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Carol Bly

Eileen Bartos

Alyssa Haywoode

Mary Hussmann

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An Interview with Carol Bly

WE'RE ADMIRERS of Carol Bly's clear, wry short fiction, and of the urgent and compelling vision so apparent in her works of nonfiction. She is the author of two books of short stories, *Backbone* and *The Tomcat's Wife*; a book of essays, *Letters from the Country*; and a book on the craft of fiction, *The Passionate, Accurate Story*. Carol Bly was born in Duluth, Minnesota, went to boarding school at Abbot in Andover, Massachusetts, and to college at Wellesley. After college and a few shaky years in New York City, she returned to graduate school at the University of Minnesota. She has taught at Hamline University, Carleton College, and the University of Minnesota. She also teaches two of the correspondence courses offered at The Loft, an innovative space for writers in Minneapolis. We had the opportunity to interview her when she was teaching an advanced nonfiction writing course at The University of Iowa during the fall of 1991.

TIR: We were wondering if you'd like to run through any of your background—especially how it relates to where you are today as a writer.

CB: I suppose two things in my life history helped me to be a writer. The first was that I was sent out of the family to be brought up by an aunt, which put me out of the normal situation; that generally helps anybody who wants to be intelligent. The other thing is that my aunt read to me aloud—an hour and a half or so every night—all through my childhood. So there was always literature. And I went to a school that ran only until noon. All afternoon I played alone or with a cousin outdoors in the woods of North Carolina. So there was nature, and solitude, which both help—as opposed to playing many baseball games. More solitude and more literature. I also had a great teacher, and I think everybody needs one at some point. Mine was in prep school. Alice Sweeney did one great thing—the rest was very pleasant and nice, but she did the one thing that makes writers out of people who think they aren't writers. She took an essay of mine and said, "This is good, the stuff from which stories are made is here. But do over this passage: it wasn't clear to me." I did it again. She read it. Then she said, "And this—it's not clear to me. 'He enters the room' and

Eileen Bartos, Alyssa Haywoode, and Mary Hussmann were the interviewers.

then what happens? That's not clear to me." And I did it again, and again. After about five re-dos, which she looked at each time, she said, "All right, that's enough; now write something else." She gave me the experience of doing revision, and I had another human being taking an intellectual interest. Those were the two things: the great teacher, and the semi-literary and solitary childhood.

TIR: In *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, you encourage writers to write what's missing in literature. One of your examples is that we never hear the stories of the wives of the men who run the big companies that pollute rivers and things like that.

CB: And run nerve-gas labs. . . .

TIR: We were curious to know how you think your writing is filling the void of what's missing.

CB: It isn't yet. That's partly because I haven't had that kind of a class life. I've mostly lived in the country. Now I'm going to try to do something about that—though I'm not sure just what. But it's hard to write with love and insight—and discipline—about people who waste their lives perfecting their tennis forehand, and who refuse to discuss the fact that their husbands are doing all this God-awful stuff in their corporations.

TIR: You think that's crucial, then, to have the love and insight to be able to write about those things.

CB: I don't have any love for them and I don't have very much insight about them. I went to Wellesley and met a lot of those people, but didn't at that time know what America was going to be like, so I didn't hang around them. Those people who were going to work the system that way were already divided away by the age of fifteen.

TIR: So your family was not comparable to their families.

CB: No. My family were idealistic, half-cultivated people. Whereas those people were already lined up—well, just like George Bush's class at Andover, which has several members in the CIA.

TIR: Yet your family sent you to a fancy school like Wellesley?

CB: Wellesley's hardly fancy. It is academically excellent. But when I was there, there wasn't one single writing teacher who really knew anything about writing.

TIR: But in the Midwest we have this stereotypical view of East Coast colleges, such as the Seven Sisters . . .

CB: You probably ought to drop it. The secret of the ivy league secondary school—and there is a secret to it, at the high school level anyway—is the small classes, with the good manners, and the frankness. As opposed to the evasiveness, plus the snarling or sneering, of the average public high school. Having taught at both, I'm always shocked at how unfair the whole thing is. Because *we could do it* for every American. We have enough staff; we have enough money, if we could get Defense Department money.

