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Gerald Lyn Early : 02-15-1995

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Early: "Did you always want to be a writer Daddy, even when you were little?"
"Yes, I think so, even though I thought I would wind up doing something else."
"But when did you first know?
When was the first time you wanted to be a writer?"
"Let's see, I think it must have been this real cold New Year's Day and my mother had taken me to the Mummer's parade because on every New Year's Day in Philadelphia these men would dress in costumes and march down Broad Street, the main street of the city. We were standing on the corner of Broad and South where we always stood with all the other Black folk. And every once in a while my mother would take me inside one of the jazz clubs on the corner there to get warm for a bit. Then we would go back out to watch some more. I liked doing this very much. So, once when we would, when we'd go inside this club I would see that the musicians had set up their instruments and I guess they were going to play a matinee show or something, although as a boy at that time I really wasn't aware of what exactly was going on, or why those instruments were out there. And I remember that I was amazed by this tenor saxophone. It was so shiny, golden and it seemed monstrously big. I thought the thing was made out of pure gold. I thought it was something Arabian, something straight out of a fairy tale. I thought that sax had to be worth a million dollars. And let me tell you, it seemed like the coolest thing on earth. I just thought, "Wow I bet that's a cool thing to play", or better yet just to walk around the street with that thing, shiny gold like that, coiled like a snake. I just couldn't take my eyes off that thing. Even when my mother took me back outside. I kept straining to look through the clubs big bay window to get another look at that sax."
"You wanted to play it daddy"?
"No, no I didn't want to play it. For the first time I felt an urge I had never felt before. I didn't want to play it, I wanted to describe it."

Rubin: Welcome to the Writers Forum, our guest today Gerald Early grew up in Philadelphia, was educated at Penn and Cornell University. He is the author of many books and the editor of many books in a wide variety of topics commenting on American culture and personal essays. His work covers topics as diverse as Malcolm X, Miss America, popular film, and the OJ Simpson trial in a recent essay.
His books include *Tuxedo Junction: Essays on American Culture*, *My Souls High Song*, *The Collected Writings of Countee Cullen*, *Voice of the Harlem Renaissance*.
The ground breaking two volume collection speech and power the African American essay and its cultural content from polemics to pulpit. Just published *One Nation Under a Groove: Motown and American Culture* from Ecco. And two books in particular interest at the moment, to the Writers Forum, The *Culture of Bruising: Essays on Literature, Prizefighting, and Modern American Culture*, which is up for the National Book Critics Circle Award. And a collection, a book of extended really personal essay on fatherhood called, Daughters from Ecco Press.
He has also, the *Culture of Bruising* which I mentioned was published originally and it was published in 1994. He's also edited *Lure and Loathing: Essays and Race Identity and the Ambivalence of Assimilation*, which I wanted to say was published by Viking in '93 and is just out on Penguin in paperback too, it's currently available.
Gerald Early is a Professor of English and Director of African and Afro-American Studies Program at Washington University in St. Louis and he lives in the St. Louis area with his wife and two daughters. Gerry welcome to the Writers Forum.

Early: Great to be here.
Rubin: I feel I know your wife whom I've never met and your daughters I've never met, from the book *Daughters*, where they play prominent roles. You were reading from that book just before, when you were asked why you want to be a writer. And in fact, that's the nature of the book is that there's almost a continual dialogue between you and your daughters, Linnet and Rosalind.
Early: Right.
Rubin: And between you and yourself really, your wife plays quite a role to achieve this forum, this fluid dialogue forum.
Early: It actually was, took a lot of work because for the hardest thing about the book was trying to figure out a forum for it and it was very difficult, but I wanted a forum that would not be chronological and I wanted a forum that actually would thwart people's expectation and okay, you're going to take your kids from this age, and they're going to wind up at this age. And I wanted the book to be thematic and built around certain themes and in a way kind of circular. So, it always seemed as though there was a sense of return. And also to have a sense of layering in the book that you feel that you know me very well. I feel as -- I feel very complimented by that, the whole point of the book was to make people enter this family; so I feel complimented, I feel I succeeded.
Rubin: Well the book puts you there in the present with your daughters, with your wife but when you were writing it, did they know you were writing it?
Early: I wouldn't have done it if they did not approve of it. And I talked about the book with them at every stage. I'd write a certain amount every day and then that evening -- I write during the day and then in the evening I would sit down with, we'd have little family conferences about "This is what I wrote today" and we would talk about -- some of that even creeps into the book a little bit. I talk with them about every stage of the book.
Rubin: And in the book you include in fact, some of your daughters writing, diaries, accounts of things.
Early: It was meant to be a real family book and they want, really wanted to have a certain kind of presence and I felt that was important too. That it felt, that it would feel that way and there was a certain attempt in the book to have a certain kind of sense of episode and to -- the episodes would kind of link in the sense that the more you read, the more these people would be revealed to you. So, that's important that they have a voice, a very strong voice in the book; so that's why these fragments were included and stuff like that.
Rubin: And therefore can we conclude that all the characters in the book approve of how they're represented in the book?
Early: All the characters in the book wanted to be in the book. All had tremendous amount of advice to give me while I was writing about how to be represented in the book. I would say that their, the finished product, they are mixed about how they were represented in the book.
Rubin: Your daughters get into a lot of your work.
Early: Yes they do.
Rubin: They crop up, in fact so does your wife. Your daughters crop up say in the essay on Malcolm X, their Malcolm my problem.
Early: Yes.
Rubin: The book *Lure and Loathing* is dedicated to Linnet and Rosalind, your kids. Now they're a bit older, how do they feel now about their interaction with their dad and his work?

