

“Working Out of the World”: An Interview with Susan Starr Richards

by Roy Scheele



Susan Starr Richards
Photo courtesy of
Mary Ann Taylor-Hall

Susan Starr Richards was born in Winter Park, Florida and grew up in that state. She has a BA from the University of Florida and an MA from the University of Washington. She taught for ten years at the University of Kentucky and has spent “the rest of my life raising racehorses and writing.” She and her husband Dick currently live in the country near Sadieville, Kentucky.

Richards has been a National Endowment for the Arts Fellow in Fiction and has received a Kentucky Arts Council fellowship. Most recently she won the Woodford Reserve Prize in Kentucky Literature.

Her stories have appeared in such distinguished journals as *The Kenyon Review*, *The Sewanee Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *The Southern Review*. They have been anthologized in *Prize Stories: The O’Henry Awards* and in *New Stories from the South: The Year’s Best*. In 1993, she won the *Thoroughbred Times* National Fiction Prize.

Her *Horse Fables* (Larkspur Press, 1987) has had several printings. In 2005, the same press will publish *The Life Horse*, a book of poems, and a collection of short stories, *The Hanging in the Foaling Barn*, will appear from Sarabande Books in 2006. Richards has also completed a novel, *In the Chapel of Carnal Love*.

The following conversation took place at Doane College in Crete, Nebraska on October 21, 2004.

Scheele: What need in the writer does the desire to tell a story arise from, would you say?

Richards: It almost seems like a need in itself. It’s not that you’re trying to persuade anyone of anything, or make a point, or even reveal yourself in any way. I think some people just need to tell stories. I never thought of it as anything *but* that. I suppose if

you’re writing a story of your own, sometimes there’s a peculiar kind of need, but I don’t usually write that way. I write almost no autobiographical stories. So I suppose it’s the old primal need, sitting around the campfire in the dark telling the story to keep back the dark, or to get out there into it and see what it is.

Scheele: *You say that you don’t usually write stories from an autobiographical point of view. Where do your stories come from, generally?*

Richards: Well, sometimes you just hear something and you say, Oh, there’s a story. And usually it’s just one detail that gets you going. Or there’s something that somebody does that’s so odd you want to know why they did that. You can’t imagine, really, why they did that, and so you want to figure it out. Those are the stories that come from incidents that you’ve heard about.

Scheele: *I’d like to turn my earlier question around. From the reader’s point of view, what need or needs does a story satisfy?*

Richards: From the *reader’s* point of view . . . Well, as a reader myself I absolutely love story. It satisfies something in me that nothing else does. And by that I mean a real story—not what people just call “fiction,” but something that’s pulling you along, where there’s an action to be completed in some sense. I don’t watch movies very much, but what catches me, even in the worst movie, is the story. I think that there is some native attraction to story in human beings. And of course there are lots of things going on in a story. There’s that ordering sense of life, that sense that there are pieces of life that have their own wholeness. My idea of what a *good* story is comes a lot, as I think it does with everyone, out of my own idea of life, which is that actions have consequences and that what people do means something—sometimes in the smallest ways and the smallest gestures, and always in the large, dramatic ways—and I believe that you should be aware of those meanings as you live your own life.

I see a lot of people (and this includes a lot of writers) who will make gestures or do things or say things without ever seeming to understand that those things have a significance, and who just cross them off afterwards as if they didn’t mean anything. What I like about story is, if it’s written right something *does* happen, and you can’t deny it, and you know what it means at the time, if the story’s all there. I don’t mean to be moralistic about it, but I think that if you can look at your own life as if you were a fiction writer, it gives you a big step back, and you can know, sometimes, what you need to do or what you need not to do, because you see yourself from that little distance of a story, and it clarifies everything for you.

Scheele: *It gives you that little bit of detachment that you need.*

Richards: Yes. I mean, I make a habit of that. Sometimes I’ll say, If I were in a story—probably it’s not that conscious—but I step back and think, Why did I do that? What did that mean? And it’s usually when you’re in a moment of uneasiness with yourself. So that paradigm of story, with its progress toward an end, I think is essential to our self-knowledge. Though in a story you’re usually not studying yourself but someone else, someone else’s experience, there’s often a revelation for you in it too—if the story’s done right and if you’re available to that, if you’re capable of that—yourself as a reader.

