

1981

Robert Penn Warren on His Writing

Susan Emily Allen
University of Kentucky

Robert Penn Warren

David Farrell
University of Kentucky

Follow this and additional works at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Right click to open a feedback form in a new tab to let us know how this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Allen, Susan Emily; Warren, Robert Penn; and Farrell, David (1981) "Robert Penn Warren on His Writing," *The Kentucky Review*: Vol. 2 : No. 3 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/kentucky-review/vol2/iss3/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Kentucky Libraries at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Kentucky Review by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@sv.uky.edu.

Robert Penn Warren on His Writing

*Compiled by Susan Emily Allen
from eight interviews with Robert Penn Warren
conducted by David Farrell*

The interviews utilized in this article were conducted for the Robert Penn Warren Oral History Project of the University of Kentucky Library Oral History Program. This project consists of tape-recorded interviews with persons who have known or have been associated with Mr. Warren over his long career. The Robert Penn Warren Oral History Project is funded by the University of Kentucky and the Kentucky State Oral History Commission.

Mr. Warren has graciously looked over this manuscript and offered a few additions and modifications. These have been incorporated silently into the text. Other editorial additions appear in brackets. Excerpts on one subject have been extracted from eight interviews and combined to produce a continuous narrative.

You see, I started back with Southern history. Southern history was just like the air you breathed, I mean, people talked about it, were it. My poetry, from very early on, had been tied to, you might say, the South, even when I was unaware of the fact.

"Guerrilla" is a poem about my grandfather. He had been a captain of cavalry under Forrest . . . ordered at one time to put down some bands of guerrillas in West Tennessee—a shock when he was telling me when I was a little boy, "And you know, we hanged 'em. We gave 'em a fair trial . . ." [laughter]. Bands of guerrillas, of course, both sides hanged 'em if they could get their hands on them, you see. They were hell-raisers, they were just robbers, brigands.

There's always been a narrative streak, you see, in my poetry, or hints of narrative. FARRELL: I've read one about a man being [hanged]. WARREN: That's true. I knew the man who tied the rope, only man in town who knew how to do a slip-noose, you



Robert Penn Warren in boyhood. Courtesy of Robert Penn Warren

see. FARRELL: Did you see this event? Or did you hear about it?
WARREN: No, my brother saw it—I think. He had a great gift for anecdote and a great gift for listening to anecdote. He knew every farmer; he hunted and fished a lot and knew every farmer in five counties, and he'd stop and talk with them, you know, sit by the roadside and talk, go out in the field and talk, swap stories and talk.

We used to hunt together a lot, and I'd go out in the Smokies, we'd go out in the Smokies and hunt every fall for four or five days. I had a great interest in the woods, hunting, and in naturalists, men collecting things, studying trees, and, oh, butterflies and leaves and trees and things like this. Well, I was very keen about birds, but animals even more so.

I started out to be a painter as a twelve-year-old. I was mad to paint animals; this is what coincided with my interest in the woods—the “boy naturalist,” you see. [Mr. Warren chuckles] And if I could paint, I would paint. My daughter *is* a painter.

But I had no ambition in a literary sense when I went to college [in 1921]. I had read a great deal because I had a lonely childhood. I spent my summers on a lonely farm where nobody came except one family for an occasional Sunday dinner. My grandfather said, “There's nobody I want to talk to.” He was a great reader.
FARRELL: This was your maternal grandfather. WARREN: Maternal grandfather. He was a great reader. He quoted to me poetry by the yard. He was off on a lonely farm and wanting to be lonely, with a few books—not a few books, the house was full of books.

My father was a small-town banker and prospered modestly up until Depression time. He was very intellectual; he was mad to be a . . . he was a poet, he published poetry. The house was full of books, and my father was a very bookish man. He read to the children nights, and all that sort of thing, in the old-fashioned way. My mother was an awfully intelligent woman, awfully well-read woman.