Early: I don't think they really fully understand it yet. It's taken them a long time to try to even understand what I do for a living. It seemed like an odd thing to be a writer. My children, when my youngest daughter when she was quite young, in second grade and they were asked in school to talk about what your parents do for a living, I remember that the teacher told me when I had a parents conference with her that "Your daughter said that you're unemployed". I'm a professor and I'm not at a 9:00 to 5:00 job and she would see me a lot at the typewriter.
"Yeah, my dad's unemployed. All he does is sit a computer all day and type and then he reads books. I don't think he works for a living".
So, I think it's a kind of a curious thing, but I think on the other hand because I've gotten some notice as a writer and so forth it makes them kind of stand out. It means that they're a little different than kids whose fathers are lawyers or whatever else it might be. And so I think it's given them a certain kind of celebrity status, especially have that book about them. That gives them a lot of celebrity status.
Rubin: It's a book that is as reviewers have remarked, really distinguished for its honesty. And of course it's easier to be honest about oneself than to be honest for other people about their idea of themselves. But I'm wondering, did a tape recorder play a role in this?
Early: No not really. I would just remember conversations. A lot of the conversations that are recorded in the book, I read back portions of the book after I would write it, I would read back portions and say this is how I remember this conversation. They, my wife and my kids would hear it and say "Okay fine. That's not how I remember this conversation; it went like this". Sometimes I would make revisions in the conversations as a result because sometimes you don't remember things correctly and things like that. Other times I was almost certain that the conversation went the way I had written it and so I didn't' make changes, but constantly went over it because it was very important that the voices of my wife and my children sounded like their voices and not like a writer had suddenly created these people. That they had to come across as their own people and they had to convince readers that they were real people and not figments of my imagination. It couldn't strike people as being a novel. So I feel confident when people say it's an honest book, I don't see any point in writing it if it wasn't going to be an honest book. I could sit down and write a novel instead and disguise all this.
Rubin: What was your sense of purpose in doing this book?
Early: I think I kind of wanted to, I was reluctant to do the book at first, but I think after I came around to it, I kind of wanted to write a book that would be sort of a homage to my growing up. Because a lot of it is sharing a lot of my growing up with my children. And I think partly a homage to ordinary parenting. I didn't have an extraordinary story to tell about oh you know, I've got a kid with cerebral palsy or something like that, it was a book about ordinary experience and ordinary parenting. And in some way I wanted to stress that. That there is something sort of good in the mundane business of parenting day to day and I just wanted to kind of do a book about that and that was important to me as well. And for me, every book is a new kind of literary experiment. This book was a very different experiment for me than other kinds of writing. It's much less intellectual. Much more personal, much more simple writing than a lot of other stuff that I've done. So it was a challenge for me to do that, and I always look for projects that are going to be challenges, that you're not going to do the same thing over and over and over again.
Rubin: Part of your stylistic effort here was it seems to make it a book that would be readably your daughters at the ages they --