I taught two days at Milton Academy. Milton had always seemed glitzier than Abbot, which was always short of money but very high in academic aims. Abbot took pride in being the oldest girls' school in the United States. Today Milton's infrastructure is slipping, because America is failing and they're slanting with it. But both Milton and Andover still have the wonderful small classes. Milton said, Would you be willing to teach four classes back to back for two days? I did it, though it's a knock-out marathon. They said, We have to apologize, because one of these classes is over-filled. I asked how many people were in it, and they said fifteen! Well, anybody can teach twelve or fifteen human beings to be human. It can be done. So what they've got is a wonderful faculty willing to work at low pay. There's idealism all over the place—teaching young people in small enough groups, with the young people being very polite—which means they and we teachers are not afraid of each other. A Milton student said to me, “Ms. Bly, one thing you said was clear, but that second thing you said wasn't clear. Would you run that past me again, so that I can see if it's you who's confused or if it's me who's confused?” He meant it. I said, “Yes—let me try that again.” That kind of cooperative learning and teaching can be done if we could halve all the classes everywhere.

TIR: How did going to privileged schools affect your writing?

CB: I don't know. So-called elite people aren't so elite, either. I didn't meet particularly elegant people. I met people who, for example, would go for the cheap shot if they had a chance. You know, in nineteenth-century novels set in England, the women and men really have some principles. At least the novelists of my early education *gave* the protagonists principles. The characters did not sell out, even when nobody would find out if they did. I'm not sure I've ever met anybody who wouldn't sell out, probably because American life has been brutal for such a long time.

TIR: So where do you see yourself, in terms of the writing you're doing?

What kind of things do you want the world to know?

CB: I suppose two things. My favorite idea is that every single person should be able to live a life that is fairly creative. If you put kids in a good enough habitat, they can move from just wandering around the place grabbing stuff to being fairly aesthetic, to being ethical, to being really empathetic toward all the rest of the lot, including the plants, the air, and the trees. That's programmed in us all. It could be fulfilled. So I'm interested in that. The second idea I've got is to approach the wives of nerve-gas lab administrators and directors and see if we can get them to rise up and speak to their husbands and change their marriages to the point where they can speak to each other about ethical things. Without him dropping her for a nineteen-year-old barmaid—which is what he will threaten her with. Or he'll be rude. When Paul Wellstone, a senator from Minnesota, was making a fuss against someone in the Senate, President Bush overheard him and said, "Who is that chicken-shit?" That kind of rudeness is going to be hard to bear for these women, because their present marital deal is if they keep quiet, their husbands' rudeness goes *outward*. But if they start talking to their husbands, the rudeness might well curve back inward against *them*. We could teach women—and this is why I work a lot with social workers—conversation models in which we say—let's take Barbara and George—"Okay, Barbara, you *talk* to George. . . ." And let's ask Barbara about her statement to the Class of 1990 at Wellesley that "a marriage is the best investment you'll ever make." Now that's an extraordinarily materialistic thing to tell a few hundred twenty-one-year-old human beings—and it suggests that women might risk their investment by speaking out. Let's ask Barbara, "Is that the best you can do? Or is that what you thought you ought to say? I'm willing to listen to any other ideas you have about it." And we would start to follow all the small paths of her ideas. Then a skilled person could say to her, "Okay, now we need to devise a conversation that you can have with the people nearest you, so that you can grow together and be honest with each other." A good social worker could do it. Writers generally don't, because they get excited; they say, "Stop! Stop, you guys, you're throwing shit all over." But the social worker would go in with modern process. There have been dozens of interactionary skill inventions since 1950. Social workers use them. Writers are slow to learn them because the last thing most literary people contemplate is learning from social workers.

TIR: Do you think writers have a chance of catching up?

CB: Many are trying. It takes skill and discipline, though. I don't do it very well. In fact, I've been warned by people that I don't do it well enough—that I don't do intervention process well enough to be really modern.

TIR: Can you say a bit about what you mean by process?

