Man Dreaming* and in 2005 *Prisons: Inside the New America: From Vernooykill Creek to Abu Ghraib* was republished and enlarged on the American prison system, which is one of those under-recorded catastrophes in the United States.

So the way this is going to go is I will start to talk a little bit more coherently, though what I intend to say is not a paper. I have been to a number of panels at this AWP and people get up and read papers. It's funny, because part of my pitch will be how the AWP now constitutes numbers of attendees, and all the rest, such as these panels, that it rivals the annual MLA conference where, of course, you do present academic papers. But these are just talks. I still see these sessions as talks, rather than presenting papers. The MLA is still primarily a hiring event for PhDs and all the papers the participants deliver is a further evidence of a hiring event, in so far as the MLA functions as a kind of a production line for scholars, one hopes, for the individual scholars, to be hired, promoted, or retained for another three years, or until they get the transformative state of tenure.

Okay, let me begin. As John Leonard once wrote in a review of my... oh, I didn't introduce myself, so most of you probably don't have a clue who I am, not that it matters. I'm William O'Rourke. I published my first book when I was a little kid. I was 26. It was called *The Harrisburg 7 and the New Catholic Left*. It was an account of the last of the Nixon years anti-Vietnam war conspiracy trials. It was on *New York Times* New and Recommended for six weeks and listed as one of the best books of the year, but my joke at the time was that I wouldn't have read it had I not written it. It was what they call, alas, a success of esteem. It got a lot of attention and at 26 I thought that's just what happens. You publish a good book and everybody pays attention. Then I learned differently as time went on. I've published four nov-

els, five other works of non-fiction, edited a couple books, and I founded the Creative Writing Program at Notre Dame, etc.

As John Leonard once wrote in a review of my 1981 novel, *Idle Hands*, I can make the obvious more clear. It's more or less what I intend to do here today. One of the first things to note is that our generation, I am speaking of my generation. I'm 68. I was born in 1945 in December. The Baby Boom actually starts in January of 1946, but I was like, premature...so I was 9 months or whatever, early for the Baby Boom. Those of us in our generation—we were the first incline of the bulging Baby Boom that peaked around 1957—are having a unique generational experience. In other words, we are unprecedented.

Now, every generation claims such a thing. Everybody wants to have a purchase on singularity. Given my own history, in other numerous accounts from historians and writers of all sorts, this claim appears to be true. Nobody, especially writers, who are—if you even agree with like the stereotype of the past—very individualistic, nonconforming, whatever other phrases you want to attach to it, always had a problem when they discover they're actually one part of the cohort, just one small number of many similar things. We, of course, rode a demographic wave of none of our doing: The Baby Boom, I suppose our parents participated in some fashion, but we just rode the wave of it. We just went along with the tripling of the number of students in higher education.

This is always been a fascinating number for me, because I noticed this back in the late '70's—I don't recall how I encountered it, I encounter a lot of things—but I saw that during the 1960's the number of individuals in higher education tripled during the 1960's. "Higher education" was counted as any form of college. What was startling was how constant the number had been previous to the 60's. Even the GI Bill—where, you know, everybody has the impression that the entire army went to college, whereas a very small percentage of the soldiers actually did go to college. But the myth is, oh every GI became a college student when they got back, which, of course, wasn't true. But even that number injected into higher education was just a minor blip. It really almost never doubled. I don't want to go into history of academic institutions, some of you might know it, but it's just startling. So we had the 60's where everything tripled and if you triple the number of people in higher education, guess what happens? I'll tell you in a minute.

I published my first novel a couple of years after the Harrisburg book in 1974 and it was called *The Meekness of Isaac*. It was about one kid who went to Vietnam and one kid who was trying to stay out of the Army, doing all he could do to do that. That year, another constant number in '74 was that

only around 100 first novels were published. *Library Journal* used to keep these statistics...Over 90% of those first novels that were published, were published by commercial presses, as mine was. So what happens when you triple the number of people in higher education? In another decade or so, the number shot up to 300 novels a year and that growth started to become rather exponential, and the ratio of commercial publishing to non-commercial publishing began to adjust.

