

Exotic Birds of a Feather: Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams

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Editor's Note by Robert Bray. *The following panel presentation took place on Friday, March 24, 2000, at the Tennessee Williams/New Orleans Literary Festival. Once we had arranged this distinguished panel it seemed only reasonable to make their discussion available to a larger audience, and so this transcription appears in **The Tennessee Williams Annual Review** for those who were not fortunate enough to have heard the original presentation. Dr. Barbara Ewell, a Kate Chopin specialist at City College, Loyola University of New Orleans, deftly moderated the discussion.*

Dr. Barbara Ewell: Welcome to the second panel of the Tennessee Williams Festival. We're going to talk this morning about Tennessee Williams and one of his most interesting friends, Carson McCullers. Carson McCullers wrote four novels, a novella, about twenty short stories, numerous nonfiction pieces, and an unfinished autobiography before her death at the age of fifty in 1967. Her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, published in 1940, was immediately successful and made her then a kind of *wunderkind* at the age of 23. Her friend, Tennessee Williams, said that she was in his opinion the greatest living writer of our country, if not of the world. This, of course, from a man not given to exaggeration. In any event, he also said, "She was the only person I have ever been able to work with in the same room, and we got along beautifully." And so, it is this rather amazing writer and her friendship with Williams that we are going to talk about this morning. And if you ever had a chance to learn something about Carson McCullers, it will be from this panel.

To begin the introductions, we have Dr. Carlos Dews. Carlos is a professor and Chair of English and Foreign Languages at the University of West Florida in Pensacola. He has written several works on Carson McCullers, including editing her unfinished autobiography, published last year, *Illumination and Night Glare*. And he is now working on *The Library of America's Collected Novels of Carson McCullers*. Next to him is Dr. Virginia Spencer Carr, probably without whom none of us would be here in terms of Carson McCullers's work. She is a professor of English at Georgia State University and has also written several books on Carson McCullers—most notably, of course, her award winning biography, *The Lonely Hunter*, in 1975. She has also written biographies of John Dos Passos and is presently finishing one on Paul Bowles and beginning another, or in the middle of another, on Tennessee Williams. And finally, we have Dr. Will Brantley, who is a professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University in Murfreesboro, and while his 1993 book, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir*, is not exclusively on

Carson McCullers, it includes her and sets a context that is very important to McCullers. It also won the Eudora Welty Prize. He has also edited a collection of interviews, *Conversations with Pauline Kael*. And Will helped to form the Carson McCullers Society in 1997. So, I think we ought to be able to learn a great deal from these people.

I would like to start with a bit of an overview, asking each of them to say a little bit of something about various parts of McCullers's life and work. And I actually would like to begin with Virginia, since as McCullers's biographer, she has probably spent almost as much time with McCullers as McCullers did, trying to understand her life. Why don't you just tell us a little bit about this woman's origins and some of her most important relationships?

Dr. Virginia Spencer Carr: I will. But first I would like to pick up, Barbara, on something you said in quoting Tennessee: that he considered Carson McCullers the greatest writer in the twentieth century. Well, he also said that about Jane Bowles. And he said, "I would never tell Carson, but to me Jane was the greatest twentieth century American writer, and I don't mean female American writer." Then he said, "Carson was very jealous." At any rate, I moved to Columbus, Georgia, really because that was her hometown, and as soon as I finished my Ph.D., off I went to Columbus College to teach. And I couldn't do anything without running into people who had known the family personally. She was known as Lula Carson Smith when she was born in 1917, first child of a watchmaker/repairman and a homemaker. And, the interesting thing is that until Carson's mother died, the people in Columbus were sure that Marguerite, the mother, had been writing those stories because Marguerite Waters Smith had such a peculiar and canny sense of humor and sense of the wry. And so when she was pregnant with Carson she was just absolutely convinced that her daughter, because of some prenatal sign, would be born a genius—was destined to a pedestal life, and you can imagine that was very burdensome to a child growing up and being perceived as different. Of course, she was different. But then to have her mother curry that idea as well! I remember in my studies that at the age of ten, she could hardly wait to get to the Chattahoochee Valley Fair: the midway, the exhibits, the rides, about which she was in utter horror and fascination. For the freak shows, she felt some mysterious connection, and she was almost afraid that if she looked at them directly that there would be an unwelcome attachment, that they might draw her into themselves, and she would be forever trapped. And she felt that she was trapped anyway somewhat in her shape and body, or so said. It was as though these freaks said, "I know you. You're one of us." She saw certain physical aberrations as an exaggerated visible symbol of her own "caught" condition. And to Carson, her caught condition involved spiritual isolation and a keen sense of aloneness, no matter how intensely she longed to relate to others. And you know by having read her novels and her short stories that they are concerned so much with that state of

being, the creator victim. I remember when she decided to give up the piano because her piano teacher was being transferred out of Columbus, her husband being a Commanding Officer at Fort Benning, her teacher said, "I'm sorry, I'll have to get you another teacher, Carson." She didn't call her Lula Carson; she had learned just to call her Carson. And Carson looked over at her and said, "Oh, I'm not going to be a concert pianist. I'm going to be a writer." That was her way of dealing, you see, with rejection. And it was not until some five years after she had written *The Member of the Wedding* and had been reconciled with her teacher after the play was produced on Broadway that she said, "Mrs. Tucker," (I don't think she ever called her Mary) "without you, my play, my novel would never have been written." It was that sense of alienation and disdain, as she saw it. And so, book after book seemed to exemplify that caught and hurt feeling. I wish to yield now to someone else on the panel for a few words.

Ewell: Well, Carlos, why don't you pick up on that business about writing. Whatever got her into being a writer, and where did her career go?

