Conversations with Margaret Walker

Edited by
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Interview with Margaret Walker
Ruth Campbell / 1983

Transcribed from an interview aired on Mississippi Educational Television, August 4, 1983. Reprinted by permission of the Mississippi Authority for Educational Television.

RC: Alexander, when did you first begin to write?
MW: Well, as nearly as I can figure, I was writing prose before I wrote poetry. I was composing little pieces when I was ten years old—that's the earliest prose. But I began writing poetry at age—oh, I'm not sure whether it was 11 or 12—but I have poetry that dates back to age thirteen. I know I was writing before then. My father said it was a puberty urge. I began writing about the time I entered puberty. I don't remember when I learned to read, and I finished grade school at age eleven, and I finished high school at age fourteen. So I had a problem of social adjustment, yes. The older girls and boys in my class were always using me to help them get their work. And I thought that it was because they wanted to be friendly with me; they were really using me. And I really had no peers my age. Even in college that was true. I understand that college is the age when young people are courting and looking toward marriage or careers—and I was too young for anything. Courting was out of the question. I didn't know what it was all about until I was out of college.

RC: You must have been a little lonely then.
MW: I don't think so. I always had a world within. And that world was a very satisfactory world. I look back now in journals that I kept—I kept diaries and journals—and when I had nobody to talk to, I wrote to myself. And I was not aware of extreme loneliness. I realize now that I did not talk to people around me; I was in conflict with those around me.

RC: When you were young, did you have imaginary playmates? Did that influence your writing?
MW: As a very young child, my mother said I would come in from school and if it, even in the wintertime, I would put on a hat and go out in the backyard in my coat and hat and talk to all my imaginary playmates. My sister didn’t want to play [outside]. She wanted to play the piano all the time.
the time I began writing until I was early twenties—I wrote every day. I wrote diaries and journals, I wrote poetry almost every day. I wrote papers or vignettes, little characters sketches. I wrote because that was my only outlet, so I wrote all the time. But after I had graduated from college and after I’d had some very bitter experiences with other writers that every day pace slackened. I became more conscious and self-conscious. And when you are extremely self-conscious, you do not write as much. I’ve written three novels. I started a novel when I was twelve, and I never finished that novel. But I wrote hundreds of pages; I’d just sit at the typewriter and write. It was a very sentimental, religious, non-racial thing, I guess more white than black, and I didn’t know what I was doing. But I was learning to type, so I was using that to write this novel. When I was an adult and looked at it, I said, “Oh, my goodness, what drivel, what trash.” Then I wrote a novel when I was on the Writer’s Project in Chicago called Goose Island. I completed it, but it has never been published. It was not a very good novel, either. I had excellent characters and some of the dialogue was very good. The plot was all right, but basically it’s the reverse of the Native Son plot. The third novel, of course, was a novel I began when I was a senior at Northwestern. It was my family story, the Civil War novel Jubilee. I spent thirty years learning how to write that book—ten years in research, and all kinds of research, but then I had the job of transforming fact into fiction. And I didn’t learn how to do that until after twenty or twenty-five years. I went out to Iowa the second time and learned how to do it. The main thing I didn’t know how to do was to create scene, or to dramatize the material. And anyone who doesn’t know how to draft a scene doesn’t know how to write fiction. Fiction is never pure reality. Fiction is a blend of fantasy and reality. To write reality is not to write fiction. And to deal with all the evils of the world without any mitigating influences is not my idea of good fiction.

RC: Could you talk about style?
MW: Style, in my estimation, is nothing more than the impression of personality on the piece of writing. Style is a very individual matter. It is absolutely personal. No matter whether you call it a simple style or a sublime style, style is absolutely individual. My style is me, it’s my voice, it’s the way I express myself. I write a certain way because I am me. And no matter how you would describe that style, or define it, style is the personality impressed on the piece of writing. The form in which a thing is written will frequently [work] against the style. Content has almost nothing to do with style. The form and the content need to be wedded, yes, but when you talk about style and the stylistic elements in the writing, you are talking about the method that [a writer uses].