CB: Yes. It's running a conversation in which some psychological or ethical purpose will be better met than without the conversation. The common workshop format is the teacher gives a lecture on what needs to be done. Then everybody looks at the manuscripts and they ask questions about the manuscripts. Sometimes they even ask the author to stay still while everybody picks on the manuscript, which is frequently a mild practice of sadism. That's the old model. I've brought down copies of an essay called "Against Mild Sadism in Workshopping," which has been published at The Loft. One new model, and there are a lot of them, is that the teacher asks generative questions. Other class members ask generative questions. If they're really good at it, they ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions waken in the author other things with deeper meaning for that author than what's on the page. So you give less attention to what is already on the page. You are talking back and forth with the author. A good process person who has experience equivalent to an MSW course in interactionary skills will listen for where the author starts to get merely brainy and will steer the talk back to where the feeling is, and will keep doing that. It's amazing to watch such teachers.

TIR: You have a good grasp of both working-class people and the social elite, and seem to see both sides. Whom do you align yourself with?

CB: No one. It's possible that when you're sixty-one, you no longer see yourself as in a group. You pull alone on so many things, and you have divided yourself apart from various groups so many times during the decades—let's say I've been doing this seven decades now—that sooner or later there isn't a single group that represents what you are. I think that's called being a human being, finally.

TIR: Well, you began by talking about the sense of isolation that started you off being a writer. I wonder if that's part of it. . . .

CB: I think so. Writers need solitude. In fact, maybe that's the key step writers take. Everyone should be a writer: we know that. But if you don't

get a good third-grade teacher, symbolically speaking, you probably won't become a writer. One needs respect from teachers and to be spared disrespect from your relatives. You laughed as if you knew about that.

TIR: There's a stream of activism in what you say, and also in *The Passionate, Accurate Story*. Are you able to write short stories that incorporate some of your activism?

CB: Only to drop it in here or there. I do the rest in the essays. That's not to say it can't be done; I'm just not sure my talent manages to do it at this point. I have an easy time doing argument in essays. I do an awful lot of lecturing: ethical subjects are easy when I give a talk some place. I'm not sure I'd force it, though I do try to drop into every single short story something like, "the earth is not wrecked yet, but it's nearly wrecked." And I try to drop in something about the evils we do in our time—not singly, but in groups. Men do evils in groups. I have to say it is men for cultural reasons. I do not believe it's a male attribute. We need to start looking at groups. That's why I read the work of people like Irving Janis and Robert Jay Lip-ton on group-think. We need to learn and teach such social psychology.

TIR: I want to ask about your statement in *The Passionate, Accurate Story* that writing an essay is three thousand times easier than writing a short story. As an essay writer, I felt a little put-down by that.

CB: I know—I lost a whole pile of friends through that. I've been trying to get them back one by one, and lunch doesn't do it. But here's the thing. Have you written short stories too?

TIR: Just poetry.

CB: Poetry is easier too, for me at least, and here's why. In the short story, you start out with something in your own life. I went through this thing and I'm going to get it on paper. I'm going to express that. Or as the *Writer's Digest* people say, I'm going to capture it. So you write what your conscious mind writes—that's the *donnée*, that's the given part. And then a second element comes in, something unconscious, and that's the other image you're going to have, the other part of the plot. As soon as those two are there, the story no longer has to do with you; it's off on its own skein. It's a work of art. It's separate. It has its own lines of discipline that you can't fool with. And your *self* doesn't get in anymore. Whereas in an essay, you yourself, the writer, can always stay right there; in fact, we readers invite you to. We love to have the person right there, just as close as we can get them.

TIR: Aren't there times in writing essays when the unconscious steps in and you're not really sure where you're going?

CB: Sometimes—but generally it makes for a chaotic essay. Not when you're writing. During the writing, you seldom know where you're going. That's very appropriate. But there's an essay of E. B. White's—and I'm not an admirer of his essays—called "Once More to the Lake," where all the images, throughout the whole first half, are sunken, or dead, or wet and cold things. No accident. Now either his own unconscious did it for him, or he picked up on it and then shined it up a little bit, so he's ready for that last line. But I don't think the essay is about what he says it's about—which is how nice it is to go back up to Maine if you're an upper middle-class person who hasn't got beaten by the tax system. What his essay proclaims is that like every other spoiled male in America, he's scared of his own death, and he will even be prurient about his son's life, and try to borrow it and trade on it. That essay is a piece of sickness in some sense. It's interesting how dear it is to the literary establishment, however.