Early: Yeah it was precisely the thing, when I agreed to do the book I agreed with them. They said it had to be something they could read and I agreed. I said "Okay fine, I will write the book in a way that you can read it". And I fulfilled that. They read the book. I read that they read --
Rubin: Did they do any; you gave her more time than you gave me.
Early: I got all that. But I thought it would be an interesting experiment to do something of this kind of intense personal nature to see how long it can be sustained and also to write in a very fixed relatively simple way. And to see how well I could do that. That's an experiment I couldn't duck out behind as I could in my essays -- I couldn't duck out behind some kind of long intellectual rumination or meditation about family or about blackness or about other kinds of things that I would do in my essays. I couldn't do that here. I was restricted simply to talking about this relationship. And talking about it in terms that my children could understand; so it was -- to write the book, to use Ralph Ellison's term it was kind of a harsh discipline to write the book.
Rubin: Is there stuff that's not in the book that was originally in manuscript? I know there is one thing; you read it last night, the original ending.
Early: Right. There were a couple of other things too that got cut. You know part of the whole writing process it seems to me is being able to trust your editor and of course you always have words with your editors, I think that's natural antagonism between writers and editors. But I trusted the editor in this. I mean he really was very in tune with the project and the things that he cut on the whole, I agreed with. He cut the ending of the book, which I thought was a very effective ending. But on the other hand I thought it worked very well as an essay in its own right. And I understood why he cut it and I don't feel it damaged the book and cut it. So on the whole; I think that the book worked well. There were other sections that were cut that I thought on retrospect should have been cut and I think the book would have been worse had those sections been included.
Rubin: So you were pleased with it?
Early: On the whole, yeah I thought it worked out well.
Rubin: It does convey the voice and the inner life of a man, very directly and remarkably lucid language if I can complement you. At one point, a continuing theme in the book besides the overall theme of fatherhood is what a father's responsibility is in terms of passing on any sense of racial identity to African American young women. And a father feels it is one of his responsibilities, but the daughters typically, for daughters more often than not deflate or reject his attempts and he's kind of uncertain about what the father's role should be in this kind of thing.
Early: Yeah that's the theme in the book that I think is very American. That is to say that in this country, at least in the 20th century the whole idea is that if you're born into a certain class, if you're born into a lower class the whole idea is that you want to rise and we believe in social mobility. The whole idea is to become middle class or higher if you can. And but in making that leap, almost always the children, if you make the leap to Middle Class your children who are going to be Middle Class, that's all they're going to know are going to feel very estranged from your origins. I think that's a very American story. I think it gets a little complicated by the whole race thing and the whole sensitivity about identity that's particularly acute with African Americans. In this book I try to deal with this issue pretty straightforwardly, sometimes it's with some humor, sometimes with real sense of I wouldn't' say tragedy but a real sense of drama. But you know I don't see it as a -- I see it as a special kind of subset problem with the whole identity with Americans. Americans have this problem and Americans have a particular kind of

problem with class because of social mobility and so forth and moving up. And I think that's the thing that inevitably happens. In some ways you do this because you don't want your kids to live the life you lived when you were a kid, you want something better for your kids, but everybody believes that. My kids have got to be better off than I am.

Rubin: But then we all lament the lack of continuity if the kids don't seem to understand our lives and what we came from. That is certainly an old American theme. The book is subtitled on family and fatherhood, but then it has a further sort of subtitle a story of rearing children in Middle Class America, at least a publishers tag. And class is a major theme in the work. It's a Middle Class family, a comfortable family.
Early: Yeah and class was important. You know everyone, people read the book and "I feel that race is just as important as class" and I said "Well no, it's really true what I said the beginning that class is more important than race", because it's more complicated. In some ways it's more complicated subject than race. Let's put it like this, class winds up complicating the subject of race in this book in ways that it would not be quite as complicated if I wasn't Middle Class or something like that, or if I had been born Middle Class and had always been Middle Class or something like that. Class is very complicated in the United States I think. Partly because we don't want to face. We're more willing to face certain issues about race than we are about class because we really want to believe that this country doesn't have classes.
Rubin: It's getting rough.
Early: It's getting harder to believe that.

Rubin: Well you have talked about American identity in large and particular ways and throughout your writing dealing really with what we think those popular culture topics and placing them in broader context of the struggles of American identity. In *Lure and Loathing*, the collection that has just been reintroduced you take the Du Bois' famous double consciousness statement that to be Black in America is to have the consciousness of Black identity and/or the consciousness of American identity and you threw it a really wide range of African American intellectuals, writers, teachers for response. I wonder if you would say something about that project and what you think of the result.
Early: Well the project was, I thought an interesting idea. I was approached about just the idea of getting some African American intellectuals together to write about what the, what race is, maybe into the 20th century. That was kind of vague so I thought that I would help the writers out by giving them this quotation. It's a very famous quotation, everyone who was approached knew the quotation, I mean it's very famous. And I told people, well I did two things, one is I broaden the concept of intellectuals so we weren't just dealing with scholars but I decided to include writers and other people I thought would have a particularly interesting response to this. The other thing was I gave them the quotation and said, "Write any way you want". It's not necessary that you have to say something about Du Bois; just read this thing and write an essay however you're inspired having read this. The results are quite a mixed bag because you know it's quite a range of people. They're politically; in fact some of the people were a little amazed that they were going to be side by side with some of these other people in this book. But it worked out fine, and that was the whole point of it for me was to have a range of thought, and a range of responses. It was not to be this ideologically driven book where okay fine, it's going to be all the people who are neocons or all the people who are Afrocentric, all the people who are Marxist or something like that. And the whole idea was not to privilege any particular opinion.

People can mosey around in the book and whatever opinions you like are fine and whatever you don't like is fine.

