

GAIL MCDONALD ORAL HISTORY COLLECTON

INTERVIEWEE: Suzanne Rodgers Bush

INTERVIEWER: Gail McDonald

DATE: May 13, 1995

[Begin CD 1]

GM: I am here with Suzanne Rodgers Bush, Class of 1955, and student of Randall Jarrell.

SRB: It looks like it's running.

GM: Okay, we're rolling. No, it doesn't handle [unclear]. Okay. So, it's May 13th, 1995 and I'm interviewing Suzanne Rodgers Bush, Class of 1955. Okay, now, because I'm doing a kind of—

SRB: Are you talking loud enough? Are we close enough to the microphone?

GM: You're close enough, not me. I'm going to sit down close enough.

SRB: I hope you do most of the talking. [laughs]

GM: Oh, good. Tell me about your background before you came here.

SRB: Okay.

GM: You said you had sisters who came here too.

SRB: Yes, yes. I'm from a little town called Scotland Neck [North Carolina] in eastern part of the state. Grew up on a weekly newspaper, my father was editor. I'm one of four girls, a very small town which, basically had a population that would not tend to go to college.

GM: Okay, that's interesting. Go ahead.

SRB: Although that's not totally accurate because out of a class of about thirty-five, I think eight or nine of us did end up going to college. So, we were for the most part that was the background.

GM: Was it a farming area?

SRB: Oh, yeah, it's a farming area.

GM: Tobacco farming?

SRB: Tobacco.

GM: See, this is why I don't know enough about tobacco growing.

SRB: Tobacco growing and cotton peanuts, eastern North Carolina. It's now, I think, Halifax County is probably the bottom income county in the state and also education wise it's been very low.

But I did have a super English teacher in high school. I was the youngest of four girls. My three older sisters had come to Woman's College [of the University of North Carolina], graduated in the Class of '46, '47 and '49. They were all English majors and I decided that I was not going to be an English major.

GM: You would be different.

SRB: Well, aside from that, I mean, I didn't want to go anywhere else to school, because they loved it and they'd felt they had gotten such a super education here. But when I came I felt as if I was following in big footsteps and it kind of intimidated me. So then when I started going to classes, I just, I always felt as if I had to live up to whatever they had been. So, I did not plan to major in English.

And the English department in those days was spectacular and I don't think I even knew it. We had among others Peter Taylor [American novelist, playwright, and short story writer], who was in and out. Now he was gone most of the time I was here. He was here in my freshman year

GM: Right

SRB: And he left. My sisters had studied under him, but I did not, because he left and did not come back. I don't think he came back during the rest of the time. Randall Jarrell, I believe was not here in my freshman year. I believe he came back my sophomore year. I'm not real sure about that. But in any event, he was here several years—

GM: Right.

SRB: —and I did have three classes under him. No, I had writing, and I had a poetry class and the other class, I'm sure was a poetry class. I don't remember what we learned. I'm sorry.

GM: No, it's just fine.

SRB: It's been a long time.

GM: It's fine. No, don't worry about that.

SRB: Except I know we studied T. S. Eliot [American/British essayist, playwright, poet, publisher, literary and social critic].

GM: He always liked to teach Eliot, I think, yes. Okay.

SRB: But anyhow we had Lettie Hamlett Rogers [Class of 1940, educator, and American novelist], you may never have heard of.

GM: I don't know that name, yeah.

SRB: Well, she's a writer and she wrote three or four books, and she taught me freshman English. We had Mark Friedlander [English professor] who's a fabulous teacher of Shakespeare and he taught me sophomore English.

GM: Wow!

SRB: So, I was just very, very fortunate. And I knew I was fortunate and it was such a super department. There was no question that I was going to major in anything else but English.

GM: Oh, great. That's wonderful.

SRB: And I certainly had—I just had probably an average knack for writing, but I ended up majoring in writing just because it was where I ended up taking my courses if anything else, because I wanted the teachers. I took my courses for the teachers, not—

GM: You didn't think—When you were taking this course did you think, I'm going to be a writer now, I'm going to be a professional writer?

SRB: No, no.

GM: You just chose it because you liked it?

SRB: I chose it because I was—I liked the teachers.

GM: You're happy with the teachers. Do you think a lot of girls did that?

SRB: I don't know, but it was the way I did it.

GM: Then you went to work in Washington, DC afterwards?

SRB: Then I went to work in Washington. In those days I did not even think about what I had majored in, I just went to work in Washington. I later actually decided I would try teaching school, because I had gotten my certificate. I got it as a backup—

GM: Sure.

SRB: —my teaching certificate. I did teach briefly. I'm sorry Mr. Jarrell. I was a terrible teacher.

GM: You were?

SRB: I felt—Maybe I wasn't so bad, but it was a terrible experience because I looked very young and I was teaching tenth grade English and it was hard.

GM: You look young now. I can just imagine what you look like when you were twenty.

SRB: Well, I looked about sixteen or seventeen, so I had a hard time teaching high school English.

GM: Yes, oh, I can imagine.

SRB: Yeah, I was a little country schoolgirl who had never had any discipline problems in the class and to deal with city schools and discipline was hard. But—

GM: But, your school that you went to was a public school?