Dr. Carlos Dews: It's interesting to me that she started with music because you can see traces of the influences of music in all of her work, especially the structure of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. And I think this nurturance from her mother had its negative and positive aspects. Writing just happened to be the outlet of creativity that she came to. Music was another. But in many ways it was just that need to create, the need to write. She said by writing she earned her soul and sort of deserved to live because she continued to write that way. And I think it was out of this impulse to bridge this incredible chasm she felt between individuals that motivated her to create, regardless of writing or music, just to have that connection with other people. And it's interesting to me, looking at her career, that almost all the work that she's known for, all of her major work, was written in a ten-year period, roughly from 1938, 1939 to 1948, 1949 and to 1950. And how incredibly young she was at the time, publishing her first novel at 23 and publishing her last major work at 33. That is an amazing ten-year period, very early in someone's age and then to die at age 50 in 1967. It is in some way a miraculous career given her medical difficulties and this sort of compressed nature of her prime writing years, ten years. I would take those ten years anytime.

Ewell: Well, Will, let's cut to the chase a little bit here. How did she meet Tennessee Williams?

Dr. Will Brantley: Well, she met him in Nantucket in 1946. He had read her works with great enthusiasm. In fact, he said in a letter in 1940 to Bennet Cerf, "I brought one novel down here with me called *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by a young girl named Carson McCullers. It is so extraordinary it makes me ashamed of anything I might do. Are you familiar with her work?—What a play she could

write!—Let us hope that she doesn't—or that she *does*—however it might deprecate other works in that field.” So, I guess six years later, Williams worked up the courage to write a fan letter—this is after *The Member of the Wedding*—and invited McCullers to join him in Nantucket. There are many accounts of this meeting, but I think the briefest and probably the one that touches on most of the components of their relationship is the account that Williams gave to Rex Reed in an interview. And I thought I would share a little bit of that. Williams said, in his manner of exaggeration, “The only *real* writer the South ever turned out was Carson. . . . She was no angel, ya know. Or if she was, she was a black angel. But she had infinite wisdom. Ours was a deep relationship that spanned many years. I first met her when I went to Nantucket to die. I had read *The Member of the Wedding* that year and I considered her the world's greatest living writer. I wanted to meet her before I died, so I wrote to her and she arrived on the boat. This tall girl came down the gangplank wearing a baseball cap and slacks. She had a radiant, snaggletoothed grin and there was an immediate attachment. I seldom remember addresses, but this was 31 Pine Street in Nantucket, an old gray frame house with a wind-up Victrola and some fabulous old records, like *Santiago Waltz* and Sousa band numbers. A big windstorm broke the downstairs windows and a pregnant cat jumped in and had kittens on Carson's bed. This was her last good year before her stroke. She did a good deal of the cooking, mostly canned green pea soup with wienies in it and an innovation called ‘spuds Carson,’ which was mashed potatoes with olives and onions mixed in it. She was in love that summer and mooning over somebody. Her husband Reeves had not yet committed suicide, but it was not him she was mooning over. She would go out and buy Johnny Walker and sit in a straight-back chair at the foot of the steps and after my friend and I went to bed she'd sit up all night mooning over this romance in her head. I'd come down in the morning and the bottle would be empty. It was a crazy but creative summer. We read Hart Crane poems aloud to each other from a book I stole from the St. Louis public library, and we had a portrait of Laurette Taylor, who had just died, with a funeral wreath around it, and the fireplace was always filled with beautiful hydrangeas, and we sat at opposite ends of a long table while I wrote *Summer and Smoke* and she wrote *The Member of a Wedding* as a play.” And then Williams made the well-known statement, “Carson is the only person I've been able to stand in the same room with me when I'm working. After her stroke, she was incapacitated, but my sister Rose was in a sanitarium near her house in Nyack and I would often stay with Carson when I went to see her. She kept a room upstairs called ‘Tenn's Room,’ which was always prepared for my visits. My fondest dream was to own a ranch in Texas and have my sister Rose, my grandfather, and Carson, and we would all live together, all of us invalids.”

Dews: Barbara, could I pick up there?

Ewell: Sure, absolutely.

Dews: It is interesting that in McCullers's autobiography, she tells in a brief fashion the same story from her point of view. I think it would be interesting to hear that. This was in her autobiography, *Illumination and Night Glare*. She writes about the summer of 1946: "Then at the beginning of next summer, I had a letter from a playwright I had heard about but never met. He was Tennessee Williams, and he said that he was in poor health and afraid he might be dying." See, there is some consistency between the accounts. "And he wanted to meet me before that happened. I answered the letter and soon joined him in Nantucket. That summer of 1946 was magnificent. It was the summer of sun and friendship. Every morning we would work at the same table, he at one end and me at the other. He was working on *Summer and Smoke*, and I was beginning *The Member of the Wedding* as a play, which had been published in novel form in 1946. I told Tennessee about my relations with Reeves. By accident, there was at Skonset Margo Von Opal, the wife of the Opal industrialist and a friend of Annemarie," (the person that she was pining over that Tennessee doesn't mention), "who had always selected her clothes. Tennessee and I had spuds Carson almost everyday. That was my recipe, and it consisted of baked potatoes mashed with butter, onions, and cheese. After a long swim, it was a good fare. Then to break the monotony of the bill of fare, Margo invited us to dinner and as she was always a marvelous cook it was always a haute cuisine affair. Margo raised her own suckling pigs, and Tennessee, possessed by some devil, fed them whiskey, which made them go wild. So, then we had wild shoats and hogs and, when peace was finally restored, a delicious dinner. I was a good swimmer, but Tennessee was excellent, swimming so far out sometimes that I was actually afraid he might drown. In the late sea-lulling afternoon, I would play the piano, or Tennessee would read poetry. Hart Crane was his favorite poet. It was Tennessee who introduced me to his agent, Audrey Wood, whom I found overbearing but put up with until I could decide on another. Then my lawyer, Floria Lasky, who has been my close friend and legal advisor for twenty years, finally found me a suitable agent, Robbie Lantz. There are no words of praise that I can find suitable enough for Floria Lasky. She just took me on when an out-and-out nut, Greer Johnson, was suing me for \$50,000." He and Carson had worked on an adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding* that was flawed and that she didn't accept. And so she was writing another version on her own with Tennessee that summer. "There was a legal procedure in which Tennessee and I appeared and swore that I had written *The Member of the Wedding* at his house in Nantucket. Naturally, I won the case."

