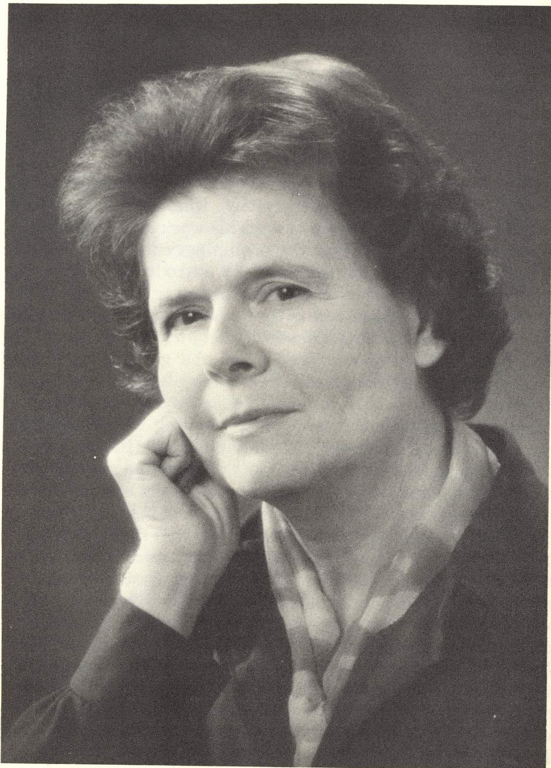
"The Courage to Read": An Interview with Helen Norris

Emma Coburn Norris

The quotation in the title is from Helen Norris's remarks at the 1986 PEN/Faulkner Awards ceremony, where another author surprised everyone by refusing to read his work aloud, offering a stirring aesthetic rationale as the preliminary to his silence. A writer with "courage and wit" was the introduction given by Richard Bausch for Norris, whose turn to appear before the same audience came next. As she rose in the midst of the stillness created by the earlier refusal, Norris opened with her own declaration, "I do indeed have the courage to read," and the grateful audience responded with hearty applause. Norris has often demonstrated this kind of courage. In 1979, for example, she gave up the academic life in order to resume the professional writing career she had begun in her youth. In addition to studying under Hudson Strode and receiving an M.A. at the University of Alabama, she has also studied at Duke; and while teaching in college she was mentor to Andrew Hudgins. Since 1979, her poetry and fiction have appeared in important periodicals and her drama has won regional prizes. With all of these works, she has consistently won awards that bring national recognition. *The Christmas Wife*, her first collection of short stories, and the novel *More Than Seven Watchmen* were published in 1985. The novel was a Literary Guild Selection, following the same designation for her second novel, *For the Glory of God*, in 1958. The University of Illinois Press is also repeating its choice of her short stories for a second collection, entitled *Water into Wine*, to be published this year. But Norris's appeal is not just to academics and critics; her audience constantly grows wider, as evidenced by media interest in "The Christmas Wife." A

dramatization of the short story starring Jason Robards and Julie Harris will be broadcast this fall.

The interview below was generated through a series of conversations in Norris's home in Montgomery, Alabama, in the summer of 1987. At that time we had a number of news-breaking items to start us talking: the television production, the publication of a second story collection, and the winning of her second Andrew Lytle Award.



Courtesy of Paul Robertson.

ECN: I'm excited about having an important writer in our midst, but I'm more interested in how you feel about it.

HN: I'm not important, but ambitious to get better; and I have a few more years left to improve. I still feel that everything I write is an experiment.

ECN: What do you dislike most about the whole process, from start to finish?

HN: The marketing aspect. I don't mean rejection slips. I don't mind being rejected. One might as well quit if he can't stand the rejection.

ECN: Which part do you like best?

HN: The planning of the story is the most exciting part; you don't even have to write to enjoy that pleasure. The first version of a story is amorphous anyway. The real fun is in revising, in making something better. Eudora Welty has talked about this in the same way. When you reach a certain stage in the story's development, especially in longer works, like the novel, the story acts as a magnet, drawing things toward it. What you see or read, you put in; and interestingly enough, the story opens up and makes a place for what you've found. This seems to be inevitable.

ECN: Do you consider this way of working free will or necessity? Is it foreordained?

HN: The excitement is in the fact that you don't know where it comes from.

ECN: Are you saying that something from the outside is involved, something beyond the self?

HN: When things are going well, it seems to be like that. You feel that you are penetrating some veil in making your effort; you are trying to know more than you know. An actor once explained to me how an actor can go over some kind of threshold in becoming the character he plays. The actor is vulnerable when this happens, and the other actors know it; they give him room to follow this lead. Writers reach a similar threshold. It's as if you are pushing very hard against some barrier. You begin to know more than you know, but you don't know how you know it.