Okay. But even though the 1960's educated so many, I only knew of one young writer back then in '68 when I was at Columbia University—Columbia had just started its graduate writing program—there were only 40 of us, back then; Columbia began, I suppose, its MFA program as a potential profit center and they use it now as a cash cow. But back then there was only 40 or so of us there: twenty poets, twenty fiction writers. Not hundreds. When we were graduating two years later, only one of our cohort wanted to get an academic job. I was startled that he wanted to get an academic job, because what came to mind was, “How?! Why are you qualified to go teach in a college or university?” It just seemed madness to me. If you want to know who it was, it was Lee Siegel. Anyway, Lee was from California, and he ended up getting a job at the University of Oregon, or something. God knows what he was teaching. Some of us took literature courses at Columbia. Others, you could just pick whatever you wanted. Lee took a course in anatomy and dissection at the medical school. They let him do that. I doubt that they'd let him do that today. And he earned his keep in that course by sketching the bodies as they were deconstructed, and Lee is a talented artist, too. He finally started to publish novels when he got into his 30's and 40's. I guess all that early teaching impeded him.

But what our generation did run into was a gathering storm of perception that we again didn't have much to do with: That students at universities throughout the land couldn't write. I never remembered in the 1960's any golden age of teenage writing. I never thought the other kids I was in high school with could write very well. I could write, but I was the exception, as were most writers who actually happened into college in all the decades before. The fact that students didn't write well wasn't news, so I was surprised when everybody thought this was a big problem. For young writers such as myself, for me, I thought it just cut down the competition, so I was happy they couldn't write. It seemed to be good for everybody.

But during the 70's and 80's, the growth period of creative writing programs across the land occurred. In the middle of the 70's, I mean at the end of the 60's, there were only a dozen programs; by the middle of the 70's, it was only in the double digits, the number of creative writing programs.

In order to get hired, you had to have a book or two already published. Because that was the older model. The few universities and colleges that kept writers on the staff, were usually writers of a more elderly sort, towards the end of their careers; they would come on as writers in residence, they would have a kind of tutorial relationship with students...but they were nothing like academics. Nothing like academics at all.

But the MFA thing, as it grew in numbers as these jobs at universities became open, having an MFA played a very particular role, along with having a book or two published, because that meant you were gelded, meaning...I don't know if there is a gender-neutral word for this but, you know, you were sterilized in some fashion, that you weren't going to be a wild man or woman in the department, because you've already had some taste of academic life at a graduate level like all the other professors in the institution. So, the numbers of creative writing programs just, you know, sky-rocketed.

George Garret and few others started the AWP, I think it was in '69, '70, as a kind of gathering of the older generation that had hung around for more than a year or two at a place and then, you know, started to teach creative writing. Here today, going from the low numbers in the '60's and the '70's to what brings us all here today at the AWP, thousands of people. And what happens to the writers—again, I don't know about you, most of you are somewhere within shouting distance of my age—the desire to be in academia, it was like, you can teach or not teach during that growth period when it didn't take much to get hired.

There was always ambivalence about being a writer, an artist, and teaching at the same time, whereas the PhDs didn't have any of that ambivalence. That's what they wanted to do. And there were any number of PhDs who were also like poets on the side and did some creative writing. And over the decades PhDs, some of them, began to do more writing because all of a sudden this new crop of people were coming in and made it okay to do that and everything started to adjust.

I don't know about you, but it's always the weird thing when you set out to be a writer and what that meant in my formative years, and you end up becoming part of a business. The AWP is a trade association. My father, God bless him, died a couple years ago; he sold bearings and was the head, for a period, of a purchasing agent trade association. And he went off to work every day wearing his suit, and none of that I wanted to do. It's an odd thing to think that I'm now a member of trade association, the way he was a member of a trade association.

As an academic, publishing has gone through its own form of creative destruction over the years, beginning more forcefully in the 1980's. It has to

do with the reinvention of the trade paperback taking over literary fiction, all sorts of stuff going on we'll talk about later. The old saw in my youth was everybody had one book in them. That's what I used to hear in the 50's, 60's. Everybody has one book in them. Well, right now, everyone has one publisher in them. You can publish yourself and others.

Now, as this phenomenon of creative writing and higher education grew and grew and grew, you needed something to support that whole mechanism. What happened is coterie publishing started. And you can always blame it on Virginia Woolf, who had her own press and published her friends, all those poets that she knew. So if Virginia Woolf could do it, then why can't we do it? Because that's what happens. So coterie publishing picked up the slack; commercial publishing has run as far as it could away from most of us. The original Fiction Collective, which started in the early 70's, was the phenomenon in which Steve Katz and a number of other people whose first books were published by commercial presses, wrote a second book and all of a sudden the commercial presses said "Oh, no." And this was even before BookScan, where now publishers know exactly how many copies you sell. You could always fudge the numbers early on in the 70's and 80's, but not now.