Ewell: Well, what was it about these two? What did allow them to become friends because Carson McCullers, as I understand it, was not really very successful at other friendships. What was it about Tennessee that allowed her to be a better friend, and what about him too?

Carr: Well, I think we have to consider first of all that both Carson and Tennessee were Southerners. Carson herself would have never written as she did, I'm sure, had the South not been a part of her milieu, an important part because it included memory, imagination, her ambivalence, her anguish. And I remember Eleanor Clark, who was the wife of Robert Penn Warren, said to me once when we talked about Carson, "I'll always remember Carson's line: 'I must return South from time to time to renew my sense of horror.'" And she confessed that once she had arrived home, stepped off the train, and was met by her father. She could hardly wait to get back North. But it was that sheer sense of storytelling, and I remember being told by her brother this tale that when Carson was a young child, I mean she was really reacting against racial injustice, against prejudice, and it was unquestioned by most people around her. At the age of five, her mother sent her to a little neighborhood grocery store, which was owned by a black proprietor, and she was very timid when she went up to the counter, and when no one else was around she finally said in the quietest voice, "I'll have a pound of colored toes please." Her mother was making Christmas fruit cakes. She couldn't bear to say "nigger toes." Why, how terrible! And she certainly didn't know the real name. Now, the baffled grocer had no idea what it was she wanted either, and so he sent her home for a more explicit instruction, and she came back saying proudly, "A pound of Brazil nuts, please." And I remember, many years later (and I found this out living in Columbus, you see, and teaching there some 14 years) the librarian, a man named John Bannister, wrote to her after she had published three novels and said, "Mrs. McCullers, I'd like very much to have a donation of some of your manuscripts. We think that it would be most fitting to have your manuscripts in Columbus, Georgia, from which your writing did evolve." And so she sought assurance from him, and her immediate response was, "Well I must know that your library is indeed public, a place where people were treated equally, 'in a manner that God intended.'" The director replied that she had no cause for concern, because the Fourth Avenue Library was the main library for colored people. They could borrow on a day's notice anything available in the main library." McCullers kept her manuscripts. And I do know that in her last novel, *Clock Without Hands*, published in 1961, as Carlos pointed out, and her short story, "The March" just before her death in 1967, confirm, that she never abandoned her concern for racial injustice and her disparagement always of bigotry, whatever the source. She never shirked her responsibility of speaking out against them. And I do know, as many of you who have read *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* also know, I'm sure, that the pivotal character is that undistinguished man, John Singer. He is just a face in the crowd in a small southern town, but there is something about him that prompts people to go to him to tell their tales. There is the bum who can't pull himself together and hold a job. There is the black physician who is so proud that he cannot get along with others, even those of his own race. And then of course there is the unhappy Mick on the brink of puberty who dreams of being a great musician. They're all drawn, you see, to Singer, of course, and it is the weight of other people's concerns that have always

struck her. It sounds on one hand to be a rather grim, depressing tale, but it is not. There is some wonderful hope. And I think that is one thing Carson had. She had hope. She had optimism that things would be better another day.

Dews: Barbara, I think one thing that explains the strong response that Carson and Tennessee had to each other is the same thing that explains why so many people have a strong response to their work, especially Southerners as Virginia suggested. It is the ambivalence about the South, being both indebted to it, but scared to death of it simultaneously. And their ambivalence—I think they shared that strong, strong ambivalence about their families, their indebtedness to their families, but also their fear of their families, and their families writ large, the South. That way, and in some ways I see them as sort of siblings, lost, separated-at-birth siblings where they recognized in each other that same ambivalence. They recognized in each other that sense of isolation, that *wanderlust* to some extent but not knowing the alternative to the South and never being able to find it. That was manifest more in Tennessee, I think, than Carson because Carson's health wouldn't allow her to be the vagabond that Tennessee was. But I think that explains a lot of the connection between the two of them.

Ewell: And yet, I guess, even in their comments about race, it seems to me that McCullers, for example, in some sense often escapes that designation of local color that Williams, on the other hand, virtually defines. And while I think McCullers treats race very interestingly, it also seems to me that as for Williams, race is not really the most compelling thing about the South. But in some ways that is how we really do define southern writers, at least white writers, well maybe even black southern writers, too. So I just wonder what you think about that. I guess what I want to suggest is: I'm not so sure Carson McCullers is such a southern writer after all.

Brantley: They were certainly both drawn to the musicality of southern speech. I know they both made comments about that, but I was intrigued by Carlos's comment about two halves of the same whole because when you look at their lives, there are some really intriguing parallels. I made a very short list. They both suffered childhood illnesses, diphtheria in Williams's case, rheumatic fever in McCullers's case. They both had what we would call overprotective mothers. They both developed a feeling for the isolation of the individual early on as Virginia just noted—the afflicted, the freakish. They were both very shy, yet they had these extremely strong wills. They chose unconventional, or expressed unconventional sexual lives. They had early critical successes, but their late works were not critically successful. They both struggled with alcoholism. They were both attached to many of the same thinkers and writers, particularly Hart Crane. They were both extremely loyal to one another and to the friendships they had made. They both wrote a kind of emotional autobiography. They transformed the contents of their

lives into a kind of creative synthesis in their works. They were both romantics at heart. They were put out with what Williams called the anarchy of modern society. They both used a form of gothic humor to convey what Williams called a sense of the awful that he spoke of in his introduction to her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. And they were both very sensitive to negative critical commentary on their works. McCullers was crushed by Edmund Wilson's pan of *Member of the Wedding*, and Williams had similar reactions to disparaging views of his work. And hence they wrote self-reflective essays in which they attempted to explain themselves to others, to show why they had a preoccupation with morbidity, with that sense of the awful. And I think this is one of the most important similarities—they wrote this very poetic prose in a mode of writing that was intensely lyrical and intensely symbolic, so I think what drew them together was this sensibility that they shared.

