

BARNARD COLLEGE CLASS OF 1971 ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

The Reminiscences of

Mary Gordon

2015

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Gordon conducted by Frances Garrett Connell on September 23, 2015. This interview is part of the Barnard Class of 1971 Oral History Project.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Barnard Alumni Class of 1971 Oral History Project

Interviewee: Mary Gordon

Location: New York City

Interviewer: Frances Connell

Date: September 23, 2015

00:00:01 Q: This is an interview taking place for the Barnard College Voices Class of '71 Oral History Project. I'm interviewing Mary Gordon at her home in New York City on September 23, 2015. The interviewer is Frances Connell.

Well, first Mary, let me thank you for being—allowing yourself to be part of this. We're thrilled to have you as one of those who will tell us her story.

Gordon: It's lovely to see you again after all this time.

00:00:26 Q: So, we usually start by asking people to tell a bit about your childhood, your family and things you want to share about that.

Gordon: Well, I was actually born in Far Rockaway, New York, but brought up in Valley Stream on Long Island. Very working class Catholic. My grandmother was an Irish immigrant, my grandfather a Sicilian immigrant. They had nine children. My mother was the oldest daughter of nine. My father is very complicated: he was Jewish but converted to Catholicism. So I was brought up in a real Catholic ghetto— and particularly an Irish Catholic ghetto, because although there were Italians around, the clergy was Irish, the teachers were Irish, the powerbrokers were all Irish. So it was a very, very Irish Catholic

working class environment. I did not have any—other than extremely superficial relationships with any non-Catholics before I came to Barnard.

And the way that I came to Barnard is kind of strange and funny and if I had the energy and courage now that I had when I was seventeen, I could rebuild the World Trade Center singlehandedly, but I don't.

So I knew—I don't know how I knew it—I always knew I wanted to be a writer. My father was a writer, I was reading and writing when I was three. It was all I ever wanted to do. And there was some way—and I cannot explain it—I had this inchoate sense that if I wanted to be a writer who was an artist—and I thought I was a poet all through Barnard—I had to get out of the Catholic environment. I somehow would not have put it that way because I didn't have the language for it—that Catholicism was anti-modernist and that all art for Catholics had to be in service of the Church. And as a kid, I knew I didn't want that. And I cannot tell you how I knew it, but I knew it.

I became obsessed with J.D. Salinger—unlike a lot of people, not the *The Catcher in the Rye*, but *Franny and Zooey* and Seymour [fictional character in several Salinger works]. And my fantasy ideal family were the Glasses. And Seymour Glass had gone to Columbia.

00:03:02 Q: Mmm—I had forgotten.

Gordon: Now, nobody in my family had gone to college. My father was—my father died when I was seven. And our high school was pretty terrible so that we had a class called “Guidance,” but they brought in people from nursing schools and secretarial schools. And I remember one time they brought in—somebody from a beauty school and everybody was supposed to give their favorite beauty hint.

Nobody had ever gone to an Ivy League school—ever, ever, ever. Some people might have gone to Queens or Hunter because it was free—but nobody had ever gone to an Ivy League school. I wrote—so I got the opposite of guidance—I wrote for the Barnard catalogue. My two friends and I from our high school, Kathy Biddick and Maureen Stratford, we took the subway here to look at it. We got off at the wrong 116th Street—116th and Lexington—and we asked the subway driver, “Where is Columbia?” And he said, “Boy, are—” So we had to go walking through Harlem, through Morningside Park, and that was very exciting. And we got here and I sat in on an English class and it was Kate Stimpson. So I had gone from an environment where you had—each class was begun with a Hail Mary; you walked from class to class in silence. If you wanted to speak, you raised your hand and stood next to your desk. In Kate Stimpson’s class, everybody was eating and drinking and talking and I said, “Oh my God, this is Heaven.”

Anyway, I knew I wanted to go to Barnard, and the nuns in my school would not send my transcripts to Barnard. And having the courage of an ox—I don’t know what kind of animal is particularly courageous, a tiger—I called the admissions office at Barnard and I said, “You have to tell them they have to send our transcripts.” And I guess they shamed them and they

did send our transcripts and—

00:00:05:11 Q: So it was you and Maureen?

Gordon: And Kathy Biddick.

00:00:05:13 Q: I don't know her.

Gordon: So we all came. And the principal called us in and she said, "I once met a Columbia professor who swore that within a week he could make a Catholic girl lose her faith, her virginity, and all her political convictions." And we were like, Who is he? Where can I find him?

So we got here; our parents were not pleased that we were not going to a Catholic college. Luckily, we all had Regents scholarships and I think Barnard cost \$1500 a year there—then—and by working in the summer we could do it. And we all had a million part-time jobs. We commuted—so, commuting is another story. But it was such a culture shock to leave my home and my school for Barnard.

My mother is—was— a polio victim and I was the only child and so I really had to live at home, I didn't have a choice. And so I commuted. And the culture shock every day was just unbelievable.

So I remember—do you remember the **Linda LeClair** episode—

00:06:33 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: —when we were freshmen? So I'm walking out the gates of Barnard Hall and there's Gabe Pressman interviewing people for television and he said, "What do you think of this?" And I said, "I believe that people should be able to have freedom to live wherever they want and I think this is tyranny on the part of the administration." And I got off the train and my mother opened the door and said, "And guess who I saw on Gabe Pressman tonight?"

So—so—also—that was one *enormous* culture shock. I didn't know any other Catholics. There was one young woman whom I kind of met for a minute who was Catholic, but I never saw her again. I did not know any other Catholics at Barnard. And it was something that—you know, it was on the one hand, a little bit exotic and a little bit shameful, but it was certainly not welcomed.

So that was one culture shock, but the culture at large was changing dramatically almost in the months of our freshman year. So I saved up all summer—I had a job working as a Republican political hack because my mother's boss was a local politician. So my job was mimeographing for the local Republican party. I saved up all my money and I had to—and I bought a Villager dress and Pappagallo shoes, which I thought were just about as elegant as you could get—and I wore it once--and within a week I had to buy bell bottoms. So that's my

metaphor for where we were as a transitional cohort. And so I came here, I was thrilled. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. Everybody seemed really smart. People were talking about everything. I thought, How can I get rid of my virginity in the quickest possible way? Because you really couldn't not and be—it wasn't about being cool, it was about being liberated. But I was going home every day—so it was very, very bizarre. And I had a part-time job. So I didn't have a lot of time to play or fool around.

I was just thrilled with my classes, I was thrilled with—with the other people that I met who were so smart and thinking and talking about things that I felt like I'd been given wings and at the same time working hard.

Now, in the spring, I took a course with Anne Prescott and that was life-changing. Because boy, had I never met anybody like her—she's a real—and she's my dear friend to this day. She actually hired me—

00:09:58 Q: She's still there!

Gordon: Well, she retired but she's teaching a little bit. She is WASP aristocracy and I had never met anybody like that. But she liked me and she encouraged me and she nurtured me. And that was a whole other world—that somebody could be so learned and so kind and so elegant. And, you know, entrée into that world, which I had read about and seen in movies, and there it was in her office. So that was really thrilling.

So that spring was the strike. And I was extremely sympathetic but I lived at home.

00:10:46 Q: Right.