SRB: Oh, yes.

GM: And your teacher was a woman?

SRB: Right. When I was in high school, you mean?

GM: Yes.

SRB: Yes.

GM: You had not studied with a male professor before you—Have you ever had a male teacher?

SRB: I had one male teacher for history. He was a phys. ed. teacher. He was not very good.

GM: Oh, phys. ed.

SRB: History was always my worst subject because I really had very little background.

GM: You mean even in college it was your worst subject too?

SRB: All the way through.

GM: Now when you got here, did you feel as if you fit in pretty well that is like other girls were from similar backgrounds?

SRB: Oh, yeah.

GM: There were a lot of small town girls then, is that right?

SRB: A lot of city girls too. My roommate was from the Washington area and she had a much easier time freshman year than I did. First, she was—

GM: She wasn't homesick or—?

SRB: No, because she was not adjusting to—I mean, I was the one having a hard time adjusting to what was required of you in a college class.

GM: Right.

SRD: Whereas she had gone to a tougher school and had a much better background than I did. So, it was harder for us who were from small schools, small country school to—

GM: How did you feel about that? Did you like being challenged?

SRB: Well, I knew it was a challenge. I mean, I don't know, I didn't even think about it. All I knew was I had to work hard. And I was really—Always been a great student. Certainly, to begin with I did—I mean, I ended up on the dean's list as I progressed through. I realized I was very fortunate and I was turned on to learning as much as anything else.

GM: Do you think that school changed you in that way that you were mainly excited about learning?

SRB: Oh, yeah, I think so.

GM: It's interesting.

SRB: It was probably more dramatic for someone like me or those of us who were country girls.

GM: Yeah, that's what I'm thinking [unclear].

SRB: Than it was for the—I remember feeling, "Wow, this is different."

GM: What ways was it different? Can you kind of describe how you felt it was different?

SRB: Well, I think life was very simple. I had not really approached life—I think ultimately now I'm back to that. Life is very simple, but what you do is you find out there are many depths. I was suddenly discovering all these depths that I—had never occurred to me. It was scary a little bit but at the same time—

GM: Depth of ideas or—?

SRB: Ideas of just life, what people were like. I never thought about people particularly being really bad or really good or whatever, you know. You discover these things as you study.

GM: More complex.

SRB: More complex.

GM: Yes. Did you find that in your literature classes too, I mean some of it you learned from your classes or—?

SRB: I think you learn and learn about people and just about life, you learn more about life. I had really grown up very protective, very protective existence.

GM: Yeah, very sheltered.

SRB: Yeah.

GM: Yeah.

SRB: That was sort of interesting. You kept wondering if you want to go forward because it was much simpler back home and so forth.

GM: You were being waked up in a way from—

SRB: Yeah, that's right.

GM: Okay, I see. That brings me to that poem that probably you know called "A Girl in a Library" by Randall Jarrell. Do you know that poem?

SRB: I tell you I do not, and I read it years ago, but—

GM: It's a little bit a condescending poem. I mean, a lot of people wonder what he was thinking about. He sees this girl falling asleep on a library table and he thinks she's dreaming about the prom and she's dreaming about home ec., she's dreaming about phys. ed. He's wishing that she was dreaming about literature, great literature, Russian literature, see. And some people think that the poem is condescending, but the last part of the poem he says, "I love you." It says, "Yet and yet." And then it stops, it says, "I love you."

SRB: Oh, that's sweet.

GM: It's a very sweet poem, but it's also clear that there were some girls at least who didn't think he could wake up and that this girl in the poem he hasn't reached her.

SRB: Well, I think one of the several stories that I remember about him actually touches on that very same thing.

GM: Tell me.

SRB: This was after we had been in the class for several weeks or maybe several months, probably several months. This was a three-hour writing class. The first class I took from him. And we were—There were three of us sitting across the front row and he said, "I think that well if you were a cheerleader or a majorette in high school, you wouldn't be interested in a course like that." I sat down, and I said, "Well, I better not say anything." We always took a break and went to the Soda Shop, which is—do you know where the Soda Shop was?

GM: I know where it was, yeah.

SRB: Next to the Alumni House.

GM: Right, right.

SRB: What is it, the faculty house [Faculty Center]?

GM: The faculty club now.

SRB: Okay, well it used to be our Soda Shop. We walked there, and I said we would—There were several of us walking down and I said, “Well, I have an admission.” I said, “I was a cheerleader.” Then the next girl said, “Well, I was a majorette.” The third one said, “Well, I’ve got you both beat, I mean, I was a majorette and a cheerleader.” So, we laughed and laughed because we were very good students in his class.

GM: Yes.

SRB: So, we went back in after the break and raised our hands and said, “Mr. Jarrell, we have something to tell you, we have an admission.”

[laughter]

GM: That’s a great story.

SRB: And he laughed. I think he secretly knew that there were a lot of people there that were awakened.

GM: I think he was—One reason I’ve always thought that is that at one point he said to Robert Watson [English professor] whom you may have known. Was he on the faculty when you were here?

SRB: He came but I never had class under him.