TIR: Which do you prefer to write, essays or short stories?

CB: I love both. I don't think of as many short stories as essays, but I think that's just lack of gift on my part. Given more money, more time, better brains . . .

TIR: We saw your reading at Prairie Lights Bookstore last spring, and we were interested in the fact that you chose to *tell* the story rather than read it. I'm wondering if you can address a couple of issues: first, what you think the difference is between hearing a story told and hearing a story read, and second, why you made that choice.

CB: In general I made it because somebody often published in *The New Yorker* whom I had vaguely admired, who wrote close-to-*New Yorker* stories, came to Minneapolis some years ago to give a reading. I heard that she was paid a thousand dollars for it. That was a lot of money then; it was about ten times as much as I got at the time. We local writers all went to the reading. We waited, and on she came. At first they announced her, then they introduced her, and then they said she wouldn't be able to stand questions afterwards because she had to get her flight back to New York that night. She got out a messy-looking manuscript and, without even saying good evening, she announced, "The title of the story is—" and began to read. She read it, closed it up, and hurried away to catch a plane. I

thought, That's not service enough for us human beings in the audience. I got the idea from Roger Angell who once wrote that it's wrong for ball-players to get paid ten thousand dollars to pitch a game. It debauches the rest of us; we feel angry. He was right. I felt angry, and I thought, Well, how else might she have done it? Should we have only poems for readings? I would miss fiction. Then I thought, We can *tell* stories. People love having stories told. So I thought, Well, how will I do it? The first time I made a mistake and wrote down just the themes in notes. Then I realized, Of course I'll remember the *themes*; what I *won't* remember is the *images*. So now I've got the themes and times on the left, and all the nouns, the objects of the story, and a few phrases that I like on the right. That's how I do it now. But something does get dropped every time; that's the drawback. The good thing for me is that I get to look at everybody, which makes it fun for me; it's more sociable. I do it for all my stories. I tell them.

TIR: What about a writer who would normally *read* from the manuscript, and would argue that he or she worked very hard to get the words exactly the way they are? How would you respond to that?

CB: They probably ought to read. There are people who write so beautifully, they have terrific syntax and rhythmic texture. It would be a shame to lose that beauty. Unless the authors had a wild memory, in which case it would be like reciting an Icelandic saga. But it would be too bad to lose elegant texture. My words aren't like that. They're much nearer to *Yeah? he said. Yeah, she said.* It doesn't matter whether you tell or read such diction.

TIR: So you don't think that there's any significant difference for the audience hearing you tell it, as opposed to hearing you read.

CB: I can't tell because the people who love it come up and tell me, and the ones who are angry don't.

TIR: How much of your writing is autobiographical?

CB: Nothing all the way through is. Bits and pieces are.

TIR: Are there specific parts of your life that you draw on frequently?

CB: Whenever anything amuses me, or if I think something's really gross, then I try to get that in, just so that injustice gets told. One small example is when I was living near Madison, Minnesota, a town of about two thousand. There's this terrible sexual boredom that young mothers often have—there are the kids, but also, life is boring. Husband and wife

are so driven by their work they are for days on end pulled apart—unless it's a miraculous marriage. So a friend and I used to park in the car beside the football field. We had philosophical conversations. I thought we were just parking there talking about life. We were planning plays, because she was a ham actor, and we had a little playhouse. Our kids, still little babies, would be crawling around in the car, the bigger ones at school. We'd be idly watching the football team. Finally I asked her, "What are all these other cars doing parked here?" Charlotte said, "They're doing the same thing you're doing." I said, "What am I doing?" and she said, "You're just looking at those boys' butts, that's all." And that *was* what we were doing. I used to draw, too, and I knew exactly how the thighs were, and the back of the muscles. Sixteen-year-old boys are heartbreaking to twenty-five-year-old women. We weren't doing any harm, but we were looking, and so were all these other women. And I thought, That really is sweet and funny: I'll stick it in a story some day. I got it into a story called "The Tomcat's Wife."