Rubin: For some reason that wonderful idea is successful here, seems out of step with some of the direction of our culture or academic life. That is there doesn't seem to be a wide space for consideration of many opinions. We seem to be sort of more ideological driven. I don't know if this is a surface impression that you get from the media or if in fact, it does say something about the direction of our cultural life at the moment. Was this something different or as so many things turn out to be something old in American cultural life or is there something distinctly different today about the nature of American public discourse.
Early: They might be. I think that Christopher Lasch put it pretty well in his, in the last book that he put out where he asked the question, "Can American democracy survive"? And the second question was "Should it survive"? And I think that we're, at different points in the history of America we've always I think asked the question of ourselves, can we survive as a nation? And what does our survival mean. And I think we're faced with that again. There are a lot of different orthodoxies and dogmas out there and you know you find true believers in the academy. I think it's no particular reason to think that people in the academy are going to be any more open minded than anyone else. They have their dogmas and their orthodoxies and so forth. I don't necessarily see -- America by its nature just reading this book I'm reviewing on Walt Whitman. Walt Whitman described American the 1950's, 1850's as being convulsive. America has always been a convulsive country. I mean it's always been a country that's sort of been on the verge of erupting, it's always been a country that the whole sense of its union has sort of been kind of fragile and always seems like it's ready to rip apart and everything. And always the sense is, a phrase I heard this morning of it being a dysfunctional family. There's a lot about that in America. Lot of soap nature American life. I don't necessarily think that what's happening is bad. I don't necessarily think it's good. I think that we can probably survive it. But America is a country that very much people desire their own space and in some way you have to give people their own space. But in the end I think that the idea of union in this country is virtually a sacred idea with Americans. And so in the end I think that we'll survive any kind of tendencies that sort of rip apart. What's happening in the academy in so far what you hear mostly in the press is a lot of stuff about left wing academic, the academic left? The academic left you know has its good points and its bad points. If people are concerned about the future of higher education of America, the threat to it is not the academic left. The academic left doesn't have that kind of power to be able to threaten higher education. The real threat in higher education I think is the greater and greater dependency higher education has on corporate power, corporate sponsorship and corporate money. And the tremendous influence of the market, the market plays values in education. That's the real threat to education.
Rubin: I, the threat may be as simple as having the money to pay the light bill at this point. The phrase "soap opera" makes me think of your essay, the almost last essay on race in America and the hungry mound review in the fall of '94, which takes up one of the topics, the OJ Simpson show that's currently playing. And you say "What we cannot escape here is how much this marriages a reflection of our human failings". And it's actually; America is getting maybe more than just a kind of ghoulish, rather typical media age entertainment out of this. There is in fat, some self-assessment going on here.
Early: I think so. I mean essentially when you get to the root of it, this is whole thing with OJ Simpson is a story of a marriage. It's not; it's not a pretty story although one would think on the

surface of it this should have been an ideal story. We have a very successful man, a beautiful woman, they marry and this is supposed to be life happily ever after. It is not; it turns out from what we've learned to not have been such a great marriage. These people, despite the fact that they are certainly materially much better off than a good many Americans turned out to be rather shallow people. And it says a lot about our heroes, but I think it says more about our state of marriage and the material comforts that we associate with success and in that respect I think that is as a much a reason for our looking at this thing as much as anything else, and why we're so fascinated by this whole thing. Because it gets back to the whole idea I mentioned before of union. Marriage is this whole idea of union. And it's so fraught with so many images of union, black and white, male and female; I mean it's fraught with this whole, with so many things about the meaning of union in America. So, I think that's why we're so fascinated with the OJ Simpson trial and horrified and repelled, but yet deeply attracted at the same time. These are beautiful people that we're talking about here. And so our culture has always looked up to these celebrities and so forth, but then when this spotlight kind of focuses on them, you look underneath the celebrity status as C. Wright Mills said "It's nothing but this kind of emptiness". And the reality of being a celebrity is the fact that you're a celebrity, which is what C. Wright Mills said, which is nothing but being a celebrity is just your ability to be a celebrity. And I think American with this trial looks at a lot of these sorts of things embedded in our culture because I think we always feel uneasy about our culture. And I think underneath it all we feel that our culture doesn't have a lot of substance and this trial in some way hits that very point, proves that.
Rubin: Maybe we revel in the proving of our own salience or something. A moment ago, speaking of *Lure and Loathing*, you talked about your intention to have a wide range of people from academics to creative writers. Now you, yourself as we've established in your writings span a wide range of topics. We've brought you here as the writer of Daughters primarily, a powerful, personal essay, creative essay if you will. I wonder how you feel about your own identity in these multiple ways. I mean are you just a writer or do you have a different mindset as you take on your academic topics and the personal writing? You've got a book of poems forthcoming. Who is Gerald Early, the writer? How do you self-identify?
Early: Well I'm just a writer, period. I have an academic audience and academics have read my books, have praised my books. David Bradley, I met him just a couple weeks ago and he says "You're the best academic writer in America", which surprised me because I certainly wouldn't have said that about myself. I don't even think of myself as being an academic writer. But he looks at a lot of the essays I've written and sees them as these really highbrow intellectual works. I'm not; I don't try to define myself too much in one way or another. I just want to, I just enjoy writing and I try to write and try to put things out there. And basically look for, in the people that I've been dealing with like Ecco Press, the Hungry Mind Review or something like that, that can deal with editors and people who publish me who know what I'm trying to do because the kind of essay that I write and work on has been something that I worked on the form of it for a very long time to be. But the thing is today, I mean I concentrate on the essay as an art form in the way that a lyric poet concentrates on their poetry. And it's an art form to me and I work at it very hard. I don't define myself. Academic audiences, when I'm with academic audiences I'm an academic. I'm still, doing the same thing I'm doing here but I'm an academic. When I'm with writers, I'm a writer. I identify myself as a writer. When I was with the Ken Burns documentary and my talking head segments he had to identify me in some way and he said, "How do you want to be identified, professor or writer?" I said, "Writer, I'm a writer".