GM: When he first came he went to registration, which apparently used to be in a big—used to be in—

SRB: In the gym.

GM: —in the gym. Jarrell was reading, sitting on the floor reading. He said, “Oh, you’re going to love it here. It’s just like *Sleeping Beauty*. This school is just like *Sleeping Beauty*.”

SRB: Awakening.

GM: Exactly. I always thought, well that’s interesting, especially because he was really interested in fairy tales. I asked his wife, I said, “Does that make him prince charming then?” She said, “Yes, I suppose that would put him in that row.” Do you think the girls thought of him that way as sort of awakening them in anyway, waking them up from [unclear]? Or is that pushing it too far?

SRB: I don’t know. I don’t know. I think we really had a great appreciation for his classes. They were wonderful.

GM: It was the material in them.

SRB: They were wonderful. His communication with material as much as anything.

GM: Tell me about that.

SRB: Okay. I have a couple of Mrs. Jarrell stories.

GM: Oh, good.

SRB: One of them a friend just reminded me of it at lunchtime, I totally forgotten. I think it was like learning through osmosis.

GM: Yes.

SRB: He—First of all he read beautifully, absolutely fabulously, beautifully just so that when you would listen to him. If you'd studied none of what he was reading—

GM: Yes.

SRB: —It just came alive to you. He would go over these T. S. Eliot poems and read them. He would read them with such grace and beauty. At the—We would maybe spend three weeks on one long poem and then have a test. He had usually not very complex tests.

GM: What kind of tests were they? I just want to make sure this I'm getting that because this is important to me. Okay.

SRB: I mean, just would be asking you about the poem and some ideas in the poem or what have you. I don't remember specifically, but they were thought questions.

GM: You had to write essay [unclear].

SRB: Essay questions, right.

GM: Essay response, okay.

SRB: I remember being so excited about answering a question because all of a sudden I was quoting, this happened to be T. S. Eliot, I was just quoting, and I thought, "Well, I didn't learn that. When did I learn that?" And I realized I had learned it because he had read it with such beauty, I mean he just—Osmosis is what you just absorbed into my—

GM: Yes, do you remember what poem it was now looking back?

SRB: Well, one thought that everybody knows, but actually he read it was, "I grow old...I grow old...I shall wear the—" What is it? "the bottoms—"

GM: "—the bottoms—"

SRB: “—the bottoms of my trousers rolled.”

GM: Yeah, it was from “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,”

SRB: Yeah.

GM: You remember to this day the way he read that?

SRB: Yeah.

GM: Wow! He must have been great.

SRB: His way of teaching, have you read *Poetry and the Age*?

GM: Yes.

SRB: Okay. If you read that—Now I haven’t read it in years. I mean, I haven’t even though about a lot of this in years, so you have to understand that. If you read that the sentences are very long and complex. Do you know what I mean?

GM: Yes.

SRB: It’s almost difficult to read. When I read that it was—I got the book while he was here and then I put it aside and then I picked it up much later and started reading it several years, maybe a year later, whatever. And I thought, “My goodness, it reads just the way he talks.”

GM: How interesting.

SRB: I mean, he wrote—To me, I mean, it just sounded as if his phraseology, his complex sentences all were the same. The written word was very much the way he spoke.

GM: Right.

SRB: He also had—He was a speed reader and he would sit at the front of the class sometimes while we would—I don’t know, why. It seems to me he was reading—He would read through things and he would read through very quickly and then he would whatever; say whatever he wanted to about this. He had this capacity just reading extremely fast—

GM: Right:

SRB: —and retaining it.

GM: Wow!

SRB: But he was remarkable that way.

GM: He would read aloud.

SRB: In class.

GM: He would maybe talk a line at a time about what he had read then or, how would class go? Tell me, would he call on you or—?

SRB: Well.

GM: Besides I know you—

SRB: The one story I told you yesterday.

GM: Yeah.

SRB: I'll tell it again.

GM: Tell it again for the tape, if you would.

SRB: Okay, now or you want me to—?

GM: This will be good.

SRB: Okay.

GM: This will be good and then we'll go on to the next.

SRB: Okay. Well, that was the very first class I took from him. This was creative writing. This was again the three-hour class.

GM: Right.

SRB: Mrs. [Mary] Jarrell was not in this class, she was in other classes.

GM: I do want to hear about that.

SRB: Okay.

GM: That strikes me, unless that would bother me if my teacher's wife was in the room, but maybe not.

SRB: Well, it was fun in a way. But we walk in—First of all, we knew that Randall Jarrell was coming back. He had this national reputation. The English department was excited about his returning to the campus. And so, I got into this class. It was not a large class. There were perhaps I would think under fifteen people. It seems to me in any of the classes I

had with him there were never more than twenty. But anyhow, I walked in and there were two or three ladies from Greensboro in the class. The thing—

GM: You mean they weren't students?

SRB: Oh, yeah, they were students, they were students.

GM: Okay.

SRB: They were graduate students.

GM: Graduate students.

SRB: They had come as we felt to sit at the foot of the great professor.

[laughter]

SRB: We thought, "Oh, golly, this is going to just—This is going to—"

GM: Ruin everything, right?

