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THE SERIES

Southern writers have brought distinctive voices to American literature, and that tradition of originality continues today. *Signature* profiles a diverse group of contemporary Southern writers—Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, Marsha Norman, George C. Wolfe, Lee Smith, and Barbara Kingsolver. These portraits of artists in mid-career humanize and demystify the creative process. Biography, process, and performance come into play as we learn where writers come from, how they go about their work, and how they perform, or read, their own work.

GUIDE WRITERS

David Todd contributed the essay on Southern writing and the chapters on Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, and Marsha Norman. He teaches writing at the College of Charleston. A native of Louisville, KY, he earned his M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Florida. His work has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Sewanee Review*, and other journals. Research for this viewer’s guide was supported in part by a grant from the Kentucky Arts Council.

Mike Kelsay was the primary writer for the chapters on Barbara Kingsolver, Lee Smith, and George C. Wolfe. He won the *Virginia Quarterly Review’s* 1993 Emily Clark Balch prize for fiction and received a 1995 Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council. He lives in Lexington, KY, where he is finishing his first novel.

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SERIES PRODUCER

Signature producer Guy Mendes, who also directed the Barbara Kingsolver program, has worked at KET for 20 years as a writer, producer, and director of documentaries. Most recently, he completed *Mountain Born: The Jean Ritchie Story*, a documentary he wrote and co-produced that aired nationally on PBS in December 1996. Other documentaries include *Gentleman from Kentucky*, a one-hour program on the career of U.S. Senator and Ambassador John Sherman Cooper that premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC in June 1990, and *FDR: An American Hero*, a co-production of KET and Pathé Cinema of France that aired nationally on PBS in 1985. He also wrote the instructional series *Kentucky GeoQuest* and wrote and produced the 15-program adult literacy series *Another Page*, starring Robert Townsend and Joe Seneca.

Under his supervision, *Signature* has thus far received a Worldfest Houston International Film Festival Bronze Plaque Award and a 1996 Gabriel Award from UNDA-USA (both for the Marsha Norman program). Both *Gentleman from Kentucky* and *Kentucky GeoQuest* were honored as outstanding productions by the Southern Educational Communications Association, while *Another Page* won a Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) local programming award. Mendes' credits as a producer also include two other CPB Award honorees: the one-hour special *Totally Radical Teenage Videos* and *Old Music for New Ears*, a 22-part instructional series. Mendes is also an accomplished photographer and teacher.

MESSAGE TO TEACHERS/ VIEWERS

Each program in this series is 60 minutes long. For the convenience of teachers, and to encourage classroom use, each of the detailed program synopses suggests an appropriate point about halfway through the program where teachers may want to stop the tape.

For each program, this guide includes

- a synopsis of the program with segment headings (each program in the series is divided into segments separated by on-screen titles) and a list of readings included in each segment;
- a brief biographical sketch of the featured writer;
- a list of some of the writer's major works with a sampling of critical responses;
- excerpts from interviews with the writer talking about his or her work;
- "Writing Ideas," suggestions for writing assignments based on the program and the writer; and
- a reading list and brief bibliography.

Teachers are encouraged to preview each program before using it.

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EDUCATIONAL USE

DISCOVER THE WRITER WITHIN: *SIGNATURE* IN THE CLASSROOM

Signature has found a place in high school and college courses on contemporary literature, advanced composition, American studies, creative writing, speech and drama, women's studies, and career exploration. Teachers find that the programs are easily tailored to classroom presentations and often use segments of the videos to elaborate on or reinforce ideas.

Clearly the series can be used in literature classes to give students insight into the writers they are reading. But helping students see themselves as writers is the most common reason many teachers use the series in English and creative writing classes. Teachers say the authors help motivate students to write about what they know. The programs on Ed McClanahan, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith, for example, allow rural students to feel more secure about writing from a small-town experience—about the people and places most familiar to them.

Teachers prepare students by having them read the writer's work ahead of time, and some show movie versions of the writer's novels and plays. (Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* and Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *'night, Mother* were made into movies and can be rented on tape. Check your local video rental stores. George Wolfe's play *The Colored Museum* has been televised on PBS, which also aired a documentary on *Jelly's Last Jam*.)

Teachers also are using the series in an integrated approach with social studies to talk about boundaries, cultural attitudes, and customs.

What teachers say about *Signature*

"*'night, Mother* is a favorite piece for my students to use in speech competition. Marsha Norman gives them an opportunity to learn about her influences and inspirations and what drove her to write the play."

"Ed McClanahan helps students discover where they are as writers. Segments with Ed reading from an early piece let students see how he has progressed."

"Change and growth in writers is addressed well in the series. It's necessary for students to study themselves as writers and to see how they evolve."

"The writers help students realize that it usually takes many failures to become successful."

"My students were interested in the many different approaches to writing and how normal the writers themselves seem."

"The series shows just how human these writers are. My students are amazed that these people actually practice their craft and are approachable. I use most of these authors' works in my instruction already."

"Students are impressed that these people are not a bunch of old, dead, white guys—they write books people actually read. They live life and write about it, which is one of the biggest benefits of the series. It also converts my [college] students from the North to see the culture we have here."

"These programs make the authors seem 'real.'"

"The program on Ed McClanahan inspired my students to finish some of their pieces. They liked to hear the authors talk about struggling."

"Once you hear the author's voice reading his or her own work, you never read the work in the same way again. It forever influences you."

PREFACE

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY GREAT SOUTHERN WRITERS?

By David Todd

R.W.B. Lewis, a major literary critic of this century, once gave this evaluation of Southern literature: “It is impossible to name another region in this country with so massive and virtually unbroken a display of literary genius.”

What is it about the culture below the Mason-Dixon line that produces so much “literary genius?”

The unbroken line of great Southern literature started during the American “Southern Renaissance” of the 1920s, ’30s, and ’40s when there began a brilliant outpouring of writing from such authors as William Faulkner, Allen Tate, Zora Neale Hurston, Thomas Wolfe, Richard Wright, Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren.

Marvelous Southern writing has continued into the present, with fine writing by Walker Percy, William Styron, Lee Smith, Wendell Berry, Alice Walker, Marsha Norman, Peter Taylor, Bobbie Ann Mason, and others.

Still, it’s hard to define “Southern literature.” Some authors in the South, such as Guy Davenport, write of places outside the region. Other native Southerners, like Barbara Kingsolver, have moved away to write of other places, yet still tell stories that look and sound “country.” And there are still others, like Warren, who, though he left his native Kentucky after he graduated from high school, often said that he could not imagine writing a novel about any other region than his native South.

Much of the work of the Southern Renaissance authors—especially Faulkner, the era’s leading writer—shares certain common themes. It evinced conflicting feelings toward the territory, an acknowledgment that Southern “gentility” masked a region deeply divided by racial injustice.

Also, though, in reading the Southern Renaissance authors, we can absorb their powerful sense of the land, of its history, of small-town peculiarity, of long hot summers and biting cold winters: the sense of place.