Gordon: So by day I would go over to Columbia and chant and demonstrate—never went into the buildings because I was on scholarship. And I thought, If I fall off this rung of the ladder, I'll never be able to get up again. You know—

00:11:10 Q: It's a huge pressure, yeah.

Gordon: It was a very class-bound thing. So, If I blew this chance, I—you know, I could be married to a guy who ran a gas station. (Snaps finger) I saw that it could happen in a minute. I couldn't afford to take that risk— although my heart was there and I was sympathetic and I was demonstrating. So I would demonstrate and get on the subway. It was very crazy-making in a way.

00:11:39 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: And I was a little bit cynical about people with money and support and backgrounds who could afford to take what seemed like a risk—but it wasn't a real risk for them—because they could have a second chance. And I knew that I couldn't. But I was absolutely with the ideas—I remember that I went down to Washington, for the march on Washington. There were buses from Barnard—

Q: Right.

Gordon: And I remember I had—we were tear-gassed—and there was—and I had Vaseline, water and a bandana, which you had to put on to make sure you'd be protected from tear gas. So that was thrilling and that was exciting, but I couldn't afford the risk—

00:12:29 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: —of losing everything because of—of a political conviction.

I remember Maureen and I would go to the demonstrations—and Maureen is totally Irish-looking, and the cops would say to her, “Honey, go home. Get out of here cause we're gonna—you know, we don't really want to beat you up.” And I knew classmates that *were* beaten up and clubbed. And so it was so shattering and thrilling at the same time. It was a breakage—the breakage was painful but it also let in a lot of light.

And I had no—I had no doubts that we were right, that they were completely wrong, that the university must not be complicit in the war machine. And at the same time, you know, the Catholics like Daniel Berrigan—

00:13:25 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: —I didn't want to have anything to do with them.

00:13:27 Q: Right.

Gordon: I did not want to be identified or associated with Catholicism— because Catholicism was sexual repression.

00:13:35 Q: Okay.

Gordon: And it was also the sexual revolution, which I was determined to be part of even though I was going home every night. So, you know, I would have to call my mother and lie and say, "I'm sleeping over on a friend's floor," while I was, you know, doing what I had to do to be part of the revolution—but going home all the time. And working hard babysitting, taking—doing typing jobs. And then in the summer I had to go back to my Republican job and I made a fuss because, you know, *what did I think I was doing?* I do not know what they were going to say: Oh, gee, you're right, why hadn't we thought of that? So, in Nassau County every year the welfare lobby or constituents would try to get the county to allow children on welfare to have free passes to the county pools. And every year the Republicans would table it until September when it was too late and so everybody would forget about it. And I knew that because I was in charge of the calendar—

00:14:48 Q: Okay.

Gordon: Now, why I thought it would be a good idea for me to stand up at the press conference and say, “This is what they’re doing!” I don’t know why I thought it was a good idea but I did it, and there were light bulbs and flashes and everybody wanted to kill me. But I had to work there for another month because I needed the job. And I remember Ralph Caso, who was this really scary—I don’t know whether he was mobbed up but he certainly was involved with a lot of corrupt people in the Republican Party. And I remember he had this black hair, a white tie, a blue signet ring, and he called me in and he said, “What did you think you were doing?” And they threatened to take my mother’s job away from her because I had done that. But it was, you know, my way of bringing the revolution to the Nassau County Republican—and, you know, it was completely ineffectual and stupid, but I thought, I have to witness, I have to do this.

And then I came back—in sophomore year I took Janice Thaddeus’s poetry class and that was an enormous turning point for me because she— did you ever work with her?

00:16:12 Q: I did, yes.

Gordon: She really took one seriously as a writer. She gave one an enormous amount of careful attention. And I really learned to be careful with language from her. And then after I took her course she hired me to babysit for her children—

00:16:34 Q: Yeah, I remember that, yeah.

Gordon: —who are my dear friends now. So then I got *another* entrée into the WASP world—I got to see where they lived. She was wonderful to me.

00:16:49 Q: Her husband was a professor of physics, right?

Gordon: A physicist, yeah.

00:16:51 Q: Yeah, right, right.

Gordon: She was very beautiful. She had hair down to her waist and— very elegant—again, tremendously kind to me. She went on reading my poems the whole time. And so I had that job, I did typing for a guy who was writing a screenplay, and I worked at the 92nd Street Y in the music department—I gave out keys—and, you know, took money for lessons every night from 6:00 to 10:00. So some days I would go from class to babysitting, on the number 4 bus, to the 92nd Street Y and then back by 10:30 or 11:00. At the same time, I seemed to have fun and make friends because by that point, in my junior year, I talked my mother into letting me get a room with Maureen. We were in the same suite. And that was another complete liberation.

00:17:56 Q: And where were you living then?

Gordon: I lived in Plimpton— [Hall, residence hall on 121st Street and Amsterdam Avenue].

00:17:59 Q: In Plimpton, okay.

Gordon: —which was new and fancy then. Now they consider it a slum, but it was pretty exciting then. I think you lived in 616 [West 116th Street residence hall], didn't you? Or 620 [West 120th Street residence hall]?

00:18:07 Q: I was all over. Yeah, I was in Plimpton briefly.

Gordon: So then what Jan Thaddeus did for me was she got me a summer grant for \$500. And it was the first time since I was fifteen that I didn't have to work in the summer. And I went to Cambridge and took Italian at Harvard. So then I came back and then took a lot of Italian at Columbia.

00:18:339 Q: And why did you choose Italian of all the languages?

Gordon: I just loved it.

00:18:42 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: I loved it. I actually at that point, you know, when I think—I used to be smart, I used to be able to read Dante in Italian. And then in junior year I had David Robertson.

00:18:59 Q: Oh, David, yeah.

Gordon: For—

00:19:01 For Shakespeare.

Gordon: No, for literary criticism. And he taught me—he really taught me how to read carefully. But in sophomore year—this is a real story—sophomore year I had him for Victorian poetry. And at that point I had a boyfriend who was gay.

00:19:23 Q: Did you know it or you didn't know it?

Gordon: Yes. In those days, you—we believed that if you loved somebody enough you could sort of “cure” them.

00:19:31 Q: Oh yeah.

Gordon: And he was very brilliant, very neurotic but very brilliant. And I would say, “No, no, you'll get over this. I'll just love you enough and you'll get over all this.” And he would say, “Do you wanna know what I'd do? This is what I'd do.” And he would take me, you know, down to the docks and I'd have to see these things, and I'd say, “It doesn't matter, I love you—whatever you do is wonderful.” And when I was trying to do my paper on

Matthew Arnold for David Robertson, he was down at Andy—and I'm at home at this point—he's down at Andy Warhol's Factory with somebody he's having a love affair with, he's tripping on acid, freaking out, calling me every five minutes. I'm in my mother's house, trying to do my paper on Matthew Arnold, trying to bring him down, and I wrote a terrible paper for David Robertson.

00:20:35 Q: Understandably.

Gordon: And I got a C+ on it. And I was shattered. But I couldn't tell him—I mean, he was so elegant and “Mr. Chip-sy.” [Referring to the English schoolteacher protagonist of the novel, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*]. And I thought, Well, maybe I'll take another course with him and maybe he'll see I'm not such a loser. And that's where I really, really learned to read closely and to read carefully. And years later we became friends and I told him the Matthew Arnold story, and he said, “Why didn't you tell me?” I said, “I couldn't—I thought you'd be appalled.”

