Charles Reis Felix Interviews, 2005 and 2006

Francisco Cota Fagundes
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Introduction
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This document consists of the transcriptions of six videotape interviews with writer Charles Reis Felix recorded from 25 December 2005 to 27 December 2005 (videotapes 1-2), and from 24 December 2006 to 28 December 2006 (videotapes 3-6). An appendix contains the transcription of an audiotape recorded on 23 December 2005. The interviewers were Mona Biskup, the writer’s daughter, and Barbara Felix, his wife. Present and often on tape is Chris Brown, Mona’s son. A second appendix contains the list of books written by Charles Reis Felix, both published and unpublished.

The venue of the interviews, the living room of the Felix home, in the San Francisco Bay Area, California could not be a more appropriate place for this series of interviews. The time, the Christmas season, could not be more propitious for Charles to share and review experiences with his wife, daughter and grandson. The mood was one of joyful togetherness with family members. Charles looks and sounds happy. It is obvious that he loves to talk. He especially loves to tell stories, being the storyteller that his readers know from his books, especially *Through a Portagee Gate*. Being relaxed, Charles’ diction is equally relaxed. The entire interview has an oral and familiar tone. It is even doubtful that Charles imagined at the time of the recordings that these interviews would one day become public; and if he did, this knowledge does not seem to have influenced the register and tone in which the interviews were conducted.
In 2014, Charles Reis Felix surprised me with a magnificent gift: a copy of these six videotapes. After viewing them, I offered to transcribe them. I secured a grant from the University of Massachusetts Amherst for that purpose. Two of the tapes were transcribed by students of mine, and later reviewed by Mona Biskup to ensure their fidelity to the original. Since I was having difficulty finding other qualified transcribers for the remainder of the tapes, Mona offered to do the rest of the transcriptions herself. Charles Reis Felix, I am pleased to say, edited the texts of all the interviews. This way, the text presented here is as reliable as it could possibly be.

Needless to say, I am extremely thankful to Charles Reis Felix and Barbara Felix for the original gift, and most grateful for the editing done by Charles. I am also most thankful to Mona Biskup for the extraordinary effort in transcribing the four videotapes and for reviewing the transcriptions of the first two. I would also like to thank the Felix family for the permission granted to me to share this precious material with Charles Reis Felix’s readers and admirers through ScholarWorks, a digital repository of research and scholarship of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Upon my retirement, a copy of the six videotapes and a hard copy of the transcriptions will be held at the W. E. B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst for consultation by Felix scholars. Any scholar wishing to consult these materials, may consult me to make arrangements toward that end.

What becomes clearly apparent from viewing/reading these interviews is how enmeshed life experiences and the experiences of writing are in Charles Reis Felix. In fact, it seems that Charles’ entire life as an adult, not excluding the time he served in the U.S. Army, was a preparation for the activity of writing and seeking to be published. Life-story and writer-story mesh to a large extent. Also, his view of literature and life overlap to a large degree. In these tapes, living and writing are mutually implicative.
The questioners are privileged interviewers and Charles a privileged respondent. He does not have to confine himself to a given narrow channel provided by the interviewers, nor does he need to fear being interrupted. A more technical and professional series of interviews by professional scholars might have avoided some repetitions; but the responses might also have sounded more confined and the results more contrived. Since the interviewers also know the main outlines of the stories recounted here, there is no need for pauses and clarification questions, except very occasionally. As a result, we get the fluidity of the responses, the natural quality of the exchanges between interviewers and respondent. The questioners merely turn on the spout... and the stream pours out, uninterrupted. Since the cache of information is huge, the interview acquires, at moments, the unimpeded stream-like flow of an autobiographical text. Given the autobiographical nature of much of Charles Reis Felix’s fiction, quite a number of the episodes recounted in these interviews echo the published work, and vice-versa. A few thematic strands shape the text of these transcriptions:

- Experiences of the high school and college student as they pertain to the life of the future writer;

- Meeting his wife Barbara, early marriage, moving from Michigan to California and the struggle to become a published writer;

- The importance of Barbara Felix from early on in Charles’ commitment to both his career as a teacher and a writer, indeed to the point where one could speak of Charles’ life-story as a writer – and he largely does that – in the 3rd person. This is a life-story often in the key of “we”, not only in the key of “I”;
• The story of a man who writes and writes, who tries desperately to become a published writer, who never gives up trying – and who finally, after decades, succeeds.

These interviews are presented here almost in the form in which they were recorded. Charles edited out some debris – repetitions, pauses – to facilitate the reading. He did not, however, interfere with the oral quality of the text. More could perhaps have been edited out, rendering the text more visually appealing. I am glad he resisted doing more editing. The interviews are presented in their raw state, as they were transcribed from the videos. This text is a naturalistic life story, not a constructionist one. The presence of members of his family as interviewers and witnesses actually reinforce what seems to be natural characteristics of Charles Reis Felix personality: self-acceptance and transparent honesty.

This written text lacks elements that only the videotape could provide – facial expressions, nods, smiles. However, what the written word is capable of presenting is contained in these transcriptions, including annotations, such as “mimicking,” “smiling,” “laughter,” etc. The interviewers, both teachers, were careful to make available markers that ensure the maximum reliability of the text.
Charles: Is it on? All right, I’m supposed to talk about myself, and for an hour, or thirty minutes, I don’t know which, and it went off already, that’s it. We need a new technician. All right, this is December 25, 2005, see, I know the year, and, I’m supposed to talk, I hope that I don’t prove to be a pompous ass or a crashing bore, I’m supposed to talk about myself, which is always a big challenge. And… let’s see, I wanted to talk to Mona for a minute.

Barbara: Mona, your dad wants to talk with you for a minute.

Charles: I wanted to ask you, do you know how I met your mother? Oh, did I say my name, Charles Reis Felix, OK. Did I ever tell you how I met your
mother? OK, we’re in an English class at Michigan, I think it was English 74, and, September 1946, and I had been there, we had been there about a week, then I noticed her. We sat around a table, it was a kind of discussion thing, and I thought I would ask her for a date. In those days, I used to get depressed a lot, in weekends especially, Saturday night, because, basically I was looking for love, and not having, not finding the girl. I had no trouble getting dates, that was easy… well, not that easy. I kept away from the sorority girls because that was a different category, but everybody else was fair game. So I had dates, but I never hit it off with anybody. And I was looking for someone that I could love, really love you know, and it had to be the right person, which is hard to find. So anyway, so I was dating everybody I could, one date… so, anyway, I decided I was going to ask her for a date. Excuse me… so it was a Friday afternoon, the class let out, everybody streaming out, I thought I wouldn’t ask her, big crowd, you know, I thought I would nail her outside, you know, where there was less people. So I let her out first, and I followed her, and I didn’t know her name or anything, really, and she is walking along, and, you know, now most girls walk, in those days, before feminism. [Demonstrates] She didn’t walk that way. You know, today, with feminism, girls don’t walk that way anymore, I guess, but she was walking like this, striding, I said, “Geez, what’s with this girl”, so I’m walking behind her, and I can’t keep up. So she’s pulling away, so I have to run, so I run after her, and I catch her on the back steps, and I asked her for a date, and she looked at me kind of surprised, because maybe I was shorter than she was or something, I don’t know, and she said, “Well, I have a date this Saturday”, and I said “Well, I expected you would”, and I said, “How about Monday? We’ll have a coke date”, and coke dates were good because, girls like them too, because it was an afternoon date, and you just had a coke in the middle of the afternoon, and you know there was no big deal about it, and then, if it worked out, you could have an evening date,
so I said “How about a coke date? OK, Monday, I’ll pick you up at Betsy Barbour [dorm], I found out where she was, three o’clock, and so, I knew she was the girl after five minutes, believe it or not, we never had a date, it was just something that I thought, you know, and I knew she was the girl, because, normally… I didn’t have a date that Saturday night… normally on a Saturday night, if I have a date or if I don’t have a date, it’s the same thing, I always get depressed, because after the date I’m depressed, and if I don’t have a date I’m depressed because I don’t have a date. So, in fact, I would say that, mentally, that was my worst time of my life, was most depression, was at that time. So, see, where was I? Oh… so, I knew she was the girl because for the first weekend in as long as I can remember, I wasn’t depressed, and I know it was because I had met her. So Monday afternoon we had the date, then Monday night we had a date, Tuesday we had a date, Tuesday night, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, we had a date every day. So, from then on, in fact, she spent so much time with me, her studies went down into the… did you drop out?

**Barbara:** I dropped out.

**Charles:** She dropped out. But see, I was more… I was keeping my grades up fairly well. But, we dated, we sort of, I don’t know if I talked it over with her or not, but we’re going to live together, right? Wasn’t that the plan? At least in my head, we were going to live together next year, the next following year. That might have gotten us into trouble with the university because I’m not sure, I know they wouldn’t have liked that if they found out about it. But I was thinking that, in terms of that. And then Christmas came along, I went home for Christmas, and I hadn’t been home for three days that I missed her so much that I said “Shit, I got to marry her”. And marriage was the last thing in the world I wanted to do. When I talked about her, I never thought of it in terms of marriage, I wasn’t looking that far ahead, I was thinking in terms of living
together. And, marriage… cause then you’re responsible for somebody, and I was hardly able of being responsible for myself, how am I going to be responsible for somebody? But anyway, so then, we got married shortly when I came back. When I was home, I decided I was going to marry her. I didn’t ask her or anything, but I figured it was a done deal. And I sent her a telegram, and I said “The Swami sees great things for you”, something like that.

Barbara: “In the future.”

Charles: Did you know what that meant? No? OK, that’s what I meant anyway. So, we got married and that’s how we met. Ok, now, at the time, we were both going to school, and I had this tremendous impulse to write. It was like, I couldn’t resist it, you know. But, of course, I had to stay at school because I’m getting money from the government to write, I mean, to go to school, but my studies were secondary to my ideas about writing. And this was the first that the writing bug, if you want to call it that, had hit me full force. I had written before, but, you know, it didn’t matter. But now I really wanted to write. And so it happened… I swear to God I didn’t know it was happening before I married her, but she had inherited some money, her mother had died, and, as I recall it, she got either twelve or fourteen thousand dollars, something like that, a lot of money in those days, easily enough to live for two or three years, and she got a Dodge car, so she came well out-fitted. So we said, “Well, what the hell, let’s have a go at it”, and she was agreeable, so we both left school at the end of January 1947, and we were married January 10th 1947, and we went up to Manistique where we, there was a cottage there, we rented a cottage from a guy named Dr Lindstrom and, thirty five dollars a month, right by a lake, and we used to go swimming every day, when it warmed up, you know, and I was writing. And then at the end of that summer… At Michigan, for the first time, I had trouble with cold, I think it was because of the war,
because I was outside a lot, and it seemed to do something, because when I was in Michigan, my right leg, from around the knee area, the calf and the knee area, began to ache, and I felt it was because it was so cold, so I would go to health services, and I would take hot whirlpool baths, you don’t strip, you just put your leg, I imagine you took your pants off, you put your leg in this hot bath and they... hot water, and that helped. And I said “Hell, I’m going to... you know, this is not the place for me”. So I said, I had been to California, so I said, that was the primary reason, was that it would be warmer, so the end of the summer of ’47 we left for California. And we settled in Walteria, which was a little tiny town right by Torrance. We went to the house, and I kept writing, in December 14th, and you were born, so... see if you, count on your fingers, it’s more than nine months. And I want everybody to know that I married a virgin. [Laughter] So, anyway, that’s where you were born, of course we could have post-dated it, then we went up to Wrightwood, no, no, we were at Walteria for a whole year, and then the Fall, we started at Walteria in September, had a nice little house, September ’47 we rented, and September ’48 the guy comes and he says he’s selling the house, and he’s going to have people tramping through, looking at the house, so I said “Shit on that, I’m not going to have people tramp through my house” so I moved out, and we went to Wrightwood, which maybe you re... no, you can’t remember that, you were a year old, but you loved it. We used to... it was snow, six thousand feet up, we used to put you in a sled, and I was with you on the sled, and we would go [wheezing sound], you know, behind you, down the hill, you know, six thousand feet, a lot of snow. But the cabin was so bloody cold, the bedroom, was like being outside that I couldn’t write, it was too cold to write, freezing cold, because the house was inadequately heated, especially the bedroom, nothing in the bedroom, so I said “Geez, we can’t stay here, because it’s too uncomfortable, I can’t write”. So, at that time, we stayed
there a while, and then we… I think our money was running out, wasn’t it? I think so, about that time.

**Barbara**: Getting low…

**Charles**: Getting low, so I said, I was writing a book called *Gently, Brother*, which was about New Bedford, that was my first book, and, never finished it, and I said, well, our money is kind of disappearing, I better go back to school, because if we went to school, under the GI bill, it would have paid us a hundred and twenty dollars a month, which was not a hell of a lot of money, but, you know, was some money. And, also… I’ll backtrack a little bit. When you were a veteran, they had a government program called, we used to call it the 52-20 club. If you’re unemployed, they’ll give you twenty dollars a week for 52 weeks, to get you on your feet, and I thought, “Well, I might as well try and take advantage of this”. This was when I got out of the service in New Bedford, in ’46, I thought I’d try it, and I went to the unemployment guy and tried to get on the rolls for the 52-20 club, and the guy said, “What do you do?”, and I said, “I’m a writer”, and this is in New Bedford, he looked at me, “You’re a what?”, so he disallowed the claim. So I said, well, I’ll try again in California, so I went down to the unemployment office in Torrance, see this was when I was out of money and a thousand forty bucks looked good to me. So I went down to the office, there was a man named Mr. Zhe, Z – H – E, he had a withered arm, and I said, “I’d like to apply to the… you know”, and he said, “What do you do?” and I said, “I’m a writer”, and he said “That’s interesting”, and right away I thought, “I’m in the right state”, you know. And he said, “What are you writing?”, and I told him and he said “Gee whiz”. And he said “Have you bought any supplies like paper or something?”, and I said “Yeah”, and he said “The next time that you come in, can you bring me the receipts, to show that you are…” and I said “Sure, no problem”, and, you had to come back every month, I think, and he
was always, always so nice, this is, things that keep me awake at night, because I never wrote him a thank you letter, that bothers me all night, you know. For different people who did things for me and I never wrote him and told him, you know. He was exceptional. So, anyway, we got the 52-20 club for that whole year in Walteria, which helped a bit, and then, back to Wrightwood, our money is running low…

**Mona:** Tell about the swimming, and going to the swimming pool, Dad, there and meeting the ladies?

**Charles:** Oh, yeah, Wrightwood, I forgot about that, isn’t that funny? There was a swimming pool there, and I went around and we started talking. Mom was home. And I met Aldous Huxley’s wife, and I think she was German, she sounded German, and we were talking, she was with a couple of other ladies, they were about 45, 50, you know. She had eyes on her like a shark, so I said “Uh, this woman…” you know what I mean? She was very appraising to you, you know, it didn’t fool me, you know, looking at you like a piece of meat, you know. I said “I’m writing a book”, “Oh, writing a book”, right away, it interested her, so she wanted me to come to her little group, which, of course, if I had any brains I would have done, but I said “I don’t like the sound of this place”. They seemed degenerate, that’s a feeling I had, it’s like, a naïve American going with the dissolute Europeans. She was probably a perfectly fine woman, but the feeling I had was “These people eat meat”, you know, so I made some excuses and I never went, they had a meeting up there every week or something, and as I said, she’s probably a very fine woman, and, you know, it was just a sensation I had, you know.

**Mona:** Had you known about his books?

**Charles:** Yes, I’d known about his books.
Mona: And you weren’t interested in meeting him?

Charles: I’m not sure he was there. He may not have been there. She didn’t say he was there. He settled in Hollywood, he stayed for years and years in Hollywood. He was like a California fixture. What’s that famous book he wrote? About people taking a pill.

Mona: 1984

Charles: No, that was Orwell. He was prescient. He started telling about it, long before it happened, he was telling about people taking pills to feel good, and that happened. I know, I took one. [Laughter]

Barbara: You were asked to join a club too, in Balboa Island, and you refused.

Charles: Yeah, when were we in Balboa Island that was before Walteria. Right? Yeah, we went to Balboa Island for the summer…

Barbara: For the winter.

Charles: Winter? Yeah, it was when we first came. Then we went to a beach, after we… Balboa, the rents were cheap in the summer, Balboa Island, beautiful place, we had a beautiful time.

Barbara: They were cheap in the winter.

Charles: No, no, that’s when people come. They were cheap in the summer because it was hot. Am I right, or am I wrong? They were cheap… one season and oh I don’t know, maybe you’re right, maybe they were cheap in the winter. When we first came, we didn’t go to Walteria first, I don’t think, we went to Balboa Island. We came in September, so you’re right, we went there in the Fall. And they were cheap, it was 85 bucks, but in the summer, I guess it is, they skyrocketed. But after a few months we had to leave because rents were
going to go up, you know. Let’s see, you know that cabin, was that before Balboa…

**Barbara**: Manhattan Beach.

Charles: Manhattan Beach, was that before Balboa Island?

**Barbara**: No, that was after Balboa Island.

Charles: OK, so we go to a place on Manhattan Beach, and we had taken out our clothes and everything, and at some point, and, we stayed there maybe one night, and, you, what did you?

**Barbara**: I went into the kitchen and turned on the light.

Charles: Turned on the light, and there were five million cockroaches! Ahh! And it’s funny, this house is on the beach, far from other houses, but the cockroaches go… I don’t understand, but that was it, we got the hell out of there, we were afraid that they’d get in our clothes, and then I thought we…

**Barbara**: You were right, we went to Balboa Island after.

Charles: Yeah, we went there first, and then, when we got to Balboa Island, we started taking our clothes off out of the thing, examining it, ’cause these people, if we introduced… Balboa Island is a ritzy place, if we introduced cockroaches into their house we were going to get shot, but it turned out all right. So, anyway, up at Wrightwood, we went to Walteria then for about a year, then we went to Wrightwood, where we met Aldous Huxley’s wife [Maria], and her group, and then, money was getting low, I don’t know if you’re keeping it straight, I’m back and forth now, are you keeping it straight? So, I decided to go to college to collect on the 120 dollars, you know, and I applied… oh mom, watch your doggy, he’s getting the cord, I applied to, huh, the University of
Idaho, of all places, the Mormon center, I’d fit right in there, [Laughs] and we applied at Stanford…

**Barbara:** Now the reason we applied at those two places was that they had living accommodations for married couples.

**Charles:** Yeah, right, right. And also, we looked at UCLA and there’s like no campus, it’s just a bunch of buildings in the middle of the city. We wanted something that was like, more pleasant. Like Michigan, it’s nice, it’s got grass and stuff. UCLA was just… and Southern Cal looked like a dump, it was in a bad part of town, you know where Southern California is [the University]? But everybody loves it who goes there, but… it didn’t look very promising. Well, Idaho and Stanford, both of them turned me down. And… I forgot what Stanford said, we were planning for the Fall term and that’s a big crush, so whether they dropped me a hint and I did on my own, I applied again for the December, January, they were on a quarter system, and I applied for the January… the second, no… not a quarter, yes… they call it a quarter, a semester is longer… I applied for the January quarter and they accepted me, so we came up here and we stayed at Stanford for a couple of years. But I had, in Michigan and Walteria and so on, I had written for two years, on *Gently, Brother*, and I hadn’t finished it, and it was too big, it was too sprawling, I didn’t have enough of a… I needed structure. And I didn’t have a structure. But what we did was, Barb typed up the first 580 pages or so, and I sent them to James Henle, James Henle was a famous editor, editor in chief at Vanguard Press. And I picked him out because he published *Studs Lonigan* so obviously he had a taste for the more classist type thing and I thought he might like it, you know, so I sent him… In those days, it was so wonderful for writers, you could send them a manuscript without any… just send them a manuscript, and they would look it over, course you had to send stamps to send it back. But today, it’s infinitely more difficult
for a writer. Number one, publishers don’t want your manuscript, you send it to them, they’ll send it back unopened. You have to go through an agent, and agents have work coming out of their ears, every other person in America is a writer, so what you do is you write a query letter to an agent, and, as I’ve found out, the query letters are turned down, so nobody ever sees… you try to interest them in your book, and you have one letter, one piece of paper to do it on, and it can’t be two pages, one page, that’s it. It’s like in Hollywood, when they try to pitch a picture, you have about two, the guy with the money, you have about two minutes to convince him that you’ve got a sellable picture, otherwise out. So it’s very much more difficult to get a reading, because often, a manuscript… if you write a plotted manuscript it’s easy to summarize, but if your manuscript is in any way complicated, or rich, or whatever… how could you summarize Proust on one page, could you do it? [Pointing at Barbara who loves Proust.] Maybe you could do it, I don’t know. But, you know what I mean? It’s too big, and, so… those query letters are designed for plotted shit, which, if it’s got a plot it’s generally shit you know, I think. But that’s a minority view, and that’s not what sells. Anyway, I send them a manuscript, and he says “I’m recommending that we publish it”, but he says “I want to tell you that final authority is not mine, it’s the publisher”. That was a woman, I believe, Evelyn Shrifte, and I thought, “Oh boy, maybe this is going to be all right, you know”. And, of course, as you all well know, Evelyn said no, not the first time, so that was that. So, anyway, after we stayed at Stanford, I got a degree in History and I… is this too much detail for you?

Mona: No

Barbara: It’s not enough.

Mona: We want as much detail as possible.
Barbara: Yeah, you’re leaving out a lot of stuff.

Charles: Well, don’t fill me in now, you’d throw me off my track. When I finish, we’re turning the camera over to you. [Looking at Barbara] When I was at Stanford, I should tell you this. When I was at Stanford, Stanford had a writing program, one of the few schools in the country that had a writing program. Now every school has one, every school has a writing program. In those days, very few had them. This rich old guy contributed a big sum of money to Stanford for a writing program. I think his name was Edward Jones, my memory might be slightly off there, but, they gave like six fellowships in the writing thing for a year, and you would be expected to attend classes. Not necessarily a full load, of course, but a class or two. And they would give you, I think it was five thousand dollars for the year, which is, in those days, was a lot of money. Stanford tuition was five hundred dollars, today is like twenty thousand. Have we had inflation? Yes, we’ve had inflation. So I said, hey this sounds… that’s the reason I picked Stanford, I wanted to… I thought this is worth trying. So, the guy who gave out the money was a man named Professor Stegner, Wallace Stegner. He’s an environmentalist and well thought of. So, I took a course from him, Creative Criticism, and what you’re supposed to do is present, I forget how many pages, I think… not just a little, a good size sample, maybe… I don’t know how many pages, maybe a hundred or so, you present it to the department, and they read it and decide, if you’re going to be eligible, if you’ll get a fellowship, there’s a timeline there, you know, it’s not done… you don’t hand it in today and get the award the next day, so, I found out that everybody in that class, Creative Fiction, had the same idea… Creative Criticism… they were going to, you know… try to nail a fellowship, but it soon came clear to me, or it developed anyway, that the race was fixed, because, in this class, he didn’t prepare his classes, he reminded me of a teacher I had in
Education, she worked in the same way. What he did was walk in and say, like, for example, he loved Bernard DeVoto, who was a writer, and… Bernard DeVoto, he had a public set to with Thomas Wolfe, another writer, and DeVoto had criticized Wolfe for his writing, it was too long, too many adjectives, bla bla bla bla, and DeVoto was a Mormon, Stegner was a Mormon, and also DeVoto was an environmentalist I think, interested in the West, so they felt close, so naturally, he took DeVoto’s side against Wolfe. Now as a writer, DeVoto is not even in a ball park with Wolfe. So he would come in, Stegner would come in and throw out a question to the class, and he would say “What do you think of Wolfe’s You Can’t Go Home Again?”. That would conclude his participation in the class, and four or five guys took over, and I had an Education course, the same way, Shaftel, she would throw out a question, sit back, and hour later she gets up and walks out, and her buddies, her graduate students, take over, and so, these four or five guys, they’re throwing the ball back and forth, you know, bla bla bla bla, and I said, “These guys, there’s something going on, it’s an in thing here, you know”, and I was right, by the way, and it was interesting too, and the corridors by Stegner’s office, he had office hours, two to three or something, you know, and, when he had office hours, miraculously the corridor filled up with English graduate students. What they’re doing is, they’re eying each other to see who walks in the office with him, and if he comes by then, “Professor Stegner!”, and I thought, “Geez, this is like, sick, you know”, then his office hours are over, the corridor empties out, there would be nobody there, and… what happened?

Barbara: She [Mona] wants a new tape.

Charles: Should I do something, Chris? OK, we’re on again. OK, take two. I’m not trying to badmouth Stegner, that’s fine, he was a writer too, so, you know, if he had been preparing his classes like crazy, when would he write?
No, I sympathise with him. I think it’s a wonderful technique, I wish I could use it myself, but he’s well thought of, he’s a hero to the environmentalists, so I have nothing against him personally, but, one of the things too that was kind of interesting was, there was an English department secretary, a young girl, you know, and she was a secretary, and when you had your manuscript to hand in as a candidate for the prize, you gave it to her, so I walked in one day with mine, you know, it was a good size piece of... I forget how much it was, but, they had limits, they didn’t want like a 900 pages, but they didn’t want just 20 either, so it must have been in the neighborhood of a 100 or something, so I handed it in to her, and she took it without a word, very cold about it, and I thought “Geez, you know, can’t you say something?”, but, the interesting thing was that, after, when the prizes were announced, and the awards were given, the manuscripts were put in a pigeon hole outside, so I go to get mine, and somebody lifted it, somebody took it, and I never got it, so it wasn’t good enough for a prize, but somebody... the tipoff there was the secretary, the young, good looking secretary, she got a prize, and she had been working in the department, so look... I mean, you know... it’s a... I’m not saying they were without talent, I wouldn’t say that, but it doesn’t hurt to know somebody, and Stegner picks the guys out for the prize, and these guys are carrying his workload, he’s aware of that, I don’t know if they all, well, I know that two of them, for sure, won a prize, from that coterie of five, two that I know about won a prize, one was a playwright, and I forgot what the other one is, so halfway through the course, I was kind of angry about it, you know, I said “This is a bloody setup”, so I did something that I’ve often done, I commit suicide. There is a story I love called... oh, that’s another thing, these people, there’s two writers Anton Chekhov and Katherine Mansfield, who was, by the way, Australian, and Chekhov wrote a story about a, as I recall, a horseman, a taxi driver, but with a horse, and his son has just died, his only son, and he’s driving around, he’s got
passengers in the back, he wants to tell them that his son has just died, they’re totally uninterested, so he ends up telling the horse, and Katherine Mansfield took that same story and did it in Australia, I read it, but I can’t remember what it was, but it’s the same story, and she admitted that she took, it wasn’t plagiarism, it was just taking the theme of sorrow, and unable to tell anyone about it, so, we had, one of the assignments was compare Chekhov to Mansfield, and they were praising Mansfield, who was… Chekhov is up here and she is down here some place, I don’t want to disparage her, she’s a good writer, but Chekhov, he’s not a good writer, he’s a superlative writer, and that ticked me off, so I said “Goddamn these bastards”, you know, so, I took a story of Chekhov it was about a professor, now I can’t remember what it was, but he went mad, and, it’s a famous story, it’s about forty pages long, and, in the story, this professor says “What’s so exalted about being a professor? All you do is relay other people’s thoughts, there’s nothing original about your work and everything”, you know, so I wrote a paper, you had to write papers, and I took that story and I reproduced the whole paragraph and I made clear that I felt the same way, so back comes my paper, C-, not only that, listen to this, he never, Stegner, never read a single paper in that class, but he read mine, so that his five buddies could rip it apart.

Mona: Oh, you mean out loud in the class?

Charles: Out loud. The thing is too, Stegner didn’t read the papers, because, I could tell, from the comments, that he had some kind of an assistant to read papers. Every paper would have comments, you know, so what happened here was the assistant read it and passed it on to him, so I got a C-, so I don’t know if you know about graduate studies, but a C- might as well be an F. Cs are not acceptable, and not just a C, a C-. Even Bs, Bs are not so good, you’ve got to get As, you know, I had been getting Bs, you know, this was a C-. And he
reads it out loud for the class, and his buddies rip it apart, so I didn’t say a word, I mean, what the hell… so I said after that, “I’ve got to get out of English, this is… English is shit!”, because it’s opinion, like if he has an opinion that Mansfield is better than Chekhov, that’s fine, but if you have an opposite opinion, where are you? I’m not going to say I think Mansfield is better, you know, he can stick his course up his ass, you know, anyway so I said, that’s it, so at the end of that semester I transferred to History, which is much better, because you can have facts then, you can argue facts and I moved into these right wing republicans, all of the professors I had were right wing republicans, but anyway, that’s another story. But, they would take some guy who was slightly liberal, and they would say, “Well of course, he’s a communist”. What!? Communists are like this many [holds his hands close together]… but for these guys [holds his hands wide apart], “Your gouging the poor”, “He’s a communist”, you know, so then I was exhausting the GI bill benefits, you’re only allowed three years, 120 dollars a month, so we were running low on that, you know, and I was supplementing our income, I was working in canneries in the summer time, you know, I remember one year, I worked in the cannery and I was on a night shift, and I wanted that, because, I was like Chris, not getting quite enough sleep, I wanted that, because I wanted to take courses in the day time, and I would go… the night shift ended at 8 o’clock, or maybe a quarter to 8 or something, and I had just a few minutes to get to an 8 o’clock class, history taught by a Japanese professor that I really liked, he was from Japan, and I had to drive like a fucking maniac to make it you know. But I worked in pie was, and the pie, and the apricots were in a… [shows a chute high up]… I’m wearing a rain coat, rain hat, and boots, and the apricots… by the way, never buy, never buy apricot pie, the stuff they put in is the shit off the floor, the crappiest, the remains of the remains… that’s pie, it comes out, sometimes, black, it’s in a big thing, and you open the chute, and the thing drops and you have a big gallon
can, you fill the gallon can and then put it on a thing, a conveyer belt where it moves down where it is sealed. So this stuff is boiling hot, if it hits, boom, geez, it’s hot stuff, that’s why you wear a rain coat, so… I’m working in pie, and that stuff splatters all over you, you know, even with a rain coat, it’s in your hair, and I had no time to shower. I tell you some people are like angels, I used to go, and sit in class, I must have stunk like a son of a… unless they liked the smell of apricots. It was in my hair, I had no time to wash. Nobody ever said anything. Now if you’re in a less nice place they’d have said, “Hey man…”. I go up to the professor, he doesn’t say a word. “He never says… “Who’s the guy who’s smelling like apricots?” And, it was quite a thing to go to Stanford, because I didn’t realize it was such a wealthy place, you know, like, in Michigan nobody could have a car, that was a wonderful idea, I think, because it equalized the social… like in a Catholic school where everyone wears uniforms, so the girls with a lot of money can’t wear nice dresses and the girls with no money wear old dresses, and… that used to get me at school, God! First day of school, here comes the girls, here is a girl with last year’s clothes… and here’s a girl…and… and the fucking teachers would go up to them and say “Ooh… I love your outfit bla bla bla”, and here is this other girl with these old… Mexican family or something, I’d say “Shit, what about her…” you know, and I thought, it must be awfully hard on those girls, they come in with ragged stuff and the other girls they… so, anyway, where was I? Oh, Stanford! Michigan had… Chris, you’re a good sport to listen to all this crap. They’re different, woman are different, they want the family history, the men are… you know, “They’re here, forget the rest”, so, where was I… yeah, so… the girls at Michigan, there were no cars, so everybody walked, to a certain extent, not completely, of course, it equalizes social things. Now, I met a boy at Stanford and he, an awfully nice boy, he was drafted in the Korean War, he fought in the Korean War. I presume he made it, I don’t actually know, and we talked quite a
bit, and he said “You know…”, he said, “I can’t get a date in Stanford,” and I said “Why not?”, and he said “Because I don’t have a car.”. They would only… you know… the thing at Michigan was you could walk to the P Bell [Pretzel Bell], drink a beer or whatever, everything was in walking distance. At Stanford, uh uh, everything is in driving distance, it’s a driving State, and these guys would take the girls to San Francisco, to a nightclub or whatnot in the car, and he, without the car, what’s he going to do? On a date, you’ll walk to Palo Alto to a movie? That’s not going to fly, you know, so he said “I don’t have a car”, so he has, basically, no social life. And the other thing I noticed when I was there, at my first week at Stanford, I saw these kids hobbling around with casts on their leg, and I said “What’s with this school?” Every ten people somebody has a cast on their leg! What the hell are they doing? I found out… they were going skiing, there again, they had money to go skiing, way up in the mountains, so it was definitely a place with money. So then, after Stanford, it was time to knuckle down and get busy. *Gently, Brother*, I spent two years at it, but never finished it, but it still proved very, very valuable, because, when I wrote *Through a Portagee Gate* I had written a lot of stuff about Pa, and I was able to cannibalize and use it, and it was so important because I was writing *Gently, Brother* in 1947, and I was writing about 1937, it was just ten years later, it was very immediate in my mind. When I wrote *Portagee Gate* it was 50 years or so later, I had lost that sharpness of detail, the little things. So it helped me a great deal. It wouldn’t be half as good, *Portagee Gate*, if I didn’t have that book to refer to. And so, you could say that I wasted that time, but I don’t think I did, because I was able to use it. And I have to give your mother a pat on the back. I used up all of her inheritance, she never said a word about it. Most women would say “You bastard! I thought you were going to be famous! Where is the book?” So then I started teaching in San Carlos and we bought this house almost right away, and we had no money for a down payment, so he
did a thing… we paid 5750 for this house, five thousand seven hundred and fifty dollars, and we had no furniture, so I said “How much, if we bought the furniture from you?”. Well, all she had were these broken down sticks from Sears Roebuck, they probably going to take them to the dump, but they said two fifty, so I said “OK”, so it was six thousand, furnished, but what a bunch… wasn’t that furniture… it didn’t last either, so what we did was… the fact that I was a Stanford boy helped a lot, cause I got it for… not a nickel down, you see, and what he did was… he set up a deal where I would pay a 125 dollars a month, and once we paid in two thousand, then the title would pass to me, but up to that time, no title, it was just like a type of payment where I had no legal access to this house, so, it was 125 a month, and my salary was about 150, so Mom went to work, so basically, I was paying for the house, and she was paying for our living expenses, and in those days when I had an electric bill, I could never pay it off. I always had to let it slide to the next month and pay the previous one. I was always one month behind, because we never had enough money to get clean with it, you know, and other bills were the same way, we would let it slide, pay it off, you know. So anyway, I worked at San Carlos, and Mom went to work at Menlo Park and then, once we had the two salaries coming in… stop?

Chris: It’s got one minute left

Charles: One minute? What can I say in one minute? You’re going to change tapes? Now if you bought a better quality camera it would last for two hours, but you went cheap on me, didn’t you? [Laughter] All right, go ahead.
On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter] and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: Matty [Matthew Felix, son]; Kingsley Amis [author]; Martin Amis [author and Kingsley’s son]; Frank Sousa [publisher]; Bel Kaufman [author]; Michael Albrecht [one of Charles’s students]; Scott Meredith [literary agent]; Norman Mailer [author]; Ted Chichak [literary agent]; Victor Weybright [publisher]; Truman Talley [publisher]; William Abrahams [editor]; Sally Arteseros [editor]; Holt, Reinhart & Winston [publishing company]; Don Congdon [agent]; Braziller [publishing company]; Grove Press [publishing company]; Henry Miller [author]; Nat Hentoff [historian, critic]; Mrs. McMullen [neighbor]; Francis Walker [economist]; Ed Knappman [agent]; Peter Burford [publisher, Burford Books]

Books mentioned: Tony: A New England Boyhood; Through a Portagee Gate; The Bluebird of Los Tramos [unpublished]; Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934; Mothballs and His Friends: Barracks Life by the Golden Gate, 1934-44 [unpublished]; Crossing the Sauer

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.

Charles: Ok, Alright Good. So anyway we needed to earn some money. So I went to teach in San Carlos and we bought this house and Barbara went to work at Menlo Park, and Mona went to school eventually. And let me see. Oh yeah. I taught at Menlo Park from 1950….

Barbara: You didn’t teach in Menlo Park.

wanted to write another book. I wanted to write a book about… that we eventually called *Tony, a New England Boyhood* and I wanted it to be about a boy growing up in New Bedford. And I knew I couldn’t do it teaching because… teaching… you have no idea of the work involved if you try to do it right. You have papers to correct… I don’t want to go into the whole thing. It’s a bitch. I went into teaching because I thought I would have free time, big mistake. Of course you have your summers off but during the year it is tough to get time unless you have some technique to… a lot depends on the kind of kids you have too. I have had classes that were just wonderful and then I have had others, most of them, there are always three or four kids that make life miserable for you. They are the ones that cause the strain and the stress. Not the general run of kids. Basically we had really good kids in San Carlos. Anyway, I wanted to write a book about Tony so we saved money so that I could take a year off. So in ’58, June, I quit teaching. I took a leave of absence. And I thought I could finish the book in one year. The year went by, I still wasn’t finished. I used to write during the night. I got into this habit. Barbara was teaching, I was home. And I would sleep during the day and I would get up when she came home and we’d eat and then I would do the dishes and I was so awfully slow. If we only had a dishwasher, you know. I used to have steam, I would be all wet with steam from the dishes. I did them too good. But that’s my nature. You know, excessive. So it took me, God, to do the damn dishes and then she would go to bed fairly early and I would have at midnight, I would have a frozen dinner. And I would write until 6 in the morning. Then I would go to bed, maybe sometimes I would walk a little bit after she left for school. But basically I read, we didn’t have a TV thing or anything like that. We did have a radio. There was a station I listened to every single night. It was CBS Music Till Dawn and they would play classical music and I would work out here and play… he went off the air at 6 and I quit at 6. And the only problem
we had was somebody gave Mom a cat. And why the hell we didn’t turn it over to the Humane Society I will never figure out. This cat liked to howl, it was a Siamese cat, and I’m trying to write, it’s on the window sill howling so I let him in… he howls inside… I kick him out, he goes on the sill. I ended up knocking him off the window. But he’d just howl. And you can’t work with a howling cat. We went through that. Finally Kaye took it and gave it to the Humane Society. Why we couldn’t do that I don’t know. One thing I am very sensitive to noise. It kind of makes me … like dogs barking. How many times this dog has waked me up. A strange car comes down the road and it barks. Wakes me up. I think he barks just to wake us up.

Barbara: Maybe twice a month.

Charles: Oh, well that’s too many times.

Barbara: Once for the meter man… and one other time.

Charles: So, where were we—San Carlos. So at the end of the first year I had not finished Tony so what to do. So we decided, what’s the hell’s the saying, in for a nickel, in for a shilling in for a pound. In for a penny in for a pound… meaning go all the way. So I said, “Ok, let’s go all the way.” I thought this book is going to sell. I have always had that feeling. This book is going to sell. [Laughter] And I convince her of it. So the second year we had no money. So what we did, was let’s see, did you come home the second year? She wanted to have a baby. Because she was getting up there in age. Getting a little long in the tooth, there, Ma’am. So we said this is now or never. Ok great. Want to have a baby, let’s have a baby. So she came home. So nobody was working. The teachers have a pension system and I took my pension out so that when I retired I would go on the dole. And I took the pension out and we used that the second year. The second year, by God, I still wasn’t done. So ok, we’ve got to
push on, we are in too far, so we took her pension out and she financed the third year. And so we finished the book. And we sent it around to various people. Not even a compliment. Not a nibble. And I thought this book may be not so commercial, it maybe has a market in the university press because it has a lot of sociological implications in it. How kids play. How a town operates. What do kids do for pleasure and so on... the kids without money. And so I tracked down a whole bunch of state universities, or universities. Nothing. Even the University of New England said they were interested stuff about New England, fiction too. No. No bites. So I thought, well. I don’t know exactly why we did this but we said “Let’s self-publish it”. So Barbara, bless her. She typed it up on an IBM [electric typewriter]. The guy didn’t want to lend us the IBM, rent it. IBM Company. He was suspicious. I think he thought we were going to make out with it or something. Didn’t he have to come up here or something to look…

**Barbara:** He brought it. A Selectric. It was an IBM Selectric.

**Charles:** Look the place over. He didn’t want to rent it. He was very reluctant to rent it.

**Barbara:** But he ended up being our friend.

**Charles:** Well, that’s because you charmed him. That Caro charm. It charms everybody. Especially strangers [Laughter].

**Barbara:** Let me tell him. Chris, that is a special typewriter that has... like an “m” has three units, so you can put small spaces in and big spaces in. You had to figure it out.

**Charles:** What do you call that?

**Barbara:** Justified.
**Charles:** Not the first time. The first time she just typed it. Then she typed it again, justified. We thought before we started, that well we would go to one of these guys that does books. Two or three advertised. I went into the place. Very cordial and he said. Watch the cord. I can’t believe this dog is being quiet. This is the time when usually he would start barking, biting bones, running around, scratching his ass and all kind of things. He likes attention. If I try to kiss her he’ll jump up and get between us. So he’s trying to talk me into it and so he says, “I’ll show you the kind of work we do. And his secretary was typing away. And he shows me a page of his secretary’s work. He lost the sale right there. In those days you had white out for mistakes. Here’s a page and it had about 20 whiteouts. I said “Christ! I am going to pay you a fortune to have his secretary… he made a big mistake… you know all these whiteouts… little pink, pink, pink, pink, pink, pink. I said “My book. Oh, Christ. It would be $10,000, you know.

**Mona:** That was white-out tape, wasn’t it, Dad?

**Charles:** No, no, it was a liquid.

**Mona:** Liquid then?

**Barbara:** Oh yeah, we had actually a liquid. I think I still have some.

**Charles:** So I said that… “Ok, thank you. I’ll think it over”. So I said, “Mom, you are going to do it”. So Mom did it twice. And she did a beautiful job. When you see the original. I don’t think there is a single typo in the original, is there?

**Barbara:** I’m sure there is. We still have those, by the way, on special paper.

**Charles:** All the typos came from Mona [Laughter]. When she typed it. Oh I ordered 500 copies. The eternal optimist. And I took out some ads in the New
Republic. Which we got I think 7 or 8 sales from the New Republic. And one of them wrote me and said “This book is a gyp”. Did we send him back his money or what? I forget it. “This book is a gyp”.

Mona: Talk about the ads, Dad.

Charles: Well, I tried to make them funny.

Barbara: And they didn’t have anything to do about the book. They were really wonderful ads.