But the images presented by Southern authors have changed since then. In the 1940s and ’50s, Southern writers began to confront the changes brought into their homeland by modern industry and political progress; communities were altered by the loss of small farms and by the migration of rural Southerners to cities or to the North. (Some of the tensions between the old ways and the new were powerfully portrayed, for example, in Warren’s most important work, his 1946 novel *All the King’s Men*.)

Still another big shift in Southern literature’s subject—the feel of Southern places, and the conflict between the old and new relations among races, sexes, and generations—began coming through in the ’60s. That shift continues into the present. In a recent essay, Lisa Alther, a contemporary Southern novelist, described the changed environment:

“My generation of Southerners has come of age during the civil-rights years, during the years of rapid urbanization and industrialization.... For me, the South of the Southern Renaissance writers—the rural and small-town South—represents some kind of vanished golden age. My South is one of bustling industrial cities with crammed franchise strips. Southerners used to have to go North to confront the wonders of urban civilization, but now we don’t have to budge.”

As Alther says, the economy of the South has changed as the nation’s commercial landscape has become homogenized. Yet the region’s people still talk with Southern accents, walk more slowly than Northerners do, and make distinctively Southern music (Nashville, bluegrass,

country, Southern rock, and Appalachian). They still think differently. And the place keeps producing well beyond its share of great writers.

Perhaps, then, we can still define “Southern” writing. Yale University Professor Cleanth Brooks, a Southerner and friend of Warren’s, suggests that its “changeless aspects” include not only a sense of place, but also a sense of the past and an aptitude for oral as well as written storytelling. The South is the home of “a culture that loves to talk,” says Brooks, “to remember its roots ... and to cherish its identity ... family and homeland.”

Alther puts this idea another way: “If you’re a Southerner writing about the South ... you are blessed with the tendency to mind everybody else’s business.” She observes as well that Southerners, having been taught good manners from birth, learn to express their feelings indirectly, “to slip them into conversations in the form of amusing stories.” And, she suggests, “It’s the only part of the country where people can sit still long enough to write.”

Flannery O’Connor also noted the abundance of Southern literature and suggested that “the Southerner knows he can do more justice to reality by telling a story than he can by discussing problems or proposing abstractions.... It’s actually his way of reasoning and dealing with experience.”

So, as for why the region produces so many good writers, perhaps it’s because Southerners especially value a good story told well.

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BOBBIE ANN MASON

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

The dislocating pace of social change is reflected in Bobbie Ann Mason's novels and short stories, filled with both tragedy and quirky comedy. In this program, Mason visits her hometown of Mayfield, Kentucky, rich in the memories she has drawn on for her work. She discusses her award-winning novels, *In Country* and *Feather Crowns*, and reads from her well-received story collections, *Love Life* and *Shiloh and Other Stories*. The program includes an excerpt from the Norman Jewison film of *In Country* as well as interviews with people who know the writer and her work—from her mother to her high school history teacher to Roger Angell, the *New Yorker* editor who encouraged her.

Part 1

"I think my writing is rooted in this place," says Bobbie Ann Mason as the program opens. While walking on her grandparents' farm, she briefly traces her family ties to Western Kentucky and reminisces about growing up on the farm. This introductory segment and the next five segments focus on Mason's childhood and school days.

In the first of these segments, "State Champions," Mason recalls her days at Cuba School and reads several excerpts from the story she named after it. The following four segments—"The Girl Sleuth," "City School," "Radioland," and "Bobbie Mason Looks at Life"—explore Mason's reading habits, the influence of music on her work, and the transitions from elementary school to high school to college.

The next two segments, "New York City" and "The New Yorker," center on the beginnings of Mason's literary career. In "The New Yorker," Mason and her husband reflect on being a Southerner in a "Yankee culture"; this segment also includes comments from *The New Yorker* Editor Roger Angell and Mason's agent, Amanda Urban.

Part 2

Four of the five segments in the second half of the program each focus on one of Mason's books: *Shiloh and Other Stories*, *In Country*, *Spence + Lila*, and *Feather Crowns*. The segment on *Shiloh and Other Stories* features an interview with her high school history teacher; comments from Mason and Michael Kreyling, professor of Southern literature at Vanderbilt University, on "K-Mart realism"; and a reading from the short story "Shiloh."

The segment entitled "In Country" includes not only Mason's discussion of the book but also comments by psychologist Gordon Williams, who says the book depicts the experiences of Vietnam vets with "eerie and uncanny" accuracy. This segment also includes an interview with film director Norman Jewison and an excerpt from his movie *In Country*.

In the segment "If You're Writing, You're Alone," Mason describes the hard work of writing and revising. In the final segments, she reads from *Spence + Lila* and *Feather Crowns*.

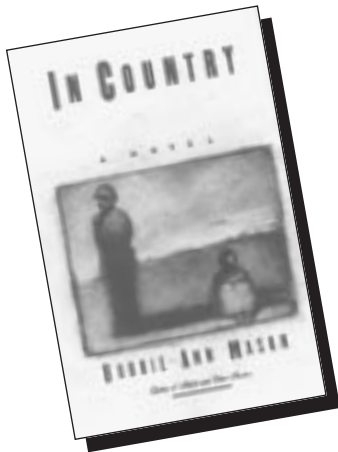
ABOUT THE WRITER

Bobbie Ann Mason, born in Mayfield, Kentucky in 1940, grew up with her brother and sisters on the family's dairy farm. "I never had much confidence," she once recalled, "[but] I had a strong drive and I was ambitious." She later wrote, "As I picked blackberries or hoed vegetables in the scorching morning sun, I longed to travel and see the world."

Mason read a lot as a girl, studying everything from UFOs to memory to reincarnation. Once, her high school English teacher chastised her for an essay she'd written about agnosticism, warned her to "stay away from these peculiar questions," and told her to concentrate on mathematics.

Instead, Mason's love of popular music—"I listened to the radio all the time," she remembers—and her curiosity about the world beyond





Mayfield led her to head up a fan club for one of the most popular singing groups of the time, The Hilltoppers. This quartet from Kentucky inspired her: “[They] gave me the notion that somebody ... from Kentucky could do something in the world.” During her senior year of high school, Mason wrote and published a national bimonthly newsletter about the group, traveled around the Midwest to see them perform, and was interviewed about the Hilltoppers on radio and national television.

At the University of Kentucky, Mason studied journalism and reported for the campus newspaper. She also studied fiction and published a story in the campus magazine. For a year after college, she wrote for movie and TV fan magazines in New York, but she soon tired of the city and left it to pursue graduate studies in English literature. “Graduate school was something I drifted into,” she recalls, “because I wanted to read and write and there didn’t seem to be any other choice.” She earned a Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut in 1972, writing her dissertation about the novelist Vladimir Nabokov.

From 1972 until 1979, Mason taught journalism and literature at a Mansfield State College in Pennsylvania. She published her analysis of Nabokov and then a second book, *The Girl Sleuth*, “a little critical study of the girls’ mystery stories I had grown up on ... Nancy Drew and all that.”