So my life was so crazy trying to balance all these worlds. And I was kind of known then as “the poet.” I was winning all the poetry prizes. You were the prose writer, I was the poet. And then senior year was Elizabeth Hardwick.

00:21:29 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: And that was a trip, as you know.

00:21:32 Q: (Laughs) A trip?

Gordon: And when I think about it now, she was a terrible teacher. She really wasn't interested in what we wrote at all, but she was very exciting. And again, it was an entrée into the larger world. She was—[Robert] Lowell had just left her and so, you know, there was all that that one was in the middle of. And she really took me under her wing. And when I think about it I don't know why the other people in the class didn't shoot me in the street because she'd say, "We're just going to Mary's work." And she told me not to be a poet, to write prose, you know, which I did do. And she would invite me to her home and we met Sam Shepard [playwright and actor] one night, we met [Mstislav] Rostropovich [world-renowned cellist], and I was, you know, just thrilled.

She didn't really read anything very carefully. She mainly told you that what you did was terrible. But she would give you good things to read and point you toward a set of standards and toward a world.

00:22:45 Q: So you were beginning to write more prose at this point? Or you were still doing the poetry? Because I thought you went off to work with [W.D.] Snodgrass—

Gordon: —to Syracuse, in poetry, yeah.

00:22:53 Q: Anyway, go on.

Gordon: But I wrote—I wrote stories for her because she didn't want to read poetry.

00:23:03 Q: (Laughs) That's true. If you're married to Robert Lowell, you don't read poetry.

Gordon: So I thought I was going—I wanted to go to regular Ph.D. graduate school. And again, without much thought, I applied to Harvard and Buffalo—SUNY Buffalo, which was very trendy at the time—and —I don't know—maybe Yale, or some ridiculous three places, which I was sure I was going to get into, and then I didn't. And then I was panicked because I really didn't want another office job. I had really done that. I was really burnt out. It's not like I had never done shit jobs, I was doing shit jobs. And then I panicked, and Elizabeth got me a fellowship to Syracuse.

00:23:49 Q: Oh, good.

Gordon: And what I regret is that I went— because I then had saved up for three years—I had saved five hundred dollars and I went to Europe that summer. If I hadn't been working class, if I hadn't had a mother who was disabled mother, who was also alcoholic—I wish I'd stayed in Europe. I wish I had, you know, worked in a trattoria in Florence. But I came home and I went to graduate school. And that was not a good experience.

What was shocking to me coming from Barnard was that women were considered an inferior species. My first—so Snodgrass took me on—I was a poet then—took me on as a special

tutorial student. And the first day of graduate school he said to me, “So, do you want—” Oh, also, what I’m forgetting about Barnard is the women’s movement is happening.

00:24:51 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: Kate Millet was teaching Freshman English when we were there. I didn’t have her but she was there. Kate Stimpson was there. A lot was happening—and we were in the middle of—that was very exciting—a lot of pro-choice work was happening—that was very exciting. And so I really felt—I was in the middle of the women’s movement—and being at Barnard I thought, Well, this will be over in a couple of years. Obviously everybody wants this. This will change. This is great. It’s really easy. And I got to Syracuse and the first day of graduate school when I’m doing my special tutorial with Snodgrass said, he said to me, “Do you know what women poets are like?”

And I said, “No!”

And he said, “Well, in the winter a male bear and a female bear go into a cave. And the male bear shoves a pine cone up the woman bear’s ass because he doesn’t want her to shit all over the cave in the winter. And then in the springtime he pulls the pine cone out of her ass and she shits all over the walls of the cave—that’s what women poets are like.”

00:26:01 Q: Oh God!

Gordon: So I had gone from Barnard where it didn't occur to me that there was—I mean, of course women were—and they were not very good to us at Columbia in terms of letting us into their little writing—I mean, Kenneth Koch was the cock of the walk over there —

00:26:23 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: And he was not, you know, he was not interested in women. And you had to write this New York School John O'Hara type of poetry, which is very male— and they didn't want us reading at their readings. They didn't want to let us in, they didn't want to publish us. But we had our own world. I mean, it pissed me off— but it didn't affect me very deeply because there I was with Elizabeth Hardwick and—

00:26:48 Q: You had a lot of supports.

Gordon: I had a lot of supports, yeah. And then I get to Syracuse and—and all the prizes are going to the men, all the awards are going to the men, and I'm shocked,. Because Barnard had really protected me from all that. And we formed a women's writing—a rump workshop, met in the basement of a church like an AA meeting, and that's where I became a prose writer because my friend had said to me, “You know, your poems are getting longer and longer, maybe you're a prose writer.” And I said, “No, I can't control all those words, I won't do it.”

So one of my friends—we were all teaching Freshman English—said, “Okay, you're really

good at taking exams and giving them.” She gave me a blue book. She put me in a classroom and she said, “I’m coming back for you in three hours”—as if this were an exam—“I want you to fill a blue book, and I want it to be a short story.” And I did it. And that’s where I—

00:27:51 Q: Do you remember what you wrote about then?

Gordon: I do, I do, because I was engaged then to my first husband whom I divorced—and he had somebody he had been involved with before me, who had given him a paperweight, a glass paperweight with a dandelion in it, and I said, “Get rid of it. I don’t want it.” And he said, “No, I like it, I’m not getting rid of it.” And that was what that was about. So then—

00:28:21 Q: How did you survive with Snodgrass? How did you get out of there? I can’t imagine you even listening to that from him from day one—

Gordon: It was the only time in my life I was ever blocked. And I didn’t go back to him after the first semester, I just stayed away from him. And I worked with Philip Booth, who was Elizabeth’s friend, and George P. Elliot. And then I worked with the women. You know? Again, I had the support group. And then I stayed on for a PhD; I was doing my dissertation on Virginia Woolf.

00:28:57 Q: Oh, perfect!

Gordon: And my subject was the gap in her consciousness between what she says women

should do in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*, and the way she portrays women who are defined by work—

00:29:12 Q: —who are defined by work.

Gordon: Yes. Who are always less beautiful, less loveable, less happy than the traditional woman. So anyway, I did not finish it. I got married, I moved to Poughkeepsie. I taught at a community college. My husband was English, we went to England. I was writing a novel, I was doing my dissertation. I met Margaret Drabble in England, I wrote her a letter. Again, I had courage. And she invited me to dinner. She had read my novel. Again, great generosity—

00:29:46 Q: This is *Final Payments*.

Gordon: Yeah. She sent me to her agent. They had been giving me a lot of crap about my dissertation at Syracuse because it was too feminist.

00:29:56 Q: I can imagine. (Laughs)

Gordon: So then *Final Payments* was published and I said, “Not doing it, not doing this dissertation, goodbye.” I then left my first husband, married my second husband, had two children, was living in the country in New Paltz, didn't like it—I'm not a country girl—and then in 1988 Ruth Kivett asked me if I wanted to just teach one section of creative writing

here, which I did— And then in 1990 Anne Prescott said, “How’d you like a real job?” And so I’ve been here ever since. My children were raised here. They grew up—my daughter’s doing a MD PhD at [University of] Wisconsin. She’s married to someone she met her first day at Columbia. She went to Columbia, she wouldn’t go to Barnard because she said my footprints were all over it.