SRB: Yeah, ruin everything for us. It was the first time I'd had a class that had outside adults. They must have been between twenty-eight and thirty-five, but to us they were older.

GM: Right, sure. [laughs]

SRB: You know, not really old. I walked into the class saw these ladies, sat down and a few minutes later—I had not—We'd moved around in that class for some reason. I remember sitting in several places in the class, but in walked Mr. Jarrell. First of all, he had a beard. He had not had a beard before. The pictures around that we had seen of him were without beard. He'd grown a beard while he was away. It was as if he was hiding behind the beard almost. He was painfully shy. And it became immediately apparent that he was painfully shy with us in teaching the class, and with a new situation. I mean, this was a new situation for him because he just returned, and we were new students he'd never seen before. He was just a very shy man.

And so, he read some short story for us to begin the class with. We were to start writing our three stories for the semester during, sometime during the semester. They would be read and analyzed in the class and so forth. But at first, we were just going to be reading other works—

GM: Right.

SRB: —about famous people, not by us. So, anyhow, he started reading this story and it went on for thirty minutes, forty minutes something like that. This was a three-hour class.

When he finished he looked around and he said, “Are there any comments?” Well, he had gone over our names beforehand as to who we were. Nobody in the class commented. I mean, we were intimidated by him. And we felt, “Who would dare say anything about this?” You couldn’t, because he was the master teaching the class.

GM: Right.

SRB: And so, anyhow, it was painful. It was a painful silence. So, then he finally started talking and he went on for another fifteen or twenty minutes about whatever thought he had about this. Then he again said, “Are there any comments?” Nobody, and I kept thinking, “Why don’t those older women say something? I mean, why doesn’t somebody say something?” But no one would. So, the first class was awful. I mean, I thought, “I cannot sit through a whole semester like this.”

GM: Oh, no.

SRB: It was just terrible. So, I decided no matter if I make a fool of myself, I will say something in the next class. I don’t care what it is. I’m going to pick at something in that story to comment on. So, he came in the next week, I think we met once a week, and he started reading again and immediately said at the end of it, “Are there any comments?” Well, I put my hand up with this big grin. [He said,] “Miss Rodgers.” And so, I made whatever the comment was, and he talked about my comment for ten minutes, fifteen minutes and that broke the ice. So, a couple of more people did comment. Thereafter every class throughout the whole semester he would read whatever he was reading and at the end of it he would say, “Are there any comments, Miss Rodgers?” And he never paused. He just would go to Miss Rodgers immediately. So, I—It was a wonderful thing for me.

GM: I should say.

SRB: Because I was—not that I was a shy person. I mean, you can see that I’m not a shy person, but I had no confidence in my own ability to make good comments anyhow.

GM: Right, and so, that you felt like you had to then.

SRB: Absolutely. One of the funny things was there was one time, and this was a student work. Oh, this is way into the class. I had to leave after about an hour and ten minutes, I knew I had to leave but I hated to miss the class. So, I went in and he read the student work. I stuck around until the end just so, I could comment. I raise my hand quickly and said what I had to say then I left. But I felt sort of obliged almost to be there in a way, at the same time I wanted to be there because it was such a stimulus for me. It was a wonderful thing to have happen, you know.

GM: Yes, yeah.

SRB: From there on I learned to speak up in other classes where I felt that I didn't have a great deal to say.

GM: That's great. That's a thing to be thankful to a teacher for.

SRB: Oh, yeah. I learned to write poetry criticism quite well, I think, because of him. And that was very important for our comprehensive exams. Now I don't know, you still have comprehensive exams in English or not?

GM: Well, for the master's degree we do.

SRB: Well, we had—

GM: You mean a senior comprehensive? Okay.

SRB: We had it in undergraduate.

GM: We've actually thought about doing it again. I'm in a committee that's trying to decide right now that assessment and how we should do it. We're thinking about some kind of exit exam.

SRB: It was a real challenge.

GM: I bet.

SRB: I mean, it was a terrific challenge. It was a three-hour exam. One hour was factual and I messed up on that because I had a difficult time dealing with history, you know just.

GM: Right, right.

SRB: All of that came back to haunt me in the comprehensive. I knew it would because I just was not good in sequencing things in terms of times and periods and so forth. The second part was a lot of comparative essay questions. Taking things, we'd learned in other courses and applying them to, in literature and bringing them all together and to the present time. Then the third part was an hour of poetry, analysis of a poem.

GM: Wow! Do you remember what the poem was?

SRB: I did.

GM: You had a choice of between [unclear].

SRB: No, no, no. We had no idea.

GM: Wow!

SRB: I think it was a [Gerard Manley] Hopkins [English poet and Jesuit priest] poem. I believe it was a Hopkins poem.

GM: Had you studied Hopkins with Jarrell?

SRB: Well, we had studied—Usually as I recall there was a bit of a comprehensive poetry class and we did several, maybe five poets, so yes. But, we also had a course leading up to the comprehensive exam.

GM: I see.

SRB: Dr. Friedlander taught me that.

GM: Oh, okay.

