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University of California
Berkeley, California

Willie Gordon:
A Life in Libraries, the Law, and Literary Noir

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2017

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Photo by Ana Portnoy, February 2017

Willie Gordon is a lawyer and mystery writer. He was born and raised in Los Angeles, California and attended college at the University of California, Berkeley. He earned his law degree at the University of California, Hastings College of Law. He worked as a lawyer in San Francisco for many years before becoming a mystery writer. He is the author of six books. In this interview, he discusses his early life growing up in Los Angeles, his affinity for libraries, education and career in the Bay Area, and becoming a writer in his retirement.

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Interview 1: January 10, 2018

01-00:00:05

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Willie Gordon on Wednesday, January 10, 2018, and this is our first session. We're in Corte Madera, California. Willie, can you start by telling me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:23

Gordon: I was born in Los Angeles at the General Hospital, on August 27, 1937.

01-00:00:34

Farrell: Can you tell me about your early memories of Los Angeles, or the neighborhood that you grew up in?

01-00:00:40

Gordon: Well, I grew up with my father and my mother, and I had a sister who was a year older than I was. I don't remember much about her at the time except she and I were very close. My father was a religious guy. He'd invented a religion called The Infinite Plan, and we actually traveled a lot around the Southwest, and he would preach his gospel of whatever it was, and he would write books. He was also a painter.

I can't say we had a happy family, but we had an integrated family. Father was the boss—Mother was the worker bee around the house—and he was a sign painter, an artist, a writer, and he worked on this religion of his, and I felt pretty secure, in my early days, but then he started to get sick, and he also had some serious problems, but he started molesting my sister, when she was about four years old, I knew about that, and it ruined the relationship between my sister and me, and also ruined the relationship between my mother and my father. It left me out in the cold. I was in the middle of a triangle between my mother, my father and my sister. I was on my own, alone in the world. My sister then raised my bother and protected him as a surrogate mother. My mother tried to be close to me but I didn't trust her because I felt that she didn't fight for her children. That never changed from the time I was four years old.

My father was still the caretaker, and my mother was a very distant person. You have to understand that my mother was a graduate of Philadelphia College of Pharmacy in 1920, actually probably the first woman pharmacist in the United States, but she didn't want to be a pharmacist; she wanted to be a doctor, and her parents wanted the son to be a doctor because he was the eldest male, although my mother was the oldest of the clan. She had come from Russia with my mother and my uncle in 1905, and I actually did find her boat and the registration and everything when they arrived. My grandfather had come before, and he was living in Philadelphia and was a peddler.

My father was from Australia, and he was a very independent, very brilliant guy who had been a Merchant Marine-type who traveled the world as a boilermaker on a ship, because that was what he was apprenticed to, but he really wanted to be an artist. So he left Australia, and came to the United States, and I suspect that he was moving back and forth between Australia and United States because he was avoiding the draft of the First World War, because he was born in 1892.

So, you figured out, it'd be about the right time to avoid the horrors of war, especially that one.

My memories of my youth were pretty happy, except for this thing about him molesting my sister, two years later he died when I was only six.

There was one incident that I remember of being in Philadelphia in 1939 when my brother was born. I remember that for some reason, and I remember the train rides and all that stuff, and I remember the beauty of the desert, because my father loved the desert. He was kind of a cowboy, and dressed like a cowboy, and loved the Old West. The reason I'm bringing this up is because he taught me one thing that was very important, and that is: Go wherever you want to go; do whatever you want to do. Don't let money ever get in the way of what you really want to do. That's been basically one of my big themes of my life. I've been everywhere I wanted to go; I've done everything I wanted to do; and I haven't let money stop me from doing anything, and it all comes from traveling with my father throughout the country and especially in the South West.

01-00:06:46

Farrell:

Did you feel like he took a page from that book and lived life by that philosophy as well?

01-00:06:51

Gordon:

Oh, definitely. This was before the war, and he built a house. People helped him in the old style. They would come over on the weekends and they'd frame the house, and they'd do this, and they dug the septic tank. and I never remember having a problem about anything there was always a way to do it; I remember going across the border and like you saw in *The Grapes of Wrath*, the people get in the car and they're piled up on top of the roof and everything. [laughs] He would get smart with the border guard, and guy told him he'd better shut up or he'd send him back to Oklahoma where the Okies came from—that type of thing. [laughs] So, it was a wild time, but I also remember the Painted Desert. I mean the scenery was so beautiful. And it was a wonderful time in my life; the adventure was incredible.

01-00:08:20

Farrell:

What were your parents' names?

01-00:08:22

Gordon:

My mother was Anna Kobalifka, and my father was William Lindsay Gordon. Now William Lindsay Gordon is not his real name. He was a bastard child of a James Reeves, The Reeves family came to Australia in 1818 as convicts, and my grandmother on my father's side, she was a Huguenot, probably from Belgium, and her family came to Australia in 1848, probably for religious reasons. They went to a town called Grenfell, which was a gold-mining town in the center of Australia, and that's where my father was born in 1892. That's pretty much all I know. In fact, I went to Grenfell to see if I could find out something, but because he was a bastard, there wasn't any way to trace him.

01-00:09:57

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about the neighborhood that you grew up in?

01-00:10:02

Gordon:

The first part of it was spent in a place called Wilmar, which is like a little hill town in a very poor section of Appalachia, and there were a lot of really dumb people there. You have to remember this: my mother was Jewish, and she probably looked Jewish, and these are hill people, ignorant people from the South and the Southeast. I would walk down the street with her when I was very young, and people would call her names, in this place where the streets had no sidewalks. It was just a rural community, right outside of Los Angeles, because Monterey Park is where it is now.

It was a very ignorant community. I was very fortunate that my mother was so well educated, because she sort of kept us up to snuff on what was going on in the world, but I also was very much aware of the prejudice there was—but I didn't know what it was about. I just knew that these people were against her, and that made a big mark on me.

01-00:11:35

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that, maybe what her background is, and why people were demonstrating prejudice against her?

01-00:11:43

Gordon:

Well, because she was Jewish, and there was a lot of anti-Semitism in those days, and as I say, I didn't know what that was, but I figured it out myself. Her family had escaped the pogroms in Russia in the 1900s and before, and my mother was not a practicing Jew. She was very tired of the materialism of it, and so she became a Bahá'í, and then my father's religion was this Infinite Plan thing, so. She was a good soul. She was a very curious person, and she'd always, was looking for light. And of course the Boyle Heights part Los Angeles parts of it, were very Jewish, and her mother and father were living there, and several of her relatives, but we were standoffish from them because she had married a man who wasn't Jewish, and who everybody thought was a drunk, and so not too many people were happy with her. But she was the hippie. [laughs]

But that has always stuck in my head, and I tried to find out about it, and there wasn't much I could find out because nobody would talk to me about it. I had to learn it on the streets, and of course, if you're a Mexican immigrant, you don't care much about that either, so, I was probably in the right place: No Man's Land. The biggest thing was, I was a gringo, not that I was anything else, and so I really didn't know very much about it. We were—what's the word? Out there, people without a country. We were sort of not treated as part of my mother's family because we were not Jewish, and in those days they were very selective about that. But I didn't care, because my father was a high roller anyway, and he just did what he wanted to do, so, that was okay with me—until he died. Now it was up to me to make it happen. Which, I didn't realize, but that's exactly what I've done. That's the gift my father left me with.

01-00:14:53

Farrell:

Do you have a sense of why your parents ended up in LA?

01-00:14:56

Gordon:

Because that was the land of the fruits and the nuts. Now my father was a religious guy, and at that time, there were plenty of them; that was the *Elmer Gantry* Aimee McPherson days. There were a thousand people like my father there who were preachers, hustlers, grifters, opportunists and futurists. I always said that my father was the Elmer Gantry of the occult because he was on the occult side of things, and he was a healer, and that's one other thing that I didn't mention before. He was a healer and he would have people that would come to him, and he would heal them. I guess, and that's why his partner, the gal who turned out to be the dominatrix in my books—she was a spiritualist too and probably a thieving bitch, [laughs] but she would do the black magic on the people for a little extra dough and then put it in her pocket, because that was her specialty. So that's, it was a three-ring circus, really. [laughter] I'm telling you it was humorous.

01-00:16:27

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about *The Infinite Plan* and the religion that your father created?

01-00:16:33

Gordon:

At the time, I couldn't tell you much except that this was a plan that my father had concocted in which he basically said, "Do as I say, not as I do." I never read that book until I wrote *The Ugly Dwarf*, because I thought he was a hypocrite and I thought he was a conman and everything else. But when I read it, I was absolutely amazed, because he took a little bit from all kinds of religions, including the Jewish religion. Isaac Singer, talked a lot about dybbuks in his literature. I mean, he just sort of took things from everywhere, and I was totally shocked that he was really a novelist, because he was talking about salvation.

If you followed him, you would be saved, and he told you how to do it, but his own life was a disaster. He was a drunk; he was a womanizer; but he was a hard worker too, at the same time, and he had many talents. Like when the war started, he went to work in building the Victory ships, because he had a skill in boiler making. My mother also went to work there, and that was kind of ironic, because she was a—how do I put this? She was a Russian citizen, but she had a green card too, but she wasn't a US citizen, and she never was. She just had the green card, and so she went to work in the shipyards too, and I've often wondered [laughs] what was that all about, if they were so security conscious.

01-00:19:05

Farrell: Was that World War I or World War II?

01-00:19:07

Gordon: Two.

01-00:19:08

Farrell: Two, okay, okay, yeah.

01-00:19:09

Gordon: Yeah, that started happening about 1940, but you see, the US government was arming the British before, the war because the U-boats were knocking the hell out of British ships, so we were building them. It was also great money, I think, for the people. They started social security, and I remember, when my father died, he lacked about two quarters which meant our family couldn't for social security benefits and we never got them. It would have made a big difference for a widow with three children who was otherwise impoverished.

01-00:20:02

Farrell: Were your parents working similar schedules when they were working in the shipyards?

01-00:20:05

Gordon: I don't think so. I don't know how that worked. I just know my mother was absent. Although, I didn't get along very well with my mother in my life, but it wasn't because of that. I adored her but I didn't trust her. Quite a conundrum. She had retreated into her own space. But she was a great recourse to me for knowledge. I used to listen to the opera with her every Saturday. I was very close to her, but she wasn't very close to me, and I never have been able to figure that one out except for what I said before that I didn't trust her. But I was close to my father by instinct, and I could visualize him much more. He was a pretty interesting guy and very important in my life.

01-00:20:56

Farrell: Yeah. How old were you when both of them died?

01-00:21:00

Gordon: I was six when my father died, and I was pretty close to fifty when my mother died.

01-00:21:10

Farrell:

Okay. Okay. When your father died, your mom just assumed full care?

01-00:21:15

Gordon:

No. When my father died, nobody assumed full care. Amelia, my father's lover and his assistant, she owned property in Mexican part of Boyle Heights, and she put us in one of her tenement houses or whatever it was, then she collected the rent from the county, because we were on welfare. She had all the money, from The Infinite Plan, if there was any—but I was on my own, from then on.

01-00:21:55

Farrell:

What was that like for you?

01-00:21:58

Gordon:

Well, it's hard to say, except that I knew what I had to do, and I did it, like for instance, when I was in the second grade, I built a shoeshine box and I went downtown and shined the shoes of the winos, and then I would eat at Clifton's at 7th and Broadway—I don't know, did you read *The Wishing Well*?

01-00:22:30

Farrell:

Yes.

01-00:22:31

Gordon:

Well that was a true story; that was my story. I used to steal money from there, and it wasn't much. You can't carry a lot of money when it's pennies and stuff like that. But, so I used to go in there, and I'd make a dollar on the street—sometimes it took me all day—then I'd go and eat free at the café, and then I'd go home, with a puddle of water following me too. [laughs] And I did that, and then I also would pick up the books on the streetcar that people would throw away because they were dime novels, and people wouldn't save them. They'd just throw them right on the seat. It was the equivalent of the tango in Argentina. It was the poor people's way to do it, so if you could read, English, you would read these dime novels. It was the people's literature, but there were some pretty good writers then: Erle Stanley Gardner, Raymond Chandler, and all those guys. They were the heroes. That was their audience.

That was about what was going on there, but my mother was an absent fi—she was depressed, I'm sure, but my godmother, the thing, she had us baptized Catholic, because of my father, I guess. I grew up in that Catholic, mystical place, but I wasn't very interested in it. One of the things that was really curious was how grateful I was, knowing what had happened. I mean, you learned what was going on in Europe about the Jews being persecuted and everything. I was very grateful to have a place to be. I was very grateful to the Mexicans for at least accepting us, even though it was tough stuff. You were all fists and elbows to have to survive because those guys were always chasing me, and that's another reason why I learned the language, just to defend myself.

01-00:25:35

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to learn Spanish?

01-00:25:39

Gordon:

Well, you run fast and talk Spanish, and you just—I learned to have no shame, because if I didn't know a word, I would say it. I guess I've done that all my life. If I didn't know something, I would just blurt it out, and then people would correct me, and then that's the way I learned. But you'd be surprised how appreciative people were and how they changed their attitude towards you if you tried to learn their language, because that way they couldn't communicate with you, but you could communicate with them and then, so they made an effort to communicate with you, and so. It was very nice. It was a beautiful experience, really.

01-00:26:32

Farrell:

Have you continued to learn Spanish and speak the language as you've moved through your life?

01-00:26:38

Gordon:

Oh, yeah. I'm totally immersed in it, and it also depends on where you go, because if you go to Argentina, it's one thing; if you go to Peru, it's another; if you go to Spain, it's another. But I studied French, because I have some facility with languages. I studied French in college because I intended to travel, and I was told that French was the language of the—what do you call it—the people who traveled and did business and stuff, and I found that that was a bunch of crap, because what I used was Pidgin English and Spanish.

The world, I don't know how much you know about the Spanish Inquisition and stuff, but when they threw the Jews out of Spain, they went various places. Some of them stayed in Spain, but others went to very faraway places including Turkey, where they had people who—the Ashkenazi, the Jews were there, so they spoke Spanish. So if you're in Turkey, you could get by speaking Spanish. Could even get by in India speaking Spanish. I mean, it was just amazing how much—so I just, I forgot about French and was—oh, and Pidgin English, also, wherever commerce had been in the world, there was a vestige of Pidgin English, and so you could communicate enough so that you could get what you wanted. It was amazing, and it still is. [laughs] It still is.

01-00:28:43

Farrell:

So you said that you were—after you moved into the tenements, it was a Mexican neighborhood. What was the neighborhood? Was that Monterey Park?

01-00:28:51

Gordon:

No, the neighborhood was on the edge of Boyle Heights right at the border of East Los Angles, and I went to school at Belvedere Elementary in East L.A. Monterey Park was where we lived when my father built his house.

01-00:29:00

Farrell: But what neighborhood in East LA?

01-00:29:02

Gordon: That wasn't East LA. When I moved to East LA, I moved to First and Indiana. That's right on the edge of Boyle Heights, and East Los Angeles.

01-00:29:12

Farrell: Okay, so you were in—okay.

01-00:29:14

Gordon: And then I went to school in Belvedere Elementary, which is in East Los Angeles, and everything else happened in Boyle Heights, which was, then it was a mixture of Jews and Mexicans, and at that time, it was the biggest city of Mexicans outside of Mexico City because all the Mexicans who came to Los Angeles lived in that area. The only problem is, they didn't have any rights, and they were the *mano de obra*, the manual labor of LA, but, with no power. That's where the gang activity came from, and a lot of mistreatment.

01-00:30:16

Farrell: Mm-hmm. Can you tell me a little bit about your time in elementary school, and going to school, especially since it sounds like you kind of had to get yourself there, and you were responsible for your own education?

01-00:30:34

Gordon: I did, and one of the things was, at the first day of school, I walked out of the gate and there were five guys waiting for me. I knew what to do. I ran into the church, and they came in the church and they just beat the crap out of me. All the time I was asking God to help me, in the church, so, you can imagine what my feeling towards religion was at that time, so. I never did get over that. [laughs] Then, walking to school next day I spotted the library, so when the bell rang that day I ran to the library with the five guys chasing me and I asked the librarian where I could learn the ABC's and she showed me and then I asked her if she would help me learn them. She did and actually showed me how to read, and that's why I love libraries, because the librarian taught me how to read and that's a big deal.

01-00:31:26

Farrell: How old were you when that happened?

01-00:31:28

Gordon: Six.

01-00:31:28

Farrell: Six, okay, so I mean, this is kind of around the age of kindergarten anyway.

01-00:31:32

Gordon: Well, I was in the first grade.

01-00:31:34

Farrell: Oh okay, okay.

01-00:31:35

Gordon: I'd done the kindergarten in Wilmar.

01-00:31:39

Farrell: Okay.

01-00:31:41

Gordon: Okay? I learned how to tie my shoe; I remember that. [laughs] But I learned how to read in LA.

01-00:31:50

Farrell: Okay.

01-00:31:51

Gordon: I don't know; I just survived there, and I fortunately didn't get beat up anymore, because I learned enough Spanish so that I—and I became a diplomat as opposed to a bully because there was a lot of fighting there, among the gangs. It's like having PST, the—what is it called, the post-traumatic stress syndrome.

01-00:32:30

Farrell: PTSD, yeah.

01-00:32:32

Gordon: I mean, you're worried because the next person in line is you to get the crap knocked out of you, so that's—

01-00:32:43

Farrell: How did you become a diplomat, and can you give me an example of that?

01-00:32:46

Gordon: Well, I just would finesse my way through, and talk Spanish, and do this. I had a few fights, but nothing really big.

01-00:32:55

Farrell: Can you give me an example of a time that you had to be a diplomat, or kind of mediate a situation?

01-00:33:01

Gordon: Well, when you have guys coming at you and you're trying to say, you know, "Let's look at"—you start talking Spanish and go, "*Yo no soy de plato*," I'm not a person who fights. But, on the other hand, when I was in the first grade I got raped by some guy in a closet in the school. That was a shock, and I'm surprised I'm not a homophobe. That was pretty brutal. So you keep these things in your head and you know what to watch out for. Of course, I never expected that. It happened, but who was I going to talk to?

01-00:33:57

Farrell: Mm-hmm. Can you tell me a little bit more about the librarian who taught you how to read?

01-00:34:04

Gordon:

Well, I was there and I went into this place and I asked the lady where the kids part was, and she told me and I said, "I don't know much about this," and I said, "but I understand that if you want to learn how to read, you got to know the alphabet. Would you teach me the alphabet?" So she did. And then, she told me how to pronounce things, and what a consonant was. I learned that stuff from her, and then I started, when I would pick these books up, I would practice what she'd told me, and I was a pretty good student for her, what she was teaching me.

01-00:34:56

Farrell:

How often would you go to the library?

01-00:34:57

Gordon:

Every day during the week, because that's when the guys were after me. I ran there every day at least for two or three weeks, and then I kept going for most of the school year, because this was my friend, and this was sort of a wonderful gift, really. That's why libraries are so important. Do you know who Michael Krasny is?

01-00:35:36

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

01-00:35:36

Gordon:

Well I was listening to a program, maybe a year or so ago, and it was about what libraries meant to you as a refuge, and you can't believe the number of people who called in, and said the same thing that I had said, that they found refuge there, and it was really a wonderful experience. It was more heartening to me than it would be to most people, because I had lived the experience. But I wasn't alone; I mean, there was a lot of people that just would do it, so.

01-00:36:15

Farrell:

Yeah, they're very special places, and I think a huge part of communities, yeah. Do you remember when you were that age and you were learning how to read, what kind of books you were reading, or authors

01-00:36:30

Gordon:

Well, I was very interested in the great men who made it in spite of their circumstances, like Daniel Webster, General George Washington. George Washington's probably not a good example. Abraham Lincoln was a superstar. You know? And not only that, but guys like—what's his name—the guy who himself created the libraries, the Scotchman.

01-00:36:59

Farrell:

Dewey Decimal? No, that's the system.

01-00:37:01

Gordon:

No, it's not Dewey.

01-00:37:03
Farrell: I don't know.

01-00:37:04
Gordon: I'll think about it in a minute.

01-00:37:06
Farrell: Huh.

01-00:37:07
Gordon: He's the one who formed libraries.

01-00:37:10
Farrell: I don't know who that is.

01-00:37:11
Gordon: Oh, I'll tell you.

01-00:37:12
Farrell: Yeah, I'd be curious to know who that is.

01-00:37:16
Gordon: He was the steel magnate, in Pittsburgh.

01-00:37:20
Farrell: Carnegie?

01-00:37:20
Gordon: Carnegie. It was Andrew Carnegie.

01-00:37:21
Farrell: Oh! Oh, I didn't know he created the library system.

01-00:37:24
Gordon: Oh, Christ, he created a whole system of libraries in the country.

01-00:37:28
Farrell: I had no idea. I mean, I know him for a lot of other things; I just didn't know about the library.

01-00:37:32
Gordon: Oh yeah.

01-00:37:33
Farrell: Interesting. Okay. [laughs]

01-00:37:34
Gordon: He was huge. He was really huge in the libraries. He had formed several libraries. There's a county library—all these things are patterned after him, because he's the one who did it, so, I thought he was an amazing guy.

01-00:37:55

Farrell:

Yeah. How long did you keep going to the library every day, until what age was that a big part?

01-00:38:04

Gordon:

Well, pretty much after I was out in the world. [laughs] Sounds like Benjamin Franklin. You know, Benjamin Franklin left home when he was eight years old, and his father gave him some advice and then, he just went. I was there. I had my job of shining shoes, and picking up books, and this and that, and I would go back and say hello to the librarian every once in awhile, but—I don't know. Once you get rolling in the thing and you went, that's where you stopped; your life takes wings and you start doing that.

01-00:38:58

Farrell:

How do you think your experiences with the library shaped you as a person, as a writer, as a professional?

01-00:39:09

Gordon:

Well, learning how to read is a big deal, no matter how old you are, and I was always pretty smart in school, but always, I don't know, just uninterested in the details of the stuff. But obviously it had something to do with when I did start writing, what I started writing, because I was—I tried to stay true to my roots, too, because it was a poor man's language and that's where it came from, and in those days, mystery writing was a lowercase craft, you know. But I knew that I knew how to read, and I knew I knew; I understood I was a good student, and I what I wanted to be, which wasn't always.

And then very abruptly when I was ten years old, we moved to this other place, Canta Ranas, which was outside of Whittier, and it was right next to Santa Fe Springs, and it was farm country, and there was a place called Pacific Clay Products, and it was mostly Mexican. There was four square blocks right next to Santa Fe Springs which was a very wealthy oil well producing area, but Mexicans weren't allowed there, until after the war, or during the war. Well this was after the war anyway, and they started building tracks around Canta Ranas where I lived, so, it changed pretty rapidly then. I was there from 1947 until 1954.

01-00:41:37

Farrell:

Okay. You went to middle school and high school there.

01-00:41:42

Gordon:

I went to Whittier High School, yeah.

01-00:41:44

Farrell:

High school, okay. That's all right. At that point, when you're moving up in grades, are there any subjects that you're finding that you're more interested in?

01-00:42:01

Gordon:

Well, I did very well in grammar school but it was a strange kind of school. I mean it was mostly Mexican, and a few gringos, and I did good there. But I never did anything. I mean I didn't study. I was pretty good in athletics. Then I went to high school and they put me in just really dumb classes. I was about fourteen when I said, "If I don't get off my ass and do something, I'm going to be really in trouble." I went and I said, "Wait, how come you're doing this to me?" I said, "I was told I was pretty smart in grade school," and they said, "Well we don't have anything on you. We don't even have an IQ test on you." I said, "Well you've got to do something for me." They put me in a college prep class, and I did the work well, and I also understood math, and I was in algebra in the first thing and I did well in that, and obviously I did well in Spanish. I was a problem for them. They couldn't figure me out, because they thought I was just a, you know, [laughs] a kid from the ghetto.

I had a good friend there that I met when I was ten. It was Carlos Rodriguez, and he was also very smart. He and I sort of ruled the grammar school side of the stuff till we got to high school. I was working, in a restaurant, and I didn't have much time for school and I didn't have much time for athletics, but I did some of it, and then I started complaining about this thing, and by the time I was a sophomore, I started to pay attention in school. And then, let's see. In my junior year, I ran for politics. I ran for the student body president thing, and that was a big shock because the school was only 8 percent Mexican, and I talked English with a Mexican accent, and I won. Carmen [my wife] was the chief cheerleader there, and so we sort of broke the glass ceiling together. You would be surprised how popular I was, because I was! [laughs] That was a big deal. That may be equivalent to learning how to read. I mean, I really got a lot of stuff from that.

Then they called me in and they said that they had to give me an IQ test because they didn't have any on me, and they did the thing, and they said, "Oh my God, I can't believe that you have such a high IQ." I said, "Well, you better find out, because I knew I had a high IQ from grade school." They started treating me with some respect, but that was a joke because it didn't make much difference to me. So, that's when my modern journey started. I guess the other is just background, but the same principles applied. I got them from my father. I got my culture from my mother. I got the idea that I could go anywhere or do anything I wanted to, without any money.

01-00:46:30

Farrell:

You had mentioned you were working in high school. What were you doing?

01-00:46:32

Gordon:

Yeah, I was working in a restaurant, washing dishes and stuff.

01-00:46:39

Farrell:

What kind of restaurant?

01-00:46:40

Gordon:

It was a fish—no. Actually, mostly it was chicken and ribs, and to this day I can't eat ribs, because we weren't allowed to eat the chicken. [laughs] I love chicken and I hated ribs. [laughter] But, I don't know. I had the work ethic. I was always working, whether it was cleaning yards, or even when I was in Canta Ranas, I would clean yards and I would work in a restaurant or, you know, do something. When I got to high school, I had this interest in student activities, and, by the time when I was fourteen, I just started studying, and so I found that I was doing good.

01-00:47:44

Farrell:

What kind of things were you hoping to achieve as student body president?

01-00:47:50

Gordon:

Well, the most important thing is I wanted to include the Mexican people in the school, who were my friends and who were left out. And I wanted to integrate it, that was a big thing for me, and we did. Today, it's 96 percent Mexican. In those days, it was only 8 percent.

01-00:48:20

Farrell:

You wanted to integrate the school, or you wanted to—

01-00:48:22

Gordon:

Yeah, the school. I wanted to integrate the school and have free passage between—you know, the social part was limited to, you had to be a gringo, and this was kind of ridiculous because this was not a wealthy town. There maybe have been a few, but you know, Whittier was a religious community, and there were people who were there, and but they were working people. Whittier College was a small college, where Richard Nixon went to school. It was surrounded by orange groves, so it was not a very sophisticated place. Fortunately, because of my mother, I was advanced in terms of cultural things because I knew more, and so I don't know. I just did all right.

01-00:49:29

Farrell:

How did you go about integrating the school?

01-00:49:32

Gordon:

Well, by just being president with my Mexican accent and talking to the people.

01-00:49:42

Farrell:

Were people not enrolled in the school? Or you were integrating activities more?

01-00:49:47

Gordon:

No, they were enrolled in school, but they weren't interested in it, and they didn't have a place, and this sort of helped. I mean within ten years, it was wide open.

01-00:50:02

Farrell: Okay. What kind of activities did you see the highest rates of integration and people being more involved?

01-00:50:11

Gordon: Well, I saw the Mexican kids starting to get involved in politics and in doing stuff, just doing stuff, taking an interest. Politics was the first thing; some of them wouldn't even vote. But everyone who could vote for me that was Mexican, voted for me. It was like a tsunami. [laughs]

01-00:50:40

Farrell: Mm-hmm. Did you find that experience empowering?

01-00:50:43

Gordon: Yes, yes.

01-00:50:45

Farrell: How did that shape—

01-00:50:45

Gordon: I really was happy because that's the way I grew up, you see.

01-00:50:52

Farrell: How did that serve to sort of shape your life or influence things that came later?

01-00:50:57

Gordon: Well just to ask the question is to answer it. I was a person of two cultures, and so, when I—there wasn't any difference between me. I would stop and I would talk to somebody, and that was the thrill that they could say, "I know this guy and he's a big shot, and he's my friend too." Especially among the Mex—boy, the Mexican people just loved me, because I was on their side. It's really amazing when you're in a situation like that and you can be on somebody's side who hasn't had somebody on their side; it's really important. It's just like when I was a lawyer and I could talk to a person who didn't speak English, and I could go into court with him and I represented him; I spoke for him. You know, my mother helped me with that too, because she [laughs] I don't know; do you know who William Saroyan is?

01-00:52:03

Farrell: No.

01-00:52:04

Gordon: Well William Saroyan was a guy from Fresno who was a writer, and he was a tall-tale teller. He was a pretty interesting guy. My mother used to tell me, she said, "If you want to do something for somebody, you do what William Saroyan does for storytellers: you speak in their voice, and you speak in the voice of people who don't have a voice." Another thing in my life story, just talk for people who don't have a voice.

01-00:52:49

Farrell:

How did being the student body president affect your career aspirations, or what you were thinking was going to happen after high school?

01-00:52:57

Gordon:

It just gave me a lot of confidence, that I could—it affected me a little bit like Berkeley asking for my books. It just empowered me, you know? It's another example of that. It's not something I ever expected. Just like that, I didn't expect that because I just decided one day I was going to do this, and my sister helped me paint the posters, and I got a guy who's a friend of mine who said he would be my campaign manager, but I had to do all the work. [laughs] So I did; I just did this by myself, and then everybody just sort of grabbed on to it. The same thing, when this thing with Berkeley, I don't know how this happened, except Shanti [Corrigan] came one day and started talking to me, and the next thing I knew, I'm over there. And, I've struggled for a lot of things in my life. Becoming a lawyer was a struggle, because I had to work, I had to go to school, and it was harder to work and go to school as a lawyer than it was to go to school and be a—

01-00:54:39

Farrell:

A full-time student?

01-00:54:40

Gordon:

—undergrad, although I did that too, and I always did these things.

01-00:54:50

Farrell:

When you're still in high school, what are your career aspirations? What do you want to do at this point?

01-00:54:56

Gordon:

I was going to be a lawyer, and I was going to be a lawyer because I saw that I could do some good at the lower levels of the thing. But, there's a very funny story about that. In high school, the guy who was ahead of me and that was the student body president was a very snobby guy, and he went to Yale. Okay? I said, "What the hell, why not? I'll go to Yale." Anyway, so I applied there and everything, and it's getting toward the end of the year, toward the end of the school year, and guys from these colleges are coming by. The guy from Yale came and we all went to Beverly Hills, and they had some kind of a party there and everything, and I didn't say hello to the guy when I walked in. I just walked in and I talked to people. I was leaving and I saw this guy, and he had a patch on his eye, and I said, "By the way, I'm Willie Gordon." "Willie Gordon? God, we've been looking all over for you," he says. "You know, we think you're one of the most interesting, fantastic guys in the whole thing, and I was very happy you came. I thought you hadn't," and so on and so forth. "We are really interested in you." I said, "Oh, okay. That's really nice of you, thank you." I thought, Well okay.

I leave and I go and then I get a letter. "We're sorry to tell you that you're not accepted." I said, "What the hell happened?" But I had really good grades,

because I was very well placed in the hierarchy of this stuff, and so, I went to Cal, and Cal was a magic thing. I don't know, just, boom. It was made for me. I'd never been in a place so accommodating for me. I just figured it out and I did this and I did that, and I had my usual three or four jobs, and then I did all my stuff, and I found the Phi Beta notes and I figured out how much I had to do, which wasn't much, by the way. I went back to my slothful ways of studying and stuff, but I got through fine.

After I finished Berkeley, I was in ROTC, so I had to go to the Army, and I did that for six months, and I became a second lieutenant. Then I was in the Reserve for eight years, but I said, "I'm leaving. I'm going on a trip." I took this trip around the world, and I borrowed money to do it, \$100 a month from a very good friend of mine, and it cost me 1,400 bucks. I would sleep in cemeteries and youth hostels, and I'd hitchhike, and I'd do that stuff, and got through it fine; was great.

01-00:58:47

Farrell:

Before we get to that, I want to kind of back up a little bit. What was it like for you to move from LA to Berkeley?

01-00:58:54

Gordon:

It was a shock. Someone had given me a little scholarship of 300 bucks and told me to prepare for college and buy clothes and stuff, so I bought Hawaiian shirts and all that stuff, and then I got here, and I thought, Jesus Christ, what's— [laughs] I mean, I was just, this is another world, you know? [laughs] I got a job hashing, and I had a place to rent for I don't know, twenty bucks a month or something.

01-00:59:33

Farrell:

Where did you live?

01-00:59:34

Gordon:

I lived in a rooming house where I had—then, the place where I was hashing, they said they needed a houseboy, and then I could have a place to live. So I went there, and there was a guy there who I shared a room with who was an English guy who had been a prisoner of war in China, with his parents, because he was in the thing, and this guy used to wake up in the middle of the night screaming, because I guess they mistreated him. Anyway, so I had this place I lived, had a place that I eat, a place that I lived. It was fifty dollars a semester. So I mean, it's unbelievable how cheap things were.