TIR: There seems to be a division between writers who write only to represent their own experience and writers who write to represent the experience of the world they know. Where do you see yourself?

CB: Eliot wrote an essay, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" saying, Look, it's okay to write all one's private love poetry until you're twenty-five but, after that, if you don't take on the whole human predicament, you aren't exercising a serious part of your nature. I'm too old for just private-life writing. I think that's appropriate until you're about thirty; if you still cling to it after that, it's awfully self-centered. This is a real fight. In the Minneapolis-St. Paul area the aesthetic people are very angry at the ethical people. And the multi-cultural people have got an ongoing battle with people whom they call elitists, and those elitists call themselves artistic perfectionists. Such battles are always going on.

TIR: Do you participate in that battle, or do you just watch it rage?

CB: I do what older people do: if it interests me somewhere, I drop in some smart-ass remark and then pull back out. These issues mostly rouse people in their thirties and forties.

TIR: You were speaking earlier about writing about the wives of the men who pollute the rivers, and I wonder if you see women as your primary audience?

CB: Apparently not. I think good men and women are interested in changing the world. Men who allow themselves to be bad want to keep the world as it is, because it works better for them than it does for most women. As Virginia Woolf says, More of us are falling to your rifles than you have fallen to ours. So men have a psychological stake in the present status of much. For example, the new men's movement divides up very clearly to me in three parts. It has its psychotherapeutic mode, which is very good. It has its back-to-nature mode, which is actually just the back-to-nature mode that *all* Americans are experiencing because we're afraid we're going to lose nature—I think people are much more afraid of that than they think they are. And then it has its male we're-okay-as-we-are stance—what howls: It used to be all right, we were on top! and I want scapegoats underneath us again! Such men love whatever literary analogies that validate these points. But I think that there are men, lots of men, who are alongside women wanting change. It's not a gender issue; it's a save-the-world issue.

TIR: Are you at all conscious of what you're saying about the women in your stories, or to the women who are reading your stories? I write short stories and I find myself thinking about those things all the time.

CB: I don't. I've been told not to; I believe Peter Elbow when he says don't think of audience. I believe the unconscious won't come up and do its secret mysterious literary work if we're writing for audience. But I don't know if that's why I don't do it—or if that's just the reason I put on it, and the reality is I'm just not thinking.

Could you write your short stories more secretly? Could you say, I'm going to do three drafts of this without another human soul, and I may never show two or three of these drafts to anyone. Would that make more of a reserved place for the unconscious?

TIR: Sure. I noticed that in *The Passionate, Accurate Story* you talk about the very secret nature of first drafts of a story, and you seem very protective of that.

CB: Yes, I am. Unlike the Iowa Workshop. I was never in it myself, but I understand everybody gets a go. Even at first drafts.

TIR: So you think it's bad to workshop first drafts?

CB: It depends on how it is done. Most workshopping is harmful and always has been. It makes people spend a lot of time together so they get a

taste of being together in a jolly sort of way. When what writers really need to do is be at least forty percent of the time alone. And suffer. You don't suffer in workshop. Well, it can be horrible, but it isn't suffering.

TIR: It's not instructive suffering.

CB: It's not artistic experience. I love workshopping. It's a lot of fun. Although if the authors have been instructed to keep silent, it's a very special sadistic touch. I can see being blindfolded if one is to be shot, or gagged if one is to be tortured in a badly soundproofed cellar, but for a *writer* to be told to be quiet is . . . At The Loft we're going to try to amend that model across the United States because so much damage is done with it. Everybody admires Iowa so much because it turns out some really good people. Other workshop programs imitate the Iowa pattern. We thought at The Loft we would just start another pattern and see if we can get three or four more patterns going.

TIR: But we still have conventional models that we cling to.

CB: Some of them are good. As in the article by Philip Levine about John Berryman.* Berryman taught more than a jolly-up workshop. Berryman literally said, "Shut up everybody: here's how you do this, and this, and this."

TIR: So he taught them how to workshop.