Rubin: I wanted to get to that, you appeared on five episodes of the acclaimed Ken Burns PBS Series Baseball, which was a nine inning job and you were in for five innings, that's pretty good.
Early: Yeah it is.
Rubin: You want to say something about your involvement with the project and --
Early: That was an interesting involvement you know? Ken asked me to become involved with it because Jeffrey Ward, his script writer had read an essay I wrote on baseball that was in a book that we were both in, Jeffrey Ward was also in the book, he had done an essay on American history. And he really liked this essay. When Burns called me about being in the, doing this documentary I said, "Look I'm not a baseball expert". There are these people who can tell you what Joe DiMaggio's batting average was on July 10, 1941. You have people that are that good at this thing And he said, "Well yeah I got all those people, but I really liked your essay and it was a really different kind of take in looking at baseball and American identity, which is what my whole thing, my whole documentary is about." So that's how I got involved with it and he wanted someone who could kind of put Jackie Robinson and Black people in baseball and the 1960's all in a certain kind of context, which I wound up doing, which I thought was very funny in a way because I wound up serving in part a kind of role of social historian, which I am not a historian. And I thought that was very odd but it worked out very well. I wrote this essay for him, for his book on baseball in illustrated history. He had several people write essays and I was one of them. And I wrote an essay about baseball in African American life, which actually I am rather fond of. I actually rather like the essay and I thought it worked out rather, worked out pretty well. I enjoyed doing the project because I love baseball and I have season tickets and I go to a lot of baseball games. I love baseball. So, I was very happy to do the project.
Rubin: You talk about the almost mythic plays that the all Negro League has in American Black Cultural memory and identity and the sense of loss. Many commentators feel, in fact, it came with the integration of White dominated Major League baseball. And now we're at a point where the strike as we speak is on, and from the series nothing else, one would almost think it's time for a new league and a new set up --
Early: It might happen.
Rubin: To come in, you know?
Early: It might happen, I mean I don't -- you know I talked to a lot of people who are very, very wise and know a lot about baseball who say that might very well happen, might have a new league you know. Everything about professional baseball may change as a result of strike, which certainly does not seem as though it's going to be settled any time soon. And it's -- this is a labor war. I mean this is war between the owners and the players. And I think it's pretty clear to anybody that the owners want to break the power of the union. And so we'll see how this little drama plays out. But in African American life with the Negro Leagues integration, the Negro League is a perfect example of the paradox of segregation and integration. And integration turned out to be a wonderful thing, a great thing for the country, a great thing for Black people. But it cost Black people something and so today you know Black people feeling very militant and a lot of young Black people and so forth, it's because they look back at integration and they feel this cost us something to have integration and we gained something. I'm not sure if what we gained equals what we lost. I would say that what we gained is more than what we lost, but some people debate that. It can be debated. But the other thing is that they look at integration and said, "We lost something, but I don't see what White people lost anything to integration". They gained everything through integration but they seem as though it didn't cost them anything.