Dews: But the thing that prevented them from being too similar and ending the relationship has something to do with what Tennessee alludes to in the comment that Will read from the Rex Reed interview, which is that they both weren't playwrights. Had they both primarily been prose writers, I think that they would have had more difficulty because if you look at Carson's relationship with Truman Capote, for example, that because they were primarily both prose writers in some ways drawing upon very, very similar circumstances and very similar responses to the South as well, that led to a clash, this sense of "you're invading my territory." But because Tennessee was primarily a dramatist and Carson was primarily a novelist and short story writer, they didn't have that sense of competition, I think.

Carr: And also, I was thinking too, I don't believe we've really talked about the fact that confrontations with reality were never good for either Carson or Tennessee. And when you mentioned their going off together, what would be a better example than Tennessee's dream of having the two of them live on a ranch with his sister Rose? He would have hated that. I mean too much of Carson did not take very long to arrive at, so far as Tennessee was concerned. I remember there was a lovely neighbor and friend, a French woman named Marielle Bancou, who lived next door to Carson. And every once in a while, she would come over late at night. And Marielle said, "You know I was reading something, Carson, that I thought was just really charming. It's the tale of Icarus. And do you know about Icarus and his fall, you know, flying too close to the sun, the wax being melted." And so she was very interested in that. So, they had a little more conversation and the next morning very early, Marielle called Carson and said, "You know, I think I told you something wrong. I've done a little more reading and that's not the name, that's not quite the way it happened." Carson just interrupted her and said, "Don't be so checky, darling. I like it just the way it is." Similarly, it was much more fun to see a teacup and saucer in a shop window in Italy and to talk about it and just say, "Oh Tennessee, I've just seen this darling little teacup and saucer. No, it's not a whole

set. Oh, it's just . . . oh, what would I give to have that." She didn't want it, and somebody bought it for her. She said something like, "Take that thing back. It's not in the window anymore for me to long after."

Ewell: Well, that brings up something else about McCullers that I find really fascinating, and that is love. At the beginning of her biography, in the first line, which I was very struck by, she says, "My life has been almost completely filled with work and love, thank goodness." Yet, as I appreciate her life, she was always seeking the love, the "little teacup," and was always writing about these triangular relationships of unrequited love. I mean, it's hard for me to think about how she could even see her life in those terms. What about that part of her life?—love, which she writes about all the time, too.

Dews: I think in that line from the autobiography, she might have had in mind something that isn't quite obvious from the surface, which is that those were the two things that kept her going. And it is sort of like a carrot and stick. You know, love, the desire for love (and it's very Freudian as well), was this idea, this instinct, this drive for her that you can see throughout her life and career. She said her greatest work, her "illumination" that she mentions in the title of the autobiography, came after the grace of labor. There's this idea that her life was in some way a balance between those two drives, one to create and the other to find a sort of ultimate love. And that is what motivated her, so she says, "My life was filled." Perhaps it would have been more accurate to say, "My life was filled with work and the pursuit of love, or the desire for love."

Carr: The lack of achievement of love, it was one thing. I mean, when she loved Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, the German. Was she German? (I forget.)

Dews: Swiss.

Carr: The Swiss woman. She probably would have been very jealous of Annemarie's success had they been living in the same area, but Annemarie's realm was Europe, all of Europe. And then of course, when Annemarie died in a bicycle accident, still as a very young woman, Carson had never really consummated this just extravagant love of Annemarie. And Annemarie tried to talk her out of it, saying, "You know really Reeves loves you very much." She had to be the lover, but not necessarily the recipient of the love. I mean it was that pinnacle moment that she couldn't bear to go beyond because it was doomed, you see, to failure. So it was that juxtaposition that she had the longing for and the lack of achievement. Also back to the South, I have to say one more thing: when I wrote my biography, everyone corroborated the story that Carson's father died of a heart attack. He did not die of a heart attack; he killed himself. But no one let me know that when I was doing the research. The pathology report, the coroner, the newspaper clipping, the

obituary, all confirm that he died in his shop of a heart attack. It was only after we put on a Carson McCullers program in Columbus, Georgia, that I learned differently. David Diamond came down and was on the program, and he had loved both Reeves and Carson, not sexually Carson, but sexually Reeves. And he and I went out to visit the Smith family's cook [Vannie Copeland Jackson] and they started talking about "poor Mr. Smith who shot himself." My book had been out for quite a few years. So it was only after I did a little book called *Understanding Carson McCullers* that I was able to correct the record, to counteract the thought that "nice people didn't kill themselves," and that it was something to be ashamed of. But then I found corroboration through other means, also, that indeed Mr. Smith had killed himself.

Brantley: The dream—they both spoke of writing, their writing processes, as a kind of sustained dream. So the dream was crucial to pretty much everything they did—their writing, their lives. It was part of their personality, their makeup.

Ewell: But aren't there all these passionate attachments to other women that she could never quite make any kind of relationship out of? Might that be part of her own sense of this frustration about love, that you can never really attain it? In the 1940s it must not have been very easy to be a bisexual. It's not that easy today, but it was certainly hard in the 1940s.

Dews: I think there is something compelling in McCullers's desire, but unfulfilled desire. I don't want to say that the difficult situation she found herself in was acceptable or desired, but it seems to have worked within her philosophy of love that she talks about in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* because many of the people she desired were already in relationships or were married or were unavailable because of their own sexual interests. In some ways, that was almost a necessary component for this desire. I mean, back to this teacup notion. The idea of the shop always being closed and the teacup always being in that window. There was something very compelling and maybe something unconscious at work in her desire, to desire the unattainable. And that is similar, I think, in Tennessee to his relationships with married men or men who were ambivalent about their sexuality. From the beginning many of these people were unattainable.