She had tried writing a novel and couldn’t finish it. But in the late ’70s, as she reviewed the literature she’d read as a girl and then reflected back on her life in Kentucky, she began to see that the place where she’d grown up might yield fine fiction. “I started to realize a lot about where I’d come from,” she recalls. So she began in earnest to write stories set in Western Kentucky.

She submitted those stories to *The New Yorker*. At first, Roger Angell, then the magazine’s fiction editor, turned them down—but he did encourage her to keep trying. A year

and a half later, her 20th story, “Offerings,” was published.

It was followed in 1982 with the publication of *Shiloh and Other Stories*, which concentrates on the small-town suburbs of Mason’s native Mayfield and nearby Paducah. The book won much acclaim as well as the 1982 Penn Hemingway Prize for 1st Fiction. Though some critics suggested that the stories were too open-ended and lacked “emotional gravity,” many also praised their quiet tone and the detailed descriptions of the characters’ immersion in the “popular culture” surrounding them—current television shows, fast-food restaurants, shopping malls, and contemporary music.

Mason next published *In Country* (1985), a novel about the quest of a teenage girl, Samantha, to learn more about her father’s death in the Vietnam War. Many readers admired the story for its confrontation of the losses Americans were feeling over Vietnam. The book was made into a major movie filmed on location around Mayfield and Paducah.

In all her books since, Mason has continued to write about Western Kentucky. In 1988, she published her second novel, *Spence + Lila*; another story collection, *Love Life*, followed a year later. Her third novel, *Feather Crowns*, appeared in 1993, three years after she moved back to Kentucky to live. She continues to publish stories and articles in *The New Yorker* about her home territory.

MAJOR WORKS

The title story of Mason's first collection, *Shiloh and Other Stories* (1982), is one of her best known. It opens, "Leroy Moffit's wife, Norma Jean, is working on her pectorals." Leroy, a trucker who hasn't worked since he was disabled by an accident, finds it hard to get close to his wife as she begins pursuing various courses of self-improvement. Both in their mid-30s, married since they were 18, Leroy and Norma Jean suddenly confront a dissatisfaction in their marriage which for years they hadn't had to admit.

Like many of the characters in Mason's fiction, they are trying to get along on the limited resources of minimal educations and low-paying jobs. Ill-equipped to understand their own lives, often unable to communicate directly with one another, the characters in *Shiloh* and in Mason's second story collection, *Love Life* (1989), often feel overwhelmed by the increasingly complex changes occurring around them: farm and factory layoffs, multiple cable TV channels, expanding shopping malls, divorces, breakups of families. They often "don't seem to progress from one thing to another," wrote one critic, "but to fall between one thing and another, to live in an absence bracketed by nostalgia and apprehension."

Mason focused acutely on that conflict between longing and apprehension in *In Country* (1985), a novel about the summer of 1984 in the life of Samantha Hughes, a 17-year-old who lives with her uncle Emmett in the fictional Western Kentucky town of Hopewell. "Emmett came back from Vietnam, but Sam's father did not," we are told.

Sam wants to learn about her father and the war. But her mother, who has remarried and moved to Lexington, has little to share with Sam, since she and Sam's father were married only a few weeks before Vietnam took him. Emmett is unwilling to talk about the war and suffers from ailments probably caused by Agent

Orange, a chemical defoliant used by the U.S. military in Vietnam.

Told from Sam's point of view, the novel depicts her train of thought by detailing the songs she listens to, the TV shows she watches daily, the stores where she runs errands. One critic described Sam's mind as "a town dump of brand names, horror movie plots, talk show one liners, and other detritus of a mass culture."

Sam gets to know another Vietnam vet, a friend of Emmett's named Tom, and reads letters her father wrote from the battlefield. Eventually, with Emmett and her father's mother, she makes a pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC to attain a deeper sense of the war's effect on her and their lives.

The critical reactions to *In Country* exemplify the range of response to Mason's work generally. Some readers object to the novel's "narrative distance," complaining that it describes physical details without revealing enough about its characters' "inner lives" or emotions. But others find that it faithfully renders "mysteries that reside in the human heart."

Mason continued to explore the challenges faced by rural Kentuckians in her second novel, *Spence + Lila* (1988), in which a husband and wife who've been married 40 years look back upon their years of living together on a farm as they cope with impending losses and illness.

Mason's second story collection, *Love Life* (1989), is more unified than her first in that most of its stories depict young adults going through courtship, marriage, or divorce. In the video, Mason reads a passage from "State Champions" in which the narrator tries to explain how she had been unable, as a young girl, to console a friend whose sister had just died: "I didn't know what to say. I couldn't say anything, for we weren't raised to say things that were heartfelt and gracious. Country kids didn't learn manners. Manners were too embarrassing.... We didn't say we were sorry."

As one critic has written: "What can and cannot be said is always at issue in Ms. Mason's



Program Director:

MARSHA HELLARD

"Bobbie Ann Mason" was directed by KET's Marsha Hellard, a native of Vanceburg, Kentucky who joined KET in 1985. She has worked on many projects, including *Universe & I*, *News Quiz*, and *In Our Own Backyard*. She also directed *Totally Radical Teenage Videos*, which won the Corporation for Public Broadcasting local programming award in 1991.

About the Bobbie Ann Mason documentary, Hellard writes:

"I first met Bobbie Ann Mason in the spring of 1994 when she came to KET to discuss the program we were planning about her life and work. She brought along some background information she had written that began, 'Most of the places that were important to me when I was growing up in Graves County are either gone or changed.' This, I thought, was her story. It is a story about loss.

"I held to this notion a long time, probably much longer than I should have. Eventually, though, I had to give it up. Reality just refused to fit so neatly into a single phrase. So, while loss does play a role in Bobbie Ann's life and work, viewers of this program will, hopefully, come to see her as I have, as an enigmatic, complex, and surprising woman and artist."

small towns. Emotional unknowing is everywhere."

In her most recent book, *Feather Crowns* (1993), Mason explores that concern further. Set in her mythical town of Hopewell at the beginning of this century, the novel tells the story of a tobacco-farming husband and wife, James and Christie Wheeler, who give birth to quintuplets. The birth is so rare it attracts national attention, and the family is besieged by curious spectators and journalists. Naive and well-meaning, they allow their private experience to become exploited before the public.

Mason's respect for the conflict between the old ways and the new is evident in this story. She vividly portrays the rituals of a farming family's life. And, as in her other work, the characters struggle for control over their lives against forces from outside their world. They suffer great losses, but through those losses they gain a measure of wisdom. *Feather Crowns* won the 1994 Southern Book Award for Fiction.

BOBBIE ANN MASON: IN HER OWN WORDS

Mason recalls that, early in her life, "I knew I wanted to be a writer." She was drawn to the study of Nabokov's fiction in part because, while living away from Kentucky, she felt sympathy with his identity as a writer in exile (as a Russian living in the U.S.). Also, she "learned a lot about image patterns from him.... He would write about sunlight coming through leaves, dappling the leaves.... To me it's just astonishing, the infinite experience of observing patterns of light and shadow, the intricacy of our experience of the physical world."