01-01:00:35

Farrell:

Where in Berkeley did you actually live?

01-01:00:39

Gordon:

On Warring. Right? It was the Tri Delt Sorority house.

01-01:00:45

Farrell:

So you were a little bit off campus?

- 01-01:00:47
Gordon: Yeah, a little bit, but, it was all right.
- 01-01:00:53
Farrell: What were some of the biggest differences between LA and Berkeley?
- 01-01:01:00
Gordon: Well, I didn't know anybody. [laughs]
- 01-01:01:02
Farrell: Well, I guess more culturally, or socially.
- 01-01:01:03
Gordon: Oh, culturally?
- 01-01:01:04
Farrell: Yeah.
- 01-01:01:07
Gordon: Well, it was a very intellectual place. I mean, everybody was. Even though I read and I did stuff like that, I wasn't prepared for—there were kids that had studied Shakespeare since they were five years old. I mean, you know, geez. I decided to major in English because I didn't know much about it which was stupid, because if I was after grades, I wasn't going to get them, because the people knew what they were talking about already. If had been a Poli-Sci major, maybe I would been a straight-A student or something. But I read a lot of stuff and that's still important to me, right? There are Miltons underneath you there, and that's one of my favorite, just wonderful experiences in life was reading him, also some Shakespeare, Chaucer.
- 01-01:02:17
Farrell: This is what you started to read when you were at Berkeley?
- 01-01:02:19
Gordon: Yeah.
- 01-01:02:20
Farrell: Some of the classics, okay. What were you majoring in?
- 01-01:02:24
Gordon: English.
- 01-01:02:25
Farrell: English, okay. Okay. What did you think of the English department at the time?
- 01-01:02:29
Gordon: Well, I thought it was too hard for me. [laughter]
- 01-01:02:32
Farrell: How so?

01-01:02:33

Gordon: Well, just I mean, they were talking about stuff that, I didn't even know what the hell they were talking about.

01-01:02:38

Farrell: What made you want to major in English?

01-01:02:41

Gordon: Because I didn't speak it very well. I didn't know much about it. Although, even in high school, I used to work for the—cleaning the rooms and the stuff especially in the summer, and geez, I'd go out in the library and I'd start reading this stuff, and it's just fascinating. I mean, it was fascinating.

01-01:03:11

Farrell: Did you go to the Berkeley library a lot, or like the one on campus, Doe?

01-01:03:14

Gordon: I would; yeah, I would go there.

01-01:03:16

Farrell: Okay. Did you have any professors or people who were particularly meaningful to you?

01-01:03:23

Gordon: Muscatine, who was really something.

01-01:03:28

Farrell: How so, or can you tell me a little bit more about—

01-01:03:29

Gordon: Well, he was the professor who was in charge of Chaucer, and I just loved the guy. I thought he was exceptional.

01-01:03:38

Farrell: What about him resonated with you?

01-01:03:41

Gordon: He was approachable, and good. I doubt if he's still alive. I also liked his attitude. He's the one who refused to take the loyalty oath. He had my respect right there.

01-01:04:06

Farrell: Yeah. Yeah, so you're at Berkeley in the 1950s. Can you tell me a little bit about what it was like to be a college student during that period of time?

01-01:04:17

Gordon: Well, it was a huge fear of the atomic bomb. We all thought we were going to be obliterated by it. People were sour; they were down. You learned the same thing in the Army when you're at ROTC. They were talking about blowing up the world, and one thing after the other, the hydrogen bomb, this and that. Plus the fact that they started talking about, "What are you going to do with your

life?” Of course, the major thing in the fifties was, get a job and make a lot of money, and take care of the kid, then send your wife to the country club. It was a totally different experience than now. I was out of that altogether. I wasn't even interested in that. I was just interested in—actually, I started to plan my trip around the world, because that's what I really wanted to see. I just wanted to do what I wanted to do, and basically, that's what I did.

01-01:05:43

Farrell:

You also had mentioned that you wanted to be a lawyer, so how did that fit into your undergrad experience?

01-01:05:50

Gordon:

Well, didn't—I knew I could just go to law school and do that. One of the things I saw is, got to law school, I saw that people with math degrees did the best in the law, but I wasn't—I wanted to know everything that I didn't know, and so I just wanted to grab as much as I could about everything.

01-01:06:19

Farrell:

Yeah. What was it like balancing being in ROTC with being a student?

01-01:06:27

Gordon:

Well, everything I just found that I made time for everything. I just did what I had to do. The only time I ever got screwed up was at the end of my college career when I wanted to take—a guy named Ian, Ian Watt, he was teaching a class that I really wanted to be in and I couldn't. I got there and it was too late because he was already filled up. I had to take this guy, this guy jerk, this guy Patterson, and I had to take a course on Faulkner, and he was not one of my favorites, and I didn't really understand the stream of consciousness thing, so I didn't like that. I got a shitty grade on my thesis, too. It was the wrong class for me. I should've stopped and I should've got the class that I wanted, but I screwed up. I just didn't get there in time.

01-01:07:35

Farrell:

Mm-hmm. Was part of being in ROTC financial?

01-01:07:42

Gordon:

Well, I'll tell you what it was, it was going in the Army as an officer as opposed to being a private. I went in as a lieutenant, and it was a hell of a lot different than going in as a private. I only went in for six months, which was the least you can do, but, there wasn't any money in it.

01-01:08:12

Farrell:

Okay. So, because I know now that if you're in ROTC, it helps offset costs.

01-01:08:17

Gordon:

Well, it's—

01-01:08:18

Farrell:

I just didn't know if it was the same thing.

- 01-01:08:19
Gordon: I don't know if that's true in the Army.
- 01-01:08:21
Farrell: I know with ROTC it is.
- 01-01:08:24
Gordon: Well, are you sure?
- 01-01:08:26
Farrell: At least when I was an undergrad, it was true, yeah.
- 01-01:08:28
Gordon: Well I know that if you're in the Navy, they give you some money, but I think the Army, you're just a grunt until you're a grunt with a bar on your shoulder.
- 01-01:08:37
Farrell: Yeah, I mean, maybe it's changed, but I—yeah. Anyway—
- 01-01:08:42
Gordon: Also, I had problems with some arrests and stuff. They weren't even sure they were going to get me into the program, because I'd been arrested a few times. In the end, I had a good old major that was quite a guy. He's the one who got me through that and got me to be a soldier.
- 01-01:09:10
Farrell: What were you arrested for?
- 01-01:09:12
Gordon: Oh, Christ, stealing bats and balls from the local baseball thing, stuff like that.
- 01-01:09:24
Farrell: Okay.
- 01-01:09:24
Gordon: It wasn't—
- 01-01:09:26
Farrell: I know that you had also run for student body president when you were at Berkeley. Can you tell me—
- 01-01:09:32
Gordon: No, I didn't run for student body president. I ran for rep at large, and I was elected.
- 01-01:09:38
Farrell: You ran against Roger Samuelson?
- 01-01:09:40
Gordon: No. He ran for student body president; I just ran for rep at large.
- 01-01:09:45
Farrell: Got it. Okay, all right, so there's—

01-01:09:47

Gordon: I was with Bill Petrocelli, Peter Merrill, can't remember, some other guys.

01-01:10:00

Farrell: What made you want to run for rep at large?

01-01:10:03

Gordon: The same thing that made me run for the thing in high school, but I didn't get the same response. I'm glad I did it, but it wasn't what I was—I didn't have the following that I—and there weren't enough Mex—I think there were three or four or maybe five Mexicans there, and two of them were jocks.

01-01:10:29

Farrell: Yeah, yeah. [laughter] What was the role of the rep at large?

01-01:10:35

Gordon: Well, actually, it was pretty good. They were trying. We didn't have a lot of voice in the government, because the adults in the room made sure of that. But we had discussions. I remember talking about having the *People's Daily* put in the student activities room, so I said I felt that they had a place there, and some people were very conservative and they didn't. So that type of thing was fighting, then free tickets to the Rose Bowl. [laughs] But that was a thing totally aside. I liked it. I had a good time, and then, plus, I got a jock job; that was not expected. I got a jock job and I got three dollars and thirty-three cents an hour, and I made friends with the guys who ran the program, and it was really good. So, I never expected to get that kind of benefit from it, and I did some good. I represented—I don't know who I represented. That was part of the problem. I didn't have a constituency that I could work for.

01-01:12:20

Farrell: Did you work with Roger Samuelson at all?

01-01:12:24

Gordon: Well I worked, only on the ExCom.

01-01:12:28

Farrell: Okay. I know that there was some, during that period of time, SLATE was a presence.

01-01:12:34

Gordon: SLATE was on the rise, and I used to have arguments with them.

01-01:12:38

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about what you would argue about?

01-01:12:41

Gordon: Well, they wanted to force a lot of stuff into the university, and I say, "Well that's fine, just, if you want that done, you go about it and get some people elected, and you can do what you want. But you just can't stand up and scream and yell and say, 'I want this,' without having people represent you." I

remember having a big argument in front of Gordon Sproul with somebody in the Sather Gate, and he said, "I don't want {inaudible}." [laughs]

01-01:13:22

Farrell: Do you remember what kind of things that they were trying to advocate for?

01-01:13:27

Gordon: No, but they weren't—they were harmless, really, in the sense that, then but they wanted to do it without representation. They thought that they were owed it, and I'd just say, "Well look it, this is a democracy. You got to stand up and fight for what you want, and you get the people elected, and you can do it any way you want to."

01-01:13:51

Farrell: So they were kind of entitled; they felt entitled?

01-01:13:53

Gordon: They felt entitled, yeah, and abused. I think it was pretty soon they got what they wanted, and they didn't do anything so great anyway, and then I guess after I left, Mario Savio came and gave good speeches, but he, he wasn't so great. That's my opinion.

01-01:14:26

Farrell: What makes you say that?

01-01:14:28

Gordon: Huh?

01-01:14:28

Farrell: What makes you say that?

01-01:14:29

Gordon: Oh, just that he was a great speechmaker, but he didn't do anything. It's one thing to give a speech and another thing to get off your ass and do what you have to do to get it.

01-01:14:39

Farrell: Create the change.

01-01:14:40

Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

01-01:14:41

Farrell: Yeah. My last question about SLATE is, did you feel like they were effective, or they were successful?

01-01:14:48

Gordon: I felt that they were going to be. One thing about power, you have to get power before you can exercise it. They didn't have it, you know? You don't know what they're going to do until they get it; like, for instance, Trump is a

good example of that. Although you could've anticipated what he was going to do just from what he said. But you couldn't anticipate it at all.

01-01:15:19

Farrell:

Yeah. When you are graduating, or you're getting ready to graduate from Berkeley, what are you—I know you go into the Army, but what are you thinking is after that? What's next?

01-01:15:30

Gordon:

Well I've already got it planned. I was going to go in the Army, and then I was going to travel, for a year, okay. I almost didn't go because I owed somebody \$300 or something and my mother said, "Get the hell out of here." [laughs] "It will still be here when you get back." And it was.

01-01:15:49

Farrell:

Did you have a plan for after you traveled?

01-01:15:52

Gordon:

Yeah. I would come back; I would pay off the \$1,400, and then I would go to law school, which I did.

01-01:15:58

Farrell:

Okay, okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your experiences in the Army?

01-01:16:04

Gordon:

In the Army? I can tell you the ones that I enjoyed the most. I got to go to the Bahamas on one of the weekends off or something, and I got to go to Mardi Gras, and I got to go to the Winter Olympics.

01-01:16:25

Farrell:

All as part of the Army.

01-01:16:27

Gordon:

Well, because yeah, because I could fly, like I could fly on MATS to Hawaii from San Francisco. Let's see; what else? But, you're surprised to hear that I didn't get much from it. [laughs] But I didn't! [laughs]

01-01:16:48

Farrell:

No, not necessarily. It just—that's a lot of traveling. Because when you think of, I think of like, the boot camp and the training, and it's very—you're like—

01-01:16:54

Gordon:

Oh, that was—

01-01:16:55

Farrell:

—stationed in a static area.

01-01:16:56

Gordon:

Yeah, that was just stuff, and the interesting thing was, if you plan ahead, there was a lot of things that you could get, you could do. For instance, going into the Army, I hitchhiked across the United States to New York, had a ball;

then I hitchhiked down to Fort Benning, had a ball seeing part of the country; then I was there. And sure, I did boot camp and all that crap, but then I got to go to the Bahamas, then I got to go to Mardi Gras, and then I came back to Fort Benning and I did my time.

01-01:17:35

Farrell: Okay. It was also kind of a vehicle for traveling and seeing more of the world.

01-01:17:39

Gordon: Exactly, yeah, yeah, yeah.

01-01:17:41

Farrell: When you start to travel, what are some of the things that stand out, or the most memorable parts of that for you?

01-01:17:47

Gordon: Well, just seeing the countryside. Remember, this is only twelve years after the war or something, 1960, and you get to go to England, and London still hasn't been built up, so there's all kinds of bomb damage there. Then you get to France and you have the same thing. They're still a little depressed from the war themselves. You get into Germany, and there's all kinds of bomb damage there too, and you see that and you go to East Germany and it's a mess. I mean, Europe wasn't put back together yet. I went back twenty years later and I was shocked at how much it had improved. You go to Italy for the Olympics. I was just having fun.

01-01:18:49

Farrell: What was it like to you to travel to countries where you didn't speak the language?

01-01:18:55

Gordon: Sign language.

01-01:18:56

Farrell: It was kind of a non-issue?

01-01:18:59

Gordon: Not an issue for me.

01-01:19:01

Farrell: Was that the impetus for you to start traveling around the world?

01-01:19:08

Gordon: Well, to see it. I wanted to see it. Yeah, and I wanted to see it and I wanted to also see what had happened during the war, which was pretty shocking. And yeah, I wanted to see the world, and I did.

01-01:19:29

Farrell: Where did you travel to on that trip?

01-01:19:31

Gordon:

Well, I went everywhere, that I could go. I went all over Europe. I didn't do much in Eastern Europe because I didn't want to go to Russia or places like that. I went down Italy and went to Corfu; then I went to Athens, and I went to Greece; and then I went to Yugoslavia, and went to Bulgaria. I couldn't get into Romania, because they thought I was a spy. I didn't try to go any further north, but I went into Turkey, across Turkey, into Lebanon. Then I went to the island of—what the hell is it? Where's all the banks stuff?

01-01:20:39

Farrell:

The Cayman Islands?

01-01:20:41

Gordon:

No, not the Cayman, that's—Cyprus, and then I went to Egypt. Oh, and first I went to Lebanon, and then I went to Egypt, and I bought, all the money, the Egyptian pounds, I bought them in Lebanon because they were cheaper. I had a good time in Egypt, and I went all the way down to the Aswan Dam that they were building, and I had a good time, and learned something. I went back to Lebanon and they asked me if I wanted to go and help make a movie that this guy—what's his name—Peter O'Toole was going to be in, about the famous Englishman. (Lawrence of Arabia) I asked them where it was going to be, and they said they were going to go down to Petra, and all I would have to do is give them six months, but they would pay me. I said, "I don't have six months," and I talked to Lean himself there, and he said, "Well, you're the kind of guy we want. We want this and that," and I said, "I'm sorry."

So then I hitchhiked across Iraq, and Syria, and—or, yeah, I guess it was, into Iraq, across Syria to Iraq, and then went into Iran. I took a train; I had to take a train because the border was closed to Pakistan. From Pakistan I went into India, and then when I got to the other side of India, I wanted to go into Burma but they wouldn't let me, because there was a lot of conflict there, and they wouldn't let me go down to Malaysia because there was a lot of conflict there. I got in my first jet flight, cost sixty bucks, and I flew to Thailand. And then from Thailand, I flew to Hong Kong, because I was afraid to go to Vietnam or Cambodia because there was a lot of stuff there.

Then I took a boat for twenty-five bucks to Japan, and I traveled all over Japan. I went to Chitose to see a friend of mine, and then I came back. Chitose was on an island in the north, and they were taping what was going on between Russia and [another country]. Then I came back down, and I took an American steam ship to Hawaii, and in the bottom class. It didn't cost me very much money. I was in Hawaii for a couple of weeks then I flew; the only other time I flew was, I flew back home. And that's it. That took me a year.

01-01:24:28

Farrell:

That sounds like an incredible excursion. What was it like to see some of those countries in the early sixties?

01-01:24:38

Gordon:

It was amazing, really. But you know, there's one thing I learned about that trip and I've never forgotten it: people are people, no matter what class they're in or anything, they're jerks or they're kind, or they're this and that, whatever they are, and that's the way it is. I have to get up and go to the bathroom.

01-01:25:02

Farrell:

Sure.

01-01:25:03

Gordon:

Thank you.

01-01:25:04

Farrell:

Yeah.

01-01:25:05

Gordon:

Well, I mean, I was just saying that, you can say the words and everything, but being somewhere where you see people in poverty and you see them struggling for their lives, and what they want to do, and how they live—you know, every little civilization has their own way, and you can't go in there and just dictate.

01-01:25:39

Farrell:

Yeah, take your Western ideals and—yeah.

01-01:25:41

Gordon:

You know, there's a wonderful book that just came out by Max Boot. Have you heard of him?

01-01:25:46

Farrell:

Uh-uh.

01-01:25:47

Gordon:

Well he was talking about the mistakes that they made in the Vietnam War, and they made in Iraq and stuff like that, and just saying that you can't go into a place and dictate what you want from them. You have to figure out how to get them to solve the problems that they have in the most efficient way so that everybody's included, and of course, we live in a morass of—I mean, to be a humanitarian in the world today is much more important than being the conqueror, because there isn't—you're not going to conquer anything. All you're going to do is breed despair and revenge. I saw, especially in the Middle East, that you make an enemy, you make an enemy for a thousand years. If you want to help somebody, then go and live with them and teach them the values that you know, and then—you know, one of the wonderful things about a library, and about education is, education, if you teach enough people, some of them are going to reach up and do things.

For instance, I just saw a thing on TV about Teddy Roosevelt going to Brazil, and there he was given Colonel Rondon as his guide, who had been in the Brazilian jungle and had done some stuff there—and while he was there, he

learned, and kind of the Indians, he made friends with them. Teddy Roosevelt was the, “make the world safe for the white man,” and I’m sure that he learned something from this guy, because this guy lived to be ninety-seven years old. He was a pacifist, and he went in there and he catered to the Indians, even though he was an Army officer, and he was part Indian himself. I think the guy should be a saint. That’s how spectacular he was. Jesus, I don’t understand how the white man—if that’s the right thing, because Genghis Khan was the same way—how they lose track, because it’s wrong. I mean, it’s not wrong and you’re going to be cursed, but it’s wrong because you’re not going to get anywhere.

[Interruption.]

01-01:29:14
Gordon:

You’re not going to get anywhere. You’re not going to get anything. All you’re going to do is breed this thousand years of anger, and every time you come back, then there’s, somebody’s laying for you. You know, I went to Whittier High School, no Mexicans allowed, except in menial things. It’s now 2018, and Mexicans now, they inhabit the school. Something happened, and in society, they moved up the way you’re supposed to move up in a society. It’s painful. Sometimes there’s all kinds of things. I mean, I am a perfect example. I’m here now and eighty years old, and I was in the bottom of the heap, and I pushed my way through. Of course, it was a little easier for me because I was white. But, there’s room.

01-01:30:26
Farrell:

Yeah. Just to wrap up about your trip, I do have a couple more questions. So you’re traveling to a lot of countries that had been colonized by various groups. Did you experience racial discrimination at all when you were traveling?

01-01:30:50
Gordon:

More of it here at home than I did there, because I was a visitor, and they thought, this guy’s from the US, and he’s a good guy, for the most part. But I grew up with enough prejudice to last me for a lifetime.

01-01:31:22
Farrell:

Were there a lot of other tourists that you ran into, or—

01-01:31:25
Gordon:

Some.

01-01:31:25
Farrell:

Some, okay. Okay. I feel like, especially at that part—

01-01:31:29
Gordon:

Well I—the thing that I remember the most is the snotty kids coming from Europe and from the US, who didn’t know shit from Shinola, and who were

there trying to find out something, find out the wrong things, and see what was in it for them, and that was a waste of time.

01-01:31:55

Farrell:

I know you just talked about it a little bit, but aside from sort of cultivating empathy and realizing that we can't impose our values on everybody, what are some of the other big things that you took from that experience of traveling around the world?

01-01:32:09

Gordon:

That the US was wrong, big time. Big time, because they gathered force in various places and they intended to use it, and it wasn't going to work. Just wasn't going to work. It hasn't worked, you know? Especially, well, look what happened in Vietnam. Look what's happening in Iraq, and what's happening in Afghanistan, and what's happening in Syria. These people, they're not going to forget. Plus—I don't know. Someone has their heads in the wrong place.

01-01:33:05

Farrell:

I know this is kind of skipping ahead a little bit, but just to sort of wrap up, did that experience guide you or influence you or inspire you when you later became a lawyer?

01-01:33:19

Gordon:

Always. In fact, I had a lot of trouble defending and representing non-English speaking people, and the rigidity of, all I can say is, a white man trying to hold on to his piece of the pie, and it's not working.

01-01:33:42

Farrell:

Yeah. [laughs]

01-01:33:44

Gordon:

It's not working because it's not theirs. I handled a case for ten years, and at one point in this saga—this was a company in Alabama, and in one case they told me they would give me \$400,000 for the case where the guy lost his hand in a thing, and I said, "You've got to be kidding me." They said, "Yeah," they said, "no Mexican is worth more than that." So now, the end of the case—it lasted ten years; probably cost them five, six million dollars and it's not over, because the guy's still getting his benefits. Stupid. Stupid! They were doing it on a racial basis that—you know.

01-01:34:41

Farrell:

Yeah. Yeah. Well I think this may be a good place to end for today, but is there anything else you want to add about this kind of period of your life?

01-01:34:51

Gordon:

No, if I'm elected, I'll serve.

01-01:34:53

Farrell:

Okay. [laughter] All right, thank you so much.

Interview 2: February 1, 2018

02-00:00:00

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell back with Willie Gordon on Thursday, February 1, 2018 and this is our second session. We are in California. [laughter] Willie, when we left off last time we were talking about your trip around the world after college and how you saw the world change or how your perspective and thoughts about the world had changed after that. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about what your career aspirations were when you came back from that trip.

02-00:00:40

Gordon:

Well, they pretty much were the same. I decided when I was seven years old I was going to be a lawyer. I needed the break because I always wanted to travel anyway. I was gone a year. I owed fourteen hundred bucks when I got back. I got a job at Firestone store in Whittier and I worked there and I paid off the loan, fourteen hundred dollars that I'd borrowed and I bought a car. It was a junk heap. It was a Studebaker. It couldn't lock. In those days it was pretty cheap to go to school. Like maybe a hundred dollars a semester if you were at a local Cal school. I didn't have any problem with that. Let's see. Where was I now? I actually got married at Christmastime but that was in between. Let's see. I drove up to northern California. I got a job through a friend of mine taking care of kids in the afternoon and so I was able to go to school in the morning and I would take care of these kids. They gave me a room. Then I did that for the fall and then I got married to my first wife at Christmastime. I moved out of the house but I made a deal with the owners of the house. They had a child and she gathered some other kids around so I started a day camp for boys from the town school. I would do that at night. I moved with my wife to Berkeley and got a place where I could do gardening to pay for the rent of the house. It was up in the hills. It was a lovely place. That's what I did. I went to go to school in the morning. I would do this day camp thing in the afternoon and I finally had to ask my brother to help me because I got so many kids that I couldn't do it all. We did that and I did it all the way through law school.

02-00:03:46

Farrell:

When you had moved back, how long did it take—I just want to back up a little bit. How long did it take you to pay of that fourteen hundred dollar loan?

02-00:03:54

Gordon:

Well, it couldn't have been very long because by the time I had left for San Francisco to go to Hastings I didn't owe any more money. I also didn't have any. [laughter]

02-00:04:08

Farrell:

What was it like for you to study for your LSATs?

02-00:04:13

Gordon:

Well, I don't know.

02-00:04:17

Farrell: Yeah, okay. Why did you decide to apply to Hastings?

02-00:04:23

Gordon: Because I couldn't get into Boalt. No. Actually, one of the reasons that was really important was that Hastings was a different type of format. They had classes in the morning and you were free in the afternoon. That really fit my schedule so I could work. I couldn't have gone to Boalt because I needed to work. Boalt had—they extended the classes all throughout the day.

02-00:04:57

Farrell: Was Hastings designed for people who worked?

02-00:05:00

Gordon: Probably but it was an interesting compilation of things. All the professors had retired from other very famous universities in the United States and they were all there just doing their thing. It was an over sixty-five club. It was also a menacing type of experience because you could not accumulate a grade point average. If you didn't make it one year then you had to repeat it or take a hike. There was always a threat. It was a societal menace really. This guy Snodgrass, who was the dean, I thought he was a jerk. I didn't like him. But I had wonderful teachers there.

02-00:05:58

Farrell: Can you tell me about some of the most influential professors that you had there?

02-00:06:02

Gordon: Well, I had Goebel for contracts, who was one of the finest people I ever met in my life. He was really wonderful. I had Perkins for criminal law, who was also very good. He was an ace where he came from. I don't remember where it was. He was really something. Then there was a guy named Bradshaw, I think. He was for code pleading or something like that. I always did well in that type of thing where you had details and limits to meet. Also in evidence. Geez, I can't remember who the evidence teacher was. I was very good in evidence and I liked it a lot. Then, as I said, I got married at Christmastime. Then I got pneumonia toward the end of the semester from the kids that I was working with and they treated me in the hospital. I was there for a week. Then they discovered that I had the only kind of pneumonia that kids get. But all the time I was in the hospital I was studying. I passed. [laughter] That's all I can tell you.

02-00:07:50

Farrell: What was the type of law that you were most interested in at this point?

02-00:07:56

Gordon: I really didn't know. I had a fascination for criminal law because when I was a kid I would read all these mystery things and I sort of understood that. I had a perpetual fear that anybody that I represented that went to jail, that was a failure on my part. I was very sensitive to that. I didn't want to be responsible

for putting somebody in jail. I came from a very rough neighborhood so I had my experiences with the law also. I knew what it was like to be hounded by the cops so I just didn't want to do that. I was sort of interested in politics because I had been a rep at large at Berkeley and I had been the study body president of Whittier High and I thought I could do something. But when I got to college I didn't feel the connection with the people that I felt. Let me give you an example of that. What we're doing with the library now is really important to me because I feel a very important connection with the school and I didn't feel that in those days because I was one of twenty-five or thirty thousand thing. There weren't very many Mexicans at the school and I felt disconnected from that community. So I was sort of like a fish out of water.

02-00:09:45

Farrell:

What was that like for you to feel disconnected in that way?

02-00:09:47

Gordon:

I had spent most of my life, after my father died, I'd spent in that community. It was really important to me. I felt another abandonment. The same thing happened in law school. Weren't very many Mexicans there and so I just felt isolated and alone.

02-00:10:19

Farrell:

Did you try to find that community outside of law school?

02-00:10:22

Gordon:

No, because I didn't have time. Everything was centered around getting an education and getting enough work to get the education so I just didn't have time until I became a lawyer. Then other things started to happen.

02-00:10:44

Farrell:

How did you go about mitigating those feelings of loneliness and isolation?

02-00:10:52

Gordon:

I just think I worked. I worked and I studied and I didn't know where I was going. I just knew I wanted to become a lawyer and things would take care of themselves. Which they did really. It's pretty amaz—

02-00:11:10

Farrell:

What was it like for you to move to northern California or San Francisco from LA?

02-00:11:15

Gordon:

Well, somebody gave me three hundred bucks and I didn't know who it was. I bought some clothes. I bought Hawaiian shirts and all kinds of stuff like that and I got up here and, Christ, they had the button-down shirts and penny loafers. I thought, "Boy, I was a fish out of water," I'll tell you. [laughter]

02-00:11:37

Farrell:

Much more casual up here.

02-00:11:40

Gordon: Yeah. It was more Ivy League, really. There weren't any Hawaiian shirts and stuff like that. [laughter]

02-00:11:55

Farrell: What year was this? What year did you move up here?

02-00:11:57

Gordon: Nineteen fifty-five I came to Cal and I graduated in 1959.

02-00:12:07

Farrell: Okay. What year did you start Hastings?

02-00:12:10

Gordon: Let's see. 1961 because I graduated in '64.

02-00:12:17

Farrell: Okay. What was, I guess, political climate in San Francisco in the early sixties?

02-00:12:22

Gordon: Well, Willie Brown, Phil Burton. These were some real liberal guys and they swung their power around. This was always a bastion of liberal democracy and Berkeley was always the people's Democratic Republic of Berkeley. You knew where you were. Of course, that fit my politics because I was always a Democrat.

02-00:12:54

Farrell: Did you notice that the city was racially diverse at that point?

02-00:12:58

Gordon: I know because I've since written about all that was going on. It was Irish. The cops were Irish. They hated the blacks. Well, even in the jury system, if you were a Mexican who didn't speak English you weren't treated very well. There was a lot of racial animus and that didn't change. There's a wonderful book, *The Season of the Witch* by David Talbot. The author talks about the influence that Hallinan had because he was an Irish Catholic and he did this incredible stuff for the community, for the black community, for the slightly left, far left. He did this stuff with Harry Bridges. I don't know if you know about the thirties in San Francisco but there were just vicious labor riots. This was a labor man's town. But it was also run by the downtown people. You had this conflict that was always ongoing. I remember when I was a senior in college, the guy who was the chief of police of Oakland, he was just an anti-black guy. His daughter was in the sorority where I worked. I remember being just outraged about how blacks were treated. And, then, of course, Butch Hallinan was a friend of mine. When I was in politics I used to do stuff for their liberal community. They wanted to have left leaning magazines in the student store and I was all for that kind of stuff. But the Hallinan's were important and two of the five sons were Kayo and Butch were both in and around my classes and everything. They were an influence and it was also a great reminder of what

we needed to do in the community. Of course, all that's past. It has happened since then because, in the sixties, it wasn't so much like that.

I remember the problems that the gays had. In fact, in one of my books, *The Ugly Dwarf*, I talk about it. About how you used to be able to go to Grant Street and you could go up Grant, on the other side of Columbus, and there were gay bars there. But they weren't officially gay bars. You would walk in there and there would be a bunch of dykes there. If you weren't used to San Francisco you'd freak out or something. You'd think this was Sodom and Gomorrah or something. It was San Francisco. I talked about the Black Cat, which I'd never been in. I knew about it and I described it and I read up on it. Then there was a famous case in which they said that they couldn't close it down or they had to honor the condition, the situation where the gays were given some rights. Of course, that was on paper. But the fact of the matter was that the cops, they could be paid off, but they were brutal. There were two sides to this story. There's the community is there and they're saying, well, these are the laws we live by and we're law abiding. Below the surface it was just boiling. It was a liberal city the people who were being oppressed wanted a voice. Well they got what they wanted, the City was better off for it, as was the Country.

02-00:17:45

Farrell:

Did you get any influence of the Civil Rights Movement when you were in law school? Was that something that was—

02-00:17:51

Gordon:

I also got it in college because Slate was coming of age. When I was in politics the battle was against them. Then they actually took over the student government. As always happens, they became compromised by power.

02-00:18:20

Farrell:

They were also mostly a white male organization, too, right?

02-00:18:24

Gordon:

Exactly. And that was the other thing.

02-00:18:26

Farrell:

Yeah. So it's—

02-00:18:28

Gordon:

Yeah. I mean—

02-00:18:29

Farrell:

There's issues with that.

02-00:18:31

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah. There were. That was true. These were liberal kids who got into dope and stuff like that. They did their thing. Then when they got in power they did what everybody else does. [laughter] It was very funny. I mean, it was funny but it was sad.

02-00:18:53

Farrell:

Right, exactly. Yeah. No, it's funny how it works out like that. Yeah.

02-00:18:56

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. You learn something about human nature.

02-00:19:00

Farrell:

Indeed, yeah. But when you were in law school, because it was the early sixties so it's right around the time this is happening, are any of your professors starting to talk about the Civil Rights Movement through a legal lens?

02-00:19:12

Gordon:

No. No. These were old guys. They were all retired. In fact, we finally got Prosser for torts. Prosser was a very famous name in torts but I had McLaughlin, who had been at Harvard. He was just a Boston Irishman. He didn't probably have a liberal bone in his body. He just was the law, the law, the law. This stuff, you had to just take it. But there was one guy who was a big deal in the New Deal. I think it was Bodin or Beau. I can't remember his name anymore. But he taught constitutional law. But he was also by the book. But what was happening is you got what's his name—oh, Christ. The guy who used to be the governor of California, Earl Warren. He got appointed to the Supreme Court. That was fantastic, I mean, for me. I just saw things start to roll. Until I had been to the south and I had experienced what was going on and how the black man was really treated, other than the way they said he was treated—it was a horror show. I really learned a lot in law school about the difference between the gospel that they preach and what they do in real life. It was pretty bad. I have friends since I was at Fort Benning when I was in the Army and if you walked off that base you were right in the deep south and it was just awful. It was just awful. In fact, I've also written about that in some of my work. I just couldn't believe it. The interesting thing about that was everybody had an answer about why it wasn't working. But fortunately, from the sixties to now, we get some bit of a picture of what had to happen. It's still happening because the prejudice is still there. In fact, right now I'm working—

[Interruption.]