ECN: This must be what happens with your male characters. The men I know find it amazing how much you know about men, how convincing your characterizations of men are. This is especially interesting in your characters who are clergymen, as in *More Than Seven Watchmen.*

HN: Empathy is essential for any writer: think of Keats, who

became the bird singing, and his concept of negative capability. Shakespeare, it goes without saying, was the best at this. I remember talking about this with a friend of mine at the University; he was from my hometown, studying writing too, going to be a reporter. He said that he wanted to experience everything. But I told him he couldn't. To return to your question, everybody has always said that women writers "can't do men." My high school English teacher, a very respected man, told us that. He was always referring to "lady novelists" in a kind of condescending way. People forget that many male writers can't do women either. Look at Becky Sharp, for example. For years the critics were not aware of that failing because the critics were men. By the way, originally all my protagonists were men.

ECN: Why?

HN: Protagonists had to be men if they were to be taken seriously. Men have generally been held in higher esteem, especially in terms of undergoing change. Men could undergo a change as a protagonist because they were considered capable of holding on to their convictions, while women were too changeable already. They were not taken seriously, even by other women. I chose male protagonists because I wanted to write about someone who would be taken seriously.

ECN: It must be awfully difficult to learn what it is like to be a man.

HN: Of course it takes effort, but you have to do something that takes effort. Why repeat something easy? Effort is what produces art. Lately, of course, women are considered acceptable as protagonists. There is a new understanding of women that fosters their acceptance as protagonists. Now I make a deliberate effort to use women as characters, and I work on my portrayal of women.

ECN: How did you get started as a writer?

HN: At home through the influence of my parents, who were very admiring of the creative process. So much so that they read *Les Misérables* on their honeymoon in the Blue Ridge Mountains. They encouraged me. I grew up before television; we had no artificial entertainment. We all wrote. We wrote plays and operettas and performed them; we made fudge and sold it. We improvised our own entertainment with our friends. And we were not the only ones in the neighborhood doing this. [Norris is referring to Vaughan Road in Montgomery, a heavily populated area which was once her father's farm.] One family we knew had seven children, all of

whom wrote novels. I can still picture them, clustered around the bed of their mother, who was an invalid, reading their novels to her. Listening to them seems to have sapped her vitals. We would gather after school and on Saturdays and read our novels to each other in the ditch. A friend of mine spent her time in study hall writing her novel, which she read to us for days on end. It was the story of a girl who had a baby. Before she finished the story, someone told her that her novel would never work: the girl in the novel couldn't have a baby because she didn't have a husband. My friend stopped writing and never finished her story. Kids today do drugs; we did novels, and I never kicked the habit.

ECN: When did you write your first novel?

HN: Age nine. I named it "The Milton Twins" after the Bobbsey Twins series. My parents liked mystery novels, and I wrote my first mystery novel at age twelve.

ECN: You were introduced early, then, to the literary as well as the oral tradition. In reading your stories, however, I notice that the rural South shows up in your dialogue. You do have characters who are not educated the way you were.

HN: That dialogue is difficult for me. First of all, because the rhythm, the cadence of every sentence, is important to me. This cadence is what I have to have right. I hear it all as well as look at it on the page. Another difficulty comes out of my experience growing up: I didn't hear the kind of banal, ungrammatical—what some people call "redneck" speech patterns. In a story like "The Quarry," for example, I have difficulty with the characters' voices. "The Christmas Wife" was such a relief, when I could work more naturally with the man's dialogue and his thoughts.

ECN: It must have been the same with the clergymen in *More Than Seven Watchmen* and *For the Glory of God*. Does this seem to be the only way publishers will accept the introduction of God or a religious dimension of life?

HN: It's a curious problem. The trades will not accept clergymen except for the ones who fall. Publishers seem to have to categorize audiences ahead of time, to aim at specific markets and thereby to set limits in advance. I know people whose lives include church, thinking about God, praying, don't you? But even the writers whom I've met at Yaddo and MacDowell ask me about that part of my work. Once, when a young composer friend was struggling over a difficult decision in her career, she asked me for help. When I

suggested that she pray about it, everyone was horrified. Some have even asked me with great curiosity, "Helen, do you really pray?"

ECN: What is it like at the writers' colonies?

HN: The isolation, which is the reason you go, is the most overwhelming aspect of the experience.

ECN: Do you have a sense there of the writers who preceded you?

HN: I've stayed in West House at Yaddo, the same house where Carson McCullers stayed, and in the very same room where Katherine Anne Porter worked.

ECN: Any sense of someone looking over your shoulder? Any voices echoing?

HN: Only in a trivial sense, with trivial topics. I have imagined some of the scenes that we've read about in the biographies occurring there [referring to scenes from Yaddo in the biography of McCullers, among others]. When I'm working, scenes flash into my mind, anyway; but they are not always scenes I can use in the piece I'm working on at the time. Another good part of the experience at the colonies is being able to talk with other writers about what they are working on.