In discussing her own early work, Mason once told an interviewer, "I think the surface is the reality." To another she said, "My characters live in a world in which television and popular music are an intimate part of their lives, and I take that seriously." In explaining her focus

on physical details in her stories, she concluded, "I'm trying to portray a world of some people who are aspiring to a better life for themselves, and I think I'm trying to understand them on their own terms and not judge them."

Mason had started *In Country* as a short story in which a minor character's "strangeness" was attributed to his experience in Vietnam, but she expanded the story as she became more interested in the veteran. She read books about the problems Vietnam veterans faced on their return to the U.S., and she visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. The main characters of *In Country* want to see the memorial because it provides an "image of healing for them," she once said. "It's a small thing in a way, but it's the only thing they can find.... I'm not responsible for solving the aftermath of the Vietnam War. I can only record the way it's affecting people in these characters."

Once, while still living in Pennsylvania, Mason said of her Kentucky background, "I think it was necessary to get a lot of distance on it in order to be able to ... write the way I have written." But, she concluded, "I'm at the point where ... I could go there on my own terms now.... I get reinfused by visits home."

After moving back to Kentucky, she wrote *Feather Crowns*, which she feels offers "basically a positive view of life." Of the confrontations, losses, and learning that the mother, Christie, undergoes in the story, Mason says: "Even though she went through extreme challenges, she came out of it with her integrity and her sense of herself. That's really the challenge for a person."

WRITING IDEAS



1. Bobbie Ann Mason keeps a notebook in which she records interesting bits of overheard conversation, descriptions of unusual people she sees, and other fragments. “Then, when I get ready to write a story,” she says, “I might glance through my notebook and pick out some stuff.... I use it as a catalyst.” Try this method yourself as a means of starting stories. You can start with a line of conversation, an image, a place.
2. Mason’s story “Love Life” opens with a description of a retired teacher watching a music video on television. The video’s images seem comic, even absurd, when described without reference to the music. Turn on MTV with the sound off and, without naming the band or the song, write a one-paragraph description of what happens on the screen.
3. Pick a town corner or shopping mall near you. Go there and sit and watch what takes place in one of the stores or the public walkway. Without naming the people or place you’re observing, write down what you see.
4. The next time you’re watching TV with other people, notice any conversations they have while watching it. Record those dialogues in your notebook, without mentioning that they’re taking place in front of the set. What sense does the talk make on paper? What can you add to it? Start a story from it.
5. Mason has often spoken of her effort to write objectively about people, without condemning or condoning the choices they make. “I have a very detached view

of things,” she says, “so that I observe things [without being] strongly opinionated or involved in ego. I like to look.”

Try writing a story from this perspective. Think of a big problem you or someone you love is facing, perhaps one for which no answer has been found. Writing in as neutral a tone as possible, describe what some people may have done to cause the problem; then describe their efforts to escape or solve it.

6. In *In Country*, Sam Hughes learns about Vietnam despite the apathy of some folks in her community. Think of an instance when you got at the truth of something, or achieved something, against the odds. Were there people who encouraged you? Others who didn’t? Write your story.



“ What can and cannot be said is always at issue in Ms. Mason's small towns. Emotional unknowing is everywhere. ”

BOBBIE ANN MASON READING LIST

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ED McCLANAHAN

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

The exuberant humor and style of Ed McClanahan's work show the influence of Dickens and Sterne, as well as his experiences as a member of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters in California during the 1960s. In this program, McClanahan trades stories with old friends, recalling his boyhood days in Brooksville and Maysville, Kentucky and talking about how those experiences influenced his writing. He also reads from his sprawling novel *The Natural Man* and his autobiographical *Famous People I Have Known*. The program includes excerpts from a film version of one of his short stories, "The Congress of Wonders."

Part 1

Ed McClanahan, his mother, and a boyhood friend begin the program with stories of McClanahan as a boy growing up in a small rural town in Northern Kentucky. The first segment, "Brooksville," includes readings from *The Natural Man* and a short story, "Juanita and the Frog Prince." In the second segment, "Maysville," McClanahan visits his alma mater, Maysville High School, and trades stories with his high school buddies, many of them centering on high school basketball and the origin of one of his characters, Monk McHornung.

The third segment, "Rebel," traces McClanahan's journeys through various universities as a student, a teacher, a writer, and an editor (of the magazine *The Free You*). McClanahan talks about his first draft of *The Natural Man*, in which Monk is portrayed as "pure villain." This segment also includes comments by writer and friend Gurney Norman and readings from the nonfiction piece "A Misdemeanor Against Nature."

Part 2

In the segment entitled "Little Enis," McClanahan is featured at a tribute to Little Enis, the guitar-playing rock-a-billy singer from

Lexington, Kentucky profiled in *Famous People I Have Known*. McClanahan reads several excerpts from "Little Enis: An Ode on the Intimidations of Mortality."

The segment entitled "Writing *The Natural Man*" continues the story of the book's evolution and that of the character of Monk. McClanahan talks about facing a deadline from his publisher—20 years after he began the book—and finally seeing that the story needed to be told in third person, not in the first person of the initial drafts.

Two of the final three segments—"Home" and "Today"—show McClanahan with his family and talking about his future plans. The remaining segment, "The Congress of Wonders," features excerpts from Paul Wagner's film of the same name as well as McClanahan reading from the short story.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Ed McClanahan remembers himself as a 6-year-old sitting beside his aunt while she read him poetry. "It was a summer afternoon; a breeze was blowing the curtains over the daybed. She was reading Shelley, Longfellow ... Shakespeare. I've always thought, 'Well, okay, something was passed on from that.' I wanted to write or to be an artist."

He was born in 1932 and grew up in Brooksville, a small rural town in Northern Kentucky. His father ran an oil distributorship; his mother was a schoolteacher. A childhood illness held him back a year from entering school, but, he recalls, "I had all these aunts who were schoolteachers, so I could read like a stormtrooper by the time I started first grade."

Although he was lonely as a boy and "not much of a slugger in fights," by the time McClanahan got to high school, he says, "things started turning around for me. I got tall all of a sudden, girls were interested, and I made the high school basketball team." He found his new





home of Maysville “a hip place to be.” His family lived within a block of the local soda fountain, the town movie theater, and the high school, and he wrote for the school newspaper.

After a year at Washington and Lee University, McClanahan transferred to Miami University of Ohio to study creative writing. He got Cs on his first short stories, but eventually wrote one good enough to win the college fiction prize. He then enrolled in a graduate English program at Stanford University, but soon discovered he wasn't ready and dropped out. After brief stints as a school bus driver and then a construction worker, he came home to study literature at the University of Kentucky. He wrote more fiction there and earned his master's degree.

In 1958, McClanahan went to work full time as an English teacher at Oregon State College. In the ensuing three years, he published only one short story, and by 1961 he had begun to feel “overwhelmed” by the prospect that he might never succeed at writing.