But when I went to college [Vanderbilt], it was because I couldn't go to Annapolis. I got the appointment, but I couldn't go because



Robert Penn Warren and his daughter, Rosanna, at Porto Ercole, Italy, during the period of his writing *Promises: Poems 1954-1956*. Courtesy of Robert Penn Warren

of an eye accident. There was a vast interest among undergraduates in poetry. Even an All-Southern center wrote beautiful little Housman lyrics. His brother betrayed him to me by showing me the poems. This ruffian, this powerful center—and the Southeast Conference was a very tough conference then—wrote poems. There were poetry clubs. FARRELL: What was his name? Do you remember his name? WARREN: Yes, I do. Why should I tell you? It might embarrass him now. [Laughter] And there were poetry societies. It was booze, you know, in reasonable quantities, and Baudelaire, I think nine to four, about a night a week.

The poetry was the thing that was a passionate concern with me. It was a way of talking to somebody or talking to yourself or something. I was sometimes in a general state of depression; I was working very hard, and I was sure I was . . . by that time I had talked myself into the notion that I was going blind then. Ransom made a reference to it at his eightieth birthday party in Dallas, Texas. One of the foundations gave him a birthday party and brought the Fugitives there and all who had survived. Ransom and I were staying in the same motel, and the night after it was over, he invited me to come sit with him for a while. And he made some passing reference to it. He said, "I knew something about how you felt." And then he shuddered. "I could feel it, I could feel how you felt." Something like that. Out of the blue he said that—he was an old man then, eighty years old, something like that. That's the only thing he ever said about it.

[Poetry] was a refuge. The reading was kind of like taking dope. It also gave some direction to life, wanting to be a poet gave some direction to life, too, which was lacking, say, in early . . . the first year or so in college. When I began to write poetry in my sophomore year I began to have a direction in life, something to do. And it was a self-discovery.

From 1923 to 1944 poetry was my chief interest, though I studied hard and began to write fiction. But I didn't finish a single poem from 1944 to 1954. From '44 to '54 I must have started fifty poems, had gotten three or four lines or ten lines and couldn't carry 'em through. But in '54, I guess it was, yes, suddenly a new place, a new time, a new life.

I began—it was a very mysterious thing to me—I married [Eleanor Clark] and had a child and was living in Italy in a ruined fortress, a beautiful ruined fortress on the sea, about ninety miles north of Rome. Porto Ercole is the name of the village behind the fortress, and we were living in the medieval fortress above that, the Gates of Hercules—huge, great cliffs. A village beyond a little bay, and this romantic spot, blood-drenched. And seeing my little one-year-old daughter around started poems, these blood-drenched old stones and the little child. The poems came like a flood that summer, and I rewrote them that winter. And a whole change of life, an attitude toward life, occurred there. I can't explain it, but poetry again became something very immediate and different for me. That's where the poems again started. FARRELL: The poems that became *Promises*. WARREN: *Promises*. I just felt caught in a swirl of life. Well, it's a magic country anyway—crazy, crazy, crazy; it was magic. FARRELL: Have you gone back there again? WARREN: Oh, we've been back many times. Eleanor is soaked in Italy—has written a famous book about it, *Rome and a Villa*. And is sunk in the language and literature. Every time Eleanor and I went there, it was poems, poems, poems. In the book *Promises* it's half Kentucky and half Italy. It was making poetry of worlds I had some sense of by experience. They were worlds I knew. In different ways, of course.

[In] the very early poems, the germ was usually a phrase or a line or something like that. The germ is now, frequently, usually, something that has a dramatic core of some kind, action, a person in action, something [like that].

I was reading Audubon's journals; not to write a poem—I was reading him along with a lot of other stuff of that general world. Having read vastly—I've used "vastly" rather with calculation there—in this sort of sub-literary stuff of the history of middle America in the South, letters, journals, things like that, I started a poem, "Audubon," and wrote quite a lot of it until I found I was on the wrong track and gave it up, didn't come back to it until up in the middle sixties. I just threw it away. I thought it was a dead duck. Suddenly one morning, twenty years later, something I'm rarely caught doing is helping in making up a bed, because I just don't believe in ever being useful when you can avoid it around the house. So as I said, I was making up the bed, and a line from the

old poem flashed across my mind which became the first line of a new poem, the book *Audubon: A Vision* [1969]: "Was not the lost dauphin, was only. . . ." That line came somehow—I hadn't even been back and looked over the manuscript, even, not forever.