02-00:22:11

Gordon:

For instance, I'm writing a story because James Baldwin came to my house for three or four days when he was here, in 1979 and 1980, and was teaching at Berkeley. One of the lawyers that worked for me then had been his lover in France. It was really interesting. He was there for four days and he brought two Algerian boys with him. I didn't realize how gay he was but he was really very effeminate until he started talking. When he was a powerful black preacher, his power was just overwhelming. Jesus, he was something. I had been reading up on him so I could write this story. What a sad life and what a

struggle. And not just him as a person but him racially, what he stood for and how powerful he was. He was a spokesman. But he was a lonely voice.

02-00:23:35

Farrell:

He's still powerful today. That power resonates. He really built the foundation of what a lot of people are trying to do now.

02-00:23:43

Gordon:

It's so moving. That's why I wanted to write the story. Just because I wanted to comment on what he was and what happened. This guy was a real voice.

02-00:23:58

Farrell:

How did he come to stay with you?

02-00:23:59

Gordon:

Well, because Bill Belli, not related to Melvin Belli, worked for me. Bill Belli had been in Paris in the sixties. He was a friend of Baldwin's and a friend of Jim Jones. Do you know Jim Jones the writer?

02-00:24:18

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

02-00:24:20

Gordon:

Well, anyway, he was close to those guys and Bill Burroughs, too. They hung around together in Paris. Obviously there was something going on between James Baldwin and Bill Belli. I saw some of that when they came to my house. Bill Belli was sitting in the living room with his legs crossed. Jim was leaning on him. Bill was kissing his head. I thought, "Well, {inaudible}." I already knew that there was something going on. But, Jesus, what an experience.

02-00:25:01

Farrell:

You said that when James Baldwin started talking it was really powerful. Can you tell me about some of the conversations you had?

02-00:25:10

Gordon:

Well, the conversation that I had really was about civil rights and how the Negro had been abused in the society. Of course, I knew something about that already. But the way he said it. He was so powerful and so convincing and so outrageous that it had been ignored.

02-00:25:34

Farrell:

Were you familiar with James Baldwin before that?

02-00:25:38

Gordon:

I knew who he was and I'd read one book of his, I think *The Fire Next Time* or something. I talked to Bill a lot about him because Bill wanted to be a writer but he was too scared. He was an admirer of Jim and he was an admirer of Bill Burroughs. I'm less an admirer of Bill Burroughs. I don't know. Did you ever read *The Naked Lunch*?

02-00:26:04

Farrell: Yeah.

02-00:26:05

Gordon: You did?

02-00:26:06

Farrell: Of course. Yeah. I feel like that's a rite of passage when you're younger. You have to read that.

02-00:26:11

Gordon: [laughter] Jesus, that was funny. And then, of course, there was all the other stuff going on in San Francisco about the Ginsburg and Ferlinghetti and all those guys. There was a lot of stuff that was connected. Actually, Baldwin fit into that but he wasn't a real bohemian, believe it or not. He hung around with those guys maybe for his social stuff but as a thinker he just wanted the right thing for the people.

02-00:26:57

Farrell: Yeah. I feel like the Bohemian lifestyle is a little idealistic. It kind of fits in a little bit with slate, right, where it's very privileged white men who think that they have the solution but don't really interact with people who are being oppressed.

02-00:27:08

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah. Right, right. Yeah.

02-00:27:11

Farrell: How did that visit with James Baldwin impact you?

02-00:27:13

Gordon: Well, of course, I loved Bill Belli. He was a wonderful guy. He had a drinking problem. But I stayed close to him his whole life. There was a connection between us that was actually enhanced. But I had to fire him because he was such a drunk. Then he went to another friend of mine, Bill O'Brien, and then he worked there for a while. But then he went into a program of some kind and then he sobered up. Got rid of his wife and moved to Reno where he would then call me all the time about this case and that case. He was a very slow-spoken guy and then I'd have to go through what he had to do. I had a lot of that in my life. Teaching renegades how to practice law. [laughter] Because I was pretty good at it.

02-00:28:22

Farrell: How did that visit with James Baldwin impact your style of practicing law?

02-00:28:30

Gordon: Well, I had my own priorities then and that was I was—let me go through what happened. I'm going to tell you how I got back to myself. When I finished law school and I was taking these kids around and I couldn't find a job, one of the woman whose children I took care of got her ex-husband to

give me a job. He was with a big time law firm. He sent me over to Bacigalupi, Salinger & Rosenberg. Now, that was a Jewish firm. They were business. They originally were with Giannini, the founder of the Bank of America, especially Bacigalupi. They were taking care of the Bank of America but it got too big for them. I was working for them. I didn't get along too well with some of the guys in there, although Charles Elkas was an incredible guy. But the other guys I didn't get along with. Some of them. They fired me. Charlie Elkas got one of his lawyers to get me a job at the city attorney's office. I went to the city attorney's office Tom O'Connor was then the city attorney and when people came in there and had a problem and didn't speak English they called me because I spoke Spanish. I would talk to these people. Jesus, I realized how much I missed them. I realized that I really missed them. They had me doing business stuff. They had a project called the midtown housing project or something. It was on Geary and Fillmore, I think. We negotiated. I went and I talked to the secretary of the treasury. It was my job to straighten it out, make it possible. They transferred this to some kind of a corporation or something in the city and then they could give it to low income people. But some of the high income people in the black community ended up living there because it was cheap. I was with the city attorney and I was doing this business stuff and then somebody got sick and they needed a lawyer to go and try some cases. I said, "Yeah, I'll do it." I volunteered. From then on I was a trial lawyer. I loved it.

02-00:32:05

Farrell:

Was that with the city attorney's office?

02-00:32:07

Gordon:

That was with the city attorney. I tried a lot of cases. Sometimes I'd try three or four cases a week. Then I heard that Boccardo—Boccardo's a very famous guy who was a personal injury lawyer and he opened an office in San Francisco. I went and I talked to Stan Bell, who was the partner there, and I said I wanted to work for him. They hired me. I left the city attorney's office. I wasn't there very long but I just loved the trial work. I started trying cases. And, because I spoke Spanish, I got to deal with the people who spoke Spanish. That's how I got back into the community that I really belonged in I felt.

02-00:33:08

Farrell:

Okay. I want to ask you a few questions about all that but I want to back up a little bit and kind of ask you some more about the daycare program that you founded. It was a daycare sports program for boys ages four to eight in Pacific Heights. How and why did you go about founding it?

02-00:33:32

Gordon:

Well, that's when I told you I came up here I didn't have any money and a friend of mine who was a year ahead of me but my age and my class and everything, he got me a job with a family in Pacific Heights and I got a room with that family and I took care of their son.

02-00:34:06

Farrell: So you were kind of like a nanny?

02-00:34:07

Gordon: Yeah, I was a nanny. Yeah, yeah. What happened was I got married. When I got married I asked the woman—she actually approached me and said, "Listen, how about taking our kids out and I'll get you some other boys." So that's what happened. I got a bunch of these kids and I started taking them out in the afternoon because, remember, Hastings, you would go to school in the morning and in the afternoon you're free. That's what I started to do.

02-00:34:45

Farrell: What kind of sports would you do with them?

02-00:34:47

Gordon: Oh, everything. Just baseball. I also took them to museums and stuff. Just sort of what a nanny does, I guess.

02-00:34:57

Farrell: Where were some of the places, as far as the fields and things you would them to do the sports?

02-00:35:03

Gordon: Well, there was a place called Julius Kahn, which is a playground in Pacific Heights. I think Pacific and—it's at the end of Pacific there. It's right there on the Presidio.

02-00:35:17

Farrell: Oh, I know what you're talking about. The homes kind of overlook them, that field. Yeah.

02-00:35:24

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. Exactly, yeah.

02-00:35:27

Farrell: You can see the bridge from there and everything. Yeah.

02-00:35:27

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's where I would take them. That was our main place. We played baseball, football, whatever the stuff was. There was plenty of museums around and I would take them. Especially when it was raining or something. We'd go. It was fun. I had a good time.

02-00:35:50

Farrell: How many kids were enrolled in the program?

02-00:35:54

Gordon: Well, I started out with four or five and then I got more and more so I got my brother to help me. We'd try and carry six kids in Volkswagen buses and then we would do it that way. I had three or four guys working for me by the time I was a senior in law school.

- 02-00:36:15
Farrell: How long did you do that for?
- 02-00:36:17
Gordon: I just did it when I was in law school.
- 02-00:36:18
Farrell: Okay, so just three years.
- 02-00:36:19
Gordon: My brother did it some more because I guess he was going to Berkeley then and he would do it. Then, of course, I got a job as a lawyer.
- 02-00:36:33
Farrell: Yeah, yeah. That makes sense. Can you tell me a little bit about after law school. Did you want to be a criminal lawyer or a trial lawyer after that?
- 02-00:36:45
Gordon: Well, I explained to you when I started with the city attorney I was really a business lawyer and then somebody got sick or something so I started trying cases and then that's all I wanted to do. When the thing came up with Boccardo—now, let's see, I graduated in 1965. I was with Bacigalupi for a year or so and then I went to the city attorney's office and then about 1970 or '69, maybe, I got a job with Boccardo and I was there until 1973 when I left and went to work with a guy named Phil Weltin and Bob Holstein, who was also with Boccardo. We opened our own firm and that's basically—
- 02-00:37:46
Farrell: Okay. What was it like getting hired at the city's attorney office? Did you need to go through a civil service test or anything?
- 02-00:37:54
Gordon: No, no, no. Talk about politics. It was all connections. This guy had been a deputy city attorney who was working for Bacigalupi and then he got me in there. It was just like the old boys club.
- 02-00:38:15
Farrell: Where was your office?
- 02-00:38:17
Gordon: At the city hall.
- 02-00:38:18
Farrell: At city hall.
- 02-00:38:17
Gordon: Yeah.
- 02-00:38:19
Farrell: You said that you were trying three to four cases a week. What were some of the types of cases you were trying?

02-00:38:25

Gordon: It's all municipal railway cases.

02-00:38:31

Farrell: Railway, okay.

02-00:38:32

Gordon: Except I also represented the department of public works. They loved me there because I used to kick butt. There was a lot of hangers on that come. They want to make the city pay and they have contracts and so on. I would go in there and just sort of smash statutes. Iconoclastic. Yeah.

02-00:39:00

Farrell: Did trying that many cases help you understand the way that the legal system worked?

02-00:39:09

Gordon: Yeah. I sort of understood that. Sometimes I'd go in and I would try a case just on a point of evidence, just to see how I would do it. I really learned a lot. I tried a lot of cases. I just overdid it. And I loved it. I sort of understood how it was done. I was actually a natural at it. I was pretty good. I don't think I lost. Well, I didn't lose very many cases. I'll tell you that. It was good.

02-00:39:50

Farrell: When you moved over to be a trial lawyer for personal injuries, what kind of cases were you trying then?

02-00:39:55

Gordon: Well, that was more a little bit of everything. Stan Bell, who was Boccardo's partner, he was an expert in construction accidents. The Supreme Court had just passed a case that allowed the doctrine of the restatement of torts to be applied. That is if a contractor did something wrong on the job, you could sue the owner of the job under this doctrine of 416. His negligence, the negligence of the contractor, was applied to the owner. It was a very sophisticated formula. He was an expert in that. I started working on cases like that with him. I tried a lot of those cases. And then just accident cases. As it went along, it was more serious injuries.

02-00:41:18

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to get back to interacting with the Hispanic community?

02-00:41:32

Gordon: Yeah, that was the wonderful part because I got to speak Spanish. They trusted me. I was able to help them a lot. I sent a lot of guys back to Mexico with money in those days because it was easy to represent them. We understood each other. We understood how it works. I did a lot for them and it was great. Got tougher as it went along. I don't know. Became more conservative. The judiciary became more conservative. They came more in droves though pretty soon. I was with Boccardo for three years and then I

opened my own office with Bob Holstein and Phil Weltin and stuff. In the middle of that things got tight. When I traveled all over the place, LA was good, San Francisco was good, Alameda was good, but then you go up into some of these cow counties and they weren't welcoming. You'd get your butt kicked. My famous saying was I had my ass kicked in every county in California. [laughter] That was probably pretty true.

02-00:42:58

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that? About how you would get your ass kicked?

02-00:43:05

Gordon:

I would go into a small country and try and help a client but sometimes I wasn't welcome. One of the things you learn is that you have to have local counsel if you're going to do some of this stuff because you need a friend. It's not so easy. You have to be known there. You can't win them all.

02-00:43:38

Farrell:

How did you go about developing relationships with local counsel?

02-00:43:52

Gordon:

Oh, you get a name, you get a reputation, and then you ask for help. Lawyers are, what's the word, they're fungible. If you go in there and you pay them or tell them you need their help and stuff, they'll switch sides. It's pretty easy. You'll see that right now, what's going on in Washington, DC.

02-00:44:14

Farrell:

Yeah. [laughter] How many cases would you typically take on at once?

02-00:44:18

Gordon:

Well, I carried about 600 cases and that was a lot when I was working for Bell. That was tough. When I opened my own business I had the equivalent. I had about 600 cases. Yeah.

02-00:44:37

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like to found your own firm?

02-00:44:41

Gordon:

Well, in the first place, I had a great partner by the name of Phil Weltin who was into the maritime stuff. He represented longshoremen. During the Vietnam War there was a renewed interest in the maritime business. We used to do a lot of that when I was at Boccardo and I had connections in that and so did Phil Weltin. We would do that. And then Holstein, his father had been a railroad lawyer. He did some of that. We started out with a bang. Phil Weltin had some cases and then I brought in the Latinos. We were pretty busy right from the beginning.

02-00:45:35

Farrell:

What kind of things were being argued as far as maritime issues?

02-00:45:42

Gordon:

You see, the Jones Act is a very distinct action. It's for the railroad and for the maritime and that's because these guys move around all the time. There's a specific set of rules that apply to them. For instance, proximate cause, which is a very important element in the Jones Act and the railroad cases, is relaxed because they're wandering all over the place. The burden of proof is less. You basically could go in there and try a case and proximate cause is on your side. Usually you can't sue your own employer. But in the case of the Jones Act you could. You could sue your own employer. The proximate cause is basically because he's working for you, it's the employers fault, you see.

02-00:46:47

Farrell:

Was the Jones Act specific to maritime?

02-00:46:49

Gordon:

Maritime and railroad. Yeah.

02-00:46:50

Farrell:

Okay, okay. So kind of for things that are in motion, that are moving a lot. Yeah, yeah.

02-00:46:59

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. In other words, if you're in California and you get hurt you have to follow the rules of California. But if you're on a ship you follow the Jones Act. Okay. Same thing for the railroad. If your client gets hurt in any state while working on the railroad, the Jones Act applies instead of the tort law of the State where he got hurt.

02-00:47:11

Farrell:

Okay. What year was the Jones Act passed?

02-00:47:13

Gordon:

Oh, it was 1900, something like that.

02-00:47:15

Farrell:

Okay. This had been on the books for a while.

02-00:47:18

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

02-00:47:20

Farrell:

I'm also curious a little bit about the changing landscape and the changing industry in the Bay Area. San Francisco used to be a port city—

02-00:47:32

Gordon:

Oh, always a port.

02-00:47:32

Farrell:

—and it used to be a lot more industrial and then that started to change, it seems like right around the time that you're arguing these cases.

02-00:47:40

Gordon:

Well, here's what happened. First place, San Francisco was the hub of all the companies. They all had business, they all had offices in San Francisco. When you would go to court every Monday morning you would answer, "Here I am and it's this case," and so on and so forth, "and it's against whoever," in San Francisco. But what happened was during the time that I was there in the sixties and seventies, it changed. The companies started moving out into the suburbs and into the other counties. You'd have to go to Contra Costa and you'd have to go to—so depending on where you were in trial, you would have to go somewhere else. That was a little bit unusual. Sometimes more difficult because the jurors were different. You wanted to have a jury because you figured that they were going to do better than a judge. Then in 1977, I think, they passed a comparative negligence statute. That is if the plaintiff was part negligent, then you deducted that part from the verdict. I didn't see that it was going to do much but it really did change things. Because in the old days, before that, they weren't so tough on the negligence stuff. They'd give you a break. But after that, then they started cutting it and it was much tougher. Yeah.

02-00:49:32

Farrell:

This was also during the environmental decade when a lot of environmental regulation acts were being passed. How did that affect what you were doing?

02-00:49:42

Gordon:

Well, it might have affected it. That wasn't what really affected the trial bar. What really affected the trial bar was the conservative insurance industry got a bigger hold into the community and they started writing the laws and they started screwing the working man.

02-00:50:11

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that or just explain that a little further?

02-00:50:14

Gordon:

It was just an unfortunate thing. The laws were interpreted in their favor.

[Interruption.]

02-00:50:25

Gordon:

The laws favored the working man and then it started to change. The jurists, the judges became more conservative. You had guys like Pete Wilson and—what the hell was his name? Deukmejian. They really appointed these judges that were just ridiculous. That's what hurt the trial bar. What happened was there was a thing called 209, which was a law about immigration. In some counties, right around San Bernardino and stuff like that, you couldn't get a jury that would give you a break on any Latin because there were a lot of Latins coming in over the border. They were persona non grata. It was pretty tough for a while. Even though I knew that 209, Proposition 209, was going to fail in the courts, while it was present it really did effect how the Latins were treated.

02-00:52:03

Farrell: Is that the removal of affirmative action?

02-00:52:05

Gordon: I'm sorry?

02-00:52:05

Farrell: Is that the elimination of affirmative action? Is that the one you're talking about?

02-00:52:08

Gordon: Pretty much, yeah. Pretty much. The regents didn't help any. I can't remember his name now.

02-00:52:17

Farrell: When you would be faced with not being able to get a jury or a lot of prejudice against the clients you were arguing for, how did you go about navigating that? How did you go about solving that problem?

02-00:52:32

Gordon: Well, you just had to hang in there. I spent a lot of my own money in those days handling these cases. The ones I couldn't settle I would lose. Just the way it was. But there's a really important thing about this trial work for me, which has connected to being a writer. My father was this great storyteller and he had this religion and he would get up there and he would tell the story. Basically he was saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." He would tell a story and it would go on, when I was that young it seemed to me to be hours, but I'm not sure. But what I started to do almost immediately when I was doing the jury trials, and I had a lot of them, I started to tell stories. I said to myself and I said to anybody who would listen, "I know this from my father." I said, "Just give me a half-an-hour with them and I can get this guy some money because I'm going to learn how to tell the story the way it should be told." I didn't really realize this at the time, until I started to write. But I would go in there and I would start talking and I would have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and always at the end I would save the best for the last. I would have something to say that was a little bit surprising to the jury and they always remembered it. I just did this for forty years or more. I found that that was the best education I ever got for storytelling because I was so good at it by the time I got into writing. I knew how to do it. It was a gift. It was a blessing that I had all that time. The reason I didn't get into writing sooner is because I was so hyperactive and running around everywhere that I just couldn't—and I knew I was going to be sixty when I started doing it. But that's a really important part in this whole thing.

02-00:55:12

Farrell: Yeah. We'll get to that, too, because we're going to spend a lot of time talking about that. But when you were arguing some of these cases, what was your experience working with undocumented people at that time?

02-00:55:28

Gordon:

Well, it was always the same on dealing with undocumented people. I was their voice. My mother used to tell me when I was a kid that I should read William Saroyan because he talked for the people. I read William Saroyan and I understood. He just had a way of talking.

02-00:55:56

Farrell:

That voice.

02-00:55:57

Gordon:

The voice, yeah. I would go in there and I would say, "I'm this guy's voice because he doesn't have one and he can't talk to you very well because he doesn't have the skills or anything, so I am going to talk for him." It resonated except in some places where people were so prejudiced about—they couldn't do it.

02-00:56:24

Farrell:

How was the court leaning at that point?

02-00:56:27

Gordon:

The court?

02-00:56:29

Farrell:

How was it leaning at that point?

02-00:56:30

Gordon:

Well, it started out, as I said, pretty liberal in the sixties and then it got increasingly conservative. Because what they were doing, they were appointing many judges that were prosecutors. The more they put these guys in there, the more technical they got. And then, in addition to that, the insurance people took over about writing the laws. I'm telling you, the computer was a curse. Sometimes I'd have three pages of discovery and then it went to a hundred and two hundred and then they had to start saying, "Okay, you guys have to have limits." Gee whiz. They started having litigators, guys who would never try a case but would send these big piles of paper into the court. They would say, "This is what we offer." They would sort of bombard you by the pound. It got increasingly conservative. Really.

02-00:57:43

Farrell:

What was the feeling then about immigration and rights for people who were—

02-00:57:57

Gordon:

Well, that became increasingly difficult, too. They had hard looks at people who didn't speak English or this or that or the other thing. It was a travesty. In the end, my last, let's see, ten years of practice was really tough because I lost my voice. The last case I really tried and worked on, I worked on it for ten years. It was about a Mexican guy who had his hand cut off. The company was a southern company. This went on and on and on and I got kicked out of court. I knew they were lying the whole time. I'd find out something and then

we'd get back into court and then they'd say something else. I would go back and I'd get kicked out again and I'd go out. In the end, it cost them a lot more money than it would have because at one point they said to me—they offered \$400,000 for the case and they said, "No Mexican's worth more than that." I said, "Okay, that's the way you want." I'm telling you, it cost them millions. It was terrible. But that's what we were faced with.

02-00:59:35

Farrell:

Do you have a sense of why the court became more conservative?

02-00:59:38

Gordon:

Yeah. Because the power came from the moneyed class and they were doing as much as they could—it's sort of like what's happening right now. Eighty percent or 90 percent to the wealthy and the rest of it, you can get the crumbs but you have to fight for them. It's ridiculous. The heyday of me as a trial lawyer and many other people was when the Warren people were around because they really loosened up the system—made it humane.

02-01:00:19

Farrell:

Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about Earl Warren's impact and maybe about how he changed things for you personally?

02-01:00:28

Gordon:

Well, he changed things for everybody. The whole idea of having to give a guy his rights before you could do anything. There was a big backlash against that. Guys like Rehnquist and those people came in and they ruined the Jones Act and the Longshore Act also, even though that was still an available avenue for people. They tightened that up. Money just got in the way.

02-01:01:12

Farrell:

How did they tighten up the Jones Act?

02-01:01:14

Gordon:

They changed the rule about when you could report and when you could use it. I'm trying to remember what that—there was one. Nineteen seventy-two, I'll never forget that. They changed the application of it or something. It was really bad.

02-01:01:38

Farrell:

How did that affect your casework?

02-01:01:40

Gordon:

Well, by 1972 I wasn't into that many cases of Longshoremen. This guy I was in practice with, Phil Weltin, it hurt him a lot. But he was a pretty crafty lawyer, too. There was a guy named Mansfield Davis who was the master. He got hurt big time.

02-01:02:09

Farrell:

What was the backlash against the Miranda rights?

02-01:02:11

Gordon:

Well, the Miranda rights was that they didn't want to give them any. They would say that they didn't have to do this on certain cases. It was just unbelievable. They would get excuses. Like searching people's cars. They would just extend it and extend it. When the Warren Court had come into that, he and Brennan—Black was a fantastic guy. He was a great liberal. And surprisingly, too. He came from the south. In California we had Traynor and several other judges who were very brilliant jurists and were very liberal and for the working man. Of course, they passed. And then comes Deukmejian and what's his name, the other rabid dog. Pete Wilson. They were just awful.

02-01:03:22

Farrell:

Swung the other way.

02-01:03:23

Gordon:

Oh, just totally. Yeah.

02-01:03:27

Farrell:

How long did you have your own firm for?

02-01:03:31

Gordon:

I still have it but I don't use it. I had it from 1977 until now. I was a lawyer and I had people working for me and then I didn't have people working for me and then I was by myself and I moved to Sausalito. I basically was ready to retire.

02-01:04:05

Farrell:

Okay. So once you started your own firm that was—

02-01:04:07

Gordon:

Yeah.

02-01:04:11

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about any other lawyers or judges that you were influenced by that you maybe consider mentors or just big influences?

02-01:04:24

Gordon:

Well, gee, yeah. Well, the Traynor and that group of people. They were just fantastic.

02-01:04:34

Farrell:

What kind of things did you learn from them?

02-01:04:37

Gordon:

Well, the open mind liberal and to give the working man a chance and doing stuff on it. There was a judge in San Francisco who was just fantastic, Francis McCarthy. God, I loved him. I used to go in the superior court and I used to try a lot of cases and he was just one of the most fascinating, fantastic guys. He knew everything, in the old style. When I would go in there I'd feel like I was at home, and not with everybody but with people like him. There were

some great trial judges from the old school and he was one of them. He was one of the best. He was one of the best.

02-01:05:34

Farrell: Did any of them help you to see the nuances of cases in a different way?

02-01:05:40

Gordon: When I worked for the city attorney's office, the first guy that was there was Tom O'Connor but he wasn't so active. Then George Agnost followed him. George Agnost was a very good friend of mine. Very, very good. He was a mentor. He was wonderful. He would teach me and talk to me about the nuances of cases and how to do it. When I went to Boccardo, Stan Bell was—I don't know, he was—God. I was able to walk into the room where Stan Bell was standing, talking, and I could understand the problem. Just by osmosis. He was the greatest mentor I could ever have. We loved each other because he also saw my talent. I just thought he was fantastic. We remained friends. Got a little shaky there after a while because I left there after three years and opened my own firm. Then at the end of his life there were some disputes with one of his secretaries. But he was a great lawyer. There was nobody like him in my life. I'm just telling you. It was just like unbelievable. I can just walk in the room. There's no explanation for this. It was by osmosis. I would understand what to do. It was just a gift.

02-01:07:44

Farrell: Can you describe your style of negotiating or arguing cases?

02-01:07:49

Gordon: Go for the jugular. [laughter]

02-01:07:51

Farrell: How would you go about doing that?

02-01:07:53

Gordon: I would grab them by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow.

02-01:07:59

Farrell: Just really straightforward?

02-01:08:00

Gordon: No. Just straightforward. Just straightforward. I was tough. I don't know if I am that way or not but that's the way I did it. I was pretty well respected for that and they understood that if I was on a case that was going to get tried, I just had no mercy. I just knew what I was looking for.

02-01:08:30

Farrell: Did you ever argue any cases against the city, having worked in the city's attorney's office?

02-01:08:38

Gordon: No.

02-01:08:39

Farrell: No, okay. So you didn't have to—

02-01:08:41

Gordon: I didn't have to go back there. No.

02-01:08:43

Farrell: Okay. What was kind of the geographic breakdown of the cases that you worked on?

02-01:08:50

Gordon: When I was doing it, it was against traffic accidents and construction accidents. Mostly for people who didn't speak English. That was when they had an accident on a construction job. Then I got into some product stuff. It was slow in the beginning because I wasn't sure where I was going so I had to just sort of feel my way. My firm, we sort of went all over the place. We had cases in Riverside, San Diego, Santa Ana. We had offices there and it got a little bit out of hand. Also the people that I hired or were with me then, like Holstein, I had a big falling out with him. I had a big fight. It was all about money. But I wasn't interested in the money so much. I was interested in helping the people. The most lovely experiences I had were with people from Mexico. But I did a lot of stuff for Peruvians, for Argentineans, Salvadorians, for Nicaraguans, and, of course, for Mexicans.

02-01:10:45

Farrell: How do you think that your childhood experiences helped you as a lawyer?

02-01:10:50

Gordon: Oh, tremendous, tremendous. I knew the culture, I knew the people. I also knew the bullshit. I knew when people were pulling my chain. They respected me. I got along great. As I said, I sent a lot of money back to Mexico. The only regret I have is when I send the money back to Mexico I'd tell them, "Whatever you do, keep your money in dollars. Don't change it into pesos." Of course, what would happen? They'd go back there and they'd change it into pesos and then they'd devalue the thing. What can I say?

02-01:11:38

Farrell: Where were your offices located?

02-01:11:42

Gordon: My offices were located—first one was at 625 Market. Then I went to 44 Montgomery. Then I went to 58 Second Street right above a Chinese restaurant.

02-01:12:03

Farrell: Why did you move the offices around?

02-01:12:07

Gordon: The 625 Market was too small. There was an opening in 44 Montgomery so we went in there. We had more room. Then ran into a little bit of financial

problems there and got a cheaper rent at 58 Second Street. We got a whole floor with an elevator. I was able to put my name in gold leaf on the windows. Just stuff.

02-01:12:49

Farrell:

Can you tell me about maybe one or two of the most memorable cases that you tried?

02-01:12:54

Gordon:

Well, the one I told you about, the one where the guy lasted ten years, where I finally settled it at the end, and they had to pay. They're still paying the guy because they didn't want to come up on things. I just pushed it as far as I could. Then I got a guy who took over Boccardo's firm, Jack Stein, I got him to help me. I spent a lot of money on that case. Almost \$300,000 in costs. But we got it all back. It was okay. That was one. The guy's still getting his money and everything's fine. The other one was the death of a child in Solano County. He was riding his bike and there was a fire and they didn't cordon off the fire and the guy hit him on the bicycle and killed him. I mean, didn't kill him. He had brain damage. I handled that. There was a pretty nice guy over there in Solano County who handled the case in the beginning but then they decided they wanted someone tough. They gave me this guy who was the biggest jerk I ever met in my life. I just battled him down to the end and then finally we got it. The reason I remember that is because he was such a sweet kid. These bad injuries of children really got me. Then I had another one with a kid, same thing, got injured on an accident. He was kind of a vegetable. Could say a few words and stuff. I took that one all the way to the end and then finally settled it. Then I had another one. It was a German kid who was just brilliant. He had three majors. He was just driving in a car coming up the coast. You know the Madonna Inn? Are you familiar with that?

02-01:15:28

Farrell:

Yes, yeah.

02-01:15:28

Gordon:

Well, the owner of the Madonna Inn was also a contractor or something. Their organization caused the injury.

02-01:15:39

Farrell:

How so?

02-01:15:39

Gordon:

They turned over a vehicle that was coming the other way and they landed on top of this car with his kids in it from Germany. It was really sad. It was just another one of those cases you just never get over because you see the loss of—and the problem is that you replace it with money but that doesn't bring anything back. I can tell you five or six where the parents stole the money when the kids had it. In some ways I'm sorry that I got into the money game because that's not what I enjoyed about it. I wanted to help the people. I really was bored. I should have quit being a lawyer when I was forty because after

that it was very repetitious. It's hard to get up for a case like that. My friend Jack Stein, who now has the Boccardo firm. He's two years younger than me and he's still trying cases. He tries the big ones. But so what. He should have enough money by now. I don't know. I got very cynical about the money part.

02-01:17:19

Farrell:

How did you separate yourself from your work so that you could take a step back? Some of the tougher cases.

02-01:17:25

Gordon:

Well, it was hard because I really—like right now I'm reading about James Baldwin, and I'm telling you, I'm feeling every pain that he felt. I want to know him well enough so I can actually finish the story. But gee whiz. I have tried cases where I felt like I was getting whatever the guy had who was injured. I shouldn't have been doing this anyway. [laughter]

02-01:18:02

Farrell:

What were some of the outlets you had to take care of yourself?

02-01:18:05

Gordon:

Well, I had raucous kids and I had terrible marriages. I had plenty to keep me busy.

02-01:18:19

Farrell:

How many kids do you have?

02-01:18:21

Gordon:

Well, I have one child living. [dog barking] Hey. Hey, hey. Come here. Perla. Shush. Come here. Come here. Ferocious. Only one of my children is living. The daughter, my daughter disappeared when she was twenty-eight and my son, my youngest son, died when he was thirty-five. The one that's fifty-four isn't in such good shape. He's like Peter Pan or something. He just flits around and not much you can do for him. [dog barking] Hey. Shush. Come here. I can't get up because I'll—come here. Come here. Come here. Come on. Come on. Yeah.

02-01:19:42

Farrell:

Here we go. Taming the beast. [laughter]

02-01:19:45

Gordon:

My daughter, I couldn't do much for her because she was a mess from a young age. My son I tried. I just wrote a story about that. I'm going to send it to you.

02-01:20:03

Farrell:

Yeah, please do.

02-01:20:05

Gordon:

Yeah. It's a tough one. It's a tough one. Actually, I almost stopped writing it in the middle of the story because there's not a happy ending here. It's just the way it goes. But I have a stepson who's a writer in New York. He's a good

guy. I'm very close to him. He sort of followed my advice when I would give him advice about what to do in life. He followed it. My son came and lived with us for about ten months here and I found out that he was listening to me, he just couldn't execute. That's why I say he's Peter Pan.