Okay, I could go on in this vein, but I won't because I'm already taking up too much time. As I been saying, this is a very large phenomenon, and we are just part of it. Another ancillary proof to this time line I'm sketching is Westbeth. I don't know if any of you know Westbeth in New York City. It's this old building...I think Bell Labs owned it, huge cement fortress, lots of train tracks coming into it, or used to, because it made war material, a lot of electrical components, all sorts of things, during World War II. In the 60's it sat vacant, the train tracks decayed; the train tracks have now become the very chic High Line. But, nonetheless, they turned it over to young artists. Okay, move in: We're going to establish cheaper housing for artists, painters, musicians, writers, whatever.

I put my name in in the 1970's just because I thought, hey—I had barely published anything...it was before the book—anyway, to make a long story short, the federal government now considers Westbeth a NORC. That's what the federal government calls it. And Westbeth is now under all sorts of legal protections because part of it was paid for with federal funds four decades ago. It's a NORC: a naturally occurring retirement community. In other words, it's an old folks home.

(Laughter.)

I give you Susan Ramsey, who will read...she doesn't age-wise qualify for the panel...but anyway, Susan Ramsey...Oh, you do? If you want to

admit it. OK. She does qualify.

Susan Blackwell Ramsey: When William was saying we all have a purchase on singularity, well, I was in college from '68 to '72, which is of course when the 60's really were. So we're the singular of the singular.

Please imagine that I am Valerie Sayers because it will make me very happy. I wish I were Valerie Sayers. When I was at Notre Dame she allowed a poet to take her fiction workshop and I was embarrassingly horrible, but it was just because I wanted to hang around Valerie Sayers for two quarters. Anyone in the room, by the way, who is under 60 gets double karma today. This is very wise of you because with any luck at all you're going to get here, though you missed the real good 60's: Of course, one thing about the 60's is that the status of women began to bubble. When you were talking about the writers in residence, they all wore ties. I didn't even notice there were no women on my faculty. An English faculty with no women in the 60's, and it was a good little liberal arts college. So Valerie, thanks to the miracle of fax, has been able to send us her 60's List and it is her 86th theses, and I'm the hammer. And it you would hand me my glasses, cause I'm in my 60's. Thank you. I'm now Valerie.

Valerie Sayers: A Sixties List.

1. This is my story, but it sounds a lot like the stories of many writers of my generation, so I offer it in solidarity, or comfort, or contrast: another writer's story.
2. I've written it as a list because I've lived by lists, a beautiful and economical form that makes you feel, briefly, in charge of things. The requirement of a writing life—giving the self over to a kind of abandonment—makes any kind of control look attractive.
3. As a woman writer coming along in the '60s and '70s, educated in a public high school in the South and a Catholic university in New York City, I certainly felt out of control. I was possessed of a serious literary inferiority complex.
4. However
5. I had a distinct advantage. I was blessedly unburdened by the need I saw all around to rank and sort writers. One morning I saw Norman Mailer on t.v. railing about who was the greater writer, Norman Mailer or Philip

Roth—I think he said Roth, but maybe he said Bellow or Cheever or some other white dude he thought he could take—and I thought, at least I don't have to carry that godawful sack of stones.

6. That need to name the Great American Novel and the Great American writer and the Great American Canon and the 100 Best Books used to be primarily, though not exclusively, a white-male-of-privilege syndrome. Now it's a global epidemic.

7. But women of the '60s and '70s were the children of Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, struggling to write a page or two much less the Great American Novel, believing in economic circumstances and luck and especially time as the factors that let writers write.

8. And while that was discouraging, because I lacked money and luck and time,

9. it was also strangely liberating to recognize the struggle and those who shared it.

10. Besides, as a woman I was also raised on the legend of the kitchen table, and even though I didn't actually *have* a kitchen table, I kept an image of myself writing at that table while the baby slept and while the children were in school and after they grew up and once earning a living was done.

11. It never occurred to me, no matter how many interruptions, that I would ever stop writing, unto old age,

12. or that I should fret over whether I would ever be thought the greatest living writer.

13. When I was a young writer, I had bigger worries.

14. It often occurred to me that I might not ever publish, or ever be read.

15. If I did publish, I was a good citizen of the counterculture and I would publish at a small alternative press.

16. I'll admit, I hedged my bets: I sent my work out to all the little magazines in COSMEP's old paperback listing and, guiltily, to the *New Yorker*

and the *Atlantic*.