Charles: I was trying to intrigue people. What would you say, this is a book about bla bla bla, you know, I was trying to… people, I thought people would say, this sounds like an interesting guy. We got one thing out of it. We had it published by The Carrion Press, I thought that was funny, and that guy from England, I forget his name, Matty [Matthew Felix] loves him, his father is a writer, Kingsley is the father, what’s the son? Amis? Amis is the last name. Anyway, the son, Matty found out he had a novel… and someone worked for The Carrion Press, and I thought, he cribbed that from me. So that’s my claim to fame. So we didn’t sell any. I got them down in the cellar right now, 500.

Mona: You have all of them down cellar?

Charles: Oh, we sent out a bunch of them. We sent them to all kinds of newspapers, editors, we sent out a ton of them, she bought envelopes, you know, padded, and we sent out… oh, I don’t know how many to everybody that conceivably might have been interested, never got one reply. But here is the funny part. I think, and having just reread it, I think Tony is probably my best work. I think it is. It’s the most… it’s got the most life in it or something. And it’s a novel too. Now, something like Portagee Gate is easier to write, because you can ramble on, see, in a memoir you can ramble on, you can talk about this,
about that, about this. But in a novel you can’t do that, it has to be unified, you have to have a theme, you can’t just… I go off for a line or two, I have a lot of asides, some people don’t like them. In fact, the guy, Frank gave the *Portagee Gate* to a fellow who shall remain nameless, a writer, and he said “This book would be a lot better if it was half as long. He’s always giving his opinions”, and I thought, that’s part of the, part of the juice, is the opinions, you see something happening, and 50 years later you comment on it, myself, I like to see that, I think of the writer, “What do you think of that now?”. So it’s like, you have it happening, and then you have the reaction years later, it’s a richer thing. He wanted it happening and that’s it. I said, I knew he was a, this guy who made that comment, I knew he was a teacher of creative writing, and I said, this man sounds like he would make an excellent teacher of creative writing. So anyway, *Tony* was a bust, and it was kind of a downer for us. So I went back to work in ’61, and Mom stayed home with Matty, and then, let’s see, the next one was 1968. I thought, I was teaching, and I thought, you know, a lot of shit is happening in school, why don’t I try writing a novel about school. Because like, *Up the Down Staircase*, by Bel Kaufman, it had… number one, for months and months, in 1955. She had a thing, this teacher goes in the slums, teaches slum kids in the 19… Depression days, now at the end of the school year, she has a choice, she can leave the slum school and go to a very nice school or stay with the slum kids. She doesn’t know what to do. In the book, the slum kids win her heart, in the second year she is going to stay with the slum kids. In reality, Bel Kaufman was in this slum school for a year, the second year, she vaulted out of there, and when to a nicer school and taught for about two years and then went on to teach in college, but in the book, she stays with the slum school. See, you always have these people… so, anyway. So I thought I’d write that teaching book. So I wrote it, believe it or not, I wrote it while I taught, it came awfully easy. *Tony* came hard, *Tony* was really hard, because I
cared about it more, the teaching book was like writing jokes or something, not jokes but, you know, it didn’t mean as much to me, so it went very, very easily. And I wrote it, and I called it *The Bluebird of Los Tramos*. And see, one of the reasons I could write it was that class in 1968, I had just 18 kids, for once I didn’t have 35 kids. I had 18 kids and they were beautiful kids, Michael Albrecht and that bunch, and they loved me and I loved them, and they didn’t give me one bad moment. So I was able to, they cut my workload way down, and I don’t think I could have written it with any other class, just that class, it was an ideal class, dream class. So I wrote it, worked hard during the summer. And I even wrote during the school year... Matty would come home from school, and we sent him up to a baby sitter for one hour, and I would rush home and Matty would be up there, and I’d write like hell for an hour, then I’d go up and get him from the baby sitter. So one way or another we finished the book, and we sent it off to a few places, no response, so there was a guy, Scott Meredith, he was a big, big editor, he was Norman Mailer’s editor, and he had a side business, for I think it was about 150 bucks, he’d read your book, he’d actually read it and comment on it, if it was good enough, he’d take it. So I sent him the book and 150 bucks, and actually he didn’t do the reading, a guy who became very famous in publishing, Ted Chichak, later had a business of his own, Ted Chichak read it, liked it and took it. Now, this is very, very critical, because a lot of agents are just kind of unknown, don’t have any clout, this guy was very, at that time, very important, he’d get you into the top man, the decision making guy, if you get the lowly guy then he has to pass it on, pass it on, pass it on, somebody says uh-uh. This guy goes right to the top, he gets the editor in chief, and I know that for a fact, I’ll tell you how I know it. He kept it, and in those days there was no Xerox, you only had one copy, unless she typed another copy, so it took a while, because he would send it, and they would keep it for 3 weeks and then send it back to him. The first one he sent it to, he sent
me the rejection and it said, Victor Weybright is considered the father of American paperback publishing, he started The New American Library paperbacks, and then Victor Weybright, famous name in publishing, then he started a company with his son, his son-in-law, Truman Talley, called Weybright & Talley, a new house, small, they sent it to him, because they figured, he doesn’t have any new books, he might be more interested in it, and he sent back a rejection, and he said “Ted, this book could be big, but it needs promotion and a lot of money behind it, and we can’t… we don’t have the funds to do it”, so he passed on it. But the agent was happy about it because he said that to me, so he sent it out for about two and a half years, 22, 23 publishers, they all turned it down. Many had good things to say about it, they said “It’s a little this, a little that”, if Felix does any more work please send it to us, stuff like that. But, ultimately, no dice. He sent me back all the rejections, I asked him to, and I have them, in one of my boxes over there, and some of them are very encouraging, but still no sale, so that was that. And then what happened was, nothing happened for a couple of years, then I heard about a guy named William Abrahams. I pronounced it Abrahams, and he corrected me very quickly. He pronounced it Abrams. He was an editor for the Atlantic Monthly, and he had moved out to California, and he was living in Palo Alto, and I thought “Jesus, he’s local”. He was living in… when you cross the railroad tracks going from Menlo Park to Palo Alto, a big apartment, it was right by the railroad tracks, so I wrote him a letter, told him about the book, and said “Would you like to look at it?”, he said “Sure”, so I mailed it to him, and he said “I’d like to have a conference with you”, and I thought “Hmm, that sounds good”, so we made an appointment. This guy is gay, by the way, so Mom was saying “Hey”…. He’s gay, his, what do you call it? His companion was a Stanford professor, a British guy, I forgot his name, long term companion, anyway… maybe that’s why he was in California, I don’t know. Awfully nice
man, a Jewish guy, little guy, wild hair. So I went to his apartment, nice apartment, he sat me down talking and he said “I like this book, but I think it needs a couple of little improvements”, and I said, “Like what?”, and didn’t say it “Like what?”, but I said, “Can you make any suggestions?”, and he was like “Like one thing, he said, “We don’t know what time it is, if you could have a thing like saying what month it is, so we have a feeling that the year is passing”, because I don’t stress this, January, February, I just write it on. He says “That’s one thing”, and I said “I can do that, is there anything else?”, he said “No, I can’t think of anything”. He’s the kind of guy that lets you do it, so I took it home and I said to Barbara, “Barbara, I can put the month on it, that’s not going to change the book any… so I let it slide. And then your mother had a heart attack, so after we got through the heart attack I decided to change the book, I added a character, Mrs. Branscomb, a woman whose husband has a heart attack, and what I did was add her to the other people, so it made the book considerably longer, a big part of it longer, still kept the same title, *The Bluebird of Los Tramos*. Los Tramos was a school district where they taught, you know, and I sent it to him, and didn’t hear from him, and so after a month or so I called him up, and I said “Have you had a chance to look at it?”, and he said “No, I haven’t, but I’ll look at it”, so he actually did, in the next few days, and he called me and said “I’d like to see you”. Now, he had moved to Hillsborough, to a little house in Hillsborough, and he had a swimming pool, but he wasn’t using it, it was all full of leaves, but Hillsborough is a very prestigious place. Chris, I keep looking at her, is that bad? Or should I look this way? Which is better?

**Chris:** That’s fine.

**Charles:** I’m going to get a crick in my neck, move over. God, God Mona, the trouble you cause. [Laughter] That’s OK, Chris, that’s all right, no, no, no,
that’s all right. That’s better. So, I go to Hillsborough, drive up there, and he takes me to his room, his house, and he says “Boy”, he says “You really have improved that book”, with the addition, and he said, let’s see, what else did he say? Oh, we went out to lunch. He was really admiring, “You really have improved that book”. So we went out to lunch, and he said “I stand to make a lot of money from this book”. No, him. ’Cause he found it, and I said, “That’s good, because if you make money, I’ll make money”, and I was thinking God, if I can leave teaching…. And he said “They’re going to be salivating for this”, and he said “I know Sally Arteseros, big editor at Doubleday, she was… oh, Abrahams, by the way, I think at this time, he was doing the Best Stories of the Year or something, that’s how he knew Sally, from Doubleday, you know they pick the best stories of the year, and they call it, I forget what they call it, short stories, so he was not a bum, you know and he said, I forget if he said I’m going to write her or phone her or something. And… no, he phoned her, and he described the book, and she said to him “Oh, goodie, goodie”, that he is going to send her the book. So he sent her the book and she turned it down, and her reader, who had read the book, a fellow, I forgot his name now, he later became more prominent, at the time he was just a reader, he left a slip, and I don’t know if they left it on purpose for me to see or what but the slip said three words, no, one word, 3 times, it said “Dull, dull, dull”, so she turned it down. He said, not to worry, he said “I know the editor in chief” of… oh… I think it was Holt Reinhart, the editor in chief, I forget his name, but he was at the Frankfurt fair, so he said, “We’ll wait till he comes back and we’ll send it to him”. Oh, I forgot, I left one part out. Before he sent it to Sally Arteseros, wait a minute, no, no, first he sent it to Sally, and then, cause he felt he had a real in with her, and then, I think after Sally, he said “I know the hottest agent in New York is Don Congdon”, and I forgot how he put it, but he said, “He’s going to thank me for sending him this book”, and it was like it was a slam dunk, and he said send
it to… cause I sent the packages, he said “I’m going to tell him it’s coming, send it to Don Congdon. So I sent it to Don Congdon, it comes back, he didn’t want it. The agent, though, was supposed to take it. So now we had the editor in chief of Holt Reinhart, and he came back from Europe, and it was sent to him, and it was turned down. So now we had 2 or 3 people turn it down, maybe one in between, actually. So Bill Abrahams, he said, “Well, you’re going to have to work on it some more. When a book has been turned down 3 or 4 times, that means there is something wrong with it”, so I said to him “Well, what can I do with it? Do you have any suggestions?”, and he said “No”. So there I was, so that was it. So, I finished it in ’68, ’69 Scott Meredith took it… so I forgot the exact year, but sometime after that, there were few publishers who hadn’t seen it, they were like, not the big publishers, Braziller, and Grove Press, I knew who had seen it because I had all the slips back from Scott Meredith, so these were like, guys who published small amounts of books. And…. I’m going to look at the camera more, Mona, because its cricking my neck. So, I found out their names and addresses, no, that’s OK Chris, no, no, so I found out their addresses, that’s going to fall off of there. And I… oh, I couldn’t have… oh, I know what. I sent them a letter, I didn’t send the book, and half of them did not respond, I think there were 16, I think. No I want to look at the camera this way, sit over there, I don’t want to look that way, that’s the worst place.

Chris: Why is that?

Charles: ’Cause I don’t want to look that way, you want me for the angle, is that it? All right, you want that angle? A director… you got to kind of use your hands, I can’t read your mind. Oh oh. Mona broke the chair, I told you Mona, you should have lost weight. [Laughter] So I sent out 16 letters, 8 didn’t reply, one came back, when you use self-addressed stamped envelopes, one letter
came back, and it was empty, usually they came back with a rejection letter, so I was “Well, who the hell sent this back?”, so I opened it up and then I noticed, you know on the flap? Where you lick it? The guy had typed “No”, and sent it back. I thought, “Here is a guy with a sense of humor, son of a bitch”. So 8 replied, 7 said no, one said yes, this is why it’s important to go… like this guy, he was selling encyclopedias in the dumbest hillbilly sections of the United States, and someone asked “Why are you going in there for? They’re not going to buy one.” And he said, “Listen, you go to enough houses, there is always one who will buy it, hillbillies or not”. So, out of the 16 we got one, it was Grove Press, at the time they had a reputation for doing dirty books, who is that guy from Paris, I think they did him, the guy from Paris, you know… Capricorn, all that stuff; Henry Miller, I think Grove Press did him, they had a reputation for doing dirty books, so I sent the book to Grove Press, and then I get a postcard from Nat Hentoff. Now Nat Hentoff, at that time had great prestige, he had written about education, and he had a lot of clout.

Mona: And jazz, he wrote about jazz.

Charles: Do you want me to stop for now? Do you want me to just keep going? So, let me see, where was I?

Mona: Nat Hentoff.

Charles: Nat Hentoff, he sends me a postcard, oh, by the way, I was afraid that if the book came out, I was very critical of schools, I was afraid I’d lose my job, and the thing could have sold 5 thousand copies, make me a thousand bucks, and I’d lose my job, so I wrote it under a pen name, John Casavan, Box 625 Menlo Park, and every day or so, you Mom would go to the mailbox see if there was anything there.

Barbara: Every day or so? Twice a day!
Charles: Oh, I didn’t tell you this, when I talked to Abrahams, and he said “I stand to make a lot of money on this book”, and I left him. I was looking for a phone, I was so excited I could hardly drive, cause this guy knows his business, I thought, and oh, I said “Well you work for Atlantic Monthly.” And I said, “Why don’t you have them do it?”, he said “I’m no longer interested in just publishing a book.” He said, “It doesn’t mean anything, I only want a book that is going to be successful, and that is going to have big sales, and Atlantic Monthly does not have the money, the dollars to promote”. And I noticed, shortly thereafter, he left them and he got his own imprint with somebody else, 2 or 3 years later, but see, he wouldn’t have wanted my book then because it had already been condemned, and he’s a guy, if some people don’t like it, uh, there’s something wrong with it. So where was I? Oh, Box 625.

Mona: Nat Hentoff.

Charles: So, I go to the box… oh, when I left Abrahams when he said “I stand to make a lot of money from this book”, you know what he did too, at this restaurant we ate, he let me pick up the check, and I thought to myself, “Oh, oh, I don’t know about this guy”. But anyway, Box 625. I wanted to… OK, back and forth, back to Abrahams. He said “I stand to make a lot of money out of this book”. I wanted to tell Mom, and I was going all over Hillsborough looking for a phone booth so I could phone her, I couldn’t find any. So I was so excited, I was driving home, and I said “God, I hope I don’t get killed on the way home, I want to be able to tell her”. So, writing is funny. After what he told me about Don Congdon, and that Don would be thanking him so much for the book, we got a letter from Don Congdon, not the book, a letter, and I remember going up to the box and saying “Mom, Don Congdon”, and I was certain that it was an acceptance, that he would not publish it but agent the book, and I opened it…. Boom. No. ’Cause I was so sure, you know, but,
you’re sure at your own risk. So… oh, I get a postcard, “This book is extraordinarily valuable, *The Bluebird of Los Tramos.* This book is extraordinarily valuable and I have suggested to Grove Press that they publish it”, Nat Hentoff, and it gave his address. Oh, and he says “If it doesn’t, phone me, and we’ll see if I can direct you to somebody else”. So I thought, “Mom, you know what? He’s not a reader for them, he’s not employed by them, he’s an outside specialist, he writes on education and jazz too”, so I said, “They gave it to him because they were interested”. They wouldn’t have wasted his time, cause he is not a reader, for… you know, you have readers in-house, you get paid a pittance, and he is not a reader. He is a specialist. So I said “That’s a very good sign, I think they’ll accept it”. Wrong again. They didn’t accept it, and I phoned him, and he gave me a lead or two but it didn’t pan out, so that was *The Bluebird of Los Tramos.* So then we went to, that was about, I wrote it around 1968, ’69, ’70. I started it in ’68, probably finished it in ’69. I know I did it in ’68 because of that wonderful class I had. So we had to put that aside. So, the next one I wrote was *Da Gama,* and I wrote that about 1983, and I wrote that while I taught, that was fairly easy to do because it’s a short book. Also it came very easily. *Tony* was the only one that I really labored over. It came very easily, and we got it printed up and I sent it, oh… I should add one thing cause I want to give her credit. When I used up all our pensions, hers and mine to write, what you call it?

**Barbara:** *Tony.*

**Charles:** *Tony.* She didn’t give me one word of rebuke and there we were without pensions, but they had a thing where you could put it back in, so that’s what we did, we put it back in, it took us a few years, though, and at the time I said to her “God, look, I could have been earning money for three years. And now I’m awfully glad I didn’t because now I have the book, but at the time I
thought, hum… I did it again, you know, I spent… in other words I could have earned money that time, for whatever reason, we needed money, bought a car or something instead of those old junkys that we had, you know, so, let me see… where were we? I lost my train of thought.

**Barbara:** *Da Gama.*

**Charles:** *Da Gama!* OK, we wrote *Da Gama*, and I said “This is a book that is going to appeal to state universities, I think, university presses, not commercial press”, so I wrote a bunch of university presses, several of them read it, including University Press of New England, which is interested in books from New England, no dice, so we didn’t… at least we didn’t self-publish it, we had sense enough not to do that. And then I retired. I thought it would have been nice to have it come out in 1984, because it was *Da Gama and Cary Grant and the Election of 1934*, and that would be a 50 year thing, but, it didn’t happen. So then, I retired in ’84, but I was on a special deal with my school district. I had to work 30 days a year to, so I would get 4 grand a year, it’s an inducement to make me retire, you see? Teaching has got one bad thing, a teacher with seniority gets, in those days, got double the salary of a beginning teacher, so they are always anxious to get rid of senior teachers because they want to hire younger teachers. So it doesn’t take much, I negotiated that settlement, I could had just quit, but I didn’t want to do that. I got 4 grand a year, and they paid all our medical insurance, for 5 years, till 1989. It was nice teaching because I taught, I tutored, one kid at a time, so nice, you know. So in ’84 I started an army book called *Mothballs and His Friends*, and I wanted to portray the army as I understood it to be, in other words, no bullshit, these are the men, this is how they talk, this is how they feel about each other, this is how they feel about women, this is how they feel about the army, this is how they interact. I wanted it to be just as accurate and truthful as I could. In other words, I wanted it to be,
I don’t want to say historically important, but I didn’t want any bullshit, I don’t want any bullshit. Anyway, I started that, and it got bigger and bigger and bigger, it ended up with 3 novels. It’s really a trilogy. I have it. I call it *Mothballs and His Friends*—Book One, *Mothballs and His Friends*—Book 2, *Mothballs and His Friends*—Book 3. And I thought of them as being publishable separately. Whether it will ever be published? God knows, because… it’s totally not commercial. You see, commercial… they want a drive and climax. In fact, who the hell was it? Somebody, one of my, and I don’t know who it was, one of my rejections was by an editor. I can’t remember now if it was a man or a woman, and my rejection gave me a lesson that I am right. It was by a man, he said “Every word must build to a climax”, and what was the next line he said, Barbara? I forgot what he said after that, but structurally he said “Every word must build to a climax”. In other words he has in mind a certain kind of book, and my books are not like that, they tell a story, like one of the stories in *Mothballs and His Friends* is this. The officer in charge of the battery, it is a battery of coast artillery men, stationed in San Francisco, the officer in charge of the battery. It starts in 1943. In 1944 the United States Army is taking heavy losses in Europe, so they need replacements, so they told every coast artillery battery up and down the coast of California, send us five men, they’re going to be replacements in the infantry, we didn’t know that though, we thought we were going to be replacement in the coast artillery, oh, field artillery, because later on they gave us some training in that, but anyway, he says send us five men. So the captain of this battery, in San Francisco, Fort Miley, picked out five men, and they are going to go off, and they are going to end up in the infantry, and perhaps some of them are going to get killed, you know, whereas the artillery is safe as can be, might as well be in a rocking chair, so I had not a thrilling climax but one of the questions I took up was “Why did the captain pick these five men? What was
there about each of these five men that makes... he was going to get rid of the five guys he didn’t want, that he dislikes, you know”. By the way, I was on the list, but I wasn’t on the list to begin with. Some guy, an Italian guy, was on the list, and he went and he complained to, on medical, to the doctor, that his back was such that he couldn’t function, so bla bla, so they took him off, put me on. Now I had just as good an out. My eyes were really bad, like 20/400, but I didn’t have the goddamn brains to go and complain, I could have been... cause all the doctors, like I remember after I was in the army and in combat, I broke my glasses, I went to a doctor in England, and he took one look at my eyes and said “How did you get...?”, in fact when I was drafted, they said “You’ll never go overseas”, and I said “Oh, thank you”. [Laughter] I didn’t say that, but I felt it, you know, but the doctor, “How did you get in... Jesus”, he said. So, I had an out, and I had it all the way to, like at Fort Meade I could have gone... all they had to do was look at my eyes and they go.... I didn’t think of it. If I thought of it, I probably would have done it, you know. I didn’t want to go overseas. So anyway, the question in the book is, one of the questions is “Why did he pick those five men? And what is it about each of them?” They’re all different. Five different guys, as different as you could be, and they were picked. That’s one of the things I took up in the book. So, I’m writing the book, and it’s really nice, full time writing, it’s just wonderful, but I’m not writing... I’m getting older so I can’t write as many hours as I used to, and I had all kinds of interruptions, like when Mrs. McMullen got her groceries, she honks a lot, I got to go and carry her groceries in the house, thanks to your mother here, “Oh, Charles will be glad to do that. Won’t you Charles?”, “Yes”. So, anyway, where were we? She’s always getting me jobs “Oh, Charles, Charles will...”. That’s why she’s so popular with these old ladies. [Laughter] So, I’m writing the army book, and then I said too, I slowed down, because 30 days a year, I had to go to school from 84 to 89, and that was hard in a way,
because I stayed up late, 2, 3 in the morning, then I’ve got to go to school at 8 in the morning, you know, but I couldn’t switch my schedule, so I did it, but it was nice, I had these Mexican boys, sweetest kids you could imagine. Mexican kids, I’ll tell you something, they are going to say I’m a racist, but… Mexican kids, if they came from Mexico, and the country, you’ll never find a sweeter kid than they are, and the girls too, but you get Mexican kids from the big city, they are tough, they are hard, they’re as different from the Mexicans from the country as black and white. The Mexican kids from the city, they go to Los Angeles and so on, and they are a rough bunch, they’re a rough bunch. Ok, but I was fortunate, I had the ones from the country, oh, the sweetest kids, you can’t believe it. So then, I wrote on it until 1992, ’84 to ’92. I was in the last book, I was almost done with the last book, I was like two-thirds, three-quarters done with the last book, and then I happened to… Chris, could I have a brief break for a second.

[Break]

Charles: So I was finishing up Mothballs Book 3, that was 1992, so I had been working on it from ’84 to ’92, that’s 8 years. For three books that’s not that bad, that’s 2or 3 years per book. In 1992, I’m getting a catalogue with remaindered books, and they had a thing, 20 books for a dollar and a half a piece, 30 dollars for the 20 books, big fat volumes, reprints of Yale Review Magazine in the 19… Mom, could you turn that off? [The heater] Because it’s…. I’ll turn it off. Just a minute. Thanks, Babe, you’re so nice… careful.

Mona: It’s also making a noise, Mom.

Charles: It’s also drying my throat up, which is dry enough without it, so, you gave one for the cause, want my bathrobe? Keep you warm. Blanket? How
about a blanket? Hot water bottle? [Laughter] Where were we? Oh yeah, finishing the book.

**Mona:** *Yale Review.*

**Charles:** The 1890s, and I said, that sounds interesting, but I had no time to read, I haven’t read books in years because I just don’t have the time. The most I can do is read a current magazine to find out what Bush is doing in Iraq, how he is screwing the country, the bastard, don’t quote me on that, you better take that off, or I’ll end up in jail, the Patriot Act. So, where was I? So I didn’t have time to read it, but I called Matty and I said “Matty, I can get you these books, the reprints of the *Yale Review*, would you like them?”, and he said “Sure”, so I said “OK, I’ll get them for you”, so I ordered them, they came, big box, big heavy box. And just for the fun of it, I was just curious about them, I started looking at them, and I…. Let’s see, I had a pair of glasses there. Somebody knocked them over. [Gets reading glasses] So I picked up one of the books, and it was an essay in the *Yale Review*, 1893, by a guy named Francis Walker. He had been a general in the Civil War, he’s now the president of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, prestigious university, and he wrote an essay on immigration, and he wrote stuff like this, talking about the immigrants who were coming to us from Europe, from Italy, Southern Europe, this is like the pits. He says from Norway, Sweden that’s fine, but Southern Europe, you know, the Italians, the Portuguese… not so good. He said [reading], “Taking whatever they can get in the way of wages, living like swine, crowded into filthy tenement houses, piecing out their miserable existence by systematic beggary at the doors of the rich and by picking over the garbage-barrels of our alleys, the arrival on our shores of such masses of degraded peasantry brings the greatest danger which American labor has ever known”, and I thought, I was thinking about my father, he is talking about my father, see, because my father
came in about, a few years after this, and I said “My father never picked over the garbage-barrels of alleys. He didn’t resort to systematic beggary at the doors of the rich”, it kind of pissed me off, so I said, I should answer that, and this is the truth. I knew I had stuff on my father, but I didn’t know what to do with it, how could you write a book about your father? You need… you know, it was sitting back there, I hadn’t really given it much thought, cause I didn’t know how to put it into form, so I thought, I’m going to write a book about an immigrant, my father, which I’ll let people judge whether or not he’s living like a swine or, you know, in other words, let me present his life and then you can decide which way it went, that’s how I actually…. In fact, I felt so strongly, I stopped working on Mothballs.

**Barbara:** Can I say something? He came out of the bedroom and he said “I got to write a book about my father”. I thought, well you haven’t finished this one, but, I couldn’t understand it, he just was, it was funny, he just came out one day and he just said that, you know.

**Charles:** So that was the best 30 bucks I ever spent. So I gave the books to Matty but I kept that one, ’cause I wanted to refer to it. And I used some of the quotes in the book. So we wrote that… let me see, 1992 and I’d say until 1998 I wrote that book, I wrote Through a Portagee Gate, that’s rough, that would be like 6 years. And then… I said to Mom and I really believed this, I said “No one is going to publish this, I don’t know why I’m doing this, you know, but no one is going to publish this”, I really thought that. I thought the teaching book had a lot of commercial appeal, I still think it does, because it presents a picture of teaching that nobody has ever presented, nobody, as far as I know, the stuff that I’m familiar with. Cause see, the guys who write about teaching, they’re serious, they’re going to tell you how to improve teaching, first you do this, then you do that, and they are always saying how they are going to improve it.
didn’t say one bloody word about improving it, I just said, this is how it was, now you decide how to improve it, this is not a panacea for bla bla bla, and I don’t idealize the kids. But anyway, leaving that alone. So we finished *Through a Portagee Gate* in about 1998, and then, I didn’t turn to *Mothballs*, cause at that time I thought “I should write a war book”. Actually, I intended the war book to be Book 4 of *Mothballs*, I was going to take Mothballs and some of the 5 guys, ’cause they were kept together, take them into war, and see how they made out, that was going to be Book 4, and I decided no, I think it will be better… I was saving them off for Book 4, and I thought “No, I think the war would be better as a separate book. Because the war, in another words, the Army in San Francisco it’s the Army, there’s a lot of things happening. But the war is such a cataclysmic event by itself, that you don’t write about the men so much, you write about the war. The war becomes important, it can’t be an adjunct to a book. It has to be The War, it’s too critical an issue to…. So, in other words, in my mind you deemphasize the men and you pay more attention to the war. So I wrote the war book as a separate book, *Crossing the Sauer*. What took a long time, was I had written a lot of notes on the war, all through the years, I was manic about writing notes. ’Cause when I was teaching, I didn’t have time to write a story, but I had time to write a note. So during all those teaching years, I wrote hundreds, thousands of notes, some were just one line, so and so in the rain, and so years later I was “What the hell did I mean by so and so in the rain?”. But I was afraid I was going to forget. And also, writing the notes is a way to keep your sanity, because you’re putting all of these things that are flying around, once you write it down you can kind of, temporarily at least, forget it. If you don’t write it down, it’s bouncing around in your brain, and you’re going haywire with it. It’s good to write it down to kind of get it under control and get it out of your mind. See, that’s the beauty about writing, you get this stuff out of your mind, you write about it and then you can kind of
say, “Well, I wrote about it…” So… again, I hope we have time for this, when I started writing Crossing the Sauer, I wasn’t going to wait until I finished the book, so I wrote 4 or 5 chapters, and I sent them off to 18 agents and they all turned it down. There’s always a few that don’t even answer you, which I had, I forget how many, when I sent out the teaching book, the critique of it, the one that Grove Press took, I remember that number distinctly, I think it was 18, half didn’t answer the thing at all, and 8 said no and one said yes, Grove Press. This one, nobody wanted it but well, except one man. And he wrote me immediately, and I said, “Boy, that’s a good sign”, in other words, he wants to get dibs on it before the others… that was Ed Knappman, of the… what is it called? The New England Publishers Associates, he wrote me immediately, I sent him the pages and within days I had, he was very much interested in it. He phoned me, didn’t he?

**Barbara**: He phoned you.

**Charles**: He phoned, he didn’t write.

**Barbara**: He phoned you instead of writing. And he quizzed you about the book.

**Charles**: That’s another thing, he said to me over the phone “The writing is very strong”, and I had told him in the letter, “It’s not finished”, but he was most interested in it, and the fact that he phoned showed that he is serious, because he is trying to get in ahead of other people. So, he soon thereafter sent me a contract, I think, didn’t he? Which I didn’t send back. Why didn’t I send it back?

**Barbara**: Well, for one thing, the book wasn’t finished.
Charles: For some reason I didn’t send it back right away. So I started writing the book, and I sent him some more, six months later or something and he liked it, he was still very much interested, then finally, at some point, I finished the book. He made a couple of criticisms of it, which I… I didn’t… it was the way it was, he didn’t see the whole book, I was writing it piece meal, so I took care of his criticism when I finished the book, cause I was able to maneuver the stuff, without doing any changes, I don’t know if that makes sense to you or not, but when you write the book in sequence, it’s different than if I took two chapters far apart and sent them to you, which is what I was doing, you know. Eventually… oh, I meant to tell you about the notes, I spent a year reading notes and most of them, almost all of them, were worthless.

Mona: Your war notes?

Charles: Yeah, because they had, they’d say “So and so gets reamed by the captain”, but that’s not enough to, you need to spell it out.

Mona: When did you start writing notes?

Charles: Oh, oh… how much? [Checking about remaining time on tape.]

Chris: One minute.

Charles: Oh! We’re not going to get done. Damn! But anyway, the thing was, what was great was this, when Knappman got the book, he sent it out, and he kept me informed, he sent it out to various editors, one big editor at Random House and everything, but… this is what was good about sending it out, he sent it out to about 12 people I guess, 11 turned it down, one accepted it. What’s his name?

Barbara: Burford
**Charles:** Burford. So, see, again and again, one, and all you need is one. And both, Knappman and Burford quizzed me by phone, Burford called me up and he said “I was going to start it at lunch, I couldn’t put it down”, and they quizzed me on the war to make sure that I was a genuine veteran, and he would say, “I misplaced the chapter that talked about him going to Paris for something, what was that about?”. See, he wanted me to tell him the story. He had the chapter, but he was testing me, he said “I misplaced that chapter. What was it about?” So I told him, and then he figured that I was genuine, but anyway, again and again, you just need one.

**Barbara:** The most amazing thing is that a lot of that book, I’d say a third of it, was written in the kitchen, on the dishwasher, after I had gone to sleep. Isn’t that true, Honey. I’d wake up around 3 o’clock and he would be, you know….  

**Charles:** The funny thing about writing is that, when you stand at your desk, it’s like trying to sleep, it won’t come, but what happened with that book is again and again and again, I did the dishes, it was time to go to bed, it was 2 o’clock, and I’m not trying to write, all of a sudden, here it comes, you know, so I’d go in the kitchen, standing up, writing furiously for an hour or so, and that happened again and again. When you’re not trying to make it come, it comes, and that’s the thing with sleep, I find that to be, when I say I’ve got to go to sleep, oh, I’m in trouble. Well, this tape was done with a valium, if it hadn’t been done with a valium, I would have been in a brilliant tape, because the valium slows me down.
DVD 1 – Writing Desk – December 28, 2005

On tape: Charles Reis Felix and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter], Matthew Felix [son]

Books mentioned: Tony: A New England Boyhood, Crossing the Sauer

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.

Charles: OK, this is December what, Chris?

Chris: December 29th? 28!

Charles: December 28. Chris Brown is taping. This is Charles Felix. This desk, we brought it up here when we bought the house in 1951, I’ve used it ever since. We bought this desk in Walteria, in California, this secondhand place, for forty dollars. And I always remember it because, due to a wifely error in transference of funds, my check bounced, and the guy came, mad as hell, banging on my door, for the money, and we pacified him, but, anyway, we got the desk. It’s been a great desk. And, starting over here, this is a plane that my little boy Matthew did, with a piece of wood and cardboard. Up here, we have the Good Fairy with a magic wand, and Mona did this when she was, my guess would be 5 or 6 years old. She gave it to me especially because she said “You’ll get anything you want, Daddy, because it has the magic wand.” Over here in the middle we see pictures of Mona, except for this one in the middle, the rest are her. The one in the middle is, we found a picture of a girl with a
mouse, she’s holding the mouse here, and here Mona is holding Matthew, and we put that in the middle because I had written a story for her called *Maria Mouse*, and this was supposed to be Maria with the mouse. Over on the left hand side we have Matthew’s works of art and he had a couple of pictures, a car he drew, the date is January 1968, and on the left hand, upper left hand corner we have a ship, that’s me on the ship, and the back, if you notice, there’s a dollar sign, and that’s the ship, how’s that expression go? When your ship comes in, that was it, and he did that for me, that was after we wrote *Tony*, and we all were hoping that it would bring in lots of loot… which of course, it did not. Over here we have a picture of Barbara, and a picture of Matthew, that is fading out, like we all fade out, physically. And, on my desk I have a place of honor, this is Barbara when she was a little girl, and over here I have a teacher, and I put it up to show the, I don’t know what you want to call it, the smarminess of teachers or whatever, these people in, teachers in the San Joaquin Valley wanted a raise, they wanted more money. But the way they put it “Our kids are worth it, don’t you agree?”, in other words, they want the money, but they use the kids as sort of a bargaining chip. Up front here, I have a card I put on my door one year, at the beginning of school, with my picture, I put on the window of my class, I said “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here”. Over here, I have in the place of honor, I have a card from Burford Books, he bought *Crossing the Sauer* in 2001, actually he bought it in 2000, it was printed in 2001, and I put it there because it was such a cataclysmic event because I wasn’t sure I was ever going to see a book of mine printed in my lifetime and so to have that happen was, I was walking on air for quite a bit there. Ah, let’s see, I might mention this dictionary. This dictionary, *Webster’s Collegiate*, I use it all the time. It says Charles Felix 406 Williams House, I bought this in my first year of college, 1941, at the University of Michigan, and I find, I’ve had it ever since. We bought a new dictionary about two years ago, and I find that this
dictionary is much better, the words are defined much more precisely, and so, the new is not always better than the old. This one [Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition, Unabridged], I really get stuck, I use this as an unabridged dictionary that I’ve had for many a year. And I guess the last thing we can talk about, is the latest addition, I had a boom box, I always play music when I write. Do you want to see some of the records, or no?

Chris: Sure.

Charles: OK, this is just a sampling of it: Joel Rubin’s Jewish Music Ensemble; Gustav Holst, The Planets; The Art of Klezmer Clarinet; Julian Lloyd Webber, Cello Moods; Vivaldi The Four Seasons; am I going too fast? This is one Mona sent me, Uma casa Portuguesa, and these are Portuguese songs, and I like the first one very much, it’s “Não passa com ela na minha rua”, which is “Don’t pass with her on my street,” a Portuguese lament by a girl; Shostakovich, Symphony nº 5; The Andes, Songs of the Highlands; this is um… what’s his name? Rachmaninoff, Symphony nº 2 I believe; and this is Peru: A Musical Journey. I have different, different… I have many more tapes that I use. And the latest addition, a really marvelous improvement, I had an old boom box here to play the music and the sound was horrible, and actually Barbara was the one who said it “You really should get rid of it”, ’cause all I did was complain, and she actually pushed me to do something, so I bought this marvelous player, it plays one CD at a time, it’s the Bose, and it costs 500 bucks, but it’s worth every penny, it has just marvelous sound, and that’s it. And this is where I’ve always written.
On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter] and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: Mr. Fortin [ran Red and White Store], Red Suave [worked at Red and White Store], Mr. Addis [boss of the pajama sweatshop], Joe [Charles’s older brother], Dot [wife of Joe, Charles’s sister-in-law], Dr. Clement [dentist], Dr. Burkholder [current dentist], Celeste Noguera [girl Joe wanted to marry], Charles’ mother, Ilda, and sisters: Mary / Ilda / Rose / Ernestine / Bertha [Family order], Pop Lord [sold pulp magazines], Eddie Lariviere [childhood friend], Edward Duclos [friend of Eddie Lariviere], Florence Lariviere [Eddie’s sister], Billy [worked in the pajama factory]

Books and short stories mentioned: Tony: A New England Boyhood, Crossing the Sauer

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.

Charles: Hey, we’re on. This is hard. I am supposed to talk for hours and not sound egotistical—talk about myself for hours—and not sound egotistical. And that is quite a challenge. This is Charles Reis Felix. This is December 27, 2005. Barbara, my wife, is here. Chris Brown, my grandson, is here. He’s the director. And Mona Brown, my little daughter, is over here on the left—Chris’s mom. Let’s see. . . the last tape I took, I couldn’t sleep the night before, so I took a valium. And last night I slept pretty good, so I didn’t take a valium, and I was going to check the two tapes to see which one I sounded more alert on. Well actually I felt more alert when I had the valium. [Laughter] So I should have taken one. But tonight we are ordering in food from a gourmet restaurant
in Menlo Park, ZCools, and excuse me just a minute. . . [Has a drink of water]
And I ordered meatloaf, specialty of the house. I’ll have that for the first time
and Mom said, “It’s just like my mother used to make.” The only thing is she’d
always tell me her mother was a lousy cook. [Laughter] But we will see how it
turns out. Now I wanted to amplify what I told about my first meeting with
Barbara. My first meeting with Barbara I chased her out of the classroom, ran
after her and caught her on the side steps of Angell Hall. Well, she tells me I
didn’t have the dialogue right. So what did I say?

**Barbara:** You said, “May I speak to you?”

**Charles:** “May I speak to you?” Right.

**Barbara:** And I said, “What for?”

**Charles:** And you said, “What for?” [Laughter] At least you didn’t say, “Who
are you?” Then what?

**Barbara:** Well, then you said you’d like to have a date.

**Charles:** “I’d like to have a date with you.”

**Barbara:** Mmh hmm. I said, I was sorry I was busy this weekend. And you
said, “Yes, I can imagine you are.”

**Charles:** You said, now I am not sure, can they hear her all right? Maybe not.
They can hear you think?

**Barbara:** Yes, very well.

**Charles:** Ok. So, say it again. You said what?

**Barbara:** I told you I was busy. That I had a date.

**Charles:** You told me you were busy. That you had a date.
Barbara: You said something—you said that you imagined that I was quite popular or something like that.

Charles: Okay, that you would have a date.

Barbara: Yeah.

Charles: Then what?

Barbara: Then you asked me if you could see me on Monday.

Charles: I asked if I could see you on Monday. Okay. All right. Well, that’s a little better. You—didn’t you say something—you said because you were 5’7” and I was 5’4” . . .

Barbara: 5’3”.

Charles: I am 5’3” now. I’ve shrunk.

Barbara: I was 5’7” and a quarter.

Charles: So you said, “What’s he want with me?” Something like that?

Barbara: I figured you wanted me to get a date for you with one of the girls in Betsy Barbour.