Scheele: *That reminds me of what Frost once said: “No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”*

Richards: Yeah, that’s right. Well, you know, it’s the shock of recognition. It’s not a shock ending—it’s the shock of recognition. That’s what you’re looking for. And it’s recognition both ways—for the reader and the writer.

Scheele: *Writing is a lonely craft, and the writer needs feedback and honest affirmation from time to time. I’m wondering what sorts of feedback you’ve gotten during your career. For example, did you ever go to a writers’ conference or join a writers’ group?*

Richards: No. I was in a class with [Andrew] Lytle at the University of Florida, but I haven’t done anything like that since then. I have what I call my “art group,” which is seven of us—six other women and me—and we’re all different kinds of artists. There’s a musician, a sculptor, a painter, a poet, two fiction writers, and another visual artist. We just draw words out of a hat and do something every three weeks. It’s very playful, and often those of us who are writers will wind up singing, and those of us who are artists will wind up writing. A lot of it is kind of silly, but we do provide each other with an audience that’s mostly entertained by what we’re doing. The more serious the work is, the more seriously we take it. So I do have that, and that’s been very helpful to me. That’s been going for about ten, twelve years now. But I never went to a workshop or writers’ conference for help with my work.

I think that Lytle gave me such a grounding in fiction that I felt I had what I needed that way. Dick [Richards’s husband] was in that class with me. He’s an excellent critic, and we have a common terminology, so that I rely on him a lot. What he’s good for is not line editing or anything like that that my writer friends can do, but he can tell me whether I’ve done it or not—either it works or it doesn’t, and he can tell me why. I don’t know how many people are so lucky, to have an in-house critic who’s very enthusiastic about your work. But probably that’s one reason I haven’t sought out other sources so much—because I haven’t needed to.

Scheele: *It’s very difficult to know whether you’ve done it or not, isn’t it? It’s so hard to get outside yourself.*

Richards: Oh, yes, yes, I never know. I know in the moment, I think. There’s that sort of flash, or sometimes you laugh out loud when you get it done, but then afterwards I’m never sure. Like that story that you like [“The Hanging in the Foaling Barn”]—I didn’t think it was any good when I first read it. And then Dick told me it was good, and I didn’t even believe him, I guess partly because I’d written it so fast, and I’m not used to doing that. But also I had no sense that I had really done anything at all. I wasn’t sure it was a good story. I wasn’t sure it was even a *story*. So, yeah, you do need someone, I think, to answer that basic question of whether it works or not.

I have a dear friend, Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, who lives down the road from me and who has published a really good novel, *Come and Go, Molly Snow*. She was in Lytle’s class with me, and we read each other’s manuscripts. Again, we have the common lingo, and we can work things out with each other. She helps me with things that Dick is not interested in doing. She can tell me, “I don’t think this character would do that,” and it’s good to have somebody who can help you with those judgments. But with fiction especially, it seems to me that, because you’re often inventing a

whole world, and people who are not *you*, mostly, you really do need someone else to react to the human elements in the story. You might have just got it wrong, what a character would do.

Scheele: *You've mentioned Andrew Lytle several times. When did you study with him?*

Richards: Let's see: I graduated in '59, so the last few years I was there—'57, '58, '59.

Scheele: *Did you have a number of classes with him, or was he more of a mentor?*

Richards: He had two basic classes, and if you graduated from the first class you went into his other class, which had a lot of graduate students in it, and people just stayed in there for years. Anybody could come, and old students would come back and participate in the class, so sometimes there'd be quite a lot of people there. But there were always a few new ones feeding into it from the lower level of that class.

I have to say now that I understand that part of my trouble when I was beginning as a writer was that it was a fairly sexist environment. The kinds of experiences that were valued for subject matter were mostly male experiences, like hunting and fishing. Of course I do a little of that myself, but that wasn't all I wanted to write about. But Lytle was wonderful. He was a great critic. His virtue was that he could tell you what you wanted to do even if you hadn't got it done yet; he could see into the story, its potential, further than you yourself could. But the times, and the atmosphere, and the “Southern boy” world—that's what I was thrown into, and in a way that's a kind of brutal world for a woman. Some of your sensibilities are ridiculed; you're afraid to have them.