Carr: I would like to mention a reported error in my biography of Carson McCullers. Tennessee called it to my attention. He said, "Virginia, there is just one thing that bothered me about your biography." He said, "Remember, I told you that she had never had a consummated relationship with Annemarie, and yet you put that in your biography. Why did you put that in your biography when I told you that it was not so?" I put it in my biography because I never heard from him that it was not so. And other people were absolutely certain. It was his reality that it was not so. But I found when I was researching out in California, at UCLA,

a whole cache of letters that Tennessee Williams wrote to various people, which he sold to the library, and in it was an envelope, a sealed envelope, and it said. "This shall not be opened until after my death." I think it was about seven years after his death when I was out there, and I found this still sealed envelope. So I took it to the librarian, and I said, "May we open this? He has been dead, you know, all these years." So, I opened it in front of her, and there was an inventory that had a copy in it. I knew there was an inventory because I had seen the inventory. On it was a letter: Tennessee Williams to Virginia Spencer Carr. It was a dated letter early on in our friendship, and he wrote a single-spaced, three-page letter explaining to me everything that he could about Carson and how busy he was writing his own life and he didn't know how much time we would have to work together. But he said, "One thing you must know is that Carson's love for Annemarie was never consummated." Well, there was that letter in the library that I never saw while I was writing the biography. And so, it was Carson's reality, fantasy reality. She didn't want to tell Tennessee, "Well yes," you know, "she is just a woman I always wanted and never got." But she did get her, and numerous people told me that she did. So, I confess that.

Dews: It's interesting. I've been talking to a number of people recently, John Zeigler in particular, and Jordan Masee, Carson's distant cousin, as well about her relationship with Gypsy Rose Lee. And both of them briefly lived together along with a number of other people, W. H. Auden, and George Davis, in a house in Brooklyn Heights in the early 1940s. I'm working on a book about this community there at the moment. And so, I was asking them about her relationship with Gypsy Rose Lee, and both of them said that she admitted to them that Gypsy Rose Lee was the only woman that she had ever had a sexual relationship with. But of course, both of those stories are from Carson to these two men who have, you know, passed that on to me. So, without a corroboration from another source, it's an issue about fantasy versus reality for Carson. It makes a wonderful story to say that the only woman you have ever had sex with is Gypsy Rose Lee. I could see very easily how Carson would revel in that story whether or not it was true. It does make a wonderful story.

Carr: I'll jump in here and say that when I was giving a talk in Columbus to some lawyers and bankers, a woman came up to me afterwards, and it was Mrs. Kathleen Woodruff (who was a victim of "the strangler" in Columbus when seven women were strangled). But before she was strangled and I was introduced and on this panel, she came up to me afterwards, and she said, "Virginia, I have three letters that Carson wrote to me that I want to give to you. I realize that if I had known you when I knew Carson, I might have really understood her." And she said, "Would you read one of these letters now. I would just like to know what you think of it." Well, it was a letter that Carson wrote to Kathleen Woodruff, and in it she said, "I see by the newspapers that Gypsy has gotten married again. My, how things do

change around.” And she said, “I realize, of course, that she was in love with Gypsy. Or at least that is the way it seems.” But this was I think Gypsy Rose Lee’s fourth marriage. And she did marry men, though she had her affairs with at least one woman. And so it was that “My how things do change around.” That was Carson’s oblique way of saying something that could be seen, you see, by other people. So she told very much by indirection, much as Emily Dickinson did.

Ewell: Will, you had mentioned that one of the reasons that maybe Tennessee was drawn to McCullers was in seeing some of those encoded themes in her work, *The Member of the Wedding*, which was what he read when he wrote his fan letter.

Brantley: I think unquestionably you can see *The Member of the Wedding* as a coming-out novel quite easily because I think that is what it is.

Ewell: Are you sure?

Brantley: It’s a coming-out novel. You have a young girl who is making decisions about her sexuality, and she’s not finding much help along the way. Berenice tells Frankie after she develops her crush *on the wedding* that this is just not done. She has seen strange things happen. She has seen two men fall in love with one another. But what Frankie has done is something completely perverse. I’m paraphrasing Berenice. We see that all of the sexual encounters in the novel are unhappy for Frankie. Her experimentation with Barney MacKean—that’s terrible to her. When the soldier attempts to rape her, she bangs him over the head with a pitcher and leaves him bloody, which is what would have happened to her had the rape, you know, occurred. Frankie loses her arbor, which is the center of her creativity, her safe space in the novel. It’s interesting to me. One of the things that I noticed in *Illumination and Night Glare*, Carlos, is that McCullers says—and this was something that was a surprise—she says, “Frankie is in love with the bride of her brother and wants to join the wedding.” Frankie is in love with the bride, not with the brother and the bride.

Carr: It doesn’t say the bride and her brother, does it?

Brantley: No. Just the bride. Frankie is in love with the bride. This is one of the most interesting components of the novel. She sees two shapes in an alley, and they make her think of the brother and the bride. And she has this conceptual crush on the wedding because the wedding represents, I would say, normalcy. It is the opposite of being a freak. But then she sees that the two shapes are actually two men, and there is something very odd about it. For a moment heterosexual and homosexual desire are conjoined, so to speak. But of course, the homosexual component is relegated to the alley, whereas the bride and the brother can appear in front of the mantel place in the living room. She tells Honey, Berenice’s brother,

that because of his light skin he could go to Cuba and pass as a Latin man. And so she is contemplating how she can pass. And then at the end of the novel, she's put aside her conceptual crush on the wedding, and it's been replaced by a literal crush on Mary Littlejohn. I think the pun there is intentional on McCullers's part. It is very much a coming-out novel, and I think Williams must have seen this in his reaction. I mean she had caught the horror of coming out in the 40's, and I would imagine that is why he wrote the letter regarding this particular novel. I mean, that is just an assumption. This one really spoke to him, you know; it encouraged him to make that leap.

Dews: And then, of course, he writes the introduction to her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* that tries to respond to some of the criticism of the novel because it had been serialized before it was published in book form.

Ewell: That is a really dark novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and yet Williams seems to think it is better than *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. He likes it a lot. What is it in that novel you think draws Williams?