Charles: Aah. Okay. All right. Well, let’s get back to business here. I should tell you about the first time I earned money writing. I was about . . . hmmm . . . let me see—about sixth grade, about twelve years old. And the Wheaties, the Breakfast of Champions, a breakfast food, had a contest. You had to write fifty words or less on a ball player that you would select for an all-star game and you had to tell in the fifty words why you would select him. So I gave some phrases—I forget who now—and well, two or three weeks. . . well, they had first prize was like $500, and they had maybe—this is rough—maybe three
prizes of $100. And then they had like maybe fifty prizes of $5. So a couple of weeks later I get a thing—I win $5. And that was big, big stuff. Boy, that was a lot of money. I had an allowance of 15 cents one week and 10 cents the next. So that was a lot of money. So my mother was excited about it and she said, “You should go down and tell your father.” At the shop. And I didn’t want to do it because I had a funny feeling about it. I wasn’t sure how he was going to take it. And I said, “Well, why don’t I tell him when he comes home from work at night?” And she says, “No, go down and tell him. He will be very pleased.” So, against my better judgment, my better feelings about it, I went down. I went to the shop. And my brother Joe worked at the shop then, full time, and he was in the back, hammering, and my father was in the front. And I said, “Pa, I won this contest—this check for $5.” And he looked at me. He looked pretty glum when I walked in. He must have been having a bad day. But he looked very dour. He didn’t say a word. And then he turned to my brother and said, “Charlie likes easy money.” And that is all he said about it. He was not exactly. . . you know. . . but I kind of expected it because he had a suspicion of anybody who didn’t work hard with his body. That was his upbringing. So that was the first time that my mother made me do something I didn’t want to do and I will tell you about the second time. This was a couple of years later. Oh, not a couple years—at about the same time actually. We did not have a refrigerator in our house. We had an ice box and during the week we didn’t. . . no ice. On Saturday, for the weekend, I would take my little wagon and go to this little guy. He had a little ice house and he would chip off a block of ice and put it in my wagon. And then I would bring it home and put it in the ice box. But during the week we didn’t have ice in the ice box, so you couldn’t buy ahead. . . your food. And so she would send me to the corner store, a Red and White Store it was called, to buy a quart of milk. And the store was run by a man named Mr. Fortin, who was very, let’s say he knew what was going on, very
alert. And he had a kid working for him, Red Suave, he was about seventeen. And he was always giving the kid hell, you know. And Red, he worked in the store and they had home delivery. Red had a bicycle. And if somebody . . . and not many people had phones, but a few of them did. They’d phone in an order. Red . . . they would fill it. Red would put it on the basket of his bike, in the front, and then pedal it . . . deliver the order. Orders were always relatively small. So my mother wanted, every couple of days she wanted a quart of milk. Now the problem was her dairy was the Frates Dairy and the Red and White Dairy was—let’s call it Red and White Dairy. It was a different name but I don’t know who it was. Different dairies. Now for him to give me a quart of Red and White milk—I think it was thirteen cents a quart—I would have to give him two cents for a deposit on the bottle. And my mother did not want to pay the two cents deposit. So she would give me an empty bottle from our dairy—Frates—and I would go to the store with the empty bottle and then this is how Red always did it—he would take my bottle. Then he’d take the paper off the top out of his bottle. And he would hold it up and he’d pour the milk into my bottle. And I marveled how he did it. He never spilled a drop. I would have had half of it on the floor. Then he would give me my bottle for thirteen cents. Now, it didn’t really. . . I didn’t think about it at the time. . . but all my mother had to do was buy—put a deposit on one bottle. Once she paid one bottle I could have taken that bottle back and forth. Saved him the work of doing that. [Shows pouring milk carefully into another bottle] No. She had to—and you know something—if I suggested that, she would have said no. Because she had. . . she didn’t brook contradictions. But actually I didn’t think about that. So anyway, this one time I went to the store and bought a quart of milk [Shows the pouring] [Laughter] and two or three other things. I came back. I gave her the change. And she said, “That’s ten cents too much. He under- charged us.” So she said, “Take that dime and take it back to him.” Well, Red Suave had waited
on me and I knew the relationship between him and the boss. And I said... I knew that that was a bad thing to do. So I said, “Ma, why don’t we just keep it.” “No, no, no! It is not our money. We are not keeping it. You take it back. Right now!” “Okay.” So I take it back. And I sort of tried to enter the store unobtrusively, you know. And I sidled over to where Red was and I said very quietly, “Uh, Red,” I said, “You gave me an extra dime.” Mr. Fortin was right there. Listening in. And he glared at him, you know. Because—he’s going to get it—because if he gave me extra money Mr. Fortin is going to think he is giving other people extra money. When I told Red, I said, “Red, you gave me an extra dime,” he looked at me like I had betrayed him. Because he knew what I was doing. And he turned white and red and white and red—he turned about three different colors. So I had to turn around and let him take his lumps, you know. So, that was my mother. She had... And I will tell you one more time... before I lose my voice. When I was working. In 1943, it was. I am sorry—’42. The summer of ’42. I came home from college and I had to get a job. So I applied at a sweatshop. They made pajamas. These sweatshops had come into New Bedford from New York. And they moved into corners of the empty mills. And the boss was Mr. Addis. Now he was quite different from the Jewish—quite different from the New Bedford Jews. The New Bedford Jews all tended to be kind of soft and pudgy—nice people, you know, very nice people. He was a New York Jew. They are a different breed. And he had been into some stuff. He had a long scar running across his cheek. When you looked at him, you tended to focus on it. He had probably been knifed. And he never smiled. Never even saw him smile once. Never saw him laugh once. Very very serious. Coal black hair—put some kind of brilliantine on it—slicked back. He had piercing black eyes. He looked just like a gangster. Anyway, he quizzed me before he gave me the job. And he wanted to make sure I was there for the duration, you know, for my life’s work. Like my job was—the cutter cut
up bundles of cloth—like sleeves—42 sleeves—and my job was to put a ticket on them—42 sleeves and wrap the thing around, bundle them up and take them when I had enough—take them to the girls. It was called a bundler. And he wanted to make sure I was going to be a bundler for life. That was my life’s work—my ambition was to be a bundler. He didn’t want me coming in for two months and leaving. So I absolutely could not tell him I was in college and I was taking off in September. He never would have hired me. Because he has to train you. Has to train you to make knots. Three weeks of training. [Laughter] You know “worthless to me”. So I fibbed a little bit. And I had the job. Everything went fine. I had no complaints. Then the last week came. Summer was over. And I had one week to go. And my mother said to me, “You’ve got to tell him that you are leaving in a week”. And that was 1942. I would have been nineteen years old. I said, “Ma, no, I can’t do that.” Because he’s going to be awfully mad, because I lied to him. He thinks that I am going to be there for good. She said, “No, you’ve got to—it is only fair. You’ve got to tell him. You’ve got to give him a warning.” What do they call it? Notice. She didn’t use that word but that’s. . . . I said, “Ma, I don’t want to do that.” “No, you’ve got to do it.” Now, here is the question I have for you. I am nineteen years old. Why in the hell didn’t I say to her, “Ok, Ma, I will tell him.” And not tell him. But I was so used to—if she said, “Jump off the fuckin’ bridge” I would have jumped off the fuckin’ bridge. I’m nineteen years old and I am like a ten-year-old kid. “Okay, Ma, I’ll tell him.” So, I went and said, “Mr. Addis, this is my last week.” And on Monday, I told him. I said, “I am going to leave for school.” He looked at me—errrgh. And, okay. You could guess what happened. That last week was the worst—it was the week out of Hell. He harassed me, every ten minutes he’s giving me hell—he never had given me hell before. Giving me hell about everything. He was so mad. Sometimes I said gee I should just walk out and screw the last week, you know, but I stuck it
out. But that was her, her advice. And it always cost me. Never listen to your mother, boys. [Laughter] Except Mom—listen to her. [Drinks some water] Now let’s see. Oh, Mona, you asked me yesterday... you said how did my family feel about my writing. My mother was vehemently opposed because she felt that I would write about the family. She didn’t trust me. Good for her. [Laughs] And she didn’t want me to do that. She was afraid of that, you know. I don’t know, that maybe I would ridicule them or whatever, you know. Extremely private person and so I could never talk to her about the writing because she was so... didn’t want to hear it. I couldn’t say, “I got a nice letter from an editor.” or “I got a rejection.” She just didn’t want to hear it. It was like, “Errrrh, don’t talk about that.” She didn’t say that but it was very very clear that she didn’t want to hear about it. So, I just... I never said a word about it. Although, when I took time off to write I told her I was writing which I am sure—I can imagine back home—“He quit his job to write!” “Errrgh. . . .” “He is not earning any money.” “Errrgh. . . .” It is like when I wrote back, when I wrote back that I had married Barbara, my mother and my sister told me, my father—they had to dissuade him. He was going to jump on a train, come out to Ann Arbor. I don’t know what he expected.

Barbara: No, he was going to come to Caro. That was when we were in Caro.

Charles: What the hell did he expect to do? Take me back? You know, to dissuade me. I was already married.

Barbara: You had left school and that upset them.

Charles: I had left school. Well, it didn’t upset them because at that point he used to give me... he used to send me money for school. I think it was $80 a month I think. But when I got married he cut that off, which is all right. He figured, hey, you want to get married, all right support yourself. But I never
could figure it out. I should have asked them. Why was he going to come to Ann Arbor. I thought it was Ann Arbor.

**Barbara:** Nuh uhh. Caro.

**Charles:** Caro? Well I would have been married. So what was he going to do? I don’t know.

**Mona:** Maybe because she wasn’t Portuguese.

**Charles:** No, no, no. That was a non-issue. Joe married a French girl. That was a non-issue. My mother might have preferred a Portuguese girl but it was loosening up already. Portagees were marrying Frenchmen all over the place. The Portagees preferred Frenchmen and the Frenchmen preferred—you know. Except the Portuguese girls. They ended up marrying Portagees. But Portuguese men—they would marry French girls more. So anyway, oh I was going to say she was opposed because she didn’t trust what I would say. She was afraid I would write about that. So when I was—I’ll give you an example of this. Not just her either. During my father’s last days I went to New Bedford. And he had retired. He was home. And we were sitting around. And Joe, who lived next door, my brother Joe, brought over a tape recorder with some music that Dot had taped. And he put it on the table and we sat around to listen to it. It was very nice music. But you know, after about twenty minutes you think, hey, jeez, that’s enough, you know. I don’t want to sit here all day listening to music. I want to talk to my father, mother and so on. So I said to him, “Joe” I suddenly got an idea, I said, “Joe, do you have a blank tape at home?” And he said, “Yeah.” And I said, “Could you go get it?” He said, “Okay.” So he went and got it. And I had him put it in the tape recorder. And I thought I would ask my father about his early life in Portugal. Usually he was very—didn’t want to talk about it and everything. But he seemed to be
mellowing out as he got older. More able to talk. And so I thought I would try and see if I could kind of coax him into... while asking leading questions. And he was at the table. And I turned it on and I started asking him about Portugal and lo and behold he started talking about it. And I could see my mother... she was there you know. My brother Joe was looking at us very stonily. He wasn’t participating in it at all. And my mother was getting more and more agitated. She would say, “Who wants to hear all that stuff.” And I said, “Ma, I want to hear it.” I said, “I have never heard this. Let him talk.” So he would talk on. And then... he probably had cataracts because light bothered his eyes a lot. And we were at the table and there was a big light in the middle of the table. I could see him kind of shielding his eyes from it. So, it wasn’t dark—it was in the afternoon. So I reached over and I turned the light off. And I said, “Let me turn it off, Pa.” And then [Shows Pa’s relief] it was good for him. And my mother shot out of the table like a rocket, “No, we want the light!” [Gestures turning it on forcefully] So she’s making... and so there he and I were talking and Joe and my mother were not happy about it. You know, I could tell but I didn’t give a shit. Well, when we finished—I don’t know how it happened—but Joe, as I was talking, he grabbed the tape recorder and left. And, you know, suddenly he is gone. So I said, gee that’s kind of strange. So I called him the next day. I called him up and I said, “Joe, can I come over and get that tape?” And he gave some kind of evasive answer. And I called him every day for... at least four times. “Joe, I really want that tape.” And he would be... wouldn’t answer me so I got the idea he wasn’t going to give me the tape. And when I told Mona this story she said, “Well, maybe your mother told him not to give you the tape.” And I say she was very capable of doing that. However, she hadn’t communicated to him at the table and he ran off with it so it must have been that he himself had the same feeling because she hadn’t told him to lose the tape. But I mean she would have wanted him to lose the tape. And anyway,
I never did get the tape. I was shocked. I’ll tell you the truth, I was shocked. Because I said, God, that he would do that to me. That he would. . . it is the only record that I ever had of my father’s voice. It meant a lot. [Got emotional on tape at this point -- my father is still upset about this] But he did it. And I know why. Neither one trusted me as to what I would write about. And they were just trying to prevent me from writing that stuff. And my brother Joe, actually. . . [Has drink of water] my brother Joe was actually an awfully good fellow. And I loved him dearly. Still do. He would do things for me like when I went to college he would give me twenty bucks, you know. And uh. . . he had a hard life. When he. . . he probably had a little bit of resentment of me and with every justification because I am the one who was sent to college. He was the one who was sent to work. He was older than I was. And when he was in junior high, round about the seventh grade—see my father was raised that kids go to work early. Like he himself—he was eight years old. He was in a sardine factory, working. The sardine cans would have olive oil all over them and he would dip it in sawdust [Demonstrates brushing off the oil]. . . he showed me his technique one day—took a brush and brushed the sawdust off because. . . to take the oil off. So when my brother Joe was in about the seventh grade he would go to school, and about—the school let out at three o’clock at Normandin—and he would come home, go to the shop and work until about seven at night. He did it all school nights—seventh grade, eighth grade, ninth grade. And then at the end of the ninth grade that was it for him. He had a ninth grade education. And I am very proud of him because he became an officer, bombardier in the Air Force—with a ninth-grade education. And that involves a lot of math because as a bombardier you had to figure out, you know, where you drop the bomb. And he participated in one of the most disastrous air raids of the war. The air raid on the Ploestii oil fields of Rumania and oh, Christ, the Germans shot up and they had fighter pilots and everything. I don’t know
the statistics but they probably lost one third or one half of their planes. They had B24 Fortresses. And his plane had holes all over the goddam place so he was very, very lucky to come back from that. Then he had many other air raids too but that was the worst one. It is a very famous air raid. Ploesti is p-l-o-e-s-t-i. I think they... they didn’t realize that the Germans had so many fighter pilots, fighter planes in that area. And they shot them out of the sky like crazy. Plus a lot of ack-ack. Well, that was later on... but anyway, at the end of ninth grade he went to work full time for my father. Not out of choice. And my father was pretty stern with him. You know, he wanted him to do the work just so and so it was a very uneasy relationship. Joe was unhappy there. And what saved his ass was he joined the National Guard and he’d go off... in fact, that led to my teeth being fixed. Because the National Guard wouldn’t accept you if you had a bunch of holes in your teeth. We had never been to a dentist. He had a bunch of holes in his teeth. Cavities. So he went and had them fixed and then he said he put pressure on my father and my mother, my mother especially—“You should fix Charlie’s teeth, too.” So off I went to get them fixed. I had, I had huge—my molars had huge cavities. And Dr. Clement was a Portuguese doctor, dentist, and he... it was two dollars to fill the cavity, three dollars if you took Novocain and my mother... my mother—you’ve got to go the cheap way. Two dollars. No Novocain. [Laughter] I don’t fuckin’—ohhhhhh-ahhhhhh, oh God that hurt so. I can’t even begin to describe it... how much it hurt. And he is breaking drills, you know. A huge cavity. Oh Christ, that hurt. No Novocain. But at least they got the teeth fixed. How I didn’t pass out in the chair I don’t know. And the drill would be hot, it would break—pssst. He’d get another drill. Oh Christ, that was painful. That was the first time I went to another dentist [Shows fear and trembling] and now I go to Burkholder’s [Lays back relaxed]. He says, “Is that all right?” I say, “What? I didn’t feel anything.” He gives you the needle, you don’t even feel it. “Are you
comfortable?” Just as comfortable as in bed. There is no-nothing. Why are people afraid of the dentist? I don’t know. So Joe got us our teeth fixed. So anyway, he went to the National Guard on one night a week and he just loved it. Not only did he get out of work early—they drilled. It’s kind of odd. He was coast artillery and I ended up in the coast artillery in San Francisco. The same thing. But they would drill with rifles: left, right, drmp, drmp. “Right flank!” And he just, he just loved it. He loved to be a soldier. When he was a kid he would run a million miles to see a parade. And he had, when he was like in the seventh grade, he had this wild dream of going to West Point. Well, talk about a wild dream. Jesus Christ! Because, number one you need education. Number two, the representative from that area, congressional, picked out two candidates. Believe me. It is not going to be a Portagee. Because there was a lot of. . . that was the Depression. . . there were a lot of people wanting to go to West Point. And they are not going to pick a Portagee for that. No way. No how. But that was just a fantasy that he had. So, now he was a soldier, so to speak. He had a uniform and everything and he just lived for the summer. For the summer they went to camp for two weeks. Away from the shop for two weeks. And camping out, so and so forth. Oh Christ, he looked ahead to that for six months. And he read all the gunnery books. He became a master gunner. He really studied hard at night. Christ, I couldn’t do it. I took a look at one. I never could do it. Even when I was in the coast artillery, too. I said, “Oh jeez.” [Gestures can’t be bothered] So he lived for that. And the happiest day of his life came when war was declared and soon after that the National Guard was activated—brought into the Army. Aah. It was liberation. Just. . . he was so happy. And he loved the Army. And he would have like to have stayed but he would have lost his officership. He was second lieutenant. But he would have stayed but there were two things that militated against it. He was going to marry Celeste Noguera, our neighbor. A Portuguese girl. And she
refused to go—to live the military life. Otherwise I think he would have really considered it. Also, my sister Irene told me that his evaluation said, maybe because of the bombing, it said he was psychoneurotic. I don’t know if that would have affected it or not. But I don’t think that ever became an issue because he was—as long as you are not an officer they don’t care. As long as he was willing to be a sergeant and he was. But Celeste was dead against it. So he had to make a choice. He came home and the best job he could get was in a sweatshop which was not so great. But then he lucked out. He became a fireman and he loved that because it was adventure—going to fires—running around—that’s the kind of thing he liked to do—excitement.

**Barbara:** He saved people’s lives.

**Charles:** Saved people’s lives, yeah. He was. . . he took it very seriously. Very serious guy. But I thought, all my life I thought, he had every reason to resent me because I was the favored one and they put him to work [Speaks emotionally]. Well, anyway. . . . [Drinks water] But he didn’t show it. I wanted to say one thing too about Mr. Addis which I didn’t mention but there was a guy there, a Jewish man, who was—he was about forty years old. Awfully nice man. We called him Nat. I don’t know what his last name was. And he, he was in charge of my department. Mr. Addis—was the whole factory. And Nat was under Mr. Addis, and Mr. Addis, you know, would give him hell all the time. Not all the time.

**Barbara:** Where was this, Honey?

**Charles:** Oh, I’m sorry. This was the pajama factory.

**Barbara:** Oh.
**Charles:** In 1942. And Nat said to me very quietly once, he said. “You don’t want to stay in this kind of work. Try to get something better.” He said it very quietly. He didn’t want Mr. Addis to hear. Oh, I have to tell you a funny story. Once time Nat said to me... you know they get excited. They have to have a order out by Monday or something. Everybody is running around like crazy.

He said to me, “Charlie, get the pins!! Get the 44 pins!!” And I went over to the table and there was a box of pins. I grabbed the pins and run back, “Here, here, Nat.” “No,” he looked at me: “The pins!! The pins!! The pins!!” It was pants. “The 44 pins!!” I didn’t have the New York accent down too good. But anyway one time—to show you the thing—Mr. Addis came over and apparently he had mislabeled, Nat had mislabeled a pajama or something. He was very angry and he took the pajamas and he threw it, flung them into his face, right close by... trrrmmmp. And walked away. And I saw tears come to Nat’s eyes. And I thought, Jesus Christ, there is something wrong with this world when a forty-year-old man gets humiliated like that. You know, it’s not right. Well, okay. I get that feeling. You know. This is not right. Because you know, Nat was working as hard as he could. And he wasn’t shirking, you know. So. That factory played. ... you know. ... when I wrote *Tony*, when I took three years off—’58 to ’61—I actually envisioned *Tony* as two books. And the second book was I was going to take Tony... Tony ends the first book—he gets a job. And it turns out to be the pajama factory. Although, I don’t state that in the book. And then the second *Tony* book was going to be Tony was going to work in the sweatshop, at the pajama factory, and I was—because the guys in the pajama factory were very, very interesting. Each one is different. They are all so different. Each one is. ... you know we think of men as all [Gestures meaning the same]. They have different ways. And I was fascinated by the way how different each one is. So I was going to stress that and then Tony was going to have an unrequited love affair, if you want to call it an affair. And then
the book will end with him being drafted and going off to the Army. And I wrote extensive notes on that. I wrote a lot of notes. But when the three years was up and I knew how hard it had been to write *Tony* there was no way I could have written that in time. So I had to go to work. So I put that aside. So I feel kind of sad about it because it is a book that I really wanted to write and never did write and it is too late now because years have gone by, you lose all sense of detail. I didn’t realize that. I thought I would remember things forever. Oooh, I couldn’t have been more wrong. Because you don’t remember things forever. You remember the broad outlines, but the detail. It is like losing your sight. You see everything so sharply and then as time goes on it fuzzes out and one character just disappears off the screen and... it is just—I can’t do it. I have time now but I can’t do it. And you lose also your approach. You are older. You think differently. So, I forgot who it was who said that to me. Maybe it was Ma here. Mumma here. She said... maybe it wasn’t you. Somebody said to me that maybe you would have been better off if you didn’t have a family and you could have written the book, you know. And I said, “Well, no, no because...” did you tell me that?

**Barbara:** I said that many times.

**Charles:** [Laughter] She was trying to get rid of me. I said, “Well, no. I still have got to work. You can’t... who is going to provide the bread and butter. You still have got to work. And also, if I hadn’t had a family I wouldn’t have written at all I don’t think. Because a family gave me stability and happiness. And I can only write when I am happy. If something, if Barbara is sick or something there is no way on earth that I can write. I have to be happy. I can write about unhappy things but I have to be happy to do it. [Laughter] And by happiness I mean by having a person I love and who loves me and if I didn’t have that I’d be depressed and lonely—you can’t write—I can’t write when I...
am like that. I read about a guy, I think it was Anthony Trollope, an English novelist. He wrote every day an hour. He is taking a long train ride—pulls out the pad—schchsch-schchsch-schchsch [Makes the sound of pen scratching on paper]. It is like these guys in sidewalk cafes in Paris, right—million people around—schchsch-schchsch-schchsch. Jeez, I have to have a wall in front of me and be by myself. That is the only way I can write. I have to just kind of. . . get into it. Anybody comes—it breaks me off. But Trollope would go to a funeral at two o’clock. At four o’clock he gets out the pad and starts writing. [Laughs] Nothing could stop him. Well, that is a writing machine. That’s not me. So Mom actually, whether she knows it or not, made it possible for me to write because she gave me peace of mind which I wouldn’t have had without her. And you didn’t hurt either, Mona [Laughs]. You know, it is nice to have a family. . . I think.

**Barbara:** Daddy used to say he loved to write in there [Their bedroom] and hear our voices out here, you know. . . Matty and Mona and. . .

**Charles:** Yeah, it didn’t disturb me. In fact, I liked it. I couldn’t hear. . . if I hear your words that would have been different but—of course I had the music on, too. I always write. . . I should say this. . . I have always written with music. It kind of, I don’t know, puts you in the mood and everything. And, different kinds of music, like I used to play opera, now I can’t anymore because I start listening to it. The voices. I can’t have voices anymore because I listen to them. But classical music, that I can hear. So anyway, I feel kind of sad about *Tony* Book Two because it is one that didn’t get out. You know, that’s the way it goes. So, okay. Now let me see. I told you about the first money I made, five bucks. Oh, I’ve got to tell you something else. I waited two weeks. I picked out another player. Repeated my description of the ball player, won another five bucks! With the same description. With a different player. [Laughter]
This one I didn’t take to my father. And five bucks. Hey, Jesus, listen you know what—when I won that five bucks—girls in the sweatshops were getting eight bucks a week. So that was like almost a week’s pay. So then, when I was like about—a couple years later—about fourteen. I was reading. . . I’ll tell you about this later. I was reading sports stories in the pulp magazines and I wrote a sports story and I sent it off to some place, Street & Smith's *Sports* or somebody, I forgot who. But I was just a kid, you know. But the thing is you had to have it typed. And I didn’t have a typewriter. So I went to my Aunt Rosie, she had a typewriter. And I asked if I could borrow it. She said, “Sure.” So I borrowed the typewriter. That’s pretty good. I never. . . that she would lend it to me—because that was an investment for her, you know. So I came back. Typed up the story. Sent it off. Returned the typewriter. And of course—nothing happened, of course. Wish I had that story but I don’t think I do. But, why, you could say, why did Aunt Rosie have a typewriter? Because she was working in the mills. She went into the mills when she was twelve years old. You are supposed to be fourteen by law. But she said, “I was a big girl. So I passed for fourteen.” Now see, that’s how her grandfather, my grandfather made his way. Because her salary went to him. So he didn’t have to make very much. A shoemaker. And he didn’t. So she had worked all those years and she was. . . I don’t know how old she was when I borrowed it. . . she was maybe thirty. Something like that. I’d have to figure it out. But she was probably in her thirties, I think. Okay, what did she do with the typewriter? She had this dream of becoming a secretary. Bought the typewriter and got the manual of how to touch type. She was going to teach herself how to touch type. But look. She had never been to school in America. She had been to school in Portugal. Didn’t know how to spell. She had no chance, really, because she didn’t have the skill to, I don’t think, to handle. . . . She gave out anyway, before she finished the course. It was self-taught at home. But for a while there
she was chchch chchc chch. [Pretended to type] And Rosie was the one that was always trying to improve herself. She used to buy Fleischmann's Yeast—correct me if I am wrong, Mom—she rubbed it on her face, I think. Is that what they...?

**Barbara:** Well they said. . . I don’t know whether they drank it. . .

**Charles:** Improve the complexion. No, no, it was a solid like soft cheese.

**Barbara:** Whether they mixed it in with water. To get rid of pimples. To make your skin nice.

**Charles:** Maybe that was it.

**Barbara:** I never did it but I remember it was advertised. I don’t know what they did with it though.

**Charles:** I vaguely remember her rubbing it on her face. I think. . . she had pockmarks from smallpox. Maybe that was why.

**Barbara:** Yeah.

**Charles:** Well, she was. . . my Aunt Mary was the oldest one; then my mother was next, Ilda; then Rose was third; and then Ernestine was fourth and Bertha was fifth. But Bertha had, the mother of the first four died and my grandfather married another woman and he had Bertha with the second woman. So Bertha was. . . didn’t have the same mother as the first four. And Bertha was like the little kid of the family. So anyway, I borrowed a typewriter and sent that story off. And that didn’t work. So then in 1943, I was twenty years old. I was fooling around with writing a little bit. Nothing serious. And I read in this writing manual that the *Chicago Daily News* was interested in buying stories. So I decided to write a story and I plagiarized the idea from a pulp magazine I had read years before. I didn’t plagiarize the words but I plagiarized the idea.
And the idea was a criminal, a gangster—he is guilty of a murder—and he is facing fifty years if the jury finds him guilty. However, if he takes a plea bargain then he will only serve ten—if he pleads he is guilty he will only serve ten years. So he is in the court room and the jury is deliberating and is now filing in and he is sweating it out. He doesn’t know what they are going to do and he can’t stand it because he can be a free man or fifty years. He can’t stand the tension so he blurts out, “I plead guilty, your honor.” So they say okay. So they lead him off. And the jury people—they look at each other because they have a slip. And the slip says, “Not guilty.” Well, I have this, if I can find it here. I have this [Shows an envelope]. Chicago Daily News—looks like 400 West Madison Street, Chicago, Illinois and it says, “To Charles Reis Felix. It has the voucher number. It says: “Story”. . . remember, I couldn’t remember the name? “Story: Retribution, June 12, 1943, $12.00.” So I. . . this was the first story that I ever sold and that was a lot of money then too. Twelve dollars. Because at that time the girls, everybody, the minimum wage which everybody got then back then, was forty cents an hour. So sixteen bucks a week. So twelve dollars was almost a week. And as I said to Mom. And that was 1943. I made my first sale. And I made my second sale in 2001 when I sold Crossing the Sauer for an advance of three thousand dollars to Burford Books. And that is fifty-eight years between sales but as I always say, “When you are a salesman, sometimes there are slow periods between sales.” And that’s what happened to me. And I should tell you about pulps. Where I got this idea from. Because when I was, oh, maybe seventh grade—I’d say sixth/seventh grade—I had exhausted the books in the library. The kids’ section. They had about ten books, you know. North End Library. It was really pathetic, you know. And I was hungry to read. North End Guild Boys Club I went to—they had about five Tom Swift books and three or four Hardy Boys. I read those twice. One of my aunts gave my brother, Joe, a Hardy Boys book. I read that son-of-a-thing
about three times. I wanted to read. So the only thing available was pulp magazines. Do you know what they look like, Mona? Rough paper. They used to sell them for ten/fifteen cents. Rough pulp paper. And they had stories in them. Like, I started off with. . . I don’t know if I started off. . . but for a while I was reading World War I flyer stuff. No books about the infantry. But like *The Lone Eagle*. I think he flew a Spad. And the Germans always flew Fokkers. F-o-k-k-e-r-s. And they’d fight. . . pfffkkrd. . . . *Battle Aces*.* Lone Eagle*. And then I went. . . I was interested in detective stories. Street & Smith detective stories. And then there were book-length novels basically about a main character like *Doc Savage*, *The Spider*, *The Shadow*. And I read them all and loved them. I really loved them. And then I read a lot of sports stories. I don’t know if I told you that or not. I don’t remember all the names now. Like Street & Smith was a popular one. There were others beside that. So I was reading the *Battle Aces*, not too many of those, but the detective stories and the full-length novels, *The Spider* and so on. I read those. At that time comic books hadn’t come out yet, I don’t believe. But *Big Little Books*. But that’s a different category. So I was reading pulps. Now the question is how did I get the pulps? I never bought one in my life. So what we would do is we’d trade. Now we used to go to a store, I will tell you about him later, Pop Lord. He had a book. . . a store—just magazines, just pulp magazines. *True Stories*, that was for women. All the different kind of pulps, you know. *True Story*—every cover was “He made me pregnant and then he left.” Or something like that. These poor girls. All of them were tough stories. Oh boy. Women had it tough. You should read those things. Men were always deserting, double-timing, and doing this. . . God. So anyway, these forlorn creatures, you know. Kicking them around, you know. So he would. . . Pop Lord sold them two for five cents. But I never bought two. And he traded them—two for one. You would bring him two, you would take one back. So I had to get some. Well, I
had to get a source and my source was a guy named Eddie Lariviere. Eddie Lariviere lived close on my street. And we got along really well. He loved. . . he was like me—he loved to read and he loved to play baseball. And, as far as I know. . . and I am certain of this. . . he and I were the only guys on that street who ever read. The other guys—no. So he loved to read—he loved to play baseball. And he loved science fiction. Oh, he was crazy about science fiction. I tried it once. I read the first paragraph. An alien comes out and he has one eye in the middle of his forehead. Oh, shit. That’s enough for me. Life is loony enough. I don’t need guys with one eye in the middle of their forehead. Life is. . . we don’t need that—we’ve got science fiction right here, with people with two eyes. So I wasn’t interested at all. I still am not. I don’t care for science fiction. But Eddie, I don’t think he bought any either. So how did he get them? Ok. He had a friend named Edward Duclos. Now Edward Duclos, he had a face. . . he was French—Lariviere was French too. . . Edward Duclos had a face looked like he came out of an abnormal psychology textbook. Great big bushy eyebrows. You know—dumb looking as hell. But he had a talent. He was a master thief. Now we called him Sing-Sing. That was his nickname. That’s where he is going to end up. That is a famous prison. So we called him Sing-Sing. Not to his face. Now he was always hanging around Eddie. Now he never read a book. He wasn’t interested in baseball. Why is he hanging around Eddie? Well, because Eddie had a sister named Florence Lariviere. We called her Flo. And she had a beautiful set of boobs. And Sing-Sing was sweet on her but, of course, in those days, you didn’t. . . you just hung around and looked. He didn’t even speak to her. But to be around her. . . he wanted to be around her so badly that he was nice to Eddie. And so what he, what Sing-Sing would do is. . . what Sing-Sing would do is he would go to these magazine stores, up and down the fucking city. He used to steal stamps when Eddie had a stamp collection. He stole stamps and then they’d trade them. But then he got
into pulps. So he would go up and down. There were a lot of smoke shops in those days where they sold magazines, cigars. Women wouldn’t go in them. It was just for men, you know. Had all this racy stuff—Film Fun, girls with narrow bras—that was about as racy as it would get. And so he would go in these magazine shops and he’d come out with two or three magazines tucked under his shirt. It would remind me of the pajama factory. First day I walked in the bathroom there was a guy named Billy. He had his shirt off and he was wrapping cloth around his waist. You know tight as hell. To take it home. And he puts his shirt back on. He does that just before he goes home. So he says, “My wife is going to make three shirts out of this.” Anyway, so anyway, Sing-Sing is delivering magazines to Eddie. And Eddie is reading them. And then after he reads them, you know, he is willing to trade them with me. Ok, what have I got to trade with Eddie? I don’t have anything. So, remember, Eddie loved baseball. So I pick up the paper one day and it says Quaker Oats. Get a brand new horsehide baseball if you send eight, not box tops, but Quaker Oats is on the side there. The Quaker. I think it was William Penn. He has a big black hat. Looks like Mom in the rain, something like that with that hat. Whatever, what is that hat called? An Australian.

Mona: Akubra.

Charles: Which?

Mona: An Akubra.

Charles: An Akubra. And so you cut it out of the cardboard, just—they want just the head. I think it was a certain one on the side. Now there is no way I am going to get eight of them because we ate oatmeal but it took us a month or so to get one box. So I was reading the damn thing and it said eight, not box tops but eight what ever it was, the heads, you know, or a reasonable facsimile. And
I didn’t know what facsimile meant. So I go out and look it up. It said like a likeness. I said jeez, maybe I should try this. . . so I went to my aunt Bertha. She loved to paint. She had these paint boxes. I said, “Bertha, could you paint me a picture like this?” And she says, “Okay.” She tries. And she was really good. She was meticulous. And it took her a long time. My aunts, I really did abuse the hell out of them. It took her a long time. When I saw it, I was thrilled because it looked just like him. And I said, “Can you make me six more?” [Laughter] She says, “Okay, but it is going to take me a while.” And I said, “That’s all right.” And so, lo and behold—I still didn’t know if it was going to work—but I figured what the hell—so she paints the eight. . . the seven. . . . I had one and I sent them off and lo and behold, here comes this beautiful baseball. It smells so good. Real white, you know. And this is a real treat around here because we never played baseball in our lives with a real baseball. We played baseball with a baseball whose cover had been ripped off from use or whatever. And we taped it with black electrical tape. That is the only ball we ever played with. A black electrical tape baseball. We never even smelled a horsehide. And it came in a brand new box. So I took it to Eddie and let him smell it. Ohhhhh. He salivated for it. So I don’t remember now how many pulp magazines I got from him but I got a bunch. And that was the type of thing I did. I remember another thing I did. I had a dial typewriter. Got it for Christmas, $1. Dial typewriter. You turn the dial it punches one letter. You turn—it is a circular dial. You turn the dial—you punch another letter. And he wanted me to type up some baseball averages for him. I said sure. So I typed them up, and on the dial typewriter. And then he has to pay me with magazines. So now when I get these magazines what I would do is. . . science fiction I don’t read them. . . but I would take them to Pop Lord. Pop Lord is on Sawyer Street between Ashley Boulevard and the Avenue. He is in a little store. There is a house behind it. Now how the store was built I have no idea. It is close to the
sidewalk and it was meant as a store because there was a plate glass window—yeah or whatever, it’s a glass window—I don’t know if it is a plate glass. I think plate glass is expensive, isn’t it? Probably not plate glass. And it is close to the sidewalk. Got just the one room. Got a little tiny room in the back, but basically it is one room. All his magazines are out the front there—stacked high, you know. They were just all over the place. Not a new magazine. All used. And Pop Lord is an old English guy, big fat guy. Sits in a chair and he never gets out of the chair. And I don’t know what he is in business for because I doubt if he made twenty-five cents a day because most people would come in to trade. He would sell some I guess, but not much. But the place was... it had no heat. It had no electricity. So in the winter time it was kind of darkish. And no heat. So he’s there with a big overcoat, gloves on and blowing out steam and... Oh oh [tape clicks off]

Mona: Keep going, Dad.

Charles: What about your thing? [The end]
DVD 2 – Chapter 4 – December 27, 2005

On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter] and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: Pop Lord [sold pulp magazines], Miss Fay Newland [high school teacher], Toussaint L’Ouverture, [liberator of Haiti], Robert Lambert, [fellow university student], James. T. Farrell [author of Studs Lonigan], Rafael Sabatini [writer of adventure novels], Henry James [writer], Ernest Hemingway [writer], June Hurley [Librarian at Pescadero Elementary School], Frank Sousa [Professor at UMass Dartmouth], Idalia [Charles’s younger sister], George Monteiro [Professor at Brown University], John Dos Passos [writer], Nevinsky [tailor next to Pa’s shop in Weld Square], Al (Albert) Beardsley [Superintendent at San Carlos], Ken Abraham [fellow teacher at San Carlos], Ralph Howitt [Principal at San Carlos], Emmett Mahoney [Principal at San Carlos], Charlie Erikson [Principal at La Honda], Bob Bickmore [Principal at Pescadero], Les Larsen [Principal at San Carlos], Mary Corey [teacher at San Carlos], Lois Lindley [La Honda School Board], Kaye [Barbara’s younger brother]

Books and short stories mentioned: Through a Portagee Gate; Crossing the Sauer; Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934; Tony: A New England Boyhood

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.

Charles: Here we are, we’re back on Sawyer Street with Pop Lord selling his magazines. . . trading his magazines, two for one. And I, oh God, I bought. . . I didn’t buy them. . . but I got a lot of magazines from him. I don’t know how I
got so many magazines but I got a lot of them. So anyway. . . of course it is a dwindling. . . if you had ten, you’d go back and you’d get five, and you’d go back and you’d get two for four, and so you would have to replenish your supply. But. . . Pop was gross, he was big. He was quite old and he wore a like an overcoat that came. . . like it was 1890. Really a moth-eaten overcoat. He had a daughter and she’d come in the shop, the store, and they lived together, and he would like give her fifteen, twenty cents to go buy food for that night. She’d come in. . . she was like a beaten-down woman, you know, very quiet and everything. But there was only one thing. . . and he had white hair. He was English. Lord is an English name. And the only time he came to life was—he was a lecherous old guy—and if a good-looking. . . the store was close to the sidewalk. . . and if a good-looking woman came by he shot out of that chair like somebody stuck a live wire up his ass. He went to the window and looked [Looks intensely back and forth] and said, “How would you like to go sparkin’ with her?” [Laughter] So then he would go back to his chair and he wouldn’t get up again until next time. But, you know, Mona, you asked me yesterday why you write. . . and why I write I think. . . that is a hard one to answer, you know, because it is like an impulse. But I think the writer. . . the writer of what I would say, of serious stuff, is trying to bring order out of chaos. I think we live. . . we are like atoms bouncing around, there are a million. . . we’re bumping. . . we see, we go to Menlo Park and we see an old guy barely able to walk, trying to make it to the store, bent over and then we go in the store and there is a young girl on her first job, and she is all excited about her job. And you are getting all this stimuli, and different impressions and it is really like—it drives you crazy. That is why I wrote so many notes, I think. I was trying to—I spent my whole life writing notes—even when I taught. When I taught I didn’t have time to write a book but I had time to write a note. I was writing notes. I have boxes and boxes of notes. All kind of things. Anything. I would see a
face—I would write about the face. I’d see that—I’d write about that. Most of them of course, ninety-nine percent have come to nothing. They just. . . they are there but I made no use of them. But I had that habit of doing that. And the only writing that is useful is when you create the scene and give the dialogue and everything, something you can use. If you just say girl with the brown eyes. . . that’s forget it. . . that’s worthless, you know. But anyway, I think when you write, it is your chance to bring order out of chaos. You create your own universe. You create the structure. You build it. You start from the beginning. You go through the middle and then you end it. And it is sort of like building a house. You control it. You’re like God. You’re controlling the universe. . . of the book. And I think that is like an impulse to do that. I think. So that is in answer to your question about what you were saying, anyway. And I wanted to say too that I—I think I may have told you this already but I’ll tell you again for the record. The most important class I ever took was in high school with Miss Fay Newland, an English teacher, because. . . a very nice lady. . . Fay was spelled F-a-y-e, not F-a-y. At least she spelled it F-a-y-e. Wait a minute—no, that’s your brother. She spelled it F-a-y, I guess. What’s the. . . how do you spell the woman’s name? F-a-y?

**Barbara:** Fay?

**Charles:** Yeah, the woman’s name. F-a-y.

**Barbara:** Well, Aunt Faye. . .

**Mona:** It can be either.

**Charles:** No, I remember now. It was F-a-y. Big point. I want to give her credit you know. F-a-y-e is your brother.

**Barbara:** Yes but my Aunt Faye was F-a-y-e. . . But Mona, there are Fays. . .
Charles: Your brother was partly a girl. So. . . [Laughter] So, anyway. . .

Barbara: He was Kaye.