Scheele: *How important has the work of Katherine Anne Porter been to you?*

Richards: I do love Katherine Anne Porter . . . how'd you figure that out? I especially love that short novel *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*; that's one of my favorite things. She was a good influence. She gave me a sense of the range of what a woman can do, even coming out of that world. And she's a great short story writer. That story she wrote called “He”—that's a killer story.

Scheele: *That's just reduced to the absolute bedrock of experience.*

Richards: Yeah, it is. But I have to say that I could hardly read *Ship of Fools*. I think she just thought she had to write a novel, because the knock on women was that they couldn't write novels, that they could only write stories. And that did seem to be true for a while—though I don't know how they could overlook the Victorians. But I think either pressure from her publishers or just from her own idea of what you had to be—you know, prove your manhood—made her write that thing. But it did not represent her work.

Scheele: *And Eudora Welty?*

Richards: I love Welty. She's wonderful. She just knocks you dead every sentence.

She's not only a great story writer, she's a great *sentence* writer. Everything is verging on poetry, but she's moving right along, too; she doesn't waste anything at all. Her language is so unconscious, you know, in the sense that you say a ballplayer's "unconscious." It's just natural, and deadly on. So yeah, she's one of my favorites.

Scheele: *We've been talking about some enthusiasms of yours in terms of fiction writers, but whom would you consider to be an influence on your writing, at least early on?*

Richards: Direct influence? Oh, I'd say Lewis Carroll: *Alice in Wonderland*. It's funny how the things that you read early have so much to do with it. I don't mean in a literary way, exactly, but just, in *Alice in Wonderland*, that wonderful sense that anything can happen. That's one of the revelations about story—it's almost like what story is about—that sense, when you get into it, that you don't know what's going to happen—even you yourself, who are the writer.

Let's see if I can think of someone more "regular." Well, in the beginning I was influenced by Faulkner, like everybody who grows up in the South. What was it they used to say? "Got run over by the Oxford Express today." You try to write, you know, and it all comes out fake Faulkner. But that wasn't finally where I was. And it's funny, I can't read Faulkner anymore. I loved him so much; *Absalom, Absalom!* was one of the books that I was just astonished by. And I tried to read it again the other day, and I couldn't. I don't know whether that's the race business or not. He's still a genius, and I think I could read "A Rose for Emily" and his other stories again. But the element of race complicates Faulkner so much for us these days. Not that he was himself a racist for his time, but he writes about it, and that world he reflects is so hard to bear.

But, anyway, Faulkner was there as an influence. Let's see . . . I don't think I've had a whole lot of other literary influences.

Scheele: *No, I think you've gotten beyond any influences that you may have had; I don't feel the presence of anybody.*

Richards: You know, I think I'm more influenced by what I hear around me. Living in Kentucky, which is not where I grew up, though my grandparents did come from there, and that voice in Kentucky is very familiar to me, I think I'm more influenced by the kind of storytelling that goes on in the culture there than by any literary influence.

Oh, my favorite novel is still probably *The Odyssey*. I think it's a great *novel*; I read it that way, and I learn things from it still. And obviously, since I've written about the Arthurian legends, those have been an influence. I really like reading myth and legend more than I like reading most fiction—I mean for my own purposes, my writing purposes. You get kind of cannibalistic as you get older; you don't want to read anything that doesn't help *you* in some way. That's wrong, in a sense, because there are probably great things out there that I'm missing. But I'm very choosy at this point about what I read. And so, if there were influences, they were early, and I'm just working out of the world now.

Scheele: *Do you have a special place where you do your writing?*

Richards: Yes. Dick and I built me a shed up in the woods, where I have a view

of nothing but trees. I’m beyond the telephone. I have a wood stove and my word processor. If somebody drives up to the house, I never know it.

Scheele: *How far away are you from the house?*

Richards: Oh, maybe a hundred yards—something like that. I go up there every day. I take a walk in the woods before I write; there’s a regular circle I walk—it takes about twenty-five minutes—and then I go write.

Scheele: *When do you write—in the morning?*

Richards: Usually I write from 9 or 10 till about 2. I know people who get up early in the morning. I’ve tried that. Sometimes it’s a good idea, especially when you’re trying to get yourself going. But I’m a late sleeper. Since we don’t raise horses anymore, I sleep till I wake up, and then I go up to the shed and write. It’s a lovely life!