17. I endured a spectacular number of rejections, which became encouraging rejections, and finally, in my thirties and forties, before I graded the papers and while the babies slept, voilà: a modest literary success.

18. I acquired a big New York publisher and I got reviewed in the *New York Times*—and all over the country, because those were the days when *The Aniston Star* and the *South Bend Tribune* had good book review sections that took on all kinds of novels and gave them 800 words, often quite generous and thoughtful.

19. I got myself a big-name agent and a bit of a swollen head. I was paid advances that were a little too small to pay a New York rent and way too big to last.

20. I published five novels with the same publisher, four with the same editor—who, wouldn't you know, was smart enough to leave publishing

21. to write her own novel.

22. I had tons of interviews conducted by airheads who hadn't read the book, and I had book tours to sixteen cities that left me feeling cheap and anti-social and a betrayer of my art. I had a New York writer's life.

23. After the magical editor who had brought me this writer's life left, my new editor cancelled lunches and spelled my name wrong in her exceedingly brief correspondence.

24. So when my fifth novel (perhaps not un-coincidentally on the subject of a middle-aged man's mental breakdown) appeared in the catalogue with no mention of tours or interviews or advertising, but rather a cheerful "Free freight," I knew it was over.

25. Oh, well.

26. I'd been seeing the ink disappearing on those corporate-publishing contracts for years.

27. I had in the meantime got myself a teaching job which, unbeknownst to

me, involved administration and twelve-hour days,

28. and I kept getting breaks. Showtime made a movie of my first two novels, which put one son through college and housed the other.

29. In the Tillie Olsen scheme of things, I was lucky, lucky, lucky, and didn't I know it. I was completely optimistic about the future.

30. I finished two new novels, one right after the other, and one right after the other new editors embraced them

31. but their publishers refused to go along. They saw my old advances and the nefarious book scan evidence. They could read a bottom line.

32. So I pulled those novels back to fuss with them, because after all they were a little odd, and certainly not destined for commercial glory,

33. but it never occurred to me to stop writing.

34. In the midst of this publishing limbo, I got cancer, and I got scared.

35. Publishing seemed...trivial.

36. When I got through my cancer scare, and all its revelations, writing in the state I'd started in—with no hope of publication whatsoever—sounded just about right.

37. I decided to Zen it, and I went on a short story bender.

38. I had a lifetime of writing failed stories, and brilliant-in-flashes stories, behind me. Now I wanted to write good stories, perfect stories, stories whose very periods would pierce Isaac Babel's heart.

39. And face it. Even those convinced they're living in the re-found moment needs a periodic hit of good publishing news. If the plan was to wait out the novel publishers, I'd have to see shorter work into print.

40. So for years I published scores of stories and essays and reviews. I don't know if they pierced anyone's heart, but they made mine keep beating.

41. I still felt like a writer because I still *was* a writer, but I was also living a

secret life as a novelist.

42. I fiddled with the novels I hadn't placed and I started another, and then (simultaneously) another.

43. I didn't care if I ever published them,

44. and I cared desperately.

45. I had half-finished novels stockpiled on my computer, my desk, my floor—and boy can I recognize a crisis of confidence when I see one.

46. So I bore down hard on the one that was going to be my elegant tour-de-force, *The Powers*, about Joe DiMaggio and pacifism and photography.

47. And around the time I was close to finishing, in the middle of one frustrating and endless academic day, a little gift popped up on my in-box:

48. an e-mail from Henry Carrigan of Northwestern University Press, who wanted to reprint my first five novels.

49. We met at the AWP that year and Henry, upon hearing I was finishing a brand-new elegant tour de force, bought that one too.

50. Here I was, thirty years later: finally matched with my alternative small-press publisher.

51. Smallish, alternativish. More important, a press I'd admired for years.

52. I'd never gone anywhere, but all the same I felt I was back.

53. And in the outpouring of generous responses to that novel—not just from reviewers and booksellers, though Northwestern came through with those—but especially in the e-mails and notes and letters from long-lost friends and strangers, I relocated some '60s principles.

54. Literature may be written in the loneliest and most magnificent of solitudes, but its entry into the world is a communal venture.

55. When most of the New York publishers decided, at the behest of their corporate conglomerate masters, that the profit margin for a single title was

more important than building a writer's readership a title at a time; when they decided that they weren't going to take those chances anymore, even if they had Danielle Steele on the list to pay for a little risky living, they betrayed a whole generation of writers.