CB: No, he didn't teach them how to workshop. He was mostly drunk. He taught them how to write the English language to have more punch. And how to know when a poem has that quick sudden turn at the end.

TIR: I want to go back to the idea of audience. In one of your stories, "My Lord Bag of Rice," you seem very definitely to speak to women. The story is about a woman who loses her husband—he dies—and it's been a terrible marriage, and she finally does something for herself: she buys a building and she runs a boarding house. I read that story and thought, Oh, this is a wonderful story because it says to women, Look, you can emerge from a bad marriage of twenty-nine years and still do what you always wanted. Was that a conscious message on your part?

CB: It may be that I don't go into my save-everybody mode when I'm writing short stories; it may be that I've saved that for myself and my own pleasure. That was *her* story.

* Philip Levine, "Mine Own John Berryman." *The Gettysburg Review*, v. 4/4, Autumn 1991.

TIR: Still, it has that message to women that they can act. It seems that in many stories written by women, women have no impact on the physical world; all the drama happens in their heads. And yet in that story, those women have a tremendous impact on the physical world. It made me wonder if you weren't intentionally trying to move fictional women characters along to a point where . . .

CB: Not consciously.

TIR: Well, it seems like a feminist story.

CB: Right. Well, if it works for feminism, then up the story! That's good!

TIR: But that was not your conscious intention.

CB: No, I was just in my sloppy mode of writer, you know. I've got this figure, and I want her to . . . Years ago I had stood by the fence of our farm talking to the woman on the other side about our husbands. I was congratulating her on hers. She was married to a wonderful man. And she said, "Yes, he's better than the others." So I said, "How do you mean better than the others?" And she said, "Well, he doesn't say, 'Roll over and take your medicine,' by way of sex." Right away I thought now that's *really* bad sex: I'm going to get that in a story if it's the last thing I do. But I said to her, "Who does?" And she said, "Oh, lots of people here," and she told me a few terrible stories.

TIR: Many writers teach because they have to, but having written *The Passionate, Accurate Story*, it seems you take your role as a teacher as seriously as your role as a writer.

CB: That's true; I like teaching. It's a calling. I also think that writing can be taught. If you don't teach it, people wait and waste twenty or thirty years learning how to do it. For example, when I was graduating from Wellesley, I had my gown and cap over my arm and my current boyfriend beside me, and I went up to this instructor and said, "Have you got any last words of advice to a writer? Because that's what I'm going to become." And she said, "Don't write essays because there's no market for that." And I said, "Must one write for market?" "Oh yes," she said, "You always analyze the market and write for that." That's a terrible thing to say. That's supposed to be a good college? That's a terrible thing to say.

TIR: Do you ever write about Wellesley, either in your fiction or your essays?

CB: I think I just drop off insults here and there.

TIR: So you don't think that there's anything important to be exposed, in terms of your East Coast experience.

CB: Alas, the obvious things are true. A Harvard education is a very good thing to have. When people have it, it pays off for them. They can work through ideas very quickly because they had to work intensely in college. Also they have that confidence of having dealt with the best. I remember singing in a church choir in England in which we sang all the best music, but we sang it terribly. We had a few terrible voices. The priest said, "Well, as Gustav Holst said, 'If a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly,' so just go ahead and sing." When people have studied in a college taken for the best there is, they themselves aim to do the very best. So I'm very much in favor of excellent programs, like the Iowa writing program, and Harvard; it's just that I want the equivalent for everybody.

TIR: I sense a little ambivalence in your attitude toward East Coast prep schools. I'm thinking of one story in *The Tomcat's Wife* where the small-town coach really wants to get this girl out of her awful family and into Exeter. In the story Exeter represents an ideal, but now you seem to be criticizing schools like Exeter.

CB: Only when they don't do their job as well as possible for as large a cross-section of people as possible. Exeter nearly does. Exeter went around in the 1970s and took kids from small, central Minnesota towns, brought them to Exeter, and changed their lives, opened their imaginations. But with much suffering. You probably read the book about the two black kids from New York who went to Exeter — two books have been written about it. One boy committed suicide, I think, and the other had a tragic life. They both said, This is going to be a white game that in the end we don't want to play. But at least they were given the chance to look at the game. So they knew what they were rejecting. The virtue of Exeter is that it tried to give that opportunity to anybody who wanted to have a go. To attend a really good school at the high school level is wonderful. If I had billions and zillions of dollars, I would see to it that there were scholarship programs for poor people everywhere who wanted to go to any school that offered classes with only fifteen kids in the sections.