00:30:55 Q: (Laughs) Yeah, right.

Gordon: And my son—so she’s doing an MD PhD and has two little boys. My son went to [University of] Michigan and was a religion major. And he is now a personal trainer and a Buddhist, and teaches a class called “Slowing Down Your Life in New York.”

00:31:17 Q: Wow. So he’s in New York as well.

Gordon: He’s in New York and she’s in Wisconsin.

00:31:23 Q: She’s in Wisconsin.

Gordon: And here I am, twenty-five years later, at Barnard—one of the odd things is looking at myself in the mirror in front of the elevator on the fourth floor of Barnard Hall—

00:31:32 Q: Yeah, right.

Gordon: —and trying to find the eighteen-year-old that looked at herself in the mirror. It's the same mirror. Am I the same person?

00:31:41 Q: Are you?

Gordon: Yes and no. I've lost a lot of courage, I've lost a lot of energy. I'm less hopeful. I'm probably a little wiser. I've learned a lot. But I feel I have the best job in the world because I've really taught other places and there's something about Barnard women—and I mean we have a—we're kind of like Ireland, we're really overrepresented with the number of writers that we produce for our size.

00:32:13 Q: Something's working there.

Gordon: Yeah. And so I feel—I feel just very, very lucky to be here.

00:32:21 Q: Okay. Let's go back just a little bit. Would you like to tell any stories about your childhood and—I know with your father—I mean you've written books about this but are there instances—

Gordon: Right.

00:32:31 Q: —maybe just a little bit describing the environment you were growing up in. I

know there were lots of relatives who were also interfering in your life (laughs) or part of it, one way or the other. The whole Catholic school—what things you remember doing—

Gordon: Yeah, so, my father was really an outlier in the world in which I grew up. He was Jewish but a convert, but he was a man of letters. Now, it turns out he was also a prodigious liar. I grew up believing he had gone to Harvard, Oxford, and the Sorbonne. He had actually dropped out of school in tenth grade but I didn't know that until my forties. But he lived—he was a failed writer—but he lived in a world of books and writing, and I did, too. And that was the only world that interested me. I just thought other children were boring and ridiculous—why would you want to play hide and go seek, which I still think is a ridiculous game—when you could be reading a book I just—I didn't get it.

We were—we were also a very pious family. And I was very pious. Often we went to mass several times a week, on holidays, and we had a lot of friends who were nuns and priests. My parents—even my mother who wasn't well-educated, had actually a rather sophisticated religious life. So I took that all very seriously. I loved it, I wanted to be a nun. It was a very triumphalist period for American Catholicism. It was after the war, everybody had to go to Catholic school. People were building big churches, big schools. It wasn't the most—it was very insular. It was a time of *great* phobia about Communism. I remember being terrified of Communism. Having a lot of nightmares that Communists would come and they would put a gun to my head and say, you know, “Do you believe in Christ?” and I would say, “Yes,” and they would shoot me or I would say, “No,” and know that I had to live as a traitor.

00:34:51 Q: Was this something they taught you or—?

Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

00:34:57 Q: Okay.

Gordon: And remember, we were having air raid drills all the time. And I often think of it— Why did they think if we got under our desks that would keep us safe from a bomb? Oh, okay, you're under your desk, they won't get you. But I remember that terror, but it had a particular Catholic inflection because we really believed that the Communists hated Catholics above all. And so a very insular life—but I'm happy with my father and our books. He's teaching me languages, I'm learning—I have a French coloring book, which I think is about the most wonderful thing in the world, with some French words, I'm learning some French words. To me this is real life and then there's this other thing called "life" which I'm not particularly interested in. And then my father dies when I'm seven and that is the trauma of my life. And so I'm left with these people who don't live in a world of books, who are very suspicious and hostile toward learning. They're very anti-Semitic. They think that all the bad things about me—which is that I'm a daydreamer, I don't pay attention, I'm not with the program—that's because I'm a Jew. So I really experienced anti-Semitism in a way that a lot of other Jews haven't because they felt free to say all of the terrible things they believed about Jews to me.

00:36:25 Q: Now, did anyone else in your family know your father's background?

Gordon: Yeah.

00:36:29 Q: Oh, everyone did. Okay. He was a convert, that was it—okay—not enough to be converted—yeah. Okay.

Gordon: So I think that between the ages of seven and when I went to high school, I think I was in a daze, I think I was—I was kind of catatonic. And my whole life was books. And I didn't have any friends and I was quite miserable. And then I went to high school and I met Maureen Stratford. And that changed my life. Because Maureen was like—she was the right way to be—she looked Irish, she had a normal family, she had two parents, nothing was weird about her. And she liked me and we had fun and we laughed. And then I realized I could have fun and laugh and that if you were in an all-girls high school even though it was a *terrible* high school academically, just beyond terrible—if you were smart and funny, that was a currency—in a way that it wouldn't have been in a co-ed school. So we were so powerful in that school—when Maureen and I walked around—we often say we will never have that much power again. And I think that's how we got to Barnard because in its ridiculous way our school was supportive of the female, not in the way that Barnard did, but just basically because they didn't like men.

00:38:05 Q: (Laughs) A little homophobia?

Gordon: But when I got to Barnard I was really in trouble academically—

00:38:11 Q: Oh.

Gordon: —because I could do English, that was fine, but, you know, we had been taught history from a Catholic perspective. Our French teacher couldn't speak French. I was taught chemistry in the following way: “What does covalent ionic bonding remind us of, girls? The mystical body of Christ.”

00:38:33 Q: No! Wow.

Gordon: So I remember going to French class and I guess I sort of tested well. But I was in French class with girls who went to France every summer. And I remember I was in a history class with Zake Shange [playwright Ntozake Shange], who was then Paulette Williams. She was from Tenafly—at that point, she was a little preppy and she was from Tenafly and her father was a doctor. She was so much smarter and with it because she knew all this stuff because she'd gone to good schools. And I hadn't. And if you look at my grades those first two years, they're terrible, because I was so behind these girls who had gone either to good public schools or good private schools. I had gone to a lousy and insular and very censoring Catholic school. So everybody says, “Oh, you went to Catholic school, you must have got a good education.” I didn't, I really didn't.

00:39:29 Q: What about current events, things going on, were you at all aware growing up?

Gordon: In high school?

00:39:35 Q: Yeah, whenever—

Gordon: No, I was just thinking—no—I was afraid—I was I was afraid of Communism—

00:39:40 Q: Other than Communism.

Gordon: I was afraid of Communism.

00:39:41 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: And I think until I was about sixteen the civil rights movement went right over my head. I did not know any black people. And then when we kind of would go—we would sneak into the city—because our parents didn't want us to go to the city from Queens—

00:40:03 Q: Pits of iniquity.

Gordon: Right. And that's when we started getting—so by the time—by 1965 I was interested in the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War but not because anyone I was around was interested. I mean, politically, everybody I knew would have voted Democratic

because of FDR but they also might have voted for George Wallace. So it was that kind of—
kind of odd time and—

00:40:36 Q: So what was sustaining you during this schizoid period—you're at home being pulled in these other directions entirely and maybe even being reprimanded for whatever's happening back at school, at Barnard. How do you think you held yourself together?