Spurred by his anxiety, McClanahan began working nights on a long story. “I wrote in a white heat,” he says, “500 words a day, seven days a week. I would teach all day, drive 80 miles to teach a night class in Portland, grab a hamburger and eat it walking down the hall on my way to class, teach three hours, then jump in my car, dash back to Corvallis, go straight to my office and write till 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, go home, sleep an hour, then get up and go teach an 8 a.m. class. It was an incredible period in my life. I lost 45 pounds and drank 25 cups of coffee every day. I was absolutely wired, just buzzing, flying around through the world.”

In five months, he completed a 100-page novella titled *From a Considerable Height*. A publisher gave him a contract to develop it into a full-length novel, and he won the prestigious Stegner Fellowship, enabling him to return to Stanford to write fiction.

As a student at Stanford, McClanahan wrote more short stories; then, in 1963, the university hired him to teach creative writing, a position he held for the next decade. It was a time of rapid change in American society. The civil rights movement was gathering strength, the country was becoming embroiled in the Vietnam War, and the hippie culture was flourishing on college campuses.

As McClanahan has written, many of these cultural changes started in San Francisco. While he continued to work as a teacher at Stanford, he lived with his wife and children in a “big old house” where people constantly dropped by to visit, including Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and other writers, professors, gurus, and political activists.

With a friend, Fred Nelson, McClanahan began producing a local magazine called *The Free You*, for which “I composed my rhapsodic odes to the revolutionary spirit of the times.” One of the earliest of these essays, “Highway 52 Revisited,” told of his encounter with some conservative young men at a bar in Kentucky one summer when he made one of his annual visits home.

“It was a major breakthrough for me to write that piece,” he later said. “Addressing people in my hip community in California, having an audience that was friendly, not judgmental ... made all the difference. I learned a more personal and direct, original voice than I had ever had before.” He continued to develop that voice in other creative essays for *The Free You*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*.

McClanahan left Stanford in 1972. He taught college in Kentucky for one year and then in Montana for three before returning to Kentucky for good in 1976. He had discovered, “I wanted at last to write *lovingly* of Kentucky.” When, in 1980, his publisher put him under a deadline either to finish the novel he'd started 20 years before or return the money he'd been paid, McClanahan found he was ready to do it.

He extensively revised his earlier work to produce *The Natural Man*, which was published in 1983 to unanimous praise. In 1985, he published his comic memoir, *Famous People I Have Known*. Recently he saw the film of his 1988 short story, "The Congress of Wonders," completed. And his new book, also entitled *A Congress of Wonders*, was published in 1996 to widespread praise. In *Newsweek*, reviewer Malcolm Jones Jr. wrote: "McClanahan lightens not merely your wallet but your heart as well. Quaff of this literary elixir. You won't regret it."

MAJOR WORKS

Set in a small Kentucky town during the 1940s, *The Natural Man* (1983) is the story of Harry Eastep, a shy, scholarly 15-year-old, and Monk McHorning, a hulking, swaggering orphan who has been recruited by the high school principal to play for the basketball team. Monk stands 6'5", weighs 238 pounds, and seems to have an endless supply of raunchy jokes to tell. He also plays basketball "with violent abandon, felling friend and foe alike," and the town looks eagerly to him to break the high school team's losing streak.

To Harry, Monk is "the most *accomplished* personage" he's ever met, and he soon becomes Monk's most devoted fan. Harry does Monk's homework to keep him eligible for the team. After hours, he hangs out with his hero at the local pool hall.

Soon, though, Harry finds himself in competition with Monk for the attention of Oodles Ockerman, the dim-witted, corpulent daughter of Newton Ockerman, who runs the town movie theater, where Harry works. Along with the rest of the town, Harry eagerly awaits one of the theater's coming attractions, a purported sex-education film. Meanwhile, as Monk's successes on the basketball court begin to add up, the pool hall proprietor starts trying to bribe Monk to cheat in some upcoming games.

These complications add suspense to the story, but, as *Newsweek's* reviewer noted, "It's McClanahan's treatment of it that makes it a thing to marvel at. Hardly a sentence lacks a comic effect." But though the novel is comic, McClanahan portrays human foibles and virtues with equal sensitivity. Characters one might have predicted would end badly reveal unexpected virtues. The novel concludes on a note of faith, in wry acceptance of the inevitable change in human fortune.

After the enthusiastic reception of his novel, McClanahan published a memoir, *Famous People I Have Known* (1985). Starting with an incident from his freshman year in college, when he met a famous singer one evening, McClanahan tells stories of the '60s culture at Stanford, of the changes he observed in the country and in himself during those years, and of his decision to move back to Kentucky in the mid-'70s.

McClanahan's 1972 essay on performer Little Enis, which he calls "a personal all-time favorite of mine," appears as a chapter of the memoir. McClanahan found Enis to be a perfect subject to write about, since profiling Enis afforded him a chance to contrast his unique style of elegant narrative description with comic, country talk. At one point, for example, he describes Enis as "this pugnacious-looking little banty rooster with a skin-tight gold-sateen cowboy shirt and an underslung lower jaw and a great sleek black-patent-leather Elvis Presley pompadour," then quotes Enis: "People sometimes asks me what I think of these people like you, which has got the long hair and all. And ... actually, see I've had long hair my own self."

The recently published *A Congress of Wonders* (1996) includes two novellas and a short story: "Juanita and the Frog Prince," "The Finches Song," and "The Congress of Wonders." First published in 1988, the short story, "The Congress of Wonders," is set at a carnival in rural Kentucky in 1944. A young teenage boy, Wade, tags along with his older brother Sonny, who is



Program Director:

PAUL WAGNER

Paul Wagner, director of “Ed McClanahan,” is an accomplished documentary filmmaker on subjects in American history and culture, produced for the Smithsonian Institution and public television. His credits include the recently completed *Out of Ireland*, a history of Irish emigration to America; *Miles of Smiles*, the story of America’s first black labor union; and *The Stone Carvers*, a portrait of Italian-American artisans which won the 1985 Academy Award for Best Short Documentary Film.

Wagner was born and raised in Louisville, received a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Kentucky, and worked as a researcher/writer at KET, his first job after graduating.

About his approach to the program, Wagner writes:

“The greatest (only?!) advantage films and videos have over written works is their ability to simply let the subject ‘live’ in front of the camera. In Ed’s case, particularly, I think you could read about him forever and never catch the essence of him that you can by hearing and watching him tell one joke or relate one story.

“My strategy, therefore, was to bring Ed together informally with people and places that I hoped would stimulate his memories and musings on life and art, and then simply turn on the camera and let him talk. For many writers that approach might not lend much insight. But for Ed, I think it does.