02-01:20:57

Farrell:

[laughter] In the midst of these pretty intense cases that you're arguing and then also your family life, were there creative outlets that you had?

02-01:21:13

Gordon:

I told you every time I tried a case I was telling the story. I was never at a loss for words. The thing that I didn't quite understand quite is that I had a charismatic experience in court. The judges liked me, the juries liked me. So I didn't understand that. I just thought it was the way—and the other lawyers aren't going to tell you that. That's what I found. When I started writing I really saw it because I knew that when I went places and I talked—and also the way I wrote. People liked it. I don't know.

02-01:22:11

Farrell:

I had read somewhere that you also had an interest in photography. Can you tell me a little bit about how that developed?

02-01:22:17

Gordon:

Well, I always did have an interest in photography. Then about thirty years ago I guess I picked up a camera and I started taking pictures. Have you ever been to my website?

02-01:22:33

Farrell:

Mm-hmm. Yeah.

02-01:22:35

Gordon:

I have some photographs there. I went to Africa one time. [dog barking] Hey. I'm going to put you in there. You hear me? Come here. Come here. Come right here. Come here. I have eleven hundred photographs of the African migration of the wildebeests and all that stuff. I've never tried to sort them because what happened was that that was another interesting intersection in my life, where I used to have an F5, which—I don't know if you know anything about cameras—but that's a film machine. And then came the digital. When you get the digital you shoot ten times as many pictures. I just got tired of doing it. I also started writing. I enjoyed being behind the camera and watching people with it. But then when I started to write I lost interest in that. I can't tell you why exactly except I think I was involved in what was before the camera. I don't know. I lost interest. I have an assistant in Spain and she's pretty good. Her name is Laura. I gave her all my equipment and it was like thousands of dollars worth.

02-01:24:20

Farrell:

So you had an F5. What kind of camera was it?

02-01:24:22

Gordon: That's a Nikon. I was a Nikon guy.

02-01:24:26

Farrell: Were you shooting thirty-five millimeters or four-by-fives?

02-01:24:28

Gordon: Yeah, thirty-five. No, thirty-five millimeter. Yeah. I tried doing slides but I didn't like them so I'd just do the film. In fact, I was just at my storeroom and I see I have five boxes of negatives and photographs from my photograph days. I saved them. People used to ask me for a copy of a photograph and I'd say, "What's the number on the back" and they'd say, "Eighty-five." "Oh, that was in the beginning." I would go and I'd find it and I'd make a copy of the thing and I'd send it to them.

02-01:25:10

Farrell: What were some of the things that you liked to shoot?

02-01:25:11

Gordon: I loved to shoot people. I had a thirty-five millimeter lens that I thought was fantastic for photographs and then the eight-five Nikon was a photographer's, a newsman's thing. That's good for photographs, too. I loved taking animals because it was fantastic. But the only one I never got was a leopard. Never got a leopard.

02-01:25:44

Farrell: They're elusive I hear.

02-01:25:45

Gordon: Elusive. Except I got one in—what's the—William Holden's Zoo in one of those countries. I took a picture of it. It was fantastic. I tried to Photoshop it to make it look like it was in the wild but it was in captivity. [laughter] I said, "I can't do that." [laughter]

02-01:26:08

Farrell: Did you prefer color or black and white?

02-01:26:13

Gordon: No, color. Well, actually, if I continued, I would have gone to black and white and I would have done portraits and stuff. I would have liked to have done that but then I lost interest.

02-01:26:26

Farrell: Who were some of the other photographers whose work you liked?

02-01:26:28

Gordon: Well, in fact, I was just reading this thing about James Baldwin. Apparently he grew up with Avedon. I wasn't a super fan of his but I liked some of the things he did. There was a guy over here in Monterey or in Carmel. I don't know. I think Clint Eastwood sort of did something. Newland? New? I'm not sure of the name. Anyway, he did some really interesting stuff. Being a

photographer is tough. It's like being a writer. You don't always get the benefits of it. But if you've got the touch. I don't think I had the touch. I just had the interest. I went a lot of places where things could happen. That's not the only one. Let me see. There were some photographers who were really {inaudible}. Annie Leibowitz, I thought she was really very interesting. She had a rough long career. She went through all that crap you can go through to get there. It's really interesting. There are some more. I paid attention to them. The ones who caught the photographs with the faces. What was that guy's name? Capa? During the Civil War in Spain? Jesus. Incredible.

02-01:28:20

Farrell: Yeah. That's for sure.

02-01:28:23

Gordon: Incredible. But what he had to give up to be there. Any moment shot through the head or something.

02-01:28:35

Farrell: Yeah. It's dangerous. Yeah.

02-01:28:38

Gordon: Yeah.

02-01:28:40

Farrell: Well, this is maybe a good kind of place to stop for today but I do have one more question for you. What did it mean for you to have such a long career working on cases that you found meaningful?

02-01:28:55

Gordon: It was too long. If I'd been able to afford it, I would have stopped and I would have done something. Because I really was bored after I was forty. I've been a lawyer fifty-six years or so. It was just too long. It was just too long. And, besides, I got immune to what I was doing and I got tired of the process. I wanted more of an intellectual challenge. There was a guy named Tom Bates. I don't know if you know who he is. He was an assemblyman for many years and then he was the mayor of Berkeley and now he's married to Lonnie Hancock. Anyway, the point was he was in the state—[coughing] excuse me. He was in the state [sneezing]—

02-01:30:05

Farrell: Bless you.

02-01:30:07

Gordon: Jesus. He was in the state legislature and he was working with policy. I would have liked to have done that and gotten away from the other stuff. [sneezing]

02-01:30:27

Farrell: Bless you.

02-01:30:28

Gordon: Sorry.

02-01:30:28

Farrell: No, no. Bless you.

02-01:30:30

Gordon: Thank you. Now, as I'm working on this story for James Baldwin, I'm having some of the same experiences I used to have as a lawyer looking up my client's injuries and stuff. I can feel this guy's pain. Jesus. I probably could have done that and then gotten away from it. It's like I'm stuck with Baldwin right now and I got to finish the story to get over the pain.

02-01:31:13

Farrell: Yeah, yeah.

02-01:31:15

Gordon: But it's one of the most enlightening experiences I've ever had because I'm really looking behind what I saw in my house and I'm really seeing something real about what happened and how difficult it was to be a black man in the seventy-seven years that he was alive. It's pretty horrible. I'm very happy that he did it because he helped so many people. But Jesus. In some ways my only experience as a person was pretty shitty in the world, too, and so that comes out.

02-01:32:12

Farrell: Yeah. It's relatable.

02-01:32:13

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. But I'm glad I had it.

02-01:32:17

Farrell: Is there anything else you want to add for today?

02-01:32:20

Gordon: No.

02-01:32:21

Farrell: Okay. All right, well thank you.

02-01:32:22

Gordon: Thank you.

Interview 3: February 8, 2018

03-00:00:00

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell back with Willie Gordon on Thursday, February 8, 2018. This is our third interview session and we are in California. Today I figured we would start talking about your writing career. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about where your early interest in writing came from. I know that you had mentioned that you knew at an early age, around six, that you wanted to write. You also at that point realized that you wanted to be a lawyer. But can you tell me a little bit about developing your early interest in writing?

03-00:01:06

Gordon:

Well, of course, you have to understand my father was a writer and he was a preacher. He would write his books and my mother would type the manuscripts. I was always around the house watching that. I would listen to him talk. I guess it was a fantasy then but I always knew I was going to be a writer. I was so hyperactive as a child that I couldn't do it then. I couldn't sort of continue to do it. But all my training, basically from then on, was predicated on basically my father's speeches. That he would get up and talk. He was a storyteller. I didn't understand the depth of it until I actually was older and I was writing *The Ugly Dwarf*, which, as I think I've said—basically my father was a dwarf. The dwarf was patterned after him because he was emotionally a dwarf. But I also knew from that time when I was six that I was going to be a writer. I also knew I was going to be a lawyer even though I had this thing in the back of my head that I was going to be a writer. I always had a facility or an ease at writing. My schoolwork and everything, I noticed that. When I went to Berkeley I studied English partly because of that but partly because I didn't speak English very well. When I became a lawyer, and this is something I didn't understand, I always thought of my father and I always said that I couldn't talk for two hours as he would talk to his parishioners, or it seemed to me that he did. But I said, "If you give me half an hour with a jury," and I knew I was going to be a trial lawyer, that I could convince them that my client deserved to get what I was asking for. From the time I made my first speech to a jury until the end, and even now if I had to go before a jury, I would practice telling the story. Now, that was also aided by the fact that when I was seven years old and I used to go out and shine shoes, and remember that librarian sort of taught me how to read, and I would pick these books up from the street car, the dime novels, and I would read those when I could. I learned something about storytelling from that. As I grew I read people like Chaucer, who I loved, from Somerset Maugham, who was a great storyteller in my opinion. Unbelievable the writers I stumbled upon. I remember reading *The House of Seven Gables*. What the hell is his name? The guy from Massachusetts there. Can't remember his name right now but I will. Nathaniel Hawthorne, who would tell the stories. I would just be transfixed by the detail and so I was a sucker. I've always been a sucker for a story. But mostly it really was the speeches I gave to the juries. I was practicing the

story, beginning, the middle, the end, and always trying, like Somerset Maugham did, to have a twist at the end and save some of the story till the end. Especially at the end when the prosecution or the defense could no longer answer, I would have something special to say to the jury. When I started writing when I was sixty, I just fell right into it. It was just so simple. Even though I didn't know where I was going in the beginning. I had the story. That's how I progressed so fast. That's all I can say.

03-00:06:31

Farrell: Can I pause you for one second?

03-00:06:32

Gordon: Yeah.

03-00:06:33

Farrell: Do you mind moving your microphone up closer to your collar?

03-00:06:36

Gordon: Oh, sure. Here?

03-00:06:40

Farrell: Yeah, that's great. Thank you. Okay. You had mentioned that your father was a storyteller. What did you pick up from his verbal storytelling? Because I think that being a storyteller verbally and on the page can be very different things.

03-00:07:00

Gordon: Well, they may be different but the context in which the story is delivered is not. I saw once a story about Chinese storytellers and then I went to China and I started to interview some storytellers. Of course, they speak a totally different language but I would listen to it. In the old days, even if you take Chaucer, the stories of history are all verbal and they were spoken. That's why the poet in the old days was so important, because he would write the poetry and it was basically the story of—you take Omar Khayyam or anybody who was a storyteller. It's unbelievable what they say. It is true that telling a story is one thing and then writing it down and preserving it is something else. For most of the time that man has been in existence the story has always been an oral history. I was aware of that. But I wasn't aware within myself that telling the story to the jury was what was going to really refine it for me. It so happened that that's what happened.

03-00:08:40

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about your process of writing the speeches that you would give to the jury?

03-00:08:49

Gordon: Well, I wouldn't write them. I had a pretty good memory and I knew where I wanted to go. Every story, every case is different because the facts are different. You have to squeeze them into the story. But the process is the same. You have a beginning, a middle, and an end and you have to pace it.

That's part of the secret of doing it. You have to know how much to give them in the beginning, what to leave out and what to put in the middle and then what to put in the end. The main concern of all this time is you must continue to educate or entertain your audience, your reader, because if you don't you lose them. The main thing was never talk so much that you lose your audience. Never write so much that you lose your audience. Make your point and move on.

03-00:09:58

Farrell:

When you were crafting these speeches, you had a sense of the facts and where you wanted to go. Would you think about it and then maybe write down bullet points or just kind of get up there and talk?

03-00:10:12

Gordon:

Mostly I'd just get up and talk. The secret there was watching one or two people in the audience. You could tell, they were your barometer. If they started to lose interest then you'd immediately refocus and try and get them back in the fold. That really worked for me.

03-00:10:37

Farrell:

You mentioned pacing. Could you tell me a little bit about how you would pace things out when you were talking to a jury?

03-00:10:40

Gordon:

Well, you don't want to give away too much. For instance, one of the big things that's important in a book, not just in a criminal story. You have to have tension and you have to have suspense. You're leading the reader on to your point and you must create an element of suspense about what you're going to say and not say it. And don't say too much so that you give it away before you get to the place where you want to do it and then make sure that you have several—as you would call them, bullet points, that you build up the suspense to and then you tell it and then you go on to something else. But never disclose the ending until you get there.

03-00:11:38

Farrell:

Can you give me an example of a particularly successful time that you did this in front of a jury?

03-00:11:46

Gordon:

Yeah. For example, I used to do heavy construction accidents and I loved them because they were mechanical and I could be building the structure and then I would always know who I wanted to blame for the accident. But I would go all around it and I would give all the details about what was not done and then who didn't do it. But I would never expose the main character until the end. Obviously the hole is there, the guy falls through it, and then you have somebody watching, pulling his hair out saying, "Why didn't I correct that?" or something. You have something like that. You are always keeping the cause of the accident a secret until it's time to tell it. That's where the discipline comes in.

03-00:12:48

Farrell:

Was there a particular case that you were able to do this successfully?

03-00:12:53

Gordon:

Oh, I had many cases. They all involved some part of a construction job that wasn't done properly. Something was lacking in the beginning and you would just mention it in passing and then in the end you see it becomes the principle factor of what was missing. That's the part of the job that failed. One of the things, you don't want to keep reminding the people about who did what. You want to tell them and then, as you head down to the end, when that part causes the accident, then you come back to them and you say, "I know you remember that Mr. Jackson is the one who didn't put that pin in the scaffold where he was supposed to because he was busy or he went to lunch," or something like that. And then you say, "Look what happened." See?

03-00:13:56

Farrell:

Can you give me an example of some of the twists that you would build into the narrative?

03-00:14:02

Gordon:

Well, you mean in the cases?

03-00:14:05

Farrell:

Yeah.

03-00:14:05

Gordon:

Well, one I just gave you. The guy was supposed to put the pin in the scaffold and he leaves it and he doesn't do it because he has to go to lunch or something. In the end you say, "Well, you remember Mr. Jackson. You remember when he didn't put the pin in there? Well, that's what caused the accident." There we are. There we have it. Okay. They may not have recognized at the time the significance of it but at the end they did. I didn't try very many criminal cases because I told you I didn't want somebody to go to jail if it didn't work. But the hidden gun that you describe in the beginning, that the guy rushes into the house and hangs up his jacket and then there's something sticking out of it or something. At the end they find that the gun was in the pocket that shot the guy and nobody knows what happened until then. You see? That's the idea. It's exactly the same in the book. You set it up. You have your client or your thing looking for something and he can't find it. I have one in the halls of power where the guy—there was a wilted daisy at a bus stop. First I have the guy looking for where the daisy came from and he goes to the flower market. Spent a lot of time on this. But not so much that the reader is distracted. Then I come back to it. They remember that somebody came in there and bought a daisy because it was very unusual because he was the type of person that wouldn't ordinarily buy a daisy. This was a wholesale flower market. Well, why did this guy buy a daisy? What did he look like? "See, I don't remember that." Someone else comes, says, "Oh, yeah, he was the guy that was dressed in black." You know that the guy in black purchased the daisy and then you know later that he used to go to a whorehouse in

Emeryville and the guy said he was always dressed in black. Then somebody sees him with the daisy and then he leaves the daisy at the murder scene. It's kind of a convoluted way but you get there and you don't really disclose who he is or where he came from until the end when you got him.

03-00:17:18

Farrell: Yeah. Slowly unfolding.

03-00:18:19

Gordon: Yeah. You start finding out other things. That he put money in his bank account, that it was \$10,000. Where did a guy like this, who's a working man, get \$10,000? So then you have your picture, you see. But you put these things together one at a time and some in the beginning where you have this guy in black. Well, it doesn't mean anything if the guy's in black. You have him at another place dressed the same way and then you have him in another place dressed the same way where you're stacking up the facts. That's the idea.

03-00:18:01

Farrell: We'll talk more about that, too. But when you were talking in front of juries, what role did performance play?

03-00:18:10

Gordon: Oh, everything.

03-00:18:11

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about that?

03-00:18:13

Gordon: I didn't understand this at the time but my appearance and my voice meant a lot. The way you present something. I'll give you a better example than even that. The other day I was supposed to go to jury duty and I went. I was conflicted between coming here and going on jury duty. I went up to the court, the judge, and I said, "Well, look it, I have an appointment with a television thing for the Berkeley Library." She says, "Well, where's your proof in writing?" I said, "Well, I don't need proof in writing. I'm an officer of the court. If I tell you something, you can count on it." She says, "No, no, you have to have a thing." I said, "All right. Let me just tell you one other thing. This guy is being tried for a DUI, drunk driving, and he's obviously an illegal alien because he doesn't even speak English. Now, I've been a lawyer for fifty years and I know what you're trying to do here. The prosecution is trying to get this guy convicted of a drunk driving because they can't touch him because this is a refuge city. But once he gets convicted he's going to go be deported. You have five cops following him. Now, this is obviously phony because they're just profiling him. Why are five cops going to follow?" I said, "It's really unfair to have that not before the jury."

She said, "Well, we're not talking about that now." Then she put me back in the crowd. They got rid of three or four people who had mentioned profiling and they were Latins and one black guy. [doorbell ringing] That's the

{inaudible}. This is becoming a shaggy dog story. The point was I was trying to shortcut was I hoped that the judge would maybe do something with the jury. What I should have done, if I didn't have this appointment, I would have kept quiet, you see, and I would have been on the jury. Or at least I would have said it in front of everybody so that the people who were in the room knew. But I didn't. That was a mistake. The question is can you take care of everybody in the world or are you going to take care of your own stuff. The technique would have been to be quiet, be chosen for the jury, and either say something about him but not enough so that they kicked you off. When you get in front of the jury say, "Look it. I've been doing this for fifty years. I've cross-examined many cops. They're all liars. Here's what I think. Even though this guy may be one or two points above the alcohol level, that's not why we're here. We're here because they want to convict him of a crime that will get him deported. They're doing it the sneaky way." If you compare the two different things—seeing what the people are doing and the prosecution is doing was always my job. That's a better example of saying and not saying than any of the others. You win or you lose based on what you know. Your experience really comes into it. That's the same thing with writing. I learned all this stuff being a lawyer. Is that bothering you?

03-00:22:44

Farrell:

No, I can still hear you. Yeah, yeah. I want to back up a little bit to when you were talking about—I know that the role of libraries in your life has played a big role and that was a place where you were able to read and find refuge.

03-00:23:03

Gordon:

Yeah. Refuge, yeah.

03-00:23:05

Farrell:

When you were reading, was that a form of escapism for you?

03-00:23:10

Gordon:

No, because I was too hyper in those days. I always read with a purpose. And had a very good memory. I would have to read four or five books spread out before me because I couldn't concentrate very well. If I read something and then I had to get up and smell the roses and all that stuff, then I'd come back. I don't know if you know much about who's what in history but Chopin was that way. I was always in tune to the people like Chopin who was probably bipolar. Had a problem with concentration and was kind of a nasty guy. But he had to be by himself a lot and then he would be back writing and then going out in the garden and doing stuff. Well, I was that way. I couldn't stick to things. Like my mother was a chemist and she tried to get me a chemistry set when I was five or six years old. But I wasn't interested in that because I couldn't concentrate enough on stuff. Even in reading, I knew how to read because I was taught but I wasn't a reader per se other than just in spurts to see what's going on. Just boom. Or in school reading five books at the same time. It's not a simple problem because I was a complicated guy.

03-00:25:04

Farrell:

Yeah. Did you always take reading seriously or was there a moment when you started to pay more attention to the way that writers were writing or the stories?

03-00:25:14

Gordon:

Well, I think it had more to do with what the content was. I was always curious about what they were trying to say. Now how they were saying it. It never changed for me. It was getting it out. Even when I write now, I quickly get to the point. Now, some of that Isabel taught me. One of the things that she always said was—she used to write plays. If you didn't immediately describe the people who were in the play, as a preface almost to what else was going to go on, you'd lose the audience. I always am very conscious of describing the site or the person as fast as I can in the beginning so that—giving three dimension to the character or the setting. That's really important. I was always looking for content and that was the most important thing. I wasn't so interested in style and I'm very surprised that people like my style. I establish these things very quickly. Then I go on to the next thing. I'm sort of impatient about that.

03-00:26:45

Farrell:

Are you a critical reader when you read other people's work?

03-00:26:50

Gordon:

Yeah. Very critical. I'm also bored quickly. If I don't get what I'm looking for I drop it.

03-00:27:02

Farrell:

What do you look for in other writers' works?

03-00:27:06

Gordon:

What do I look for?

03-00:27:06

Farrell:

Yeah. What keeps your interest?

03-00:27:09

Gordon:

Profundity. That they are talking about something that's really meaningful or that you get the feeling of what the character is like immediately. Or that you are made part of the story quickly and that you can see that something important is going to happen that's going to add to your knowledge of the world for people or a situation. I'll give you a pretty good example. I just saw something on TV. Oh, I know what it was. It was about the cheddar man. Do you know who the Cheddar Man is?

03-00:27:54

Farrell:

No, I don't.

03-00:27:55

Gordon:

Well, he is a skeleton that was found in England that is ten thousand years old. Through DNA they figured out that the guy was not exactly black but he was dark tan and he had blue eyes. But he was a man of color. This was really important because here you find that the inhabitants of England ten thousand years ago were not white. They were something else. Then you say, "Well, how did they get white? Where did all those people come from?" There's a story there. I'm interested and I would like to know. That's great storytelling. But Cheddar Man.

03-00:28:51

Farrell:

Cheddar Man.

03-00:28:52

Gordon:

He was found in a place where they now have cheddar cheese. That's the secret. So that's why they call him Cheddar Man. Nobody could figure out what they were talking about.

03-00:29:02

Farrell:

That's funny.

03-00:29:04

Gordon:

But I just thought that was just wonderful. When you watch things and you're waiting for that type of profundity in how they tell the story. The English are pretty good at that. If you read, see this junk in Hollywood, it gets pretty boring. It's just wham, bam, blow up.

03-00:29:30

Farrell:

There's no substance.

03-00:29:31

Gordon:

There's no substance. Yeah, yeah.

03-00:29:32

Farrell:

Yeah. You have been picking things up, whether that be in your reading, in talking to people, in your cases, watching TV, the whole time.

03-00:29:42

Gordon:

Exactly. The idea is that the incident comes from anywhere and you're walking around. You see it in people, you see it on billboards, you see something that says wow. They just did this book about three billboards. That's an Irish story. It's not an American story. The guy has carried it around for years and then he took it from Ireland and he put it into this thing and he just did a wonderful job.

03-00:30:16

Farrell:

Interesting.

03-00:30:18

Gordon:

Yeah, really interesting.

- 03-00:30:20
Farrell: Yeah, that's really interesting. That's a great story. I saw the movie. Yeah.
- 03-00:30:23
Gordon: Well, I mean, yeah. It didn't belong there but he made it belong there.
- 03-00:30:24
Farrell: He adapted it to—
- 03-00:30:27
Gordon: Exactly. The world is alive. Especially if you're in touch with this stuff. There's no limit. It's an exciting thing.
- 03-00:30:49
Farrell: Yeah, I agree. I totally agree. One of the biggest influences that you had was Isabel Allende. Can you tell me a little bit—
- 03-00:30:59
Gordon: Well, that's not totally true.
- 03-00:31:00
Farrell: Okay, okay.
- 03-00:31:01
Gordon: The biggest influences I had were people like Chaucer. When I was with Isabel, the things that we had were things in common. Like, for instance, creative visualization where—I think I told you about the fact that when I was a lawyer I would have people come into my office and they'd tell me, "Oh, I had this terrible accident. I had this." I would say, "You know, I'm really sorry but I can't help you if that's the way the accident happened. But if it happened this way," and I would tell them, "then I could really do something for you." The next day they'd come back. They said, "You're absolutely right. It happened exactly the way you said. Gees, how did you know?" I could see things. I would put my own brain to work and I would say, "Okay, here's what could have happened. If this happened I could help you." I saw Isabel doing the same thing. This was somebody personal. I saw. I didn't realize that I had this talent until I saw it in her. I'd say to her, "Well, you can't be that way. Let me tell you why." And then I would tell her. She'd say, "Okay."
- 03-00:32:33
Farrell: How did you guys meet?
- 03-00:32:34
Gordon: We were introduced by a friend of mine who was a professor of Hispanic literature at San Jose State University. She brought her over here for a talk. We met and she never left until twenty-seven years.
- 03-00:33:00
Farrell: Were you familiar with her writing before that?

03-00:33:02

Gordon:

No, but the professor gave me one of her books to read so I was familiar with *Love and Shadows*, one of her books. I said I would like to meet her. Yeah.

03-00:33:12

Farrell:

Okay. What did you take from that story or that book?

03-00:33:18

Gordon:

Of that one I said that she thought about love the way I thought about it. But that was just superficial. I liked her storytelling. She did some of these things that I've been talking about, so I could visualize the story.

03-00:33:34

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about the creative visualization? Just what that means to you and how you developed that?

03-00:33:44

Gordon:

Yeah. It means that you see things or you visualize the way things happen. I can't give you any more specific thing. Somebody falls off a roof and he falls off because something isn't done right and so on. Something has to be there that causes him to fall. You see him falling and everything and you understand why. You say if this happened there had to be something wrong with the place where he was working. That's where you start. So you see this and you know what happened. If the guy tells you something else, if he says that he tripped, why did he trip? Well, you have to know all that stuff. But, for instance, when you're doing this, you actually see it happen. When I create something in a book, it's the same thing that happens. I visualize what's going to happen next. I just write down what I see as quickly as I can and put as much as I can together with it. Right now I'm writing a short story about James Baldwin. He was only in my house for four days. But I've been reading about him and I can include some antidotes. I can visualize this because he's given me the antidote. I write what I see. That's basically what creative visualization is. With Isabel, she was talking about a story that she was telling about a child that was molested by her stepfather. She forgot all about it. She says, "I'm really worried about this." I don't know if the people are going to believe it or not. I said, "Well, when I was a kid, I read this book about a woman who used to play on a merry-go-round and she would talk to the horses and all that stuff on the merry-go-round. Then when she grew up she forgot all about it." But she used to take her daughter to the same thing and her daughter would talk to the horses and stuff. She would say, "What are you doing?" I said, "It's totally feasible that a child has a depth of memory that a parent doesn't have and that she can forget that when she grows up." That was the basis of her story and that's why she was able to do it, because she understood from talking to me that this could happen, even in fantasy or in reality. That's a pretty good example of what I'm talking about.

03-00:37:28

Farrell:

At what point in your life did you start writing? I know that you became a writer when you retired but were you writing from your legal career?

03-00:37:40

Gordon:

I would write from the law. What was happening in the law was really just having this ability to listen to people and then to say, "Okay, we can't do it that way. We have to do it this way."

03-00:37:57

Farrell:

Right. But creatively, at what point in your life did you start just practicing?

03-00:38:02

Gordon:

I'll tell you, when I was sixty. The first thing I did was I had a teacher. His name was Clive Matson, who was a poet, and he had a reading class. I didn't know. Somebody took me over there and said, "Try this." I wrote some stuff and I did it and turned it in and I read it. Then someone in the class said, "Wow, what a powerful narrator." I said, "I was just waiting to hear that." I didn't know if anybody was going to accept that. I didn't even know that I was that good a lawyer, believe it or not, until female judges came in and they would listen to me. The other lawyers were telling me, "Jesus, you've got her in your pocket, you've got her. Just blah, blah, blah." I said, "I had no idea that I was that effective. When that person said, "What a powerful narrator," I thought, "Wow, something's going on." [laughter]

03-00:39:20

Farrell:

Where were you taking that class?

03-00:39:23

Gordon:

I was taking it—well, it turned out—done at my house for years but I started in 2000. Maybe it was 1998. But I had a case. I would go to Oakland once a week and we would go over these things. Supposed to write ten pages or something.

03-00:39:47

Farrell:

Where in Oakland?

03-00:39:50

Gordon:

Somebody's house, the guy's house.

03-00:39:52

Farrell:

Okay, so it was informal.

03-00:39:54

Gordon:

It was informal. But every week you would go there. It wasn't every week, it was every two weeks.

03-00:40:02

Farrell:

How did you get connected with that informal writing group?

03-00:40:03

Gordon:

A guy named Ward Schumaker was a friend of mine who is an artist and a writer. He invited me to go with him. That's what happened.

03-00:40:16

Farrell:

Did you spend a lot of time with the literary community leading up to that, in the late eighties and the nineties?

03-00:40:24

Gordon:

Well, when I got together with Isabel, it was 1987. I traveled with her, carried her bags. I met all of her publishers. I met writers. I met personalities. I spent some time with them. Not a lot. Some. I read some of their works and some of them I didn't read because I didn't like them. I looked at them as more people than writers and stuff. But some of them, like Khaled Hosseini, I just clicked with him right away because he was my kind of guy. He still is.

03-00:41:08

Farrell:

What made him your kind of guy?

03-00:41:11

Gordon:

He's just an empathetic person. He also was a mystery reader when he was very young. In fact, he gave me a blurb for one of my books. He's a good friend of mine. Because he really is a person. I always chose that over—

03-00:41:32

Farrell:

Ego.

03-00:41:33

Gordon:

Ego. Yeah. I can give you twenty names of just jerks.

03-00:41:40

Farrell:

Yeah. Being around the literary community in that capacity and seeing writers as people and not as stars, did that help you realize that being a writer was obtainable?

03-00:41:59

Gordon:

Sorry. That's the wrong question. As a lawyer I saw the same thing. I saw there were really great guys and then there were jerks. Some of the jerks were fantastic lawyers, great manipulators of people. They had their success. I don't know what it was. It was something ridiculous about what they really were. Whatever goes up goes down. These guys had a plateau or something for what they do. But they're jerks and they're going to end up jerks. I was looking for humanity and pathos. The real value. Those people I've kept. The ones that aren't that way, I just forget them.

03-00:42:56

Farrell:

I guess maybe what I was trying to get at, was there ever any sort of hesitation or sort of intimidation about becoming a writer or was it just, "I'm going to try this and see how it goes?"

03-00:43:11

Gordon:

I didn't hesitate because I didn't understand what the power of becoming a successful writer meant or anything. I just did it. I didn't have any perception of what was ahead of me. I didn't care really so much. I didn't have any

confidence that I was ever going to be a writer of any consequence—and I still don't have that, don't feel that way. It's not what I was looking for. I always just wanted to tell my stories and fulfill my mission that I had in my head and that was you're going to write a book or two or three or six. The more I got into it the more I enjoyed it. I was surprised that people enjoyed my writing as much as they say they have because I didn't expect that. I don't know.

03-00:44:29

Farrell:

When you started taking that class in Oakland, what was your goal?

03-00:44:34

Gordon:

Just to write a book.

03-00:44:36

Farrell:

Where did that goal come from? Why did you want to write a book?

03-00:44:38

Gordon:

I just knew I was going to do it. I said I was going to do it and I started to do it and that was what was so fantastic.

03-00:44:54

Farrell:

Because the idea of writing a book can be so daunting. Was it one of those like affirmative things where you just put, "I'm going to write a book," and so you're putting it out there and you're making yourself accountable? Or were there times where you're like, "I can't do this."

03-00:45:09

Gordon:

Yeah. No, well, there's always that. [laughter] What happened was I finished this book and it was long. It was seven hundred pages, called *Flawed*. I loved writing it. I didn't spend a lot of time sending it to here or there or anything. A couple places I sent it, they rejected it. Then I was finished that after a couple years. I really couldn't get into writing so much because I had a case that was kicked out of court in 1998 and it went through the appellate process and came back. In the year 2000 I got the case back and I spent two more years fighting the case. I was writing and fighting the case. I finally finished the case and then I say, "Okay, I'm ready to do this." It was a ten-year case. Then I wrote a short story. I had a court reporter who used to read my stuff in the beginning and she said, "You know, this is better than your long novel." It's shorter, crisper, and everything. She said, "Why don't you try writing mysteries." I said okay. That's how I got back into the mystery thing.

03-00:46:53

Farrell:

Okay. I want to ask you more about that process but just before we get there I am interested a little bit more about that class that you were taking. How many people were in that class?

03-00:47:06

Gordon:

Oh, there was anywhere from six to seven. I will say this. I love Clive Matson. He's a good friend of mine. He was the wrong guy to direct me anywhere. He just would comment on what I wrote and everything I wrote was okay. I

needed to go back and use my experience reading crime fiction and then reading the stuff I was telling you about with my father, beginning, middle, and end, and the surprise and all that. I went back and I started doing that. I knew a lot about mysteries because I was always interested in them and I was always interested in the way they progress. One of the reasons I didn't want to go into the mystery thing in the beginning was because I got really tired of breaking down the door and shooting the six guns six times and then I learned that Earl Stanley Gardner and all his guys used to do that because they got paid by the page and you had to discharge all six bullets because you made more money. I said, "I don't want to have a guy like that," because I read all their stuff. I want my guy to be more like Columbo or something. That's why I got a reporter and that's why I used that to sort of make it more interesting. Because I got a reporter because he couldn't do all the stuff that the private eye or the cop could do. He needed everybody's help. I wanted to make the other characters as viable and as alive as I could. They had to share the stage with all these other people. That was more interesting to me. I didn't make him violent. I didn't make him knock down doors or anything else.