Gordon: I was so excited by learning. I had a life of the mind that was thrilling. I was being so supported here in my life of the mind. I was being so supported here as a writer. I had friends. I just never doubted that that was important and that I could do it and that was home and that was real life. And everything else I would eventually be able to put behind me if I just kept my focus on the life of the mind, which thrilled me and sustained me.

00:41:29 Q: And this—clearly you've had a strong drive from the beginning.

Gordon: Yes.

00:41: 35 Q: And you were quite brave in a number of situations. Where did that come from?

Gordon: I have no idea. I have no idea. I don't know, I don't know.

00:41:40 Q: Desperation—

Gordon: I just—I was a brave kid. I remember—but I was very pious and I—I was really good at taking difficult positions which hurt no one but me and accomplished nothing. That was kind of my specialty as a kid.

00:42:03 Q: An example?

Gordon: So for example, I really liked the Lives of the Saints. And there was this saint Dominick Savio who was an orphan boy in Naples and he lived in an orphanage. And the other orphans were using bad language and he took a crucifix out of his pocket and he said, “Say it in front of Him!” And the boys fell to their knees and repented. Well, I tried it in my neighborhood and they did say it in front of him. There as a man in our candy store who—he liked me, he gave me egg creams, and I talked to him about selling girlie magazines, which I thought he should not be doing, and he stopped giving me egg creams and went on selling the girlie magazines. I mean, I had this *mouth* and I guess I’ve always felt, If I know I’m right, you cannot stop me. I don’t know where I got that from, I don’t know, I just don’t know. I think it was Lives of the Saints, I really wanted to be a saint, I wanted to be a martyr. And anything else seemed really—

00:43:16 Q: Boring.

Gordon: Second-rate and boring.

00: 43:20 Q: Second-rate, yeah. What about the relationship between your parents?

Gordon: Terrible.

00:43:22 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: They were so different. I have no idea why they got married except they shared a religious life. They fought all the time. And I think quite frankly my mother was greatly relieved when he died.

And my mother, interestingly, a complicated case—she always worked, until she was seventy-five years old.

00:43:52 Q: Until she was seventy-five. Okay.

Gordon: Yeah, and she was a legal secretary at the time when a secretary worked for one boss and she had worked with the same man for years. That was her real life. She loved work. And in the neighborhood, in this working class neighborhood, she had authority. So if anyone got an envelope from “the government,” they brought it to my mother, she would open them up and say, “Well, this is what you do.” She was writing people’s wills. She was doing people’s income tax—so she had authority. And she had complete contempt for traditional womanhood. Total contempt. Total contempt for women who were interested in cooking and decorating and fashion. So I actually had an opposite problem in coming of age, which is my mother said to me when I was twelve, “You’re very smart and men don’t like

smart women and so nobody will ever marry you, and so I'm sending you to typing school because you have to be able to support yourself because you're too smart for men." And her only way that she could imagine that a woman could support herself was to be a secretary.

00:45:08 Q: Right.

Gordon: So she sent me to typing school when I was twelve and shorthand school when I was thirteen. But she never—she always praised me for good grades. When I got a good report card, she took me out for a special shrimp cocktail treat. She never told me to shut up or don't read or—nothing like that. What she would say is, "Don't pay attention to your clothes—that's vanity. Don't bother learning to cook—that's just stupid."

00:45:43 Q: Ah, okay.

Gordon: So I had to teach myself to cook.

00:45:45 Q: Very different, yeah. So this actually fed into—I think fed into a lot of the feminist thought at the time—when you were a student at least. It's changed since then. So would you say she was the most influential person in your early years?

Gordon: No, my father definitely was.

00:46:08 Q: Your father was. Okay, okay.

Gordon: And my mother in a very touching way was supporting me and allowing me into a world which would separate me from her.

00:46:23 Q: She knew that much, yes.

Gordon: Yes. And she didn't stop me, although she was very resentful—but she also simultaneously enabled me and resented the leaving.

00:46:36 Q: So you were able to—

Gordon: It was very much a class issue, too.

00:46:39 Q: Yeah, say more about that—clearly it was.

Gordon: Yeah.

00:46:45 Q: Coming to Barnard and finding—there was a lot of money here. Some people say they weren't aware of it, that it was class-less. I was always very aware of it.

Gordon: Quite aware—I remember there was a woman here, Josie Biddle Duke —

00:47:00 Q: Okay.

Gordon: —she was the heiress to the Duke fortune, and what I remember was she could go across the street and take over a building, and she could go back to the Dukes. I remember we were in a geology field trip and it was very cold and some young woman, I don't remember her name, said, "Oh, it's so cold I'm going to take myself down to Fred Layton's and buy myself two pairs of fur-lined boots." I thought, Well, maybe I'll go to Klein's and get a pair of socks, you know, if I'm lucky.

00:47:33 Q: Yeah, yeah.

Gordon: And people would say things like that, they could do things, they were going to these places on their vacations—you know, "We're going to the Bahamas for spring break." "You're what?" You know. And with no notion of the ease of their lives—

00: 47:53 Q: Sure.

Gordon: That was a little hard not to resent.

00:47:58 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: But I liked a lot of them and anyway I thought I was going to be—but what was interesting—it was very different—there weren't the—if you had money, you kind of had to try to hide it then. Everybody was wearing jeans and Indian print skirts. I mean, yeah, you

were wearing the expensive boots or not but it didn't really matter. And we didn't come to school with, you know, every appliance known to mankind. I mean, we all watched television at Plimpton, in the—so in a way you could be conscious of it but I think now it's much more marked because of the conspicuous consumption. We were of a generation where people had to pretend they were living poor even if they weren't.

00:48:44 Q: That's true, yeah, yeah. That's a great difference. Yeah. Okay. So what about—I know Catholicism has played a huge role in your life. You're somewhat of an expert on Catholicism in this country and certain theologies. Would you like to speak a little more about that and that whole trajectory of being immersed in it as a child and hitting the wall of Barnard and then going from there?

Gordon: Yeah. Barnard was my time when I didn't want anything to do with it. And largely it was because one of the things that happened when we were here in 1968 was, as well as the Columbia strike [student protests April 1967–1968 against Columbia University institutional links to support of the Vietnam War], was *Humane Vitae*, the Pope's encyclical against birth control. And that was a deal breaker for me. And so for a long time I was just angry at the Church, I didn't want to identify with it, I didn't want to have anything to do with it, at the same time that I was aware of how it had formed me. And I think the rhythms and the liturgies of the church were really in my bones. And so I've always—another of my schizophrenia—ae—is that I am a political leftist and an aesthetic rightist.

00:50:07 Q: Hmm.

Gordon: And I think it's the—

00:50:09 Q: Interesting.

Gordon: —formality of the Church, of the liturgy of the Church, the prayers of the Church always appealed to me. Also, there was a way that the Church allowed you an imagination as a female of heroism not connected to men. There was the image of the nun and there were all the saints.

00:50:31 Q: Interesting.

Gordon: And so I always kept this image of the saints in front of me. Now, I would define saint differently but I really didn't want anything that wasn't heroic. And heroic in ethical terms—and heroic that was about giving everything.