“As one of the film’s interviewees, Tom Marksbury, says, Ed’s ‘writing voice’ is essentially the same as his ‘cocktail hour voice.’ So perhaps the viewer would do well to think of this as a chance to spend cocktail hour with Kentucky’s King of the Small-Town Baroque.”

leaving soon to fight in World War II. McClanahan’s distinct mix of “overblown” language (as he once put it), comic exaggeration, and genuine pathos is abundantly evident in this poignant story of a younger brother’s yearning to keep his older brother from harm. All three stories feature, as one critic describes him, “that colossus of chicanery, Professor Philander Cosmo Rexroat, B.S., M.S. and Pee-Aitch-Dee, herpetologist, philatelist, minister of the Gospel and licensed practitioner of colonic irrigation.”

ED McCLANAHAN: IN HIS OWN WORDS

While recognizing that the novella he wrote in 1961 was much improved by his revision of it 20 years later, McClanahan recalls that writing it while teaching composition full time constituted a critical stage in his development as a writer. Though teaching grammar was “an onerous chore,” he found himself “interested in the mechanics of the language in a way I never had been before.... I was really getting my hands into the machinery of the language.”

He also drew inspiration from the companionship of several poets on the college faculty. “Language was falling out of these people ... one of them was always assonating and alliterating. It was wonderful.”

Though he concedes that the novella’s style was “poetic,” it also had a “gloomy ... confessional tone.” He’d intended it as “a searing indictment of Southern small-town values.” Monk McHornung was a villain. “He represented all the insensitive louts who mistreated me in my childhood. It was ... about rejection and alienation.”

But 20 years later, no longer embittered, McClanahan changed the point of view to the third person and, searching for a way to write kindly of Monk, found the answer in the non-fiction portrayal he’d already written of Little

Enis, whom McClanahan had found endearing though also “rude and crude.” In profiling Enis, McClanahan had been content simply to quote and describe his subject without criticizing him. Likewise, he now decided, “The way to render Monk was simply to *let him be himself*, to lighten up on him, to leave off judging him.”

Of his work now, McClanahan says: “For me, where the act of writing really goes on is in the interplay between the written voice and the spoken voice. I like for there to be a counterpoint between those two things ... to write in a deliberately overblown literary voice which plays off against these really earthy voices of my characters. And, to some extent, I like to amalgamate the two voices, so that sometimes I can get both of them going at once in a kind of weird harmony.”

Reflecting on his affection for detailed description of small-town life, he says: “There exists this amorphous, shapeless mass of human experience. There’s not an atom of it that isn’t potentially a work of art. All that’s required is an artist to single it out and ... reveal it for what it really is.”



WRITING IDEAS

1. Mark Twain once said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.” Ed McClanahan keeps three thesauruses at his writing desk. He says that, when he’s writing, he uses a thesaurus sometimes not just to find “the right word,” but to find synonyms, “to see what other nuances I can come up with. You can’t use a thesaurus haphazardly. But I find the thesaurus is like a little mine of ideas.”

To discover the variety of expressions a thesaurus offers, look up these words: *run, light, fair, green, tranquil*. Thesau-

ruses are arranged in different ways. You may find it easiest to use one published in dictionary form.

2. The protagonist of *The Natural Man*, Harry Eastep, loves sports writing for “the *assonance*, the *alliteration*, the sheer mythmaking *hyperbole*, the splendid excess of it all” [emphasis added]. Look up these terms and the term *consonance*. Try writing a paragraph that displays these qualities.
3. McClanahan describes an early draft of *The Natural Man* as containing language that was “jacked and pumped.... I had a lot of wind in my sails.” For the fun of it, try writing a paragraph that could be described that way. For instance, try using two or three similes where ordinarily you might use only one. In *The Natural Man*, for example, McClanahan wrote not just that Newton Ockerman was fat, but that he “was as ponderous as three hundred pounds of vanilla custard on the hoof, the sort of fat man whose girth was greatest just below the belt, like a gravy boat or a soup tureen.”
4. Using the first-person point of view, write a story about a time when you were treated unfairly by someone bigger than you. Write the story again, but from the point of view of that bigger person. Then write the story yet again, using the third-person perspective.

In writing one of those versions, consider exaggerating what happened or how it felt to one of the characters. What other adjustments do you have to make—in someone’s personality, in dialogue or setting—for that version of the story to be interesting?

5. Practice reading what you write aloud to someone at home, then read it aloud to a group.

ED McCLANAHAN READING LIST

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“As one of the film’s interviewees, Tom Marksbury, says, Ed’s ‘writing voice’ is essentially the same as his ‘cocktail hour voice.’ So perhaps the viewer would do well to think of this as a chance to spend cocktail hour with Kentucky’s King of the Small-Town Baroque.”

—Paul Wagner

“ McClanahan lightens not merely your wallet but your heart as well. Quaff of this literary elixir. You won't regret it. ”

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MARSHA NORMAN

PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

The work of playwright Marsha Norman ranges from gritty urban dramas like *'night, Mother*, which won the Pulitzer Prize, to musicals like *The Secret Garden*, which won the Tony Award. This program traces Norman's childhood and the beginning of her writing career; goes backstage to show her working with actors, designers, composers, and producers; and includes readings by Norman, dramatizations of her work, and commentary by critic John Simon and others.

Part 1

The writing and producing of the musical *The Red Shoes* is the frame within which Marsha Norman's story is told. The program opens with "Preparing The Red Shoes," in which Norman talks about her vision of the story and how it differed from that of the producers. This segment includes an excerpt from the famous movie of the same story.

Going back in time, the second segment, "Starting Out: Louisville," talks about Norman's childhood, schooling, and jobs in Kentucky. It also features her talking with Jon Jory, producing director of Actors Theatre of Louisville, about the advice he gave her when she was just beginning her career as a playwright.

That advice led her to write *Getting Out*, the focal point of the next two program segments. In one, Norman and others recount the mounting of the play and the response to it. In the other, Norman reads two excerpts from the play. John Simon, a critic with *New York* magazine, discusses Norman's place in theatre.

In the segment entitled "Third & Oak: The Laundromat," Norman takes viewers on a tour of Louisville, pointing out places which formed the basis of her play *The Laundromat*; this segment includes an excerpt from the televised version of the play.

In the next segment, "'night, Mother," Norman talks about her move to New York City

and she and Anne Pitoniak, an actress who played Mama in *'night, Mother*, read a scene from the play. This reading is followed by a glimpse of Norman at a gathering of Pulitzer Prize winners and her take on *Traveler in the Dark*, the play that followed *'night, Mother*.

Part 2

The opening segment of the second half of the program, "The Red Shoes Continues," returns to Broadway and technical rehearsals for the musical. In the following segment, "The Secret Garden," Norman and her colleagues—set designer Heidi Landesman, director Susan Schulman, and composer Lucy Simon—talk about their work together on that musical. Also featured is an excerpt from the fund-raising workshop version of the play. Norman concludes this segment by reading a lyric from *The Secret Garden*.

In "Loving Daniel Boone," Norman returns to Louisville for the ATL production of the play by the same name. Then the final chapter of *The Red Shoes* is revealed in "The Red Shoes: Opening Day." Norman talks frankly about the bad reviews and the play's closing.