SRB: Every—We had to write a poetry analysis every week for that class. But that was—No matter what else we were doing, it was a three-hour class again once a week. Met in the library and once a week every week you did a different poem to learn how—

GM: What analysis did you write? Do you remember what kind of questions you would try to come to grips with when you would write about these short once a week things?

SRB: You mean the way we would handle?

GM: Yeah.

SRB: We did basically would always include things about the meter and whatever, and then we would the—basically the meaning of the poem.

GM: Right, so a close reading, a close reading of the poem.

SRB: A very close reading of the poem.

GM: Okay.

SRB: And that was a wonderful—

GM: Yes, it is.

SRB: —kind of study too.

GM: Students don't like to write those kinds of papers at all.

SRB: Well, I'll tell you it got to be fun.

GM: You got good at it and got more confident about it. Yeah, that's interesting. Now okay, let's—We leave the bigger classroom issue. Tell me about Mrs. Jarrell in the classroom, so we don't forget.

SRB: Okay. I'll also tell you about Mrs. Jarrell and Mr. Jarrell on the tennis court.

[laughter]

GM: Oh, you got all kind of stories.

SRB: That's the one my friend reminded me of at lunchtime. Well, they were newlyweds and I think it was the second year that he was here that she came that I was in the classroom. Whether she was married before and that was the first class I attended, I don't know. I heard her say yesterday that she went to all of his poetry classes, she did not go to his writing class, so that explained why she was not in that first class.

GM: That makes sense, yes.

SRB: But she—I walked in and again here was this woman, as I said to her yesterday, in this flowing and she said, "Yes my flowing skirts."

[laughter]

SRB: These wonderful big sorts of flowing skirts, the cotton skirts that she wore, and she would sit sort of at the back of the class. There was another professor's wife who was with her, Dr. [Lenior C.] Wright's wife. Apparently, I don't know that he is, I think deceased, and she has remarried somebody else, so no longer around.

GM: [unclear]

SRB: Dr. Wright in the history department. But, she was younger. Anyhow there were those two maybe another in that class, again about three adults.

GM; Right.

SRB: What we considered adults in this class. She would sit there, and it would just be this sort of love going across the room.

[laughter]

SRB: I mean just admiration and adoration. And I said something like that to her yesterday, she was so pleased, and she remembers those very pleasant days. They would walk across campus holding hands. And he would drive in a little sports car, he loved sports cars.

GM: Right.

SRB: He would drive with his beard flowing and around campus. Sometimes she'd be in the car. He was just—He was an interesting person. And they played tennis, and this was the story that went around, I don't think I ever saw this, but my friend did see this. They would play tennis on the tennis courts and she would make a real good hit, whatever you do in tennis. I'm not a tennis player. And he would leap across the net and give her a kiss.

GM: Oh!

[laughter]

SRB: It was a great love around, they were great. They just walked around campus obviously very much in love. It was fun for everybody.

GM: You all liked it.

SRB: Oh yeah, it was fun.

GM: It was romantic. [laughs]

SRB: It was fun, and we would chuckle about it and, you know, it was fun to see, but it was not at all intimidating to her—

GM: To have her in class?

SRB: She was of course older than we were but, I don't know how old she is now. I would say in her early seventies, maybe late sixties.

GM: I think she might be a little older than Maddie.

SRB: Oh, really. Well, but she seemed very young.

GM: Yes.

SRB: And she was very friendly, and she did not—I don't recall her even speaking in class.

GM: She wasn't like a student. I mean she wasn't—

SRB: Yeah, she just sat there in admiration. But, maybe she did in other classes, I don't know. She was charming and very nice. I never felt intimidated by her. I mean we got—We loved actually at the end, we loved having these other women in the class, because we found out they added a whole another perspective to whatever we were studying—

GM: Yes.

SRB: —that we were again ignorant of. You go in thinking, “Oh, they're going to spoil it for us. Why are these old ladies here?” They didn't, I mean it was—

GM: I found that with the adult students here we have a lot of students who are older here now. They always raise the level of the class, almost every time. The other students I think admire them too. Would you say that—I'm sorry, go ahead.

SRB: I was going to say it was a special time that I think no student has now because we truly had small classes, very small. And I took maybe one class that was a required education course maybe had fifty people in that class. That was the largest class I remember having. I had one class with two people.

GM: Wow!

SRB: It should not have existed, but it did. We couldn't believe that they didn't take it off the books, but they didn't.

GM: You got lots of personal attention.

SRB: Right. They were—The teachers were very—They knew us, and they knew my sisters. I always felt that I was keeping—

GM: The whole Rodgers family on your shoulders.

SRB: They were better students than I was.

GM: It was very personal then, very, very personal. Like almost like a finishing school, would that be fair assessment?

SRB: No, no, not at all like a finishing school.

GM: Okay, like how?

SRB: I don't know. But, let me say that Peter Taylor for instance—

GM: Okay.

SRB —has been and of course he's dead now. He came up to Washington several times lecturing. He always remembered who exactly who my sisters were, he knew who I was

because of them. He had a wonderful faculty for remembering names and people and he did that in his books, you could read that in his books. And he would remember people in the class, but he was—Both they were very good friends, or they seemed to be very good friends, Taylor and Jarrell. And he was an amazing person in keeping up with the personal aspects.