Scheele: *You wrote me this summer that you had been “bird-dogging a story for a month, not letting anything else in my mind.” Could you describe that process more fully? What goes on when you’re on the trail of a story?*

Richards: Well, it’s not that you give up living. I think it’s first of all that you exclude all other voices, and that includes television, radio, and all that. I don’t read much. I don’t read anybody else’s fiction. Sometimes I read a little poetry, but I’m not inclined to do that. I’m listening for the voice in my mind that is the voice of the story. Once it gets working in there I try to keep everything else away. I don’t get crazy about it, but there’s a general sense of being caught up in something all the time—something that’s yours, that you’re interested in and can’t give up on. Once you get to that point—I don’t want to use the word “mechanical”—but there is some sense of impetus in it that is a little like a bird dog, shifting back and forth, waiting for the scent, ready to freeze at any moment.

Scheele: *Located not far from your present hometown of Sadieville are the small Kentucky towns of Side View and Stamping Ground, and your stories refer to such local place names as Sorter Ridge, Russell Cave Road, and the Snyder farm. I think there’s a kind of poetry to such names, but it seems to me they go beyond local color and help to establish the authenticity of a scene or situation. Would you agree?*

Richards: Yes. I was thinking when I read “Miss Brown” yesterday [“The Murderer, the Pony, and Miss Brown to You,” a story that Richards had read and commented on at a public reading the day before] that I used that name Russell Cave Road. Nobody knows that name out here, and I almost changed it to “a local highway.” But I decided not to change it, because I like Russell Cave Road better, and I figured people could extrapolate.

Scheele: *In general terms, how do you see the relation between character and place?*

Richards: Well, they’re almost the same thing, aren’t they? Henry James said that in fiction landscape *is* character. And that seems true to me, because you’ve got

the place, and you've got the people seeing it, not to mention the fact that, especially in the kind of stories I'm writing these days, the people and the place are all mixed up—it's hard for them to distinguish themselves from their place. I think they're essential to each other; you almost can't talk about one without the other. Obviously I have a great attachment to my place, and to the natural world, and that shows up in most of my writing, one way or another.

Scheele: *One thing that strikes me is the stylistic variety of your stories. No two of them seem alike. This suggests that you develop each story on its own terms, not according to some preconception or formula. Is this variety something that you consciously strive for?*

Richards: Not consciously, so much. But it's like my Muse is one of those bad nightclub singers who always used to introduce the next number by saying, "And now, for something completely different!" I mean, whatever I just did, I don't want to do anymore. So I don't do it consciously, but I will find myself, after I write a nice country story based on the land, wanting to write romance or something like that. I just let myself do that; I write whatever I want to. I obviously *need* to do a lot of different kinds of things, and I'm very happy, once I put something aside, to look around and find something that seems, at the moment, exotic. I think my stories do fall into categories by now—there are a certain number of this kind and a certain number of that kind—but I always want to wander waywardly from one sort to another.

Scheele: *Tell me something about your love of horses. When did it begin, and how did it develop?*

Richards: We moved to Kentucky when I was 23, when I took a job at the University of Kentucky. Now the truth is, I didn't have a horse when I was young. We didn't have enough money to have a horse. But a friend of mine did, and I did ride her horse sometimes. We rode double, and sometimes triple, on her old quarter horse named Bosco. So I loved them from the beginning. And then when we got to Kentucky . . . it was odd, because I grew up near the water, near the ocean and on a lake, in Florida, and I felt really landlocked when we moved. But somehow the horses came to seem like the sea to me—one came in the place of the other. I don't think the land just in itself would have functioned that way; but when you put the country, which I do love, and the force of the horses in it . . . It was like it filled that hole that I'd felt in my life since I had to give up the water, essentially—there are lakes and creeks in Kentucky but nothing like what I was used to, whereas in Florida the water is always looking back at you, and speaking to you, as water does. In Kentucky it was so quiet and solid. And I guess just the notion of the horses, and the life in them, all that mixed up with the land, just gave me something that I really needed to have in my life.

Scheele: *Have Sherwood Anderson's great stories about horses—here I'm thinking of "I'm a Fool," "I Want to Know Why," and "The Man Who Became a Woman"—been in your mind at all as you've written about horses?*

Richards: Well, I like those stories. "I'm a Fool" is one of my favorite stories; I like that one a lot. And I'm interested in that story not so much because of the horses but because of the way he does the point of view. I think that's a wonderful use of the first person.