And I think young Black people; I think the biggest thing about the whole militancy nationalist sort of thing is that I think they want White people to feel as though the whole racial drama and solving racial drama, they want it to cost White people something.
Rubin: Well I would like to go back to you as a creative writer or writer. You've won a writing foundation award, which is a very high honor; I didn't mention in my introduction but it's not something you can apply for.
Early: No it's not. If it were I probably wouldn't have won it. If I would have applied, I wouldn't have gotten it.
Rubin: Well you read at the beginning here the bit from Daughters where your daughter asks you, it's Rosalind asking you how you wanted to be a writer and you gave an answer associated with the Philadelphia Members Day Parade and Jazz. And jazz and music are important in your work.
Early: Yeah I really, with any writer I'm inspired by other writers and there are all kinds of people I can tell you about who influence me and I can tell you, I can even point to certain essays and tell you "Yes this is my James Baldwin essay, this is the my George Orwell essay, this is my Virginia Wolf essay". I mean I can point to specific works and tell you that like GK Chesterton essay, but the music is a big influence because I think it's such a powerful, emotionally powerful art form. And it's -- it would be nice to be able to put together words that would have the power and the rhythm of music. And I think a lot of writers in some way, whatever your literary influences, and we all have our share of them, a boat load of them that like I said we steal from and so forth and so on. That music, I think for many writers is a very important influence in the sense of it giving you a certain kind of poetic sense; it puts me in a certain poetic mood to listen to music. And trying to think about doing something with words that musicians are doing with sound, because after all in some way the words are sound and you want to get a certain kind of musical sense with them.
Rubin: You play jazz music while you're writing, that is tapes, CD's or whatever -- - that's what you use to write.
Early: Yeah it's very helpful to me. I find, I can't write in silence. I have to have some music going on, it's very funny because I tried on many occasions to write in silence in a library or something that with a little portable computer or something. And I can never get anything written; silence just kind of kills me. But if I've got some music going, it doesn't matter how pressured I am that "Oh my God, I've got to finish this review by tomorrow" or something. If I've got some music going or something I can get the thing done. It's incredible whereas if I'm in my office and its absolute silence I find I get writers block and I can't write anything.
Rubin: Who are your, if there are any special writing artists, writing musicians? Who do you listen to particularly?
Early: I listen to just about anybody. A lot of different jazz musicians. It depends on the mood. If I really want to write something and I really want to write something that would have a certain kind of technical expertise or sort of strike people as a kind of technical force, "Oh this is really a good piece of writing the way it's put together" and so forth. I might listen to Oscar Peterson or something like that because he's somebody who is very technical, or I might listen to Horowitz or somebody like that. If I want to listen to something with a great sense of emotion to it because I want to be in a kind of emotional sort of a mood, I might listen to Miles Davis or something like that because of the great poignancy sound to his music or something like that. It's different people depending upon the mood.

Rubin: You spoke before about how you take non-fiction as a genre, form with its own kind of integrity. Wonder if you'd expand on that. Do you feel for example any special responsibility to your audience as a writer within that genre? How do you think about non-fiction?
Early: Well you know I think that non-fiction is seen in the academy for a long time because it was so rarely taught in creative writing programs. It is starting to be taught more now. But basically it was in the academy if you had non-fiction writing it was either journalism or academic writing. And all the space in between journalism and academic writing were not really very much considered. And you know you may have had some idea on an English Department faculty who may have been a biographer, maybe. And if the biography was you know, sufficiently critical enough it would be respected by the colleagues. But I feel that there was this incredible space that wasn't being dealt with and I particularly thought that essays were a form that for a very long time, a literary essay was not being dealt with. That's really what I wanted to go back to was writing literary essays. Now I tried, what I bring to the essay is as much intelligence as I can to an essay. And I remember someone saying to me once, "You know some of your essays are demanding in the sense that they require that the reader has to know a lot. And I said, "Well you know it's a discipline". And I'm not requiring the reader to know, I'm not making any greater demand to the reader than I'm making on myself. But what's being done here is really for the service of the reader and these associations are being made in the essay are there to help the reader. So, the essay is an art form that is not journalism. It's not an academic essay. It's a literally piece. Its criticism and a, what I hope is a pure state. The critic as a person thinking about things. And writing about what you're thinking in some kind of way that's intelligent and some kind of way that's lucid and some kind of way that has some literary pretentions. That is to say it has enough literary pretentions so at least some of this stuff, somebody can take into a classroom and actually talk about as a piece of literature. So I'm aspiring to be considered in the same way a fiction writer is. You know a serious fiction writer. This is a literary work. So yeah, there are elusions in the work. There are elusions in the style and things of that nature as well as direct references and so forth but that's because I feel what I'm doing is a literary work and I'm hoping that people will not only get a certain kind of enjoyment out of it just as an essay and what it's saying, but enjoyment as a literary thing for how it's saying what it's saying. So, I found that for me when I tried to do straight academic writing I just, I found it very boring. You know because you had these restrictions and you had to put on these footnotes and it was a kind of a ritual that I didn't find all that interesting. I didn't have anything against footnotes. I didn't have anything against research. I mean a lot of those essays are a lot of research; I didn't have anything against any of that stuff. I had, I just didn't like this confining way that this thing was put together. I want to show people I knew how to write, you can't really demonstrate very well in an academic essay that you read in your average academic journal that you really know how to write. You might be able to demonstrate to people that you got a lot of, you could do a lot of fancy foot work in so far as analyzing text or subtext or whatever it is that you're analyzing. But I wanted to be able to do more than that and I felt that the, we were losing in literary studies, start of the literary essay because people wanted so much to try to imitate something that was objective and scientific. I'm not interested in that. I'm interested in other kinds of things. I wanted to be a literary essay. I wanted to return to the essays.
Rubin: And what do you feel about the self or the [Inaudible] that is projected or portrayed in the non-fiction that is there a one to one correspondence should there be between the speaker of the essay and the live life.