The program concludes with a segment entitled "Coming Attractions" in which Norman talks about what she's working on next.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Recalling her girlhood in Louisville, playwright Marsha Norman once said, "I would sit in the theater and think, 'I could do that; I would be really good at that.'" But at first she didn't believe she would ever have the chance to write plays. "I didn't know any writers, and I certainly had no local playwrights as role models," she has said. "Kentucky's writing tradition was mainly a mountain one, I thought.... I was from a working-class family. I figured playwrights mostly came from wealthy East Coast families who had big libraries in their





homes and whose children went to prestigious colleges.... I was 29 years old before I finally believed I could have a life as a writer.”

Norman, born in 1947, is the oldest of four children. Her father worked long hours as a salesman while her mother, whom she has described as a strict disciplinarian and a fundamentalist Christian, raised the children. In a 1984 interview, Norman said that, as a child, she felt “isolated. Not lonely, but definitely cut off from other children.” Later she said, “I always felt like I didn’t belong.” As a result, she found, “I lived on imaginary conversation. I still do.”

But, she notes, her parents did provide her with piano lessons, book club memberships, and visits to local theaters and libraries. At Durrett High School, Norman worked on the newspaper and yearbook and, inspired by English teacher Martha Ellison, wrote a prize-winning essay, “Why Do Good Men Suffer?” The topic later became a focus of her creative work.

Attending Agnes Scott College in Georgia on a scholarship, Norman majored in philosophy and did volunteer work at a local hospital. She then returned home to Louisville, where she earned a master’s degree in education. For two years, she worked with disturbed adolescents at Central State Hospital, then taught gifted children at the Brown School in Louisville, where she also involved students in filmmaking. By 1976, she’d begun writing newspaper articles, including a weekly children’s supplement called *The Jelly Bean Journal* for the *Louisville Times*.

After writing a musical about inventor Thomas Edison, Norman met with Jon Jory, the director of Louisville’s prestigious Actors Theatre. Jory was a skilled mentor to budding playwrights. He didn’t produce the musical, but, perhaps detecting her sensitivity toward suffering people, encouraged her to pick “a painful subject” to write about.

Norman had saved up enough money to take time off from work to write. A year later,

after “living like some sort of a hermit and pouring down lots of coffee,” she returned to Jory with a play called *Getting Out*. ATL produced the play, and after its Louisville premiere, it ran again in New York City, where it was a tremendous success and established Norman’s career as a writer.

“To buy time,” as she puts it, for writing plays, Norman went on to write teleplays and screenplays. She also wrote a novel, *The Fortune Teller*, which was later made into a TV movie. But she has continued to do her best work for the stage.

Not long after *Getting Out*, she had more success with another drama, *Third & Oak*, inspired by a place in Louisville. Norman has described that play as “about how close you can be to someone without ever really being able to talk to them, to ask them for what you need.”

Several years later, she brought that theme to life again in *night, Mother*, a forceful drama of a lonely woman’s confrontation with her mother over her decision to commit suicide. The play won numerous awards, including the 1983 Pulitzer Prize, and earned Norman a reputation as one of the nation’s leading dramatists. It was later made into a major film starring Academy Award-winning actresses Anne Bancroft and Sissy Spacek.

Since *night, Mother*, Norman has written a tremendous range of plays, often rewriting them after trial productions. In 1984, *Traveler in the Dark*, a philosophical drama about a surgeon struggling with his failure to save the life of his devoted nurse, received mostly bad reviews. Norman then worked on “an experiment in the script,” and the improved version won a somewhat better reception.

As she once said, “I come from a tradition of hard work and confidence, and there are certain assumptions that I grew up with.... ‘You don’t quit.’” In working with Norman on the original production of *Getting Out*, Jon Jory observed that she had the “crucial ... ability to rewrite.”

“ Marsha writes deep, painful stuff that’s not always ‘up on the crust.’ It’s all bubbling beneath the surface. ”
—James Earl Jones

In 1989, she collaborated with composer Lucy Simon and others on a musical based on *The Secret Garden*, a classic children’s novel. After a trial run in Virginia, Norman revised the script to achieve “more of a feeling for the Yorkshire setting in the dialogue, and ... descriptive passages that invite the audience to put their imaginations to work.” It later opened to lukewarm reviews in New York, closed briefly so that more of the script could be cut and rearranged, and then reopened to great success. The final version earned numerous awards, including a Tony for Best Book and Lyrics for Norman.

Her most recent Broadway effort, in 1993, was a stage adaptation of the 1948 movie *The Red Shoes*. The musical was troubled with changes in management, opened to bad reviews, and closed immediately.

Norman returned to Kentucky in 1995 for the premiere of her latest work, *Trudy Blue*, one of 11 plays showcased in Actors Theatre’s 19th annual Humana Festival of New American Plays.

MAJOR PLAYS

Getting Out (1977) was inspired partly by Norman’s encounter with a particularly troubled 13-year-old girl at Central State Hospital, as well as interviews Norman conducted with women who had been in prison. It’s about a young woman, Arlene, who has just been paroled from prison and returns home to a small apartment in Louisville.

Her apartment occupies one part of the stage; the prison cell she has left occupies another. One actress plays Arlene, who wants to start life anew; another plays her formerly violent self, Arlie, who moves around in the prison cell and at times lingers about Arlene like a cruel memory. Arlene, trying to go straight, is tortured by temptations to fall back on crime.

The play gradually reveals Arlene’s struggles

through alternating scenes of the former Arlie’s misconduct and the present Arlene’s efforts to save herself, as when she resists the advances of a pimp who drops by or fends off her oppressive mother. The play ends on a hopeful note, with Arlene finding a way to own up to her old self without giving in to it.

As for the drama’s deeper sources, Norman says, “My whole life I felt locked up. I think the writing of *Getting Out* for me was my own opening of the door.”

Norman’s next major work was *Third & Oak*, a pair of one-act plays: *The Laundromat*, a late-night conversation between two women, one a widow, the other trapped in a bad marriage, and *The Pool Hall*, in which a young disc jockey struggles to win respect from a pool hall proprietor who was a friend of his father. Actor James Earl Jones, who starred in a televised version of *The Pool Hall*, said, “Marsha writes deep, painful stuff that’s not always ‘up on the crust.’ It’s all bubbling beneath the surface.”

That description could apply equally to *‘night, Mother*, Norman’s best-known play. It is set in a small home out in the country where Jessie Cates, a dowdy, middle-aged woman, lives alone with her mother. Jessie is divorced, she suffers from epilepsy, her absent son has turned into a drug addict and thief, she has tried to hold a job and can’t, and she has no friends. On a routine Saturday evening, as she is preparing to give Mama her weekly manicure, Jessie calmly informs her that she plans to kill herself later that evening.

For the duration of the play, Jessie puts the house in order—arranging grocery delivery, writing directions for where to find things—while Mama tries to undo her daughter’s decision, to distract her from it, to argue, cajole, beg. The dialogue moves naturally through Mama’s efforts to put a positive face on their conflicts and losses, but Jessie remains adamant: “I’m just not having a very good time, and I don’t have any reason to think it’ll get anything but worse. I’m tired.”