03-00:49:25

Farrell:

Right, yeah. When you were learning how to write, how were you initially, in the early days, structuring your stories?

03-00:49:35

Gordon:

Well, I was trying to tell a coming of age story in the first place and that was flawed. It's one of the best things I ever did. Not because it was such a great literary thing but I got the stories out. I just had a friend of mine recently who read that who commented on it when I sent her this article that came out in The Library Journal. She said, "I always knew that if you could get your shit together, that the stories you were telling, you were going to make something of yourself. Now I see it's happening. I always knew it was going to happen if you figured out how to do it." But the stories wrote in Flawed, I have used every one that I wrote about in that book except maybe two. I'm still thinking about using them in another book or in something. Because they were really important to me. The stories themselves were well structured. They just didn't fit together in a book. Everyone had to be separately stated and have its own beginning, middle, and end. That was really important. Every writer has a trunk book. You know what a trunk book is?

03-00:51:09

Farrell:

I do but can you explain it for the audience?

03-00:51:11

Gordon:

Yeah, I will. Well, a trunk book is you write something that's really important to you and then somebody who also is important to you or was going to help you in your career says, "That's a nice story but go in the bedroom and open the trunk and put it in there and leave it there and then do something else." Everybody who's been a writer has or should have a trunk book or a trunk full of books that haven't worked. That's why I tell people now write and don't

ever throw anything away because you'll come to use it someday, usually you to revise it or rewrite it, but most the time it has your voice or you can work more easily to have your voice.

03-00:51:57

Farrell: What made you want to write a coming of age story?

03-00:52:01

Gordon: Gosh, I don't know. Just wanted to do that.

03-00:52:04

Farrell: Did you find writing *Flawed* cathartic in any way?

03-00:52:07

Gordon: Yeah, sure. Sure.

03-00:52:10

Farrell: What was it like for you to write that?

03-00:52:13

Gordon: It was exciting. I never looked at it as anything but exciting. I was telling a story. Maybe it was my story but it was every man's story. It had everything in it. Loss, joy, happiness, failure. Everything. I touched on all those things. Sexuality. In fact, the dwarf turned out to be an outlet for the sexuality that I was trying to describe. Then I found that he was a useful person to talk about because he reminded me so much of my father. I also had the dominatrix in there and then I realized that she came from my father's lover, assistant, and I used her, too.

03-00:53:14

Farrell: Yeah. We'll talk more later about how you parceled those stories out into some of your other books, because we will talk about your books specifically. Between 1998 and 2002 you've got the law career but you're also writing. How would you structure your day and how much time would you spend writing?

03-00:53:36

Gordon: Well, I would do all my law stuff in the morning and partly in the afternoon and then I would come home and then I would write. I would do everything that I had to do on my personal stuff, I would do that in the afternoon. I did that for a long time. But especially then. I still was pretty hyperactive so I would do all my other stuff and then I'd come back to the end. As I've gotten older and then I got sick and I didn't have the strength to do it that way so I started to have to do it in the morning. Now when I try and write or do something I have to do it in the morning. Or if I talk to you on TV I have to do it in the morning because I get too tired. [laughter]

03-00:54:31

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about your writing process and how that's either developed or changed over time?

03-00:54:38

Gordon:

The main thing is that I do it now in the morning when I do it. I sit down and I sort of wait for the inspiration. Not a good idea because sometimes it doesn't come. I never throw anything away. I don't know why. When I start writing I can always use it, even if I have to edit or rewrite something. I haven't had much luck with editors because I haven't found any really good ones. I basically write and then I have a few people that I trust who comment on it.

03-00:55:21

Farrell:

Okay. Do you type on a computer or do you do longhand?

03-00:55:25

Gordon:

Well, I used to write by hand and I would do all that and then I would edit it myself when I put it in the computer. But then after about four books I realized that I probably should just do it on the computer. I've gotten much better at doing that.

03-00:55:46

Farrell:

Was that a big transition for you? Going from longhand—

03-00:55:49

Gordon:

It was a transition. I also had a big hero. What the hell is his name? The guy who wrote *Sand and Fog*? He used to write by parking his car by the cemetery and writing by hand. Then he would come back. Andre Dubus, the son.

03-00:56:14

Farrell:

The guy who wrote *The House of Sand and Fog*?

03-00:56:16

Gordon:

Yeah.

03-00:55:16

Farrell:

I don't know who the author is. But yeah.

03-00:56:18

Gordon:

Yeah, Dubus. His father was a writer, I believe. Anyway, then his father was in a terrible accident in which they amputated one of his legs; I followed him. He was my hero for a while, as many others were. That's what he used to do. I've sort of lost track of him now because I have my own stuff to worry about. But I just loved the idea that he would go and sit by the cemetery and write and then come back home and then put it on the computer. It became much easier to just put it directly on the computer and so that's what I do now.

03-00:57:13

Farrell:

In the early days did you find that the thoughts flowed better when you were writing by hand?

03-00:57:18

Gordon:

I thought that. But now they flow just as well on the computer. Yeah.

03-00:57:24

Farrell:

Okay, okay. When you're out in the world do you carry a notebook or anything if you have an idea that hits you or you just kind of mentally catalogue that?

03-00:57:32

Gordon:

No, I mentally catalogue it because I always thought I had a pretty good memory. But now, as I'm getting older, probably should have a notebook. [laughter]

03-00:57:44

Farrell:

[laughter] Were you involved in any other writing groups or writing classes when you were first starting out?

03-00:57:50

Gordon:

No. That's the only one I've ever had. I felt bad when I stopped this group because there weren't good writers in it anymore. I was the only one who ever got published in this whole thing. I stopped going there. I also changed how I wrote. I was so intent about time limits and stuff and getting a book out and stuff. I didn't want to do that anymore. I also started to write short stories. I have really enjoyed doing that a lot but it's slower. Like right now I'm reading about James Baldwin. I'm going to put some of his anecdotes in there as though he told them to me. But the other one—like, for instance, I have one about Hemingway when he tried to beat the crap out of me in Pamplona. I just want to tell that story.

03-00:59:02

Farrell:

Did that story actually happen?

03-00:59:03

Gordon:

It happened to me, yeah.

03-00:59:05

Farrell:

Are you comfortable sharing that story?

03-00:59:07

Gordon:

Sure.

03-00:59:08

Farrell:

I know you're going to turn it into a short story but do you mind sharing that?

03-00:59:11

Gordon:

Oh, just that I was walking down the street, probably had a heat on because I was with two buddies of mine. This madman came out of a bar and wanted to choose me off because I was talking in Spanish to somebody and I think he didn't like the fact that I was a Gringo talking Spanish. I was crushed when I found out it was Ernest Hemingway. They dragged him back in the bar and he was just smashed. Shitfaced is what we would say. He went home to Idaho that year, 1960, and then he killed himself. I was really crushed. I don't know, sometime later, two or three years later or something—no, it was a long time

after that—I read *Iberia* and in *Iberia* there's this thing about Hemingway and how he used to choose off everybody. I thought, "Gee, whiz, I'm one of the guys he chose off. I feel pretty good about that." [laughter]

03-01:00:22

Farrell: How did you find out that it was Ernest Hemingway in the—

03-01:00:25

Gordon: Because the guy told me. He says, "Look it, you don't want to mess with this guy because this is Ernest Hemingway and he knows how to box." I said, "Well, save him from me." [laughter]

03-01:00:40

Farrell: [laughter] You let him live to see another day.

03-01:00:42

Gordon: But, you see, that's a much more interesting story than just Ernest Hemingway because I was with a guy who also knew Ava Gardner. We went to Madrid and she took us out to all the flamenco clubs where she would—everybody loved her because she was a—but she was kind of dumb. I was trying to get back to her hotel so I could get after her. But her agent stopped me. This other guy, this friend of mine who was with me and was her friend, he came back and he lived with her and he became a drunk because she was a drunk. Now he's dead. She's dead, too.

03-01:01:36

Farrell: Yeah, they all are at this point.

03-01:01:38

Gordon: Yeah, that's right. That'll teach them to mess around with me, or not mess around me as far as Eva goes.

03-01:01:43

Farrell: [laughter] You had mentioned that you didn't have a lot of luck with editors. Can you tell me about your experiences? I mean, editing has changed so much in writing.

03-01:01:54

Gordon: Well, here's the problem. I was sixty years old, okay. I was not the classical guy that a publisher would be even interested in because no matter what I did I was going to have a short life span as a writer. I couldn't find a publisher or an editor who would really take me except Isabel's publishers in Europe were interested in me because of her, you see. [dog barking] I had luck in Europe. My books were published in Spanish and several other languages before they even came to the English market. I didn't have time to get a hundred rejections because I just wanted to get my stuff out there. That's why I started publishing my books in English myself. That's been wonderful because I get them out there. In fact, sometimes I just stand on the street corner and give them away or my wife does. [laughter]

03-01:03:17

Farrell: Oh, sorry, go ahead.

03-01:03:18

Gordon: That's the reason. I have never found an editor that was really that good.

03-01:03:26

Farrell: Have you tried to hire editors?

03-01:03:29

Gordon: I have tried to hire them.

03-01:03:30

Farrell: What have you found?

03-01:03:32

Gordon: Lacking.

03-01:03:34

Farrell: Are they not reading it or are they not giving you good feedback?

03-01:03:37

Gordon: I guess it's a complicated process to become a copy editor. I heard of some good ones. Like Khaled Hosseini has a very good copy editor. I have a big problem with publishers because I don't want somebody telling me that I need to have X amount of things published or they don't want to touch me. That's not why I'm writing. I'm writing to get my works published and out there. That's what's been so thrilling about my career is that that's what I've done.

03-01:04:13

Farrell: Yeah. You don't want to have somebody telling you that you need to play the game in order to succeed.

03-01:04:17

Gordon: Yeah. That's exactly what I learned. I started listening. For instance, there are publishers who won't even take you to read your work unless you have a certain editor. The certain editor is trained by them to say, "Look it, this is what I'm looking for." It's usually crap. I'm sorry. There's a lot of books published in the United States that aren't even worth using for toilet paper. I just want to get the stuff done, written. I still have a book that my father wrote in 1943 that I have on my shelf. He wasn't Mr. Gallan. He just did the same thing. He published it himself sold it to his parishioners and stuff. Dollar a copy. Dollar to get in, dollar to get out. I'm just being practical about what's important to me.

03-01:05:23

Farrell: Who are some of the publishers that you admire?

03-01:05:28

Gordon: That I admire? Well, I admire my Spanish publisher, Random House, because they've taken care of me there. I don't know. Simon & Schuster has a great

editor. She's Columbian. I like her. I've met her. She remembered reading my first book in Spanish. I like her. I admire her.

03-01:05:57

Farrell: What do you like about her?

03-01:05:59

Gordon: That she remembered my book and that she's high quality.

03-01:06:06

Farrell: In a perfect world, what does a good editor look like to you?

03-01:06:11

Gordon: Well, an editor—I'm using it as a publisher. Someone who will sort of take you under his wing and really make allowances for you. I had a Spanish Publisher for my first and second books, Juan Pascal. He was like my God Father. He really took care of me. And for instance, Isabel had a great publisher in Germany, Unsel. He was a wonderful guy. He was a drunk, he was everything else. But he had a guy. He used to have some writers that he would sort of take under his wing and he would keep them and he would do anything—I had a guy like that in Brazil. Sergio Machado, ran Record. Even my books, he would sort of be my mentor. He liked me and I liked him. And then he died. As soon as he died his sister took over the Publishing House and she said she didn't want to carry me anymore because she wanted romances and I wasn't going to write romances. The thing is that there are publishers in the US, and I don't know who they are, that will take care of you like that. But that's not the ones that are prevalent.

03-01:07:36

Farrell: That's the exception, not the rule.

03-01:07:37

Gordon: That's the exception. Yeah, yeah.

03-01:07:38

Farrell: Yeah. You also mentioned that you have a few commentators. What role do they play in helping you shape your books?

03-01:07:48

Gordon: Well, they're really helpful because they say, "You know, I like this but when are you going to have a love scene or something like that?" Or "I don't like this guy and I'll tell you why." They tell you why. Or they say, "Stop emphasizing this and do this." If it's somebody you really like then you pay attention to them. Otherwise you just don't pay attention.

03-01:08:23

Farrell: How many commentators do you normally have look at a single piece?

03-01:08:28

Gordon:

Well, it depends. Lately I have about five or six people who are reading my short stories. Sometimes it's because it's about them. Like I have a short story called *The Lord of the Pampas*, which is about an Argentinean friend of mine. It's about San Francisco. Anyway, so I sent it to him and I said, "Read it." He said, "Oh, it's fantastic. I love it," this and that, "but what the hell are you giving me Chilean wine for? I'm Argentinean." I said, "Well, I had to do it that way but I'll change it." I put in Norton classic Malbec instead of the Chilean wine. But the other people who have read it say it's a great characterization of him. I just did it because he's a character. A real character. The story is fanciful and all that crap. I wrote another story, *I Dream of Zombies*. That one I put the dominatrix in there, about how she had to go to jail. She really did have to go to jail. My father's lover had to go to jail for practicing black magic. In jail she wrote a thesis about how to create zombies and she wrote it on sheets of toilet paper. A thousand sheets of toilet paper and stuffed it under her mattress and then when she got out she got a buddy of hers to come to San Francisco and they started creating zombies. That's a story. I like the story. We'll see. But I've done the story. Just haven't given it wide display. *The Wishing Well*. I've had that published in Spain. Also *A Troubled Boy*.

03-01:10:44

Farrell:

Yeah. I read that. Yeah.

03-01:10:45

Gordon:

Those were personal things of mine. I loved telling those stories because they gave some insight into me and some of the important issues that I wanted to talk about.

03-01:11:00

Farrell:

What's it like for you to give a piece to somebody who it's based on?

03-01:11:06

Gordon:

Oh, it's funny because I treat them kindly. Horacio was my Argentinean friend. The guy's six foot eight. He's a drunk and all that stuff but he's a great character. He should belong in everybody's novel.

03-01:11:21

Farrell:

How do you approach them when you're giving them the piece?

03-01:11:25

Gordon:

I don't approach them. I tell them.

03-01:11:26

Farrell:

You do? But what do you say to them?

03-01:11:28

Gordon:

Yeah. They love the idea. They love the idea.

03-01:11:30

Farrell:

Okay. Have you ever had any pushback for that?

03-01:11:33

Gordon:

No. No. Not yet. Of course, I've been pretty kind to the—I don't know. People like to read about themselves.

03-01:11:45

Farrell:

That's true. They do. They do. That's for sure. I wanted to talk a little bit about the role of noire. There was a point where you realized that you should be writing crime mysteries. You have your own—I mean, what you may not consider style but having read your books there is a style there that does depart slightly from like the—

03-01:12:07

Gordon:

Classic.

03-01:12:09

Farrell:

—quintessential noire thing. But can you tell me a little bit about your interest in noire? Do you like noire? Did it play a role in your life leading up to this?

03-01:12:19

Gordon:

Well, I think we talked about this before, where I used to go on a streetcar downtown to shine shoes and then I would go around and I would see when people had left dime novels. A dime novel in those days was basically like the tango was in Argentina. The poor people read these books because they cost a dime and then they'd be through with them and they'd leave them on the streetcar and I'd pick them up. I knew that it was poor guys like me that lived in that place where I lived. Actually, it was amazing that they were in English even. But they were. I took the ones in English and I would read them. That was noire. The movies were all noire. You went to the movies. Humphrey Bogart was in his prime. James Cagney and all these guys, they were there and there and they would bust up the place and get the six gun out and get six shots off. The tough guy was always there. Nobody can forget Chandler's Marlowe as portrayed by Robert Mitchum. Jesus, he was the greatest noire heroin the history of—he was better than Chandler's Marlowe's depiction of him. He was fantastic. These guys made an impression on me.

03-01:13:57

Farrell:

What did you like about noire? Noire films?

03-01:14:00

Gordon:

Huh?

03-01:14:00

Farrell:

Noire films.

03-01:14:01

Gordon:

Well, Humphrey Bogart was spectacular, the tough guy with the great lines just like Marlowe, the this and that. And remember, I was poor. I didn't even have a living room to go to in the high-rise apartment or whatever. Just the one liners and stuff. This is the thing that dreams are made out of. The famous lines. I still watch that movie and think, "Wow, that's amazing that they could

do that." But I also got tired of the brutality. I wanted to have a more subtle hero—since I grew up around the marginal characters of the world I wanted to have them play a bigger part in the mix. One thing that was really important that we talked about briefly today, that I wanted the guy who was the principal character not to be able to do the things all himself. I had everybody—he had to go to other experts and people and he needed a lot of help to get where he was going. I always thought that was really wonderful because I could bring in other people who were essential to it.

03-01:15:37

Farrell: It makes the story more rich.

03-01:15:39

Gordon: Yeah, it does. And also, you can get a little bit deeper into the marginal character of the criminal because there's something wrong there generally. Why is the guy going to go to a life of crime?

03-01:15:59

Farrell: By including those other voices the story becomes more textured.

03-01:16:02

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. That's why I do it. Some of it without even intending to, just because it's me. That's how I got started.

03-01:16:15

Farrell: Were you a fan of James Cain, who was the pioneer of noire genre film?

03-01:16:21

Gordon: I would say no, not initially. He did some great work in films like *The Postman always Rings Twice*, later *Double Indemnity*, but he didn't get the publicity the others did. I don't know if you know who Claude Mesplède is but he is really one of the granddaddies of noire literature. He does a dictionary of crime writers. And, of course, he's an old man now and he's got Parkinson's. But I spent almost a week with him and what a wonderful guy. He's talking about all of that. He gave me a book by a Chicago writer of the thirties. Unfortunately I don't remember his name right now. But I gave his book to a Chicago woman who knew him and she was very grateful because it was published in 1935 or something. He started to bring humor into noire. He was one of the first guys that did it. When we go to have breakfast with her, we talk all the time, and she's amazing because she talks about Chicago in the old days and stuff like that. It's amazing. But he was an amazing guy. Like, for instance, that's a person I met who just enriches your life just because you talk to him.

03-01:17:48

Farrell: Yeah. At what point in your life did you meet him?

03-01:17:53

Gordon: It's been about five years now.

03-01:17:55

Farrell:

Okay. How did it end up being that you went to spend a week with him?

03-01:17:59

Gordon:

Well, because I have an assistant in Madrid who has really helped me immeasurably in the Spanish speaking world. She's a big fan of mine. She goes to France a lot and she set it up so I would meet him. And so it's been great. She also represents a French writer who I've also met. In fact, we were in Columbia with him and both he and I ended up in the hospital. He's very successful in France. Not so much anywhere else. But he sells a million copies a year in France, which is unheard of. He's a character. I really like him. Now, there's a guy I really like.

03-01:18:56

Farrell:

Did you spend the week with him in France?

03-01:18:59

Gordon:

With Claude. Yeah, in France. In Toulouse. Yeah.

03-01:19:01

Farrell:

Okay. What was that week like for you? What did you learn? How did that impact you?

03-01:19:05

Gordon:

Well, the talks with him and some other people who—there's a lot of Spanish writers and people who are in France because of the problems with Franco and all that stuff. You have a whole colony of people in the southern part of France who speak better Spanish than they do French. There's a market for books in Spanish, writers. I don't know what you know about having connections in other languages but Spanish is a fantastic language because wherever you go in South America and parts of Europe, you have colonies of these people who just—they embrace you. It's a wonderful experience. It's a wonderful community and there's some great writers. They don't have the hostility or the egos of people in the United States. There's not their façade. It's really interesting.

03-01:20:26

Farrell:

When you spent the week with him, what did you learn from him?

03-01:20:30

Gordon:

I learned from him just to keep on going. He liked my work. He read one of my books in French and he liked me very much and he said I was talented. When you hear somebody like that say you're talented, I'll tell you, that's great.

03-01:20:50

Farrell:

Yeah. What did you guys do during that week?

03-01:20:51

Gordon:

I drank a little bit more than he did because he has this problem. We had lunch and dinner with people, writers. Because he's like the guru and people come from everywhere to talk to him.

03-01:21:10

Farrell:

Did it make you feel like part of the literary community?

03-01:21:14

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

03-01:21:15

Farrell:

Do you feel like you have a literary community here in the States?

03-01:21:20

Gordon:

Not much. I have friends but I'm not part of any community. I just get tired of going to these conferences and I hear these people sort of bragging about what the hell they're doing and they're not doing much. But I have some friends and I like them very much.

03-01:21:44

Farrell:

Do you like the international writing community better than the domestic?

03-01:21:47

Gordon:

I do. Yeah.

03-01:21:50

Farrell:

Aside from the ego, how are they different?

03-01:21:53

Gordon:

Well, they're more realistic. Being a writer anywhere is a struggle and it's more of a struggle in Spain and Latin America than it is here because you can have another job that pays you well or you can have a job—if you're really lucky, you can have a job as a writer that pays you well. But you're also subject to a lot of pitfalls that you shouldn't have to worry about. If you publish a book with somebody and you don't sell enough, you're out. I know people who have written three or four books and because of their connections they get the book published but they can't get it published again from the same publisher. You have to have a day job.

03-01:22:46

Farrell:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah. Yeah.

03-01:22:50

Gordon:

So those things. The result of the work is not so good. Because they're beholden to their publisher and what they want from them. I just can't. Yeah. Being a writer isn't what I ever felt about it. I'm doing it my way because it's the happy way for me. I want to get the books out. Some of that I learned from my father. Publish it yourself. But the thing is that I'm getting to the place now where I've changed what I'm writing. I'm writing these short stories now and I'm very much more satisfied with what I'm doing there. I'll get back to

another novel sooner or later or maybe never. But I'm doing what I want to do and feeling very, very fulfilled by it.

03-01:23:57

Farrell: Do you identify yourself as a writer?

03-01:24:01

Gordon: I do now but I didn't before.

03-01:24:04

Farrell: When did you start to think of yourself in that way?

03-01:24:09

Gordon: Oh, about three or four years ago. When I kept getting great reviews in Spain and Latin America, I started to feel that way. Some of the stuff that I've gotten in the US. Like this thing at Berkeley was a total surprise to me. I'm still surprised.

03-01:24:33

Farrell: What does it mean to you to get that kind of feedback?

03-01:24:35

Gordon: Well, as I said in this article, this is like almost getting the Nobel Prize for me. I never expected to get this kind of recognition as a writer. I wanted to do it sort of like my father did it. I've gotten much more recognition than I ever thought I would get. It is a wonderful chance to give back, like to the university. When the library at Whittier High School was named after me I felt like I was with my roots. It was just incredible. It was just the most wonderful experience I ever had, until this. When I found a way to make a connection with Cal, in which I could get recognition for what I was doing and also do something for them—I'm not a very pretentious guy. I just like to be recognized for what I am. I'm being recognized for more than what I am and it's helped me. I also have been approached now to do my books in a television series. Of course, that's a little bit of a joke because it takes forever to get something like that done. I don't have any pretenses about that either, you see. But I like the idea. And then, more than anything, when I got published I thought that was just the end and my life was complete. But now I'm doing stuff that I would never have done before. Like writing short stories is suicide in the publishing market because nobody writes them unless you're Saunders and you get *Twelfth of December* or something. But I don't care, see, because I don't need the money and I'm doing what I want to do. We get to travel. It's much different. It's not easy to travel anymore but we get to go where I want to go and do what I want to do and talk to the people that I want to talk to. It's very rewarding.

03-01:27:15

Farrell: You mentioned that working with Whittier High School and with the Bancroft Library is like kind of coming back to your roots. Do you feel like writing has helped you come back to your roots?

03-01:27:28

Gordon:

Yes. It's part of the master plan for me. Yeah, sure. When you work at something like being a lawyer, like I've been a lawyer for more than fifty years, and you stop, your life is through. My life is not through and I'm very happy about that. It's really wonderful. Because it's another talent that I had. I knew I was going to use it but I didn't know what it meant to use it. It's great to still have my noggin working and be able to express myself. I actually noticed that the other day in court, where I started chewing out the judge. I was always that way anyway. So now it's great. I can do it in a lot of different ways. [laughter]

03-01:28:27

Farrell:

Next time I want to get more into the specifics about your writing. I think this is probably a good place to leave it today, unless you have anything else you want to add for this time.

03-01:28:35

Gordon:

No.

03-01:28:35

Farrell:

Okay. All right, great. Well, thank you so much.

03-01:28:38

Gordon:

Thank you.

Interview 4: February 15, 2018

04-00:00:00

Farrell: Okay. This is Shanna Farrell back with Willie Gordon on Thursday, February 15, 2018 and this is our fourth interview session. So, Willie, today I thought we would talk about your books. Last time we were talking we were discussing how your first novel, called *Flawed*, was something you use as a basis for your six book and you had turned parts of *Flawed* into your different books.

04-00:00:39

Gordon: Most of *Flawed*.

04-00:00:40

Farrell: Most of—okay, yeah. I want to kind of talk about that a little bit as we go today. Just to kind of get started, *The Chinese Jars* was your first book. You published it in 2011. But it's based on a short story that you wrote in 2002. Can you tell me a little bit about what the inspiration behind that short story was?

04-00:01:00

Gordon: Well, actually, *Flawed* has a lot to do with everything I've done, because I really spent a couple of years writing it and it was seven hundred pages or something. I just poured it all out. Then I was done with it. I had a case that I got back about the time that I finished *Flawed*. It took two more years. The whole case lasted ten years. Then I was done. Then I had to do something. I wrote a short story called "All You Can Eat" and it was based on an article I read in the *New York Times* years ago about a guy who used to go and pick invitations out of the trash at an engraving company and he would go back to the sewer where he lived, put on a tux, and he would come out at night and he would go to the cocktail parties. One day they found him passed out on the street and they took him to the hospital and he was dying of bleeding ulcers. I never forgot the story. It was many years ago. I wrote this story and my court reporter, gal by the name of Sue Uccelli used to read my stuff for me. She said, "I really do like this better than all the stuff you did in *Flawed*," and said, "Why don't you do something with this?" I thought about it and then Isabel reminded me that I knew a lot about mysteries and stuff, going back over the {inaudible}. Said, "Why don't you write mysteries?" I took this story called "All You Can Eat" and I made it chapter one of *The Chinese Jars*. That's how I started writing mysteries. I just kept going and going and going until I was finished with *The Chinese Jars*. I figured what the heck, I'll write another one. What I was really working on at that time, because I knew a lot about mysteries just from being a kid and just reading them and reading Sherlock Holmes and all that stuff, I liked the idea. I started thinking about my father, about how I had been really preparing for telling stories all the time I was a lawyer and they usually had to do with setting up suspense on some factual matter that had to be resolved before a jury. I would use that, I don't know if

you want to call it a formula, but it was a short way of doing a formula. The English writer, William Somerset Maugham.

I would always try and get a surprise ending. I wanted that in *The Chinese Jars*, too. I finished that book and then I remembered another story that I read in the *Los Angeles Times* about the battle for the shoe shine trade in Palm Springs. It really was amazing because the title fit in. It was called *King of the Bottom*. I loved that title and I thought, "Well, okay. I've done this one thing. I remember hearing something about Point Molate because somebody was trying to build a condominium there but it was polluted. They suggested that they would dig a well fifty feet in diameter and at the bottom they would put a fan and they would blow all the toxicity up into the air. And I thought, "That's the stupidest idea I ever heard," because when it was going to go up in the air it was going to come towards me. I lived in Marin County. I was going to be the subject of the poisoning. Well, a few days after that the guy who wrote the book report for the *London Times* or whoever it was, of Isabel's first book, which was called *The House of the Spirits*, he wrote it and gave a very favorable review of it. It was twenty-five years since that had come out. Christopher Hitchens came again to the house and he brought his quart of black label Scotch and his wife, who was, by the way, an American. I don't know why in the world I told her the story about the pollution in Point Molate and what a stupid idea it was to dig that up and blow the stuff into the air. She told me that she remembered that in LA the people who are responsible for all the toxic dumps were Armenian and they had come to the country because they were allowed in as Caucasians in 1923. I immediately remembered the consul general of Turkey in Los Angeles being shot by a teenage Armenian boy. I had a story. I had a toxic dump and then I put the Armenian there and then I hung him. That's how the story started. I wanted to tell that story because the basis of the story was really my experience with Latin workers who were being poisoned or injured in the workplace. That was my theme. Also corrupt cops and all that stuff. This is stuff that just happened. It just fell in my lap. I remembered being in a *vaporetta* in Venice and I saw a guy who was very handsome, tall, gray hair. The only flaw in him was he had a droopy eye, half closed, because something had happened to him. I used him as the crooked DA. That was unbelievable because he was perfect. I put him in the office. He was my dad's sort of image of—he loved cowboy stuff and he loved the Old West. He actually painted a lot of paintings about the Old West, Indians and cowboys and horses, shooting rifles and all that stuff. I put all that stuff in this guy's office. My father's really given me great ideas for a lot of stuff. That's how I started. This was not in San Francisco. It was in Contra Costa County and Martinez is the capital of Contra Costa County. I actually needed a detective that Samuel could be friends with. I made him on the opposite side of this case and I just developed the story. I had the idea about the blue beetle. That was another thing that I had read a long time ago. I read a book called *Fly for the Prosecution*, how insects and stuff like that solve cases. I put the beetle at the scene of the crime. They found it on the guy's pant leg. But it really was he was wrapped in a blanket and it came from

somewhere else. One of the clues, big clues was where did it come from. By the way, it was William Somerset Maugham.

04-00:12:44

Farrell: Oh, yeah. Okay. That makes sense. Yes, you have mentioned him before. [laughter]

04-00:12:50

Gordon: We can stick that in there somewhere.

04-00:12:51

Farrell: Okay, great.

04-00:12:54

Gordon: That's how it started to develop. I had to research the stuff about the Armenians because basically I had followed it. There's a very interesting writer and filmmaker in Canada whose name is Atom Egoyan who is a very dark kind of depressed guy. But he writes these movie scripts. I don't know if you've ever seen anything by him. He's written about the Armenians.

04-00:13:41

Gordon: He wrote a wonderful screenplay, a wonderful thing called—Exotica. Anyway, it was the idea where the guy would come to a bar every night and he would look at a dancer and he would sort of fantasize about everything. The truth of the matter is he was mourning the murder of his daughter. At the end he just sort of cries and starts to talk about it. Well, he was famous for these awful scenarios in the movies where the people would—I mean, people would die in bus accidents. Then he did this story about the Armenian disaster. Arart It was a pretty hard to watch the movie but it was really great. Then I read a lot about that and I had a good friend who was my realtor and she gave me a book and then took me to an Armenian church service. I did all that stuff and I put it all in the book. I wanted a punch line at the end of the book that no one was going to expect. I did. But I'm not going to tell you what it is because you're going to have to read the book. [laughter]

04-00:15:11

Farrell: There you go. [laughter]

04-00:15:13

Gordon: That was the idea. Everybody was expecting something that happened. They were blaming the Mexicans. In the end it's not the Mexicans at all.

04-00:15:28

Farrell: Right, yeah. Yeah. I want to talk a little bit more about that in depth but I kind of want to go back to the first one. You had written the short story "All You Can Eat" in 2002 and then you publish *The Chinese Jars* in 2011.

04-00:15:42

Gordon: Well, no, but that's not what happened. What happened was that I wrote *Chinese Jars* in English and then I started trying to get it sold in the United

States and nobody wanted it. I was a member of the mystery writers organization here in Book Passage and I gave it to, I don't know, Mosley's. I gave it to Mosley's editor and he wasn't interested. Then I asked one of Isabel's publishers to read it and he loved it and he wanted to publish it. Of course, they had to make a slot for it. This was around 2004. I had a publisher interested in it by 2004. They have to make a place for it. It came out in 2006 in Spanish and it came out in French and it came out in German and it came out in Polish and it came out in Romanian. It sort of made the rounds. I couldn't get a publisher in the United States to be interested in it. When the time came and I got fed up with trying to deal with the United States I started looking around for a way to publish my own books. That's why it didn't get done until 2011.

04-00:17:38

Farrell: I see. Okay. That makes a lot of sense.

04-00:17:42

Gordon: But in the meantime I was publishing stuff in Spanish.

04-00:17:45

Farrell: This whole time before 2011 you are writing things that are being translated into other languages before they're being published in the US.

04-00:17:55

Gordon: Yeah. Exactly.

04-00:17:55

Farrell: Okay. That makes a lot of sense. When you were having the book translated were you working with specific translators or was that assigned to you by the publisher?