GM: Right. It made you feel really good and cared for and intellectually nurtured with him, but it's not like a finishing school. You really said, "Oh, no it wasn't like a finishing school."

SRB: Well, I think a finishing school it was being very social, and this was not.

GM: This was not. It was highly serious.

SRB: It was serious, and you know, we would have liked to have more boys around to tell you the truth.

GM: Over and over, I've had women tell me that, well not women no, I've talked to maybe four women now and they all said that they believe they got a really stunningly good education. I mean of a kind that would be comparable to one of the seven sister schools [unclear].

SRB: In fact, Dr. [Richard] Bardoff [history professor] made a point about that just yesterday when he was—Yeah. I think he's right. I mean we really were—It was very unusual. When I went home on holidays it was obvious to me that what I was getting when we compared hearing you talk about what you learn and what you're doing. The difference between this school and other schools was dramatic to me and just hearing my friends talk. The other thing that was interesting there was a girl in my class named Sory Guthery. I'm getting away from Jarrell a little bit here, okay.

GM: That's done, that's fine. I like hearing about the school.

SRB: Sory married Charles Kuralt [American journalist and television news anchor].

GM: Okay.

SRB: They were high school sweethearts and he was over in Chapel Hill, she was here. I think she might have been a year ahead of him. And he—They decided to get married I think her junior year, after her junior year. So, she transferred over and had her classes, her senior classes over at [University of North Carolina at] Chapel Hill was very disappointed in the quality or and the people. They gave her a choice of where she could receive her degree. She decided to receive her degree back here—

GM: Wow!

GM: —because she thought her—She got such a better education here, yeah. They were later divorced and it's just a little interesting.

GM: I've heard that before. I mean it's very consistently the case and people say that about how proud they were of having gone here that they knew they were working harder under their education it meant something.

SRB: Well, people, a lot of people came here because they knew they could transfer to UNC.

GM: Right.

SRB: A lot of them then went on and transferred, others decided not to transfer after—

GM: That's interesting too that they didn't leave.

SRB: Yeah, once they got here.

GM: Now, let's see. There is a book you might enjoy reading called *Throwed Away: [Failures of Progress in Eastern North Carolina]*. Have you read it, by Linda Flowers [Class of 1970]? She grew up in—She was a friend of mine at the University of Rochester where I was before. She was a graduate student, but she's from North Carolina. She went here, but not until the late '60s I guess. Anyway, she's written a book about growing up on a share, she was a sharecropper's daughter and coming to school here on a scholarship [unclear]. I bet you'd find it interesting. Her point is that for these sharecropper's daughters to be able to come here it was a very big thing. I mean, it was like being able to go to Vassar [College]. You know, she thought like her education was very, very good here over and over.

SRB: That's the reason it's not like a finishing school.

GM: Yeah, because it's serious, that's what I mean.

SRB: No, no, well not only that but because it had sharecropper's daughters here.

GM: Well that's true too.

SRB: It was—

GM: It did, didn't it?

SRB: That's right it did.

GM: I mean this is not just rich girls.

SRB: There was a girl who came from an orphanage who lived next door to me. I don't even remember her name. I just remember that she and I was impressed that somebody gone all the way from school through life living in an orphanage. So, there were people like

that and a lot of the people had to work in the dining room to make ends meet, to get through college.

GM: Yes, that's admirable, yeah. One of the things I'm interested in trying to understand is what the atmosphere was like when you went back to the dormitory for example. You lived in a dormitory?

SRB: Yes.

GM: All the girls did I assume, okay. When you all talked about your—If you talked about poetry in the dormitory, did you ever talk about poetry in the dormitory? Who did you—What poets did you like? Do you remember talking about poetry with your friends or was that something you kept in the classroom? Do you remember?

SRB: No, I don't. Actually, if we did—I told you, you know, we talked more about who was a good—At least I talked about who was a good teacher.

GM: Yeah.

SRB: The poetry was secondary, I'm sorry.

[laughter]

GM: No, that's fine. No, no, I think that's interesting that it was so driven by personality.

SRB: And who was really a good teacher?

GM: What made a teacher a good teacher from your point of view then?

SRB: I think the ones who made me think, and the ones who made me learn. I mean and, you know, who I felt really challenged by.

GM: Yes, so hard, the ones that were hard, the ones that were demanding. Also, charismatic, would that be fair to say because Jarrell seems to have been—When you were talking about the way he read and so forth or no?

SRB: But, I don't think his—He was so shy. I mean I think you—either you wanted to say, "It's okay to talk to me."

GM: [laughs] Oh, that's interesting, yeah.

SRB: I felt I had to come to class just to help him out sort of to get the things started at first, after I got—

GM: It's so interesting you should say that because when I asked Heather Ross Miller if she was Sleeping Beauty [name of the main character in the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*] and he was Prince Charming [name of a character in the fairy tale *Sleeping Beauty*], she said, "I think maybe he was Sleeping Beauty."

[laughter]

GM: She had that same kind of, "We needed to help him," kind of thing.