Charles: Kaye. Oh he wasn’t Faye. Oh that’s right. Pardon me. Okay, well, that’s a girl’s name, too. Kaye. Maybe your mother knew more that you realized she knew. No, he was a good fellow. Ahh. . . so. . . oh, Miss Newland. She had a habit. . . this was on the college side. . . so everybody was serious, you know. . . they all wanted to go to college. We would. . . we had a big book of essays and we would read an essay a week and then the next day or so we were supposed to. . . actually it was due a week later. . . to write an essay having something to do with the essay that we read. It could be a tangential relationship but it should be inspired by whatever that subject was and so I would always do mine on Sunday. I write it long hand and then you would turn it in, I think it was on Monday that you turned it in on. . . or Tuesday, I forget. . . the beginning of the week. And then she’d grade and return them. And she had the habit of having the students read their essay if she felt it was superior. But not a lot of students. She would have, I’d say, four at the most. . . maybe. . . maybe just three? Three would be a more likely number and she would always pick me. And I always read mine. And because I used to inject a little bit of humor and the kids liked it and they would laugh and they would be ex[cited]. . . when I came up everybody would be waiting. . . because the papers were all very dry, very serious. I was the only one that made a joke. And so when you’re in that kind of situation you can make even a lousy joke and they are going to laugh because there is no one else making jokes. So they would all sit up and really wait for me to talk and I would have. . . looking out. . . seeing the expectant faces. . . you have a sense of mastery, of power, because what you say is. . . they are listening. And that is hard to do. . . to get somebody to listen. Most people, you know, they. . . [Indicates floating off] they go off pretty quick.
... you don’t have long to hook them. So I got a feeling, and it didn’t happen overnight, but it gradually happened that you say jeez, that is something I can do. And I can do well. And it is the only thing I can really do well because math and science I was okay but not great. But this I was great. ... comparatively. So it gives you a feeling that you know that that is something. ... you should always play to your strengths. Whatever you are good at. ... that is what you should do because then you have a possibility of doing something. If you struggle with a weakness I think the chances are you maybe become competent but not great. I think like a great doctor. He is not somebody. ... like that dentist, his father told him to go be a dentist and he came back and said, “I really wanted to be an English teacher.” That’s. ... that’s. ... that’s bad. That’s the wrong, you know, that’s the wrong way to go at it. You go at what you can do best. What you like. And you’ll do better. But anyway, so indirectly I kind of, later on, I think I said that’s something I can do. And when I went to college I took a course in writing, a sophomore course. It wasn’t what they call creative writing. It was just, you could write what you wanted more or less. And the writing that I did was. ... like I wrote a Roman story. It was a guy in it named Flavius. And I knew nothing about Rome. But that was the kind of story I was writing. And I wrote a play about Toussaint L’Ouverture, who was the black liberator of Haiti. And I read a book about him and then I wrote this play. I don’t know if I ever finished it or not. But that again is. ... I knew nothing about Haiti, but that was what I thought a writer did, he wrote about stuff that. ... you know, it didn’t have anything to do with me actually. But what changed all that was in college this guy on our floor in Williams House, Bob Lambert. [This was before the war. The first time Charles was at Michigan.] He had a book called *Studs Lonigan*. And he had taken slips of paper and put it in four or five places throughout the book. Where there was a sex scene. And he put that in and he passed the book around everybody in the dorm. And we all read the sex scenes.
Studs Lonigan by James. T. Farrell. And it is about Chicago. . . the lower class Irish. . . lower, working class and lower middle class of Chicago. And I read the sex scenes but I saw right away that they were not pornography. Because although they were sex scenes his intent was to portray the sex incident in a realistic way and not. . . didn’t do it to stimulate you. Pornography attempts to stimulate you. That is their intent. His was not. His was to reproduce the scene. And I saw right away the difference. And I thought this is interesting, so I went out and I bought a copy. It was a Modern Library Giant for I think a dollar forty-five. And I read it. And I really liked it. I was very impressed. And what. . . and again this is not something that occurred to me that minute. . . but you gradually. . . it somehow gets in the back of your mind. . . you gradually, eventually, weeks, months, maybe years. . . it seeps forward and you begin to realize something. And that was. . . he was writing about lower-class people. And all my writing. . . there were no lower-class people. They were. . . like the kind of writing that there was in The Saturday Evening Post was middle-class America. Comings and goings, and so on. And the other kind of writing is adventure writing like Rafael Sabatini. Pirates. And that’s what I thought writing was. I thought, when I was reading Rafael Sabatini. . . who wrote Captain Blood and Scaramouche. . . I thought that was the greatest writing in the world. It was exciting, adventurous and always dealing with a hundred years back. In other words, Sabatini is living in the nineteen hundreds—he is writing about the French Revolution. It is historical. But it is not about his life. It’s about. . . and that is what I thought writing was. And Farrell made me see that these people were interesting and I never realized that people on the lower levels were worth writing about because, you know. . . they go to work, they come home, they go to sleep, to go to work, to come home, to go to sleep. . . . Where’s the adventure? Where’s the excitement? Nothing to write about. They are not worth writing about. And I saw that this was worth
writing about. Because they had defeats and they had successes. And they had betrayed people. And all the things in life. . . they were doing them just like the wealthy people were doing them. In fact, the upper class people, the books like Henry James, it is always on a certain high level. . . you never get down to the zingers. . . like they don’t happen. And like for example, in Henry James. . . now I haven’t read any James. . . I am just guessing here [Laughs]. . . but I don’t think that they ever mention where they get their money. It doesn’t, you know, it doesn’t happen. It is like, I told you about Hemingway. That always bothered me. How is this guy living? And I found out later he married a wealthy girl and that was how he was living at the. . . this is before he became famous. So, I always ask myself, “Where’s the money coming from?” And in the Henry James type book it is never mentioned. Now when you are on the lower levels. . . that is all you talk about is money. Because money is life. Money keeps you alive. And money is very important. So money is a big, big item. And so I think I told you this. . . it was in the book [Through a Portagee Gate]. I made a boo boo at school. I had this guy, he had a beautiful sweater on. He was a Yankee. I said, “Ooohh.” Because I wasn’t fooling. I said it was as soft as. . . my mother used to buy these prickly wool things for three bucks you know. You would put them on your skin and you’d go grwnnnn. . . [Shows scratchy movement] And his must have been cashmere. It was so soft. I just marveled at it and I said, “Do you mind if I touch it?” He says, “No.” So I touched it. And I said, “Jeez, that is a beautiful sweater.” And then I said to him, “How much did it cost?” [Laughs] That’s the first thing you say to a kid in the North End. “How much did it cost?” He looked at me. I could see. . . don’t ask that. He said, “I really don’t know.” So, I realized right away I had made a blunder, you know. That I had asked him that. You don’t ask money questions. But anyway, Studs Lonigan was probably, as I said, the most important book I ever read because it focused me on New Bedford and my
people. Farrell is Irish. He wrote tons of books. He wrote a Danny O’Neill series, five books. Danny O’Neill was Farrell and he wrote. . . I bought every one of them. And he wrote many, many books about the Irish. That was his. . . that was his subject. . . and I could see that New Bedford, for better or for worse, was going to be my subject. So he steered me away from Flavius and Rome and towards the cotton mills. Which is good. And I was going to say that. . . see. . . what. . . it skipped my mind here. Oh. Yeah, this has to do with A Portagee Gate. You know, I make fun of the Portagees but they really saved my life because I’ll be very frank with you. . . I was very leery of these special groups at university like a Black Studies group, Hispanic Studies. Because I think they tend to be a separate enclave and they set their own standards and I don’t trust them to have the same standards as the university at large. Because for one thing they are taking kids that don’t have the proper prerequisite. . . . I am not saying they shouldn’t take them but I am saying that I have a feeling that sometimes they don’t have the same high standards as the university unit. And I think, I may have mentioned to you that Mexican girl that I had who was a very very poor student and the librarian at Pesca. . . I won’t say. . . well at Pescadero. . . she came up to me and she told me so-and-so. . . I had had the girl in the fourth grade. And she said, “So-and-so is at San Francisco State.” And I was shocked. I said, “She’s at San Francisco State?” She said, “Yes.” I said, “God.” I said, “She must have, you know, improved a lot since I knew her.” And she said, “No, Charles, she hasn’t. She is a student at San Francisco State.” And she said, “She came up to me the other day, because I knew her. . . .” and this is the librarian talking, Mrs. Hurley, and she said, “She wrote a paper and she wanted me to look it over for mistakes.” And she said, “Charles, I did and I was shocked. It was. . . grammatically it was a total mess.” She said, “Really bad.” She said, “A good fourth grader could have written a better paper.” And the girl was. . . she said, “I hardly knew what to tell her.” And the girl was at a
university, apparently doing okay, you know, as far as we know. So what I meant was. . . I was a little bit leery of those groups. And so, in the end, going through Frank Sousa. . . well, I should go back a little ways here, if you don’t mind. I am going to mix everybody up here if you are trying to follow this. But when I wrote Through a Portagee Gate I told Mom, I said, “This is a good book but it is never going to see the light of day because nobody is going to publish it.” I didn’t even send it out. Well, what for? Because the commercial press would not look at it with a ten-foot pole. It isn’t what they want. And the University press. . . I had lost faith in them so I just let it sit. And then, I don’t know if it was you, Mona, or my sister Dahlia, sent us a book, published in New Bedford. It had Portuguese recipes, Portuguese stories from the Azores. It was different articles about the Portuguese. A nice little book. And who sent that to us?

Barbara: The Spinner By coincidence--

Charles: Spinner.

Mona: I think it was Aunt Idalia.

Barbara: By coincidence Mona and Aunt Idalia sent them around the same time.

Charles: Oh really.

Barbara: So we got two.

Charles: We got two, okay. Well whoever sent it. . . I began reading it and there was an article in there by Professor George Monteiro, Emeritus from Brown. . . talking about Portuguese literature. Which is a pretty skimpy subject. Not Portuguese literature. . . Portuguese-American literature. There are plenty of writers in Portugal but not so many here. Like he spent a lot of time on John
Dos Passos. John Dos Passos had a Portuguese father and an American mother and his father was very wealthy. He was a corporate lawyer, I believe. A corporation lawyer. And he... it was a thing out of wedlock I believe... so he sent the mother and the child to Europe where he had them live in high style. Lived at the best hotels. And John never had a... never went to school in his life... he had private tutors. And when John became eighteen years old... and he traveled all over Europe seeing all the things you are supposed to see... Florence and so on... retracing Chris’s steps [Laughter]. Chris is retracing his steps. And when he was eighteen years old he comes to America. His father now claims him. I guess he is of age. He gives him... before that he had his mother’s name... he changes his name to Dos Passos and goes to Harvard. And he wrote a number of books. But he never... he never would tell anybody he was Portuguese. And his subjects were totally non-Portuguese. So to call him a Portuguese writer is okay but he is not really talking... most Portuguese don’t travel in high style in Europe and have private tutors. So he is an anomaly at best. But so what I am saying is the Portuguese don’t have very many writers, Portuguese-American writers. So anyway, when I read the thing I said, Jeez, you know, I didn’t know that there was a professor, a Portuguese... I... totally new to me... a Portuguese professor at a university. See, I was out of the loop. Things had been happening and I wasn’t aware of them. There were Portuguese professors all over the country and I didn’t know that. And so, I said, you know, I am going to write him about Crossing the Sauer. He might want to read it, because it is by a Portuguese. So I asked him if he wanted to read it and he said, “Sure.” I wrote him a letter. And then he read it. He liked it. So I said hmmm. I think I will ask him if he wants to read Through a Portagee Gate. But I was afraid to send him the whole book. It was too big. It was overwhelming. It was about eight hundred pages I think. Wasn’t it about eight hundred, Mom? Yeah. So I was afraid to send him the book. So I said I
am just going to send him part of it. . . so he won’t. . . like giving him a meal. You don’t want to give him too much food at one time. So Mom said, “Send him the third part. That’s the good part.” And I said, “No, because if that is the good part, the best part. . . what do you follow it up with? You save the good part for the end. You build up to it.” And so I said, “We will send him the first two parts.” So we sent him the first two parts. And he wasn’t terribly excited about it.

**Barbara:** He wanted to see that it got published but he wasn’t. . . you know. . .

**Charles:** He wasn’t excited about it. . . he was interested, but. . . .

**Barbara:** He was interested. He read it in one sitting, believe it or not.

**Charles:** Yeah. So then we sent him the third part. Now he raved about the book.

**Barbara:** Oh, he was really just. . .

**Charles:** The third part was what did it. . . but I was right. See, you save the kicker for the end.

**Barbara:** Yeah.

**Charles:** Now, you don’t start with the kicker. What do you come in with after that? Ahh [Illustrates nothing] So anyway, he said. . . he said, “I’ll tell you who you should send this to. Professor Frank Sousa at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. He runs a Portuguese program there. Portuguese Studies. Portuguese Culture Center.” And he said, “This is just the kind. . . And he publishes books. And he does a fine job of them. And this is just the kind of book he is looking for.” So I sent it to Frank. And he liked it. And of course, George had recommended it to him. Which that doesn’t hurt, you know. He liked it. And he eventually published it. And he published *Da*
Gama. And I am just certain that he is going to publish Tony. We are still working on Tony, tightening it up a little bit. And in another month or two we will send that to him. I am almost certain he will publish Tony because it has heavy Portuguese content. And that is what they are looking for. And so, now see... now the joke is on me, because I philosophically thought programs that specialize in one racial or national group—that’s maybe not so good. Because we want to be America, we don’t want to be fifty different cultures. Maybe we do. I don’t know. But that was the feeling I had. That it is kind of divisive, you know. But now, this is who is publishing my book. If it wasn’t for him, I wouldn’t be published.

Mona: And he has done a beautiful job on the printing and publishing.

Charles: A beautiful job on it. Did a beautiful job on printing it. Not so good distributing. No? Well, he’ll get around to it. [Laughs] Poor Mona. Ok, I withdraw that. He has done a wonderful job. But I owe him a lot. Because... I am jumping the gun here... he will end up publishing three of my books and that’s... Another thing about him that is great is that he largely lets me publish the book exactly the way I wrote it. He might question me about something but if I say well, this is the reason, he accepts it... Like for example, he wanted to say... I’ll give you an example. He wanted to say ethnic groups instead of nationalities. And I said, “No, Frank. Back in the 30s we didn’t say ethnic groups. That is a new word. We said nationalities.” Now I said you don’t want to get words from today and put them back then. They don’t belong. That is an anachronism. You use the word that was used at the time if the book is about that time. Then it becomes a mixture of words and so... I was very, very careful to try not to use any code words that were used today. Like we had an argument one time, with Mom. Maybe I am misquoting you, Mom, but I was using the word gay. And she said, “Well, that’s going [to
mean]. . .” I said, “No, no, no, no. Gay in those days was a good word meaning light-hearted and so on. I am not. . . not going to use it because now it means something else.” I mean that is tough. If you think that means a homosexual, then that is your problem. That is not what it means. Of course today it has more than one meaning. But. . . so, I think you have to keep the vocabulary and that maybe gives me trouble because. . . in the old days, Mona, people were much more blunt about nationalities. Much more blunt. See, when you are just coming from Europe. So, there’s Italians there, and there are Jews here, and there’s. . . Now you can’t say that. Can’t say there are Jews there. Hey, what are you. . . anti-Semitic, you know. But that is how we talked. And it wasn’t that anybody was necessarily anti-Semitic. . . it was we identified the groups by that way. The first thing you said, “He’s Italian, isn’t he?” Today we don’t do that. But why? Because now the kids are third generation. They don’t have that terrible awareness of nationality, which we did then. We are becoming more [With hands shows smoothing off]. . . edges are going off. And as the generations come along from first to second to third that is finally going to disappear.

Mona: It is also political correctness though, isn’t it?

Charles: Yeah. But I think, too. . . and I read this. . . many of the Jewish leaders are concerned about this because what made the Jews cohesive was antagonism from the outside. . . pushed them together. They married each other. Because they were a verboten group. Now in America if you are accepted, that pressure from the outside pushing them together, is no longer there. So, some of the Jewish leaders are worried that the Jews are going to start marrying Gentiles and the Jewish faith is going to be attenuated. Because if you marry a Gentile mother she is not going to be pushing the kid into Jewish rabbinical stuff and schools, blah blah blah and so on. So they are aware. . .
some of the leaders. . . or maybe not all of them. . . I have read. . . they are aware of as a culture changes there are dangers to them because if you are pushed together. . . now you are allowed to go out. . . then you lose some of that. Now let me check one thing, Mona. I will see if I have covered everything. And then if you have any questions or anything like that you can say. . . . Oh, I wanted to mention one thing. This. . . I regret this so much. When I went back to my father. . . it was just before he retired from his shop. [The shop was owned by Nevinsky, the tailor] I went to his shop. And he was. . . every building in that block had been burned down but his. And the tenant upstairs had left. The tenant in Nevinsky’s tailor shop next door had left. He was there all by himself. And with hostile forces [Gesture of surrounding]. I said [Hits his head meaning disaster]. . . So I knew that he couldn’t stay there much longer. So I thought, you know, I should get a professional photographer to come in and take pictures of the shop. And I kept saying that to myself. I had the money to do it. And I don’t know. . . to this day I say, “What in the hell was wrong with me?” I didn’t hire a guy to come in and. . . I didn’t have a camera myself. And I didn’t want a little snapshot. I wanted a real good picture. Because that interior of that shop is just priceless. And I spent so much time there. Where the sewing machine was. Where the threader was. Where this was. . . the old calendar five years old on the wall. . . the shelf with the shoes, of course the shelf now had no shoes. It used to be piled three high with shoes. And I wanted so badly to have a picture of the interior of the shop. And I didn’t do it. Now I wouldn’t have told my mother about it because I was old enough then, I am not going to get her permission. She would have said no. But I wouldn’t have told her. But I would have asked him. And at first I said well maybe he’ll say no. I said, oh no. He is mellowing out. I think he’d be. . . I think he’d be thrilled to have somebody come and take his picture because he liked to have his picture taken. And I think he would have been. . . yeah, I think
he would have gone for it. I am almost certain he would have gone for it. But I
didn’t do it. And to this day I said... what the hell... why didn’t I do it? And
that is one of the things that has plagued me my whole life... is I have these
impulses to do something and I think about it and I think about it and I don’t do
it. And I can’t figure it out. Why don’t I do it? What’s the answer? [Looking
at Barbara] You don’t have an answer? You’ve lived with me all these years,
you still don’t know? Haven’t you been observing me, studying me?
[Laughter] And you don’t know. What good are you? All right, let me see if I
have covered everything. So, oh... I’ve got one more to tell you. How much
time have we got, buddy?

Chris: Plenty.

Charles: Twenty? I’ll take nineteen minutes and we’ll have one minute for
questions.

Mona: Plenty. He said plenty.

Charles: Plenty what?

Mona: He said plenty of time

Charles: I thought he said twenty minutes.

Barbara: He said plenty.

Charles: Oh, plenty. Ok, this one I’ve got to tell you. But I did want to say
about Sousa and the Portuguese that... I’ll repeat myself but... I’ve had... I’ve
learned that you’ve got to be careful about how you make up your mind
about stuff. Because as I said, my impulse was negative to Black Studies,
Hispanic Studies but it is favorable for Portuguese Studies. Well, that doesn’t
make sense. See, it is profiting me. Is that why I am favoring it? You know.
[Laughs] So, you’ve got to be careful. Maybe we should have open minds.
Which is tough for me. But I wanted to tell you about the second worst day of my life. The worst day was when your mother got sick... with her heart attack. That was the worst day. When the doctors talked to me, I had to sit down. I was about to keel over. And so this was when I was writing... what was I writing... what was I writing... Tony. I was writing Tony. I took the first year off. And I had a leave of absence and they were going to give me one year off. And at the end of the year I had to make up my mind... either come back...

Barbara: To teaching.

Charles: To teaching, yeah. This is at San Carlos. To teaching. Thank you. Come back or quit... or, you know, resign. So I said, well, shit, I can’t... May came around. I could see I was a long way from finishing. So I was having bad relations with them over there... I didn’t care for them at all. So I wrote a postcard and I said, “I quit. Charles Reis Felix.” [Laughs] And I heard from some of the people... they were really pissed at me. Beardsley, the superintendent... you know, it is like contempt. Abraham said, “Boy, you’ve got a lot of balls in saying that!” So, I said. “Well, I am not going back there. He’d never hire me back, so what have I lost?” So then, the three years were up. And when I quit, I had had a... I had worked for a guy, Ralph Howitt, as a principal there. He and I got along very well. And so... a really nice guy. So I said, “Ralph”, I said, “Would you send in a recommendation for me to Stanford Employment so if I look for a job I will have your recommendation?” It is an employment... you send in recommendations and then they send them to your prospective employer. And so, he said, “Sure.” So we had then another... another principal named Emmett Mahoney... and why don’t you stop it for a minute. Go ahead. Just stop it [The recording].

Tape stopped.
**Barbara:** Go ahead.

**Charles:** So, I knew that when I went back to teaching I would need recommendations so I asked Ralph Howitt to... if he would be willing to send one over to Stanford Employment Office. He said, “Sure.” So, I presumed he did and then there was another principal there, Emmett Mahoney, whom I did not get along with. And this started early. When I first started in San Carlos, to get money... I got my salary of course but I augmented it with my being a student at Stanford. If I took twelve units, the government would pay me to go to school, the G.I. Bill of Rights. A full study thing would have been sixteen units but they would give you the full hundred and twenty dollars for twelve units. So I took twelve units. So I was quite busy. Excuse me just a minute. [Has a drink of water] Quite busy with teaching and taking twelve units. And I had papers to write, so I wrote them on the weekend. Saturday and Sunday I devoted to my college work. The rest of the week I did my school work. And so Emmett Mahoney had moved into a house and he wanted to have it painted. So he requested, so to speak, that all the men show up that Sunday and paint his house for him. And he did this through Ralph Howitt. Emmett didn’t ask us to come. Ralph did. Ralph was his assistant. Ralph was the vice principal, later on Ralph was a full principal. And Ralph came to me and he said, “Say, we are all turning out Sunday to paint Emmett’s house.” And I said, “Uh, Ralph,” I said, “Listen, that’s the day I have to have to do my papers. I can’t. I don’t have that time.” And he said, “Charlie, I would come because we are all coming.” I said, “Well, no, but I can’t do it. I don’t have the time.” So he said, “Well, okay.” [Shows a concerned expression] And when I turned up Monday. . . oooooh. . . I got the gimlet eye from Mahoney, you know. I am the one guy that didn’t show up to paint his fricken house. And he’s a guy... it is like librarians, Mona. They’re small. . . They carry grudges for... . . He used to
send us out a paper every day, the Dinky Daily... things to do. Don’t forget to
do this, don’t forget... blah, blah, blah. Oh every day... the Dinky Daily... oh
you know, like we were little kids. And so anyway I... I really goofed up... I
cut my throat in that district because I joined the Union. In those days that was
an absolute no no. And that was a quixotic gesture because there were about a
hundred teachers and there were two union members. What good are you going
to do with two union members? And I knew going in that we are not going to
convince these dames to join the Union. They’d go, “We are a profession.”
[Unintelligible] You know, “We’re a profession.” And I said that a profession
that doesn’t set its own hours, you know... You are not a profession. You are
a worker. You know. “We’re a profession.” I remember having a discussion.
Garbage people got a huge pay hike and I was talking about it, you know. And
this woman said... she said, “Well,”... and I said, “Look at us.” She said,
“Well,” she said, “We have the respect of the community. They don’t.” And I
said, “Yeah, we have the respect and they get the money.” I said, “I’d rather
have the money. Somebody else can have the respect.” But anyway, so I joined
the Union. That was really bad, because we had a union meeting at the school
and while we were having it Mahoney would... in the library... and while we
were having it Mahoney wanted to know who was there. He walks in to see
who is there. At the meeting. And he pretends he is looking for something.
But he wants us to know he’s got his eye on us. You know, that’s the guy... he’s
trying to intimidate us. So anyway, joining the Union was not a good
move. But so... and then I took the three years to write the book. Now it came
time to look for work. And so I went to Stanford and I said, “Who have you got
down for”?... I wanted to find out who they had down for a recommendations.
If I could ask somebody else. And he said... he went through it and said,
did he send that in?” And he sent it in at the same time I asked Ralph Howitt to
send it in, at the end of my first year of writing. I hadn’t asked him to send it in. So I says, Ah ha. This is a hatchet job. He is going to kill me on this recommendation, you know. Because I thought, I probably have a legal case.

Mona: What they put recommendations on file? Do they?

Charles: Yeah, at Stanford.

Barbara: Stanford does.

Charles: They put them on file. Then when you go look for work you tell the person that you are applying to send to Stanford, they will send you. . . not me. I never saw the recommendations. Stanford will send you the recommendations. So I said, now that’s really weird. . . that he sent it in. But I figured I know what is on there. That this guy’s no good. He’s a troublemaker. I am sure everything in the book. So. . . so then. . . I went out. I went up to. . . looking for work. . . I went up to La Honda. And the principal up there was a guy named Charlie Erikson. Older guy. Not too far from retirement. And he had just women teachers. And he wanted like to have sports and he didn’t want to do them himself. And I was good at sports and everything. So we had a. . . sat down and talked for an hour, hour and a half. And he really liked me. He said, “Boy,” he said, “I really want to have you.” He said, “You are going to fit in here just great.” He said, “Tell you what,” . . . this was like a Tuesday. . . he said, “Tell you what,” he said. “I’ll get this to the Board right away. You’ll have a contract in the mail on Friday.” I said, “Great.” So Thursday comes. . . here comes a letter from La Honda. I said, “Here it is, Mom.” I open it up. “We have just filled the job, so. . . We have just filled this position. We will not be needing your employment.” And I said, “God, Mom. You know what this means?” In fact he told me. He said, “All I am going to need to do is phone your school district.” He didn’t go to Stanford. He just phoned the district.
Talked most likely to Al Beardsley, the Superintendent, who hated my guts. And he said so we just filled this position and that’s it. Just a one liner. I said son-of-a-bitch. Now, losing that job is one thing but what it means is wherever I go, if they phone the school, I’m in trouble. And so I went up to Montara, which is really a windswept place by the coast, talked to the guy.

**Barbara:** Wait, tell about the day. What we did.

**Charles:** Oh, yeah. Yeah. That’s important. When we got the letter. It was such a shock because I saw what the future was . . . and the only marketable skill I had was being a teacher. I had nothing else. I don’t want to go selling in a store or something. So I was really just overwhelmed. Did you come with me? Or did I go alone? [Looking at Barbara]

**Barbara:** No, we went together.

**Charles:** We walked down the highway. I had never felt . . . because I felt really pushed against the wall. And I said, “What the hell am I going to do?” I said, “I am going to end up on an Indian Reservation somewhere.” I said, “We are going to have to move. Because I am not going to be able to get a job in this area because they are all going to phone San Carlos. So that was really. . . boy, that was a really low point, wasn’t it.

**Barbara:** Yeah, it was. We were really down.

**Charles:** How did you feel?

**Barbara:** Daddy was so down. I don’t know. I don’t think about a job. I am not really mature enough to be serious about money and stuff.

**Charles:** Well, that was really bad. That was the worst day.

**Barbara:** But it just broke my heart to see you like that.
Charles: Because I didn’t know what to do, you know. I felt what the hell am I going to do. So I went to Montara and had a talk with the guy up there and he was interested. See they were interested when they talked to me. And... but I said the same thing is going to happen. Sure enough. I get a letter back... buzz off. So I says, “I’m fucked.” Pardon the language. So, but I still plugged by... I liked Pescadero. We used to go to the beach there. I said, “I am going to try Pescadero.” So I went to Pescadero. The guy up there was a Mormon. I love the Mormons. [Smiles] And he was... that was Bob Bickmore. We sat down, had a lovely talk and he said, “Well, I sure could use you.” He says, “All I need to do is check on you a little bit.” I says [Looks despondent], “Okay, I says.” He says, “Tell you what.” He says, “Come back Friday.” And I said, “Okay.” So I come back and I am saying, “Well this is going to be the same thing. I am going to go back.” I said, “I tell you what is going to happen, Mumma. I am going to go back there and the secretary is going to... he won’t see me. The secretary will say the job has been filled.” So I went back and walked in with a really heavy step. I thought this is it. I am going to get axed. So the secretary showed me into the office. Put me down on a chair and went. I said, Well... when is it going to come? [Looks discouraged] So he walks in... bright... and says, “Well, he says”. ... I should tell you this. I had a principal named Les Larsen... at San Carlos. But he wasn’t at San Carlos any more. He had been made Superintendent at Woodside. And he and I got along pretty good, you know. I remember one time... to distract the subject here... his girl friend... he later married her... was sick and I just... we had a thing of lunch duty. Where the teacher had to be on lunch duty. And I had just served a lunch duty and I was going to eat my lunch. And he said, “Mary’s ill.” Mary Corey. And he said, “Can you find somebody to take her place?” And I said, “Sure.” And I... so instead of asking anybody, I took it. So I didn’t have a lunch break and he walked into the door and saw that I was taking her lunch break so I think
that helped him to. . . it helped me make points. I didn’t do that for that reason but I did it anyway. But anyway, back to the thing. . . and he was now Superintendent at Woodside. And what’s his name, Bob Bickmore, had asked me, he said. . . instead of saying. . . instead of saying, “Where did you work?” And I would have said, “San Carlos.” Well, I probably did say that. But he said, “Who was your last principal?” Now, he is smart in a way. Because a principal would know more about you than a superintendent. But of course if he had called San Carlos and Emmett Mahoney took the phone that would be the same thing because Mahoney and Beardsley were together. Pardon me all these names, but. . . But he said, “Who was your last principal?” And I said, “Les Larsen.” I said, “He is the superintendent at Woodside right now.” Now I had not asked Larsen for a recommendation. So, I didn’t know. So I am there sitting with a heavy heart, expecting to get axed, you know. Expecting he called San Carlos. And he walks in and he says, “Well, I called Les Larsen and he vouches for you.” So I says, “Oh God.” [Looks so relieved] So, he said. . . I don’t know if he had a contract then or got to me one soon. Well, the postscript to this story. He said. . . first week on the job he said. . . “I’d like, if you don’t mind,” he said, “Call up Charlie Erikson at La Honda and arrange a football game between his school and our school.” And I said, “Sure.” And he said, “I’ll be listening in the phone.” So I said, “Mr Erikson,” I said, “This is Charles Felix and I am at Pescadero Elementary.” I pretended I didn’t know who he was. I said, I hope the hell he. . . I said, he is probably going to tell Bickmore I am a bastard, you know. But I already had the contract, so I said. . . . So I said, “We would like to have a game with you if you can arrange it.” So we arranged it. Bickmore didn’t say a word. He just listened, you know. And we had the game. It was a good game. And then apparently I was making a good impression in Pescadero because we had a get together with the La Honda people and Lois Lindley, who was on the Board, at La Honda said, “Oh, I hear
Pescardero got a new crackerjack teacher.” And she come over and shook my hand, you know. And one time she said, “Why don’t you work at La Honda?” But I don’t think she said it that day though. But anyway, I was asked that several times. But so then we started having meetings with a. . . like at Half Moon Bay. . . Pescardero, La Honda, and Half Moon Bay, Montara. . . all the teachers get together for a meeting. So I am sitting there. Who comes and sits down next to me but Charlie Erikson. The guy who told me to buzz off, you know. And I was. . . I wasn’t angry but I wasn’t going to kiss his ass, you know, I was cool. And then about a year later we had some more games and we were always very circumspect. And this will end this story. But about a year later, I am at a meeting, he comes and sits his ass down next to me and says, “You know what?” He says, “I am retiring at La Honda.” He said, “You really ought to apply for that job up there.” And I said, “You know that’s. . . thank you, I just might do that.” Of course, I didn’t. But anyway. . . that’s the story of my adventures in teaching. But as Mom says, “God, that walk down the highway.” You never want to go through that again, you know.

**Mona:** So what was the length of time between applying for the first job and finally getting the job?

**Charles:** Just a matter of weeks. Because see. . . six, seven. . .

**Barbara:** Yeah, poor Daddy. He didn’t know. . . he did a lot of things because. . . he went into the City to see if he could sell paint.

**Charles:** Well, that wasn’t. . .

**Barbara:** He thought about being a guard. . .

**Charles:** Wait a moment. Wait a minute. But I am not sure you have the right sequence. No. That was. . . that’s not the right sequence, Honey. That was. . .
you are going to mix the thing up here. That was before, when I was at Stanford.

**Barbara:** Oh.

**Charles:** And I had finished the... before I taught. So, you are mixing up the sequences.

**Barbara:** Okay.

**Charles:** I didn’t try to get any job painting, or guard or anything. That was, let me think. That was a different time. That was before I was a teacher. Once I was a teacher I never tried to be a guard or to get a job painting.

**Barbara:** To get through school. . . .

**Charles:** That was when I tried to get a job at PAMA, the military school. That was before I started teaching.

**Barbara:** Oh. To get through school I used to borrow fifteen dollars. What did they do? They gave. . . .

**Charles:** Oh, you know what. This is going to mix everybody up. That was ten... that was ten years before.

**Barbara:** That was when we were at school.

**Charles:** Your mixing... that was when I was a Stanford. So forget what she said. That was ten years earlier.

**Barbara:** Yeah, no... I understand that. But I just wanted to... .

**Charles:** This sequence is just teaching. So what I did, Mona, was look... I went to La Honda. That didn’t pan out. I went to Montara immediately. That didn’t pan out. I went to Pescadero and hit a home run. So it took two... .
Barbara: I thought you even went to Portola Valley.

Charles: No, but I did go to Los Altos.

Barbara: Los Altos. Uh huh.

Mona: How old was... Matty was just born then.

Barbara: He was just a little... .

Mona: One year old or something?

Barbara: Two I guess.

Charles: Let me tell you about Los Altos. Mona, listen to this. I went to Los Altos. And I was being interviewed by a vice principal. And he said, “I see here you have been away from teaching for three years.” I said, “Yeah.” Because I had left San Carlos. He said, “What have you been doing for these years?” I said, “I have been writing a book.” He said, “You have been writing a book?” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Well, we wouldn’t be interested in you.” He said, “We want people who... .” Well, no, he said. . . well I think he said, “If you had your choice would you write or would you teach?” . . . or something like that. I’d say I’d write. Well anyway, he may have said that. I am not certain. But anyway he said, “We are not interested in a teacher, in a person whose first love is not teaching. We want people who are committed to teaching.” So he didn’t... . that ended the interview. And I remember I was hostile. When I heard that I was hostile. I made some kind of remark. I forgot what I said. But I figured well he is insulting me, I am going to insult him right back. [Laughter] So, I said something. Not fuck you. But something. You know, after I lost the job, well why bother. Why bother shining him. But that is what he said. Instead of saying here is a guy who might be interesting. He has done something besides teach. You know. No. “We are interested in people
who are committed to teaching. Like me.” Well, that concludes the Felix saga. I want to say one last thing. I am a very fortunate man. I have a wonderful wife. I have two wonderful children, Matthew and Mona. Two wonderful grandchildren. And I have had... I have been blest with good health. And I wouldn’t change anything in my life if I could. Now did you have any questions, Mona?

Mona: How much time?

Chris: Yeah, we’ve got a few more minutes.

Mona: Could you say something about your actual physical writing? Like do you have to have things arranged a certain way on your desk...?

Charles: Yes... Yes.

Mona: Or what do you do to get yourself thinking right? What is your pattern?

Charles: Well, it is relatively the same. You know what I was going to do. Not today, Chris. But some other day maybe we can take pictures of the desk. What I do is my desk is loaded with stuff so I move it off the desk to write. Put it on the bed. And then I clear a place. And I have this nice lined paper. And I use. I used to use. I used to use a watcha-call-it, didn’t I?

Barbara: A pen.

Charles: A pencil. A pencil. I used to use pencil.

Barbara: Well, you use a pen.

Charles: I used to use a pencil. Most of my old writing is in pencil. I don’t know how to type. Barbara has typed every bloody word I have ever written.

Barbara: No, I haven’t. Not all of it.
Charles: Well, pretty much all of it. And besides typing Tony twice. Three times. Three times. So. . . which is a feat in itself. And then. . . now I write with a pen. And it is funny. I wrote much better. I used to have a flow pen. They quit making it. Now this pen digs in and I don’t write quite as smoothly because I like to flow along. You know, instead of. . . it is like driving a car with the brake on. But anyway, I have the mound of paper. . . if I have. . . if I have notes on that particular subject and they are available. . . some of them are buried in the cellar. . . I look at the notes first. . . just to see what I have. And then I just start writing. And I have an unabridged, a wonderful Webster unabridged dictionary on the desk that I don’t consult much anymore but it’s great because it has words that are seldom used. An ordinary dictionary wouldn’t have that word and I. . . when I first started I used to look up all kind of weird words and write down the definition. And then I said that’s. . . I don’t do that anymore. I try to use language just as simple as. . . my language has become more simple. Which may be a sign of brain decay. Somebody said that about that British woman, she has Alzheimer's. I forgot her name. Do you know her name? They said. . .

Mona: Burdoch.


Mona: Iris Murdoch.

Charles: Murdoch. Murdoch. Yeah. They said her writing still good but it is a lot simpler. Well that’s me. So I’m in the gradual stages of Alzheimer's. I think slow. Slow. Please slow. So. . . and then I just write. And I’ll say this. Writing is one hell of a pleasure. These guys who say writing is agony, I say, “Oooh, why, why are you doing it?” If it is agony, you know. It has always been a great pleasure. Real pleasure.
Barbara: It has been fun to. . . when he is writing sometimes to peak in the door, you know. . . and he’ll be having a big smile on his face and sometimes he’ll laugh.

Charles: I am easy to amuse.

Barbara: When the kids were small he used to lock. . . he put a lock on the door. A hook. So the kids couldn’t come in but they’d go and peak in the door.

Mona: And then when I got tall enough I could take the knife.

Barbara: Oh yeah, take the knife and get it up. [Flick the lock]

Charles: Let me tell you a story about Matt. . . let me tell you a story about Matthew. This is a crazy house. I used to write to two or three in the morning. I am a night person. I can’t. . . mornings I am groggy. It takes me hours to wake up. Always been that way. So I would write to two or three in the morning. I’d come out elated. And I grab. . . Matty loved car driving. So I would grab Matty. . . we’d go in the car. . . of course those days there wasn’t a lot of traffic. . . and I’d put him in. . . and he loved to do this. . . . He was like eight years old or something? Young.

Barbara: He was little.

Charles: I forget. He was a small kid. Put him in the seat next to me. Take him up on the highway and then I’d have him come over and sit right close to me and I’d take my hands off the wheel and I’d keep my foot on the accelerator. Of course he couldn’t reach it. And I would let him drive. And this. . . I was really elated you know. And so we’d drive down the highway three or four miles. If I saw somebody coming I’d say. . . well, I didn’t have to say anything. . . he’d move and I’d grab the wheel. I don’t want them to see a little kid grabbing the wheel. Those were the days when I could drive at night. Now,
lights blind me, you know. We used to do that every night. We’d go take a ride
down the highway. He used to wait for me to do it because he loved it. And he
would drive the car. He would actually drive it. I trusted him. And of course I
wouldn’t go ninety miles an hour. And sometimes a guy come up behind us so
I grabbed the wheel and I would do something, turn off or whatever. Because
we weren’t going like sixty miles an hour or anything. Okay. Did I answer
your question?

Mona: When you were writing Tony, how many hours would you work?

Charles: I’d work from midnight to six in the morning. What I would do is. . .
I would. . . what I would do is, Mom would come home, she was teaching that
first year. Not the next two years. This was the first year. I couldn’t do this the
second and third year because she was here. And so she’d come home tired.
We’d have dinner. She’d make dinner. [Audiotape clicks off] Oh, that one is
going?

Barbara: That’s just the tape.

Charles: She’d make dinner. Then I had the job of washing, cleaning up the
kitchen. And I was, oh so glad. . . I told you I was so slow I’d get all sweaty
from scrubbing. . . scrubbing them too much you know. Then I’d dry them with
a towel. We didn’t have a dishwasher. Some reason. We went up to Kaye’s
house one time, saw the dishwasher. . . . The next week we had a dishwasher. I
said, “God, you know these things are wonderful.” But anyway, I spent all this
time, getting soaking wet. Then that would be maybe eleven o’clock or so. So
I would have a frozen dinner. That would be my evening meal. By that time it
would be like midnight. And I’d come out here to this table. There was a round
table here. And I’d play my little radio, Music Till Dawn. And I’d write from
twelve to six. And that was the schedule for the first year. The second and
third year would be. . . would probably. . . we’d used to stay up very late. We’d stay up to one or two. And Matty would be up with us. Doing his things. Probably Child Protective Services would have taken him away. “What’s this child doing here.” I have to tell you a funny story about when I was home I grew a beard.

**Mona:** I remember that.

**Charles:** And I used to walk down the highway and girls coming from school would [Gave a scared look] look at me, you know. I was the boogy man, you know. So I figured. . . I did it more or less not. . . to save time. Because in those days you shaved with a regular razor. That took a lot of time. And scratched up your skin. They didn’t have electric razors. At least I didn’t have one. So okay, so I had a beard for at least a year. Big [Shows full beard]. And so about ten years later in Woodside a bearded man was jumping out from the bushes, throwing stuff at cars and disappearing. Who is this bearded man? So I hear a knock on the door. Knock, knock, knock. It’s a policeman. I said, “Hello.” He said, “We had a report there is a bearded man living in this house.” Ten years later! Bloody cops!

**Mona:** But Dad, you answered the door. . . remember you were wearing the top hat?

**Charles:** Not with him though. That was with Kaye.

**Barbara:** He used to wear a top hat. Just a felt toy one.

**Charles:** A party hat.

**Barbara:** Yeah, New Year’s Eve.

**Charles:** I go to the door and he says, “We have a report there is a bearded man living in this house.” I said, “Well, there was. Ten years ago. That was me.”
said, “But I don’t have a beard.” He was hunting up. . . I said, “Boy, they have. . . somebody was keeping a file on me. [Laughter] Bearded man. Suspicious activity.”

**Barbara:** One time Uncle Kaye knocked on the door. Daddy used to like to wear this felt hat when he was. . .

**Charles:** It was a party hat.

**Mona:** It was a top hat.

**Charles:** Top hat.

**Barbara:** It was a top hat. It was made of felt. So it was kind of nice. It was a toy though. But it made your head feel nice. You know, Daddy’s head gets cold. So, he is wearing this. . . writing. . . Kaye knocks on the door. And Daddy goes and answers it. And Kaye says, “Are you having a party?”

**Charles:** So have you got any final words? [To Barbara]

**Barbara:** No.

**Charles:** None?

**Barbara:** Nope. It has been great. It has been great.

**Charles:** None? It has been great. Ok, I agree with that. All right we’ve got time for one more question.

**Mona:** No.

**Barbara:** No, no. . . we’ve got to have dinner.

**Charles:** Come on. Come on. Give me a question. Please. Please give me a question. I want a question.
Barbara: You are one of these guys that. . .

Mona: When did you start writing notes?

Charles: Ooh.

Barbara: Oh, God. . .

Mona: Was that in university?

Charles: Day one. Before then.

Barbara: Even before then.

Charles: I have always written them.

Mona: At your home, in New Bedford?

Charles: Well, when I came back from the Service. That is when it all started. And that is another thing too. That the war. . . the war made me a lot more reckless than I had been before the war. Because like, take like quitting school. I quit teaching for three years. I quit school at Michigan. That is a reckless act. And the war made me reckless because I said fuck you only have one life to live and you might as well go for it. Before that I was much more careful. But I thought, you know. . . that is another thing too. . . I was very, very fortunate because I had several occasions in the war it was just. . . I could have been killed like. . . just like that. [Snaps his fingers] With shells. And 88’s. And so it gives you a different perspective on things. You say, well you know. . . maybe, maybe you are not going to live forever. And so it makes you more reckless. Which is. . . which was in a way good because I wouldn’t have written Tony if I had been prudent because we spent three years at it and didn’t get a nickel. And also. . . Is that it? Ahh, come on. How long will it stay on?
I want my. . . listen, I paid for a full hour. I want a full hour. [Laughter] How much time have I got?

**Chris:** Three seconds.

**Charles:** All right. I’m taking the three seconds. So let me see. What can I say. . . It’s been fun.


Mona: I’d like to talk about your influences on your development as a writer. First of all, touching on your early life experiences. What I would like to know is how did your mother and father learn to speak and read English?

Charles: They didn’t go to school. They just learned it by talking to people, listening. Now my father became a citizen rather early. I think, I am not sure of the year, but early he became a citizen. My mother became a citizen much later. And I can remember, like in my consciousness, my father was always a citizen.
So it was done before I was born or before I could observe. My mother, I was in high school when she started going downtown to take her tests and so on. And now my father being in business, he had to learn English because the customers, some of them don’t speak Portuguese. My mother had less incentive, but she actually spoke good English. I think with her thing it was movies. She was an avid movie-goer. She went to the movies—the Capital Theatre regularly and I think from that. . . because I know when they went to a movie together she had to translate for my father. You know, something—what did he mean or stuff like that. He could follow—he liked movies without words—action films. You know, like Charlie Chaplin and so on. But she, she knew English actually better than he did as far as understanding. Oh also, he did not. . . he was barely literate and she was more. . . she had trained to be a teacher. She had gone to normal school. She had a picture on the wall of graduation. I think she was sixteen years old—from the normal school—she was going to be a teacher. So she was certainly literate in Portuguese. So when she came over she started reading books in English. So being able to read, you know—and so on. And he had a much different time reading. He could read but very slowly. He read the Portuguese paper and then he read The Standard Times, but slowly. So she was much more adept at reading. I forgot your question.