Early: Not necessarily. I mean sometimes in the essays create a persona, but I think somebody should be there. I don't think it should be just another disembodied writing. I mean, yeah I mean it's somebody should be there. Presence of mind, a set of nerve endings, a certain set of synapsis create a disdain. It might be, and you write it with a certain sense of almost to me a kind of blues mentality. I mean the blues sort of is the music that says "I feel this way. I'm going to play this for you". And because if you listen to it you'll understand how I feel because you felt this way too. And the essays -- I think this way, you'll read it and no matter how intellectual it may be at times with something like that it's really communicating that I think this way and I'm communicating this to you because I think on some level you think this way too, or you can understand the way I'm thinking. It's all about you know, the common humanity. It's all about a common ground. That's what all my books are about. So, you know it's not anything, any more complicated than that in the end and other than the sense that I feel that I can communicate directly with people on those pages. If one essay doesn't work I tell people "read another one" you're bound to hit one that probably will hit broad enough that you'll probably find one that you will.
Rubin: To what extent is such a form as you're describing it is invention or imagination, permissible, impermissible in terms of even the factual stuff you're recounting or the experiences you're recounting? To what extent do you feel the imagination can shape it or must shape it or not.
Early: Well the imagination has to shape certain things. You just can't throw something out there as it happens. You can't, I don't think it's possible anyway. No matter how much you may try to sort of be the camera eye and just say "Okay you put a camera in a room and you just let it run and run and run and see what you get". And even that, as mundane as it is, it is a camera's eye and it has carved out a certain thing and so it's kind of created a narrative. That narrative may not be particularly interesting but it's a creative one. Everything you're doing is you carved out something that's a camera's and you're creating a narrative. How much fiction should there be as much as you can get away with I suppose. As much as you can get away with, you can live with that you're not compromising your integrity or the integrity of your subject. But I mean there's always a certain amount of shaping and in that respect a certain amount of fictionalizing that happens. It's not that you're lying or that you're making things up, you're giving the thing a purpose and a definition.
Rubin: You know we heard your answer to your daughter about when you knew you wanted to be a writer. How did you become a writer?
Early: When I was in college I decided I wanted to write essays, since I was a junior in college. And I decided I wanted to write essays. I've been reading essays and I read James Baldwin, [Inaudible] and these other people and I decided I really liked this form. I want to write essays. I didn't how I was going to do this and the only place I could think about doing this because at this time I wanted to get published too. I wanted to see these things in print. And the only thing, place I could think of was to write for my school newspaper; so I wrote for Penn's newspaper. And you know at first they sent me out on assignments and I had to cover because I was the new kid on the block they sent me on these awful assignments you know? The women's faculty tea and stuff like that, back when the women, the wives of the faculty I should say would be having teas. They don't probably do that anymore. It was a more sexist day. And I covered that sort of stuff. But eventually I got their trust that they felt I could write well enough that I could start writing op ed pieces. And I punched out op ed pieces every week, and then I started writing these long features for the-- what you might call is the entertainment insert. I'd interview jazz artists

and stuff like this and those were my essays, that's where I started. And I punched out maybe, because this paper was published every day. I punched out maybe two or three essays a week. I did this for two years, that's a hell of an apprenticeship. Figure you learn something about writing essays writing all that stuff. But then after that I decided that went out to work for a couple years and I went to graduate school because I decided that I wanted to write an essay on a certain kind of intellectual level. I didn't have enough knowledge or training to be able to do that, so I thought I should get a PhD in English and then I'd have the training to be able to do that. And you have enough training as a critic. I certainly had training as a journalist but I didn't want to be a journalist. I wanted to be a critic; so I got a PhD. That's why I got it.
I didn't get it necessarily because I wanted to write academic books. I got it because I wanted to be able to write criticism. I wanted to be able to write literary essays. I already had in mind what I wanted to do and I got the training to be able to do it.
Rubin: And getting a graduate degree in English did not either A, kill your love of literature or B, completely distort your ability to write what you really think and feel, so that's helpful.
Early: I went into it with my own mind. As I tell graduate students I talk to all the time, you know this is, what do you want to do? Why are you here? What do you want to do with this thing? I mean if it is that you want to write another book like FO Matthiessen's American Renaissance or something like that, that's fine. I don't have any problem with straight academic writing. I read it all the time, its fine. But is that what you want to do, or do you want to do something else? And if there's something else that you want to do then don't let this degree make you do something you don't want to do, because you're not going to do it well.
Rubin: What's the first publishing you did that really felt like you were achieving the kind of thing you wanted to achieve in your written work? You know the kind of essay you're talking about?
Early: 1981 I published my first essay. It was in a literary journal called the Hudson Review; it's called Hot Sticks versus Cold Spades, which is in my book *Tuxedo Junction*. As the first essay I published that's really the beginning of working out the kind of thing I wanted to do in an essay. And it was for me a real big feat because it was on a subject that I didn't feel that the Hudson Review normally would be interested in wanting to have an essay about, which is boxing. So I said, okay I must have written this thing on a sophisticated enough literary level that these people looked at this thing not as an essay about sports but as a literary essay as dealing with a rather peculiar topic. And so I knew that I had ability to be able to write a certain kind of literary essay. Then I felt that once I can keep developing that ability, I can write about anything as long as people felt that whatever the subject was, there was enough literary expertise in the thing to make it work, and that was the start.
Rubin: How do you work as a writer? Is there a lot of revision? Do you -- we know you play jazz. Do you read the stuff aloud; do you share it with anyone in process? What's your writerly procedure?
Early: A lot of the revisions, I mean I have to write something over a period of time so that's what I usually try to do. So, I write something and it's the essays I write for the Hungry Mind Review. I write something and I usually will revise it several times before I send it to them. Then they'll come back with a copy edited version and make some changes. And then that will suggest more changes to me. So, I'm constantly working on the thing and trying to make the thing as good as I can make it. It's not easy in many instances because you're under such time constraints. Ideally I would like to say "Oh I'd like to take a year to write each essay" or something like that. That's impossible, I couldn't do that. I'd write maybe one book in a