04-00:18:05

Gordon: The publisher's did that. I was trying to get the Italians to publish a second book but they weren't interested. I went back to the Portuguese. Brazil was very interested. And, actually, they published all my books except for the last one. But I had a mentor there, which is really important for a writer. Sérgio Machado, who was a wonderful guy. He loved me. He published all my books. But he died. His sister took over. By that time my last book was ready for publication. She wouldn't publish it.

04-00:19:00

Farrell: How did you meet Sérgio?

04-00:19:01

Gordon: Sérgio? I met him because he was Isabel's publisher in Brazil. I should say that it wasn't that he wouldn't publish it. He died before the last book was ready. Then his sister wouldn't publish it because it wasn't a romance.

04-00:19:24

Farrell: You mentioned he was your mentor. Can you tell me a little bit more about—

04-00:19:27

Gordon: He was just a guy that I could send stuff to and he would tell people in there to publish it. I don't know. He was just a—

04-00:19:40

Farrell: He was like an advocate for you?

04-00:19:41

Gordon: Yeah. He was an advocate. That was just the wonderful way it was.

04-00:19:47

Farrell: Did he ever give you feedback on your writing?

04-00:19:49

Gordon: No.

04-00:19:50

Farrell: Who in those early days, when you're writing these books, is giving you feedback on them?

04-00:19:54

Gordon: Well, I had a wonderful publisher of my first book. At that time he was with *Ediciones B* and when I finished the *King of the Bottom* he said, "Look it. Come over to my publishing house," because he was fired for some reason from *Ediciones B* and then he said, "Okay. I'm going to start a publishing company called *El Anden*. I want you." He paid me a lot more money than I was probably worth and I published it with him and I went all over South America and finally I got to Mexico and it was time to publish it and have a cocktail party. He couldn't pay me because he didn't have any money. I said, "Okay, I'm going to pay it and then you pay me at least half of it back when you get some because I understand you don't have any money." When I got down to the thing he couldn't pay me because he was having a lot of financial trouble. He was kind of a wild man. He really was a great guy. In Spanish he was my *padrino*. More or less a mentor. I've looked for people like that in the US and they don't exist, at least not for me. Do you know who Maxwell Perkins was? Well, Maxwell Perkins used to take care of his boys. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway, all this. I haven't found anybody.

04-00:21:42

Farrell: It's hard to find.

04-00:21:44

Gordon: Yeah. Well, I know. I've tried to find. And they're not there. My book publisher over here in Point Richmond, he does this for me. But, of course, I pay him to publish it. I have a good relationship with him. He's published all my books. But now he's getting old and he wants to retire. I say, "No, no. Let me finish my book about short stories. Then you can retire." I've had a hard time with publishers. My French publisher, pardon my French, is a jerk. I haven't gone back to her. I have great friends in France and my assistant in Spain works all the time, sending my books to French publishers. And as of

yet I don't have any luck there. With English, Spanish, and Portuguese, Brazilian, that's a pretty full load anyway. For a guy my age to be running—I used to run around Brazil. It's a hard job.

04-00:23:14

Farrell: Have you ever been able to read any of the translations? I mean, the Spanish?

04-00:23:18

Gordon: Well, I can read the Spanish one because I correct it.

04-00:23:21

Farrell: How do you feel about the translation? Do you feel like it was pretty accurate?

04-00:23:25

Gordon: It's a complicated problem because in Spain they speak a language that we don't speak in Latin America.

04-00:23:37

Farrell: They speak Castilian Spanish.

04-00:23:38

Gordon: They speak Castilian Spanish. But on every country there's a difference about how they speak the language. I tried in the beginning to get them to do it in Spanish, Latin American Spanish and Mexican Spanish and everybody laughed. They said, "Nobody's going to give you that stuff." It's printed in the language that it's written and then everybody's going to deal with it that way.

04-00:24:09

Farrell: Some of the texture of what you were trying to say was lost because Castilian is so proper?

04-00:24:15

Gordon: If you really want to read a book the way it's written you should read it in the original language. There's some words in Spanish. They're words like *gilipolla*. is a scoundrel, a bum. But it's not the same thing as *vago*. It's not the same exact thing. But that's the word that they use to describe Samuel in the first book. Everybody who's a bum gets the word *gilipolla*. I would go to Mexico or Argentina or somewhere else and then they would say, "Oh, *donde esta gilipolla?*" They were making fun of me. It was a—

04-00:25:19

Farrell: That's an interesting challenge with translation.

04-00:25:23

Gordon: Well, it is. But I would battle with him through the first two or three books and they'd say, "Look it, you can't do that." They'd say, "Well, what about this, this, this and this?" I said, "Well, you've got it all wrong." Then I would explain to them why it was translated the way it was. I'm basically telling them what their translator is telling them and why we're doing that. That's been an interesting experience.

- 04-00:25:57
Farrell: What were their arguments against using the language that you wanted to use?
- 04-00:26:00
Gordon: Well, because the Spanish don't read it. They don't use those words. They use the words that they use and that's as close as you're going to get.
- 04-00:26:14
Farrell: They thought that their audience wouldn't understand it?
- 04-00:26:16
Gordon: Exactly.
- 04-00:26:18
Farrell: How much did you fight for that?
- 04-00:26:22
Gordon: In the beginning I fought a lot. I understood. I got it.
- 04-00:26:31
Farrell: How did you go about self-publishing the first one?
- 04-00:26:38
Gordon: Well, I was looking around for somebody to publish my book and I was looking around for agents but I couldn't interest anybody, partly because of my age and partly because they didn't understand what I was trying to do. Then I asked Elaine Petrocelli at Book Passage who was good at this. [sneeze]
- 04-00:27:18
Farrell: Bless you.
- 04-00:27:19
Gordon: Her husband and I went to school together and he's a writer. And, of course, he had all the connections that she had. Can we stop for a minute?
- 04-00:27:34
Farrell: Sure, yeah.
- 04-00:27:36
Gordon: Back to reality.
- 04-00:27:38
Farrell: Okay, we're back.
- 04-00:27:39
Gordon: So Bill Petrocelli was also a writer. He was getting his books published by different publishers and his wife knew, I guess, because they're pretty prominent in getting authors to come. I started checking around. I didn't like any of them but they had this one guy over there that did a pretty good job, I thought. And so I went with him. He's published all my books.

04-00:28:18

Farrell: What's the publisher or what's the house?

04-00:28:22

Gordon: Bay Side Publishing in Point Richmond.

04-00:28:23

Farrell: Bay Side Publishing in Point Richmond, okay. Okay.

04-00:28:27

Gordon: He doesn't do much for you and that's one of the big problems, not just with him but in the US. If you're not a major mega seller or something they're not going to do much for you.

04-00:28:44

Farrell: What do they do for you?

04-00:28:44

Gordon: Nothing.

04-00:28:45

Farrell: Just print essentially?

04-00:28:48

Gordon: They just print it. Yeah.

04-00:28:50

Farrell: How much say do you have in the physicality of the book? Because your books are—like the paper stock is a little bit thicker. They're more substantial than like the dime store pulp novels.

04-00:29:01

Gordon: Yeah. I don't have much to do it with that. They do it and they do a very good job. I'm very happy with that because I buy a lot of copies and I actually carry them around the world in English and in Spanish and in Portuguese. I'm very, very pleased with the quality of the thing.

04-00:29:25

Farrell: Yeah. They are very substantial. Even when I was reading them, the spine doesn't even bend. Yeah. What about the design?

04-00:29:34

Gordon: Well, I am very, very fortunate because my former daughter-in-law is a designer and I have a very good friend who is an artist and a calligrapher. Ward Schumaker does the calligraphy, Lori Barra designs the cover and so far we've done each one a different color so they're recognizable.

04-00:30:02

Farrell: There also is a beauty in the simplicity of them. Was the simplicity intentional?

04-00:30:10
Gordon: My daughter-in-law is wonderful at that. She really is. She is fantastic.

04-00:30:18
Farrell: So you kind of just let her run with it?

04-00:30:20
Gordon: I just let her. Yeah.

04-00:30:22
Farrell: Okay. That makes sense.

04-00:30:24
Gordon: I'm going to tell her what you said.

04-00:30:25
Farrell: Please do. Yeah. They look great. I want to talk a little bit about the specific parts of the story. Your protagonist in all six books is a man named Samuel Hamilton who starts in the first one as an ad sales man and then through the course of the books basically promotes through the ranks to becoming a reporter. Can you tell me a little bit about Samuel, what you see his strength as being?

04-00:30:55
Gordon: Well, the first concept for Samuel was that we had to get him in the right place, where he wasn't going to have all the accoutrements of modern thrillers. No cell phone, no fax, no degree of any kind, and no specialty. Just a reporter or just a guy whose parents were murdered. By the way, that actually happened to a friend of mine. He drops out of school. He is depressed and he has to do something to survive because his parents are no longer available. He starts selling ads. He's got a problem with booze. He goes to Melba's Bar. Melba was an actual person. I owned a bar with her for twenty-five years.

04-00:32:12
Farrell: Oh, you did?

04-00:32:15
Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

04-00:32:15
Farrell: Where was the bar?

04-00:32:16
Gordon: In the Mission.

04-00:32:17
Farrell: What was it called?

04-00:32:19
Gordon: Melba's.

04-00:32:19

Farrell: Oh. That makes sense. Where in the Mission was it?

04-00:32:21

Gordon: Twenty-second and Capp. Right behind the savings and loan building.

04-00:32:27

Farrell: What is it now?

04-00:32:28

Gordon: It's something else. It's still a bar because we sold it. I got that bar because I represented seamen and one of the guys, a Cuban guy, needed some money and I violated the cardinal sin of being a lawyer. I loaned him the money. I loaned him six thousand bucks to start the bar. Then he started running drugs from the place and he had to flee. He just left town. He tried to sell the bar to someone else. I was a very good friend of the city attorney, George Agnost at that time, and he stopped him from doing anything. Then I went to the ABC and I said, "Look, I have a note from this guy. It was my loan that he used to get started and I want that bar myself." The guy said, "You can't do it," blah, blah, blah. But then the next day he said, "Okay, you can do it." I ended up with a bar for six thousand bucks. I get the liquor license. I said, "Well, I can't run a bar." I said to Phil Weltin, who was a partner of mine at one time, I said, "You know anybody I can get to use this?" He said, "Yeah. Melba." Melba was the sister-in-law of somebody else or friend. He said, "She's a great gal and she's got a little problem with the sauce herself but she's a hard worker." I went and I talked to Melba and I said, "Listen, Melba. I just want somebody to run this bar and all I want is five hundred bucks a month. I don't care what you do as long as I get my five hundred bucks. The rest of it's yours." That worked for twenty-five years. She gave me five hundred dollars a month. You can figure out that was the best investment I ever made. [laughter]

04-00:34:53

Farrell: That was also the basis for your deal between Melba and Matthew for Camelot.

04-00:34:57

Gordon: Yeah, exactly, exactly. Well, yeah, sure. That's right.

04-00:35:00

Farrell: Oh, interesting.

04-00:35:01

Gordon: Boy, you're a good reader.

04-00:35:02

Farrell: I read the book. I took notes.

04-00:35:04

Gordon: Well, that was the idea. I moved Melba from the Mission to Nob Hill because I used to stop in at a bar right around there. It was right on the corner where

the cable car goes. I made it a little bit better. I had a view of the Bay and the blah, blah, blah. I made the stop a little bit better and stuff. That's where she stayed. She guided Samuel in the beginning because he was like a lost child. She also filled this other thing. She was one of the people that helped him. Even when he needed money, she was the one that would help him. That was the idea of Samuel in the first place, was he couldn't do this stuff by himself because he didn't have any of these positions. He hadn't been a police officer. He didn't have the education or anything. He had to turn to people. That way I got much more bang for the buck. In other words, I could get information through him and the person that he went through and it made it much more interesting what he was trying to do. The idea of the gumshoe stuff, of him doing it, was really important. Where did I get that? Well, I did that as a lawyer. I would just start asking questions. The ability to inquire is what all my clients or my people have. They know how to ask the questions. That's the basis why some people say that I have a great style for dialogue. Well, it's based on my experience as a lawyer just asking questions and waiting to get the answer.

04-00:37:23

Farrell: Where do you think Samuel's gumption comes from?

04-00:37:27

Gordon: Well, I think it comes from me. [laughter]

04-00:37:35

Farrell: Where does it come from in you?

04-00:37:37

Gordon: I can't explain that. I just have always been that way.

04-00:37:38

Farrell: Just a natural curiosity?

04-00:37:39

Gordon: Yeah. Oh, yeah, has always been that way. Yeah.

04-00:37:44

Farrell: You mentioned that Samuel needs help from a lot of the other characters in the stories. Do you think of this as a tool for developing both characters and plot?

04-00:37:55

Gordon: Yes.

04-00:37:56

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

04-00:37:59

Gordon: Well, the idea is when you're a lawyer and you're starting to investigate a case, you just start asking questions. Out of that you quickly learn who to discard

and who to pay attention to. It's always a surprise when you get the kind of response that you need to help solve a case. All I've done is gotten rid of the stuff that doesn't count and just go directly to the parts of the dialogue or of the thing, what I need. I know what I need when I'm going to go to the next step. It's just lucky that he finds or snoops around to get that thing or ask somebody or gets somebody to give him the person who will give him that information. The difference would be you go around, you're looking, you're looking, you're looking, you're looking. Sometimes in the way that he meanders through the world, you see a little bit of that. I can give you an example of that. When he finds the girl has been murdered in *The Halls of Power*, he finds that she's been murdered and there's a wilted daisy. He starts walking up and down the street to see if it's possible that she was somewhere and then where'd she get the daisy. He goes. That's just snooping. The process is fun. You can just sort of let the reader come along with you and he discovers what he has to discover. But that's the way a lawyer does stuff. I just thought at the time, and I still think, that it's very interesting because you take the reader with you to see how he gets there.

04-00:40:15

Farrell: It's like the process of everything.

04-00:40:16

Gordon: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

04-00:40:18

Farrell: Do you find that as something that defines your style as a writer or storyteller?

04-00:40:22

Gordon: I think so. It also is my style as a lawyer, which is very helpful. Just like telling the story to the jury in the end, the story. How did you get here? Well, when you're in the jury place and you're talking to them, well, they hear that but they don't see how you got there. Well, the other part is how did he get there? He got there by the process. I think the process of being a lawyer makes it interesting. To this day I think that.

04-00:41:00

Farrell: Yeah. It's engaging for the audience.

04-00:41:02

Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

04-00:41:07

Farrell: Camelot is the bar that Melba opens and she has a bloodhound dog named Excalibur. What's the significance of naming the bar Camelot and the dog Excalibur?

04-00:41:14

Gordon: Oh, just to give this symbolism of King Arthur and having a woman be at the roundtable and having a mutt who nobody thinks is worth a crap be Excalibur

and then finding out through the course of these stories that this dog is fantastic. He can solve mysteries himself.

04-00:41:45

Farrell: Which we see in the second book.

04-00:41:48

Gordon: Yeah, and also in the fifth. I mean the sixth.

04-00:41:50

Farrell: Yeah. Well, it starts to show. Yeah, yeah. What do you try to convey by setting scenes in bars?

04-00:41:59

Gordon: Well, that's where a lot of people hang out that are sort of marginal. They tell their miserable stories to the bartenders and the people. Melba's there to listen. That's how she's connected to San Francisco. She's basically the voice of San Francisco. She knows everybody in town and she's the one who directs him to people who can help him. Sometimes. That's why I brought Bernardi in in the second book, because I wanted him to have a police officer who could also do it.

04-00:42:35

Farrell: Want to talk a little bit about San Francisco as a character?

04-00:42:42

Gordon: Yeah. Very powerful one.

04-00:42:45

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about how you view San Francisco as a character, not just a setting?

04-00:42:51

Gordon: Yeah. Well, I think that it's a place of great change. The book that you and I were talking about, *The Thirteenth Circle*?

04-00:42:59

Farrell: Oh, the witch—

04-00:43:04

Gordon: Yeah. Witch.

04-00:43:03

Farrell: Yeah.

04-00:43:04

Gordon: What is it called?

04-00:43:04

Farrell: *The Season of the Witch*.

04-00:43:05

Gordon: *The Season of the Witch*, yeah.

04-00:43:06

Farrell: By Talbot.

04-00:43:07

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Well, I lived that because I saw the changes coming to San Francisco and I saw the unions getting strengthened and I saw guys like Hallinan. They changed the dialogue in San Francisco. I used to go and watch Vince Hallinan try cases. He had a magic way with the jury, really, because he wasn't any better or worse than any other good lawyer. He was just good. I knew both of his kids. The two older ones that went to Berkeley when I was there. I just felt very comfortable knowing that that was part of the process. It got into the drug stuff and that was not so much fun. But the music and all the things that happened around the social movement really made a big difference in San Francisco. Even when I used to try cases, boy, the juries were fantastic in San Francisco.

04-00:44:21

Farrell: You pull from the culture, the geography, the time? Pretty much everything that makes San Francisco so special?

04-00:44:32

Gordon: Exactly. I just grabbed it all. Even the gay world in the fifties and the sixties, that was going on, and it was going on in a way in San Francisco that was unparalleled. San Francisco, New York really held special places in that. I was just there. That's why I wanted it in that era, when all of these things were starting. I remember Grant Avenue in the days when it was illegal, homosexuality was illegal and stuff, but you could go into a bar where you'd see a bunch of women sitting on the bar stools and they were all gay. If you had a date who was a sophomore at Berkeley, let's say, and you said, "See all those women there? They're all gay." She would scream because this was perdition. [laughter] That's the way it was. Big Daddy Lipscomb, he was there. I just used those guys. And then there's a character, I think it was *Halls of Power*, if I'm not mistaken, where the big guys at Finocchio's and he's a dancer. Finocchio's was also—the men dressed up like women and blah, blah, blah. I just used him there because it was a natural thing in those days. They were there. I wanted people to remember that about San Francisco, that it had that possibility. *The Black Cat*, the same thing.

04-00:46:42

Farrell: Yeah. How much time did you spend in neighborhoods that became central to the stories? Like Chinatown or China Basin?

04-00:46:50

Gordon: A lot because Chinatown was, of course, right by where I worked. North Beach I spent a lot of time in the evenings drinking and eating there because it was a great place to do that. Much better then than now really. They moved

those things from down below on Pacific and those other streets and they closed them down because it was like Shanghai Alley in the old days. When they closed them down they moved up to Broadway. So even the Matador Restaurant and all that stuff, those things were exciting in the fifties. I was there as a college student just watching, and really watching. Just watching what was going on. I had no idea of the significance of it, that this was the beginning of stuff. I just thought that was life. The other thing that was also fantastic is you could go into some of those places today and they can still have the underground passages. It's really true because I had a kid who was a friend of Jason, my stepson's, who used to work for somebody on one of those Broadway things. He was telling me, "Well, hell, we still have them there." I just used it in one of the stories. I use it in one more because in the first story I knew from a woman who owned a restaurant on the corner of Bay and, what the hell is it, Broadway, that they had these tunnels underneath there.

04-00:48:57

Farrell:

Yeah, the Prohibition era catacombs that are under the building.

04-00:48:59

Gordon:

Yeah. Well, I don't even know they were prohibition. These were since the beginning of Chinatown in the fifties, in the 1850s. That's the way they escaped. They're still there. I doubt if they're used as much. I know they are used because I had a kid that used to go down there and hide stuff and then bring it back and so on and so forth. Oh, I know where I got it. I'm going to send you the story.

04-00:49:34

Farrell:

Okay. It's a short story?

04-00:49:37

Gordon:

"Senor Las Pampas". "The Lord of the Pampas". That's where I put it. Yeah. Yeah.

04-00:49:46

Farrell:

Okay. As far as trying to write to a place or invoke a neighborhood, how do you go about doing that? How do you write a neighborhood in descriptive, illustrative detail?

04-00:50:01

Gordon:

Well, yeah. I think just from being there. A lot has to do with the smells. I'm going to give you an example. New York is as diversified as San Francisco but everything is spread out. You can't walk down the street and say, "Oh, this is the Dominican neighborhood," if you're in some other part of New York. But in San Francisco you can walk down the street, you can walk down Montgomery Street, and the closer you get to North Beach you start to smell things. You start to smell the Chinese food, the Philippino food, the Italian food, and these smells, they just sort of whirl around. And so you're saying, "God, you're in everything. You're just there." I don't know if you've ever gone down Stockton Street in Chinatown. Let's say it's Saturday and you see

all the shopping that's going on. All the vegetables are out there. The roasted duck. It's just incredible. Maybe you get a little bit of that in New York and Chinatown.

04-00:51:27

Farrell: You do, yeah. Yeah.

04-00:51:31

Gordon: But you don't get the other smells. You see what I mean? In San Francisco you get them all in one place. Excuse me.

04-00:51:41

Farrell: What information do you try to convey about the places that you're writing?

04-00:51:48

Gordon: Well, what they're like. What are the people like that inhabit them and some of their customs? For instance, in *The Chinese Jars*, right across from the Chop Suey Louey's they have a place, it's a club or something, and you go in there and you see them gambling and stuff. All of a sudden the guy disappears. How do you try and describe that?

04-00:52:46

Farrell: So speaking of, I guess, different food in different areas, I kind of wanted to talk about the role of race in your books. Bringing in certain characters that are maybe perceived in one way or different or are villains and some of the language that you use, as well, because your protagonists aren't seemingly racist but some of the language can be interpreted that way.

04-00:53:20

Gordon: But San Francisco's a racist place.

04-00:53:21

Farrell: That's true. Yes.

04-00:53:26

Gordon: As is life. When I was a kid I used to hitchhike a lot and sometimes I would go to Tahoe or something and I'd come back. One time two of us were coming back and we got picked up by a cop, a San Francisco cop. Well, from the time we got in the car—this was in the late fifties or something. From the time we got into the car until he dropped us off in San Francisco, he didn't stop talking about blacks. He didn't call them blacks either. It was just basically disgusting. You have an organized force that's supposed to protect the public and you're seeing what you're seeing here today in the whole United States and you saw when Obama was president. There are people there who viscerally just hate him because he's a black. That was also true about police officers in San Francisco. I am personally sure that that racism still exists. I was on jury duty in Marin County this last couple of weeks. Had a Mexican judge and they were trying to pick a jury for a Latin American guy who didn't speak English for a drunk driving case. They had three or four people on the jury pool who were actually called to the panel who were Latin and one guy was black but

very light skinned, lighter than me even. They're saying that they had been stopped several times by the police in Marin County because they were being profiled. You see? Finally I had an appointment with you last Thursday. I had the morning free but I had the afternoon, had to be back there if they were going to do this. I went up to the judge and I said, "Look it, I have this thing. I'm doing a TV thing for the library at Berkeley and I need to be free to do that because I already made a commitment." She said, "Well, do you have a slip for the people?" I said, "Well, wait a minute." I said, "I'm an officer of the court. If I tell you something." That wasn't good enough, see. I said, "Besides that, I've been a lawyer for over fifty years and what you're doing here to this guy is you're trying to—" I meant you collectively as part of society—"you're having a case in which five cops stop a guy for drunk driving. Okay. Now, why do you have five cops stopping a Latin guy for drunk driving?" The guy doesn't even speak English. He's got a translator. She said, "Well, we're not talking about that right now." Since she sent me down and then she made me wait all day on Wednesday to see if I was going to be on the panel. I should have just kept my mouth shut. I was telling Carmen this. I should have just kept my mouth shut, gone on the jury, and then just voted against the conviction. Because I was trying to explain to the judge this is a refuge for them. They can't be just asked for their papers. They get them for drunk driving, then they convict them, and then they turn it over to ICE and then ICE says, "Well, you've now been convicted of a crime and therefore you're going to get deported." I said, "That's totally bullshit." But anyway—

04-00:57:57

Farrell: It's a systematic way of—

04-00:57:58

Gordon: Yeah. So the racism—I mean those things. When I say them in the writing I mean that you can take that to the bank, that we live in a racist society.

04-00:58:12

Farrell: You're basically representing what you see in the world.

04-00:58:17

Gordon: Yeah, exactly.

04-00:58:17

Farrell: Okay. Do you find any of the stereotypes that you write into some of the narratives problematic at all?

04-00:58:25

Gordon: Well, I find them problematic in that when they interfere with daily life for someone else, that's what bothers me. But I mean like putting the pimp with a place in Oakland. There's a lot of animus between the races in these places. But I wanted to give him a voice because he's part of the society, too. I also wanted to make him help in resolving one of the cases because they do that too. The more I've been in the legal system the more I've seen public servants being black and helping and taking on the civil service. In the beginning I

didn't see that, just as I didn't see it with women. Yeah, those are all important things. In the beginning I think the only lawyers that were female in the system dressed like men and had suits and all that stuff. But now more than 50 percent are women. So times change.

04-00:59:54

Farrell:

When you use antagonists from places like Jordan or Israel, do you feel like you need to stay up on current events to write those plot points?

04-01:00:05

Gordon:

Well, tribalism is something that doesn't change people very much. You can look around and see how they dress and everything but you can't change them in a basic way because they'll always be that way, at least in our lifetime, and they'll change slowly.

04-01:00:36

Farrell:

Well, I guess also I'm thinking about using people from these countries as maybe being slightly problematic because of the way that they're perceived in the media, so it's maybe feeding into some negativity there. Do you think about that?

04-01:00:50

Gordon:

Well, it's more problematic now. They're in the shadows. In the sixties they're just in the shadows. They're fungible. You need a clerk somewhere and the guy can be Indian or can be everyman. But he's just a stick figure that's put there and he's supposed to do the thing. Well, I wanted to give him some life. Nowadays there's a big problem because you see the guy and he's smiling at you but you don't know if he's got a dagger. You don't know what he's going to do to you. You just don't know. Like this kid this morning or yesterday, this shooting thing, it was a Latin. But there's something wrong with him. They're coming out of the woodwork in the wrong way. But most of these people come here. They work hard. Some of them make it, some of them don't. I used to represent seamen from Yemen. They came for the reason everybody comes, because they make a living. But then they get hurt or they get tired. They go back. They go back to the same thing. When they were here they weren't any different than they would be in their country. I know that. I knew that from representing Mexican workers and Central American workers, South American workers. I'm just telling them the way they are.

04-01:02:41

Farrell:

There's also some themes of class in your book.

04-01:02:44

Gordon:

Yeah, class is important.

04-01:02:45

Farrell:

Some of your characters are quite wealthy while others live more modestly or sort of on the fringes of society but that's race, as well. How has your experience as a lawyer allowed you to write to class?

04-01:02:58

Gordon:

Well, I went to school with a lot of white wealthy people and I saw how they acted, how they shoved themselves around. There was plenty of that. I guess I felt some of that when I was growing up. But just telling it like it is. I had enough experience to see what they were like. The big melting pot, the more we're in this together—when I was a kid the WASP element of society in this country, it looked like they ruled it. If you read Hemingway carefully you'll find that he was trapped by that image. That's the way he perceived women. He was always looking for the WASP. That changed slowly. That's why I loved that book so much that Talbot wrote because he showed how in San Francisco the working guy, Hallinan, who was a shit disturber, just did what he had to do.

04-01:04:29

Farrell:

Travel also comes up because some of the books become more international. How do you pull from your travels to write those parts?

04-01:04:36

Gordon:

Well, I went around the world when I was twenty-two and I saw everything. I probably didn't understand everything but I saw it. I saw if a person was generous, it didn't matter what class he was in. He was just what he was. Whether he was rich or poor or middle class or what, his character was—and that really helped me a lot when I used to pick a jury. I could just sense the differences. I think I know a lot about that. There's more of a feeling that you just get when you see that. I'll tell you, when I grew up, I grew up in a Mexican neighborhood. We were all subject to this thing. Conrad and I, we reached the glass ceiling. But then I went on. When I left the Mexican neighborhood and I went to college, I just kept going. I didn't realize that in the beginning. But I remember it. I just couldn't get away from it. I knew what the people were like who were wealthy. The image of people trapped in those street clothes, I guess, the suits. The people who were—basically more and more in society they just moved up with money. I don't know if you remember the guy who was the lobbyist. I think it was Jack Abramoff. He was a Jewish guy who got in big trouble because he was doing all kinds of stuff with Indian tribes. He just stole and bribed. He went to jail. He was a suit but he wasn't a real suit. But he wanted to be. You see those kind of phonies.

04-01:07:20

Farrell:

The deception, because that also plays a big role in your books, as well.

04-01:07:23

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

04-01:07:25

Farrell:

Yeah. I'm sure. Did you see a lot of that as a lawyer? A lot of the deception? Sheep's in wolf's clothing?

- 04-01:07:32
Gordon: Sure. My clients weren't that but I saw a lot. I'll tell you where I saw it. I saw a lot of it in the judiciary.
- 04-01:07:36
Farrell: That's how it plays out in a lot of your books, as well, is not from people who live on the fringes of society but the people who are creating the systems for that.
- 04-01:07:49
Gordon: That's right. Who's controlling who gets in and who gets out. Or who stays out. It's getting kind of old now because people keep bursting through. But there are always people who are going to try and stop them. Trump is one of them. Trump is a man who's riddled with so much prejudice in his heart. If you start studying this guy's background, it's pretty bad.
- 04-01:08:15
Farrell: It's bad. Yeah. It's bad. Yeah. You use a lot of the same characters. Samuel Hamilton is in every book. Melba Blanche. Mr. Song.
- 04-01:08:33
Gordon: Mr. Song, yeah.
- 04-01:08:34
Farrell: Charles Perkins, Officer Bernardi. How do you develop those characters over a series of time?
- 04-01:08:44
Gordon: I'll tell you one guy you don't want to get rid of. You can bring characters in and out. You don't want to ever let go of Charles Perkins because he can be a punching bag. He's just a snotty guy who's got power. His position gives him that power. You want him around so you can punch him as much as possible. The other people come in and go out. Like I don't know if you remember in the first book you had the Chinese murderer.
- 04-01:09:18
Farrell: Yeah.
- 04-01:09:21
Gordon: Well, he did a little bit and then he's gone. You'll probably never see him again. But Mr. Song, you see him all the time because Mr. Song has something to offer. Like, for instance, he owns the bank, which is absurd. I mean really, you think Chinatown's a corrupt place and how can he hold a bank? But he's got something that makes it work. He gives Samuel, the most important witness in *King of the Bottom*, the Chinese one. These connections are really important and they're also tribal. And that's the thing that you're looking for. You're trying to remember and have the people not forget that all these people come from tribes and when it comes down to the time of who are they going to help, they're going to help little people like themselves. You

may think that they're just slotted in this little place and they don't have any power but I want to show their power. That's why we do it.

04-01:10:51

Farrell:

There's also a romantic interest between Samuel and Blanche that you kind of play out over a series of books and kind of culminates in the fourth book. Can you tell me a little bit about, let's see, what it was like for that to finally have that romance?

04-01:11:14

Gordon:

Well, I'll tell you exactly what happened. People kept bugging me and bugging me. "When are they going to get together? When are they going to get." In the book before that I think I had the thing about the beans. I finally just had her pounce on him. [laughter]

04-01:11:32

Farrell:

Yeah, she makes the first move.

04-01:11:34

Gordon:

Yeah, yeah. Because he's shy and he doesn't know what the hell to do.

04-01:11:40

Farrell:

What do you think that Blanche has to offer to Samuel?

04-01:11:43

Gordon:

Probably nothing. But here's the deal. In these mysteries, if you read these mysteries, it's either the guy's divorced or she's kicked him out of the house. You don't want to get him too confused with romance. I don't know if you know anything about the famous Andrea Camilleri. He's a very well-known Italian writer of mysteries and he's done a lot of screenplays and stuff. He's very Italian. He spends a lot of time about food, which I do, too. But if he's going to have romance, it's like, "Yeah, I spent the weekend with my girlfriend," and blah, blah, blah, and then that's it, because he doesn't interfere with the single-mindedness of what he's trying to do. That's why I have the interest but she's not there interfering with the job he's trying to do. I don't know how else to put it. She's not an important figure in with what he's doing.

04-01:13:29

Farrell:

But the scenes between them definitely keep the reader engaged, I think.

04-01:13:34

Gordon:

Well, yeah. They keep them curious.

04-01:13:36

Farrell:

Yeah. It's nice that there's some build-up there, as well. It keeps you wondering what's going to happen. Yeah. Your third book, *The Ugly Dwarf*, was pulled as well from your first book, *Flawed*. How did having space from writing *Flawed* in 2000 to when you actually sat down to do *The Ugly Dwarf*, how did that benefit you, having that time in between?