00:50:53 Q: Sacrifice.

Gordon: Yes. Holding nothing back. And I—I think that I transferred that to art. That that was what the artist had to do—give everything, hold nothing back, not do it for the result, not do it for the reward, but for the sacredness of art. So at the same time that I didn't want anything to do with, you know, these bishops and creeps—and I also—as the liturgy changed, I wasn't attracted to a less formal liturgy. And so for years I just—all I was was

angry at the Church, I think until my early thirties— in which my husband was a religious Episcopalian. And so I kind of came back to through that. I tried to be an Episcopalian for a while and then I realized I couldn't, that it was still the Church of England and I wanted—

00:51:52 Q: The Church of Rome.

Gordon: Yeah.

00:51:56 Q: And in terms of writing about it, what—I mean, what kind of trajectory do you think you—I mean, how did you evolve to—to be able to write about Catholicism—

Gordon: I never choose my subjects.

00:52:10 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: I just realized, Oh, wow, these people are living with me and they're in the shower with me and I don't know how they got there. So it's nothing that I—it's never anything that I will—

00:52:25 Q: Okay. The whole—what's it like? What's it been like for you accomplishing so much as a writer?

Gordon: I feel very lucky. I think that if I had not come of age when I did, when the women's

movement still had cultural sway, I would not have had the career that I did. So I feel very lucky for that. I feel very grateful to Barnard that because I have a job that I love and a salary I can depend on, I can write what I want to write. I do not have to be conscious of any kind of fashion. So I feel like that's been lucky. So in the years when I was starting people were still interested in women's fiction. In the years when they weren't, I could still write the kind of fiction that I wanted because I didn't have to be dependent so much on the marketplace. So I feel like I've been very, very, very lucky—very lucky. And I don't think that my fate or my career are replicable for a younger woman.

00:53:31 Q: Hmm. It's a different age, huh?

Gordon: Yeah. Because people aren't taking fiction seriously. You can't live poor anymore, in the city certainly. And, you know, fiction and literature are not at the center of the cultural conversation anymore. They're just not.

00:53:55 Q: Right. So in terms of your political involvement and causes that you may have supported over the years, where do you stand on any of these issues now?

Gordon: Well, I'm wildly pro-choice. I still can't believe that we're fighting the same battles about abortion that we were forty years ago. I cannot believe what's being done around Planned Parenthood. So those are still the causes that are really closest to my heart. I'm a wild Obama supporter. I'm madly protective of him. If anybody criticizes him, I just want to knock their teeth down their throat and say, "Do you understand what he's up against?" I am

really concerned about issues of immigration. I think that—I don't have any idea—in a way, I have a clearer idea about what we can do about choice. I don't know what we can do about immigration but I am sickened by the anti-immigration rhetoric. And—and, you know, I'm from a family of immigrants.

00:55:07 Q: You're what?

Gordon: I'm from a family of immigrants.

00:55:12 Q: Of course.

Gordon: And I feel like, most anybody is: how did they think they got here? I'm very depressed by the stupidity of the American non-voting public. Just the fact that anybody could take Donald Trump seriously for one second when we're a country that has had more people with more years of education than any country in the world, what does that mean? So, you know, I'm going to support Hillary Clinton, and I'm going to support feminist issues. Feminism has changed. I kind of feel like a bit of an old lady when I—. The ways that my students define feminism are very different from the ways we did. I have to listen and sometimes keep my mouth shut.

00:56:07 Q: What would be some examples there?

Gordon: What I think is interesting is—

00:56:12 Q: I mean, we're on what? The second wave? Third wave?

Gordon: Third wave.

00:56:14 Q: Third wave.

Gordon: The whole notion of the objectification of the female body which really got us up in arms. They don't think it's a problem. They think they can wear whatever they like.

00:56:28 Q: Ah, yes.

Gordon: They think that pornography is no big deal. I think that they've forgotten about some of the bread and butter issues like day care. I wish that date rape weren't their biggest issue. I mean, I think it's an important and a very vexed issue and I get it; I think it's a little less simple than they think it is. But I want to hear what they say about it. I wish that they were a little bit less tolerant of the culture of corporations. I'm not sympathetic to the Cheryl Sandbergs of this world. [Sandberg is CEO of Facebook and writes on business leadership for women]. I don't think that's feminism. I think we thought feminism was trying to make the world more cognizant of the good values attributed to women—that is, a notion of community and nurturance and sharing. Not, how can we be as greedy and aggressive as men, only better at it. That's not my idea of feminism and I think that might alienate me from certain younger women so I—I'm willing to listen and keep back. We're obviously on the

same side but the vocabulary's very different.

00:58:05 Q: Right. What would you say—as a mother of a daughter, how has that impacted your involvement with her?

Gordon: Well, she thinks I'm a wimp feminist. She thinks that I'm much less of a feminist than she is. So what she's going to do with her life is do reproductive rights and women's health care.

00:58:24 Q: Oh.

Gordon: We have a lot of interesting talks about— (Phone rings) I'm terribly sorry. Sorry.

00:58:31 Q: It's okay.

Gordon: We disagree on things but she's a major feminist. She's much more ethical than I am. She thinks I'm kind of a slave to fashion.

00:58:53 Q: Much more ethical?

Gordon: Yeah. So, for example, when she was twelve—it was a time when one of the abortion doctors was shot—

00:59:06 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: —And we were going to go to one of the demonstrations and it was about ten degrees below zero. And I said, “Anna, I’ve been doing pro-choice work for about thirty years and it’s ten degrees below zero, I don’t think we should go to this demonstration.” And she said, “That’s an excellent example for your daughter: Stand up for what you believe in— unless it’s too cold.” (laughs) So she instructive to me about some things that we—she’s wildly pro-choice too—so, I mean, the whole dress thing—she would be of the—women should wear whatever they want and it’s men’s problem. I just think, Well, that’s not realistic. I think she’s more— (Phone rings.) I’m so sorry.

1:00:04 Q: That’s okay. I’ll turn it off for a second.

(Pause in recording)

Gordon: Sorry.

1:00:09 Q: So we’re just resuming. Go ahead.

Gordon: I just— so I still think that having sex is something that should be taken sort of seriously—that you shouldn’t be just using people as objects and then with no—

1:00:25 Q: Right.

Gordon: And my daughter thinks that's absolutely archaic, although she's married and very traditional in that way. But she wouldn't be critical of that in a way that I would be. I don't know—but I think—and I'm a little—a little unsympathetic to women who are very well trained and stay home, are stay-at-home mothers, the ones who have two nannies and are at the gym all the time. I understand that there's no sense going to work if you have to spend your whole salary on daycare—I get that—but women who were on Law Review at Yale and are now spending their afternoons getting their legs waxed and their afternoons getting their eyebrows plucked and their evenings at Pilates, I'm very critical of that. I'm critical of women who have training that they're not using, to stay home—and I wouldn't be critical of it if men did it in anywhere near an equal number—then that would be fine with me—but they're not. And she thinks I'm wrong about that. She thinks that people should be able to have any choices that they want, so—so—

1:01:57 Q: Interesting.

Gordon: So—so we differ on that.