Dews: I believe, thinking of his family, that he sees the struggle between the characters in *Reflections*, perhaps, as reflecting some of the dynamics in his family with his father's, I think, ambivalence and sexuality in that family and this sort of strange dynamics at work, with the Pendertons especially. With the Marlon Brando character in the film and how he was this sort of hyper-masculine figure, which was, of course, masking his repressed homosexuality, and the devastating effect that it has on everyone around them. And I think Williams may have responded to that. I think it is very similar to the way I've always thought of Captain Penderton, and it's great that Brando played them both, Captain Penderton and Stanley Kowalski. It's ideal that they were played by the same actor. They really are very similar portrayals of masculinity.

Brantley: It is a devastating critique of masculinity and heterosexual normality, and it explodes the notion that there's a clear link between biology and gender identification and erotic desire. Williams must have seen all that because it is the very same thing he was doing in his voice, what he would do in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Dews: *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, especially. Yes.

Ewell: And McCullers too, in some of her novels—don't you think? Especially *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, where desire goes all-which-a-way.

Dews: I mean, I think in some ways what McCullers and Williams were doing in many of their works was denaturalizing heterosexuality because they had this

keen view, I think, this very queer view of a heterosexual, what was purported to be heterosexual normality, and they had this sort of outside view of it and were able to critique it best in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Ewell: Well, that makes me think about that summer on Nantucket, when McCullers is dramatizing *The Member of the Wedding* and Williams is writing *Summer and Smoke*. Do they show up in each other's plays in any way?

Brantley: Possibly she is Hannah in *The Night of the Iguana*, right? He incorporated components of McCullers in Hannah. And I think he said that to Donald Windham; I'm not sure if that is the source there.

Dews: But, you know, I think it is remarkable looking at those two plays how little content or how little influence they seem to have had on each other. Despite the fact that they were living so intimately and working so intimately, I think there seems to be a clear line between the two. And somewhere Tennessee was asked, "Did you participate in the dramatization?" And he said, "Well, I may have suggested," you know, "a bit of dialogue here and there."

Carr: Well, he made it very clear to me that the only thing wrong with it was that the play itself was too long, of course. And when it opened in Philadelphia, one whole scene had to be taken out, which took out a couple of actors as well. And he said, "Carson didn't need me except as a catalyst for herself." And he said, "The only thing I really suggested was that scene that got taken out that didn't work." He said she was an intuitive writer in every way. As a playwright, she was an intuitive writer. And, I was thinking how on her birthday she reportedly would get up very early, dress, and whereas she might normally on such days lounge and do her entertaining abed, on her birthday she would get up, dress, and wait for the first caller, often, you know, before eight o'clock. And once when Tennessee came fairly early one morning, he brought her a parakeet. And she just exclaimed over that bird. She had always wanted a parakeet her whole entire life. She never had one. And, you know, they looked at it. The parakeet, I guess, was hung in another room. I'm not sure just where. And, Tennessee stayed quite awhile, at least three hours. And when he got up to go, he said, "I'm sorry. I would love to spend the whole day with you." She got up. She excused herself. She got up. She was, you know, pretty much an invalid at this point. She took the birdcage from the other room, and she said, "Tenn honey, just take this old bird home with you. I don't really want it." The joy, the anticipation, the fun of having a bird—which she said she had always wanted—was not the reality she sought, and she was quite ready to have Tennessee take it with him when he left. And later, and I don't remember, it couldn't have been that same bird, and you might correct me on this. But it was when she told Tennessee once that her bird had taken sick, and she insisted that he take a look at it. And, Tennessee did tell me this, he said, "There was the bird,

and it was lying on the bottom of the cage on its back with its legs up in the air.” Rigor mortis had set in, but she didn’t want that to be her reality. She just wanted him to think, “Well, it was just a little bit sick.”

Brantley: It is entertaining to see the way he describes McCullers to friends—in his correspondence to Maria St. Just, for instance, his Russian friend. Their nickname for McCullers was “Choppers” because her cheeks looked like lamb chops to Maria.

Carr: So full.

Brantley: Full, yes. Obviously, she had much less patience with McCullers than Williams, even doubted that her hand was in fact deformed. In one of the letters, she makes that comment. But he would tell Maria that you simply have to be patient with Carson. You have to see what she has accomplished. You have to understand her sensitivity. Williams made the same kind of remark to Donald Windham in their correspondence. He reminded Windham of what McCullers had produced.

Ewell: You know, one of the things that has always intrigued me about Southern women writers is how difficult it has been for feminists to find a way to talk about them. It was a long time after the women’s movement began that feminists like Louise Westling and Anne Goodwyn Jones began to discuss southern women writers. And McCullers has been one of the last to be included, and I wonder what’s made her so difficult for feminist critics? I suppose another way of putting that question is: What kind of consciousness did McCullers herself bring to her writing about being a woman in southern culture?

Carr: I don’t think she considered herself a feminist. I mean, that was not a part of her vocabulary.

Ewell: Well, that is why I was trying to say it another way, about her role as a woman, because she certainly knew she had to deal with that. So what was it that McCullers brings to her awareness of being a woman?

Carr: She said that at the age of six, she told Newton Arvin (her friend who was an English Professor at Smith College and one of Truman Capote’s lovers, probably Capote’s first lover) this: “Newton, at the age of six, I knew I was born a man.” Her identity really was so masculine. I mean, not masculine, it was just “I’m born a man,” you know. “I’m a man, and I’ve just got some of the trappings of a woman.” Now she had heard about Reeves McCullers from her family. While she was in New York, they kept writing about this wonderful young man, a soldier from Fort Benning who kept coming to the household, and Marguerite Smith kept a kind of

literary salon. I mean she really had; there were Edwin Peacock and John Zeigler and quite a few others who came to visit, and Reeves and Margarita, Carson's sister, had a sexual encounter that may have been somewhat like Mick's in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. And it was indeed the desire of Reeves and Rita never to let Carson know that they had had a sexual encounter. There was very much a jealousy between Carson and her sister, not between her and Lamar. By the way, what was his nickname?

Dews: Brother Man.

Carr: Brother Man. But between the two sisters. So, there was this element of jealousy in Carson, when Tennessee said that he was as much Blanche Dubois as he was Stanley Kowalski, he might just as well have said, "At the age of six, I knew I was born a woman." He was, what is the woman's name in *Sweet Bird of Youth*? Alexandra?