SRB: Yeah, I mean he was very shy and what I—Interestingly enough and how I did this is beyond me. They came to Washington right after I moved to Washington to—

GM: Right, and he had the thing—

SRB: I very brazenly and why did this—I called him up and said, "Well, I'd like to give you a party." Gave him a party. I invited all of my friends and they came and they said, "Oh, we met all your artsy friends." And I thought, "Artsy friends." I thought it was such a funny—I never thought of my friends as being artsy and I can't believe I did it. I remember he was—

GM: I'm amazed too, I have to say.

SRB: Jarrell [unclear].

GM: You were about twenty years old or something at this time.

SRB: I was about twenty-two, but I did this. You know, I think, "Golly day, I had really had nerve didn't I."

GM: But they came.

SRB: They came, oh, and they were delighted. They were very pleased that I had done this. They were [unclear] as she said yesterday, they were just enjoying being sort of working part-time and seeing the sights of Washington—

GM: Exactly.

SRB: —going to the [Washington] Redskins [professional American football team] games. He loved sports.

GM: Yes, no, yeah, I've heard that over and over about the cars and the tennis and so forth. I think—One of the things I'm trying to understand is why he liked Eliot so much, he seems to have just been crazy about Eliot. There's a story that goes around about they started doing Eliot in his class. I think Mary told me this story, that they'd started doing

Eliot and it was February, in the spring semester. And he said, “Do you all mind if we just continue doing Eliot for the rest of the semester and not do the other poets and everything?” They said, “No, that’s fine.” They spent their entire semester on Eliot. You remember the Eliot? It’s interesting to me that you remember.

SRB: Yeah, the Eliot does standout.

GM: But you don’t know exactly why?

SRB: I don’t know why. It’s been so long.

GM: So long.

SRB: Right.

GM: Yeah, it’s just interesting to me how consistent that’s been—There must have been something about Eliot’s poetry that really moved him, that he taught it so well. It’s what people seem to remember. Let me see if I have any other questions, okay. Oh, this is something you probably, you may not feel comfortable answering this, and I don’t even know what I’m fishing for by asking it. But he wrote a letter to Allen Tate [American essayist, poet, social commentator, and United States Poet Laureate], who I guess was also here occasionally as a teacher.

SRB: Earlier.

GM: Yeah, he wrote this letter in 1939, which was before Jarrell even came here. In it he said, “I think I have a semi-feminine mind.” It’s an interesting letter about being a poet. It seems interesting. When he was in the army he said something in a letter about, “They wanted an executive director for the Camp Fire Girls [American youth development organization].” Other places he said that he really liked teaching here, not in Princeton, not any place else but here, he liked Woman’s College.

I’m just wondering if there’s any way of knowing and it may not be what it was about women, but he felt that why he liked teaching women. It wasn’t just he liked teaching, he liked teaching women, and Mary was very clear about that. She said, “I think he loved teaching, but I think what he really loved was teaching young women, he really liked that experience.”

SRB: I think he’s just extremely sensitive in a way that a lot of men aren’t.

GM: Okay.

SRB: I think women analyze a whole lot and I find that men—I will sit with a woman and analyze a situation, but a man is not interested in doing that. He was very analytical, and his thought processes was that way. So, I think maybe that was one reason women found that he was such a wonderful teacher.

GM: Yes

SRB: The teachers who can analyze—

GM: Yeah and take time or something and be sensitive.

SRB: Oh, yeah. We would spend days it seems to me on three or four lines of the poem, and so that's what another reason when you go over and over something you learn it, you know. He was analyzing thoroughly. So, I think that—

GM: People use the word sympathetic to describe him. Betty Watson [American artist] for example was his friend and she said, "He was terribly sympathetic to women, he liked to listen to them talk. He didn't like to talk in the groups, but he liked to talk one-on-one with friends who were women." He seems to have had some simpatico ability with women that a lot of men don't have.

SRB: I don't think so.

GM: You think that's what you sensed.

SRB: Yeah, I haven't thought about it particularly, but I think that's true.

GM: A lot of his poems the main speaker in the poem is a woman. Many of his most famous poems were either about women or actually the speaker of the poem was a woman. It's an unusual quality of his work and he often writes in a woman's voice, sympathetically too.

SRB: And yet it wasn't that he was not masculine.

GM: No, yeah. That's clear. He wasn't effeminate at all. Right, yeah. That's so interesting, isn't it?

SRB: Yeah.

GM: Maybe that's why he was comfortable in a woman's college it's that it brought out the side of him or enabled him to be comfortable in that.

SRB: And yet when I think about it, he loved things that men did too because he loved the sports and the cars and all of that. He had that identity too.

GM: Well he always said semi-feminist.

[laughter]

GM: So, he can't be wrapped around this [unclear].

SRB: Yeah. I do find some men do—Seem to communicate better with women and there is a simpatico sometimes.

GM: Yeah, yeah, I think my husband is that way for example. He's easy with women and other men are uncomfortable, whereas his father was uncomfortable with women. Did you ever hear the words new criticism used in your classroom?

SRB: I don't remember. I don't, I really don't remember.

GM: It wasn't theory. You can talk about theory you just did, you just did the poems, right?

SRB: Yes.