Scheele: *That naïve speaker . . .*

Richards: The innocent eye—yeah. So I like Anderson, but we don’t have the same vision, really.

Scheele: *Your chapbook Horse Fables (Larkspur Press, 1987) has been popular enough to have several printings. Was it easy or difficult to write those fables?*

Richards: I wrote those in one morning. Of course they came out of twenty years of listening to horses talk to each other, and to me, so it wasn’t as fast as it seems—but I did write them all in one morning. I remember I came up to the house and showed them to Dick and to somebody else—and that somebody thought they were like children’s stories, and I was a little confused by that. I could see why they thought that, but they weren’t children’s stories.

Scheele: *That may tie in to my next question. Do you think readers are naturally drawn to the simpler forms of fiction such as fables, parables, and tall tales? Maybe there was a confusion there with one of those forms.*

Richards: That might be it, yeah, thinking that they were for children because they’re simple forms. I don’t know, I hope so; *I’m* drawn to them. I think not parables so much, because that seems to edge over into not just a story . . .

Scheele: *It becomes a story with an agenda.*

Richards: Right. And I don’t like stories with agendas. But I like tall tales, and I’ve always thought that “The Hanging in the Foaling Barn” approaches that. It’s closer to the tall tale than anything else that I’ve written.

Scheele: *Speaking of “The Hanging in the Foaling Barn,” how did that story come about?*

Richards: It started out as a long, rather depressing story about an actual murder. I think I got the idea for it—I can’t remember this very clearly—but I think there was a story I overheard in a store called The Tack Room, where you go to buy bridles and saddles and things like that. I think there was the germ of an idea in something I overheard there. Then I wrote this story. It was thirty pages long, and it wasn’t very good.

I was thinking about this recently, how this story shows that you shouldn’t publish too soon. I’d sent off a collection at that point, and I put that story in there. It hadn’t been published in a magazine; I hadn’t sent it anywhere. But I was trying to fill in, because I didn’t have quite enough stories. Southern Illinois [Press], which used to have a series, almost took that collection. And if they had, the story would have been published that way, and I never would have written it as it is now. So it’s like we say in the horse business, “You never know where your luck’s coming from.” The horse that doesn’t get sold at the sale, that you thought you were going to get a lot of money for, but you have to take it home, and then it runs for you? That was what that story was like.

Scheele: *The story's about Maurice, the hired man who each year in foaling season threatens/attempts suicide in various ludicrous ways, and his boss Luther, who is exasperated but patient with him. The story concludes, however, with a beautiful passage about a newborn foal which confirms the dignity and mystery of life. Did you have the idea for that ending right away, or did you have to struggle to find it?*

Richards: I went right to it. That story—when I actually wrote it as the story it is—I wrote in maybe two days. So, no, I wasn't struggling for an ending. But I didn't know that was what it was going toward. I knew about the scene in the loft, but they're up there waiting for this mare to foal, so I had to figure out . . . I don't think I even figured it out; it's just what happens in that situation they were in. So it's not just dramatically right; it's what *would* happen.

Scheele: *Are Luther and Maurice composite characters, or are they based on particular individuals?*

Richards: I'd say they're composites, though I don't think of them that way anymore. There's a certain sort of humor, not just in Kentucky horse people but in Kentucky people in general, that Luther kind of represents—that hard reality and exaggeration. And Maurice—I guess there was an actual night watchman that he might have started out being, but he was pretty much invented. The truth is, they're both invented for my purposes. I knew there was going to be a hanging—or *wasn't* going to be one—and I think these two people just arose out of my knowing that.

Scheele: *Several years ago you completed a novel, In the Chapel of Carnal Love, which is based on the Arthurian legends. What can you tell me about it?*

Richards: It's eight Arthurian romances, using "romance" in one of its many older senses, that is, a tale of love, seduction, and magic. Every one of those stories is based a little bit on one of the Celtic legends—not the ones that turned into *Morte d'Arthur*, but the older Celtic or Breton legends, like the story of the woman who turns into a horse, or the horse that turns into a woman. There's a story I was thinking of reading out here, called "Gawain and the Horsewoman," which is based on that. And they're intertwined, so that the characters and actions from one piece appear again in another, and it all adds up to a novel. And of course there's the triangle story of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot working all the way through it. Those three, and Gawain, all have separate sections; some of them have several.