Mona: Would she have—you said she was reading in English when she came—so would she have taught herself?

Charles: Oh, I don’t know if she was reading in English when she came.

Mona: No, but.

Charles: She learned.

Mona: She would have taught herself then, probably.
Charles: Yeah. Both of them taught themselves. They never went to school or took a class for English. No.

Mona: And do you remember consciously learning English yourself?

Charles: No. No, absolutely not. Just learned it off the street. We spoke Portuguese at home. Gradually as the kids became anglicized we began to speak a lot of English at home. So that by the time, oh maybe when I was, say when I was twelve years old, the language at home was mostly English. When my father was home, it was the same thing. English, Portuguese, you know. Certain phrases in Portuguese we kept. In fact, that is hard to remember about my father. What did he speak at home?

Mona: Like when he was telling his stories, would he be telling them in Portuguese and you be responding in English?

Charles: God, that is a good question. What did he say? Let’s see. . . . Portuguese. He would tell me—he was more at home in Portuguese. So he would tell them in Portuguese. Yeah, definitely. In fact, now that you’ve made me think about it—definitely Portuguese. Yeah, no question about it. Much more at home in Portuguese. His English was like functional. “Fix shoes”, you know stuff like that. “Tappies?” “You working?” In other words, basic function, but no. . . . Now when this guy used to come over, this guy John Bilsboro, Jack Bilsboro, he used to read the newspaper at the library and come over and tell my father the news—he would tell it in English. And my father understood.

Mona: He was the Englishman.

Charles: He was the Englishman. He might have been Scottish, maybe. And he used to be, I think, a weaver in the mills. But the mills collapsed, so no job,
you know. Tall, skinny guy. His ribs—he looked like he had no meat on him whatsoever. Which he—he probably didn’t eat that much. And he used to walk all the time—walk all over. So my father would understand his stories in English but when it came to ease of conversation, definitely Portuguese, for him. Now the kids—my mother spent more time with the kids than he did and so we were basically speaking English most of the time. Because we went outside the home and that is what we spoke. We spoke English with the kids. We spoke English at school. That became really our primary language. And although we understood the Portuguese. Another thing was this. None of us ever studied Portuguese so we had problems with trying to read it. It helps if you learn the language, reading. Because then you know how to pronounce the words. You’re visualizing. If you just go by ear, you goof it up. Especially long words. Like my father would goof up English words if they had more than one syllable. Because he wouldn’t get the syllable right. And we would do the same in Portuguese. We’d goof up the word—everybody would laugh, you know.

Mona: Were any of your teachers at school Portuguese?

Charles: No. None. Well, when I went to high school there was a man named Mr. Gracia. He was Portuguese. But he taught on the Commercial side so I never had him. He was my—I was editor of the Yearbook—and he was the Yearbook Advisor. But he never said anything to me in Portuguese—always English. But he was Portuguese. But he was the only one. I can’t remember another one.

Mona: Do you think that your love of words and your confidence with using language could have developed from being a translator for your parents? Do you think that influenced you?
**Charles:** No, no, I was not a translator for them. I never translated for them. They were adept enough that they did not require anybody to translate for them.

**Mona:** So when they sent you to the shop that was to—or to buy something—that was helping but not because they were dependent on you.

**Charles:** Oh, because they couldn’t do it? No, no, no, absolutely. My mother did the heavy shopping herself. She would send us just to get—like we had no refrigeration for the longest time. And so you’d buy—a quart of milk, you’d buy the milk, drink it and then go buy another quart, you know. Because we didn’t have a refrigerator. We had an icebox that she would use, oh maybe on the weekend. You’d go out and buy a chunk of ice. And then, oh gosh, I was like, I don’t know, maybe fourteen she bought a refrigerator. That was quite a purchase, you know—we didn’t have to. . . because I used to go and buy the ice. I’d take my little wagon and go, there would be a little ice house on the corner. And you’d go in and buy it and the guy would put it on the wagon. I’d bring it home and then I’d carry it up, you know. And I’d be—it would drip all over me and I’d be wet—but you know, kids don’t mind. And it’d be like, I don’t know, maybe thirty pounds. Thirty pounds. [Shows carrying something heavy] But most of the time—I don’t know how they did it because in summer time it got pretty hot. And she wouldn’t let—people who had a little bit of. . . who were not so “budget conscious”, I will put it that way [Laughter]—they would have the ice man come to their house, with tongs and put ice in their house. But she didn’t want to spend the money so she’d send me out on a weekend for the ice. It’s kind of odd because refrigerators were all over the country. But people wouldn’t. . . you’d think everybody would have one.

**Mona:** Well, she was used to the other way.
Charles: They don’t want to put the money out to buy it. Buy a refrigerator. That’s a big purchase. But jeez, what a convenience. Hard to believe, isn’t it? For a small amount of money, basically. Because they had the money, they just didn’t want to spend it. That would be a hell of a problem, I would think—food. And heat.

Mona: Well, you wouldn’t be cooking and saving it. You’d be. . . .

Charles: No, you’d be eating it up. No you’d eat it up. And if she wanted like—she wanted to make a sandwich with pressed ham or something—go to the store. Send one of the kids to the store. Buy the ham and bring it back. Eat it. At the store there is a refrigerator. But it makes a hell of an inconvenience. You got to go back and forth to the store. I spent my youth going to the store. [Laughter] Buy this. Buy that.

Mona: Do you think that the influence of hearing and speaking Portuguese at home has affected your writing. For example, either in your use of English or the way you tell a story or. . . .

Charles: No, no. It had no effect whatsoever. What might have had an effect on me was my father’s way of telling a story. He dramatized it and he stretched it out. It used to drive my Mother crazy. She’d say, “Get to the. . . .” like your mother—all women are impatient. [Laughter] I don’t know why. “Get to the point, man.” She couldn’t stand it, you know. And Barbara’s the same way. Get it over with. Let’s eat right now. If we eat at eight o’clock, tomorrow she wants to eat at seven-thirty. The day after she wants us to eat at seven. Get it over with. Except in certain matters. [Laughter] But, let’s see, oh yeah, his way of telling a story was to drag it out and I tend to do that. I put in a lot of details, in other words, editors don’t like that. They want it like—they’ll say the first paragraph is the most important in the book. You’ve got to start with a
slam bang, right off the bat to hook the reader. That’s not my style, at all. If I have a slam bang I want to save it. If you start with a slam bang, what are you going to do for an encore, you know what I mean? But that’s what they say, first paragraph—hook the reader. That is totally antithetical, if that’s the right word, to my style. I tend to go slowly. What I want is to build up momentum and then carry it and then hit the climaxes in the proper place. So I take, I tend to take. . . as I say, it is it is very unpopular. . . that way is very unpopular. You just don’t do that anymore. But I think, as far as I can tell—these things are hard to tell—because most of the stuff you do is unconscious. It is not conscious. It is just I am very comfortable that way and like, you take Portagee Gate. George Monteiro, he didn’t actually say this, but I had the feeling that I am starting off too slowly. You know, like “Where’s he going with this?” Well, I’m going somewhere but you’ve got to have the patience to sit and go with me. My train is a slow train. It’s a freight train. They want a fast overnight express—fshswoosh! And that’s not my style. That was not my father’s style, too. He would take his time, you know. And he’d enjoy it. He’d laugh along the way. Or if he—if somebody was trying to diddle him you know—he’d stop and swear at the guy. Even if it was like five years ago, he’d say, “That son of a whore.” The Portuguese, they don’t say son of a bitch. It is a greater insult to insult the mother because in Portuguese the mother is, she’s like a sacred figure. So if you insult the mother that is like the ultimate, you know. There is a current expression in the United States, motherfucker. Not the same. Not the same. Because, it started with Blacks, I think, motherfucker, the term. And I don’t want to denigrate them but, or in America the feeling about the mother is different than the feeling in the Portuguese mother. The mother in Portuguese is. . . maybe it’s changed but in the old days it’s like, you say, a saint. So it’s a very, very strong insult to say to someone “You son of a whore” because the mother’s a whore. And so that was like the ultimate insult
puta, you know filho. . . . And to a woman you say the same thing. Not as common but if she was a bad woman you’d say, *filha de puta*, “daughter of a whore.” And he would stop the story and swear at the guy. And then he’d go on with the story. In other words, what he would do, is he would relive it. He would relive it. And then finally, you know. . . so I never, it is funny—I am rehashing my book—but I was never impatient to hear the end of the story. I knew he was going to get there. I would just. . . so. . . .

**Mona:** I guess what I am driving at is. . .

**Charles:** I forgot your question.

**Mona:** . . . well he was coming from an oral tradition.

**Charles:** Totally. Totally.

**Mona:** And what I am thinking is that that had an influence on you, Dad.

**Charles:** Right. A total auditory. . . in fact. . .

**Mona:** The storytelling.

**Charles:** The auditory—there are, I remember reading, certain tribes in Africa there is no written language. So they hand these stories down from generation to generation. And the people develop a memory for them, because you have to. It’s like, I have heard about communists in prison, don’t ask me who now. The guy wrote the whole book in his mind. I thought Holy Mackerel, how was he able to do that? He had to—he couldn’t write it on a paper—but he had hours and hours. And I remember reading about one guy—if he had like a special dinner with a girl or whatever—he would dream about the dinner. It would take him three days to get through the dinner. Because he had to take the time to distract his mind and he would slowly, every, every morsel they ate he would stretch it out—it would take a day to tell, to finish the dinner, see. But
definitely, the Portuguese had an extremely high illiteracy rate. I forgot what it was. But it was shwoosh. [Gestures through the roof] So, so they relied heavily on the auditory thing. And certainly my father is a prime example of that. He never read a book in his life. Like me now, I don’t read books. I don’t have time. [Laughter] I only read during dinner and then I want to know what the hell is happening in the world so I will read magazines or newspapers. It is odd because once I used to read books like crazy. But I don’t seem to have any time now. I don’t want to sit and read. To me the time is too precious. I will do it during the meal. Barbara will watch a ballet and I will read. And she’ll play, like I was telling you, she’s played *Swan Lake* so many times I could hum it for you, the whole ballet.

**Mona:** Did your... your mom read though?

**Charles:** She read. She went to the library religiously. And I read some of her books—they were mysteries that she would get. What was the name of that, I don’t, oh god. . . there was a woman who wrote mysteries, I forgot her name, Carolyn something. And she wrote about three hundred mysteries and I think my mother read just about every last one of them. I can’t see you over there, Mom. Why don’t you sit closer? So I can look at you. It’s like you’re not here.

**Mona:** So where do you think your love of reading came from then, Dad? Did your brothers and sisters... brother and sisters... ?

**Charles:** No, they did not. They did not. Nobody read. Just me. I don’t know. I just—I can remember in first grade, actually it was 1B, so it was the second—we used to have grades split in half. You’d have a teacher until December, January. Then you’d have a different teacher. And they called it 1A and 1B. And, let’s see, 1A—which came first? I think the 1B came first. 1B, 1A. No, I’m sorry. 1A came first. And then 1B came—that’s the second half.
So this teacher had the library—she got from the library a box of books and every Friday you had to take a book home. Presumably to read it. And I’m saying 1B. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe it was the second grade. I don’t think we were reading books in first grade. Were you reading books in first grade? [Looking at Barbara] No. And you had an advanced school in Caro. Didn’t you? You had a school that was ahead of the curve. [Distortion on tape] bright students. And so anyway [Looking at Barbara]—did you give me the finger? [Laughter] You gave me the finger. Gawd almighty, Mom. What’s come over you. Since you hit eighty, you are getting as feisty as the dickens. You were pretty nice before you hit eighty. Now your natural temperament is coming out. Feisty as hell. But I like that. She is not a push over. So, where was I? Oh yeah, I would take a book home—every Friday I’d read it. There were fairy tales—like Yellow Book or Green Book or different books. I loved the fairy tales. And I always. . . you had to take a turn picking out the book so if you were at the end you got the left overs. But finally you got. . . like there was a book I wanted but you would never get it. Finally, after two months. Well, one thing that when there are no books available, they become precious and you really appreciate them. And by the time the term was over I had read—some of those kids took books home and never read them. But you had to take it home. They insisted you take it home. And half the kids didn’t read the book. But I read the book, religiously. And so you really appreciate books. Like my library, when I was old enough to go to the library. . . they had maybe. . . they didn’t have a shelf of books. They had one row of books, for kids. And I read every bloody book there was except one. What was that book I couldn’t. . . ? Lorna Doone. There was something about that book—I couldn’t read it. And to this day. I should read Lorna Doone and find out what it is about. I have no idea. It was eighteenth-century, or nineteenth-century English book. It was in a stiff cover, about so big. About nine hundred pages. And I just. . . firstly Lorna
is a woman I guess. And I don’t recall ever even reading it. I just would look at it. [Shows holding the book] I couldn’t read it. But I read every other book. And so there were no books to read. That’s why I got started reading pulps. Because that was available. I think I told you about this in the other one.

Mona: Yeah, but that is okay, Dad.

Charles: So where am I? But pulps, pulps was my reading matter. Not out of choice, necessarily. But they were good. They were action, you know, I got sports magazines. Couldn’t stand science fiction. I think I am repeating myself.

Mona: It doesn’t matter, Dad. This is a stand alone. So, it doesn’t matter.

Charles: Okay. I’d pick up a science... now I told you how Eddie Lariviere, he loved science magazines. Astounding Stories. He’d try to get me to read them. I’d read them and they’d say—this guy came out, he had an eye in the middle of his forehead. I’d say, “Okay, that’s it.” I am dropping out right there. Because I always said there is enough weird stuff in life. You don’t have to have a guy with an eye in the middle of his forehead. But anyway, sports stories, mystery stories, Doc Savage, The Shadow—I loved them all. I read everyone I could get a hold of. And I used to go to Pop Lord’s. Didn’t I tell you about him? Yeah, I told you about him. I’d trade two for one. I’d give him two and get one. How I got the two is a long story. Because I never bought a single one. Trade—you’d trade you know, stuff like that. And I told you about my aunt. I got these baseballs. She painted the Quaker Oats thing, you know. You’d send in eight Quaker Oats packages, or the emblem, and you’d get a brand new baseball. Real smell, you know, horsehide. I gave that to Eddie Lariviere and he gave me [Gesture showing a large amount]. . . Christ, I don’t know how many. But I think I am repeating myself. And I forgot your question.
Mona: I guess what I am wondering is... your mother valued education, right?

Charles: Yes. Now... I am going to put on Chris’s sweatshirt.

Mona: Okay, do you want to stop?

Tape restarts.

Charles: Okay, I had to interrupt the talk, Mona, because I was getting a chill. So I had to put on my brand new polartec jacket that my grandson Christopher Brown bought for me today.

Mona: Can you see tendencies in your early years that led you into writing? I mean you have talked about winning competitions. You’ve talked about being successful in the classroom—having to read your stories out.

Charles: I didn’t win competitions.

Mona: Well, the baseball... .

Charles: Oh I see, yeah. The most important thing I think was the classroom success. Reading... especially with Miss. I had had a couple successes before that but especially Fay Newland, English teacher in high school—the senior year. Very briefly because I think we already talked—she would have us, not all... we wrote an essay, one a week... . We’d read a chapter in a book. That would spur us to write an essay on the subject. And so, the next following week, one of the days, I forget which day, we would discuss the chapter we read. And she would select like very few—maybe one or two, three at the most I think—to read their papers aloud. Mine was always one of them. And mine had a little bit of humor in them so the kids really responded because you know school is uhhhhh [Shows bored face]. When you have a joke, oh they just go crazy. And so they really responded. And as I think I said, it kind of gives you a feeling of mastery. In other words, I imagine a comic feels that way, on stage.
Look I have made them laugh, you know. So that gives you confidence. A lot of writing is just confidence. What I have to say is interesting. That’s why writers as they get older, they have problems. Their confidence starts to lessen and they begin to question themselves. And that is bad. That is really bad. You cannot question yourself. But as you get older you tend to do that. I remember Theodore Dreiser, he used to be one of my favorite writers, he had confidence coming out of his ears. But when he hit, I think it was in his seventies, and he wrote a book called I think *The Stoic* it was called or *The Bulwark* or something like that, and he didn’t know if it was any good or not. Now that is like incredible for him. So he sent it, I don’t know if you remember this, Mom, he sent it to James T. Farrell, a younger man and who had liked Dreiser’s work to ask him, “Is it publishable or not?” And Farrell said all the right things. He said “Yes, it is.” He gave him back a little bit of his confidence. But the fact that he actually would say, “Is it publishable?” is for this man was very knowing and so I am saying that confidence is central. And whatever gives you confidence helps you. Of course, I think you could have—somebody could have confidence and it is not well founded. You know like some people think they could do such and such and they can’t, but I would say, but maybe this isn’t true for everybody, but for I think a lot of us you have to feel that what you are saying is important enough for somebody else to read. If you have that feeling you can go ahead and write.

**Mona:** Is it correct to say that in your own mind you have always been a writer first?

**Charles:** Absolutely. Not, I’d say, when I first began to feel that was when I left the Army. And I was home. . . let’s see. . . I was discharged in November ’45. And I had just missed the beginning of the semester at Michigan which started November 1st I think. They had a crazy system, you know. So, I had to
wait until, I think it was March 1st. So I was at home. And so I started writing a
book about the Army. And I actually may have started it in the Army because I
sent some pads home with writing on them, you know. But for really
concentrating on it, it was when I was home, waiting to go back to school and I
wrote on my Mother’s sewing machine in my bedroom. It was winter time—ice
cold in there. And I would say from that point on I felt that I wanted to write.
My life more or less was—I had to do other things. I had to teach, you know.
But if I could have written full time, by God I would have. I would have done it
in a flash. I felt that, like when you go for a job at teaching, the interviewer
says, “Is teaching what you loved to do more than anything else in the world?”
And I would say, “Yes.” [Gestures with a rude sign.] “No. I am here under
duress. I want to write.” “Get the hell out.” In fact, that happened one time. I
think I told you this too. I went to look for a job. I had taken three years off,
three years off to write a book, Tony, in fact. I thought I could write it in one
year. It took me three. Because it is a solid book, which will be published in
May, we hope, in 2007. Tony: A New England Boyhood, look for it at Baker
Books—nowhere else. [Laughter] And Luso Brazil [Luso Brazilian Books] has
a copy. Search hard—you may find one. It’s a rare book, man! Nobody has
one. They order it on Amazon and Amazon writes them back in six months,
“Not here.” “I couldn’t get it. I wrote to Amazon.” Why is Amazon taking the
order? Why don’t they have a system that says, “We don’t have the damn
book.” But anyway, so I go to look for a job. And I had just spent three years
writing and this guy he was a [Unclear word] guy, you know. It was Los Altos.
He said, “I see here you have been writing for three years.” “Yes, I did.” He
said, “Well. . . .” I forgot how he put it. He said, “Well, teaching is not your
first love, then is it? Something like that. And I knew I wasn’t going to get the
job, anyway, so I said—it pissed me off—so I said, “No, it isn’t.” “Get out.”
He told me, he said—he didn’t say “Get out.”—“We only take people who love
teaching. And I thought, “Well, I can do a better job loving it half-assed than most of your people can do it loving it full-time.” And I did because I related to the kids. The kids liked me.

Mona: You cared about the kids.

Charles: Yeah, and I understood them, I think. Like in San Carlos they had a—I’ll pat myself on the back here—The San Francisco News had a contest, “Who is your favorite teacher?” And you get so many points for writing in. The teacher got points if you wrote in and I was pretty prominent on the list. And it was the kids in San Carlos were all writing in. And I was shocked. I looked at the paper and there I was! And so, it was my class. They didn’t tell me about it. Nobody ever said to me, “I sent your name in.” They did it all on their own. But I was like, I don’t remember, maybe third or fourth, Mums? Something like that?

Barbara: I thought you were one.

Charles: No, I wasn’t number one. I think if you were number one you got a scroll.

Barbara: You got a certificate.

Charles: Did I get a certificate? I did? I don’t think I was number one. You would have got something.

Mona: But that is amazing because kids have to actually want to write in.

Charles: Yeah, you have to write in. See the kids—there was only one type of kid. . . . I was very successful with smart kids, with dumb kids, any kind of kid because I took them at their. . . . Like some teachers, we had a teacher, what the hell was her name, oh shit can’t remember her name, Eleanor something. Eileen Shaw was the same way. Dumb kids rankled her. She couldn’t stand
dumb kids. And she let them know that they were dumb. And she treated them like dirt. I said that’s a hell of a way to treat a kid. He is not dumb because he wants to be dumb. He’s dumb because he is dumb. You know it is like a horse who is lame. The horse doesn’t want to be lame. But the one kid I did not have success with was a kid who was extremely buggy. [Gestures to mean crazy] A buggy kid. I can’t relate—you know I couldn’t handle it. A buggy kid. And it is the one kid that I... I just couldn’t talk his language, I guess. So I wasn’t good with a buggy kid. You know a mental—mental stuff. Like I had a kid in San Carlos, I won’t tell his name I guess. I know his name very well. He was buggy. He and I got on pretty well actually for a buggy kid, you know. Because he wasn’t hostile. See often times a buggy kid is hostile. And that is hard for me to take. I find it difficult to take a hostile kid. And he wasn’t hostile but he was buggy. And I said to myself, this kid, something is going to happen to him, he’s too... And sure enough when he was about twenty he tried to rape a woman on the street. But you could tell when he was ten that this kid’s got problems. But that was the one kid I was not successful with—a hostile kid. I had kids that, shit, they hated your guts. They didn’t even know you. I’ll tell you what it is. Their family life is [Points down]. Like this kid, one of the kids that I had problems with, his old man was a drunk, he beat up his mother, used her for a punching bag and no home life and he was angry and he takes it out on me. And I said, Jesus Christ, I am innocent. I had nothing to do with this. I didn’t beat your mother up. But anyway, so what was I going to say? Oh yeah, so some of these teachers shouldn’t be teachers because they have certain kids they like and they treat the rest like crap and that’s not right. And they shouldn’t be handling kids. I got along fine with the dumb kids. I would give them what they could do. And I would never insult them. Some of my favorite kids were dumb. [Overcome with emotion] Anyway, ye God, I am getting to think back. I had some lovely kids. I had some kids that you just
want to take them home with you. Except Mom said no. [Laughter] They were just as sweet as can be. Some kids stand out. They are like stars. Most kids—they are okay, you know. But every now and then you get a kid that is primo. Like the Portuguese would go like this [Pulls on his ear]. That’s their gesture for something that is really good. I had a, oooh I had a meal—oooh [Pulls on ear]. I had one kid, maybe I told you this story. Did I tell you this story?

Mona: Tell the story about the kid you kept after school every night and then you met him when he was an adult. Tell about that.

Charles: Oh yeah. He’d treat me like an old buddy. I thought isn’t this funny; isn’t it wonderful. We had problems but Jesus Christ. That would happen with more than one kid. I would think is he putting me on, you know. “Oh, Mr. Felix.” I had a kid. I probably told you this story. This kid, this was in Pescadero, this kid kept saying he wanted to race me. Did I tell you this story? He wanted to race me. Peter Marchi called me up about—he’s a kid I had, a lovely kid—called me about a month ago and he remembered this story. He was there you know. So this kid wanted to race. I said, “No, I don’t want to race, I’ll beat you.” And he said, “No, you won’t.” And I said, “Oh yes I will.” I said, “You’re fast, but I’m faster.” So finally I said, “Alright, I’ll race you.” So we went out during PE and I knew that I would fag out after a long—I couldn’t run a long distance you know. Not in my street clothes. I knew I had to have a short distance. So we said, “This will be the starting line.” And we were on the hard top. We went. . . oh about two basketball courts. And I said, “This is the ending line.” I said. “And we are going to put a kid here who will determine who won.” “And we will start here.” And I said—I knew I was fast enough for a short distance. Today, I would. . . . So I said, “Ok, I’ll tell you, what I am going to do is I am going to say On Your Mark, Get Set, Go.” So we both got down. And all the kids are watching. And I said, “On your mark, get
set... go!” And when I said go I was off. I beat him out of the... [Laughter] And I ran like hell and I beat him. The kids were all—Marchi was still laughing about it. I didn’t jump him by much, but enough to win. And he said, “Oh you got a headstart...” “No, I didn’t” [Laughter] So he said, “Oh let’s do it again.” And I said, “No, no, no. I never do it twice.”

Chris: How old was he at the time?

Charles: This was, let’s see, this was seventh grade.

Barbara: How old were you?

Charles: Oh, I don’t know. I was... still able to beat him. That was like a... I am not sure what year that was. The kids—it all blends together, you know. But that was like, you know, in the middle of my teaching so I was probably... I used to play sports a lot, not there, but when I taught PE. I didn’t teach PE. I was a supervisor at Farrell Park [Jack Farrell Park, Palo Alto]. And I can tell you when that was. That was in the 1960s, wasn’t it? Yeah, 1960s. See at school I was in nice clothes. I didn’t want to run around. I would get sweaty. But at the Park I was in regular clothes, gym clothes so to speak, wearing sneakers and everything. So I would always play football, play basketball with the kids at the Park. So I was pretty active physically. I would work at the Park and then I’d go get a haircut and then I’d go Draegers shopping. Come home at 9 o’clock happy as a bug in a rug. I had energy then. Today it would take me three days to do what I did then. Well anyway, we got off the point.

Mona: When you came back from the Army and you were writing. What sort of reaction did your Mom and Dad have. I mean you said before that they weren’t keen.
Charles: Oh, my father wasn’t concerned with this because you know. . . . My mother, it uhh, I think that she wasn’t antagonistic to it because she didn’t think it was going anywhere. And so she kind of was amused by it more than anything else you know. As I think I told you, she would come in and say, “Ahh, escritor com pena grande, escritor com pena grande.” Meaning, writer with a great pen. A great writer, see. Escritor com pena grande. Actually though she had seen I guess enough of it so she would not, she would not at all have been pleased with my writing because she was very very protective of privacy. And here I was. . . . [Gesture meaning outpouring] So that would have really, really have bothered her. And so she wouldn’t have. . . . Now if the book had been well received and everything, maybe she might have changed a bit but basically she was very, very—you don’t talk about family things.

Mona: But you were writing about the war?

Charles: Yes. I was writing about the war. But then I started, as soon as Barbara and I got together, I started Gently, Brother, which is about New Bedford. She wouldn’t have, she wouldn’t have liked that at all.

Mona: Do you remember when you first publically said that you were going to be a writer or that you were a writer.

Charles: Oh, I never said that to anybody because I feel you’re, what you do for a living is what you are. So I never said I was a writer. I always said I was a teacher. Because I didn’t feel you have a right to say you are a writer unless you are a writer. And my thing was, it might as well have been a hobby as far as the world was concerned. Because I wasn’t published. And it is just that I felt that was why I was on earth, was to be a writer. But I never in my life ever said to anybody that I am a writer. Not once. I still don’t, do I. Mom. . . hey, wake up. [Laughter] Jesus Christ, I am sitting here sweating away, giving
scintillating conversation, racking my brains, making jokes. . . and you’re sleeping. God.

**Barbara:** I just got worried that Mona might step on Bumby.

**Charles:** See she is worried about her dog. Let sleeping dogs lie.

**Barbara:** He is really asleep.

**Charles:** And you were half asleep.

**Barbara:** No, I was not. We’ve got to eat pretty soon.

**Mona:** You had the short story, *Retribution*, accepted by *The Chicago Daily News*. Did you ever think about writing more short stories and sending them to other papers or *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The New Yorker* or. . . .

**Charles:** Oh, *The New Yorker*—oh God—my stuff [Shakes his head]. They would never never publish my kind of stuff. Never in a million years.

**Barbara:** [Whispers] I think we had better finish.

**Charles:** What do you want? Do you want to stop now? What did she say to you?
DVD 4 – December 25, 2006

On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter] and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: Idalia [sister—3rd child], Irene [oldest sister—2nd child], Albert Costa [childhood in early primary school], Eddie Lariviere [childhood acquaintance], Butch (Roland) Barrabe [best friend], Alfred Duquette [friend in high school], Milan Milutinović [Serbian politician], Thomas Wolfe [writer], Anton Chekhov [writer], Professor Joe Lee Davis [English professor at University of Michigan], Wallace Stegner [Stanford University professor], Jonesy [Warren Jones, kid from the gang], Bernard B. Carter and Nat Guy [played against at tennis tournament], Bud [younger brother of Barbara—2nd child], Kaye [youngest brother of Barbara—3rd child], Sharlene [granddaughter-in-law]; Dr. George Monteiro [Professor Emeritus of English and Portuguese at Brown University], Ed Knappman [agent for Crossing the Sauer], Peter Burford [Burford Books], Frank Sousa [former Director of the Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth]

Books mentioned: Tony: A New England Boyhood; Gently, Brother; “Teaching book” [3 versions: The Bluebird of Los Tramos x2 and Vice President Nixon, Welcome to Our School]; Army book [Mothballs and His Friends: Barracks Life by the Golden Gate, 1943-44]; Through a Portagee Gate; Crossing the Sauer; Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.
Mona: Okay, this is a continuation of the interview with Charles Felix.

Charles: This is Christmas Day, 2006.

Mona: Yup, and Barbara Felix.

Charles: And Barbara Felix.

Mona: Now yesterday...

Charles: and Mona Felix and Christopher Brown.

Mona: Yesterday, after the tape was turned off, Mom, you said a bit about Dad’s sisters and their knowledge of Portuguese. Could you tell us about that again?

Barbara: Well, it was just that Aunt Idalia told me that she and Irene went to the high school and took Portuguese. And I think this was after they graduated. That was my feeling—as adults they went. And they took a course in Portuguese and she said it was Irene’s idea and she wanted to do it and that Dolly went along as...

Charles: A chaperone.

Barbara: ...just to—as company. And so they both went and they took Portuguese. And they took reading and writing.

Charles: They definitely did that as adults. Because when I was there Portuguese wasn’t taught in high school.

Barbara: Mmh hmm. But you know, Mona, you could check—you could double check that with her on the phone, when you call.

Mona: Would they have done that because they wanted to visit Portugal? Do you think?
Barbara: Hmm, I don’t know. It is a good question. Yeah, ask her.

Mona: Okay, Dad. You had some things you wanted to elaborate on.

Charles: Yeah, there are a couple of things. I really misspoke the other day—yesterday. You said why did I not associate more—like my friends were not Portuguese—and I said. . . . I think I misled you to think that because they were dumb. That had nothing to do with it. Actually, all my friends were on my street—my little neighborhood. And I’ll go through my friends in just a minute. There were no—on my street—there were no Portuguese. On my—part of the street where we lived—the neighborhood. Coffin Avenue. And for example, my best friend when I was in first, second grade was a boy named Albert Costa. He was Portuguese. And he lived not too far from me. You could see his house. And, in fact, you know that picture of the first grade. I am up there sort of alone. Next to me is Albert Costa. He has got very short hair. And he was my best friend.

Mona: What did his Dad do? Do you remember?

Charles: Don’t know. I’ve forgotten. I know his mother died of cancer of the breast.

Mona: When he was little or. . . ?

Charles: Ah, yeah. When he was a little older. But what happened was they moved to Acushnet and so that was, as far as I can remember, that was the only Portuguese family on the street other than us. Now a French family named Lariviere moved into their house. And Eddie Lariviere, I was friends with him. He is the one who provided me with the pulp magazines. And he had two good-looking sisters. Everybody was hanging around him, you know. Now, he and I were friends, but not real friends. My real friend was a boy named Butch
Barrabe. Butch was his nickname. His first name was Roland. And I think in French it would be B-a-r-u-b-e. But for whatever reason they spell it B-a-r-r-a-b-e—Butch Barrabe. Now he lived on the street close by. And in my thirteen, fourteen years of age he was my best friend. Now actually, he lived on the street. And he is the model for Lommy in the book [Tony]. Now I had. . . . Actually, he was a member of the gang as I was. And for the purposes of the novel I wanted the gang to look worse than it was so I removed him from the gang.

**Mona:** This is *Tony*.

**Charles:** In *Tony*, right. I moved Butch from the gang and I made him live elsewhere. Till we got together. Actually, he lived on the street. Not too far away. His father ran a restaurant. So that part is true. Now the thing about Butch was he was a. . . . Like yesterday I said—it sounded like I was using smartness as a criteria for friendship. That is no, not the case at all. What was nice about Butch was that, he wasn’t too awfully smart, but he was an awfully sweet boy. And, for example, he never tried to hurt you verbally. There were a lot of mean kids in the gang and they would always insult you as much as they could or. . . . They weren’t nice. Verbally speaking. The idea was to ridicule people. Not just me. Everybody. They ridiculed everybody. And Butch was different. And so we were very close friends for a number of years. Then. . . so I would say I had three close friends: Albert Costa, Butch Barrabe, and then when I went to high school—that was the ninth/tenth grade—I got in the College Scientific course and there was a boy named Alfred Duquette, a French boy. He lived two streets over, so we were both North End kids. Most of the kids in the college course were from the West End, very few from the North End. Very few from the South End. Mostly West End—which was the nice part of town. I always said, “They had running hot water there.” You know,
it’s a step up. So Al and I would take the street car down to high school. So we got—he was in my classes. And we—he was a nice kid—and we got on very well. So all through high school he was my best friend. Like on Friday night we had a standing. . . we would walk, talking, both of us, [Uses hands to show intense talking] both of us we were talking like this. There wasn’t a moment of silence. We’d walk to the South End to Hazlewood Park which was a hell of a long distance. We’d start about 7 and get back about 10.30. Walking every—to give you some idea of those times we’d walk through a colored section. Perfectly safe. Never occurred to us to be afraid. Today. Uh uhn. You can’t do that. You are going to get into trouble.

Mona: So what would you talk about.

Charles: School, girls, sports. You name it. Anything. Teachers. So what I am saying is my friends were not—I wasn’t excluding Portuguese—there were just none there. Albert Costa, Butch Barrabe, and then Al Duquette. He became a mathematician.

Mona: Do you know what happened to any of them?

Charles: Albert I lost track of. And Butch, I don’t know. He dropped out of school. He went to work for his father. Al became a mathematician. He went to school somewhere, I forgot where. University of Massachusetts. And then he became a mathematician. Then the other thing I was going to say was about the Portuguese was this. They were an ethnic group. And when I associate with them or any ethnic group. . . it is good to be a member of them in a way because you have security; you are part of a group. But the bad part is you have to think like they do or it is difficult for you. So it is what I would call tribalism. It is a tribe. And you have to play ball so to speak or it doesn’t work. So it has pluses and minuses. The plus is that you have the security of the
group. But the minus is you have to be like the group. And I felt—it was an
instinctive thing. I felt uneasy being part of a group like that. It didn’t seem
right. I’ll give you an example. You are supposed to be interested in
Portuguese girls, not any other type of girl. Because the group wants to further
its... its uhh...

Mona: Keep the unity... .

Charles: ...keep the unity going. To keep the thing. It is like the Jewish
people. They get very upset if they marry because they know that the kids are
not going to be quite as Jewish maybe as they would like. And it works
sometimes and sometimes it doesn’t. But anyway, I felt uneasy about that. It
was just kind of an instinct. I didn’t want to be—I wanted to be free to think
what I wanted to be. Do what I wanted to do. A good example of tribalism was
just a short time ago. I think his name was Milan Milutinović. He was either
the. . . I think he was the president of Serbia or a General of Serbia or something
like that. He was responsible for massacring all kinds of—his soldiers would
surround a village of Muslims in Kossovo and Albania—they’d surround a
village and they’d march all the people out—men, women and children who had
done nothing—and he’d shoot them and throw them in a pit. He did that to a
whole bunch of villages. I imagine several thousand people he was responsible
for. When he died Serbia had changed somewhat, ostensibly. So I don’t think
they were able to give him a state funeral. But at his funeral people lined the
funeral thing. As I recall it was thousands of people. I don’t think it was just
hundreds. Maybe I am wrong. But I thought it was thousands, with flowers,
waving Serbian flags and all that stuff. And they treated him like a hero. Now
actually he was the furthest thing in the world from a hero you could imagine.
He really deserved to be hung. If you were in favor of hanging which I am not
sure I am. But anyway, that is tribalism. Because he represented Serbia and the
people, I guess, felt what he did was correct, I suppose. But the long way around here is to say that the tribal feeling makes you do things that you shouldn’t do. Tribalism probably, you could call Germany tribalism. The murdering of the Jews. It’s a tribal thing. And you go along with it.

**Mona:** Well, some of it is fear of unknown or hatred of differences, isn’t it?

**Charles:** Hatred of difference. I think that’s it. Now sometimes, there’s a . . . . Like I think Europe today—we are getting off the subject here—but I think Europe today has a big big problem with allowing Muslims into their country because they are, by western traditions, they are unassimilable. They don’t assimilate good. Into the culture. So you have a problem there. And like this guy in Holland or Belgium, wherever it was. Holland. He did a documentary, I think. And they murdered him. That is their response. Not to argue it out but to kill him. That is not western traditions, you see. That is another subject. All right. I’m going to shut up now. Go ahead.

**Mona:** Ok, when we stopped yesterday, I had asked you about if you had been interested in writing short stories and after the camera went off you said, “No”. So I would like you to say something about that.

**Charles:** Oh yeah, yeah, no. I am the opposite of a short story writer. I don’t like short stories. They pare down. It is the bare bones. It is all structure. Usually a surprise at the end. It is artificial. I’m the opposite. I like to put in a lot of details, build it up. There was a writer named Thomas Wolfe. He was criticized for too much . . . too many words, you know. And he said, “I’m a putter-in-er and not a take-er-outer. And that’s what I am. I like to put in details. I’m not quite like Wolfe. He would like put six adjectives together, you know. And he loved to do that. It was alright but I don’t do that so much. But I like to put a lot of stuff in. That is the opposite of a short story writer. They
have to take it out because they’re limited. And what can you do with eight, nine or ten pages? You can’t create character. You can’t create change of character. There is no space. Short story writers will say, “It is the most difficult art form.” But for me, I think it is an inferior art form because you can’t do very much with it. The only one I have ever seen, in my reading days, the only one I ever read who did something with a short story was Anton Chekhov. Nobody else did. Somehow, he was such a genius, he could, in a short story, he could hit you like with a sledge hammer. No other writer, for my part, has ever done that. So I guess it can be done. But it is very very hard to do. To get an emotional impact with a . . . and his longer stories were always better, I think. But his short stories were really good. His first ones were terrible. He wrote them for newspapers. Every now and then they bring them out—Chekhov stories. But they weren’t very good. But later on, when he began, really in his maturity you could say, his short stories were really fabulous, but that is unusual.

Mona: Did you have any university teachers who were a positive influence on your writing and gave you encouragement or guidance?

Charles: Yeah, yeah, I had. I had one. Professor Joe Lee Davis from Michigan. He taught English. We didn’t write stories or anything. We wrote critical essays, but it doesn’t matter because he liked mine. And he, I think, I’m trying to remember now. We didn’t read our stories aloud to the class. But one day he had me read mine. Not a story, I am sorry—a critical essay. I forgot who it was but he thought it was so good he had me read it to the class. And that was the only time in the whole year anybody read an essay to the class. And that has tremendous effect on you. Because he is singling you out. So, it builds your confidence. That what you say is important enough that people will
want to read it. In fact, I had a girl come on to me, Mom, after that story. In an intellectual kind of way. She was impressed by it.

**Mona:** Were you seeing Mom at that point?

**Charles:** No, no, this was before the war. Yeah, and she was impressed by the story. Later on she went to New York. She was a strange co-ed—impressed by brains. Very few were, to my chagrin. [Laughter]

**Mona:** So you talked a bit last year about the course at Stanford and Stegner. Was that the only creative writing course you ever took, then?

**Charles:** Yeah, yeah. And the reason I took it, really I was trying to get a prize, a fellowship, and as far as... actually it wasn’t creative writing. It was critical writing. You would criticize writers. I actually never took what we would call today a creative writing course where they would examine your story. I would never have taken one. Because I felt—I knew I had to go my own way. I didn’t want anybody telling me, “This is wrong. This is...” I felt, I’ll do it my way and they can... What they do... I have a relatively low opinion of those courses because what they do is try to teach you techniques and so it is like *New Yorker* short stories. They are all the same. There is nothing distinctive about them. You’ve read one you’ve read them all. And I don’t think that is worth doing. Why do something that somebody else has already done.

**Mona:** Did you ever have a one-on-one session with Stegner.

**Charles:** No, no. Oh god, no. That was reserved. Well, you had a—there was a one-on-one meeting to allow you into his course. That was just like, “Who are you? Why do you want...” You’ve got to pass the gate. That was it. Once you were in the course I never had a one-on-one meeting. Lot of guys did
though. They would suck around his office, “You know, I’d like to discuss this with you.” But they’re thinking about the 5,000 bucks. [Laughter]

Mona: Who was the man that read and commented on Gently, Brother?

Charles: That was Professor Davis. I say, this is how you are when you are young.

Mona: This is the man in Michigan?

Charles: Yeah.

Mona: The one you liked.

Charles: Yeah. This is how you are when you are young. I am ashamed to tell you this. You know, it is a 500 page book. He is a busy man. I didn’t ask him, “Could you have time to read it?” I just sent it to him. Said, “Would you read this?” And he did and he commented on it. And I didn’t like some of his comments. So I never answered him. I never even said thank you. Isn’t that deplorable? When you are young you just. . . . At least when I was young. I just marched in. Of course you want to read it. I didn’t realize. . . . Today I realize what an imposition that was. To send him a book and say “Read it”.

Mona: What sort of comments did he make, Dad?

Charles: Well, you can find out. He wrote them in the book.

Mona: Well, they are very faint. I couldn’t. . . .

Charles: Oh really?

Mona: On my copy. I’ve got a photocopy.

Charles: Not now. They are on the [Points]. Mom has them out there.

Mona: So, you don’t remember the tone of his. . . .
Charles: Well, I think his comments were probably quite good. Like it took me a long time to get into the book. About fifty pages of talking about New Bedford. You’re not getting into the story. That’s a good comment. So I am not adverse to criticism it is just I don’t want to sit there and have somebody tell me how to write a story. “You must start off with this.” Well, bullshit, you can start off with anything you want. If it fits into the thing, you know. In other words, a lot of those courses teach you formulas more basically, I think. Formulaic types of thing.

Mona: [Distortion on tape] When did you start taking notes? Do you remember when you began that?

Charles: I started taking notes later on when I didn’t have time to write. When I was working.

Mona: So you didn’t take them before you went to the war?