1:01:59 Q: Interesting, yeah, yeah. You mentioned several minutes back there that prior to going to graduate school that you traveled to Europe--and you wished it might have been different—that you wish you had just stayed.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:02:13 Q: Can you say a little bit more about that?

Gordon: I think that I've really worked too hard my whole life and I've been too serious and now I'd like to be able to play and I'm probably too old, but I've always felt—I guess I've always felt this, If I fall off the ladder, I'll never get back on again and so I've never felt that I've had the amplitude to explore, to enjoy myself. I wish I'd—I'm okay in Italian—

1:02:42 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: —but if I'd stayed there for a year, I could be really fluent. I just could have played more if I had a job that I could have left at four o'clock in the afternoon and gone drinking and dancing all night.

1:02:58 Q: Okay.

Gordon: I've never had that in my life. I have been a very serious girl and I wish that I'd had more time to play. I was very driven, you know, by—by writing—I mean, that's the thing I like about myself—I had my eyes on the prize—but I wish I had played more. And I think if I'd had more money, or if I'd been of a different class, I'd have been able to do both.

1:03:26 Q: Yeah. So what about the whole process of writing? What is your regimen or—I'm sure it's changed over the years, but how do you keep so focused? And how do you keep moving forward?

Gordon: I'm really good at compartmentalization.

1:03:40 Q: Okay.

Gordon: And I have certain hours that are just designated hours—now, it changes depending on if I'm teaching or I'm not teaching. When I had little kids, I'd get up at 5:30 in the morning and work for a couple of hours before they got up and then after they went to school. Now that I don't have kids at home, the hours are more flexible, but I have to do four hours a day unless—not on days that I'm teaching—on days that I'm teaching, at least I make sure that I have half an hour. Renoir said, "Every day you have to be an artist, if it only means drawing an apple in the margin of your notebook."

1:04:19 Q: Hah! Who said that?

Gordon: Renoir.

1:04:21 Q: Oh, Ren—okay.

Gordon: So—so I don't let any days go by—and sometimes, you know, it—it's not a

capitalist venture. You don't always have a product at the end of the day. Sometimes you sit there and think you're the stupidest person that ever lived. So those are days when I read very carefully. And—but—you know, I just feel that there are certain times when I'm not available. Just, you know—a bad mommy story—we were renting a house in Cape Cod and I used the—I used the attic to write in. And I had a—I had an au pair—and was not available for the kids between 9:00 and 1:00, and I was up in the attic writing and my son, who was then five, was sitting in front of the door. But I wasn't going to open the door until 1:00 because that was the rule; but of course I couldn't work at all because I know he's sitting there. So when I opened the door and I said, "David, could you—you know, you're not supposed to be there because I'm working." And he said, "I didn't know you knew I was there." And I said, "I knew you were there." And he said, "But did you know I was crying?" And I thought, Okay, I'm the worst mother that ever lived. But, actually, one of the things that my daughter said to me is, "You were not a problem for us as a mother when you weren't paying attention. You were a problem for us when you were paying too much attention." But I am—I think it's that training of having all those jobs—

1:05:59 Q: Yeah. Right.

Gordon: —of having all those part-time jobs at Barnard. One thing I'm good at is I do what I'm doing when I'm doing it, and then it's over and I do the other thing. And I just—it—probably all those part-time jobs were good training.

1:06:18 Q: Of necessity. Yeah. All right, what places that you—you keep talking about going

back to Europe—I know you wrote a book about Italy— What would be your ideal place to live and are you going to maybe travel? I mean, those are two questions. Let's start with the living and then the traveling.

Gordon: I think I want to live in New York. I'd love to spend a lot of time in Italy. That's my—Rome makes me completely happy. And then I'd like to have another little house, maybe in Umbria or something like that, but there's something about the life in the streets of New York that—that is very, very dear to me. And I think that living as an expatriate is always a little bit unnatural. You never quite get the code completely, and sometimes you think you do and that can be deceptive. So I never want to be an expatriate, but I'd like to have a place where I spent a lot of months—and it would be Italy.

1:07:36 Q:..And how about travel? Have you been able to travel since those years, since that summer before you went to graduate school?

Gordon: Yeah, I, I've spent—I've spent a couple of months at a time in Italy. I've really traveled around Europe. I haven't traveled much outside Europe—to my shame.

1:07:59 Q: To your shame.

Gordon: It always required more time than I thought I had, but I also never wanted—I was never comfortable going somewhere where I didn't have the language. And now I wish I could—I would—could go to Asia, but I would have to go in some way that isn't like any

other kind of traveling that I've done because I have to be sort of guided. Because it might be like being a blind person and I've never wanted that experience. But I would love to go to Cambodia—and Thailand and Vietnam.

1:08:33 Q: Hmm. And has your son traveled? As a Buddhist at all—?

Gordon: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

1:08:37 Q: He has gone there—so he's shared his experiences of—

Gordon: Yeah.

1:08:41 Q: Fascinating. Okay, in terms of the changes you see in yourself over the course of your life—and again, this is almost an absurd question to ask a writer, but I will ask you anyway: What do you think has changed the most about yourself in terms of your view of yourself as a woman?

Gordon: I no longer care that much if people are looking at me or not. The way that I was in the world, needing to feel like I was desirable and desired. That's over and it's a great liberation—I like it very much. And I'm now I'm somebody's mother or somebody's grandmother, so that is a whole other series of resentments that then get attached to you, or a series of possibilities that—that you're not threatening as a sexual person and so you have certain kinds of conversations and relationships are open to you in the way that they weren't.

But I think that one thing that the women's movement hasn't touched at all is the enormous tyranny of looks—

1:09:57 Q: Tyranny of looks. Yeah.

Gordon: And we're not going to get better looking as we get older, we're just not. As good looking as we are, some eighteen-year-old is going to be better looking than us. It's just not going to change. So I feel really happy to be liberated from those anguishes and stupid wastes of energy.

1:10:20 Q: Okay. Fair enough. You've been married now, what—forty years or thirty?

Gordon: Yeah.

1:10:28 Q: Okay. And how did you meet and how has that worked in terms of your career and—

Gordon: We met because my husband was a colleague of my first husband so we were a great—we were a great scandal.

1:10:38 Q: You were a great scandal—oh no! (Laughs)

Gordon: Yeah. We kind of miss that. My husband's a lot older than I am—

1:10:43 Q: Oh.

Gordon: —he's twenty-five years older than I am—

1:10:45 Q: Oh my!

Gordon: —so we've had an unusual relationship that worked really well for me because I didn't have to—help somebody build a career—I didn't have to hold myself back for fear that I was jeopardizing his self-esteem. He had built a career and been very successful so he was able to help me a lot with the kids. He's a scholar, he's an eighteenth century scholar, so we share—we share sensibilities and passions almost a hundred percent of the time. He's the opposite of being threatened by my work—he's wonderfully, wonderfully supportive. You know, if I wanted to go somewhere or travel somewhere, or be alone to write, that was never a problem. And so a lot of difficulties that women writers or professional women have had, I have been spared. He's also much calmer than I am. He's a real—I really married America, I married a Midwestern WASP—who thinks I'm the most exotic thing in the world and never knows what to expect.

1:12:07 Q: It keeps it interesting.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:12:11 Q: Where was he from then?

