

INTRODUCTION

The writers interviewed in this volume—William Humphrey, Reynolds Price, Harry Crews, David Madden, and Robert Drake—are in many ways representative of contemporary Southern authors. Most are traditional storytellers, yet they are highly innovative in working out of the Southern literary tradition. Their conversations in this collection center on the past and the future of Southern literature, and the processes of fiction making. What emerges is a kind of forum, with a rich interplay of views and voices on subjects of common concern.

There is a breadth of scope among the writers that I have interviewed: William Humphrey is mainly a tragic novelist, but he is also a writer of short stories, historical fiction, autobiography, essays, and "sports fiction"—that is, fishing; Reynolds Price is a prolific novelist—especially of late, as well as an active playwright and poet; Harry Crews spends a great deal of effort on personal writing, including family history and personal essays, even though he is mainly a comic novelist; Robert Drake is a teller of short tales and a moral essayist; and David Madden, the most eclectic of the lot, is engaged in the novel, the short story, poetry, drama, editing, film, how-to books for writers, autobiography, and literary criticism.

There is also geographic variety in this selection of writers. There are two from Tennessee, and one each from North Carolina, Georgia, and Texas. Two now live in Louisiana and Florida; only one, Humphrey, lives outside the South.

The collection's unity derives from these writers' travelling to Hendrix College, Conway, Arkansas, for a special course in the literature of the South that included study of their work. As these authors visited—usually for a week at a time—it was natural for certain issues to emerge repeatedly: the present state of Southern writing and its future, the elements of the grotesque in Southern writing, the ways in which life in the South has contributed to the region's fiction, how these writers feel about being Southerners, the concept of regionalism, and the state of publishing today. They dealt especially thoroughly with the question that was to be raised by the 1989 literary conference at Louisiana State University on "Southern Letters and Modern Literature: Can the South continue to produce a distinctive literature?" These are the common issues of the initial interviews with each writer. The second interviews focused more upon their attitudes towards being writers, the sources that feed their imaginations, the writers and books that have meant the most to them, their work habits. These interviews will be of special interest to other writers, would-be writers, and students of writing. The question of how the writing of these five writers fits into the context of Southern literature sometimes finds a place in the first interviews, sometimes more appropriately in the second.

I did not approach each author with a common set of questions. Common concerns produced the common discussions. I made every effort to allow the interviews to run a natural course, and the writers were encouraged to speak out on those issues that were most important to them as writers—and in the way that seemed most relevant to them. For example, one writer discussed the Southern oral storytelling tradition as it *appears* in his own writing, while another approached the issue from the perspective of how it

has *influenced* his work. And I might add here that I did not cut short anyone's answers with the thought of rushing on to the next question. At least an hour was allocated for each interview. The only "cutting" that I have done is in editing out any repetition that occurred. All of the interviews took place in Conway, Arkansas, except for the ones with Drake, which I conducted in New York City in 1986—after the Southern literature course in which he played a major part.

As they undertook to discuss the range of issues that I have outlined, Humphrey, Price, Crews, Drake, and Madden were not shy about commenting on their immediate forbears and their contemporaries. And so their opinions on Faulkner, O'Connor, Lytle, Welty, the Fugitives, McCullers, Williams, Percy, Capote, Robert Stone, Anne Tyler, Ernest Gaines, Cormack McCarthy, Alice Walker, and others appear throughout.