Charles: Oh no, no, no, no, no. After I came back and started teaching school. I wrote Gently, Brother and then started teaching school.

Mona: No I am talking about the war, Dad. You came back from the war and went to New Bedford and you started to write.

Charles: No notes, I started a book.

Mona: Right, ok.

Charles: No notes, I just started a book about the Army. And then when I started going to school. Actually it started when I was at the University. Started at Michigan. My first semester back I studied. My second semester I lost it. I wanted to write the second semester I was back.

Mona: So were you taking notes the first semester?
Charles: No, the first semester I just studied. The second semester I suddenly began to write. And I felt, I want to write. And my studies dropped off because I spent all my time writing. I met your mother that Fall. And I was writing. I was trying to do two things at once. Be a student and writing. And I got by with being a student but my grades—instead of being A’s there were now like B’s.

Mona: But were you taking notes as well?

Charles: No, I was writing, just writing, straight. When I started doing notes was when I started teaching school. I didn’t have time to write the story out so I would write brief notes on it: you know, bla bla bla bla. And I wrote notes and notes and... boxes of notes because I didn’t have time. I didn’t want to lose the thought. But I didn’t have time to pursue it. When you teach, oh god it is so time consuming, you can’t believe how time consuming it is. Weekends you are busy correcting papers and stuff. And during the week you are exhausted. It really is a... I never got the knack of it to get it under control time-wise. It always... so many times I would start writing something in the summer time. I am going to keep this up. A month later I stopped. Because you just don’t have the energy or the time. So in lieu of writing the story I would write notes. I have boxes of notes coming out of my ears. Mom filed them. Want to comment on that, Mama? No? Why not?

Barbara: Well, just—it was fun. I liked filing them. I had a system where I would put the folders out on the bed. First I would put them in big categories—you know New Bedford this and that. And then I took those big categories and divided them up and so I would lay them all out on the bed and did it that way. Yeah.
Charles: Boy she was—she saved me—because then when I came to write something. When I wrote the Army book, I had all these folders.

Mona: So when you were at University in the second semester you weren’t working on the war book then.

Charles: No, no, no.

Mona: You were starting on other projects.

Charles: I was working on New Bedford. I forgot the war book. The first book was not the war book. It was the army. Nothing about war. The army.

Mona: Okay.

Charles: Stateside.

Mona: I see.

Charles: The war was... I didn’t worry about it. I didn’t... [Gestures like it was pushed away]. Now for example I remember—this was that summer I wrote a long story about—I probably told you about this. This kid. I had a tennis racket that I traded for. And it had a busted string. So I took some string and tied the two ends together—so when the ball hit that it would go shwshsh! It would fly off in any direction. So I started playing tennis at the Park. I had played, you know, very little tennis. And so the kids on the block, the street, thought it was hilarious to play tennis. That was like, you know, playing golf. So one of the kids, Jonesy, for a joke, they were going to have a tournament at the Park for kids under sixteen, I think. And as a joke he put my name in. And I saw Charles Felix will play, or C. Felix will play Bernard B. Carter on the first round. I think I said this in the other story. So I go up there. And I figure I’ve got to show up. So we played. A sweet guy from [Gestures], a nice kid. And I remember it was 1-6. He beat me 6-1, then the second was 7-5, 7-5 I won.
Second round I am playing Nat Guy. He won the tournament. He was a Jewish kid, from Fairhaven. Comes out with the white pants, all the paraphernalia—three or four rackets. [Laughter] I am there with my busted string. “Who is this C. Felix?” He comes out. I am sitting. “It’s me.” And he was older. He was probably—I was probably thirteen—he was probably fifteen, sixteen. But he was a nice guy. He found out right away I couldn’t play worth shit. So he could have fhwshoos! Some one on my street would have zipped the ball in. He hit in here, here, here. . . boom. [Demonstrates] I don’t think he even ran once. He said, after the game you know, he said. . . six love, six love. He kept his sweater on. He didn’t even raise a sweat. And he said, “Okay, I’m going to. . . who wants to play?” or something like that. He was a great player because later on he was New Bedford champ. Nat Guy. But anyway I wrote a long, long short story about that whole thing. And I don’t know, now I forgot what my take is on it.

**Mona:** Do you still have it?

**Charles:** Oh yes, it’s down cellar. Somewhere. We’re not going to look for it. But anyway I wanted to tell you, Mona. I don’t want us to go down cellar ever. But I don’t know if I told you this or not. But I started writing. . . did I tell you this? I started writing like a fairy tale, for you. And I started it. Did I tell you this? I did? Ok, I started it one summer. Long tale. I wrote it all summer long. Vacation. And in the fall I wanted to keep it up. Wanted to finish it, you know. But school, boom. I couldn’t keep it up. I had to stop. So, it is like an inspiration. It’s gone. I could no more finish that story today than I could fly. But some day we will find it and we’ll give it to you. How’s that? Okay? Now where were we on this?

**Mona:** Alright, well the next. . .
Charles: That was the short story I was writing that summer I met your mother. I gave you the story to read, didn’t I? [Looking at Barbara] When I met you in the Fall?

Barbara: The story about the tennis racket?

Charles: Is that the one?

Barbara: You gave me several, Honey.

Charles: Several stories.

Barbara: Yeah, mmm hmh.

Charles: I can’t remember. I know I wrote another one, too but I can’t remember what it was.

Barbara: It was really exciting.

Charles: What was it about? Do you remember what it was about?

Barbara: I don’t remember what they were about. All I can remember is the handwriting. I just loved it. It was very exciting and I was really thrilled with the stories, you know.

Charles: You liked the story.

Barbara: Every time you wrote a story, you would give it to me and I would read it.

Charles: That’s why I married her. If she had said the story stinks, I wouldn’t have married her. [Laughs]

Mona: That’s my next question. Was Mom the first person to really believe in your writing?
Charles: Yeah, yeah. I think so, yeah.

Barbara: Well no, because your teacher in high school.

Mona: I mean the first person close to you.

Charles: You know, that’s not—that was just essay stuff, Mum. That’s not. . . .

Barbara: Well, I was thrilled. I just couldn’t get over it, you know. I thought it was fiction. But it wasn’t.

Charles: Well, it’s you know.

Barbara: Yeah.

Charles: Good fiction has a basis in reality.

Barbara: Yeah.

Charles: Good fiction doesn’t just. . . . [Gestures like off in the sky]

Barbara: Well it has to be.

Charles: Unless it is. . . . of course there are some, like fairy tales, I guess, but most fiction has a basis in reality.

Mona: Mom, last year you told a story which didn’t get on the tape about you guys giving some of Dad’s work to be typed and the man. . . .

Barbara and Charles together: Ohh!

Mona: Can you tell that story.

Barbara: I can’t tell it. He can tell it. He was there. I wasn’t there. I didn’t go.
Charles: Well, she told you.

Barbara: Huh?

Charles: The lady told you.

Barbara: No you went. . . was I the one who went to pick it up?

Charles: Yeah. I didn’t.

Barbara: Yeah, I guess so.

Charles: The lady told you.

Mona: So start from the beginning and set it out.

Barbara: Well, we. . . oh it’s a long story.

Mona: Yeah, well, that’s good.

Barbara: No. After my mother died and Daddy and I were married, we had to go and settle the estate. And after that we went up to the Upper Peninsula to really a very tiny place on Lake Michigan.

Charles: Near Manistique.

Barbara: Named Manistique.

Charles: Near Manistique.

Barbara: Near Manistique, called Naubinway. And Daddy, he had so much writing and we needed help getting it typed.

Mona: You didn’t have a typewriter then.

Barbara: Yeah, I had a typewriter but I was taking dictation, and you know: blah blah blah. So I had a butcher that I used to buy meat from. He used to get
so mad at me because I wanted ground round and I’d pick out a piece of round steak and I would say, “I want this ground.” And he would just go out of his mind because you don’t grind that up because. . . .

Charles: It’s too nice.

Barbara: Too nice. Too expensive. We went up there. We put two thousand dollars in the bank and they thought we were the richest people in the world. They treated us like we were. . . .

Charles: Yeah.

Barbara: Anyway so I was talking to him and I said, “Do you know anybody who knows how to type? My husband writes and we’ve got some stuff that needs to be typed.” And he said yes his wife did it, very excited, very happy. So I brought the stuff to the house.

Mona: This was Gently, Brother then?

Charles: No.

Barbara: No, this was army stuff that he had written about the Army.

Charles: Yeah. When I was in the—no—oh yeah. It was either. . . I either wrote it in the Army or I wrote it when I was home, after the Army. It was Army stuff. Go ahead.

Barbara: So, I go, knock on the door to pick up the typed stuff. [Laughter] And he comes out into the hall and he told me that his—I wish that I could remember it because he was really upset—but his wife could not type it. It was just. . . .

Charles: Bad words.
Barbara: Yeah. Too strong.

Charles: Too strong.

Barbara: It’s funny. It was really—I was dumbfounded. You know, I couldn’t believe it. But he was very upset.

Charles: Yeah.

Barbara: And I never did speak to the woman.

Mona: You said they were shocked.

Barbara: They were. He was shocked. Right. He was—it was beyond him.

Charles: And the language wasn’t all that bad, actually. It is much worse now.

Barbara: Well, we did find a woman. Daddy found a woman up there who did type it.

Charles: Where?

Barbara: In Manistique.

Charles: We did?

Barbara: I never knew her. Yeah, you did.

Charles: I did?

Barbara: And she did type the stuff. I didn’t type that.

Charles: I don’t think I did, Mum.

Mona: So is Manistique where Daddy had the beard and you told me the story of leaving the movies and everyone sat there and watched you?

Barbara: Oh no, that was Caro. [Laughter]
Mona: Would you describe that?

Barbara: Well, this is about our life, Mona. It is not about the writing.

Mona: This is all important, Mom.

Barbara: Ok, Chris, Daddy and I were married, you know, with my brother [Bud] when we were at Michigan, okay. And I had to go home to settle my mother’s estate. My mother was dead. And take care of my brother.

Mona: Younger brother.

Barbara: Right. Kaye.

Charles: Chris, you want to put the camera on her?

Barbara: No. So, what happened was then it’s time for Daddy to be through school so he came to join me but nobody had ever seen in Caro somebody that looked like Daddy. He had a beard, he started to grow a beard.

Charles: Looked like a rabbi.

Barbara: So we... one night we went to the movies. Everything was fine, you know, we watched the movies. And when the movies are over, they turn the lights out so people can leave the theatre.

Mona: Lights on.

Charles: Lights on.

Barbara: Oh they turn the lights on, right.

Mona: So you were with Bud and. . . ?

Barbara: No, just Daddy and I were together. Daddy and I were together. And the lights went on. Daddy and I—and Daddy says, “Sit.” because he wants
to wait until everybody’s gone so he that can get up so we didn’t get up and run out of the theatre. We sit. And every head in that theatre turned to look at Daddy. It was really funny, you know. You don’t realize that you are making such a stir but you are. And then my old boyfriend stalked me during that period. Earle. Yeah, parked outside the house, a little distance away. And then one time I walked downtown and he followed me in the car so I did get in the car. And which I was probably... I wouldn’t do today. I wouldn’t trust him.

Charles: Yeah, freaky.

Barbara: Yeah. Gave him one last kiss goodbye.


Barbara: But, oh, Mona.

Charles: He was—that guy was freaky.

Barbara: I got some pictures, yeah.

Charles: That guy was freaky.

Barbara: You what?

Charles: That guy was freaky.

Barbara: Yeah, a little strange. Yeah, I mean he parked all day long and watched this house. Watched the house.

Charles: He is a little strange for Caro but he is very strange for other towns. [Laughter]

Mona: Were you ever jealous of Dad’s writing?

Barbara: No.
Mona: The fact that it took his concentration?

Barbara: No. I thought it was wonderful. Gee. Wonderful. No. Do you think I would put up with it all these years. No, it was wonderful. I loved it. Didn’t I, Daddy?

Charles: Yeah. Yeah.

Mona: Could you both talk about decisions that you have made that really have been determined by the writing.

Barbara: Everything we’ve done.

Charles: Well. . .

Barbara: The biggest one was Daddy took off time to write Tony.

Charles: Oh, yeah.

Barbara: And we didn’t. . . and another big one was when we were first married we went up to Manistique that was—I mean up to Indian Lake, at Naubinway.

Charles: We took. We took two years off. And then money was running out so I went to Stanford.

Barbara: That was before—you know, neither one of us had finished school. But I had that money.

Mona: So the point of that was so he could write?

Charles: Yeah, yeah.

Barbara: Mmh hmm, yup.

Charles: Then Tony took three years.
Barbara: So that’s five years.

Charles: And we took our money out.

Barbara: See, you went and made money, Chris. [Laughter]

Charles: Just think though, Mom. If we hadn’t that, we wouldn’t have Tony now.

Barbara: Yup.

Charles: If we hadn’t done that.

Barbara: Yup.

Charles: So... It’s a trade-off.

Barbara: Yeah.

Mona: Do you talk to Mom in detail as you are writing about what you are writing about?

Charles: No, I don’t like to talk about it.

Barbara: We found out that didn’t work.

Charles: No, I don’t want to talk about it.

Barbara: I use to read his stuff when he was writing it, you know. But that, that wasn’t a good idea.

Charles: I don’t like to show it to anybody until it is done, because they can influence you. And it is bad to be influenced, I think.

Barbara: Sharlene found that out.

Charles: Yeah?
Barbara: That people start making suggestions and.

Mona: Everybody has a different.

Barbara: Yeah and then you start changing things and.

Charles: That’s what I found out when I sent stuff out to editors. Every editor had a different. . . I said this is crazy. One guy likes this. One guy likes that. One guy likes this. And you know that they don’t. . . He doesn’t like this and another guy likes that. So. . . If they all said the same thing you would say—hmmm, you know, maybe they have something there. But they differ. So everybody has their own thing. Why should you go by their thing? Why not go by your own thing? What were you going to say, Mom?

Barbara: Nothing.

Charles: Nothing? Nothing at all, huh? I have nothing to say.

Mona: Could you say something, Dad, about the effect of your marriage on your writing and Mom’s contribution to the books?

Charles: Well, Mom’s contribution is enormous in many ways. For one thing she typed—I don’t type. Every word is—she’s typed every single word. When I was in college and I had a paper to write I spent all day and ended up with about two pages. It took me all afternoon—jrrp jrrp jrrp jrrp. So I don’t type. I don’t do computers. She is my connection to the world, see. And also she sorted the notes and what not, you know. And she’s been, you know, encouraging me to send stuff out, you know, like that. But I say that even more important than that is she has made me happy to enable me to write. Because I think I told you before—if I am miserable I can’t write, you know. She gave me security, emotional security. And that I think is more important than
anything, because typing maybe you can always pay somebody to type but you can’t pay somebody to give you emotional security.

**Barbara:** Well the kids really helped you too though because they could have. . . because he used to go in and lock the door. The bedroom. And the kids were really good.

**Charles:** They were.

**Barbara:** They could have had a tantrum.

**Charles:** Right. They used to come to the door. Of course when Mona was small. She was too small to come to the door. Because she was just a baby. Mona was just a baby. But Matty was a little bigger. So he could come to the door. But when you were small, you know. You were just a little baby.

**Mona:** I remember teasing you by getting the knife and sort of threatening to flick the thing.

**Charles:** Flick what thing?

**Barbara:** Unlock the door.

**Mona:** Flick the lock.

**Charles:** Oh the lock, oh yeah, yeah, yeah. I remember that.

**Mona:** Did you ever write poetry or think about writing plays? Did you ever. . .

**Charles:** Not really. No.

**Mona:** That didn’t interest you?

**Charles:** That wasn’t my talent.
Mona: What about—you love history so much? Did you ever think about.

Charles: Plays tend to be artificial. You know, you’ve got to—it’s too, well, it’s too schematic. You’ve got to have this in the first act, that in the second, third act, you know, and so on. Poetry, I had no talent for poetry. Matty can write some. He wrote some good poems, Matty did. I am sorry—go ahead.

Mona: What about non-fiction, Dad. Like, it seems to me you have such a love of history. Did it ever appeal to you to do research and write a non-fiction book in the sense of taking a topic and exploring it?

Charles: No, because to do it properly you have to be an expert on that subject. That’s five years or so before you can even begin to write. And it is hugely time-consuming. And I think I could have done it as far as doing it because I am able to consult research things and stuff but it is tremendously time-consuming and so it runs a poor second to what I would call creative writing. Another thing is this, research, historical research, basically anybody can do it. If you put in the time. Although some writers are much more skillful than others but it’s a thing that it’s there, the facts are there—you dig them out and—I am not trying to denigrate it—it’s quite a form, but someone else could actually do it, maybe. But my book—I don’t feel anybody else could do it, because it is life as seen through my eyes. So it is unique to me. That’s why, you know, research—you have two hundred books on Stalin. Everybody. . . they could all be good but they take a different aspect of it. It is not unique, really. So if I have any time I would like to do my stuff.

Mona: Do you feel that you have had luck in terms of your writing? Are there any, sort of, pivotal moments that you think, you look back and think, oh I am glad that that happened or I made that decision or. . .
Charles: Well, actually I thought my teaching book was going to get published because it came close. But when that fizzled out—that was my only chance. Because *Gently, Brother, Tony*—nobody even wanted to look at them. You have to get subjects that people are interested in and they were interested in teaching. So we came close on that. We came close but we didn’t make it. So I thought, after that, I thought well I am done for. Because that was my one shot. So I started writing the Army book. And I thought this is way too long for them. They will want to compress it into nothing. And I said this is not going to. . . . And then I did *Portagee Gate* and this was worse. I told Mom, I said, “This is a good book but it is never going to see the light of day because nobody in the world is going to publish this.” And so I actually thought I was never going to get published. And I said I am going to keep writing, maybe someday somebody will look at it.

Barbara: Are you talking about *Portagee Gate*?

Charles: Yeah.

Mona: No, just in general.

Charles: Just in general.

Barbara: Well, he did have luck. Because you sent us that book on New Bedford Portuguese and in that book we read about Monteiro. Monteira.

Charles: Monteiro.

Barbara: Monteiro. And we wrote to him. Daddy wrote him just a little letter about Portuguese writing and then he wrote back and then Daddy told him we had a book. And that is how the book got published.

Charles: Yeah, but before that, before, before we came to him. . .
Barbara: So that was luck.

Charles: . . . I suddenly got. See I had all this overseas stuff. I knew I was going to do something but I didn’t know what. I thought, what I thought I’d do with Crossing the Sauer. I thought it was going to be Book Four of Mothballs. I thought I would take the men overseas. That was always my plan—to make it into Book Four of Mothballs. Then I saw it doesn’t fit. It doesn’t fit. So what can I do with it. So I thought, “Why don’t I write a little thing.” Instead of fiction, make it non-fiction. So I did. Crossing the Sauer. And I thought, you know what? This may have a chance because it’s a subject that it’s concise, short. It’s non-fiction. Which is a plus. And it’s a subject that people are interested in. History Channel is showing World War Two. I said, “This has a chance.” So I thought, so I kind of said maybe I can get published with this. And I sent it out, sent it out. I didn’t even wait to finish the book. I had about twenty pages written and said, “I am going to send this out.” Mom didn’t think that was too good an idea. She said wait until you finish the book. I said, “No, I want to send it out.” See if I can get any reaction, you know. I sent it out to eighteen editors, uhh eighteen agents. And Ed Knappman said, “I am very interested in this.” And I thought huh! So then he published, he sold it. But then I was left with Portagee Gate. And I says, and Mothballs, well, you know. I thought, like for example. With Mothballs, I said well now. Peter Burford, Burford Books, who published Crossing the Sauer. He might be interested in doing this as a novel, you know. So I sent him some choice chapters. Nhh nhh. [Shakes his head] And I sent Kappman some stuff. Nhh nhh. [Shakes his head]

Mona: They don’t do uh . . .

Charles: They don’t do fiction. That’s true. But I thought Knappman might, if he felt—Knappmann, he’s a business man. He’ll do fiction if he thinks it’s got money in it. He doesn’t want to do normal fiction. But if you gave him
something he felt he could turn into money, I think he would, you know. Anyway, they didn’t want to do it. Didn’t want to handle it. So I thought well that’s it, you know. And as Mom said we found out, you sent us that thing. And I sent George Monteiro *Crossing the Sauer*. And he was—the fact that it was by a Portuguese writer may have impressed him. And then we went from that to telling him about *Portagee Gate*. We sent him the first two books. I don’t know if we are repeating ourselves or what. We sent him the first two books of *Portagee Gate*. He held back his opinion. He said, “I’d like to see Part Three.” I always said, I said to Mom, “Well, Part Two is awfully good. He should have been sold on Part Two.” Because the really unique thing about the book is Part Two—Pa speaking. Because as far as I know there is no other book where an immigrant is given voice to his life. My life—there’s been others. Children of immigrants. That’s not so unusual. But the immigrant himself speaking—that is unusual. In fact, I don’t know of any other book that has it, myself. So he should have been sold on Part Two. But he wasn’t. He wanted to see Part Three. So after we sent him Part Three. I didn’t send him Part One, Two and Three all together because it is too big. You send a guy 800 pages he says, “Ohhhh. Jesus Christ, I can’t read this”. You give him a little bit, you know. And so then I sent him Part Three and then he was sold.

**Barbara:** He read it immediately.

**Charles:** Yeah, he read it immediately.

**Barbara:** Whatever we sent him he read right that minute.

**Charles:** Yeah, he responded, right, boom.

**Barbara:** He got right back.
**Charles:** And then Sousa, which is really ironical. Here I am been saying the Portuguese are you know, Portuguese—again I repeat myself—the Portuguese saved my ass. Sousa published the book. The last people in the world I would expect—that’s what I was saying to Chris—there are lot of surprises in life. Because the so-called Americans would have no interest in this at all. The Portuguese did. And so Sousa really is responsible for the whole thing. [Distortion on tape]

**Mona:** He is extremely busy too.

**Charles:** He is also fund raising. I told the guy, “Jeez, you are doing three jobs, you know.” So if he doesn’t answer me right away, I can understand, you know. But he’s got a lot going. But I am very... I am really in his debt. I don’t know if I have ever made that clear to him. Am I speaking loud enough, Chris? Yeah? Because if it hadn’t have been for him, Honey, we would have *Crossing the Sauer* and that’s it. The rest would be in a box.

**Chris:** Down cellar.

**Charles:** Down cellar. [Distortion on tape]

**Mona:** How has your approach to writing changed over the years do you think?

**Charles:** Hmmm. I don’t know if it has or not. Well, if you want to compare *Tony* with something I did—or okay *Tony* compared to *Da Gama*. They are like how many years apart? 1961 to 1980. Well, they are about twenty years apart. The first book is by a younger man and it’s much more playful. It is much more fun. Lot of jokes in it. Lot of puns. *Da Gama*—much more serious. No puns and totally different. So I think with age you lose the—I don’t think it is necessarily good—but I think you lose that playfulness and you become kind of sober faced. That’s why you take a guy that is eighty—he
doesn’t usually look like a guy that is twenty, you know. He’s [Makes a downcast face] for whatever reasons he’s just not as playful. He’s not as much fun. And that’s a process of aging though I think. It is not a decision you make. You just don’t do it. It’s kind of like you walk faster when you are younger. That’s part of the thing, I guess.

**Mona:** Do you think writing has gotten easier for you or.

**Charles:** Writing has never been hard for me. I have always loved it. I always say these guys who say writing is agony—I say, “Why do you do it?” I have always loved writing. And that has never changed. It has never been difficult.

**Barbara:** Daddy enjoys it. You can hear him laughing in there or even if sometimes he just picks up books that he has written and then he starts. . .

**Charles:** I love my own writing. I am my biggest fan. [Laughter]

**Mona:** Are you able to say which period of your life you think was the most satisfying in terms of writing?

**Charles:** Well, probably after I retired. Because when I wrote *Tony* I was still a teacher really and I knew that once I finished the book I was going to have to go back to teaching so I didn’t feel that I had as much time. When I retired I said well that’s it. I’ve quit working. We’ve got our retirement now. And I can. . . what do you got there?

**Barbara whispers:** It’s getting late. [Whispered exchange about time in background with Chris]

**Charles:** So I had all the time in the world to write, as a retiree. And so it is a different mental thing. That is why I could take. . . see I could relax. I could take for *Portagee Gate*. . . I wrote that from. . . no started off with *Mothballs*. I retired ’84. I worked on *Mothballs* from ’84 to ’92. And I worked on that. I
didn’t goof around. But I had a nice feeling. I could finish it. And I could take as many—no pressure of time—no deadlines. I could write it as carefully as I wanted to.

**Mona:** And you could get absorbed without being interrupted.

**Charles:** Without being interrupted. And without thinking, next year I’ve got to get to work—I’ve got to go to work. And then when I quit that in ’92 I started *Portagee Gate*. Same deal. I felt—and I took ’92 to about ’98 I think, six years—and I felt that, you know I didn’t feel that I had to do it tomorrow. I worked at it just as hard as I could. I don’t mean that I loafed around or anything. It is just a mental feeling that you have the time and you feel real good because you know you have the time to finish it, unless you kick the bucket or something. But other than that you have the time to finish it and it gives you a different mindset. Like when I was writing *Tony* I had one eye on the clock so to speak because I was racing against the time. And I think I told you I had another book *Tony II* that I just didn’t have time to start even because by the time I finished *Tony I* we were broke. Dead broke. So *Tony II*—pfsfsft.

**Barbara:** Dead broke.

**Charles:** I mean dead broke!

**Barbara:** Really scary broke.

**Charles:** I ran, I ran down to Ben Franklin [Five and dime discount store] to get a job stamping stuff, you know. I lined up the teaching job but I worked at Ben Franklin until I went to teach. And it kept us. It brought groceries in. Well, you know for a long time when we were first married I was never able to pay the electric bill. I would pay—I always had a two-months bill. I would pay the old month. I never had enough money to pay both months. So I would pay
the old month. And then the next month I would get the bill for the next two months and I would pay the old month. It took us years before I paid—before I could pay the whole electric bill. It was a hand-to-mouth existence.

**Barbara:** When you think about it... I used to have to borrow every month $15 dollars from San Jose State—you know they would lend you $15 to get you through.

**Charles:** Mom had a ring that her mother had given her and I remember I went to a pawn shop in San Jose—went all the way to San Jose—to pawn the ring. Not sell it. Pawn it. Fifteen bucks I got. Came back with fifteen bucks.

**Mona:** And you got the ring back eventually?

**Charles:** Oh, when you pay—when you redeem it.

**Barbara:** But he sold all my other jewelry.

**Charles:** Well, I sold that too, didn’t I?

**Barbara:** Not the ring, no. Mona has the ring.

**Charles:** Mona has it, okay. Yeah, that’s right.

**Mona:** That’s the diamond.

**Barbara:** Yeah, with the flaw in it.

**Mona:** It doesn’t have a flaw in it.

**Charles:** Mom had these jewels that she used to wear when she went to balls. And I sold her jewelry.

**Barbara:** No, Earle gave me those emeralds.

**Charles:** Oooh. No wonder I sold them.
Barbara: No, they weren’t emeralds. They were a . . . what’s the red stone?

Charles, Chris and Mona: Rubies.

Barbara: Yeah.

Charles: You told me somebody gave them to your Mother. Now you tell me Earle gave them to you.

Barbara: No, he gave me. . . god, what are they?

Charles: Rubies?

Barbara: It’s not. Rubies are very expensive, Honey. It was something else that was red.

Charles: Garnet?

Barbara: And he gave me. . . several things. He gave me jewelry. The only man who ever gave me jewelry.

Charles: I would have bought you jewelry if. . .

Barbara: He gave me an amethyst ring. How much did you get for that? It was a big amethyst, too.

Charles: $2.50. Two and a half bucks.

Mona: And you didn’t write him a thank-you letter, Dad.

Charles: Well, when did you ever want to wear jewelry?

Barbara: No, I don’t like jewelry.

Charles: Don’t like jewelry.

Mona: Well, that is the end of this tape.
Charles: Oh, okay.

Mona: So, to be continued tomorrow.

Charles: We hope.
Mona: I talked to Aunt Idalia today and I asked her about learning English as a child and she said that you were the only one that didn’t have to repeat first grade. That Joe, Irene, and Idalia all had to repeat first grade because they had been speaking Portuguese in the home and didn’t know English. So, do you want to say something about that?
Charles: Yeah. I am very interested that you told me that. I didn’t know that. I thought we all went through. We should add maybe that there was a kindergarten at that school but none of us went to kindergarten because my mother felt that they just play games. She didn’t feel that it was educational. And I remember Miss Duckworth taught kindergarten. Miss Sullivan taught 1B—that was the first grade. Now Barbara made a good point. She said, which I never thought of, that in kindergarten you would have learned English, gained language skills. And that hadn’t occurred to me. But it surprised me very much. I could see where Joe and Irene, being older, would not have known English but by the time I got to first grade—like Joe was five years older than I was—he would have been in school for five years. He had spoken English with all the kids. I am sure he must have started speaking it at home so I think I would have picked up some of the English from him and the same thing with Irene. Now she was either three or four years older than I was. And she was in school. She would have picked up English so I am surprised that the young children, the younger children—myself and Idalia—hadn’t learned English from them, in the home. I might say this though... I think Barbara said, “Weren’t you going out in the street and playing?” And the answer is, “Absolutely not.” Until we went to school we were totally at home. We didn’t go play at all as a preschooler.

Mona: Would your Aunts have known English?

Charles: Some, yes. Because they had been there quite a few years.

Mona: Bertha?

Charles: Bertha was Joe’s age so she was pretty young. But I know that for a while, my mother worked in the mills for a while, and Aunt Mary babysat me. She lived downstairs. Now she wouldn’t have known very much English. So I
wouldn’t have picked up much English from her. So I guess... I don’t feel though that I went to school knowing just Portuguese. I don’t feel that at all. So I must have picked it up from my brothers and sisters—brother and sister. Because they became bilingual pretty quick. So that’s what I said. Excuse me just a minute. [Has a drink of water] Let me see. Oh, I wanted to mention a couple of things that we talked about, or started to talk about. Let me see now what I was going to say. [Looking at some notes] Now you asked me about writing. “Why you write.” And I don’t think anybody knows why you write. It is just something you want to do. And of course as you get older... [Clears throat] boy, my voice is really going... as you get older you start wishing that you could write something so good that it would live. So that somebody a hundred years from now would read about your life. And say, hey, here was a person. It is like writing a book about yourself or your life is like engraving on a grave stone. You want people to know you were here. Or that—like I wanted people to know in my Portagee Gate book—I wanted people to know that my father was here. He was here. He was a person. He thought things. He acted. And I wanted to make a living record of that. Somebody said that you are really more of a historian than you are a writer and that’s probably true. I don’t feel I am a creative writer at all. A creative writer you go rrwhrrrh [Gestures]. No, no, no. I try to make a record of things that I have seen or felt or observed or experienced or whatever. I got—in connection to this—I got an eyesight or a view into the things I... In the 1940s there was a guy named Robert van Gelder. Now he was a journalist, a writer, for the New York Times. And he had a—what would you call it—a column or whatever—a department. He did interviews. And I am not sure it was every issue of the Times, but every other issue, or maybe every issue, I don’t remember. He would interview a prominent writer of that day. And he would ask them all kind of questions and stuff—like
you’re doing. And then he compiled the best ones into a book: interviews of Robert van Gelder. And I bought that book.

**Barbara:** How old? When did you buy it?

**Charles:** He was interviewing in the 1940s, so I probably bought it in the 50s maybe, early 50s. I read that thing like you wouldn’t believe. I didn’t read it in the *Times* because I didn’t take the *Times*. And the *Times*. . . well, I bought the book. And I read it and reread it and reread it—because I was thinking. You are looking for a clue as to how to get published and what people are looking for and what it is all about. I was looking for clues, basically. So I read it and read it, many times. And uh, can you hear my voice or is it pretty squeaky?

**Mona:** I can hear it.

**Charles:** I wish I had a lubricant.

**Mona:** Just a bit louder.

**Charles:** Should be louder? Okay. Now here’s the kicker. I bought the book and put it on one of our shelves. Years went by. Maybe, let me see. Let me see, 1950—maybe twenty-five years later—I picked it up. Now he interviewed all the prominent writers of his day. I was shocked. Nobody. . . those names had disappeared. They were unknown. The best sellers of that time. If I said it to somebody—“Who?”—you know. And they were, they were the celebrity writers of their day. And it is like the celebrities of today. Most of them [Makes a movement like they are gone] it’s like fifteen minutes of fame. That’s it. And that really made me realize, in a way, the futility of writing. Because we write and we scheme. We want to get published. We read our reviews. And then we go on and speak at engagements. And twenty-five years later we’re gone. Nobody, nobody knows who we are. And so I thought, you know
really, just to do that—to me is a waste of time. Because to be a celebrity of a particular specific period. I don’t see what the advantage is of that—although it’s. . . I suppose you want to be recognized at a restaurant or something. But I don’t want to be. I think the worst thing in the world is to be famous. Because you can’t live. You go to a grocery store you are mobbed by people who want your autograph or whatever. I think to be a famous movie star—to me that’s a horror. You can’t go to a restaurant. You are eating and then somebody comes over. That would. . . anybody interrupts my eating I want to shoot them. [Laughter] So to me that’s not, you know. . . . It would be nice to have some money so that you can live the way you want to live. I don’t scorn the money. But to be recognizable. I don’t want that at all. In fact, Barbara was saying. . . “Why don’t you send” . . . when Crossing the Sauer was. . . “Why don’t you try to arrange an interview in the Half Moon Bay Review?” I said that is the last thing in the world I want. You sell about four copies. And for that people recognize you. I don’t want to be recognized. So anyway, that. . . it really threw me when I read the Robert van Gelder book twenty-five years later. Because I saw, boy, our fame is, you know. Like the other day Barbara and I saw a documentary on Tojo, the head of Japan during the war. He was a general. He made it in to, whatever they call it the prime minister, the premier whatever. And the guy. . . it had been made a few years ago. And the guy was talking about Tojo like his name would live forever in history. And I thought, “It’s. . . he’s already gone.” We know about him because we lived through that period but like Jay Leno, he interviews kids on the street, they’re college kids. And he will say something like, “When was the Civil War?” And they will say, “Uhm, 1935?” This is true. They’re college students. They don’t know their history whatsoever. Amazing questions. “When did the Pilgrims come over?” “1912?” “Say, who is Tojo?” “Tojo? It’s a candy bar.” He’s already gone, except for history buffs. But when we live in a particular time we think, “Oh,
everybody’s going to know him and everything, especially today with the
celebrity culture. It’s bogus. You’re a celebrity for five minutes. That’s it.
You’re gone. So, getting back to the point. I am probably belaboring it I
suppose, like I do everything, the Robert van Gelder book really shocked me. It
really shocked me. Because, as I said, the most famous people of that day are
gone. So I said, “The only thing. . . .” Well, I would write anyway because I
enjoy it so much. But the only thing that matters is fifty years from now. Is
somebody going to pick you up or not? If they pick you up, you are pretty
lucky, you know. Maybe in a thousand years they are not going to pick
anybody up. There may be nobody left. The way we are going.

Mona: I was struck by—I read this—that Truman Capote said. And I was
struck how different he was to you, Dad, because I could see that you, even
when you thought you weren’t going to be published, you still worked hard.

Charles: Yeah.

Mona: And you have to write. It is like eating for you.


Mona: You have to do it. Truman Capote said, “I never write—indeed am
physically incapable of writing—anything that I don’t think I will be paid for. [http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4867/the-art-of-fiction-no-17-truman-capote]

Charles: Oh God. . . .

Barbara: Oh boy!

Charles: That’s tragic.

Barbara: Yeah.
Charles: That’s absolutely. . . that’s tragic.

Mona: It struck me how he’s at one pole and you are at the other.

Charles: No, no, that’s tragic.

Barbara: He never expected *Portagee Gate* to be published.

Charles: Well, I never expected any of. . . I reached a point where I said, “Shit. I am going to go to my grave and if anybody reads me, it will be after I am dead.”

Barbara: It is just like a miracle.

Charles: Yeah, right. It is. *Portagee Gate* especially.

Barbara: It is interesting what Daddy said though because early on when we were still at University of Michigan and he talked about he wanted to be a writer and I asked him why and he said, “You get immortality.” I remember him using that word—immortality.

Charles: [Laughter] Boy, I was a confident sucker, wasn’t I? Well, put it this way, if you write something that you think is good, you have the possibility. But I get this *Publishers Lunch* and I read some of the titles, the books that are sold. And it will be like fifty books or whatever. It would describe them briefly and I would say, “It is such crap.” I mean, who would want to read this book? It is just, oh God. It is just so pathetic. I said, but. . . .

Barbara: Well did you ever get anything out of—for years we took *Publishers Weekly*, a very expensive magazine—and did you ever get anything out of that?

Charles: No, not really.

Barbara: Why did you read that? Why did you read those book reviews?
Charles: I read it cover to cover and every book that came out they wrote a review of it. Big fat thing. Came out every week. I read every single word. And I was looking for clues as to how to get published. How to get an agent. What are the tricks. Writing there for money or whatever, or for publication I should say, it has tricks. Like every trade has tricks. I am trying to find out what are they looking for. Is there an agent or an editor who would maybe like my kind of work? You know, like they specialize. Like some writers, some agents just do romances. And that would be stupid for me to send one of my books to an agent that does romances. Some do—specialize in science fiction. Some specialize in celebrity books. So you have to try to find out which agent might be interested in your work, you know. Now there is another thing about writing that I learned. When I was younger I thought, “I am looking for an interesting story. I will write an interesting story.” And this happened in Pescadero, when I first began. There was a Mexican boy, his name was George Escobar, a really nice kid. And he worked for a guy. He would have come to school but he did odd jobs for a man who lived down the coast. He started telling me about this guy and it got me interested and I, I don’t know how I got the information, but I did find out about him. This man was not a trained historian and he was not a trained anthropologist. He lived over in the—he was living in Pescadero then—but in the old days he lived over in the San Joaquin Valley, inland. And although he was not a trained researcher I think, he got interested in the Indian tribes in that area where he lived. I forgot the name of the tribe and the Indians had died out. There were no more Indians left. But he got interested in—because this is where his people lived—on Indian land. So he got interested in them and he began studying and he got, researched as much as he could about them. Like their language. He would write down words. He didn’t know what they meant half the time, but he would write them down. And what did they do. How did they. . . did they fish? Did they hunt? What
was the family structure like? Things that anthropologists do. They study the culture. And he was very active in that. And then, somebody said to him, “I think there is an old woman alive who is one of those—an Indian—from the tribe.” And it was like, you know—he couldn’t believe it. So he searched her out and sure enough he found this old woman who was the last member of this tribe. And I thought . . . and he was terribly excited about it. And he used her as his . . . open the door. She told him what the words meant. How they were spelled. What kind of baskets they had. In other words she was more important than anything that he had found to that moment. And he was elated about it. Naturally. And I thought, “Boy, think of that.” As you get older you get lonely because your friends die off, your family dies off. Think of how lonely that woman must have been to be the last member of her tribe. She couldn’t talk her language to anybody. There was nobody left. To me that’s like the acme of loneliness to be the—it would be like the last man on earth. You can’t talk to anybody. She can’t talk to anybody in her language. And I thought, “Boy, that is quite a story.” And he wrote a book about it. No, not about that. He wrote a book about the Indians. But he wrote a book and he described the life which didn’t interest me too much, you know. Indians are Indians. Some have these kinds of baskets; some have those kinds of baskets. But in the book he told how he came across her and how he found her. How excited he was. And he wrote a book. I think it was published by the University of California, I think.

Mona: It’s not Ishi, is it?

Charles: No, no.

Barbara: No, it’s a book that Mr. Richardson told Daddy about.

Charles: He did? No Ishi is a separate—Ishi is the same case but a separate deal. Ishi came first—about 1912 I think—went with Kroeber in California. So
he wrote a book and I talked to George Escobar and he says—I asked him about it—the man had the book for sale. So I said, “Would he let me examine it?” So I took it and I said to George, “How much does he want for it?” And I thought being a teacher you know he might say, you know, cheap, you know. Now in those days books were like $3.95. A big fat book was $4.95. And he wanted 25 bucks. “Oh Jesus Christ!” I said. We, we didn’t have. . . that’s a lot of money. So I deliberated and I says, “Shit.” So I asked him for a . . .

**Barbara:** Thank you. [Chris poured her a glass of wine.]

**Charles:** Now, Mom, take it easy on that. You’ll get a headache, remember.

**Barbara:** Yeah, yeah, I will.

**Charles:** She’s hitting the sauce again. You are a bad influence, Christopher. Good?

**Mona:** I think that is too much, Mom.

**Charles:** What kind of. . . . Yeah, I think it is too much.

**Barbara:** It is, well I’ll. . . .

**Charles:** Chris, what kind of wine have you got there?

**Chris:** It’s a Margaux.

**Charles:** Margaux?

**Mona:** It is very special, Dad.

**Charles:** Yeah, boy.

**Mona:** Extremely special.
Charles: Extremely. . . we buy only the best in this house. Ok. She’s, oh boy, she’s smelling it. Spit it out now.

Barbara: Don’t, don’t take too much of it. [Chris taking some wine back.]

Charles: Yeah, take a lot of it.

Barbara: No, Chris.

Charles: That’s plenty.

Mona: Yes, yes, Mum, we want you to be able to go with us tomorrow.

Barbara: I probably won’t have a headache. I haven’t had a headache for a long time.

Charles: We don’t want you to get drunk.

Mona: Anyway, this is all being taped. [Laughter]

Charles: We’ll have to walk you home tonight. So anyway, so I said, “Jeez, I’d like to buy the book, you know.” By the way, this is not a hint for you to buy me that book because I wouldn’t read it. I am through reading books. I don’t have time. But it’s true. I don’t.

Barbara: You probably can’t buy it, Honey.

Charles: Well, you could buy it but you’d probably pay about 500 bucks for it, because it would be very—not many out there. So anyway, so I took it home and that weekend I copied like a son of a bitch all Saturday and Sunday. I wrote, wrote, wrote. Copying about him finding the woman because that was what—

Mona: What, what was his name, Dad?
Charles: I have no idea. I forgot. The part... I wasn’t interested in the ethnography. I was interested in the old woman. Not anything else. So as fast as I could... shwwwwt... because I said I am going to use this someday. And then I returned the book. If he had said, you know—5, 10 bucks—I would have said, “Hmm, okay.” But, okay, so my idea was I was going to write about her. I said, “This is quite a story.” To be the last living... and at that time I had never heard of Ishi. Ishi was the same story but I had never heard of him so I didn’t have him to go by. I thought this was like unique, you know. And so I thought I am definitely going to write this because it... it is a fabulous story. If you could get it like... well, like from his point of view. He thought there was nothing—there was nobody there. And nobody—it’s driving him crazy. What does this word mean? Like they go nuts when they find Egyptian hieroglyphics. What do they mean by this? What does this word mean? And it drives them nuts. There is nobody to tell them. So you have a story from two points of view. His point of view. His excitement at finding her. And her point of view of being the ultimate survivor.