Scheele: *You have a collection of poems, The Life Horse, scheduled for publication in 2005. Are these poems primarily about your years of raising horses?*

Richards: No, they're not. The first three poems are about horses, and raising them; the rest of the poems really come out of my life since then. When you read them you think, This is a woman who spends a lot of time walking in the woods. The poems are really about my life, and the place where I live. And there are a lot of animals in them. But the horses just kind of move in and out of them; they're a thread in there.

Scheele: *Several of your stories—I've just been reading "Clarence Cummins and the Semi-Permanent Loan," which made me think of this—develop around a sense*

of Southern rural character and rural humor. I gather that these two elements are a great source of pleasure to you in writing such stories.

Richards: Yeah. “Clarence” is another story I’ve refinished; I didn’t have the ending right on that one. I wrote it a long time ago and I didn’t know as much about what ought to happen in an ending. That story is so much a tale. It just jogged off on its own; once I got that voice going, it just went wherever it wanted to go. And that kind of story is hard to finish. It’s not like you’re driving it toward any action. I had no idea what was going to happen next all through that story. The voice was crucial. Once that got started I was just listening and writing it down as it came. So yeah, the Kentucky humor is I guess the core of that story, and that sense that you get anytime you live in the country with people basically associated with the land—you see it in Chekhov, for instance—that sense that all sorts of strange things can happen, you know, that people do really odd things that you can’t predict, and *think* odd things. And I guess that’s what I was really entertained by—encountering that culture, sort of raw.

Scheele: *“The Last Dragon” is a story in which two unidentified alligator poachers are trailed by a man named Jaret, who intends to confiscate their hides and implicate the men with the authorities. How did you come to write on such a subject?*

Richards: That’s a part of my first novel. But that’s the only part I really think has any lasting life to it. Oh, you know, I grew up with alligators. I liked them, and at that time they were threatened—I don’t think they are anymore. But it was just that sense of having the mythical beast living out in your front yard, sort of, when I was growing up. And also, probably, a sense of the loss of that world, which happened pretty much while I was growing up. That creature as a symbol of that loss, I guess, led me to that. Part of it, too, was that I loved the water so much. I wrote that story after I came to Kentucky, and I was calling myself back to my old world.

Scheele: *Most of the story takes place at night, at the edge of a lake (appropriately named Lost Lake) and an adjoining swamp, and the two poachers are known only through what they say and the other noises that they make. Almost all of what is said is from the mouth of a man who lisps; this seems to heighten the sense of otherworldliness of the setting and what’s going on there. Why did you use a speech defect as the only means of identifying these characters?*

Richards: It’s part of the plot. This man has false teeth, which he takes out at night. His name is Pop—that’s why they call him that. And Jaret recognizes him from that—he’s somebody he knows.

Scheele: *The language of the story is ultra-descriptive as the narrator tries to convey a sense of Jaret’s surroundings. Occasionally, as in the following passage, it employs metaphors that encapsulate the story’s underlying sense of terror and impending violence: “The light stretched into the water almost at Jaret’s feet. He could see the minnows dazzling slowly up to it, their eyes bulging and still, as if they had just been raised from the dead.” Do some stories demand a more intense or more poetic level of language than is the case with most stories, do you think?*

Richards: Yeah . . . I was writing myth there, or right at the edge of myth, and I

think that does demand not mythic epithets, exactly, but . . . yeah, I think you have to find your own epithets in that kind of circumstance.

Scheele: *This summer I was reading your story “Calling Up Billie” [i.e., Billie Holiday], which appeared in the magazine Brilliant Corners. It’s a very complex story, dealing with such issues as the suicide of a friend and relations between blacks and whites, but at heart it’s about two women’s love of jazz. Has your own love of jazz influenced your writing, and if so, how?*

Richards: Well, I think mostly in that one story. And I don’t think I told myself I was going to try to write like jazz when I started out with it, but that’s the way it came to be. I’m trying to think if there’s any other way that that’s true No, I don’t think so, really, except for the fact that I always want to do something different. But as a rule my stories are more formal in their structure than jazz is. Of course there is some very formal jazz. If you’re talking about the Modern Jazz Quartet, for example, I can kind of see a correlation there.