56. This generation.

57. Screw 'em.

58. What irony that this generation, who may soon be looking into the corporate maw of Assisted Living, once had Assisted Publishing.

59. Now we—well, I—am finally learning to do what poets and many of the prose writers at this conference have known for a long long time:

60. get by with a little help from our friends.

61. And much as I believe the Mark Zuckerbergs of this world are capitalist seducers who have invented tacky and juvenile jargon to demean charming, intelligent, and lovely people who only want to connect with those friends,

62. I'm ready for the geezer writers to occupy, if not Facebook, whatever strikes our fancy: the thousands, the millions, of collectivist sites and apps and networks to come.

63. And while we're occupying the new electronic encampments, let's don't neglect the hand-letter presses and the binders and the book-artists who cherish the medium and have long since stopped thinking for one moment about mass markets and tweets.

64. Or the university presses that came to my rescue and are under terrible pressure to earn out. And all the other small, medium, and gonzo alternative presses that have hung on all these years and spring up as I speak.

65. Some of us have been smart enough to live our entire lives in collective endeavor: all we have to do is walk down to the book fair to see the history. But others of us need to move back to that youthful '60s ideal of the power of the small and the local. Reaching one book-buyer at a time is inextricably connected to what it is we do—one writer speaking to one reader at a time.

66. As the generation behind us wrests control of the means of critical production and joyfully downsizes and disperses publishing, we're all back to hawking one book at a time, and though there's nothing I'd rather do less than sell (except maybe administer), there's selling and there's selling. It seems to me there's some real delight to be had in a guerilla assault on Big-Profit Publishing. Let them eat Danielle Steele.

67. Sure, I still put myself to sleep with fantasies of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize.

68. Sure, big publishers can let more people know about the work.

69. And yes, if I were offered another big advance, I'd know what it meant: a writer will do most anything to buy more writing time, or a room of her own, and the New York publishing world is still filled with smart good editors.

70. But this time I'd think real hard about it.

71. Easy for me to say. I'm one of the lucky ones who's had the advances and the film options, who got the job.

72. I'll get to retire one of these years—soon, I hope—and reclaim a full-time writing life.

73. I'll finally be the writer who can afford to write, the Tillie Olsen writer unsilenced bigtime.

74. Watch out.

75. Those of us in our sixties belong to a politically committed generation with a lifetime of reading and writing behind us.

76. I find myself writing to that aging readership now, and I find myself writing gleefully about the aged—and the young, and whatever and whom-ever I'm inclined to write about, in whatever forms and language I embrace.

77. I am setting my work in an anti-nostalgic past and a terrifying rising-water future and I often find myself feeling blessedly unhinged sitting at that kitchen table—which still doesn't actually exist.

78. I realize that my subjects and my history may not be sexy to a hot young editor five years out of Bryn Mawr or Amherst, but maybe they're sexy to a whole generation of folks who sustain me

79. and to all kinds of younger readers who are willing to cut their own paths.

80. It's no use, tasting bile, feeling neglected, romanticizing any past much less a publishing past:

81. No use, and no fun.

82. Writing well is ever and always, unto old age, the best revenge and the sweetest satisfaction,

83. and having machines to crank up the type,

84. not to mention a whole new publishing world springing up online,

85. isn't such a bad bargain either.

86 My list is coming to 88 items, and since 88 is not nearly as many years as I mean to live, let's just say: to be continued.

87. Whatever happens to publishing, and whatever happens to my own ability to publish, I'm glad to be back to a point, most days, where the publishing isn't the point, the writing is the point.

88. And it doesn't occur to me—it can't occur to me—that I might stop writing, because then I really might curl up and die.

(Applause.)

WO: Thank you, Susan, and I'm sure Valerie will thank you. David, David Matlin.

David Matlin: When I first began to think about what it might mean to be an artist, having seen a number of examples, I wanted to be a painter. And in the midst of those first desires and those first attempts at painting, I

realized that it was going to be writing and it really threw me into a kind of a crisis. In the midst of this crisis, I remember there was an advertisement in the small desert town that I grew up in in southern California of a series of porn movies that another young potential artist was going to show in a little town called Cucamonga, California. So me and a couple of friends who were really interested in being hot-rodders and all kinds of other things went to these porn movies. And it turns out that the film maker of these porn films was Frank Zappa, who originally founded the Mothers of Invention, and there he was playing his drums in this little community called Cucamonga, California, and I thought, Ahh, this is really interesting. And I never took a creative writing course because when I was a kid at that point, there was no such thing as a creative writing course. You more or less had to try to figure it out for yourself.