Mona: And having someone interested in her memory.

Charles: Yeah, that’s a plus. Yeah, yeah.

Barbara: I’m going to have to take some.

Mona: What?

Charles: You can take some cake but no wine.

Barbara: No, I forgot. I haven’t taken my medicine yet, so...

Charles: I am going to suffer for this tonight. “Oh, my head!”

Barbara: No, no.
Mona: Why did the boy tell you about it? Do you remember?

Charles: I asked him about it. He didn’t tell me the whole story. Did someone else tell me that story? About this woman?

Barbara: Bill Richardson. He told you about the book.

Mona: Who is Bill Richardson?

Charles: He’s Tony’s cousin.

Barbara: From Porterville.

Mona: Oh. Oh, our Bill.

Charles: I got a lot of information from the boy though. I know that. But he wouldn’t have known. . . .

Barbara: But Richardson told you first, Honey.

Charles: He told me first. Maybe so. But how did I know the guy was living in Pescadero?

Barbara: Because he had been to see him.

Charles: Oh, he had been to see him?

Barbara: Right.

Charles: Ohhh. Well, ok. So that’s. . . she’s probably right. Ok, so the reason that I am spinning this out is that I found out later I couldn’t write a sentence on it. I couldn’t write one sentence. Because I found out that I could only write what I myself had experienced. So you could give me the most wonderful story and the most wonderful plot in the world—it’s wasted on me. I am not that kind of writer. A lot of writers, they could do anything. They can write on assignment. You give them a plot. They’ll write the story. I can’t do that. You
know I go in there [Motioning to the bedroom where he writes] writing is like flowing, like breathing. But if you gave me an assignment like that. Come back in five hours I would have like two words. I just can’t do it. So that was an important lesson that I learned which is—no use listening when people tell you stories—unless you are going to repeat the story in a story. But as far as. . . I use to think I am going to go to a bar and I am going to hear a wonderful plot and I am going to. . . you know. . . and I can’t do it. As I say, you can give me any plot you want—it’s wasted. So I wasted a lot of time thinking about stuff to write that I never would write. I would think about interviewing somebody and so on. Get a lot of interviews. Like I interviewed this guy from New Bedford for a while, who married my Aunt Rose.

Mona: When were you interviewing him.

Charles: He came and visited us. He stayed with us for a little while.

Mona: So what year would this be?

Charles: Oh that would have been when I was at the cannery. I was at the cannery in 1950-51. But I found out afterwards. It’s all. . . . I wasted my time. I cannot write somebody else’s—it’s his story. Not my story. And I just can’t handle it. I can’t do it. I can’t do it. So that was an important lesson. Because then it could focus me on me. Instead of fiddling around with stuff, you know. Now, you mentioned that on the. . . [Puts on his glasses and looks at his notes.] Well, let’s see about the. . . what did I say. . . . Yeah, you wanted “a summary of your life” basically. I wanted to mention—Oh this is. . . I want to tell you a couple things before I forget. Yeah. I will tell you about the sweatshop in a minute.

Barbara: Take off your glasses.
Charles: Oh, yeah, I don’t need them. I wanted to mention about doctors. Two doctors come to mind. I think I told you this already but I’ll tell you again anyway. I used to go to get my eyes. . . . [Gestured to show eyes checked.] Dr. Milton Flocks. And I had big thick glasses. Christ! Really. And I didn’t want the glass to shatter so they use to make it extra thick. So it was pshhhht [Shows how thick]. People would say, “Jesus Christ!” It’s like the guy. The minister that married Mom and me. He had glasses so thick his eyes were big—huge eyes—because they were magnified. I imagine mine were approaching that. So I was concerned about my eyes. And I would talk to him and he’d say, “Well, you know.” So I would say, well. . . . I remember this so well. I said, “Well, when I am sixty-five”—because he kept saying, “Your eyes are deteriorating.” Every time I went. “Your eyes are worse. You’ve got to get new glasses.” So I kept thinking, if every year I come or every two years, they are getting worse what happens when I am sixty-five? “So what is going to happen when I am sixty-five?” You know in the movie and the mother comes in and says, “How’s Jimmy doing?” And the doctor goes. . . . [Shakes his head with a discouraged look] “Jimmy’s dead.” So I said to Flocks, “What are my eyes going to be like when I am sixty-five?” And he goes. . . . [Shakes his head with the same look.] [Laughter] Son of a bitch. He gave me the feeling I was going to go blind. For years I thought I was going to go blind. The son of a bitch. I went and had my cataracts removed from my eyes in my 70s and my eyes are better now than they have ever been and I’m without glasses. I use glasses to read and to drive but my eyes are like 20/30, 20/40 without glasses. And I thought, “The son of a bitch.” The years I spent. . . . What am I going to do when I can’t read? When I can’t. . . you know. Then I am going to tell you about another doctor. Dr. James Butler at the Menlo Medical Clinic. I had an exam with a doctor named Dr. Finney—I think it was. This was like—oh, early 90s. And they have a—men have. . . Chris should have this test taken if he hasn’t. It is called a PSA.
They draw a little of your blood. And its, uh, I think it is specific something, specific antigens or something. It is called a PSA. And it is to check your prostate. So I had a physical. The PSA is suppose to be like 3.5. I think no more than that. Is that about what you get? [Looking at Chris] Mine was either 25 or 35. Waaaay out of the. . . . So, that’s what you do when you have prostate cancer. The warning is the PSA. So he said, “You are way out of it at 25. We are going to send you to a specialist, Dr. Butler.” And I thought, “Oh, fuck. Cancer.” That’s what I thought. Cancer of the prostate, you know. The next question is can they cut it out or has it spread? See. 25! I am in a bad bad zone. Now if it was 6 they would be worried. So I am at least 25. It was double digit. I know that. And so I said, “Oh, fuck. I am too young to die.” [Laughter] “I am writing books, you know.” Then I found out. . . . I don’t know how I found out that you also get a high PSA if your prostate is big. I didn’t know that initially. It is called BHP or something. And my prostate is like as big as a balloon. [Laughs] The doctors say, “Boy, you’ve got one mighty big. . . .” I don’t know how many doctors have said that. “You’ve got a mighty big prostate!” I said, “Yeah, I know! That’s why I have to pee every thirty minutes!” [Laughs] It cuts off your urinary tract, whatever, you know. So I go to see Dr. Butler. And he is going to take a biopsy. And he comes out—he’s wearing—you know how they wear white. He’s wearing white. It’s all dirty. [Laughing] It looks like he had eaten spaghetti all over. This fucking guy’s not too clean, you know. He’s at the Menlo Medical Clinic. So he makes an arrangement to have a biopsy. They take a snippet out of your prostate and then they check it for cancer. So he sets me up, and he says—he had a camera and everything—“Did you want to see me do it?” [Laughter] I says, “No.” You know, you know he wanted me to watch him do it. I am very queasy though. I said, “No, no, no.” So he takes about. . . takes a couple of snippets. I dunno, I think they take a needle and puncture it. They pull some out. It’s not
terribly—I was so... I had to have a Valium before I went in. I asked him, “Is it okay if I had a Valium?” He said, “Oh yeah, that’s alright.” Actually, it is not painful really. No more than an ordinary exam is. An ordinary exam is painful if you are tense. And I was always tense. You know that guy... rrrrhgh... I mean if he comes near me I’m... If you relax it’s phhtttt... Gay guys love that exam. In fact they ask for it. [Laughter] “Would you exam me, please. I think you missed something. Would you examine me again.” So, anyway—he took the biopsy—that was like a Friday—and he says, “We’ll have the results next week.” I said, “Okay.” So I go home. Now comes sweating time. What’s he going to tell me? It’s benign? That’s the big prostate or... bad news, you know. I come home and starting Monday I am expecting a phone call. I’m dying. I’m sitting around... This is a life and death sentence, I felt, you know. And I keep reading, “So and so died from prostate cancer.” Oh shit. Every time, like... “Died from prostate cancer.” And they are like rich guys. You’d think they would be having exams every other week, you know. And they probably don’t like going to the doctor any more than I do, you know. And so I am sweating it out. Every day is agony. That’s the fact—the truth. Tuesday comes... Wednesday comes... “Oh God”. Thursday comes... I know it doesn’t take that long to have a biopsy, you know. Friday comes... He hasn’t phoned me. I am trying to figure... “Oh my God.” Finally I can’t stand it. My heart’s going boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I pick up the phone and I dial the number and I get the nurse, naturally. I said, “This is Charles Felix.” And I said, “Last Friday I had a biopsy on my prostate. Have the results come in yet?” And she says, very casually, “Oh yes, it was negative.” Today I would have said, “Why in the fucking hell didn’t you phone me?” But I was so relieved I felt like jumping [Gestures high up] so I didn’t think to... Later on I realized. But she goes, “Oh yes, it was negative.” I thought, “My God! What kind of a doctor is this?” He is in the Menlo Medical
Clinic. A week later she calls me back and says, “Do you want to have the operation?” And I said, “What operation?” To slice up your prostate, so you don’t have to pee so much, you know. And she said, “Uh, didn’t the doctor tell you about it?” And I said, “No, he didn’t tell me about it.” She says, “Well, he wanted me to ask you if you wanted to have the operation.” He doesn’t ask me. She asked me. I said, “No, I don’t.” “Do you want the operation?” What? He’s having her do it. She is doing cold-calling. “Here’s a list of . . . ask ’em. . . .” “What should I say?” “Say, do you want the operation?” [Laughter] And that son of a bitch—he left me with something—he gave me an infection.

**Barbara**: He gave Daddy an infection that lasted forever.

**Charles**: Twice. What is that pill they give you like. . .

**Barbara**: You had to take an antibiotic.

**Charles**: No, what’s that. . . . If you have bird flu they give you a. . . .

**Mona**: Tamiflu?

**Charles**: Ok, what do they give you for it? It is a certain. . . . They say take it if you are at risk.

**Mona**: Yeah, it is Tamiflu in Australia, they call it.

**Charles**: I don’t know. That’s not the drug though. This is a. . . .

**Barbara**: What do you mean your Proscar? Are you talking about?

**Charles**: No, no, no. It’s a drug. It’s a very popular drug. That they say, “Take it if you think you might have. . . .”

**Barbara**: Oh, yeah.
**Charles:** I took it for three months. And it was tested. I still... I had prostatitis.

**Mona:** What? He gave it to you because he was dirty?

**Charles:** Well, I presume so.

**Barbara:** Yeah, it can happen any place but it was probably more with... .

**Charles:** It can happen but more likely with him. He probably gives everybody prostatitis. So I had to take it for another three months. Finally it cleared up. Later on, a couple of years later, I had another biopsy and no problems. So when I went to the doctor I said, “Could I have gotten it with the exam?” And he said, “Oh yes.” It was probably where I got it. I am not sure I got it because he was not too clean but I always... I said, “That son of a bitch—he really did a job on me.” But when he [she] said, “Oh yes, it was negative.” I was—I wouldn’t have cared what—I was so fucking elated. I said, “Oh my.” [Blows a kiss to the heavens] So that is the story of my two doctors. Now I am going to tell you about Eddie. To show you how times have changed, okay?

**Mona:** This is about the sweatshops.

**Charles:** Yeah. I was working at the States Manufacturing Company.

**Mona:** So give the year, Dad—roughly.

**Charles:** I was working at the States Manufacturing Company in—it would be 1940—the summer of 1942. I had been to school for a year. I was coming home—so for the summer I got a job there. And I think I told you a little about it. I won’t go into such detail. I acted—if I had told him I wanted a summer job there would have been no way on earth I would have got the job because... to train you—they don’t do that, you know. I said, “I want to learn the trade.” You have to convince them, you know. And, “I want to be a bundler the rest of
my life.” So I got the job. And we made pajamas. And we had three 
departments. One was the spreaders—they spread the cloth—they walk back 
and forth spreading the cloth. On a roller. One guy runs the roller, the other 
guy smooths it out. Get to the end—come back. Walk all day long. Smooth it 
out. Nice job really, because they had exercise you know. And then, most of 
the—there was a guy, a cutter. He cuts, he puts a pattern on top—on paper— 
and he cuts the pattern. Those guys are all missing a finger or two. Because 
every now and then the blade—swessst—they are holding it down, see as they 
cut.

**Mona:** Like several thicknesses.

**Charles:** Many layers. Oh, many layers. A huge amount of layers. Not just a 
few. A lot of layers. And he’s cutting you know, and see [demonstrates] and 
every now and then he goes—clrrkkkk—boom. Those guys—their left hand 
is—they are lucky if they have a left hand. Most of the people in the middle 
section were—what do you call them—stitchers. Power-sewing machines. And 
they were on piece work. They don’t even look up. They go wherroomroom... 
they are really—girls. Then there was a small department on the other side— 
shipping. They ship the stuff out. And I was on the side with the cutters. With 
the spreaders. Because after you cut it, I would tie it with a piece of rag, with a 
label, a ticket like it was a 44 sleeve, or whatever it was, and then I would put 
them in a basket and take them to the girls.

**Mona:** How would you know what size it was? Would they’d tell you or...?

**Charles:** They probably told me. They probably told me. Yeah. Because they 
wouldn’t have trusted me to know. So they probably would. Well, it would be 
very easy to make a mistake which wouldn’t do at all. Now, Mr. Addis. This 
place came from Brooklyn. And Mr. Addis—he looked like a guy in a gangster
movie. He has black [touches his hair], a Jewish guy, you know—they were all Jewish guys [The managers and foremen]. He has black hair slicked down. A scar [draws a line down the side of his face]. And his eyes! You know, it is funny, in New Bedford the Jews were all kind of pudgy, not aggressive. These guys from New York were something else again. You can’t just say he is a Jew. You have to say where he is from, see. It is like Mexicans. You get Mexicans from a rural area—isolated—they are the nicest people you could ever meet. You get Mexicans from the city, from LA—all bad habits down there: drugs, crime and everything—different bag of beans you know. So it is not just the nationality. What’s your upbringing? Where were you raised? Like the Mexican kids—they are the sweetest kids in the world. I think I. . . did I tell you about them? A kid. . . we had parties, you know, give him a cupcake and everything—never eat it—take it home for his kid sister. That’s what they are like. From the rural areas. That’s a fact. They would never eat it. You know—their kid sister. [Got emotional] I get sentimental when I think about them. And it used to get me—that Jack Oakes. Somebody stole a key—a master key at the school. One of the women left it in the door. Somebody came by and took the key. Well, he was terribly worried. It opens every classroom in the school. Opens the office. Because there is money and stuff, you know. So Jack Oakes, the Principal. . . he is trying to find out who took it. So he is quizzing. . . he thought it had to be a Mexican. He is quizzing these Mexican kids from this rural little area and I could see [a look of horror] they were so shocked. And I thought, “Jack, for Chrissakes! I would trust that kid with my wallet.” You know. . . and of course, I think I maybe wrote about this. I am not sure. I forget. Probably wrote about it.

**Barbara:** You did.
Charles: The kid who took it was a kid from the city who was a fucked-up kid and his family took him to Pescadero figuring a nice rural area would be nice for him, you know. And I said, “Ahh, it’s not going to work.” Because I knew—I had the kid in my class. I won’t tell you his name. He took the key. And later on he became a big, big drug dealer. Up in Washington, the state of Washington. They found in a... like a... not a... he was like a wanted guy.

Mona: What nationality were his parents?

Charles: He was American basically. I think they found huge caches of money buried in his yard. I mean he was big enough to be prominent.

Barbara: Yeah, he can’t come back to the United States even.

Charles: Well, how do you know where he is?

Barbara: Well, remember, you said that he was writing to or he phoned—something—one of the guys.

Charles: Oh, he phoned somebody?

Barbara: Said he missed... Yeah.

Charles: He was a big drug dealer. I had that kid in my class. And I knew in thirty minutes he is bad news. Well, anyway. We got off the subject. Back to the sweatshop. We had a custodian. Well, we didn’t call him a custodian, we called him a handyman, a janitor. Now they have a nice word. A custodian. Like teaching. I am not a teacher. I’m an educator. Educators. Teachers, that’s not too nice. Educator, that’s nice. Okay, so he was a handyman. And I didn’t know this. But he was a, what do they call it, not an everyday drunk but an every now and then drunk. There’s a word for that.

Mona: Binger? Binge drinker?
Charles: No. Let’s put it this way. Every now and then he went on a binge. He’d be perfectly dry. So, he was very cordial. We would get along very well. And he came up to me. . . oh, I should tell you about money. The girls worked from 8 to 5 with an hour for lunch so it was an eight hour day. The men worked from 8 to 5 with an hour for lunch and then we always worked two extra hours, from 5. Very happy to work. In those days I’m not sure we got overtime for that. Maybe we did. Maybe we didn’t. I don’t remember. Time and a half. But everybody was anxious to work. So we worked from 8 to 7 at night. So that was like a ten-hour day. Didn’t work on Saturdays or Sundays. So that would be like a fifty-hour week. We got . . . in those days we got 40 cents an hour. We got 40 cents an hour, so that would mean 40 hours would be 16 dollars and then 10 more would be, ok. We didn’t get time and a half because I seem to remember my check was 20 dollars. Not my check—cash. They give you cash in a little envelope. So Eddie came up to me one day and he gave me some. . . . Oh, they told me, before this happened, they told me about his wife. They said, “He is scared to death of his wife. She’s a holy terror.” They just said that incidentally. So anyway, Eddie came up to me and he said, I don’t remember the story now, but he gave me a cock and bull story about an emergency. And he needed five dollars. He’d pay me Friday. That was like Tuesday or Wednesday or whatever it was. And he said, “I’ll pay you payday.” I said, “Okay.” So, you know, I took the money out. So I gave him 5 dollars. A day or two later he didn’t show up for work. And I didn’t know what happened. And he stayed out for two days and I found out—they told me—he went on a binge. Now how do you go on a binge with 5 dollars. I don’t know. Of course you could get a beer for 10 cents, I guess.

Mona: He might have borrowed from other people as well.
Charles: Ahh, not around there, you don’t. But he went on a binge. Got the money and went on a binge. Came back to work. And so Friday came along. And you get paid one at a time. And he quickly got in line, got his little envelope with the money in it. Mr. Addis, he has a paper, he looks at the amount of money. Oh no, it is already in the envelope. He doesn’t count it. The girl, the secretary counted it. He has your name and he checks it and gives you the thing. So we’re in line. Eddie gets his envelope. I am in the line. I expected him to wait and give me the five dollars, you know. So I get it—he’s gone. I said, “Shit, he must have forgot.” I was so naïve, you know. I said, “He must have forgot.” So next Friday, I don’t think I did—maybe I did ask him again. So the next Friday, of course he didn’t have it. The next Friday he did the same thing. He ran up there and he got his envelope. I would always amble up, slowly, you know. And then he quickly went up and got his check, got his pay or whatever, and took off. So it finally dawned on me. He is not going to pay me back my 5 dollars. So I didn’t upbraid him for it. I asked him a couple of times. “Eddie, what about my 5 dollars?” So one day I was working and I was talking to Billy. Billy was the guy I may have told you about. I walked into the men’s room and he was wrapping cloth around his waist. Just before he goes home. Puts his shirt over it. He says, “I’m going to make 5 shirts out of this” or something. And I thought, “You stupid ass.” Addis, you know—you are walking and it looks like you’ve got armor on. If you walk out in that and Mr. Addis sees you, you are fired, you know. Quickly. On the spot. No nothings. So anyway, I mentioned it to Billy. I said, “Billy, you know, he borrowed 5 dollars from me and didn’t pay me back.” And Billy said, “Oh, oh, okay.” So you know, I just told him and let it go. Well, what Billy did, but I didn’t know this, was he told Nat, who was our boss. And Nat told Mr. Addis. So the next Friday when Eddie ran up, you know, Mr. Addis didn’t give him his payroll. Oh, sorry, the next Friday when we were getting
paid, Eddie ran up quickly and Mr. Addis said, “Wait a minute, Eddie.” You know, there is a line of guys waiting to get paid. So I came up and Mr. Addis handed the envelope and said, “Give him his 5 dollars.” Isn’t that amazing. He was very shamefaced.

**Mona:** Was it because you were young, do you think, Dad? That they felt it was wrong?

**Charles:** No, I’ll tell you. He had a moral sense. He felt it was wrong. That I had been taken advantage of and he had to give me the 5 dollars because he would have been fired if he hadn’t. And he turned white. And somebody told me, “He’s going to get the beating of his life when he goes home because he gives his wife minus 5 he’s going to get it. They knew him, what his background was, you know. So very shamefaced he gave me the 5 dollars.

**Mona:** And did it backfire on you then later or not?

**Charles:** No, no. No it didn’t. He was kind of embarrassed. He wasn’t a mean guy or anything. No. He was not angry about it. He just was shamefaced. But I thought, “My God, today that would never happen.” A boss would say, “It’s your hard luck. You live and learn from this.”

**Mona:** Not if it is a kid.

**Charles:** Really?

**Mona:** How old was he?

**Charles:** He?

**Mona:** Yeah.

**Charles:** Oh, he was like 40 or something. Bald. . . .
Mona: And you were. . . . You were 20.

Charles: Yeah, and I was a young 20. I didn’t know beans, you know.

Mona: Yeah, I know.

Charles: But I thought. I thought to me I said, “That’s a sign of the times. That people were more—there was a much greater sense of morality then than now.” Now it’s like, like everything goes kind of, you know.

Barbara: When you were. . . .

Charles: Yeah.

Barbara: Did you ever get paid for working for your Dad?

Charles: No. We got an allowance.

Barbara: Yeah.

Charles: Now Joe got paid because he worked full-time. I was never a full-time worker. You know I worked there all summer. I wasn’t much of a help to tell you the honest truth. When I was a kid we used to—I used to get 10 cents one week and 5 cents the next. Now when Joe was working there he got several dollars. Now I want to say one other thing. This is December 27, 2006 and on January 10, 2007 Barbara and I have been married 60 years.

Barbara: Oh, 60!

Charles: 60 years, Mom.

Barbara: God! Gosh we made it! [Laughs]

Charles: We made it. And I want to say anything I have accomplished in life, I have done it because of her because before I met her I was one miserably unhappy son of a bitch, you know. And she, that’s a fact, she gave me
happiness which enabled me to work. So she is. . . . She made me happy. I wish, sweetheart, I wish we had another 60 years but unless we inject ourselves with monkey glands. . . . [Laughter] I am all for it. If you want to go and get some. In the 1920s they used to do that, you know. If you wanted to rejuvenate yourself. Where can you find a monkey? I'll kill him myself. Do you know which gland they use? I am not sure. Probably his balls, I don’t know. So, anyway—so what did you have in mind? [Pointing to list of questions]

Mona: Uhmm.

Charles: How much time have we got, Chris? Two minutes?

Chris: Another 8 minutes.

Charles: 8 minutes? Ask me an 8 minute question.

Mona: Ok, You used to say how if you had had a chance you would give up teaching or working.

Charles: In a second.

Mona: Right.

Charles: In less than a second.

Mona: So you could write.

Charles: Yes.

Mona: But I just wondered. T. S. Eliot said, in response to a question about whether a writer needs money or to work or things like that. He said that he could only talk about himself. “It is very dangerous to give an optimal career for everybody,” he means all writers, “but I feel quite certain that if I had started by having independent means, if I hadn’t had to bother about earning a living
and could have given all my time to poetry, it would have had a deadening influence on me.” [http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4738/the-art-of-poetry-no-1-t-s-eliot ]

Charles: Well, I don’t feel that in my case because I was teeming with ideas to write, you know. Like Tony. I wanted to write a sequel. And Tony took three years of really hard work.

Barbara: And you wanted to write the war book.

Charles: Yeah. Now that’s why down cellar I have boxes after boxes of notes. And the reason is the notes simply are a substitute for writing. Because I can dash a note off in seconds but writing takes—you’ve got to look at it—it takes hours. I didn’t have the time available. But Barb, Momma, will tell you. How many boxes of notes have I got? Too many to even count. That was because it was a cheap or a poor substitute for writing. In my case it would have been different because I was teeming with energy. And like sometimes during the summer I would write furiously.

Barbara: You wrote Da Gama, didn’t you? Or did you write it during school?

Charles: I was teaching, yeah. I was still teaching. But you see that was, that was kind of different because that was a thin book and I, whatcha call it, wrote most of it during the summer.

Mona: But do you think teaching helped you? For example when you wrote Tony. In that it gave you... you had contact with kids?

Charles: No, no, oh no. It didn’t help me at all. The contact was when I was a kid. That’s what I write about. Not this time. Teaching as far as writing goes—total loss. All it did was take my bloody time.

Barbara: And energy.
Charles: And energy. And kept me from writing. And it was just a way to put bread on the table. I think every writer is different. Like, you mentioned Capote. If he’s writing only for money. Well, that’s you know... that’s... He’s a hired hand more or less you could say. Well, in other words. . . well, it’s alright.

Barbara: What was C. S. Lewis doing for a living?

Charles: He worked in a bank.

Mona: This is T. S. Eliot.

Barbara: Oh, T. S. Eliot.

Charles: He worked in a bank.

Mona: T. S. Eliot.

Charles: See poetry, though, is a little different. Poetry, you can write that... it is not like a novel. A novel is like a marathon. A poem is like a sprint. You could write poetry and work in a bank. Because you could write a poem that night. Not a long poem. See what I mean? It is a different focus. It is [Holds fingers close together] short. His poems—well I guess some of them are long but... I am not saying that it is good to be working but like Carlos Williams he was a doctor, a poet. But I don’t see how a man can write novels and work full time unless. Unless he’s like—I’d read some of these guys. They get up at 5 in the morning and write until 7 and then they go to work. Well, [Laughter from the image of Dad getting up at 5 in the morning]. At 7 in the morning I am unconscious. Well, I read about a doctor. He gets up every day at 5 and goes for a run. Five in the morning. Good Lord. That guy—he could live to 150—I am not going to do that you know. So it has to do with your energy level, too. Now I didn’t have... I had tremendous energy for writing. I used
to write twice a day. I’d write in the afternoon—3 hours or so. I’d eat dinner. And I’d write at night for another 3 hours. That’s six hours writing. That’s a lot of writing. But I read about some guys—these best seller guys—they’ll write 12 hours. After 6 hours my brain was gone.

**Mona:** But when you were teaching. Are you talking about when you were teaching?

**Charles:** No. No, when I was writing full time. Like during the summer. I would work three hours. Now I could only work three hours at most. Once. I can’t work 6 hours anymore. Oh Oh—I’m getting worried here. Mom—you’ve got 30 seconds. 30 seconds. Say something, please! You drunk, you [Laughter]. If I didn’t keep an eye on her, she’d be lying in a gutter. She is a secret binge drinker. And a binge candy eater.
On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], Mona Biskup [daughter] and Chris Brown [grandson]

People mentioned: William Goyen [writer]; James T Farrell [writer]; Matthew [son]; Thomas Wolfe [writer]; Ernest Hemingway [writer]; James Henle [publisher]; Theodore Dreiser [writer]; Henry James [writer]; H L Mencken [journalist]; Laurie Toth [friend]; Leo Tolstoy [writer]; Fyodor Dostoevsky [writer]; Ivan Turgenev [writer]; Anton Chekov [writer]; Marcel Proust [writer]; Peter Biskup [Mona’s husband]; Armando Valladares [Cuban poet]; Jean-Paul Sartre [writer]; George W Bush [US President]; Chris [grandson]; Sharlene [daughter-in-law]; Peter Burford [publisher of Crossing the Sauer]; Gore Vidal [writer]; Ed Knappman [agent for Crossing the Sauer]; Frank Sousa [publisher of Through a Portagee Gate, Da Gama and Tony]; Lillian Hellman [writer]; Dashiell Hammett [writer]

Books mentioned: Gently, Brother; Mothballs and His Friends: Barracks Life by the Golden Gate, 1934-44; Tony: A New England Boyhood; Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934; Through a Portagee Gate; Crossing the Sauer; Vice President Nixon, Welcome to our School!

*This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.*

**Mona:** This is Thursday the 28th of December, 2006. Mona Felix talking to Charles Felix. I have a quote I would like to read you, Dad, about the place of
the setting and the importance of a region in writing. In an interview, William Goyen said,

“For me, environment is all. Place—as I was saying about my students—is absolutely essential. I know the vogue for the non-place, the placeless place, à la Beckett, is very much an influence on writing these days. It has been said that places don’t exist anymore. That everything looks alike. There is the same Howard Johnson on your turnpike in Kansas as there is in Miami and in the state of Washington. And the same kind of architecture dominates the new office buildings and the skyscraper. What is a writer to do? Free the “reality” of his environment? To lament loss of place, to search for it in memory? Because within place is culture, style. We speak of a lost way of life. In many of my books and stories, I’ve felt the need to re-create, to restore lost ways, lost places, lost styles of living.” http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/3637/the-art-of-fiction-no-63-william-goyen

Charles: Is that it?

Mona: Yes.

Charles: I think that is a perfect quote for me. Especially the end, he’s trying to recreate. . . read that sentence again. . . he’s trying to recreate a. . .

Mona: “In many of my books and stories, I’ve felt the need to re-create, to restore lost ways, lost places, lost styles of living.”

Charles: It is like a historical plus to be able to portray a place, because the places change. . . as they were then. . . no more. . . everything changes. I was thinking like of James T. Farrell he had Chicago, the south side of Chicago, Thomas Wolfe had Asheville, North Carolina—that was their place. They wrote about it extensively, Farrell particularly. Later on when Wolfe went to
New York, New York became his place, but his earlier work—it was all on Asheville. My place is New Bedford. I didn’t actually realize that. I wrote a book about New Bedford, *Gently, Brother*. And then I wrote some other stuff, and then… but I kept being drawn back to it. And so clearly that’s my place. And everything, like I’ll give you an example, of something that is gone forever. When I was a kid going to Knowlton School, sixth grade, fifth/sixth grade—you come out of school—there would be a guy in a car, a nice car which in itself is unusual because nobody had cars. And he calls you over. Not a child molester. Today he would be a child molester. Now he calls you over. And as a kid, the way we were, if an adult calls us over, we go. Instead of saying, [waves hand] “Go to hell, creep.” Today, the kid would say, “Hey, get lost.” Ok, he is a salesman for *The Saturday Evening Post*, and he has a… and he has called over a bunch of kids. So we are standing, like six or eight kids. And I hated this because I wanted to leave and I felt you don’t leave. This is an adult. He wants us to sell *The Saturday Evening Post*. It costs 5¢. So he wants you to go door to door and sell it. And he’s showing you all these crappy prizes you are going to get: a baseball—that’s a prize—or a glove. You have to sell about ten million copies to get a glove. And he is giving us a spiel, you know. He shows us the magazine. It’s a thirty-minute spiel and you are stuck. You want to get the hell out of there. I was always… this happened to me several times. You know, I’m bored. I know I am not going to take the magazine. It is just a waste of my time. And here’s the thing. This guy is so dumb that he doesn’t realize nobody in the North End is going to buy his *Saturday Evening Post*. It is a middle-class magazine and it costs money. There just are not going to be any takers. You go up and down the street twenty times nobody is going to buy it. Because it is the wrong place. And so all in all it is a waste of time. Well, I cite this as I don’t believe that happens any more. You know, that a guy parks himself outside a school and gets this captive audience and so on and
so... I don’t know if I wrote that in *Gently, Brother* or not, but that is an incident that I don’t think is going to happen again.

**Barbara:** Daddy, he came to our school too.

**Charles:** He did?! The same guy probably.

**Barbara:** But it was different. He would come and he had selected kids, so maybe this was after the spiel. They were boys and they would run up and he would give them the magazines to sell. And I was so jealous. . . .

**Charles:** Oh really?

**Barbara:** I wanted to have one of those white sacks that go over your shoulder with *Saturday Evening Post* on it, you know. I just wanted so badly to be able to. . .

**Charles:** Well that’s the difference between your town and mine. Yours was more of a middle class—

**Barbara:** What were they? 5¢?

**Charles:** 5¢. I never saw any kid take on the job, actually take on the job.

**Barbara:** He would meet them after school, you know. He would come once a week I would guess.

**Charles:** See the difference is you had kids who took it because they probably sold some. But I never saw one kid. . . Nobody wanted a white sack because we all knew it was a total waste of time but the salesman didn’t know that or I guess he didn’t. So I am listing that as an example of a thing that has gone.

**Mona:** You have not only preserved place you have preserved people.

**Charles:** Customs.
**Mona:** Well, people, not just your father, but the man in the Library... people in the mills. You have actually preserved people, haven’t you, Dad?

**Charles:** I’ve tried. I’ve tried to. That’s right. The Army book, *Mothballs*, I am trying to preserve the men. *Mothballs and His Friends*. All the various kinds of men. There they are. And as far as I can do it, I tried to do it as truthfully as I could. This is the way they are.

**Mona:** And that creates a problem because some of the things that were said then are not acceptable today.

**Charles:** Right. I find that deplorable. They want to whitewash the past. It didn’t happen. Well... you lose your sense of history then. Basically you’re censoring in retrospect. I always marvel at these people. They will take a guy 200 years ago, like at the Declaration of Independence, and he will have an attitude that was prevalent at the time that doesn’t match the attitude today. So, oh he’s a bad guy. They want him to know politically-correct positions 200 years later. Well, if they would realize a lot of the opinions we have today 200 years from now are going to look just as barbaric as those. They don’t sense that. Time—it is in flux. It changes. You’re silly if you think—like I see like women, a style in the 1920s like cloche hats... everybody is laughing ha ha ha—what you are wearing today they will laugh at 30 years from now just as much. So you are not superior to that woman because you are laughing at her hat. That’s another thing too. This is not exactly on the subject but it always amazes me how, and I do this myself, we judge quickly. Like I was thinking about Ernest Hemingway. His father committed suicide. I don’t know if I said this before or not. His father committed suicide. He was a doctor. Now I don’t know why he committed suicide. But anybody who commits suicide—they are desperate. They cannot cope with the situation that they are in. It might be medical. It might be financial. They just don’t see any way out so they kill
themselves. They are in misery. He wrote about his father in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*. He was totally contemptuous of his father. Called him a coward. And he obviously didn’t like him very much. But his suicide was like... he went on for a whole thing about it, you know... he was “rrrrh”... contempt. Ok, that’s Hemingway. Contemptuous of his father because his father kills himself. What does Hemingway do? Forty years later he kills himself. So I thought, Christ, you know we don’t... Hemingway especially I think. You don’t give a guy any understanding or compassion for what he is going through. Just the act. Voomp—cuts him off. So I don’t know how that is appropriate to this but I throw it in anyway. That’s it.

**Mona:** Where did the name Gaw come from? [Used in *Gently, Brother*, unpublished book]

**Charles:** I made it up.

**Mona:** Why did you choose that name?

**Charles:** Well, that’s a good question. I could have called it New Brunswick or new this or old this or that. But those don’t say that. I wanted something harsh because it was a harsh place. I wanted something that sounded like a crow’s call. You know crows go like, “Caw, Caw, Caw, Caw.” What I didn’t like about it is it is too much like science fiction. Science fiction would have a place named Gaw. I said, well I don’t like that but I wanted a harsh—and another thing I think, people are going to remember the word better than if I called it New Caledonia or something. I could have taken a word from England and called it New Ipswich or whatever because most of those towns in Massachusetts came from England. I was surprised. Almost every town that I’ve heard of in Massachusetts there is an English thing like New Bedford. This is *new* Bedford. So I wanted something harsh and that would represent the
town and would be simple. And would may be remembered better than Old Ipswich or something like that. But I thought about that. That was my reason.

**Mona:** I’d like you to talk—I know you don’t have time to read much now.

**Charles:** I read a lot once.

**Mona:** I’d like you to talk about what books you used to read. What you enjoyed and why. Maybe if there were any authors that particularly struck a chord with you. I would like you to talk a bit about that.

**Charles:** Ok. Years ago, my two favorite authors were James T. Farrell who wrote about Chicago. I read probably... he used to write fat novels, 400 pages, published by Vanguard Press, by James Henle... I read probably nine or ten of his novels and bought them which is unusual, to buy the book you know. But you had to buy them because the libraries didn’t carry them. And in fact, did I ever tell you I got a letter from him once? You know, I was young. I was outraged that the Library, the New Bedford Public Library, did not have *Studs Lonigan* which was his masterpiece, a trilogy. So I wrote a letter to *The Standard Times* saying they buy twiddle twaddle like—and I named three or four books—but a really serious book they don’t buy and the librarian wrote back to the newspaper. He found out, I don’t know how, he found out I was young. He put he’s a young student... he doesn’t know anything... these books he calls so called twaddle, he said, “Many people enjoy them.” So he was pissed off. Well lo and behold, Farrell got a hold of my letter to the paper. He must have had a clipping service. And he wrote me a three paged letter single spaced... I have it somewhere. Do we have it handy, Honey? [turning to Barbara] No.

**Barbara:** It would be downstairs.
Charles: In the files. Single spaced letter, three paged letter. He was so touched by the fact that somebody. . . . So I liked him. Then there was a guy who. . . he’s kind of gone out of vogue which I think is too bad because, especially Studs I think. Some of the other books, like he had the Danny O’Neill series. Danny O’Neill was him. And he wrote in great detail and I always liked detail but it didn’t, it kind of just went on and on and on and on and it didn’t have a real climax or anything but I liked him. And I liked a guy named Theodore Dreiser. Now Dreiser was a. . . he’s not so big anymore. In fact he is not big at all. At one time he was a big, big name. He wrote a. . . like was the father of realism which I liked. For his time he was very bold. Like Sister Carrie came out I think in about 1900 and it was a departure from people like Henry James who wrote rather long involuted sentences, flowery. Like Matty was quoting the word aloft. Henry James would have used the word aloft. A realistic guy would never use the word aloft, you know, he held it aloft. It is too too flowery. Now Dreiser is kind of interesting. He wrote Sister Carrie. It shows you how times change. Carrie was not a prostitute at all. She was just a woman, you know. But she ran off with a married man. He was a salesman, his name was Hurstwood. Hurstwood ruined his life because after he ran off with her he lost his. . . he had a position. . . and by running of with her he lost his position and became a waiter and just. . . . Anyway, Doubleday, I forgot Doubleday’s first name. Doubleday agreed to publish the book. And they were in the act of publishing it. Doubleday’s wife—he called the book Sister Carrie—Doubleday’s wife happened to pick up the book and here is a girl running off with a married man to live out of wedlock. Ohhh, Christ! She said to her husband, “I don’t want you publishing it. This is dirty stuff.” And so to satisfy his wife—he was under a contractual obligation to publish it—he published it but he kept it in the cellars. He didn’t sell it in other words. He did not send out review copies. He didn’t send them to bookstores. He just
published it because his contract said you publish it. It said nothing about trying to sell it. And that threw Dreiser into a terrible depression. In fact he almost killed himself. Went down to the water to throw himself in but didn’t do it. So I like Dreiser’s work: *American Tragedy* . . .

**Barbara**: Well, how did he finally get into the . . . ?

**Charles**: Later on. He made a big hit with some of the other books but initially they tried to kill it. And he was quite a guy. He liked H. L. Mencken, the critic, because Mencken praised his work which not. . . many people thought he was crude. You know you can’t write about that stuff and Dreiser always did. Now there was no graphic sex whatsoever—none whatsoever—but just the idea of a man and woman screwing out of wedlock that was it. And he had other books the same way, see. And they were affronted by it. This was immoral. Immorality. You are promoting immorality. So Dreiser had a friend named H. L. Mencken, who was a critic in Baltimore, and Dreiser was driving from New York to Florida and he’s going through Baltimore and says “I might as well stop at Mencken’s house.” So he stops at Mencken’s house. Goes upstairs, into the house.

**Barbara**: It’s bitter winter.

**Charles**: Who’s telling this story? You are going to give away my punch line. Grrr! [Laughter]

**Barbara**: I think you need that first.

**Charles**: No!

**Barbara**: Ok, sorry.

**Charles**: You are like the editors. They want a punch line in the first paragraph. Punch line belongs later on.
Barbara: That’s not the punch line.

Charles: Well, it is part of the punch line.

Barbara: Ok, go ahead.

Charles: Feel free. . . . [Distortion on tape] She wants me to get to the point. . . get with it.

Barbara: No, no, that’s not it. I thought you forgot.

Charles: Ok, so he stops at Mencken’s house and they have a cigar, and are talking. Have some wine. They both loved to drink. Mencken was a German, you know, loved beer. And they were sitting around. And Dreiser had a woman named Helen. It took him about thirty years to marry her. I don’t know why he waited so long but she was a very faithful companion to him. Helen Dreiser. But they weren’t married at this time. He married her when he was quite old. And Mencken said, “Where’s Helen? I guess you left her in New York.” And Dreiser said, “No, she’s down in the car.” Now this was sub-zero temperatures. He said, “No, she’s down in the car.” Mencken says, “Jesus.” A car without a heater. And they had been sitting talking for a couple of hours. Mencken rushes down. He finds the poor woman. She is practically frozen. He takes her into the house and tries to thaw her out, you know, and Dreiser’s like [Makes the crazy sign]. Mencken was just astonished by it. He said, “How could he do that?”

Mona: Did he write about this?

Charles: Mencken wrote about it, yeah. He said, “Where’s Helen? Is she back in New York?” “No, she’s out in the car.” [Laughter] Dreiser, like he was half-nuts. Before he wrote Sister Carrie or was it after—after I guess—I can’t remember if it was before or after. He was very good at, he knew how to
write. Although he wrote stuff that middle class people didn’t want. He knew how to edit stuff that they would like. In other words he knew how to write, not write, but edit crap—romance stuff—like *The Saturday Evening Post.* In other words he could [Made a gesture like dividing the mind]. He started off with newspaper work. So in other words his own work was one thing but to earn a living he could write anything. He became a famous editor and he was editing several magazines that were very popular at the time and then—this shows how nuts he was—the owner of the magazines had a fourteen-year-old daughter and Dreiser was either bopping her or attempting to bop her.