Brantley: del Lago.

Carr: He said, "I could have written, I could have spoken everyone of those lines myself as a woman, and I am. I mean, that is my sensitivity." It is really interesting, that sense of the sensitivity, of identity. So "feminist" would not have been a part of Carson's vocabulary.

Dews: I think it is very important to consider the influence of her mother and how unconventional, in many ways, her mother was at the time in Columbus. And I think, Virginia, you can correct me if I'm wrong here, but my impression is that her mother, Margarita, or Bebe as the family called her, was in some ways looked down upon by other more genteel members of the Columbus community. That she allowed Carson to smoke at a very early age, and she did have this sort of literary salon taking place in their house and cultivated friendships with this diverse, interesting group. And I think part of the progressiveness that we see in her sensitivity, of course, may be from her mother's sensibility that way and that feminist examination of McCullers in seeing the origin of her strength by resisting what we might call the patriarchy. I think this ability would have certainly come from her mother. And if you look at the fathers, well, mothers are almost entirely absent from her work, but if you look at the fathers, they're very, very impotent characters. If you look at Frankie's father in *The Member of the Wedding*, for example. He is this very weak, very bland, a very unformed character.

Ewell: But the women don't come off very well in McCullers. I mean there is Amelia, whose life is trashed by these two men. Even Frankie capitulates and becomes Jasmine. McCullers just seems so unable to imagine women in any kind of powerful role.

Dews: I guess Bernice is probably the most powerful of her female characters.

Carr: I asked Carson's brother, Lamar Smith, who is dead now. The whole family is dead. I can say some of these things. I asked Lamar, "Why was it that his sister, Carson, never really depicted characters with strong mothers?" He said, "Oh, she couldn't have stood revealing so much of herself—it would have been such a breach of decorum. She was so dependent on her mother that she could never create that strong character who was a mother; therefore, she just had to have her characters motherless or have them die in childbirth, you see." And, Lamar is really quite an interesting character. He was dyslexic, and people thought he was stupid because he couldn't read well. He dropped out of Georgia Tech, an engineering major because he thought he couldn't succeed. But he became very successful in his die and machinist work when he settled with his wife in Perry, Florida. "And," he said, "you know, I realize now that I probably could have done almost anything I wanted to do if I just recognized early enough what the problem was." At the time of our initial meeting I was a graduate student at FSU working on a dissertation on McCullers's writings. I did not ask Lamar himself my next question, but I asked his wife: "Tell me about Carson's miscarriage. I've read somewhere that she had one." This question I asked while Lamar was off in another room getting a big jug of wine from which to serve us. His wife whispered: "Shhh! Don't say anything in front of Lamar." Well, indeed, she had had a miscarriage, a medical abortion really. Lamar returned and caught only the tag end of the conversation: "What do you mean, Carson had an abortion? She was never pregnant." His wife, whose name was Virginia, replied, "Well, remember when your mother went up to New York to see Carson and she took with her a great jug of pot-liquor for her to drink in the hospital?" Yes, Lamar did remember that. Carson could not have followed through on a pregnancy because her health was precarious. Lamar declared then that the family would have never talked about such a thing. If there had been a rape in the home next door, and the event had been published on the front page of the newspaper, no one would have mentioned it within the family. The word "rape" would not have been uttered in the South when ladies were present. A few years later, after I had moved to Columbus, Georgia and was teaching in the local college, Lamar Smith called me and asked if he could come up to see me. "Of course," I told him. When he arrived he was in a wheel chair, and his nurse accompanied him in my living room. "Mr. Lamar, should I bring your suitcase in now?" "I thought we should wait until Virginia asked me to be her houseguest for the weekend," he answered. I assured Lamar that I would be delighted for him to stay, provided he could negotiate the steps into my downstairs guestroom. We ended up driving his nurse to the motel room they had reserved, and he stayed with me. I drove him all over. We visited his cousin, Virginia Storey, who didn't even know he was in town. We watched *The Member of the Wedding* on television that Sunday morning, and he reached over and took my hand and held it through-

out the movie. Then I drove him back to the motel to pick up his nurse, and he drove back to Florida that night. The very next day I found a huge box of red roses at my doorsteps, and inside was a note from Lamar with the message: “End of Act I, Scene I, Darling. Thanks for a wonderful weekend, Love, Lamar.” Before I could write him a thank-you note, he called to make sure that the roses were long-stemmed American Beauty roses, and I assured him they were. Then he explained: “You see, I gave my first wife Virginia (he called her Jenny—she was now deceased) American Beauty roses, and I wanted to make sure that these are what you have received, too.” In his next letter, quite a few weeks later, he proposed that we get married, to which I replied, “Oh, no, I think we will be better friends if we stay just as we are.” Nine months later, Lamar married his nurse.

Ewell: Well, I wonder if this might be a good time to ask the audience for questions?

Audience: [A question about the line “the show is over and the monkey is dead.”]

Carr: “Sweet as a pickle, clean as a pig?” Is that it?

Brantley: It’s also in *The Member of the Wedding*, right?

Dews: That’s what Frankie’s father says when he pulls her from the...

Brantley: Car.

Dews: ...from the car when she is trying to leave with the wedding couple. He says, “The show’s over, and the monkey’s dead.”

Audience: [Question about the representation of homosexuality.]

Ewell: I’m not sure I can repeat that exactly, but someone asked if McCullers really did make choices about creating encoded characters.

Audience: But she did make a choice.

Ewell: Oh, that’s right because she eliminated some overtly gay characters from manuscripts. And so she did make a deliberate choice to write encoded characters.