TIR: Yet these are the same schools that produce George Bush and members of the CIA.

CB: But they also produce people who try to change the George Bushes. The grief is that some people fall into that corrupt practice of using private schools as old boys' networks in order to control all the resources of the world.

TIR: Which is something that you say you're interested in; we've nicknamed it "the elite disease."

CB: That's a good name; did you make that up here? The elite disease, yes, that's the corruption that takes elegant education and privilege and then uses both to corner all sorts of resources. That's the major horrible thing about humanity. But we shouldn't duck it by dumping everybody into a public school, because American public schools often are barely worth attending.

TIR: So you would send people from the Midwest, and from less traditional pools, to ivy league schools or Stanford or wherever, in the hope that they themselves wouldn't join the CIA, in the hopes that . . .

CB: That they'll break it, that they'll bust it. Three years ago, in the Andover alumni magazine—my old school melded with Andover, that's why I get it—somebody wrote in when Bush was running one of his invasions, "I certainly don't find that I'm proud of what my fellow Andover alumnus is doing. This is not my idea of America; this is not what I grew up and studied to do." Somebody else wrote in "I'm sorry to see that the Andover family is falling apart." Then I wrote "No, this open moral objection by Andover alumni to the President is the most wonderful thing I've heard yet." Then I got in touch with the first writer, who was teaching at Milton, which is how I came to teach there. Later I found out there are whole cadres of people trying to break up American aggressive foreign policy—and other social ills. Just recently at Andover, somebody wrote in "By the way, I'm gay, and I was gay at Andover, and it was hell covering it up. I had to keep my family from being mad, and I had to keep people from finding out so I wouldn't get tortured," and so on. Then several others responded. I wrote in to the editors and said, "Congratulations on this, too; now Andover's going to be for peace, and it's going to be for everybody for their own sex freedom. What next? This is terrific." Then they got piles of letters, from many. So the desire to change the cruel attitudes is around, just not in enough numbers, yet.

TIR: I can't help but think about all the kids that would go to these

schools and then have to return to their communities—whether it’s Los Angeles, New York City, or rural Minnesota. Can they make a difference? CB: Say that a whole bunch of kids go to fifteen-in-a-class schools somewhere. They go back to their communities, their conventional families, and they’re supposed to bring that change with them. If we believe in education, they can. They can have this conversation where some guy says, Listen, all those environmentalists are just a bunch of communists. And the Andover graduate can say, Which ones? The ones from Lac Qui Parle County, or the ones from Yellow Medicine County? The guy says, I don’t know. And the graduate says, Well which ones did you mean? People educated to quiet, thoughtful talk are able to start the conversations that allow people to work their thoughts into manageable sizes and see what’s going on in them. But it means we have to teach a social work conversation pattern to both educated and uneducated people. And that’s possible.

TIR: You’ve mentioned social workers a couple of times. Are you a social worker?

CB: No. What’s more, my friends who are have said, Carol, do us a favor. It’s wonderful when you come to us and do our keynote speeches—because I always say they’re in the best field there is, and in my opinion they are—but they always add, If you ever do a career change, for God’s sake don’t become a psychologist, a psychotherapist, or a social worker. I said, Why? And they said, Well, because you’re a writer, and writers are directive. They tell everybody what to think and do, and if people don’t do it, writers are likely to bring in an analogy or a metaphor and say, It’s like *this*. Whereas social workers *know*, through discipline, *nothing* is an analog to anything else. Everything is only what *it* is, and let’s look at only this particular case. Social workers find analogy anathema; we writers love analogy. So metaphor exhilarates us. We don’t always make good colleagues in the social process club!

TIR: Yet you as a writer have this very strong relationship with social workers.