Poetry, for me, is not something you do after you get it fixed in your mind. Poetry is a way of thinking, or a way of feeling; it's a way of exploring. It shouldn't be a profession; it should be a way of life, the best you can make of it as a way of life. I don't mean to get melodramatic about that, but it's a way of being open to possibility.

In a novel there's more of the same openness at the early stages. I don't start a novel, writing it, until I've got a novel in my head. Now, it's not going to be the same novel, but I've got *a* novel in my head. I get a different kind of pleasure out of both. I wouldn't be without either kind of pleasure. And that was an accident, writing fiction was an accident. Here is how my first fiction began in New York City in 1927, before I went to Yale. I knew Louis Mumford and Paul Rosenfeld, who with Van Wyck Brooks ran *The American Caravan* back in the late 1920's. I had contributed a lot of poetry to it. And Paul cabled me at Oxford in my last year there and said, "Why don't you write us a novelette," said, "like those tales you've told me?" And I said, why not?

[For a writer of fiction] the things that happen that you don't know the meaning of at the time acquire meaning only after a long time, *may* acquire meaning after a long time. I had a flat tire in a place called Don Jon, D-o-n J-o-n, New Mexico. It was one garage and two tiny little houses, and that was all. And desert in all directions, and I had a flat tire. And an old man leaning with his back against the wall in the shade of a garage. He came out, and he saw a Tennessee license on my car, and he said, "I'm from down there, but I haven't been back in seventy years," or something like that; maybe eighty years, maybe. He was an old, old man and tough as whitleather, you know, and he got to talking about his life. Well, I put him in my first published novel. A lot of things happen that way, but you've got to just try to be a listener, listen to . . . more than you talk [laughing], which is hard for me to do sometimes. I don't go out hunting material. Material hunts *you* down, you are pursued by material.

I always talk my novels out. FARRELL: Who do you talk them out with? WARREN: My wife . . . well, my wife won't talk novels. I don't even . . . I don't know what book she's writing. She'll hand me the book, and I'll say, "Oh, another one." FARRELL: You don't know about it until it's over. WARREN: She won't tell me anything. FARRELL: But you like to talk about it. WARREN: I'll talk to taxi drivers, friends, anybody. FARRELL: Literally? Taxi drivers? WARREN: Yeah, anybody. If they'll listen, I'll talk. FARRELL: What do you say to a taxi driver? "I'm writing a novel"? WARREN: "Well, now, let me tell you a story." [Mr. Warren bursts into laughter] You know, I won't say, I'm writing a novel. But I like to . . . I compose by telling it.

FARRELL: How about the prose, the essays, the criticism and the poetry? Are you more a poet than a novelist? WARREN: Well, I can't say; time will tell. But as a matter of fact, I feel closer to the poetry, I do. And it's a more personal thing.

I always send poetry to friends. As you get older you have fewer friends to send it to who have the time or the inclination to reply. I enjoy the association that you get in the university community with a certain number of your faculty friends. You don't find that sort of thing everywhere. I worked hard at teaching, but I enjoyed teaching. I swore off teaching three times but each time went back—but only a term a year. But I really fell in love with teaching. I enjoyed it. The students are stimulating, they have ideas. I have a different life, a different world, and your own children don't take the place of it. FARRELL: Your own children don't? WARREN: No, they don't, because I know more about, in one way, about other people's children than I know about my own.

[FARRELL: What are you going to do next?] WARREN: Well, I have no theories. That is, if I finish this book and I feel like writing poetry, I'll write some more poetry, but if it won't come, and the novel seems hot still, I'll do the novel. I've got a book finished now [*Being Here*: Random House, 1980]; I hope to do another summer's work on it. A birthday present to myself, my seventy-fifth birthday. FARRELL: In case nobody remembers? WARREN: In case nobody remembers.