**Mona:** You mean have sex with her?

**Charles:** Yes, I am trying to be polite, you know. He intended to have sexual intercourse with this minor. And he may have. I forget now. When the publisher found out about it, he fired him and so he lost his. He was getting a tremendous amount of money because these magazines were popular. So he lost it. So that’s the kind of guy he was. So those two guys were the two that I liked the most.

**Barbara:** Did Dreiser write *American Tragedy?*

**Charles:** Yes. It’s based on a newspaper story. He liked the idea of it very well because it was a guy on the make. Dreiser was on the make. So he responded to this other kid who was on the make. And the other kid, he had a girlfriend who was low class, he was low class but then he had an opportunity to move up in the world. And his girlfriend was pregnant. So the real story was he drowned the girl. Took her out in the row boat and dumped the row boat and she couldn’t swim. Dreiser in his novel tried to make it—he was going to do it, changed his mind and she fell over. But the guy was electrocuted for it. [Audio distortion] Now writers like Hemingway were very popular. I never cared for
him. I never cared for him at all. Because I felt he was ego. He wouldn’t tell the truth about himself if his life was at stake. He had a certain image that he was trying to present of himself. And I felt it was a phony image and I didn’t want to.

**Barbara:** The amazing thing is Daddy’s style of writing is very much like Hemingway’s.

**Charles:** Well, I dunno.

**Barbara:** Uses quite short sentences. Check it out. Daddy uses very short sentences instead of using compound sentences and complex sentences.

**Charles:** But he doesn’t use adjectives and stuff.

**Barbara:** He doesn’t use conversation. But I am talking about the sentence structure.

**Charles:** Well, he has conversation.

**Barbara:** But not as extensive as you do.

**Charles:** I don’t think he used adjectives too much.

**Mona:** I remember you guys talking about Thomas Wolfe a lot. Was that?

**Charles:** Yes, I liked him a lot, too.

**Barbara:** Oh yeah, we both did.

**Mona:** Why did you like him?

**Charles:** I liked him because he... well, he wrote about people—the way they were. And he wasn’t trying to present an image. And he kind of had a screwy family and he wrote about them truthfully. So I responded to that. I don’t write like him at all. He wrote very—he is like intoxicated. Writes very, you know,
nine adjectives in a row. The thing is... your friend, what’s her name? Laurie? Laurie Toth? She sent us a... this guy had written like a book. Didn’t he write a book about the war? And he told an experience. He met Hemingway. This is the one I think. He met Hemingway at a bar in World War II. And Hemingway was, this was during the war, Hemingway was a war correspondent. And I thought this was interesting. And Hemingway is telling him all the stuff he had done, you know, in the war. And the guy got up. He was just an ordinary soldier. He got up. And he says, “I think you’re full of shit.” And he walked off. Because Hemingway’s idea of the war was like—his pal was a guy who was at the regimental level. The guy was an officer. He had a trailer with a shower in it which was like unheard of, you know. In other words these are privileged people. And Hemingway palled around with him but when he talked it sounded like he was on the front line. And in his mind I guess it was. But I thought that was interesting. And this guy didn’t know who he was. He’s a famous writer, you were supposed to you know and kowtow to him, but he was not a literate guy. I just marveled. When I read that I said, “Oh, my God. Here’s an ordinary guy listening to this guy and he says, ‘You’re full of shit.’” OK, we’re a long way off on that question. But you’re right, I liked Wolfe a lot, in fact it was funny when I was writing Tony—I was writing it here at night. I use to write... Mom was teaching and I was home. She was the breadwinner. And I would write, I hope I didn’t go into this before. We had a table there, a little round table, remember the round table? Well, it’s the same table that is in there [Pointing to the bedroom]. We don’t throw anything away. And I would write from midnight to six in the morning, playing the radio softly with classical music. And I would have a frozen dinner about midnight. Mom was sleeping. Preparing to go to battle the next day. And I would have a frozen dinner. While I had the frozen dinner I would read this big fat book, Thomas Wolfe’s letters. They were collected. And they just fascinated me. And I would read
them and I would re-read them. And I spent most of that year reading his letters. Because I liked him a whole lot. So let me see, we had Dreiser, we had Farrell—of course Farrell was earlier, much much earlier. He’s not much of a language guy, Farrell. He’s like more, I don’t know what you would call him. His writing is not very polished. But I liked the fact that he was looking at things honestly, you know. But as far as writing skill, or technique, or style—not much there at all. And then of course, I didn’t read these guys when I was going to Stanford. I was teaching while I was going to Stanford. So I couldn’t go to class because I was teaching and so I took reading courses. Because I needed money from the government. They were paying me $110 dollars a month. So I went to school. So I took the minimum number of courses and I would take reading courses or education courses in the evening to make out the units. So I took a reading course in Russian writers and they just blew me away: Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and Turgenev and Chekov. I said, “God, what writers!” I think those four or five guys are the best writers of the world. I think American writers don’t—we’re not in the same—it’s like, what would you say, ballet dancers? Well, I guess there are some good American? Are there? [Looking at Barbara].

**Barbara**: It’s different.

**Charles**: I would say, by my feelings, that American writers, our literature is very down in the scale of things. British writers I think are higher than ours. But I think by far the best—I mean they are not a little better, they are hugely better—are the Russian writers. And it is funny. They flowered in the nineteenth century. Four or five of them and then it is like gone. Russian writers after nineteen hundred stink. Absolutely stink. They are worse than ours. But in the nineteen hundreds, eighteen hundreds I mean, you have as I said—Turgenev and Dostoevsky. Each one is different. Each one of those
writers is different. Yet each one is an absolute unparalleled writer. You’ve read them too, haven’t you, Mom? What did you think?

Barbara: Oh, I love the Russian writers, yes.

Charles: Now Mom is a lover of Proust. And she has read him, what, three or four times?

Barbara: But I like the Russians, very much.

Charles: But I couldn’t. . . . Now this shows you something. . . . I couldn’t read a paragraph of Proust. I read one paragraph. I say, “Ok. That’s enough.”

Mona: Do you think you were influenced by any of these writers or not?

Charles: No. No, I don’t think so. I think the most influence on me was Farrell because, I think I already probably said it, he wrote about the people he knew, the low-class people. And that was the first time I had ever read anybody who wrote about low-class people, in a truthful way. And in a realistic way too, in that he wasn’t softening it up. Like middle-class writers in *The Saturday Evening Post*, they would write about a cobbler and it would be like. . . .

Mona: Romanticized.

Charles: Yes, just not a person. . . not a real person. And Farrell’s people were real. And so I thought, “Boy, this is really something. And so I felt that I would make my people real. But the Russians—they go beyond that. There’s something. . . . I can’t even tell you what it is because if I knew what it is I would try to do it myself. But it is like when you listen to some piece of music. How did this guy create that piece of music? Who the hell knows? It just came out of him. And it came out of them. And as I said each one was different. Like Dostoevsky was half-crazy. But he’s a. . . like Tolstoy is much more sober and I thought Tolstoy was the best I ever read. But when I read Dostoevsky I
thought this guy’s even better because he goes. . . he’s half-nuts and he is able to somehow. . . I dunno. . .

**Mona:** Go deep. Go into the person.

**Charles:** Yes.

**Barbara:** Get into the lives.

**Charles:** Yes, like *The Brothers Karamazov*, I thought at the time and I probably still would, this is probably the greatest novel ever written. That’s Dostoevsky. He’s half-crazy. That’s what makes the book great. He’s not controlled.

**Mona:** You used to read a lot of nonfiction too, didn’t you?

**Charles:** Well, I used to read. I read fiction. And then after a while I got started on this. Communism interested me. Not that I was a Communist but I was wondering how did this work out. So I read a lot of books by former Communists. And it was good because. . . Peter and I would really get along on this. It filled me with such a horror of Communism that I just. . . My God, you know. . . because a lot of American journalists they were just very bad guides when it came to Communism. Like the reporter for *The New York Times*, had the Russian beat. I forgot his name now. He was reporting on Russia to *The New York Times* and they were printing his things. He was a total liar. Because he wanted to stay in Russia and he knew if he told the truth Stalin would kick his ass out so he had to play ball. Like Stalin had starved to death probably six million people in the Ukraine. He wanted them to become collectivized and they resisted that so he simply took their wheat away from them, you know for the winter. And sent them off to Siberia. It was a famine in the Ukraine. And this guy reported back, “There is no famine in Russia.” This
guy from *The New York Times*. Everybody said there is no famine in Russia. And so you find a lot of reporters turning a blind eye to it. . . or they didn’t know any better. But this guy knew better, you know. And there was, for example, a Cuban poet. I think his name was Valladares. He wrote a wonderful book. He was a poet. And Castro wanted him to toe the line and what not and he wouldn’t do it. He would write his own stuff. So they threw him in a camp, in horrible conditions. And I wish I could remember the name of the book. That was a great book. So after he got out of prison he fled to Spain I think, wrote a book about it. And I had read the book. And it was reviewed in *The San Francisco Chronicle*. And this guy who reviewed the book said, “This guy, this poet,” he says “he is a criminal, a thug and a liar.” And I thought my God, he is not a criminal. He is not a thug. Nobody who could write a book like that is a thug. “And he’s lying about Castro.” That’s the kind of stuff that used to drive me up the wall, you know, to read. Ok, enough on that.

**Mona:** It drove you up the wall because you felt it was dishonest.

**Charles:** Absolutely dishonest. Yeah. Total lie. Total lie. It just used to drive me crazy. That’s why I can’t stand Sartre. Sartre was an apologist for Stalin. And anyone who joined forces with Stalin, who knew better, and Sartre was not stupid. I have just total contempt for them. I can’t stand them. Like I can’t stand our President. [Bush]

**Mona:** When I was reading the interviews in various books I was struck by how often writers discussed their friendships and relationships with other writers. And it seemed to me it was very much a communal world similar to what scientists have. And I know that you had two opportunities early on to join writers’ groups. I would like you to talk about if you had any other opportunities. Why you didn’t take them up and also if you had a chance again, if you thought it would help you get published, would you have done it?
Charles: No. No. I am, for one thing, I always felt that they wouldn’t like my way of writing because it doesn’t follow the pattern, the acceptable pattern. And I didn’t see any benefit whatever from talking to them, because they have their own thing you know. Which is fine with me. But I don’t want to... it is a waste of time for me. So I did and I would today avoid other writers like the plague. Because I don’t see any point to it.

Mona: Well, it is not just other writers, is it, Dad? You’re a very private person, aren’t you?

Charles: Yes. Yes. Well the thing is this, too. I have low energy. I am a very low energy person. And friendships take a lot of time which I don’t really have or I didn’t have. If I was writing, I wanted to be writing. Then I wanted to come out and have dinner and talk to my wife and stuff. There was no time for friendships. It seems like a stupid thing to say but I really was tight on time. I never had time. If you had a friendship with a guy you really hit it off with that might be good, you know but I think a lot of friendships are... I think it is wonderful if you can have a friend. I really do. I am not downplaying it. But I think, like a guy will say I have hundreds of friends. I say how could you possibly have hundreds of friends? It is not possible. You have hundreds of acquaintances that you get along with maybe. And especially, like Chris in business. He’d better have a knack of making friends. I wouldn’t fit in business at all because I don’t have the knack of making friends. Well, I have the knack of making friends but I am not a group type of person. I’m kind of a lone guy over there. That’s me. The guy the guys say, “What’s the matter with that guy?” And so in a lot of businesses, in a lot of activities, you had better be able to have friends because otherwise you are going to die. Friends take care of you. You go along together and so on and so forth. But I was always kind of
a lone wolf type guy. I think that’s probably one reason Matthew has never, he’s kind of a lone wolf too. Don’t you think so?

Barbara: It is interesting to me with Chris’s wife, Sharlene, who’s a writer. She found that when you are with a group with other writers, young writers, then they start criticizing one and another’s work and making suggestions and so forth, that it can actually be detrimental.

Charles: I think it can be detrimental.

Barbara: Right.

Charles: Very detrimental. And you don’t know their motives, either. There are some people that are damn spiteful. I feel my work is, pardon me for saying this, but it is sacred to me and I don’t want people sitting on it, you know what I mean? So, I could be wrong. I could see where people could say, “Well, if you had had an open mind you would have done better and so on but I think I will write the way I want and sink or swim with it.

Mona: Do you feel you are a bit of a hermit?

Charles: Yes. Very much so. And it is probably not a good thing psychologically because I am very close to my wife which I want to be. But I don’t have a circle of friends. And that is the... Barbara, she is not like me quite, but my wife Barbara, she is sort of reclusive too. She goes out and is very friendly and has a lot of friends but she doesn’t want to... like she turns down dinner engagements and stuff. She doesn’t want to socialize that way. So she has turned down. . . [Gesture meaning a lot].

Mona: She needs to come back here to gather her energy.

Charles: Yes, right. Right. She goes out and is very happy to meet them and everything. I don’t go out. She goes out. But once she leaves, that’s it. She
doesn’t particularly want them in her house. And she has a point. “If I go to
dinner, then I am supposed to invite them to dinner and I am not going to do
that.” So she and I are very well matched that way. We are both hermits.

Mona: I would like to ask you a couple sort of hypothetical questions.


Mona: If you had one book that you could choose to live, which would you
choose?

Charles: That’s really a tough one because I think that. . . I would say that Da
Gama is probably. . . it has less power than the other ones. But they are
different. I think Tony has a lot of power. And I think Portagee Gate does in a
different way. And I think the Army book, Mothballs, does. They are all
different. I would hate to choose. I don’t know. I would hate to choose one of
the three. What do you think, Mom?

Barbara: I would choose Da Gama.

Charles: Da Gama? Well it’s like a perfect little thing but it’s smaller.

Barbara: That’s ok.

Charles: Ok. She would pick Da Gama.

Mona: I would choose Portagee Gate. If I had one to take with me on a desert
island I think that I would choose Portagee Gate.

Charles: Yeah, maybe, yeah. The one that I labored over the most, you know,
really worked hard at was Tony. It is more dense. There are a lot of puns and
jokes and stuff in it. So I worked at it. Now they say when you labor at
something it is not a good idea, it is not good. I did not labor over. . . I did not
labor over Mothballs or Portagee Gate. It just kind of flowed. Maybe that’s
good. In other words, I wrote *Tony*. I didn’t write the other two. It just... came out. I worked on *Tony*. Like a paragraph—I’d spend a long time. The other two just... like *Mothballs*, which is mostly conversation. I wrote that almost as fast as my hand would go. Because conversation is very easy for me. Non-conversation is very hard. *Tony* doesn’t have a heck of a lot of conversation. Not like *Mothballs*. So I had to work at it. And so... .

**Mona:** But *Tony* is probably closest to your heart in a way, isn’t it?

**Charles:** I don’t know. It’s a... I don’t know. Matty thinks it is my best book. So it’s tough. They each have... Now there is more emotion in *Portagee Gate*. In *Mothballs* there is no emotion hardly. It is just reporting. These are the men. So it is just like a reporter. There is not much personal stuff in it. It is more observation. So maybe *Portagee Gate* is the one with the most fire power, you might say. Because it has... it has many more ingredients than the other one does. Yeh, could be.

**Mona:** So here is another *Vanity Fair* type question.

**Charles:** Yeah.

**Mona:** If you could choose... well this is two parts. You don’t like editors suggesting changes to your work. If someone offered to make a movie of your book. A book. How would you feel about it, given that they would change it.

**Charles:** They have to change it. They have to change it. I’d say, “Give me the money and do what you want with it.” Because the movie has nothing to do with the book. See. Now the thing about editors is I am not adverse at all to hearing an editorial comment. I welcome it. It could improve the book. But every comment I’ve heard has been not worth doing. Like a... let’s take... I’ll give you an example. Well, an example... I used to send a book out to editors.
Each one had a different take on the book. My teaching book. One said this. One said that. It reminded me of that old fable—the seven blind men feeling the elephant. They’re saying “He’s lying.” Each one has a piece. So they don’t have the elephant. And here’s an example of Peter Burford. He didn’t want me to put the, what do you call the thing at the end. . . [in *Crossing the Sauer*]

**Barbara:** Epilogue.

**Charles:** . . .the Epilogue. He didn’t want that. Put it at the beginning. And I said, “No, no, no, no.” I already had a Prologue at the beginning. He wanted to do away with the Epilogue. And I vetoed it. And he thankfully let me do that. And all kinds of people—that’s what they comment about—the Epilogue. They don’t comment. . . and he wanted to destroy it. That’s what I mean. These guys come at you with horseshit. You take these editors. Some of them. . . a guy works on a book for three or four years. They take it home on a weekend. Like who was I reading. Just the other day I was reading. This editor. They praise him. He has ten comments on every page. And I thought, “Oh my God, you know.” I can’t believe. . . if you are making ten comments on every page you must be a lousy writer. Because if you are a good writer who is going to make ten comments on every page? So right off the bat I say that that guy and I are not going to get along at all. Because I don’t want ten comments. Ok I’d say, “That’s enough. I don’t want any more.” And I don’t want my book to be a collaboration.

**Mona:** You mean a lousy editor, not a lousy writer, don’t you?

**Charles:** No, a lousy writer. If you can make ten comments. . . well either way it’s a lousy editor or a lousy writer. If they are making ten good comments on a page, you’re a lousy writer. But the thing is I don’t want to collaborate with anyone on my work. And often they will say it is a collaboration. Not
with me. I want it to be my work. If it is awkward or something, then so be it. But let’s put it this way. I am predisposed to throw out your suggestions. But. . . but. . . but but. . . I will listen. Now for example you made certain suggestions that I threw out but you made others that were excellent and I changed the. . . like I forget. . . don’t ask me because I don’t remember so good. But you would say this is not clear and I would read it and say shit you’re absolutely right. It’s not clear. So I am happy like when you comment. I am happy to read every one. But I have to agree with the change. Like if I’ve said a. . . you made a suggestion the other day that I didn’t want. Something about a. . . do you remember what it was?

Mona: The sleeping—picking his nose while sleeping. [In Mothballs]

Charles: Oh yeah, he’s describing the men the way they react when they sleep. And I made an observation about one guy. And you wanted me to say while he is sleeping. And I looked at the paragraph and I said, “Look. They’re sleeping here, they’re sleeping here. It’s clear that he is sleeping.” So in this case—he was like the fourth guy. Well, if you made it clear for the first three guys that they are sleeping so then it is awkward to say while he’s sleeping because you should know he is sleeping because of what has preceded it. See? But no, I am very happy to read suggestions. As long as. . . what I would hate would be somebody having the veto power over me. And some editors do. Now like a, who was that guy? Vidal, I think it was—Gore Vidal. They actually threw out a whole section of one of his books. This editor did. And it has festered in Vidal’s mind ever since. And he takes every opportunity. He’s angry about it. To this day. In other words, he didn’t have the power to veto it.

Mona: Well, or maybe he didn’t want to make the choice of not publishing the book.

Mona: Because in actual fact you could say. . .

Charles: Yeah, they could. Yeah, yeah, they could. Oh, in fact I read a thing in Publisher’s, what’s that called? That we get from the Authors Guild. Authors Bulletin. They were talking about contracts. And they were saying no publisher will give you the right to veto his thing. They actually said that. No publisher will give you that right. And so I wrote Knappman and I said, “Can you put this in the contract? That I have the right to veto it.” He said, “I don’t think we will have any problem with that.” And he put it in. And I put that into Frank’s contract too. But I remember reading Authors Guild. They are talking about the commercial guys. No publisher will give you that—the right to have final say.

Mona: So you sign the contract first.

Charles: You sign the contract, yeah. And I. . . today that is very troubling. Because I am very very sensitive about people screwing around with my stuff. So I don’t know. I have never had a contract with a regular publisher—outside of Burford. So it hasn’t come up. But it used to bother me. I used to think. Well, of course. I’ll tell you what. My teaching book, which came close to being published, I would have felt differently about that. That was just. . . . In other words I am not emotionally involved in that book. And if they suggested stuff I would have probably argued with them but then I would accept it. Because the book, it didn’t mean that much to me. Not like these other books. And so that book I would have said, “Well, ok. If they have to.” But these other books I am emotionally tied up with them and I would be very. . . I would find it very very difficult to. . . . I had a thing in Portagee Gate. I was writing about Lillian Hellman and stuff, a Jewish writer, and he [Frank Sousa] felt
that. . . I think he was sensitive to the Jewish thing. It wasn’t anti-Semitic. She was Communist. I was anti-Communist not anti-Jewish, you know. But anyway, he felt it didn’t belong. And he was right in a way. It didn’t really. . . it was an awfully good paragraph, awfully good. . . but. . . So I thought, “Well, I had better give him a little something, you know.” It was not germane to the book. She. . . I don’t know if you want to hear this or not. She was a partner with Dashiell Hammett. And Dashiell Hammett had daughters that he was concerned about, you know. He had been divorced. So he left the rights to some of his material to his daughters. Lillian Hellman wanted—she’s a greedy bitch—she wanted to get her hands on the rights. So she called in the two daughters—they are unsophisticated—and she had her lawyer scare the shit out of them. That, if they took these rights on, they would be responsible for Dashiell Hammett’s debts. Which is a falsehood. So the best thing that they could do would be to sign them over to her. So they did. And I remember one, *The Dain Curse*, Hellman sold it to CBS for five hundred grand. This was years ago. The two daughters are struggling financially. And she would send them a little—fifty bucks at Christmas or something. I thought that is really shitty. She betrayed Hammett. That’s how much of a woman she was. Hammett wanted his daughters to have those rights for obvious reasons. And he gave Hellman rights too. But she wanted them all. And so I made. . . I referred to that in my little thing. I wish I could remember. They had a series of ads in *The New Yorker*—women with furs—oh shit, what did it say, the ad? Remember that ad? It had a slogan. And it showed Lillian Hellman in one of the ads—she had this beautiful fur, you know. And so I made fun of the ad because it built in beautifully with her screwing the daughters. And I just offhand—I can’t remember the slogan.—something about “A woman of distinction” or something like that. Anyway we took it out. I gave him a little bit. . . Frank. . .
I said, “Well, what the hell.” But it still hurts me because it was an awfully good paragraph. Mona, we’re drawing down here. . .

Mona: If you were to give a young writer some advice.

Charles: I would be a bad person. Look, I couldn’t even get published. What kind of. . . they want to be published. I am the absolute wrong guy to give advice to—for them to get advice from because look at my record. [Laughter] This is a doctor who has killed twenty-five patients so you don’t want to go to him for medical advice. I’m the last guy you want to get advice from. If you are really serious about your work though then go your own way. If you want to get published—you want to make money—you’ve got to be a bit of a hack. It depends what you want. If you want to take your chances and end up like I almost did with boxes of notes and everything else—go your own way. So it depends what you want. So this will be it. I want to bid you good night, Mama, Mona, Chris. It’s been fun. Hope I haven’t bored you too much. Have I, Sweetheart? [Looking at Barbara]

Barbara: No.


Barbara: The hour went by very quickly.

Charles: Say something else. Go ahead.

Barbara: Well, I love you, Honey. How’s that?

**Barbara:** We have our giggles.

**Charles:** Alright. I am not going to say another word. Come on, Mona. Say something.
Appendix – December 23, 2005 [audiotape]

On tape: Charles Reis Felix, Barbara [wife], and Mona Biskup [daughter]

People mentioned: Warren Jones [local kid]; Bernard Carter and Nat Guy, [played at tennis tournament]; William Demond [History professor at Michigan]; Wallace Stegner [English professor at Stanford]; Miss Fay Newland [high school teacher]; George Gardner [fellow high school student]; Toussaint L’Ouverture [liberator of Haiti]; Robert Lambert [fellow university student]; James T. Farrell [author]; James Henle [publisher]

Books mentioned: Crossing the Sauer

This transcript has been edited by Charles Reis Felix for the sake of clarity.

Mona: This is side one of tape one December 2005 with Barbara Smith Fox Felix and Charles Reis Felix and Mona Felix.

Charles: A lot of Felixes.

Barbara: Honey, remember that article that you wrote for the paper, or was that a short story? That you wrote and you sent away to a paper?

Charles: Oh, that was a short story.

Barbara: And you were in high school or elementary school?

Charles: No, no, no. I had been at a University of Michigan for a year and a half. This was 19… I started at Michigan in 1941 and in January 43 I left because the draft was imminent, I thought. And so I could have stayed at
Michigan. They would have given me credit but I didn’t know that. If you left in the middle of a semester… I thought you would lose all your credits. Assumptions. Always we assume wrong. They would have given you credit for as much work as you did. But I thought they would wipe it all off so I didn’t want to waste the money so I left in January. And I went home and I got a job at a venetian plant making venetian blinds, waiting for the draft. And at the time I had a little time, when you are at school, you are studying all the time, but now I had extra time. So I wrote a story. And I, I have the paper actually. [He has the slip of paper showing payment.] I sent it off to the Chicago Daily News.

Barbara: Wait wait, what was the story about.

Charles: You want to hear what the story was about? [Sounds incredulous]

Barbara: Yes.

Charles: Oh Christ. It was a story that I plagiarised from a pulp magazine. And in it the story is that, I didn’t copy it word for word but I copied the idea. And in it a guy’s on trial, and he is a criminal, he’s a gangster, and if he loses the verdict he will go to prison for 20 years. And so as the jury is deliberating, he’s thinking about it, what he should do. If he pleads, let’s see what was the expression, in other words he can… he has gone for not guilty but if he says guilty his sentence will be much reduced. Don’t ask me why at this time.

Mona: Bargaining.

Charles: Yeah, in other words a plea bargain. If he takes a plea bargain his sentence will be much reduced. If he goes for broke he will be found not guilty or get the full 20 years. So at the last minute, just as the jury is filing in, which I don’t think you can do this in actual law, there are deadlines on plea bargains,
but this was a long time ago. So as the jury files in, he loses his nerve and says “I am guilty Your Honour”. And then he gets the reduced sentence. And the kicker is that the jury’s verdict is “Not Guilty”. But he takes the… he loses his nerve. So that’s the gist of the story which I plagiarised. And the Chicago Daily News in those days… I never read the Daily News but I read about it in a book for writers, they were buying short stories. And they would print them. And this was, I think, April 1943, I got an acknowledgement from the Daily News, they bought the story and I can, I have the paper actually, they bought it for 12 dollars. Now, did they actually print it? I don’t know because I never, I never bought the Daily News. So I can’t say it was printed because I never saw it printed but I can say they bought it. And that was my first sale. That was 1943. And then my second sale was 2001 when I sold Crossing the Sauer. So that’s like… let me figure this out… 7…57… 58 years between sales. But when you are a salesman, sometimes you have a dry spell. [Laughter] When you are not as successful, so that was my dry spell, was 58 years. Then I went off to the Army and I didn’t write any more until I was actually at College. Well, actually, after I was released from the Army and I was home and I was waiting for Michigan to start up again at the beginning of the semester… I was released from the Army in November 1945 and I went back to College in late February 46. So I was home for two or three months. And at the time I started writing an army book, an army novel. It was never finished because I used to write in my bedroom which was ice cold. This was winter time and there was no heat in the bedroom. And we had a kerosene heater which we shouldn’t have used because it was not vented.

Mona: This was in New Bedford?

Charles: New Bedford. We had a coal stove in the living room, if you want to call it a living room, family room today they call it. [Laughter] For us it was a
combination kitchen and dining room and living room. And every other kind of room you can imagine. So I was writing in the bedroom. It was off... you had to go down a passageway and turn right. My sister’s room you’d turn left. And it was so far from the stove that it got no heat what so ever. So I would sometimes have a, not always though because it smelled and I didn’t like the smell, a kerosene heater. And it didn’t...it was just weak, it didn’t throw out much heat. So basically I was ice cold in there. But I wanted to write and I wrote this army book.

**Barbara:** Did you write in bed?

**Charles:** No, I wrote at a desk which was my mother’s Singer sewing machine, the top of it was flat, so that’s where I wrote. And the only advantage to it was it was off by itself, it was quiet. If I was in the living room, there my mother was, there was noise, you can’t concentrate. So I wrote from December to late February. I think the semester started in March and then I went to school. That book was never finished. But I went to school and the first semester, the spring of 46, I was gung-ho for being a student and I studied my ass off. I remember I had a course on Shakespeare and the play we had to, we read 5 or 6 plays, and I knew those plays inside and out because I read them very carefully. Anyway, I did very well as a student. I had all A’s and B’s. And then the summer of 46 I wanted to come home and write some more on the army book. And my mother said, “No, if you come home, you’ve got to get a job”. So I said, “Screw that” because I didn’t want to work in a sweatshop for 20 bucks a week. That’s a waste of time, you know. So I said, “Well, if that’s the case I’m staying at”... I didn’t tell her this... I said “If that’s the case, I’m staying at school in the summer session”. See the Army paid you, not the Army, but the GI Bill of Rights paid you, I forgot how much. If you were married I think it was $120, this is a guess now, and if you were single I think it was like $95, something
like that. See when I married Mom they gave me more money. That’s why I married her. [Laughter] I married her to get 25 bucks more a month. But anyway I started writing that summer, while I was a student and I wrote a couple of short stories. I remember one was about playing tennis. And the thing was that I managed to get B’s in my studies but I wasn’t the same student that I had been in the winter, spring, because I was focussing on the writing and that was like the beginning of the end. Because what happened was I became a writer and not a student. And you can’t do well that way. I still got B’s and stuff but it wasn’t the same. And then I met your mother in the Fall of ’46.

**Barbara:** But what were you writing about during that period?

**Charles:** Short stories.

**Barbara:** About what.

**Charles:** I wrote a short story about playing tennis. It was a long story. Well, you want to hear about the story?

**Barbara:** We want the Army stories.

**Charles:** No, not the Army stories. Well, this is going to take 99 hours if I tell you every story.

**Mona:** We want to know.

**Charles:** Well, when I was a kid I traded for a tennis racket. I traded some, I forgot what now. We didn’t buy stuff, we traded. And I remember this tennis racket. It had a broken string. It was a Wright Ditson tennis racket. So I wrapped string around the break, where the break was, so when the ball hit that thing it went shhhhhht. So I tried not to hit the ball where the break was. I would have been better off to just not repair the break. So I started playing tennis at Brooklawn Park and I’d find a guy and we’d play together, you know.
Well, they were going to have a tournament. And of course I never would have entered it. But as a joke, this guy, Warren Jones, who lived on my street, as a joke he entered my name in the tournament. And I didn’t know that. And then they told me afterwards. So the first round was advertised in the paper. It told you what time to play and so on. I showed up and I was, I played, this is amazing. I drew the worst player in the tournament and I was the second worst. And I played this guy. I have that, I took it out of the paper. It is in one of my scrapbooks. [might be in the cellar] A sweet guy. Very nice boy. Bernard Carter. I had never met him before. But he beat me the first set 6-1. Which is I won one game, he won six. Well I got, what do you call it, the adrenaline going and I beat him the second set 7-5. That’s extra see, usually it is 6-4, so you go extra. And then I won the third set 7-5. But he was an awful sweet boy because the way he played. He wasn’t… you know he was very courteous, very unusual boy. Well, he was not a street kid, he was a kid from Brooklawn area I believe, in other words if you want to put a class thing on it, he was definitely upper class, middle class at least. So anyway I beat him, which is kind of an amazing thing.

Mona: How old were you then?

Charles: Oh, gosh, let me see. Probably… I wasn’t in High School. So I would say, probably eighth grade, something like that. So then they drew the bid for the second round. Or what do they call it, they drew the seeding for the second round. And I got a seed Nat Guy. He was a Jewish boy. He was older and he was from Fairhaven. And definitely had a little bit of money. Jewish, did I say he was Jewish? And he was seeded number one. And he went on to become quite a tennis player. When he got to be 18. He always won. He always won the tournaments. Nat Guy. That’s short for Nathaniel. So I’m sitting by the fence, waiting to play this guy and he walks in and he is dressed
for tennis. He’s got the tennis garb, all the tennis… the white sweater, the long white pants and it looks like he is going to play at Forest Hills. And I am there with my regular shoes and just a regular shirt. And we were sitting there and he was walking “Where is this Charles Felix?”. So I said “That’s me”. So we went out and played and of course it was a joke. And again, a very nice fellow. He realised right away that I was terrible so he didn’t break a sweat and he’d just putt, I’m running like crazy and the one nice thing about it he never hit the ball hard.

Mona: He wanted to have a game.

Charles: Well, he wasn’t having a game.

Mona: But I mean he could have just gotten rid of you straight off.

Charles: Well, he did, but not by hitting it hard. He would just place it, place it, boom. So he beat me 6-love, 6-love. And afterwards, and he didn’t run. And afterwards, I forgot how he put it but he was with a companion there, he said “Let’s play a little.” So in other words, after I departed ignominiously, he played this other guy in a real game. But it wasn’t part of the tournament. So I felt kind of humiliated. But anyway, so the story I wrote was based on that. On that experience. And I can’t cry about it. He was nice about it. He didn’t sneer at me or anything. And as I said he went on to win the tournament so it says N. Guy defeats C. Felix 6-love, 6-love… 6-all, 6-all. So anyway I started writing. That’s kind of my downfall because if I had studied I could have gotten a Ph.D, because the next semester, the fall semester, I took a course from a man named, I think his name was William, I am not sure, Demond, who taught American history and loved Roosevelt. He was a Democrat, in contrast to guys at Stanford, all of them were Republicans and they hated Roosevelt. I couldn’t have studied with a guy like that, he would have thrown me out. I would have
said “Hey that’s bullshit” and he would have thrown me out. But Demond I could have studied with. And also, that was a subject that I liked. I started off as an English major [He started at Michigan in the College of Pharmacy and after one semester switched to English.] but I found out that… English – everything is a matter of taste. The professor likes a certain poet and he doesn’t like a different poet and so you had better like the poet he likes. Because you have to play ball with them. If they are going to give you an advanced degree, you know you’ve got to shine up to them. This is all, you know… maybe I like somebody else. On a certain level it is possible, you know. If you like Edgar Guest, well then you shouldn’t be there. If you like, for example, well I was going to say a novel, well maybe I don’t think Hemingway is the greatest writer but he does. I’m in trouble, see. And a matter of fact I don’t think he is a great writer. I don’t think Hemingway is the greatest writer. I don’t think he is even a great writer. But that’s a minority view. The accepted canon is “Hey, he’s a great writer”. But anyway, I veered off, I said history is better because at least in history you can argue about facts but they are facts. If a guy says the Holocaust didn’t happen, you can marshal evidence to show that it did happen. But in literature you can’t do that. It’s taste. And so I said, “I don’t want to argue taste. I want to argue facts”. So I dropped English as a major and went to history, although when I came out to Stanford I may have gone back to English, I can’t remember what I did at Stanford. I know I ended up in History.

**Barbara:** Well you tried to get into…

**Charles:** Oh that was it. I wanted to get into Stegner’s… I thought better get into English. Right.

**Mona:** What was your first army book about then?
Charles: It was about being in the army and the various things that happened. But it was terrible because I wrote it on pads and when I started writing full time again I looked at the pads. In fact, when we were in Manistique, we paid a girl to type it. And it was terrible.

Barbara: Tell her the story.

Charles: Well first, we’re jumping the gun. So I am back in Michigan and then I met Mom, and she took a lot of my time. [Laughter]

Barbara: Well, he wooed me with his stories so you were writing stories about…

Charles: I wooed you with the stories that I wrote that summer.

Barbara: So I didn’t get any army stories.

Charles: No.

Mona: But before that. You haven’t really said what started you writing. Can you go back even further.

Charles: You mean why you write?

Mona: Like in high school.

Charles: Oh, high school.

Mona: What happened. Did you have that decision in your head that you wanted to be a writer?

Charles: No, not really. I think you go to it gradually. In high school I had a course with Miss Newland, Miss Fay Newland, and she had us write a paper every week. We would read an essay, in this big book of essays. We would discuss the essay and then you write a paper inspired by the essay. It didn’t
have to have anything to do with the essay but it had to be something along, tangential to the essay. And she would have the students, one or two students, maybe three students at the most, read their paper in front of the class after she had corrected it. And she ended up having me read my paper every week. And that was terribly confidence building you know. And I used to put jokes in the paper and that’s why she probably had me, so everybody was laughing. And so gradually, you don’t realise this the first day, but when you are up there, you’re reading a paper, and everyone is looking at you expectantly, almost laughing already, and you say something and they are all laughing… and you don’t get anyone’s attention as much as when you make them laugh. And so I am reading the paper and they are laughing. You get a sense of power. That what you are writing they are listening to. And that didn’t happen with me in any other subject. That I felt a mastery of the subject that I did there. And it is terribly ego boosting. That you actually can write something that people will listen to and enjoy and laugh. And so I think the idea to become a writer probably started in her class. I was always interested in reading and stuff but the idea that I could actually write something that somebody else might want to read… I think it definitely started in her class. And it started because she picked me every week and the kids really responded to my writing. There were kids like George Gardner, he was the son of a math teacher, she would call on him sometimes. Well, his was flat. It was like, hmmm, “So what?” You know what I mean? What they want is, they want fun. And liveliness. And that was in my papers. I guess, because they responded to it. And so that maybe started me, you know, writing. I should tell you about Michigan. We are going back now to 194… I was in Michigan twice. The first time, like my yearbook says I wanted to be a playwright but I just put that in for the hell of it. You know I had to put something in. So anyway, when I was at Michigan the first time, between 1941 and 1943, I read a book about Toussaint L’Ouverture. He was the black
liberator of Haiti. I can’t remember now if he actually liberated them or was killed in the process. I can’t remember, But he was known as Toussaint L’Ouverture, as the black liberator of Haiti. When I read it, one book, and I decided to write a play on it, knowing nothing at all about Haiti or anything but I wrote a play or least started a play, I can’t remember if I actually finished it. And then I took a course…

**Mona:** Why did you want to write a play on that?

**Charles:** I don’t know. About his struggle to liberate Haiti. And I remember this course I had. It was a writing course. This again is my first shot at Michigan, not when I came back from the army. First shot was before the army, then there is a shot at Michigan after the army. And I remember I wrote a play, a story, about… how are we doing? Am I talking for nothing? You’d better have a good battery in there, too, goddamit. [Laughter] Sit up? Ok. Why? That makes it better… declaim better? Ok, Mona had me sit up. “Sit up” she said! That’s like a teacher. “Sit up!” So anyway, I wrote a story about… a Roman story. I remember I had a character named Flavius. Now what the story was about I don’t have an idea, I don’t an inkling of it in the world but that is the kind of stuff I was writing. The reason… what did I know about Rome? Nothing. I may have that story because I saved a lot of my college papers but it would take me a week to find it so I am not going to find it. But anyway that was the kind of stuff I was writing… about Haiti…. I wasn’t writing about my life at all. I didn’t think my life was of any interest to anybody. And what changed it was this guy, he was an engineer… this is my freshman year at Michigan. What changed it was this guy who was an engineer, I think his name was Robert Lambert and he lived on my floor in the dorm, Williams House. And somehow somebody had tipped him off to a book. Because these guys, the engineers, they didn’t read books. They just did not read books. But they are
good at their math and stuff. But somebody tipped him off about the book. And it was a book with dirty parts in it. So they had put pieces of paper, a book mark, by the dirty parts. Five or six dirty parts. And they passed the book around to everybody. Everybody looked at it in turn. And the book was called \textit{Studs Lonigan} by James T. Farrell. It was a trilogy, three novels and he had published the novels separately. And they sold nothing. But when James Henle of Vanguard Press put them together, he had published them separately… I remember reading one and they got this thing. The first book sold 400 copies or so. When he put the three novels together, the trilogy, it took off. And it became a Modern Library choice. A Modern Library Giant. I think they cost a buck forty-five, in those days, a Giant. The ordinary Modern Libraries were a dollar twenty-five or a dollar fifteen, something like that. The Giant was a dollar forty-five. This was a Giant because it was big. So I read the dirty parts and I realised immediately this was different from dirty parts in dirty books. I saw, right away, that he was writing realistically about the sex. In other words, he wasn’t writing to stimulate you. He was writing it to reproduce what had actually happened. Now that is different from pornography. Because pornography is designed to stimulate you. It doesn’t have to be realistic at all. The intent is different. His intent was not to stimulate you. There was not that much of it, to tell you the truth. But his intent was to… like he had a girl being raped, I remember by Weary, Weary was his nickname, Weary Riley was raping this girl. And then he goes to prison for it. And \textit{Studs Lonigan} was about lower class, working class, lower middle class Irish in Chicago and he’s [Farrell] in the book as a character I believe but the main character is a guy named Studs Lonigan who has a tough time trying to make it, get a job and stuff. And as I recall he dies from pneumonia in his 20s I think. Something like that. But the main thing was reproducing, well I didn’t know this at the time, but when I saw that the sex was different it interested me in the book. So I read
the book. And I imagine... I think I am pretty certain, in fact I know I did. I went out and bought a copy of it. Because this copy was a circulating library and I couldn’t... and it takes quite a while to read that book because it’s a fat book. And I don’t know exactly, I don’t recall exactly when I read it. If I read it at school or if I read it that summer when I went home but I read it soon thereafter. You checking to see if the batteries running?

**Mona:** It’s going to come to an end.

**Charles:** How do you know when it comes to the end?

**Mona:** You will hear it click off.

**Charles:** It will click off. Ok so... I read this book and it is probably the most important book I ever read in my life because I saw that these people were not the kind of people books were being written about. See, we were used to the *Saturday Evening Post* stories. They were always nice people, middle class or upper class, not in *The Post*, not upper class in *The Post* but you know in Henry James and Edith Wharton, those are upper class people. And he was writing about people that were like working for a living. And I had never realised that they would be of interest to anybody. Now this was a flash of insight but it comes to you gradually. Now I read that book and I was interested in those people, and they are not literary people at all and from there I made the jump to if those people are worth writing about, then maybe my people are worth writing about. See, I got it from him. That they were of sufficient importance to be written about.
Books by Charles Reis Felix

*Gently, Brother* (written in 1947-48)
(Dave Mello, child protagonist)

(Tony, child protagonist)

*Da Gama, Cary Grant, and the Election of 1934* (about 1975)
(Seraphin, child protagonist)

Three books about teaching (during 1970s):

*The Bluebird of Los Tramos*
(Seraphin, mature teacher, protagonist)

*The Bluebird of Los Tramos*
(Mrs. Branscomb, older teacher, protagonist)

*“Vice President Nixon, Welcomo to Out School!”*
(Two teachers wanting out – Mary and Ken)

*Mothball and His Friends: Barracks Life by the Golven Gate, 1943-44* (1984-1992)
(Mothballs, Long John, Hunkie, and Whitney)
  (Pa and Charley)

  (Charles)

*Published books*