# Interview with Shirley Ann Grau

*Mickey Pearlman*

Shirley Ann Grau, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1965 for *The Keepers of the House* (1964) comes from "a loosely-structured family of eccentrics if there ever was one" who were "splendid [but] forgot they had children for long periods of time. Everybody was so interested in whatever they were doing" that "they had very little time to organize others. When they remembered us, they *were* very concerned about it. Everybody was expected to go their own way [but] we were not expected to *do* anything at all. So you either did, or didn't. In either case, [it was] your problem. They'd say, 'that's very nice, dear.' It was sort of monumental indifference. I don't remember anything traumatic. Nothing seems to have happened."

Grau, who graduated from Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University, lives now, as she has from early childhood, in New Orleans, where she raised four children [with James Feibleman, a writer and professor of philosophy at Tulane, now deceased] who "have all come out different." They are "an amazing variety" who range from "extremely conservative to extremely liberal." Two are married and one of the unmarried children "will marry at the first twinge of arthritis. When he gets up [one morning] and there is a twinge, he will marry the next 'girl.'" She said with some seriousness that "it's very nice to begin to see them go away," that children are "wearying... one grows tired." The fact that they get married and leave home "is one of the few good arrangements in nature's plan." In any case, she said philosophically, children follow "their own genetic imperative," you can't "really influence [the end result] too much" since "there are billions of possible [genetic] combinations. Some throw up physical flaws, [some throw up] mental or moral flaws; they are now checking the genetic material of murderers... it works or not," and that "when you think of the number of genetic possibilities and possible combinations, it makes a lot of

sense" that her children "are just about as varied a lot as you can have."

Grau reminisced fondly about living in the French Quarter during the early 1950s in an apartment where "one wall was black and there was one kind of purply wall" in the days "when it was a small town... not the Quarter you see now" and "you could have a very comfortable apartment behind a big courtyard and hear nothing except cats climbing the roofs at night." Now it is "a very different place" with "such an obvious dark side, a drug-laden and prostitution-laden side; it bothers me when you see a young girl with eyes running, nose running, standing on a street corner, obviously waiting for a 'buy.' When you see young boys and their pimps... working the streets, it's obvious and depressing" and there is "such a contrast between the lovely architecture and the incredible sordidness of the people walking around the streets.... Too bad."

*Nine Women* (1985), Grau's latest work, is a collection of complex and unusually disturbing stories about women marooned in the often muddy waters of emotional crisis. This collection is her first published work since *Evidence of Love* in 1977 and is markedly different in tone and subject from earlier novels like *The Hard Blue Sky* (1958), *The House on Coliseum Street* (1961), *The Condor Passes* (1971) and *The Wind Shifting West* (1973). The lead story, called "The Beginning," which she says is "a basically simple, ordinary story [about] a hooker and her child," a "variance on a fairy tale," will be incorporated into a novel which she is writing now.

Grau seemed reluctant to discuss her work in any detail; she said, "If I look at people abstractly at all, which I don't, [I would say] it's a never-ending parade of eccentricities and amusement... a grab bag of possibilities, [and that people] are remarkably good at passing blame." What is important in her work "is whatever the reader sees, not what the writer thinks he [sic] puts in it," that "whatever you see in a story is there." That is the "wonderful thing about words, their overtones, and the meanings they drag along with them." The finished product is "sort of an enormous Rorschach blob [that] everyone reads differently. Words are symbols, and all the associations they carry can't be controlled. They can only *approximately* be controlled and the rest, who knows?" But the stories do seem to have in common a sense of the often ungathered threads of a middle-aged woman's life, which one somehow expects to be more neatly braided or arranged. There is a haunting quality here which has to do with the unfinished scenario of experience, the unresolved complications of fluctuating memory, and the familiar insight that the character (or

the reader) does not understand the reality of her own experience as well as she might have expected to. Grau's women seem caught in that amorphous middle place between the initiation of events and their resolution. In "Hunter," for instance, the heroine, Nancy Martenson, for whom "time came and went in a pattern of overhead florescent [sic] tubes," (26) and who finds herself the sole survivor of an airplane crash in which her husband and daughters have perished, spends the insurance money on cross-country flights, awaiting her own death in the statistically inevitable plane crash. In "Letting Go," Mary Margaret, the daughter of ardent but uncharitable and unloving Catholics whose lives are demarcated by empty rites and rituals, is "running with fear from something she didn't know, something that might not have been there, something that might even have loved her"(61). "Housekeeping" has a similar message: Nothing is satisfied, or in place, and one waits for the ghostlike past to be jettisoned in favor of the present. "Widow's Walk" is an open-ended story of a woman, Myra Rowland, who is alone, without answers, entrenched in the boring patterns of the advantaged, country club life which she shared with her now-dead husband. What underscores this story is the sense many woman have, in retrospect, of having been too young and unknowing for the youthful, demanding years of marriage and childbearing, and too aware but disillusioned for the later, less stressful, more disgruntled years. It is the familiar story of many women, who experience themselves as out of time and place, but who understand the mechanisms of daily experience, and for whom the frustration and emotional ennui remain daily irritants.

Grau, whose first published work was a collection of short stories called *The Black Prince and Other Stories* (1955), said that, in her opinion, "very few courses on the short story are taught in colleges but collections of short stories are selling like mad." There is "a big difference between what teachers choose to teach and [what] readers choose to read, and there is not much correlation." She said that she "puzzles over the effect that teaching has on reading habits" in later years. "You wonder how many literate people go back and re-read *Hamlet*, [which they] were assigned in college" since most "students leave school actively disliking the printed word and it takes eight years to get over four years of college."

We talked at some length about a book on mother-daughter relationships that I was working on, and she told me about "a meeting [in New Orleans] a couple of years ago [which featured] mother-daughter pairs" and to which she took her own daughter,

who is a lawyer. Her opinion is "that some people are just so hooked into eternal self-analysis . . . they think about themselves incredibly, and they are ALL ALIKE! You'd think if you wasted that much time on yourself, you'd come up with something different!" This conference convinced her that "this [kind of] introspection is encouraged by analysts, and magazine articles" and "what bothers me is not that [some people] are so self-concerned, but that they are so basically dull-as-soap and so very, very boring." One daughter, whose mother "had had ten or twelve children," made them "kneel down every morning to say the rosary [and] with no wiggling. If they wiggled, they had to start all over again, which strikes *me* as barbaric and cruel. I'm not sure that, deep down in the daughter's mind . . . she didn't think it was barbaric too, but she didn't tell this story as a complaint. She said, 'I was raised very strictly.' This was an example of strictness. A few things like that just curl your hair. After all, the woman was thirty-five."

This conversation seemed particularly revealing because the encoded message suggests that few conflicts are ever totally resolved, and that painful experience continues to reverberate in seemingly innocuous, but powerful moments, much like those depicted in *Nine Women*. None of the conflicts described there are resolved and that is, perhaps, related to their author's statement that "there are so many irritations in the world that I try to limit squabbles" and that "I tend to avoid anything labeled 'feminist' [because] it tends to be awfully strident." It seems to me that these are the words of a writer who has a particularly pragmatic, practical, and unsentimental view of the world: that people's lives are "the most amusing jumble of things," and that there is, in spite of her best fictional efforts, very little explanation for, comprehension about, or resolution of, that "jumble of things" to be found. For every writer, however, there is the recognition, and the description, of that "jumble," and at that, Shirley Ann Grau has been doing an exemplary job for over thirty years. ❧