CB: Social workers take a graduate course that I want everyone in America to take, called “Interactionary Skills.” Every person needs to learn how to ask a question and listen to the answer, and then to listen to a second answer. We just don’t do that in America. Most people don’t get asked two questions in all their lives. In the classroom, a teacher asks, can any-

body tell us what the capital of Colombia is? Nobody can do it. Johnny, can you? No, he says. Then the teacher never comes back to Johnny to ask, Well, if *it is* Bogotá, then what, Johnny? In other words, you never get a second chance, so Johnny's unconscious never joins the conversation. I'd like interviewing skills taught to elementary and high school students all over the United States.

This year I'm pushing to have English, in the fourth, seventh, tenth, and twelfth grades of American public schools, team taught by social workers with the English teachers. It will help, because English teachers are so overworked. The social workers can listen to a story, and they can pull it apart and say, "What was it like for that person, or what was it like for the mouse in that story? What was it like for the dog?" Then kids begin to say, "Oh, there's what it's like for me, and there's what it's like for someone else": they learn how to have a civil and philosophical conversation. When the nine-state, Midwest School Social Workers' Association met last fall in St. Paul, I talked to them about this. They came forward to volunteer. We are in the brainstorming and pilot-project planning stage now.

TIR: Do you think the establishment is going to step away? I mean, are traditional English teachers going to say, "This isn't the way great literature should be taught — you're stepping on my toes here"?

CB: Yes. So we're inviting them in at the very bottom floor. A pleasing aspect for them straight-away, whether or not it makes up for the fact that they must share some of their hobby, is that they won't have to read so *many* student papers. As it is, people come to college never having written a paper. Or if they've written one, the teacher's only response has been a smiling face at the bottom and "Real good." They've never had a paper read thoughtfully, because there isn't time. The teachers are underpaid because of Reagan and Bush milking the public weal. Say there are thirty or more students in the schoolroom — that's the way it is, alas, or worse. A social worker can take them in two lots of fifteen and talk about a story with them. Asking each student about the story will do much, intellectually, that we expect of sending children home to write a paper. Everyone gets to speak, and everyone gets asked to expand his or her original idea to a more complex one.

TIR: It's like the point you made earlier that Johnny only gets asked one question — we never come back and ask him a second question. So he never gets to develop his thought.

CB: Right. Public school English teachers are exhausted. They have a right to go home at the times they go home. Especially if they have to come back to stamp purple markings on fans' hands at the basketball game that night. They should be able to go home and not read papers. If you're paid at the secondary level what public schools pay in most states in the U.S., you have a right not to be reading papers at night.

TIR: If you've got that interaction happening in the classroom, people are talking through their ideas. You don't have to have them write them down. It's another kind of thinking process. But what about the value of learning to write decently and coherently?

CB: Writing, and reading literature, yes. But since they're not doing it anyway, what's the loss? I just talked to a group of seniors at Blake School, which is at least second-best in the Twin Cities and at least thirtieth-best in the country. They were sitting in a small classroom, twelve or thirteen people. I told the story of the mouse who saved the dove's life.* Wonderful story. The dove is in a cage, and the mouse figures out how to let her out, and then says, "You can fly. Let's see it." The dove then flies away happily, and the mouse says, "Oh, so that's what flying's about." And the mouse goes back to feed her kids. But since she freed the dove, there will be no more bird seed laid out every night where the mouse and her family can find it. There are many ethical issues in the story. And discussing these issues with the students was, I think, worth fifty percent of writing time. If we're teachers, we need to do that interviewing technique between our students and ourselves. And we need to do it inside our families. And also between ourselves and between the various selves, inside ourselves. It's a life-giver.

TIR: So in terms of the unconscious joining the conversation, should writers have a similar goal?

CB: Yes. When you say to your manuscript, as many writers do, This is a piece of drivel; how could I think this is a short story—it's terrible—who will read this? Then you can say, Well, if it's not a piece of drivel, what is in there? And who exactly would say it's no good, who would say it's good, and why did you write it down, and so on. You learn to have that cordial inquiry phase take longer before you allow a judgment that says, I don't like it. You learn to use those conversational, those asking-and-listening skills, with other people, but also with yourself. Inside yourself.

* *The Mousewife*, Rumer Godden. Viking.