lifetime. But I try to do as much revision as I can because revision is the key thing, because you're constantly when you revisit a subject you're constantly rethinking it and revisiting a subject is very good for me. I think it's good for a lot of writers who revisit subjects. And so I like to write something for a while on a subject. Go away and do some other stuff and then come back to that subject because your mind's fresh and you can do some different things about the subject and you've learned some other things. So you try to get it, try to do it as well as you can and then you let that essay go and then you say "Okay fine, whatever flaws are in that essay, I've learned from that essay so that the next essay I wrote won't have those flaws". They'll have another set of flaws, but won't have those flaws.
Rubin: And you've got a book of poems coming out, when did you write these?
Early: They were written over a period of years from about -- I started seriously to do these poems about 1984, 1985. Part of it was because I had a kind of big personal trauma that happened in my life and then part of it was because I wanted to invite these things as sort of short hand for writing the essays. I really like poetry. I mean I find poetry to be very useful for me as an essayist, I mean I read a lot of poetry. And I'd rather -- I'm more impressed with a lot of poetry then I am with pros and I'll read Shakespeare all the time, and I find it very inspiring to read it. And so I started to write these poems for that reason. Then as a lark I sort of sent them out to places and they published them for me. I said, my goodness how do you like that? And then I worked and worked on them for some time. I didn't think about doing it as a book. I was approached by the guy who is publishing it LB Broskey for Time Bean Books and I was approached by him and he had read these poems and he said that he really wanted to publish them. I hadn't even thought about them as a book. But it gave me a chance to rework them and do some things with them. And then I discovered that it was a useful thing for me to do this book of poems. I don't know if I'll do any more poems; I probably will try to but it was a useful thing to do. It was a useful learning experience and if nothing else however the book may be received, if nothing else I think it will make me a better essayist. So I've always thought writing poems made me a better essayist --
Rubin: How? Why? How is poetry useful?
Early: It makes me focus in a certain way on language. It makes me focus in a certain way on trying to be precise. It makes me focus in a certain on structure and how I can mess around with structure. Poetry is another kind of harsh discipline. It makes, because the ways you have to work with language and because of the kind of tremendous restriction that I feel you're operating under with poetry. I think it helps me tremendously with writing essays. So for no other reason than that I feel that writing the poems have been very helpful.
Rubin: What sort of trauma provokes poetry?
Early: Oh man, oh man all kinds of, all kinds of trauma but at that time I thought that, that was at a time in personal trauma for me and so far as -- one time during my whole married life that my wife and I thought we might break up. So it was a big trauma because I thought that I was going to, I thought a phase of my life was really going to end completely and it was going to end in failure, which is -- a marriage breaks up it fails. And so I really just, failure will make you think about a lot of things and I think that really drove me to writing poetry about failure.
Rubin: Did you share the poems with your wife?
Early: Mm-hmm, yeah she reads all the stuff you know? She liked a lot of the poems. Some of the poems were quite, were quite moving, so she liked a lot of them. A couple of them are in daughters and one of them I wrote for my daughter Linnet, called "Dumbo's Ears", which is a poem that my wife likes a great deal. And thought that it really captured something, but that was

written -- I remember very well when that was written. That was written during this kind of crisis time.
Rubin: We're coming to the end. We sort of seem to be caught in the beginning at the same time. It's been a pleasure to have you here.
Early: I enjoyed it.
Rubin: And you are working now on a book on Fisk University which will be out --
Early: I hope by the end of '96, beginning of '97.
Rubin: Terrific, look forward to having you back. Gerald Early thank you for being here today.
Early: Thank you.
Rubin: And for the Writers Forum I'm Stan Rubin.
[Music]