Program Director:

NELL COX

"Marsha Norman" was directed by Nell Cox, a native of Frankfort, Kentucky who is now based in Los Angeles. Her credits include directing episodes of commercial television hits—*M*A*S*H*, *The Waltons*, *L.A. Law*—as well as award-winning PBS series such as *WonderWorks*, *Ghostwriter*, and *American Playhouse*. Recently she directed a documentary on the Broadway play *Jelly's Last Jam* for *Great Performances*.

"Marsha Norman" has been honored with a Worldfest Houston International Film Festival Bronze Plaque Award and a 1996 Gabriel Award from UNDA-USA.

About her subject, Cox writes:

"Marsha is so articulate, and she just happens to be articulate on many subjects which are dear to me: the role of the artist, the role of the woman artist, the creative process and how to nurture it, and the struggle toward selfhood—especially when raised in a culture that doesn't appreciate or understand many of the best things about you.

"Marsha is of course a wonderful writer, and it was a pleasure for me, in preparing the documentary, to go back and read all that she's written. She has a great gift for getting down and into her characters, but the thing that has always impressed me the most, since I first saw *Getting Out*, is her ability to create conflict, to set up situations that grab you and don't let you go.

"We were so lucky that during the time we were making our documentary Marsha was preparing a musical for Broadway. Because of this, the film gives the viewer some glimpses into the exhilaration, the intricacies, and the ups and downs of writing for the Broadway theatre.

"I think this film will say a lot to anyone involved in the creative process about how to tap the juices and keep them flowing. But I also believe it is an inspiring piece about determination and fighting back in the face of daunting odds."

By the end of the play, having watched Jessie reject every argument for living she or her mother could come up with, the audience is moved to pity for their isolation and to a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, what it means to be alive.

Norman's next major success was the 1991 musical *The Secret Garden*. Based on a novel by Frances Hodgson Burnett, it tells the story of an orphan, Mary, who comes to live with her uncle Archibald in an old English mansion. The uncle broods about, mourning the death of his young wife. Mary befriends his sickly son, Colin, and together they discover a secret garden that brings life back into the mansion.

While the critical reaction to the musical was mixed, audiences loved it—to Norman's delight. Noting that at one time in her life she would have found a bad review "devastating," she said, "I'm over that."

To come up with the subject for her comedy *D. Boone* (which premiered at Actors Theatre in 1992 and is now titled *Loving Daniel Boone*), Norman "made a list of all the things I like about Kentucky, from spoon bread to Mammoth Cave." But it was her memory of a childhood visit to the Filson Club, a historical society in Louisville where she saw a tree stump on which Daniel Boone had reputedly carved his name, that inspired her most.

Initially, she wrote a monologue: A woman talks about what Daniel Boone means to her. Norman developed that into a play about a cleaning woman at a historical museum who, disillusioned with romance, decides to enter a secret passageway to the past. It lands her next to her hero, Boone, just as he's in the midst of fighting Indians. The comedy multiplies as she's followed by her boss, another cleaning lady from the museum, and her boyfriend, "Hilly," who wants to fight Daniel Boone to win her back.

MARSHA NORMAN: IN HER OWN WORDS

Norman has found that as many of her plays have "failed" as have succeeded. After *Getting Out* established her New York reputation, *Third & Oak* enjoyed moderate success. But her next play, *Circus Valentine*—in which an acrobat attempts a triple somersault to help a family circus—had one performance Norman describes as "a total disaster," and she chose not to publish it.

Some of the other plays written before and after the huge success of *'night, Mother*—including *Traveler in the Dark* and her latest Broadway musical effort, *The Red Shoes*—also were poorly received. But, in a lecture she gave in Kentucky in 1984, she likened writing to performing in a high-wire act: "There is no way to do significant work without failing.... It's proof of courage, proof of growth, and proof of stretching beyond what you did yesterday. The only way not to fall is not to move at all."

A year later, in a newspaper essay, Norman urged theatergoers to attend more new plays, not just the hits. "To have an idea for a play is to submit to what can be a very long, brutal process," she wrote. "Plays take years to write.... If artists don't have the opportunity to work—well, it's like the athletic department telling its runners that they can't even get onto the track until they're ready to win."

Commenting on her most recent "win," the 1992 comedy *D. Boone*, Norman acknowledges its contrast to her relatively somber earlier work. "I tell people, 'Thank God I don't still have *'night, Mother* to write.... It's great to be alive, and it's fabulous to be able to make people laugh."

WRITING IDEAS



1. Once, in discussing her childhood, Marsha Norman said she learned from her family to respond to serious problems by making jokes. For a time, later on, that habit made it “very hard for me to express anger directly. But I find that I write perfectly wonderful fights.”

Is there someone or something you’re angry about? Try writing a dialogue in which the anger is shown but not spoken of directly.

2. Norman has often drawn her inspiration to write from “an emotional memory, a moment I was in great pain, or ... desperately afraid, or ... in awe of an act of courage.” She advises beginning writers to “pick an event that happened at least ten years ago. That’s enough time for all the insignificant experiences to have fallen away.”

Think back to a time in your childhood when you experienced such a moment. Describe it from your point of view at that time. Where were you? What time of day was it? Who was around? What sounds did you hear? What happened?

3. List at least ten things you like about the place you live in, however you might define “place.” Draft an outline for a play that mentions at least three of those things.
4. In giving advice to writers, Norman says, “Save writing for the things you can’t talk about.” If you don’t already keep a private, personal journal, get a notebook and start one. Unlike a diary, a journal is more than just an account of daily events. It’s a place for recording hopes, fears, descrip-

tions, questions, thoughts. What can’t you talk about? Write about it in your journal.

5. With a minimum of props (for example, a kitchen table, a fishing boat, a line of waiting people), write a dialogue between two people in which each has a secret from the other. Do not reveal the secret, but make it possible for the reader to infer it. For example, a wife who has just lost her job and hasn’t worked up the courage to tell her husband comes in the door right as he has finished hiding the surprise gift he’s bought for her birthday. Try to give each character an individual way of speaking. Let the dialogue crackle with feelings not directly expressed. And don’t forget stage directions—gestures can be revealing, too. So can the failure to answer a question.
6. If your class is studying a Marsha Norman play, break into groups of three or four. A week ahead of time, assign each group to perform the same scene from the drama. Let each group sort out among themselves who plays which part (actual gender needn’t matter), who directs, how the scene ought to be “blocked out.” The players need not memorize their lines, but each group should rehearse the scene at least five or six times before performing it before the rest of the class. When all have finished, let the class discuss each group’s interpretation.
7. Solely from memory, write down some portion of the most important conversation you’ve had this year. Write down one you had five years ago.



“ Marsha has a great gift for getting down and into her characters, but the thing that has always impressed me the most . . . is her ability to create conflict, to set up situations that grab you and don't let you go. ”
 —Nell Cox

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