I don’t know whether this is true of poets, but almost every fiction writer I know really wanted to be a singer, or a great saxophonist, or something like that. I think it’s certainly true that writing stories is what I do *instead* of singing; it’s my kind of singing. Especially when you talk about Billie Holiday—that wonderful, distinctive voice and powerful sense of emotion—I think all that is something you can use as a writer. She helps me write. You know, I often find the other forms of art are more useful to my own writing than reading is—I mean in terms of inspiration, getting me going.

Scheele: *I read somewhere that you were writing a play. Did you finish it?*

Richards: Yeah, I did. I was thinking about that just a while ago when you said you’d always wanted to write a short story—I think I’d always wanted to write a play. The first serious literature that I read was Bernard Shaw’s *Nine Plays*

Scheele: *The old Modern Library edition?*

Richards: Yes. That was in my grandmother’s library, and I read that quite early—I must have been twelve or so—and I loved it. I’ve always loved to *read* plays. I guess my experience of plays is more read than seen.

So this play—this thing—came to me. I got up from my nap and went and sat on the porch, on the couch, and overheard this conversation between these two people, and from the conversation I knew what was going on between them. It was a very dramatic situation. It’s not unusual for this to happen to me; I often hear people talking in my head, and usually it will turn into a story. I kept trying to make this into a story, and it wouldn’t do it. And even though things usually appear to me that way, as dialogue, I just couldn’t believe it was a play because I’d never written one. But I finally decided I had to write this as a play.

The plot involves two old friends from the ’60s, one of whom was supposed to bomb the ROTC building on campus but got sick, and the other one did it instead. Twenty years later, the one who was supposed to bomb the building is a prosecuting attorney, and the other one is still underground. And in the aftermath of 9/11, the one who bombed the building shows up in her old friend’s bedroom in the middle of the night and wants to turn herself in. So it was a natural dramatic situation.

I’d had this story in my mind for years and years before the bombing in New York,

and when that happened I thought, I can't write that now, because no one will see this character as sympathetic—she was a bomber. But then it came to me that this was the time when I did have to write it. So that was where the play came from. It hasn't been produced. I've been trying to get somebody to even *think* about it. I can tell you that it's very difficult to switch from fiction to drama; it's a whole new world. The things you don't have to say—in fact, you *can't* say—and then the things you *do* have to say . . . I guess if I never get it produced, I will have still learned a lot about how to write dialogue for my fiction.

Scheele: *What's it called?*

Richards: Oh, it's had a lot of different titles, but right now it's called *Who Bombed Building D?* I still have some hopes for it. Getting a play produced is harder than anything. Think of how expensive it is! They have to feel, when they look at your play, that they *have* to put it on. It's not do they want to, it's do they have to. I don't think my playwriting abilities will ever come up to that. But I had an awfully good time doing it. Those two people just talked in my head like crazy!

Scheele: *What kinds of things do you read for pleasure?—i.e., when not reading serious literature.*

Richards: The truth is I don't read very much serious literature. It seems to me that I read everything till I was about 45, and then I pretty much stopped. I read so hard, so seriously—I was learning my craft and took notes on everything I read—and at that point I pretty much quit reading serious literature and started writing it instead. So now I read British mysteries, I read my bird books, I read Krishnamurti, I read myth and legend, *The Racing Form*. But I'm a stranger in literary circles, because if somebody says, “Have you read such and such?” I usually say no, especially if it was written in the last twenty years. And if I do occasionally read serious literature these days, it's mostly rereading. There's so much I'd like to reread. I'd like to read all of Conrad again, for instance.

Scheele: *What have you been working on recently?*

Richards: I just finished a story called “Grass Fires,” a nice country story, so of course I'm writing a romance right now. It's a story I've had around for a while. It's a bit of a ghost story.

Scheele: *Where do you see your work heading in the immediate future?*

Richards: I don't know. I guess I'm at the point in my life where I have to decide whether I'm ever going to take on another novel. I've got some novels in mind; in fact, I've got some started. But I'm having such a good time writing stories right now, and I love writing stories. I like being in a novel for a long time—it's like you really live in it, you know, for years and years—but there's that great sense of delivery with short stories. And also there's the fact that I'm 66, and you have to think about what you want to do in the time that you've got. It takes me a long time to write a novel. I may just be happy writing short stories for the rest of my life. It's funny, I love beginning stories. I have enough stories begun, that I'm interested in, that I couldn't possibly finish them all unless I lived to be 123 or something. So I may just do that.