And a number of years later, cause I don't want to go through a whole autobiography here, I was working in a very dangerous foundry in Berkeley, California, and went over to San Francisco State University, and just on a lark turned a series of beginning writings into this man named Robert Creeley. He told me to come back in about 3 weeks or a month later, which I did. And we sat down and had a very interesting conversation because I had turned him in a kind of pile of chaos, and for some reason, he loved it, and he said, "What do you want to do?" And I said I wanted to have time to read now. I've never really had time to read. I've had to work, I was a construction worker, I'd hitchhiked, I'd been in jail...all kinds of things. And they gave me a scholarship to what was then called the State University of New York at Buffalo. So, I looked it up because I didn't know anything about this and there were people there like Robert Creeley who were teaching and John Barth and Jorge Luis Borges, and they gave me a complete fellowship. I didn't have a bachelor's degree, I didn't have nothin'! And they took an incredible chance and I suppose from that point on, I've been living on that chance and taking it as far as I could go.

And I walked in from having moved from Berkeley, California, and my first graduate seminar was with John Barth and it was terrific! They told me when I came in, all of these people, that they didn't care what I wrote, or if I wrote during that period of time that I was at Buffalo. But they cared more about, at that moment, for me and for all of the others who were then graduate students in that program, is how we cast ourselves and attempted to find an imagination of what it was we were reading. And, on the basis of that possibility, I've felt ever since that the major issue in any of these so called creative writing programs probably isn't the writing itself, but how one educates one's own imagination, and I always think that that's really

the major issue in terms of any of these processes. If it's really not involved in educating the imagination, then there's really no sustaining resource that one can come to. I've always felt that that was always the major issue in terms of how one reads. And they were really interesting, because Creeley and others because they were such incredibly interesting, wonderful monsters.

I remember I would have these courses, nobody would say a thing to me, and then at 4 o'clock in the morning in a bar, suddenly people like Robert Creeley would sober up and start asking me questions about what you were doing, what you were thinking, what you were imagining, what you were dreaming, and the quality of that interest and the sense of how to articulate that interest at a point when you didn't think you were capable of it provided a sense of how one, I suppose, gains one's nerve before what you're doing, and how to discover what that nerve and courage might be. And if one doesn't have mentors like this, I think you really get lost and won't be able to sustain what it means to be able to make an art for one's own lifetime.

That filled me into a lot of possibilities, and one of those possibilities for myself, because I couldn't get a job and I was not dissimilar to William over here on my left. To teach and to go into a university was really the last thing on my mind. I couldn't have conceived any of that. More what I could have conceived of was being a construction worker for the most part and trying to make my way into the world, because I thought always, and still do on many levels, that if you teach, it propels you into responsibilities that have nothing to do with the actual writing itself, and I've always found that very difficult. So, at a very late age, I did get a job at a university.

But I think again, and leave it open to you guys and what questions you might have, and the most important part of whatever these programs are, and they often don't even think about this, is really how to educate one's own imagination, and how to, in that process, to discover that reading is an art that you must make up out of your own individual peculiarities. And, out of those peculiarities really move forward with as much nerve as you can find and courage that you can find in yourself and see what can happen. (Applause.)



[WO: The Q&A period was not transcribed and not all of its questions are intelligible on the tape and the beginning portion is missing. Some of the later questions are inaudible. But what is there can be found at the electronic web

*version of the journal where a recording of the entire panel has been placed:
<http://ndreview.nd.edu/>*

The questions were varied, but covered interesting subjects, the role of teaching the young, the adjunct-ization of the academy, the effects of ageism, and one question allowed me to say something I had meant to say in my opening remarks, that the larger society, in many ways, has found it convenient to house a lot of America's writers in the academy, thereby removing them from the streets and barricades. Indeed, the right-wing conventional wisdom is that universities are full of "liberals", but, as was pointed out, whatever the truth of that (and it is a small truth) those who run the universities, both private and public, are not liberals at all.

One other thing that emerged from a number of questions was the fact that some of the audience had only begun to write since they became sixty, after other careers and endeavors. One had her first novel released the year before by Norton. This did seem like a new trend: first novelists in their sixties!]