04-01:14:01

Gordon:

Well, I never understood why I had the dwarf in there anyway. I also had the dominatrix in there. Actually, I was just writing by—what's the word when you—stream of consciousness writing and I don't know why I had the dwarf in there. But I wanted the dwarf in there. Isabel didn't want it and people hated it and I loved it. I decided to write this book because I wanted to talk about him. Then in this book I had him come out as the religious guy. I started to understand, my father, he had a lot to do with my father. Other characters did, too. The guy who did the magic stuff for kids in the first book, I was touching my father and stuff. He comes out as the thing and he comes out as the pervert. The dominatrix comes over and helps him and she basically is my father's lover. I can realize. By that time I had read the *Infinite Plan* that my father wrote and I saw that, Jesus, this guy is writing this stuff. It was a literary book. It really was. It was like a novel because it wasn't him. It was saying, "Do as I say, not as I do." I realized, finally, that my father was an emotional dwarf. When I finished the book people would come up and say, "God, I loved that character, the dominatrix. She was fantastic. What a strong woman," and blah, blah, blah. Then I started to realize that the readers liked her. My mother was a very weak person in the sense that when my father died she became very depressed. She was a brilliant woman. She had a just great degree where she was first in her class and all that stuff. But she hated being a pharmacist and so she didn't do it very long. She wanted to be a doctor. I'm thrust into this Mexican neighborhood where I don't know any of the rules and my father's lover is the one who helps me learn the rules and tells me what to do. She showed me how to survive in the mean streets of East LA. They were pretty mean. I felt very much at peace with it. By the time I finished that book I felt, "Wow, I understand it."

04-01:17:30

Farrell:

Yeah. I was going to ask you if that book means something different to you than the other ones.

04-01:17:35

Gordon:

Well, it did. It meant that I sort of learned what my relationship with my father was and how she helped me because she was a crook. She would do black magic on the side. She went to jail for it. When you read the thing with zombies you'll see. You haven't seen that yet, have you?

04-01:18:00

Farrell:

No, I haven't seen that yet. Yeah.

04-01:18:02

Gordon:

Yeah, okay. All right. I'll send that to you today.

04-01:18:04

Farrell:

When you finished *The Ugly Dwarf*, did you feel a sense of closure?

04-01:18:08

Gordon:

Relief. [laughter] Because I got rid of him.

04-01:18:15

Farrell:

Okay. What was it like for you to experience a sense of relief?

04-01:18:18

Gordon:

Well, that was good. I didn't understand. You know, I'll tell you something. When I got my first book published in Spanish I thought, "Wow, this is just such an incredible experience." I bought a thousand copies of my book in Spanish and I still have probably five hundred of them, I guess. But that was a big accomplishment for me because it's what I wanted to do. When I finished six I thought, "Wow, why don't I feel complete?" Did you read the article that was written about me in the library?

04-01:19:08

Farrell:

Yes.

04-01:19:10

Gordon:

I have gotten so much feedback from that article. Such a wonderful feeling. My assistant, Carmen, everybody is saying, "Well, people want to know about you." I'm writing these stories and there's more about me in these stories than there is anything else. I have a different mission than I had before because I wasn't talking about myself. I was just messing around with character, suspicious, and all that stuff. But then I realize now I guess sometimes you got to tell people who you are.

04-01:19:56

Farrell:

Yeah, you have more to say.

04-01:19:57

Gordon:

Yeah, I have more to say and I didn't realize that. I'm not saying that I have to do this, because I don't have to do it. But I'm getting more and more satisfied that I need to do it. I think the point is that you're never finished. You just give up. [laughter]

04-01:20:28

Farrell:

How did your books or the writing change for you after you were done with *The Ugly Dwarf*?

04-01:20:33

Gordon:

Well, as I say, I was through with that and I could go on to other things. I always had this thing about the Middle East. Always, from the time I was there. I always wanted to get it out. It's the same thing. I got it out in *The Fractured Lives*. I had one story from the Palestinian side but I didn't have the Jewish part of it. I have a really dear friend who's with a guy who's told me the story, the Jewish side of the story. I had that and I thought, "Well, I can't just forget about it. I need to talk about it." They also told me that I'd better hurry because things are going to change. I said, "They're not going to change." They're still there. Now hopefully Netanyahu will go to jail and somebody that can really do something for the country and the Palestinians will do it and they'll get rid of Trump and then who knows if they'll be able to fix the damage. The world is a very complicated place.

- 04-01:22:04
Farrell: Do you view your books as serials?
- 04-01:22:12
Gordon: Yeah. If I understand you correctly.
- 04-01:22:17
Farrell: Yeah. Like serialized novels.
- 04-01:22:19
Gordon: Yeah. Somebody wants to do a television series starting with *The Chinese Jars* and just go all the way through. They're not interested in *Chinese Jars*. They're interested in *King of the Bottom* first. And, yes, I like the idea. I hope it happens. But there's a caveat there. It takes years to get that going. Somebody will benefit from it but not me.
- 04-01:23:00
Farrell: Yeah. To be continued on that one.
- 04-01:23:02
Gordon: Yeah. Well, on everything. [laughter] Good luck making money as a writer.
- 04-01:23:07
Farrell: Yeah. That's very true. Is this series done for you or do you have more?
- 04-01:23:14
Gordon: I don't know. That's a really good question. I need to write these short stories. The theme of the short stories is based on things that have happened in my life that I want to talk directly about. I'm going to write these ten stories. It's taking me longer than I thought because the resistance I have to doing it has been pretty tough. But I'm going to do that. For some reason it's very liberating for me to do that. I'm having a wonderful time doing it. Like I'm doing this thing about James Baldwin. It's such a huge project talking about this guy other than in just dimensional terms. He represented a lot of things and I just saw him for four days.
- 04-01:24:15
Farrell: Yeah. I want to talk a little bit more about that next time when we talk more about the short stories. But I have just a couple more questions for you about the books. What do you admire about Samuel as a protagonist?
- 04-01:24:28
Gordon: Well, I admire that I created him and that I brought in all these other people to help him because I expressed a lot of his abilities. I've gotten a lot out of the character that I didn't expect to get because I had other people helping him and then him gaining confidence from that. In some really interesting way it's about how one goes through life and gains confidence.
- 04-01:25:06
Farrell: I was going to ask you if it was a metaphor for life.

04-01:25:10

Gordon: Yeah, totally.

04-01:25:12

Farrell: And also finding work.

04-01:25:12

Gordon: And also for my life.

04-01:25:15

Farrell: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

04-01:25:18

Gordon: Well, first place, I grew up and I had a father and I had a mother. However miserable it was, it was a family. My father died and then thrust into a foreign culture that I didn't know much about. I didn't have anybody to help me grow or anything else. What I didn't realize was that my father's assistant was helping me. My mother certainly helped me culturally even though she didn't know what to do as a personal guide. She was a wonderful, wonderful cultural guide to me about music, about literature, about philosophy, about education. There was nothing that was impossible to do. Then the library where somebody taught me how to read. Working as a shoe shine boy. All those things. They start to show you a pattern of life that you're going to do things and when nobody's there you're going to do them. When I was fourteen I just said, "Gees, if I don't get off my ass and do something, I'm going to be in pretty bad shape." Then people start coming towards me and I started to do very well in school. Then they couldn't figure out why I was doing well in school so they give me an IQ test and I said, "Why are you doing that?" They said, "Well, because you're exceptional here and we don't know why." [laughter] Then they said, "Well, you have a high IQ." I said, "I knew that," because I knew that in grade school. They said, "Well, we never got any records from your grade school." I said, "Well, I just reminded you." I was elected student body president. Carmen had some of this, too, because she became the head yell leader or whatever the hell it is. Then I go to college and I master that system for my purpose. Then let's go to right now where I'm getting honored, or a formal honor. I'm feeling that it was really important for me to go there. It gave me the basis. I became a lawyer, which was really amazing. I got to go around the world. I still have some of the books that I read in my English classes in college. I read them. Because I love them. This is an experience of a lifetime. I'm not through. I'm basically always thinking about what's next. Sometimes I don't feel much like it but it's still there.

04-01:29:00

Farrell: What has it meant to you to write this series of books?

04-01:29:03

Gordon: Well, it's absolutely incredible. I wanted to write from the time I was six years old. I said I was going to write. It's even in my annual that I was going to be a lawyer and a writer. Finally when I got to be sixty I said, "It's time." I didn't

exactly know how to do it. I have a wonderful friend who I used to give an office to and she's now in Hawaii. Her sister is one of my editors and she's in New York. I sent her the same article I sent—I sent it to everybody in the world that I could think of. She said, "I'm really proud of you, Willie, because when I read *Flawed* for the first time I said to myself, 'God, if this guy ever pulls this together, can figure this out, he's really got something.'" I'm not sure what she meant but I pursued it and I felt that even though *Flawed* was a trunk book, there was something there that was really important that I developed. My books are basically rewrites of the story there or a twist on the story there. You never get it right the first time so you have to go back. Now that I'm doing this short story stuff and I'm talking, most of it comes directly from my life, I just feel another chapter.

04-01:21:05

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. Well, I think this is a good place to leave it today unless you have anything else you want to add?

04-01:31:14

Gordon:

Nah.

04-01:31:14

Farrell:

Okay, okay. Well, thank you so much.

04-01:31:17

Gordon:

You're covering it pretty well.

Interview 5: February 22, 2018

05-00:00:00

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell back with Willie Gordon on Thursday, February 22, 2018 and this is our fifth interview session. We are in California. [laughter] So, Willie, last time when we left off we were talking about your transition from novel writing to short stories and feeling like you wanted to bring yourself a little bit more into your work and short stories was maybe a good vehicle to do that. What made you decide on the short story form?

05-00:00:40

Gordon:

Well, it actually was an accident. I was in a book group where every two weeks you had to produce pages. The teacher would go over them and then other people would go over them. I just didn't like the people who were in the group because I didn't think they were very good writers and all the good writers that I knew had left. I said, "Look it, I just can't do this anymore." I was used to doing it a couple weeks. I missed the discipline of doing it. But then I started thinking about it and I thought about, "Well, I've been doing this since 2000 or earlier even and I was always in a hurry to get the pages out so I was rushing my thoughts." I said, "Well, I'd like to reflect on what I've done and maybe change some of the things." Everybody that I know who knows me wanted me to get more into autobiography. I started thinking about these projects that I'd done, all the novels. Of course, they're all autobiographical because, as Hemingway says, "What else are you going to write about except yourself?" Probably an egocentric way of telling the truth. I just started playing around with that. In each one of these stories I'm reflecting on a part of myself. The first one I wrote was "I Dream of Zombies". I'm talking really about my father's administrator of his religion and stuff. She was a good one to poke fun at because she was into so many things and she was sort of a devil. I had that in my mind. I wanted to do something about it.

05-00:03:23

Farrell:

Yeah. So you wrote that story in 2015. It brings back characters from *The Ugly Dwarf* and you mention Dusty Schwartz, the actual dwarf from *The Ugly Dwarf* and Dominique. Did this story come from wanting to tell more of Dominique's story?

05-00:03:43

Gordon:

I wanted to get out that she had really gone to jail for black magic. In *The Ugly Dwarf* it's mentioned and I guess she goes. But what did she do? I just finished that part and then just gave her another jab in the ribs.

05-00:04:04

Farrell:

What inspired you to write that story?

05-00:04:07

Gordon:

Well, I had been reading a little bit about zombies anyway. Isabel wrote a book called, something about beneath the sea. It was about the culture of Haiti and what they went through and then how they got out of there and went to

New Orleans. I knew something about it. Then a mover and a hustler in Madrid has a program called the Children of Mary Shelley and it was about horror or something. I wanted to write a story for that to see if they would accept me into the group. By the time I got around to doing the story they had moved on. It wasn't done for that purpose. It was just done because it was fun. The idea was that every time I got a chance—in my first book I had the magician who used to go to the kid's party and the Chinese joggers and he was a drunk. So that was my father. It was another jab in the ribs for my father and one for her, too. I just came out. I don't know, I feel like I'm done with it now.

05-00:05:51

Farrell: When you talk about your reading about zombies, do you mean that you were reading about like voodoo culture?

05-00:05:58

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

05-00:06:02

Farrell: Okay. Because in the story Dominique uses black magic to create surrogates essentially to carry out robberies.

05-00:06:09

Gordon: Yeah, exactly.

05-00:06:11

Farrell: Did you have any prior knowledge of black magic before you wrote the story? Aside from the voodoo?

05-00:06:14

Gordon: Well, I had some. I always was interested in it and I was always interested in the medicines that they used. I was always, actually, always curious about how the hell do you make a zombie. Is it really true? I don't know. I decided it was kind of inconclusive. I don't know. It's not perfect and it certainly isn't an historical novel about something or even an historical playbook about how you do it. I just had fun with it. A friend of mine read it at the end and he says, "Well, instead of just saying that she's changing his diapers and stuff, why don't you just have the guy reach up and grab her by the neck." [laughter]

05-00:07:11

Farrell: It was an interesting twist at the end.

05-00:07:14

Gordon: Yeah. I like that. You get a lot of stuff from your friends when you're doing this. That was a perfect ending.

05-00:07:26

Farrell: Yeah. Well, especially with the foreshadowing in the beginning, saying that she had special plans for him, but then at the end he ends up killing her. Yeah. Why did you choose to jail Marco and then kill Dominique?

05-00:07:42

Gordon: Say that again?

05-00:07:44

Farrell: One of your characters goes to jail and lives and the other one—

05-00:07:45

Gordon: Oh, jail Marco. Well, because I wanted to have her have some responsibility. The guy was going to squeal so she was going to go to jail anyway. It killed two birds with one stone. [laughter]

05-00:08:05

Farrell: Did you want to leave the door open to have Marco be in more of your stories later?

05-00:08:08

Gordon: No. I can bring her back if I want to.

05-00:08:12

Farrell: Okay. Interesting. How would you? Well, I guess the end isn't—

05-00:08:18

Gordon: Well, all he did was reach up and grab her by the neck. I didn't say he killed her.

05-00:08:24

Farrell: True. I guess I did that. Okay, fair enough. [laughter] You had mentioned that you feel like you're done. Do you feel like a sense of closure with those characters?

05-00:08:30

Gordon: I don't know yet. I don't know yet. I got a lot of mileage out of her and people loved her. It's time to move on.

05-00:08:43

Farrell: Yeah. On that note, then you wrote "Even Pimps Have Bad Days in 2016" and you bring back Samuel Hamilton for that story.

05-00:08:50

Gordon: Yeah, and also the pimp that I used in the "Halls of Power." I was conscious of the fact that there's a racial issue there. The guy goes to—

05-00:09:09

Farrell: The Tadich Grill?

05-00:09:07

Gordon: No. He goes to Tadich Grill and he's very uncomfortable because in those days you didn't see many black people. There's another interesting twist about that. That Tadich's daughter, one of Tadich's daughters, married a guy who was the tackle for the Oakland Raiders and they never talked to him again. They never talked to her or her husband.

05-00:09:41

Farrell: Because he was black?

05-00:09:42

Gordon: Black, sure.

05-00:09:43

Farrell: So they were upset because of—

05-00:09:43

Gordon: Cedrick Hardman.

05-00:09:46

Farrell: Oh, I didn't know that.

05-00:09:47

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. She was married to him. He's a big hero in the football world.

05-00:09:51

Farrell: Is that why you chose to have it at the Tadich Grill?

05-00:09:54

Gordon: Yeah, yeah. Exactly. Plus it was a popular place that I knew about. I wanted to bring him into the culture. There's a bigger idea there that's important to me and that is marginal people have a world of their own and they don't get any recognition from outside the world. But they run the world. If you want help in something and you don't have that connection, you're screwed. You'll see it in all my works, like on the jury stuff. For instance, in "The King of the Bottom", the Chinese woman gives the hint about what this guy is doing and then the blind man down below, he talks about this guy. He knows everything even though he's blind. You get the idea that the little people in the world, they have a voice, too, and that's what's ignored. Look at what's happening right now in Florida, where you have an uprising of just ordinary people who are saying this has got to stop. That's the way you get things actually changed. If you go back to the Depression, it was the little guy who changed America. It didn't come from the top.

05-00:11:30

Farrell: Even how the country was built originally.

05-00:11:34

Gordon: Yeah. Well, that's interesting because the biggest change in the United States of America was that the workingman had a chance. He could come to the United States and he could do something and all of a sudden he was the boss. That had never happened in history except maybe in *Spartacus*, where the slaves take over or something. Those things are really important and they're important to me to get at that. There's a lot of power there. I represented those people and I know them and I respect them. They're not all good.

05-00:12:25

Farrell:

There's a lot changing in terms of upward mobility. There's an evaporation of the American dream.

05-00:12:34

Gordon:

Well, I wouldn't be too sure of that. Just not being realized by Americans. If you look at the number of Africans and Middle Eastern people. People come into this country and they build empires and they're not white middle class people from Nebraska.

05-00:12:59

Farrell:

Well, no, and I view that as the American dream, what you're talking about. But now with stricter immigration laws and a lot of the racism that's bubbled to the surface that people were afraid to express.

05-00:13:10

Gordon:

When I was young, and it was in the thirties and forties, there was still the WASP thing. The WASP people ran the world and everybody else, they made the money but they didn't have class. That changed because the WASP people got pushed aside and people from other places—for instance, the Asians, the Latins, the Arabs, fantastic mobility and everything else. Nowadays you can't even tell who's from where. People like Trump and those people, they object to that because they want to hold onto the power. This fight is still about who's got it. They want to say the white man still has it but that's not true.

05-00:14:12

Farrell:

Yeah, I agree with you. Yeah. It'll be interesting to see how all of this play out.

05-00:14:19

Gordon:

Well, it's going to change. The question is the fear of white men losing his power, what does that do to society. And, of course, I know it from the Latin point of view. They're as capable as anybody else. The question that you see lacking is Eastern bloc people, especially from Russia, come and they don't have the same value. There's an intrinsic value in the American idea. They don't seem to have it. Look at all of them who Mueller are after. They're crooks.

05-00:15:04

Farrell:

How do you try to get at these ideas that clearly you care about and you think about in your writing?

05-00:15:15

Gordon:

Well, I come from a very strange place in society. I'm considered white. I speak Spanish fluently. I grew up being prejudiced against by Mexicans because I was white until I got to be a certain age, and then I just moved into the society, without the dregs, at least apparently, but inside I still had them. I still was trapped by my circumstances. In the beginning I told you that my mother was Jewish. I remember things happening when I was very young. When we lived out on the country people would make fun of her because she

was Jewish or looked Jewish. I would ask her what they were saying. She would say, "Oh, never mind." But I simply got the feeling from her that it was something to be quiet about, in the Old World type of thing, because if you said that you were a Jew they might take you to the ovens. I was aware that it was a tough life for people. She grew up with that. I grew up with it, too, because I felt her problem of sort of hiding that part of her heritage. Maybe not even consciously. I don't know.

05-00:17:20

Farrell:

The racial divide certainly shows up in "Even Pimps Have Bad Days" from the outset. It's really immediate.

05-00:17:27

Gordon:

Well, that's right. And then, of course, I grew up outside the mainstream. The people that I was with were always fighting for better rights. My mother, culturally she taught me all these things about don't talk above the people. You are the voice for the people who can't talk for themselves. As a lawyer I was always that. As a writer I am, too.

05-00:18:01

Farrell:

It's interesting the way that you do that in that story. It's subtle but this is how it manifests in real life. Like the pimp at the bar not being able to get a table until Samuel, who's white, shows up. I mean, that's how it manifests and that's how the systematic oppression—I mean, that could happen today.

05-00:18:26

Gordon:

Yeah. Well, it happens. I mean, it happens. I tried to make it subtle so that he is feeling the pressure, because they always do. I say they. I'm falling into the trap but that's true. I remember one time when I was with the city attorney and it was my job to get a tax proposal through in which they turned over a housing project right off of Geary called Midtown to a—it was a black organization. They were trying to change the Fillmore. I was sitting in there with the guys from the insurance company and they were blasting these guys as black guys and this and that and incompetent and all that stuff. They were going to take over this multimillion-dollar project. So they did. But I'll never forget the backstabbing that went in there. And then, of course, some people in the black community took advantage of that. There were guys that were multimillionaires living for two hundred dollars a month in luxury apartments and stuff. It just is unbelievable how it works. People take advantage of things. If you've got muscle and you've got all this stuff. I remember in the beginning, it was in the sixties when this was happening, and these black people, they rose to power in San Francisco with this kind of deal. Who knows if they turn their backs on their own people. I don't know. I don't know that much about their culture.

05-00:20:36

Farrell:

Yeah. I'm wondering if any of the elements of that short story you encountered in any of your casework. I'm wondering if you ever worked on any prostitution or underage prostitution cases or even kidnapping cases.

05-00:20:54

Gordon:

No. No, I didn't. I didn't handle much in the way of criminal stuff. I handled racial tension a lot. Not so much in the way that you've asked. I have a Mexican and I go into a jury problem. I'm fighting that issue. For instance, I had a case, a death case of an illegal alien who was killed walking down the street drunk. I was in San Bernardino County. I couldn't get a jury because they said, "Well, their parents always taught them to speak English and do this and that." They weren't too keen. I lost that case because this guy was just run over. The guy ran away from the scene. I lost it. I got some money from a man, the original guy who hit him, but then he was in the roadway and another guy came and ran over him and then he ran away. But we finally caught him. He was the one who was being tried. They wouldn't do anything for him. It was a shame. It was a real shame. I encountered that a lot, especially in small counties. In LA and in San Francisco I could do all right. But when I went into these cow counties, boy, no go. It was just a problem I've always had.

05-00:22:59

Farrell:

Social justice has been something that I think has come up a lot in both your work as a lawyer and also your writing. What about social justice feels important? What makes you want to fight for racial justice?

05-00:23:16

Gordon:

If a person is living here and working, he's entitled to a fair deal. Your job is to figure out how to do it. For instance, I have that story of the *King of the Bottom*. That's based on a true story where a guy was testifying in a murder case and then he went and he stole money from the blind man at the thing and the juror saw him. A guy who was totally guilty was set free. I wanted to point that out. I also wanted to point out this other point that I'm making, that the little guy in the society is the one who really pushes the ribbon. I think I did that. That's a very popular book of mine.

05-00:24:12

Farrell:

Yeah. And what about social justice is important to you?

05-00:24:18

Gordon:

Well, that the little guy gets a fair deal. They're victimized. And what happened was that, increasingly, with Republican governors in California, when they're going up the thing and then they started appointing judges and stuff, they appoint conservative people to the bench who tighten the rules and they kick out the marginal thing. Because in the old days if a guy was a hardworking guy and he was doing this they would give him the benefit of the doubt and they would give him American wages even though he was only entitled to foreign wages and stuff like that. I had a case that lasted for ten

years. The last one that I tried to summary judgment, the judge made a terrible ruling. He was a prosecutor and there's a rule that if you are in a criminal case you have to quote the law in its entirety and the defendant has to quote the defense in its entirety. But in a civil case you don't have to do that. You can quote the idea of it and you can let the jury decide that. But this guy just kicked me out. I said, "You're making a big mistake." When I came back to the court I asked for a new trial. I heard the judge say, "Everybody makes mistakes." I said, "Well, I've been doing this case for eight years and you're the third mistake." So anyway, I got the case back. Ultimately we settled it. The other part of that case which really frosted me was the company was a Southern company and the guy lost his hand and in the process of running back and forth to the South and back, they said finally, "We'll give you \$400,000 for this because no Mexican is worth more than \$400,000." I said, "You guys are making a huge mistake here." They're still paying him today. It's almost twenty years now and they're still paying him money because they're just stupid. They could have settled the case for a million dollars and he would have gone on his way.

05-00:27:18

Farrell:

Yeah. Well, one thing I liked about "Even Pimps Have Bad Days" is that the fifteen-year-old girl who was kidnapped, Leanne, ends up saving herself. She doesn't actually need help from anybody else. She was savvy enough to be able to get out of a bad situation. I felt like that was a really great sort of empowered plot point or maybe there's a better way to describe that. But what went into your decision to make her—I mean, Samuel's somebody who needs help from everybody. But this girl didn't. What went into your decision to write that?

05-00:27:54

Gordon:

Well, are you talking "Even Pimps Have Bad Days"?

05-00:27:56

Farrell:

Yes, yes.

05-00:27:57

Gordon:

Well, I liked the idea that she came from this sort of messy background where her mother was a prostitute and the pimp knocked her up and she had a child. She had values, too. She was a person even though she came from that type of background. This is all such an individual thing, where you have people who—and I know that from my own background. You make decisions and you make mistakes and everything but you get something straight based on the principles of what your parents teach you and what's going on in society. Just because a woman is a prostitute, you don't know how she got there. But she's there. She has a religion, she has values. I wanted to emphasize that.

05-00:29:08

Farrell:

You also weave in parts of history or just systems. The way that prostitution works. There's a big childhood prostitution problem in Oakland.

05-00:29:21

Gordon: Not just in Oakland.

05-00:29:22

Farrell: No, but it takes place in Oakland so I just—geographically the way that—

05-00:29:26

Gordon: Yeah. Well, that's where they're safe. They're safer.

05-00:29:29

Farrell: Right, okay. But then you also had talked about the Kaiser shipyards and the reason why they came from the south to the Bay Area. Did you have to do any research to include that? Or I guess what made you want to include those snippets of history?

05-00:29:48

Gordon: I have a pretty good memory, especially about social things. I remember the people coming from the south, not just to Oakland but to Los Angeles, also. Because you have southwest LA. You have Compton, you have all those things. These are all created by the war mostly. Here you have a cheap labor force. Could do this thing. They're uneducated and they bring all the baggage with them. Nobody gives a crap about them becoming better or educated or anything else. They just want the cheap labor. When they're done with them they cast them aside. Then they sort of wall them in and you get what you get. I know that you know about all the riots they've had in Los Angeles. That's one of the problems. They've had it several times because they don't treat the people right. But I've talked to many people in the judiciary, Mexican guys, who like the black clients better because they're easy to deal with. They have a better result in the trial courts than the Mexicans do here because they're not foreign in that sense. They're part of the culture. I don't know. You saw that a little bit in the OJ trial when they tried him in downtown LA, which was a big mistake for the prosecution because they had so many blacks available in the jury pool. They couldn't do anything about it. They got the wrong result there. There's a lot of payback in the system, too.

05-00:32:02

Farrell: Yeah, that's true. Yeah. Did you want to write the story as a way of showing people that we should learn from the past?

05-00:32:13

Gordon: I wanted to write the story because I felt that a pimp and a situation deserved as much credit for a good outcome. They learned things from the society. I wasn't trying to do anything except tell the story.

05-00:32:41

Farrell: What was it like for you to bring back Samuel?

05-00:32:42

Gordon: Well, I always liked Samuel. He's my alter ego, I guess. I spent a lot of time with him. Things happen. When you're trying a case, I was going to say, it's

the same thing. You're in the story and you need something. All of a sudden something drops in your lap and you go there. I had an English teacher who was an expert in Chaucer and he was talking to me one day and he was saying, "Well, you know, you get backed into a corner when you're writing stuff so you have to figure out how to get out of the corner." [laughter] If you have a lot of stuff in your head then you say, "Well, let's see, I'll take this one." They're all stories. They're stories based on trying to be fair and to make a point and that's what I'm doing.

05-00:33:48

Farrell: Are there more Samuel Hamilton stories in the cards for you?

05-00:33:54

Gordon: Yeah, sure.

05-00:33:55

Farrell: When you finally decide to retire him, do you want to provide your readers with a sense of closure or you don't—

05-00:34:03

Gordon: I don't know yet.

05-00:34:04

Farrell: Okay, that's fair.

05-00:34:04

Gordon: But I'll tell you this. I stopped writing novels because I wanted to get off the chariot, so to speak. I was rushing to get these things done, so on and so forth, and I wanted to stop that for a while and I wanted to sort of look at the autobiographical stuff, *The Wishing Well* and *Troubled Boy*. Did I send you the one about the Argentinean guy who runs the mafia in San Francisco?

05-00:34:44

Farrell: I don't think so.

05-00:34:44

Gordon: Oh. Well, I'll send it to you anyway. This guy's a buddy of mine. He came to me after he'd been in jail four years in Argentina in a dirty war. His father was a governor of a province. I just liked him right away and I gave him a job and then he finally, after, I think it was eight years, he passed the bar, mostly because he didn't speak English well enough. He just took over my practice and I left. But he's also a bigger than life character. He's like that. But he's an entertaining guy. There was another point here. That if you have a Mexican or you had somebody who was downtrodden, a black man who was downtrodden here, and you had someone come from Spain or some other place where they had grown up feeling privileged or they didn't have this downtrodden thing, they did better in this society. Horatio, he was a college graduate, he was a *senorito*, as they say. He had a lot of privileges where he grew up and so he came and he's done well in the society. That's another point. I've been in the south where a black man who comes from someplace else, not from the

United States, and he does okay there, too. It's a strange phenomenon. It's breeding and maybe social class. It's how you feel about yourself. If you're being plastered, pushed down, pushed down, pushed down all the time, it's not good. You lose some of the pizzazz that you need to get along in the society. Now, why I got it even though I had a double whammy, I grew up with Mexicans and they were prejudiced against me all through high school and stuff, I felt that pressure until I was selected student body president and then when I went to college I realized that I was learning stuff. The whole world just exploded in front of me. And I traveled. Nothing's stopped me. But I was stopped. I was full of tattoos. That's the astonishing thing. It was like a, what do you call it, an osmosis. You're here and you're trapped and then all of a sudden you're not. So you're another person.

05-00:38:05

Farrell: It's a transformation.

05-00:38:06

Gordon: Yeah. Well, it's an osmosis. It's like a butterfly. That was a wonderful experience. I'm acutely aware of that. I still don't understand everything about it but I know that that's an important subtle thing. Speaking the language, the gift that I got from being there, I can communicate with a huge part of the world.

05-00:38:39

Farrell: Do you think that's affected your penchant for social justice? The fact that you can communicate with non-English speakers?

05-00:39:46

Gordon: Sure. Absolutely. Absolutely. A lot of them suffer from the same thing. It's not a race thing. It's a class thing. Many Mexicans leave Mexico and come to the United States and it's really not even a racial thing for them. It's a class thing. The reason they don't go back isn't always economic. It's the fact that they have a status that they could never get in Mexico because they're dark skinned or something. Those are all subtle points but they're all true.

05-00:39:21

Farrell: Then with your book, or, sorry, your short story, "Lord of the Pampas" that you wrote in 2017—

05-00:39:30

Gordon: Yeah. That's the one I'm talking about.

05-00:39:33

Farrell: Okay. Oh.

05-00:39:33

Gordon: Yeah. "Lord of the Pampas" is about the Argentinean guy.

- 05-00:39:38
Farrell: Oh. Okay. I see. Yeah. Horatio. The story takes place in basically a single room occupancy building that's managed by Horatio and it's where retired San Francisco fire department.
- 05-00:39:54
Gordon: Well, it's not really managed by him. He just has an apartment there. Because he's an employee who has connections and stuff, he gets an apartment there on the top floor.
- 05-00:40:08
Farrell: Oh, I see. Okay.
- 05-00:40:09
Gordon: Yeah. It's owned by a Jewish guy.
- 05-00:40:12
Farrell: Okay. Okay. But it's also where retired fire department and police live.
- 05-00:40:18
Gordon: Yeah, exactly.
- 05-00:40:20
Farrell: And Horatio becomes the protector of the people who have been the protectors.
- 05-00:40:26
Gordon: Yeah. Which actually is not exactly true because Horatio protects himself. He becomes a symbol. You see?
- 05-00:40:35
Farrell: Yeah, okay. Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit more about how he's the symbol?
- 05-00:40:38
Gordon: Well, he's the symbol because he comes from a different place and yet he's basically a democrat, small D, and he believes in all these things and he was in jail for four years in Argentina where he fought for those things. He was thrown there by the autocrats, the generals and all that stuff. He escapes that and he becomes a force in the society, just like many other people do. And he's huge. The guy is six foot eight. When they go after him they're supposed to do him in. Instead he's the one who does them in. You see? He becomes the brains for the opposition. That's the old idea. That's my idea. The marginal guy in the society and stuff. This guy's a drunk and he's a *bon vivant*. He wins.
- 05-00:41:59
Farrell: There's also some foreshadowing at the end when you write "Horatio Martinez had won the second round but they both knew this was not the end of the war." I'm wondering if you're planning on more stories with these characters.

05-00:42:08

Gordon: Maybe.

05-00:42:10

Farrell: Okay. You're just leaving it open-ended?

05-00:42:11

Gordon: I mean, with Horatio you just have to leave it open.

05-00:42:13

Farrell: Okay. That's fair. Where did that title come from?

05-00:42:17

Gordon: Well, the Lord of the Pampas, that's a very famous idea of an Argentinean, because the Pampas in Argentina is where all the grain grows. It gives them tremendous power. They have no money but they have power because they had land and they can do all these things and get tremendous results and also wealth from this idea. The Lord of the Pampas, well, hell, he's the king of the Pampas. He gets a lot of respect from that.

05-00:43:05

Farrell: Then you also in 2017 wrote "Murder in Georgia." Can you tell me a little bit about writing that story?

05-00:43:10

Gordon: Yeah. Well, that's the one that bothers me and I don't know if I'll put that in the thing. Did you read "King of the Bottom"?

05-00:43:18

Farrell: Yeah.