ECN: This must be the best place to do that kind of talking. Could you do much of it in academic settings?

HN: Not really. Academic people have objected to such things as my having written a novel instead of the regular master's thesis.

ECN: Was this for an M.F.A.?

HN: No. I hadn't even heard of an M.F.A. until several years ago. This procedure was what Hudson Strode wanted and convinced the other professors to do. Although I had already completed the full program for the degree, mine was the first to be so used. It was his idea, not mine. Years later, when I applied at Duke, friends told me that my novel-thesis would work against me. This kind of attitude surfaces in academic settings. I knew one professor with mean teeth who would refer from time to time to my "little novel." To me, academics are on the outside looking in, unless they also write.

ECN: Since you've left the academic world, I'm sure your working habits have changed. When do you write now?

HN: Whenever I want to. I also have a house, a yard, friends, and many other kinds of activities. If I were a genius, I would sacrifice them for my writing, but I'm not. I put friends first.

I don't give up things for the writing, but I do give it a lot of time. I get up and write in the middle of the night as well as in the daytime. At night the arresting images appear. In the morning I'm fresher, using the logical part of the brain. In the morning I can stitch the scenes together like a quilt.

ECN: Do you follow regular patterns during the day?

HN: Not unless I'm at a writers' colony; then I write all day every day. Interruptions at home are okay, but I begin to feel guilty if I'm not writing.

ECN: What about reading? As teachers, we've based much of our lives on reading; but isn't there a time when reading isn't enough?

HN: Reading can satisfy the imaginative urge at some point in one's life, for example when my children were little. Children don't like it when you devote your time to writing instead of to them. I've talked about this with the women at Yaddo.

ECN: But children can't stand it even when you're on the telephone.

HN: Or even when you're digging in the garden, when you're doing anything creative. Women are so timed. There are very few years when they can have it all. I've always been a writer, but not a full-time one when my children were at home. I started writing again when my children were in school. Eighteen years after my first novel was published—graduation, publication, and marriage happened all at once for me—I published a second. And then twenty-eight years later, two of my books came out in the same week.

ECN: So the difference is that you kept writing, although not always publishing.

HN: When I got back into it in 1979, it made me feel better—to push words around. I started writing poetry first because I needed to learn condensation. Short stories were easier after that. I follow a classic pattern in my stories: they all have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and include a climax. I write about people and important issues in their lives, about people waking up. As I said earlier, when I write I hear the words; sound is essential. If I can't write with the rhythm I want, I'd rather not be published. I'm talking about not only rhythm, but sounds of vowels, of trochees, monosyllables, and caesuras. This is not a rational process: the symbolism, imagery, refrains, the lyric or musical quality is beyond that. This effect is involved with the passion in my characters' lives. [Norris has written about this for her publishers: "I

intend my stories, as opposed to a current bloodless look at the world, to be full of passion in its radical sense."] I'm not talking about eroticism.

ECN: I want to ask about publishing in light of what you've said about the marketing aspect. Academic presses have gotten a lot of publicity lately for taking on creative works like yours that the big commercial publishers are afraid of [Norris and *The Christmas Wife* were mentioned in a *New York Times Book Review* article in summer of 1987, as an example of success in academic publishing].

HN: Zondervan is known, of course, for religious publications, not novels like mine. I thought *Watchmen* would have made a good Christmas story for a commercial magazine, but it turned out better as a novel. The commercial houses relegated it to the religious area. [The novel won the 1986 Christian Book Association's Gold Medallion.] Other writers also ask about my publishers. At Yaddo, everybody said, "Zondervan?"; and at the PEN/Faulkner ceremony people asked if I like my publisher [referring to the University of Illinois Press]. And of course I said yes. This nomination was the first time a university press had gained such access to this kind of market.

ECN: Besides publishers and markets, I'm still interested in the voices—what you hear in your head as you write, how you create different voices in your stories.

HN: This goes back to my interest in cadence. Prose has to be heard, too. Young people are not necessarily aware of this because so many of them have a hearing problem from listening to all the loud music. The dialogue has to be something I hear. I don't normally express myself the way many of my characters do. I've tried to remember some of the voices from my childhood in order to accomplish this. I can recall a certain kind of circumlocution. Once, when a man who worked for my father came to our house to ask for help—his truck was stalled, something like that—I remember his earnest plea for help: "I'm a little boy lost in the tall grass."

ECN: There's a great deal of sensitivity in your handling of these characters, no condescension. I'm thinking right now of "Money Man."

HN: Some people have found that story repulsive.

ECN: I can't imagine why. It's not grotesque, if that's what they mean. It could have been grotesque, or sentimental; but it has that combination of passion and restraint, that sweet

cleansing pain that wakes your reader up. Bausch's "courage and wit."