RC: Are any of your characters based on real people?
MW: I think I do some things with character, other than to base them on real people. I have a rule of thumb for character that was taught to me when I was out at Iowa and living with Miss Hoovey.1 And she taught me there are only five things you can do with any character, and given those five things, every time that they appear, the character appears, there must be consistency. You can only describe the character and tell how he looks. And you have the character talking and hear him talking. And you go behind the mind of the character and experience him thinking. Then you see him in action and you see him reacting to others. That’s all you can do with a character, those five things.

RC: How important are revisions to a writer?
MW: I think writing is nine-tenths rewriting. Even with poetry. Sometimes the poem comes out whole because you’ve thought about it a long time and it’s been in the unconscious or in that secondary imagination a long time, and you put it down as it should be, and there’s been this long period of gestation. But if you get a flash and you think you’ve got a sudden idea, you sit down and you attempt to do it right away—frequently, that is not going to come out right the first time. You have to think about it and rework it. I have one poem in For My People that I reworked at least twelve times, and worked on it about five years. That’s a poem called “Delta.” On the other hand, “For My People” was written in fifteen minutes, with the last stanza not there. I had to think about that a long time before I could write that final stanza.

RC: What makes the difference between whether something rolls off your pen, or whether you have to take this time of gestation?
MW: I think it is again a question of the conceptualization. How complete is that at the very beginning? You cannot organize and realize the work, compose it, when the concept is half-baked. When you conceive the thing, when you have the complete idea or configuration in the first conceptualization, it doesn’t take a long time. But if you do not have that all together in

1 Walker lived with Alma Hoovey, a former English professor at Iowa, from 1962–65.
that earliest intuitive moment, then you have to rework and rewrite. When you type very fast and use the touch system, and I think rapidly and I write rapidly; I write as I talk—too much, too easily, too much, too soon, too fast. And when it comes out, you get a lot. But, you know, everything you think is not what you want on paper.

RC: What are your views on modern life today, the permissive attitude, et cetera?

MW: I think it's like the last days of Pompeii, or the last days of the Roman Empire. I think that we have lived through a century of war and revolution, and that we have not been able to implement the positive elements of the Einsteinian Revolution so that high technology—in terms of the sciences and math—and we are completely adrift in terms of the humanities and the social sciences. I think something that people were talking about at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century has had a terribly demoralizing effect on people today. Since I believe that—I consider myself more a Christian humanist—I am not inclined to believe that God is dead. But people like the Marxists and the atheistic existentists say that the reason we are so morally adrift is that we have lost God, that for modern man, God no longer exists. And when God does not exist, then the people have no vision. They perish because they are without substance, without balance, without anything to believe or hold on to. And so in our secular society, we have lost all our God. We have no ideals left. Our world is a world of chaos, crime, corruption, and that's it.

RC: Do you think too much of that crops up in today's writing?

MW: Yes, I think that one of our brilliant young black women writers—in fact, I could name three or four of these black women writers who are selling hot stuff everywhere—they are on the border of, if not including, soft-core pornography.

RC: Then how should a love scene be handled?

MW: I think that subtlety is more effective than blatancy. I think that when women or men decide that everything has to be sexually explicit, that there's something kind of twisted with their sexual natures. That's what I really believe. That when sex has ceased to be anything sacred—when it ceases to have anything sacred or private about it, then it has lost its true, basic meaning. Sexuality is a part of humanity. But then humanity strives towards divinity, you see. And if sex is not tempered with genuine spiritual love, then something pretty ugly comes out.

RC: Some years ago, you wrote a poem "For My People." It still has application today.

MW: I wrote that poem when I was twenty-two. And I hope it has significance today. I was told already—I've been told many things about the poem—but during the sixties, when we were at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, friends came to see me from California. And they said when young men and women were thrown into the jails in California, one of the civil rights leaders would go in there and read poetry to them, and they always read "For My People." That was one of the crowning glories for me. They were saying that this poetry helped to spawn a kind of revolution. That's precisely what it was intended to do. And that was a compliment.

I'm not a native Mississippian, but I've lived here a great part of my life, and my family has been here, members of my family, for a hundred years. And I think Mississippi is one of the most interesting places and certainly a climate for genius. I think it's a great place for writing. The social ferment has been so horrible that out of it, you were bound to get great writers like Faulkner and Wright. You were bound to get very great writers like Tennessee Williams. Those are great, great writers. And their genius, their genius really came out of Mississippi.