05-00:43:19

Gordon: Okay. Well, "King of the Bottom" basically has the same clue basis that "Murder in Georgia". I was in the Army and I saw all this stuff first-hand, what was going on in Georgia and I was horrified. I'd never seen anything like that, where the black had their own toilets in the town, they couldn't drink water out of the fountains. This is Fort Benning, Georgia. If you walked off the base, you were screwed. You had to follow the rules in the town. That's what that comes from. Now, I don't know how apparent it is that the same clue things, it's the blue beetle in "King of the Bottom" and it's wood chips in "Murder in Georgia". But it's the same idea. You find the chips and you find the guy. I don't know. Did you not make any connection like that?

05-00:44:28

Farrell: I didn't but I understand that they were both clue based. I guess I didn't do the sort of one-to-one comparison.

05-00:44:37

Gordon: Well, I'm worried about that. But I wanted to tell that story. Originally that was the story in *Flawed*. That whole thing was based on that, the trip to the south. That's where I got the idea of the blue beetle. I read a book called *The*

Fly for the Prosecution, in which they do it by finding flies and the larvae tells them how long it's been there and where it's been and so on and so forth. There's a technical reason for it.

05-00:45:20

Farrell: Yeah. Which makes sense.

05-00:45:26

Gordon: But I love the sheriff drinking the Dr. Pepper. I just love it. Because the guy's just so corrupt and so everything. Anyway.

05-00:45:38

Farrell: Oh, that's funny. You mentioned this before but there have been—

05-00:45:41

Gordon: Did you like the story?

05-00:45:43

Farrell: I did. I did. Yeah.

05-00:45:45

Gordon: Okay. All right. Well, I may just keep it.

05-00:45:47

Farrell: Yeah. I don't necessarily think that they have to be—I understand sort of the structure that you were using and that made sense. It seemed like it was something—

05-00:45:59

Gordon: Well, that helps me. Thank you.

05-00:46:02

Farrell: You also mentioned that there have been a couple more autobiographical stories than others. We'll talk about *The Wishing Well* in a second. But one that you wrote called *A Troubled Boy in the World*. It's a little bit of a different autobiographical because it has more to do with your family and so I'm wondering what it was like for you to bring your family into your work in that way.

05-00:46:27

Gordon: My daughter also disappeared. She was a drug addict. Her body's never been found. I thought about doing that but my stepson had a very close relationship with her and he sort of wanted to write it and so I left it alone. I may do that. I want to do it because it's a haunting thing for any parent to lose a child and never know. You know what I'm saying? Yeah. I started to do that because those things have always bothered me. When you lose two children. And even *The Troubled Boy* is like losing a third one but he's still alive.

05-00:47:21

Farrell: Was it hard for you to bring those stories into your work?

05-00:47:24

Gordon: Well, I've been writing for twenty years and they're just coming out now.

05-00:47:31

Farrell: Have you shared that story with your son?

05-00:47:35

Gordon: Yeah. Well, yeah, sure.

05-00:47:37

Farrell: Was he okay with you writing about that?

05-00:47:40

Gordon: Yeah. He's the one who told me the story. I used to go and pick him up at prison all the time. Every time I would go to prison he always was full of wonderful things that he was going to do and then as soon as he got out I'd—like I went down and picked him up in the Valley and I brought him back and then I let him out in San Raphael and then I just saw him running towards a group of his buddies. I knew what was going to happen. In three months he was back in jail for violating his parole. He was here in our house and we had to finally kick him out because he just couldn't keep his hands off things and drank all the booze. Grabbed my credit cards at night and would go out and buy cigarettes because he didn't have any money. He was like Peter Pan, I guess. That's what I've said.

05-00:48:46

Farrell: Did writing that story help you process any of that?

05-00:48:50

Gordon: It actually relieved me. It helped. Him staying here helped a lot because Carmen loves him. That helped him a lot, too. He had a terrible relationship with his mother. I was always very close to him but, as she says, it needs a mother. I don't know. He is what he is.

05-00:49:17

Farrell: Do you think you'll include that story in your collection?

05-00:49:21

Gordon: Yeah. Oh, yeah, for sure. Yeah. I like the story. And, in fact, I was going to talk about redemption and then I realized that probably won't be redemption because he's stuck in that thing. He knows the mean streets of San Francisco like nobody else.

05-00:49:42

Farrell: There's also a departure in that story from the mystery or the detective.

05-00:49:47

Gordon: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Totally, yeah.

05-00:49:49

Farrell: Was it different for you to write?

05-00:49:53

Gordon:

It was very painful and the thrill of it was, for me, it was going to be redemption at the end. But then I know that's bullshit. It's not going to happen. When my kids were young I used to watch other people's kids and they were going to go do this. I said, "My kids will do that, too. They just have to get out of this thing." They never got out of it. The one I haven't been able to touch is Harleigh, my second son. I had my fingerprints all over him because I didn't want him to turn out like the other two. Turned out the same way. He was a goner. He probably was always a goner, so I don't know.

05-00:50:50

Farrell:

Do you think you ever will write that story?

05-00:50:52

Gordon:

I don't know. I would say yes only to just get it out of my system. But it's not easy.

05-00:51:05

Farrell:

Are there more stories that you want to include in the collection that are more personal and autobiographical?

05-00:51:09

Carmen Gordon: Can I interrupt?

05-00:51:13

Farrell:

Sure.

05-00:51:13

Gordon:

She wants me to write her story. [Referencing his wife, Carmen.]

05-00:51:15

Carmen Gordon: No. Willie is saying also by Lindsey staying here with us, it also brought out a lot of love that was stored inside of him towards his son because those ten months they were able to really connect and be together. That was the wonderful thing about it. That you got a lot of this anger and how much he loved you in things that he said.

05-00:51:51

Gordon:

That was a big surprise. I always said that Jason, my stepson, was the only one of my children that ever followed the things that I taught him. And yet here my son was with me for ten months and he was saying that he remembered the things that I taught him. I'm telling you, it's a big surprise—

05-00:52:13

Farrell:

And intelligent.

05-00:52:13

Gordon:

—when you say, "How did you show that?" He said, "It's the reason I survived because the things you taught me." I thought, "Jesus, that's amazing how one person can use it for advancing and another person uses it just to

survive." I was very surprised. When my son was here he was using drugs, what do you call the stuff that they give them?

05-00:52:46

Carmen Gordon: Methadone.

05-00:52:47

Gordon: Methadone. He didn't tell me. He told her. Toward the end I said, "I know that you've been using methadone and I'm just grateful that you're using that instead of something else."

05-00:53:07

Farrell: Are all those reasons that you want to include that story in the collection?

05-00:53:09

Gordon: The important story of that was at the end of the story he kept doing what he was doing. That was the point. It wasn't going to be a happy ending.

05-00:53:30

Farrell: Are there plans for more stories like this in that collection?

05-00:53:33

Gordon: Maybe. I don't know. Right now I'm finishing the one about Baldwin and I can't remember how many I have there. I just want to do ten.

05-00:53:47

Farrell: Okay. And with the James Baldwin story, why did he come up for you now?

05-00:53:51

Gordon: Well, because Bill Belli, who was a very good friend of mine and worked for me, he was a literary person. He was also a pretty good lawyer. He came to work for me. I was very attached to him. He was a good guy and a smart guy. We used to talk all the time. He wanted to be himself a writer. He was a very good friend of James Jones, the writer. He was a very good friend of Bill Burroughs, the writer. He was a very good friend, in fact a lover, of James Baldwin. He was a consummate interesting guy. James Baldwin was here in Berkeley doing something, '79, '80, something like that. He said, "Look it, James Baldwin's here." I said, "Hell, bring him over. I'd like to know the guy." Because I knew something about him anyway. A little bit. A little bit. When he came over, Jesus, he was a dynamo. You looked at this guy, this small, unassuming, very feminine looking person, until he opened his mouth and then, wham, you got blown away. He came with all his trappings and everything, these two Algerian boys. They ate us out of house and home. But, Jesus, it was really interesting.

05-00:55:31

Farrell: But why now?

05-00:55:32

Gordon: Well, because I'm telling stories. I actually want to talk a little bit about Bill Belli in there because I admire him.

05-00:55:45

Farrell: Sure. Oh, in the story you want to talk about him?

05-00:55:48

Gordon: Yes.

05-00:55:49

Farrell: Oh, I see. Okay.

05-00:55:50

Gordon: In fact, that's probably how I'm going to end it. Because he had some big problems himself. He was a drunk and finally had to fire him. He got sober. He's twenty-five years sober and he divorced his wife, which he needed to do, because she beat the shit out of him. I had trouble with his story because I didn't know what to tell. I read a lot of articles from his book, essays and so forth, and then I just picked them out and I asked him to tell me about certain people, like Malcolm X. I just took what I got from the stories. That's another point that was really important in that story. And that is that in 1948 he went to France. Now, 1948 was only three years after the war was over and from other stuff I've read the French were very depressed. Their society had been ruined. A lot of poverty and stuff. Yet it was still France. In addition to that, there was an element of shame in the society because they had really collaborated with the Germans in many ways to just shit all over their own people. There's a sense of guilt there and depression. This guy is there. He's struggling and he tells one of his friends who's an American that he has a hotel that's much better than the crap where the other guy is staying. The guy comes over there and he steals the sheets from his own hotel and he gives the sheets to Baldwin and they have embroidered on them in red the other hotel's name. The cops come and they get the guy and they say, "All right. Where are the sheets?" He says, "I gave them to Baldwin." They take the guy and Baldwin, they put him in jail. He's there and he's there for four or five days. He's eating bread and some kind of leek soup and it's awful and he's sick and everything. He goes to court two or three times and he's just a black guy who's there with everybody else. Then he sees a guy he knows from New York who's a lawyer. He says, "Help me get out of here." He sees him in court. The guy gets him a lawyer and the lawyer comes in, says to the judge, "This guy's an American." They said, "He's an American?" The judge is totally shocked. He says to get him out of there. It's the point. You get the point?

05-00:59:31

Farrell: Mm-hmm.

05-00:59:29

Gordon: Here he is, he's a black man, he's a queer. He's there. And yet as soon as they learn that he's an American his status changes. Now, you can see why

Baldwin's in France. Because in New York he's just a squirrely black guy with no power. He's gay. There he's an American.

05-01:00:03

Farrell: Yeah. Not subject to the same prejudices.

05-01:00:06

Gordon: Yeah, exactly. So there's my point again.

05-01:00:09

Farrell: You'll bring in the Paris part?

05-01:00:12

Gordon: Yes. That's what I'm doing. Yeah.

05-01:00:13

Farrell: Yeah, okay. Yeah, because I think that the—

05-01:00:16

Gordon: I don't want to keep going because there's a lot of stories there. But I put Malcolm X and this story because I wanted to show something about him and the difference between him. Plus, his power.

05-01:00:32

Farrell: Baldwin or Malcolm X? You said his power.

05-01:00:38

Gordon: Oh, I mean Baldwin. It's always about Baldwin. His power. He was from a religious family. His stepfather was a—what do you call it?

05-01:00:46

Farrell: A preacher?

05-01:00:50

Gordon: A preacher, yeah. He had this power. I've seen a couple plays of his in which it's also been manifested.

05-01:01:03

Farrell: It's going to be interesting. I feel like Baldwin is having a moment right now.

05-01:01:07

Gordon: Yeah, he is. That's the other reason. But I knew him personally. Not too much but enough. Yeah.

05-01:01:20

Farrell: Yeah. Will you include "The Wishing Well" in your short story collection?

05-01:01:23

Gordon: Yeah.

05-01:01:25

Farrell:

Okay. We'll talk a little bit more about "The Wishing Well" because I think that also ties into some of your philanthropic work. But I do want to ask a little bit about your writing process. How long do these stories take for you to write?

05-01:01:40

Gordon:

Some of them went pretty fast. "The Wishing Well" story, I was driving down the street with my friend, Craig Barron, who was a client of mine. I said, "Oh, there's the old—" what the hell's it called?

05-01:02:04

Carmen Gordon: Clifton's.

05-01:02:04

Gordon:

Clifton's Cafeteria. He says, "Oh, yeah. It's reopened. The guy who bought it is an entrepreneur." I said, "You know, I used to go in there and I used to steal money from the thing." He says, "Gees, that guy might be interested in that because it's a wonderful story." Immediately I said, "Will you ask him if I can go there and make a contribution? I want to give him a thousand bucks because I used to steal the money from there. It wasn't anywhere near a thousand bucks but I would like to just pay it back." So we arranged it. We went there and we had a meeting. They brought the press in and all that stuff. Then I just decided to write it. I think somebody called me from NBC or something like that. They didn't believe me. They didn't believe that I could get away with it. I said, "The hell with it. I'll tell the story and then we'll see." But I didn't care if they believed it or not because it's happened.

05-01:03:21

Farrell:

From start to finish, how long did that story take?

05-01:03:24

Gordon:

Well, I think within a year it was done. I just had other things pending. I was writing some of these other stories, too.

05-01:03:34

Farrell:

You write stories simultaneously?

05-01:03:38

Gordon:

No. I write them one at a time. But if I've had something in my mind I finish it and then I go to the next one.

05-01:03:44

Farrell:

I see. Okay.

05-01:03:45

Gordon:

I don't like to jump from one to another. In fact, this Baldwin story stopped me from finishing my book because I got stuck on it. I actually was trapped. I didn't know what to do. I don't know enough about the black culture in and of

itself and I had to read about Baldwin specifically and take what I knew plus what I read and put it into something. Yeah.

05-01:04:19

Farrell:

What about some of the other stories that are more mystery driven? They're similar to your novels. How long do those usually take you?

05-01:04:26

Gordon:

Those are easier. Talk about routine. Now, the first one I wrote was the one about the zombies. I don't know. Some people have said that I should just have one burglary instead of two. What do you think?

05-01:04:50

Farrell:

I think it makes sense because to have two burglaries, because the first one was a test and things went well. And that was also—

05-01:04:56

Gordon:

Thank you. That's what I—

05-01:04:58

Farrell:

—how Dominique was going to pay the bail and so she was trying to decide, "Do I use all of that?" I think it makes sense to have two.

05-01:05:03

Gordon:

Yeah. Okay, great. Thank you.

05-01:05:05

Farrell:

It also helps build tension.

05-01:05:06

Gordon:

You see how you're helping me? Huh?

05-01:05:08

Farrell:

It also helps build tension towards the end. Yeah. How does your process with short stories differ from writing novels?

05-01:05:19

Gordon:

Well, first place, they're more personal. I'm really noticing that they're overtly biographical. I wanted to change the pace. It's also taking longer. Two years I should have finished the book. But I wasn't in a hurry. I just said, "The hell with it. I'm going to do it my way." I'm getting some heat for that from my publishers and stuff. I don't care.

05-01:06:02

Farrell:

[laughter] I had a question there but that was funny. What excites you about short stories?

05-01:06:09

Gordon:

Well, they're quick. I'm not sure I told you this. I think I did. When I was a kid I used to go and watch my father speak at his thing. One of the things I took away from that was they were too long. When I started to be a lawyer,

subconsciously I was doing my father's work by preaching to the jury a story. I'd have a beginning, a middle, an end, and I'd have a surprise. I did that for forty years, trying cases, or more, because I've been a lawyer fifty-some years. Every time I would try a case I would remember my father and I would tell the story. I would try and always entertain the jury. Always say something beginning, middle, end, and then if I could find one, I'd have a twist of some kind that would interest them, that had been ignored by the other side or something. Then I would just come into that. I liked that. It was where I learned to be a storyteller, from that. Maybe I was already a storyteller. That really helped me.

05-01:08:01

Farrell: What does your typical day, when you decide to write, what does that look like?

05-01:08:04

Gordon: Well, right now I have some limitations because I have a health problem. I'm very tired in the afternoons. I used to write in the afternoon when I got through with everything else. Now I have to find time to do it in the morning. But right now I can't do it because I'm doing an interview on TV and sometimes I have to do other things which I don't want to do but I like to write. If I don't write in the morning I generally can't do it.

05-01:08:45

Farrell: How many hours in the morning do you write for?

05-01:08:48

Gordon: Well, if I can do it, I like to spend two or three hours.

05-01:08:52

Farrell: Do you tend to do it five days a week? Six days? Seven days?

05-01:08:55

Gordon: I'd say, yeah, five days. Sometimes six. I would do it seven but I need to get away from it.

05-01:09:03

Farrell: Give yourself a break. Yeah.

05-01:09:05

Gordon: Yeah. But I'm not as disciplined as I was when I had to do the stuff for the writers group.

05-01:09:16

Farrell: In those two or three hours, how many words or pages can you typically knock out?

05-01:09:18

Gordon:

Well, I just was working on Baldwin two days ago. I wrote three pages, which is a lot to do in one day really. As I get toward the end or something I wrote more because I'm anxious to get it done. Yeah.

05-01:09:41

Farrell:

Do you feel like you need to be disciplined in order to be productive?

05-01:09:46

Gordon:

Yes. You need to be disciplined. Yeah. Fortunately I keep stuff in my head. But I don't ever feel like I've progressed until I get it out on the page. I go over it again. Now I just do it on the computer. I used to do it on a tablet and then put it on the thing and that was sort of a revision. But rewriting is a very important part of it. Then I sent it to the editor. I haven't found a good editor yet but I still have the same one for twenty years, so I don't know.

05-01:10:24

Farrell:

Now that you have been writing for twenty years, how does actually writing and producing work compare with your ideas of it before you started?

05-01:10:40

Gordon:

Well, I always knew I was going to be a writer. I did a couple of things forty years ago. I just put them in a drawer and I look at them. It was kind of interesting but nothing. I didn't know how to do it. When I started writing this trunk book, *Flawed*, I just started writing and I took my pages to the reading conference stuff. I finished what I had to say and then some gal in there that was then part of the group said, "Wow, what a powerful narrative voice." I said, "That's it." [laughter] But I didn't know what I was doing still and I just meandered through this seven hundred pages and I told all these stories that I've repeated in books. But I didn't know how to finish them. I knew the idea of the story because I got that out. I wasn't satisfied and nobody else was either. I finished that and I got the case back that I was working on, the one that lasted for ten years. I was involved with that. That took another two years. In the meantime I wrote this short story, which is chapter one of *Chinese Jars* and I sent it to my court reporter who then would read my stuff. She said, "I like this better than your long blab, blab novel." Isabel said, "Well, why don't you write mystery stories? You know about it, you know about forensics. You know about this. You used to read these dime novels all the time." I said, "Okay." I made a novel out of chapter one. Which isn't a very good short story because there's something missing from it.

05-01:13:21

Farrell:

Yeah. With a novel you can spend more time developing that.

05-01:13:24

Gordon:

Well, yeah. You know, a novel is fantastic. You can wander all over the place and then come back to the—but a short story, it's like shooting a bow and arrow. You get one shot. Either it hits the target or it doesn't.

05-01:13:39

Farrell: Yeah. That's a good analogy.

05-01:13:41

Gordon: And that's it.

05-01:13:43

Farrell: I want to talk a little bit about your philanthropic work. You had a library named after you in Whittier. Can you tell me a little bit about how that came to fruition?

05-01:13:56

Gordon: Well, when I was a student at Whittier High School I used to work sometimes in the summer. I also used to clean windows and stuff. I would read the books. I read the *Canterbury Tales* and just stuff like that. I would always go to the library and read that kind of book. I didn't know who the hell Shakespeare was so I'd read that. Then I'd read history books. You name it, I would just go in there. I just loved it. I couldn't get enough of it. When I finally was working, everything—in the fifth grade I used to go to a guy in Los Nietos who had an oil well pump factory. He would give kids Christmas presents. My teacher took me there because I was kind of interested in painting and my father was a painter and my sister was a—and I was painting a picture of America with my teacher. She took me over there and the guy said, "Here's a paint brush. Tell me a little bit about it." He said, "Where do you live?" I said, "I live over there on Flood Ranch, Canta Ranas. He said, "Oh, I love Canta Ranas. The people there are wonderful." It was all Mexicans and me. He says, "You know what I'm going to do for the people there?" I said, "What are you going to do?" He says, "I'm going to build them a library." I thought, "Wow, that's fantastic." I went back and I started telling everybody they're going to build a library. It was really going to be great. I'm in the fifth grade, eighth grade, nothing. High school, nothing. I go to college, I come back, nothing. In 2004 they're having a conference of California illiterates and they give Isabel a prize for contributing to literacy. She actually did because a lot of people from Latin America, Mexico, would read her books in Spanish and they got interested in books. Sort of like Rowling with Harry Potter.

05-01:16:43

Farrell: Harry Potter.

05-01:16:44

Gordon: She would do it in Spanish. The guy who was speaking was from the Santa Fe Springs Library and Canta Ranas had now been incorporated into the town of Santa Fe Springs. I went up to the guy. I said, "Hey, I'm Willie Gordon from Canta Ranas." I said, "Do you guys have a library there?" They said, "Who the hell are you?" Then a gal came up and grabbed me by the sleeve and she said, "We know who you are. Your buddy Gus Velasco, who you grew up with you, is now mayor of Santa Fe Springs and he asked me to say hello to you." I said, "Look it. I know you don't have a library in Canta Ranas. I want to talk to you and I'll come down there. I have an idea and I want to share it with

you." I went down there and I talked to Gus, my friend, this person who was in charge of the libraries. Not the guy who snubbed me. Then the city manager, whose name is Fred Latham. I said, "Look it, you guys. Here's the story." I told him the story about the guy promising the library and I said, "I don't have enough money to build a library because that takes five or six million bucks but I can give you a hundred thousand dollars of my own money if you'll promise to build a library with it." They huddled around and they said, "Well, we'll do it on one condition. That you bring Isabel Allende down here so we can give her the keys to the city." I said, "Well, the tail doesn't wag the dog. I have to see if she wants to do it." I asked her if she'd do it. She did, okay. So we went down there. They gave her the keys to the city and I told them I'd give them a hundred thousand dollars. It took a while. Jesus Christ, they're screwing around, screwing around. That was in 2004. Now, this library finally got approved and we worked it out in 2013. So that was a long—

05-01:19:06
Farrell:

That's a long time.

05-01:19:08
Gordon:

But it was done. They said they were going to name it after me. I said, "You don't have to do that. Just build it and let the people get in there." The big hang-up was they wanted to make it digital. I didn't understand in those days what that meant but then it meant that they could collect all the books of the world and they could have them on the thing. That was fantastic. It was much better than just having something in the library. That was done. I went down and I gave a big speech in Spanish and in English. It was wonderful. It was wonderful.

05-01:19:58
Farrell:

What did it mean for you to have that library finally open?

05-01:20:01
Gordon:

Well, it was lovely because it was a promise that I feel had been fulfilled. Then Los Nietos, where I went to school, I talked to them and I told them that I would give them some money to put computers in their library or whatever it was so that they could have it. I said okay. I went to the high school. I always loved the library at the high school. I told them I would do the same thing. I would give them money to buy computers for the library. They said that was fine. I did that. I gave them a hundred thousand dollars, which is what I gave to the Canta Ranas. Pretty soon I get this thing in the mail. They said, "We want to name the library after you." My heart swelled. I just couldn't believe it. Because my roots were so tied up in these three areas. It was just a dream. It's like you live your whole life for it. I was thrilled.

05-01:21:31
Farrell:

Well, did it feel like a homecoming for you?

05-01:21:33

Gordon:

Yeah. It was just like unbelievable. Yeah. I was a poor kid from Canta Ranas and I used to have to sometimes walk to school and there was no library and I'd have to go to Whittier or I'd have to get on the big red one and go to LA. That was the days of the big red one. And go to the county library. This was a wonderful experience. It was just terrific. This thing worked out in Whittier and we had this celebration. Carmen was there. It was really emotional.

05-01:22:19

Carmen Gordon: Mary sobbed.

05-01:22:21

Gordon:

Oh, she was sobbing. Yeah. I wrote a little thing before and I just welcomed everybody into the library. Daydreams have been a big issue in my life and when I talk to kids I always tell them never forget their daydreams because that's where your realities come from. It's not the other way around. It's not you daydream and then nothing ever happens. That's where you get your substance. It was such a moving experience. Nothing in my life affected me that way until this thing came up at Bancroft. That affected me the same way.

05-01:23:11

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about that?

05-01:23:13

Gordon:

Well, the thing is when I went to Cal I was just student number 25,651. I wanted to go to Yale but somebody screwed me in the application thing. I never got there. Fortunately, when I went to Cal I loved it. It was my place. It was a place I could work, I could do everything I needed to do. I wheeled and dealed and did all the stuff that I could do. I got an education. I had three jobs. I never expected to be honored like that. I didn't want to give them money just to give them money. I wanted there to be a connection between me and the university. When they proposed this thing and asked for my books, I said, "Jesus, that's—" and I even said it in the article. It's like getting the Nobel Prize. I felt the same way about Whittier High School. I got two Nobel Prizes in my life. That was my connection. When you help somebody get to a library and they find a way to do things, it's really important in their lives. I heard a program on Michael Krasny about that and I was trying to get in to say part of the conversation but I couldn't. There were a lot of people like me who were just out there. I got to do something about it.

05-01:25:11

Farrell:

Libraries are beautiful, too, because they welcome in people from all walks of life, from all backgrounds.

05-01:25:17

Gordon:

That's the point.

05-01:25:18

Farrell:

It's a place that are significant to people on such an individual collective level. Yeah.

05-01:25:27

Gordon: Well, even marginal people.

05-01:25:27

Farrell: Yeah, exactly. It's important. They're a sanctuary, essentially. You write about that in the *Wishing Well*, too, how the library becomes a sanctuary. Yeah.

05-01:25:36

Gordon: Yeah. It was.

05-01:25:38

Farrell: How do you hope your relationship or your connection with these libraries grows or is remembered?

05-01:25:46

Gordon: Well, I hope that it is remembered. Not so much for my sake but for the sake of future patrons and people who will learn the same thing I did, how important they are and how they evolve. Now you've got video, you've got all this stuff. You can connect to the books of the world. You can do all this stuff. And, of course, it's much more expensive but, gee whiz, it's fantastic. It's not just me in the middle of this time that's doing it. The big steel magnate from Pittsburgh.

05-01:26:29

Farrell: Oh, Carnegie?

05-01:26:28

Gordon: Yeah. He started libraries. That was one of the things I always remembered. Fortunately we had public libraries here. He had a connection of libraries all over the country. I'm not alone in this. I want there to be more people like me and hopefully more people like Jim Carnegie with a hell of a lot more money than I've got who really will do something to get people to do more. It's like a civic duty or something.

05-01:27:08

Farrell: How do you hope your contributions to these libraries impacts the lives of others?

05-01:27:14

Gordon: Well, I hope that it encourages them to read and actually to do things. To take the idea and apply it to their style of life, whatever it is. Doesn't have to be libraries, it has to be something else. I know that'll happen. I know it'll happen because it happened to me. For circumstances, libraries were the things that I focused on because they meant that much to me. I've described in detail why. I think that there are people all over the place in the United States and other places, it has the same effect. I just hope that people will do it.

05-01:28:12

Farrell: Do you have a favorite library?

05-01:28:14

Gordon: [laughter] I'm supposed to say Whittier. Well, I have Whittier, Los Nietos, Canta Ranas, and Bancroft.

05-01:28:30

Farrell: [laughter] Do you have any other outside of that? Any other libraries that you're fond of?

05-01:28:32

Gordon: No.

05-01:28:33

Farrell: Okay. Those are kind of your—

05-01:28:34

Gordon: That's enough.

05-01:28:34

Farrell: That's fair, that's fair. Now I want to ask you some reflective questions. What has the work that you've done as a lawyer meant to you?

05-01:28:48

Gordon: It's really important. I've told you the story about my mother, told me to read Saroyan, never to get outside the scope of talking above the heads of people that you were talking to because she knew somehow that I was going to speak in the public for people, other people, and she didn't want me to get fancy about it. She wanted me to just use the language that the people use and talk for the ones that couldn't talk. One of the biggest privileges of my life has been doing that, talking for people who couldn't talk and writing for people who are marginal so that they have a voice in the society, too, or they can identify themselves. The way you get out of being marginal is by reading about people like you and then you can take the next step to do that. It's not like turning out like someone like Nixon or something, or even LBJ who got arrested. Was one of my favorite guys. Look at Robert Caro. Fantastic. He wrote four books about LBJ and he's not finished yet. He wrote this book about Moses. He had to be a fantastic guy in the library because that's where he spent his life. You read about these people. Or McCullough. Here's a guy, he writes about historical history and stuff. There are people, they're just gifted with this thing, about telling the story of the greatness of man and all these people that he was talking about in general come from just the earth. They're just founding different places. One time I was studying about France in the 1700s and there was this great story. You would think that everybody who was a great writer or something was from Paris but they showed where all these people came from. It was from all over the place. The artists and the writers and the stuff, they just came from everywhere and they gathered there because that was the center of the thing. Even, what the hell was his name, the great Italian lover Casanova, but he described in one of his books this fantastic thing about how Paris was the center of culture and how they brought people there for different reasons. The idea about young women, they were brought

into the culture sort of like the way Trump does, because they were good looking. They ended up making big contributions. I never got over that. I just thought that was just incredible. The human being, no matter where he is on the social level, has a capacity to take that advantage or whatever it is and then move it somewhere else. I just think that that's incredible. I'm telling you myself. I was just a kid from the ghetto but I had an incredible mother who was very cultured and I had a father who was a genius. I stored this stuff up until I could use it. I would just pounce and take the step. I had no idea what that meant. I just said, "I'm putting myself here." That's what I've tried to do for the people I represent. The things that I've done so that there's something left to build on for someone else.

05-01:33:39

Farrell:

Yeah. Also, a lot of your work has been social justice facing or has a lot to do with the Mexican population, the Mexican American population. What impact do you hope that that work has had?

05-01:33:55

Gordon:

Well, I don't think you can tell that, but I will tell you this. You hear people saying this all the time when they're saying how they got somewhere. They all say the same thing. They stood on the shoulders of someone else. That's all I did. I stood on the shoulders of the people that came before me who did all this stuff. I had no expectation until this thing started happening with libraries. I was just going along. I just decided I was going to do these things. I know why. But I could never measure what I had done for the community except as a lawyer. I knew that I had helped people go back to Mexico with a lot of money and some of them pissed it away and some of them didn't. But always on the shoulders of someone else who came before me.

05-01:34:59

Farrell:

What has it meant for you to be able to realize your dreams of being a writer?

05-01:35:03

Gordon:

Well, I'll tell you. When I published my first book I thought, "Wow, the circle's complete." It wasn't complete because I kept going. When I had all these books done then I said, "Well, there's something missing," and that is that I'm going to now go into myself in a more de—I don't even know if it was myself. I just wanted to dig deeper, which is what I'm basically doing. I don't know if I'm finished or not. But it's amazing how—you know when you're a lawyer for fifty years and then you start doing something else, it's incredible. It really is incredible that you have another shot. The thing that's really fortunate about that is that I'm in good enough health and mind to be able to do it and to sort of fantasize about what's left. I'm not done yet.

05-01:36:13

Farrell:

What has it meant for you to be able to share your stories with your readers?

05-01:36:17

Gordon:

Well, that's a big shock really. I have this wonderful assistant in Spain who's been very encouraging, as Carmen has been. I never expected that kind of feedback, ever. It's helped me realize that doing the stuff I do, like giving money to the libraries, is a way of enriching other people's lives because they get something from it and then they can go forward. And maybe more important than the libraries. It couldn't have been predicted unless we'd done the libraries first. So I'm really grateful and totally surprised. Totally. I never expected this kind of reaction, especially to me. [laughter]

05-01:37:24

Farrell:

My last question for you is what are your hopes for the future?

05-01:37:29

Gordon:

The hopes for the future. Well, I'll tell you. I hope that we as a people, and I don't mean just Americans, can learn something from all the stupid things we do. Because if we don't learn them—you know the virtue of the society that we've created—the real virtue, not the self-dealing and all the stuff that people do to get ahead but the virtue of really trying to help other people, I hope that we learn those lessons and that we can go and do it. Like what's going on right now in Florida. If we can stop the hijacking of our society by some crazy guy who gets four billion dollars every year to promote guns, we can control those things even though they seem to get out of hand, we can have a society that can promote itself by merit and by justice and all the other things that we—it's no picnic because there's always somebody who's going to take advantage of it and you always get nuts like Trump that come along every once in a while and talk their way into it. But if we can limit that. Democracy is one of the worst forms of government except for every other one, as many people have said. But it seems like we have to learn the lesson over and over again. I worry about that a lot. Sometimes I can't sleep because of it. So I don't know. I'm just hopeful.

05-01:39:00

Farrell:

Yeah, yeah. Well, being hopeful is good. Being hopeful is good. Is there anything else that you want to add before we wrap up?

05-01:39:59

Gordon:

No, I think you've covered it very well. Thank you.

05-01:40:01

Farrell:

Okay. Well, thank you so much. This has been a pleasure.

05-01:40:02

Gordon:

Yeah. Yeah.

[End of Interview]