Dews: It is interesting that you ask this question because one of my former graduate students, Betty McKinnie, and I just wrote an essay that is going to appear in a collection of essays about southern women playwrights about this very character, Lily May Jenkins. And Lily May Jenkins was originally proposed, as you say,

for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. In the outline that she wrote for “The Mute,” which was later *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, she includes this character, and McCullers removes her during the editing process. And we speculate that between the time she wrote the outline of “The Mute” and when this character reappears in *The Member of the Wedding*, but not in the flesh, Berenice uses Lily May Jenkins as an example of perversity to try to steer Frankie away from falling in love with the wedding. Will had alluded to that scene. She resurrects that character, at least in name, as a negative example for Berenice to use to try to convince Frankie, but as Lily May was characterized in the outline of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Lily May was going to have a very powerful role in that she was going to be the person who, at the deepest, darkest moments in the novel, would dance and sing and sort of bring people together and lift them. And I think what we speculatively argue in this essay is that McCullers, having moved to the North (and found what I think was to her a haven for her bisexuality or homosexuality) realized that the South would not have accepted or that that original Lilly May character was unrealistically drawn. That character in that setting could not have performed that role. But, as a negative example, as an example of the South’s homophobia, for example, he could work very effectively in *The Member of the Wedding*, and that may be why she resurrected him and used him that way. We make the argument that she somewhat plays the South’s homophobia against it . . .

Brantley: She does.

Dews: . . . by using that character. And that wouldn’t have been how she had been using it. She would in some ways have been downplaying the South’s virulent homophobia if she had allowed him in the original novel.

Brantley: Like Tennessee Williams, she preferred indirection to a more direct route.

Ewell: Anybody else? Questions? Yes, way in the back.

Audience: [Question about McCullers’s dealing with Jewish characters.]

Ewell: The question is about her dealing with Jews, projecting her otherness onto Jewish characters.

Carr: I can’t comment on that. I’m sorry.

Dews: Well, there’s a story about her anti-Semitism. She received a letter from someone accusing her of anti-Semitism. I think Jordan Masee told me the story, if not it was John Zeigler, saying that this was the critique of her work that was most hurtful to her because it was certainly the last thing she would have intended. But

I think this idea of projecting otherness onto Jewish characters, she does it in a number of her short stories.

Carr: In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* there was a line in which one of the twins said, "I'll be damned if he [the hunchback Cousin Lymon] ain't a regular Morris Finstein." Carson had received a letter signed "An American" which took exception to what he perceived to be an anti-Semitic remark in her book. And Carson wrote a letter back, and she said, "Why anyone ought to recognize that this is just, you know, my gross overstatement. It would be like Swift believing that they really should eat the babies." She said, "That could have never entered my consciousness." She was so totally non-prejudicial, I think in that regard.

Audience: Does McCullers appear in any works by Williams?

Brantley: Williams said that he worked some of McCullers into Hannah, that she became some of that conception. It is in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*, in one of the later interviews. That's as close as I can put my finger on it at the moment.

Carr: I can't remember that reference at all. I mean, of course, the fact that Hannah was considerably older than Carson. I guess I don't see the similarity, but Tennessee said what he wanted to believe even if he didn't believe it, and saying it made it a part of the tale.

Ewell: The question is about the inability to even locate Carson McCullers's house when you are visiting Columbus, Georgia. So what is her reputation in her hometown?

Carr: Of course even when I was writing the biography, her high school teachers remembered her with great fondness as one of the best students they ever had taught. Well, of course she wasn't. She was ordinary. I interviewed her classmates, and they said that they did invite Carson to join a club, unlike Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, who was a member of no club. But one woman said to me, "Well of course, we only invited her because she played the piano. We were a dance group, and so we needed somebody to play for us." But she said, "She played just like she wanted to—fast or classical and nothing we could really dance to." And so there was certainly the illusion of her being, in a sense, "the first lady of Columbus, Georgia." The house was purchased by a professor at Columbus College, as a matter of fact, Thornton Jordan. And for a long time it was a house that was lived in by other owners, and Jordan purchased it with the idea that indeed if the college could keep it up and have it as an historic house that one could go through, it would work out. There is an historic marker in front of the Smith family home at 1519 Starke Avenue. A lot of people in the town would

have liked her just to go away very quietly. And they could just never accept that she was writing these weird stories and that they came out of Columbus. Even her father was upset when he read *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and he said he was sure that she had gotten her ideas over in Sin City (Phenix City, Alabama). And her brother said, “Oh no, there was plenty of that that went on here. Don’t think that Carson had to go elsewhere.” But it was a memory, the memory play for her, the memory tale.

Dews: Carson recounts in *Illumination and Night Glare* the story of the reactions to *Reflections in a Golden Eye* when it was first published because people thought it was a depiction of happenings at Fort Benning, when in fact the idea came from Fort Bragg in Fayetteville because she and Reeves were living there at the time she had the idea for the novel. But, in *Illumination and Night Glare*, she talks about how she was home at the time she had been ill, and members of the K. K. K. called and said that they didn’t like “nigger lovers” or “fairies” and that tonight was her night. And her father called the police, and they stood vigil around the house that evening. But as Virginia said, Thorton Jordan has given the house to the college, which is now known as Columbus State University.

Audience: Her house is hard to find—Stark Avenue takes a bend and doesn’t come straight out to Wynnton Road.

Carr: The house is at 1519 Stark Avenue, off Wynnton Road, about two blocks behind the elementary school she attended briefly, called The Wynnton School. The street takes a jog or two, and the house itself is on the left. Just before her house, also on the left, is the house in which the family lived with whom the Smiths shared a maid, and across the street lived a young boy who died of spinal meningitis, and that, too, was part of the background in *The Member of the Wedding*, in which little John Henry died of spinal meningitis. So McCullers did use her memory.

Brantley: It was the Rex Reed interview, incidentally, and Rex Reed says that she also used Tennessee’s grandfather as part of the source for the old judge in *Clock without Hands*. There is another source also; I just can’t put my finger on it.

Dews: There’s also a Carson connection to the character named for Big Daddy as well. Carson’s cousin, Jordan Masee—his father was known as Big Daddy and was the inspiration for some of the characteristics and the name for sure of Tennessee’s character, Big Daddy, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Brantley: And one of his nicknames for Carson was Sister Woman.

Dews: Sister Woman, yes.

Ewell: Well, thank you all very much. I think we've learned a great deal, and you've been a very attentive audience.