HN: With a story like that you have to pinch yourself in because the central character is a little retarded. Establishing the narrative voice is more difficult in that case. You need a particular narrative voice for each story; the earlier you establish it, the better. This is one place where the writer establishes power. He has to anesthetize the critical faculty for the time being. People are moved through emotions, not intellect.

ECN: This makes me wonder who your favorite writers are. I know you have a wide range of interests, but what are your preferences now?

HN: I've always preferred the older writers: Turgenev, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and especially Chekhov. For sheer enjoyment, I pick up a novel by Trollope; and I like Thomas Mann.

ECN: What is something you've learned about writing from the great Russians you've mentioned?

HN: If I have to pin it down, one thing is that you understand life better after writing. For me, it's a chance to make something out of whole cloth.

ECN: Would you call it a process of discovery?

HN: Yes, as Gide talks about first getting a sense of "loving bewilderment." Writing is always an adventure, and it's never the same.

ECN: This helps me understand how you can portray such a wide range of experience, including pure humor as well as wit and irony.

HN: Is irony a dimension of life, a rhetorical technique, or a perspective?

ECN: Whatever it is, in your stories it's related to that quick, subtle turn you make before the reader catches on to what you are doing: your wit pulls you—and us—back before you get into something that could be too pathetic or emotional. It's kind of Chaplinesque to me.

HN: Of course, "One Day in the Life of a Born-Again Loser" is a funny story, but it's almost a tragedy.

ECN: Even though you use realistic details, many of your characters seem to live in a distant world. The emotional context, though, is always recognizable. Is it the Jungian symbols that create this effect?

HN: I have a story containing a television set. I do use details of modern life. In "Starwood" the editors took out a reference to

Viet Nam. I think it had something to do with the inconsistency with people riding trains. In "The Quarry" a woman digs a hole and performs a ritual, and the quarry itself is probably Jungian.

ECN: Don't forget the well in "The Singing Well."

HN: Those symbols—the caves, for instance, in "Starwood"—help me to get breadth and depth without too many words. But my family and friends often use them to try to figure me out. My son, who was an English major at Sewanee, has pointed them out to me.

ECN: How have the homefolks reacted to your success?

HN: The promise of television makes everybody sit up and take notice. People really think writers are very odd people. They may be right. I got more publicity when I was accidentally locked in the Post Office than I have ever had. That story made the front page, perhaps because of my letter about it.

ECN: Is this "Why I Live at the P.O."?

HN: Almost. People who have never read my stories remember the newspaper's coverage of the incident. Because it happened during the Iran hostage crisis, I called myself a "hostage" of the Post Office.

ECN: Are writers odd people, a la *The Wound and the Bow*?

HN: Well, if you were utterly happy, you wouldn't find it necessary to write. Some kind of divine discontent is necessary; writing may be a way of making oneself content. On a certain level, one writes to make himself feel better. I feel guilty about not writing, but I am not driven. You constantly measure your production against what you think it should be. I once took up watercoloring. It was therapy and great fun, but I had nothing there to live up to.

ECN: You have said that academic life is something you had to overcome. In what way?

HN: I'm thinking about the dominance of rules. This is the kind of influence that has to be resisted. An interest such as mine, literary criticism, can be intimidating. On the other hand, there are academic habits like overpunctuating sentences. I didn't write during my years as a teacher, just as I didn't when my kids were small. Academic papers are fun to write, but they use only one side of the brain. I have an academic side, but it's not my deepest side.

ECN: Where and how do you position yourself as an artist?

HN: An artist is someone who intends art, as opposed to a craftsman who can achieve money and recognition. This

means you never arrive: you are out there alone, judging yourself harder than others do. You know there's a razor's edge between divinity and folly and that you can fall off onto the folly side any time. When you have other motives [than intending art], you don't have this problem.

ECN: How do you feel now about this stage of your life and achievement?

HN: My physical health is good, my emotions sound. All my senses are sharpened; they are true perceptors. I use all five of them in writing: smell and taste particularly. If I can think about it, I can smell it. You have to incarnate what you're writing about, and you can't use ways you've used before. Something fresh from the writer calls forth a fresh response from the reader.

ECN: Where do you get ideas for stories?

HN: Conversations. Conversations with everybody from my friends at the writers' colonies to the young man sitting by me on the plane coming home. I learned about woodcarving from the men who show their work at the craft shows here and from the father of another writer. A friend laughed at my reference to the cormorants chewing up my typewriter ribbon and began to set me straight on cormorants. Then I started research on them for my story ["The Cormorants," in the forthcoming collection]. A young man who was what they call a "ground pounder" in Viet Nam told me what it was like to be there. The Jamesian concept of the "germ" of a story is a good description of what happens. The germ of "Water into Wine" was an experience with a door-to-door salesman who tried to convince me to buy a water-filtering system. People will talk to me—and I listen.