GM: Okay, because that was right at the time when people were starting to talk about the theory of new criticism. My sense is that teachers maybe talked about whether the students weren't—gotten taught that term.

[recording paused]

GM: I'm testing Suzanne Rodgers Bush, and this is a test. So, the Arts Forum. Tell me what you remember about the Arts Forum.

SRB: Well, I'd heard a lot about the Arts Forum because my sisters had participated, and it was quite a big deal when they were here in the late '40s. They had been sort of a period I think when it dropped off a little bit, then it became the Arts Festival by the time my class came along. And when I was a senior, I think it did not put a great deal of emphasis on the writing aspect. By then it was in dance and theater and music, everything. So, I decided to really try to sort of do what I had heard from my sisters, and I was chairman of the writing aspect of the forum, or the festival.

GM: In 1955 or the year before?

SRB: In 1955. In the spring of 1955. My yearbook is upstairs, and I'll go get the yearbook because there are a couple things in there. I noticed Flannery O'Connor [American novelist, short story writer, and essayist] was here. And I thought Robert Frost [American poet] was here that year but, maybe Robert Frost was here the year before. Because we did it for a couple of years building it back up so, I don't remember who. But, what we did was we wrote off to schools all over this part of the country, or schools who had participated in other years, to their writing department, inviting their students to send works in. And if their works were accepted, they could come down, and me come up and meet whoever the person was who was going to be the resident, visiting resident writer. And that person then would read each of these works and talk individually with those as well as lecture or discuss things with any students who wanted to come.

GM: Right.

SRB: And that year we put at the *Coraddi* [art and literary magazine of the college], without an editorial board because the whole editorial board had just resigned because there was a— It was a crazy thing. There was a print of a nude man that was put into the *Coraddi*, and the administration was furious, and the legislature got all over us. And so, the whole editorial board resigned, and I had, I was chairman of the committee, and I had all these people coming in, we had accepted them, that various stories and poems for publication. So, I in effect put that issue *Coraddi* by myself. I put it together and took it to the press. I didn't know what I was doing, got advice, but it came out. It came out without an editor. It just came out, with the committee doing it. Basically, the committee at that point came down to me, to my doing it.

GM: Oh, man.

SRB: But, I'm—A man named Robert Humphrey [English professor] was on the staff, and I think he was here several years, and he was the faculty advisor. We always had a student and a faculty advisor planning the whole activity. We usually had two or three sessions of writers who, as I said, who just talked with the students informally, might hold a reading with a discussion afterwards, and then individually met with the various writers whose works were accepted in the publication. We had Saul Bellow [Canadian/American writer] one year. We had Flannery O'Connor. I'm not sure that Peter Taylor didn't come back at that point one year.

GM: To do it?

SRB: To do it.

GM: Were you aware of how glamorous this was to have these people? I mean—

SRB: Only sort of.

GM: Because I looked at the list of who all came here, and it's just stunning.

SRB: But, this was really quite a writing center at the time.

GM: Yes, it really was.

SRB: And that's the reason, as I said, I majored in writing without really having great talents, just because the teachers were so super. The teachers in lots of departments were super. The history department had wonderful teachers. Dr. Bardolph and Dr. [Eugene] Paff, and there were some others. But we just had—And if you found a niche in an area, I kind of felt sorry for people who didn't get into really good departments, who were off majoring in other things, because I felt like they were missing.

GM: Right.

SRB: And I'm sure there were other good teachers out there that I didn't know about.

GM: Sure. Did you get to introduce any of these famous people?

SRB: Yeah, I was saying I had to introduce Robert Frost, and I don't even remember, I remember what I wore [unclear]. The other thing I remember is I had to make sure he was settled, and he stayed in the Alumni House in one of the little rooms, and I was given directions as to what he was to eat for breakfast, and there was a man there, who worked in house, and he had to cook a certain breakfast. It was a soft-boiled egg, as I recall, for breakfast. But just sort of funny little things like this. Robert Frost again had the same thing happen to him that Randall Jarrell did because he said, "Do you have any questions you want to ask me?" And we sat around in Elliott Hall, in one of those lovely little rooms that they had. Nobody said anything, and I was scared to death. I thought, "This has got to succeed." And he finally said, "Well, I know what you will probably like to ask me," so he asked himself the question. [laughs] Isn't that charming?

GM: It really is.

SRB: He did that twice.

GM: [unclear]

SRB: Everybody was intimidated. I mean, of course we realized Robert Frost was [unclear].

GM: You must have, right. And so that, you kind of got that back going then, basically.

SRB: No, no, no, I did not. Let me not say that way. I'm saying I think it had gone through a down period and we started building it back up. I remembered some things that I was chairman one year, my senior year. Now there were other people who participated.

GM: Sure, that's fine.

SRB: I will go get the annual.

GM: I would love to see the annual.

SRB: Yes.

GM: Because then I could picture the girls, and that would help me.

SRB: Okay.

GM: That would be great, if it's not too much trouble.

SRB: No. Do you have anything else you want to ask me?

GM: I was just looking. I don't think so. I think you answered all the questions I wanted to ask.

SRB: Let me run upstairs and get that.

GM: Yes, I'll turn this off. Thank you, okay.

[End of Interview]