Gordon: Gary, Indiana.

1:12:13 Q: Oh my! (Laughs) And you met in upstate New York?

Gordon: We met in New Paltz, we met in New Paltz. Yeah.

1:12:19 Q: Okay. And he's also a professor?

Gordon: He was, he's retired.

1:12:23 Q: Retired.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:12:27 Q: So when you first came to Barnard—or when you left Barnard—did you envision yourself at that point as a writer able to go pursue—able to have a family and balance all these things or—?

Gordon: I knew I was going to be a writer. I was afraid that what my mother told me was right—that nobody would ever marry me. But I was never going to compromise the idea of being a writer for that. I thought—I knew that I could kind of control my work as a writer; I

couldn't control my romantic life. I was very afraid that my very accomplishment would take me out of the running as a desirable woman.

1:13:12 Q: Interesting. So you listened well to your mother.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:13:16 Q: Although she had been very much a feminist—

Gordon: Yeah. Yeah, she was.

1:13:21 Q: —and a model there as well. Okay, let's see—

Gordon: It's interesting because I think a lot of working class women, particularly working class Irish women, have a lot of contempt for men.

1:13:33 Q: For what?

Gordon: For men.

1:13:35 Q: Oh.

Gordon: They think they're kind of a luxury item, and women really keep things going and

do all the work. And I think for Irish women, because so many Irish men are alcoholic, they've been the breadwinners but they have to pretend that they have this man in the house. So I think there's this funny kind of working class unconscious feminism which is based on the fact that they know they can do everything and they've had to do everything and pretend that they're not. They wouldn't call it feminism but it makes them powerful in some way.

1:14:15 Q: Or in control. Right, right.

Gordon: Yeah, yeah.

1:14:19 Q: Okay. And how did you actually—I think I may have asked this before—but the whole balancing the time for the writing and then raising the kids—I know you took a few years off between novels.

Gordon: No, I didn't take a few years off between novels.

1:14:33 Q: Oh, you didn't. Your kids are how close in age?

Gordon: Three years.

1:14:37 Q: Oh, okay, yeah. So you were still able to work—

Gordon: I didn't teach for eight years—

1:14:43 Q: Oh.

Gordon: That's what I didn't do.

1:14:45 Q: Okay.

Gordon: And so I always had a babysitter every morning between nine and one and, you know, if I was writing *War and Peace* at one, that was kind of too bad. Looking back on it, I don't accomplish that much more with a whole day than I did in those nine to one hours, but I had a place—I went to a place that was not in the home so I had no domestic distractions. And I just did it. And I was like a little writing machine for four hours. You know, you can't really do more than four hours' concentrated work. And you can get a lot done.

1:15:39 Q: Okay, yeah, good, good. Let's see, what else I need to cover here? Do you want to speak a little more about your spirituality?

Gordon: I'm now back in the very left wing of the Catholic Church. I think that the Catholic Church at its best, which is not that common but it does exist, it combines a great ethical consciousness and an aesthetic consciousness, and I guess it's very un-capitalist. I really hate that everything is about money and productivity. I love—I love being in a space where there's no product, which is the space in church. And also, what I like about being Catholic,

particularly in New York is, I am in a room with people that I'd never talk to otherwise. I am in a room—you know, the woman who cleans for me and I can go to Mass together, we're saying the same words, we're saying the same prayers. There are crazy people, there are criminals, there are old people, there are young people, there are people from Eastern Europe, from Africa, from South America, from Africa—and we're all in the room together— and we probably have nothing else in common and we're saying those words. That to me is irreplaceable. And we're saying words that people have been saying for thousands of years—not self-consciously as if we were dressing up in hoop skirts. There's a kind of vitality to those ancient words. So there's a very organic link to the past, it's an organic link with people who are very different from you, all saying the same words and for that hour wishing for the same good things. Now, I don't think it makes us any better when we walk out of the church at all, but that hour is precious and lovely to me.

1:17:51 Q: So are you at all involved in the Pope's—

Gordon: No.

Q: Pope Francis's visit? Are you following that?

Gordon: No.

1:17:57 Q: I mean, is he of your beliefs, do you think? You were kind of mimicking him now—this is what the Church should do—

Gordon: I think he's wonderful.

1:18:04 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: He's not great about women.

1:18:08 Q: Oh, okay.

Gordon: He said that the door was closed to the ordination of women. He's not going to get rid of the birth control ban. I think that he's—he's tonally wonderful. He's compassionate, he's open. He's not going to—he's not a reformer in that way. He's not going to change some of the really bad things about the Church. But what he has done is he's a presence in the world of compassion—and I'm thrilled about what he's saying about climate change. I mean, that is—

1:18:44 Q: —long overdue, yeah.

Gordon: You know, that's really important and really powerful so I'm very proud of him. My God, he's so much better than what went before him—I mean, let's not even—I think he's a very good thing in the world. If you know the insider baseball, you have a little—some reservations.

1:19:06 Q: Right.

Gordon: But they're only reservations within the family, and for the larger human family I think he's a very good man.

1:19:13 Q: Okay. Good, good. How a bout—you're—you're a grandmother. How has that changed your life? Anything you want to share about that?

Gordon; It is just unalloyed bliss. It is fun, it is delicious, it is wonderful, and you know, I don't have to say no to them ever. They're just utter delight to me.

1:19:42 Q: And you see them how often?

Gordon: I see them for a few days every month and then more in the summer.

1:19:49 Q: Yeah. And are any of the members of your family being raised as Catholics?

Gordon: Oh—

1:19:54 Q: Everyone. No.

Gordon: My grandchildren are being raised Jewish.

1:19:58 Q: Oh, Jewish. Okay.

Gordon: And my son is a Buddhist.

1:20:02 Q: Right. You said that about— what about—what would you say you're most proud of in your life?

Gordon: That's a very hard question for an Irish Catholic woman to answer.

1:20:19 Q: (Laughs) Yes.

Gordon: I feel like I've worked hard, I feel like I've kept my ideals. I think I've been a good friend. And I think I've had fun. I think I haven't—I haven't been puritanical about pleasure, but I don't think I've done it at other people's expense. But I do think that, you know, the very ideals that I had—I haven't really swerved from them too much. I think I've been serious—maybe too serious but—I think I've tried to keep what is important to me at the center of my life.

1:21:13 Q: And what do you look forward to in the future?

Gordon: More rest.

1:21:20 Q: Less seriousness and more rest.

Gordon: Yes.

1:21:22 Q: And how would that spell out?

Gordon: I just—you know, I wish I didn't always feel like I had a gun to my head—

1:21:29 Q: —to keep writing you mean—

Gordon: Writing is fine, but I'm looking forward to not having to be anywhere at any given time.

1:21:39 Q: Ah, okay.

Gordon: That to me is the greatest luxury—and not feeling that—I mean, I love my students, but that will—that will be behind me. And I have more time to play, to travel to sleep—really looking forward to sleeping some more.

1:22:00 Q: No more up at five-thirty in the morning? (Laughs)

Gordon: Yeah.

1:22:02 Q: Interesting. Are you actually going to retire at some point from teaching?

Gordon: Yes. I've told them that I'm leaving when I'm seventy.

1:22:10 Q: Oh, so you've got some time.

Gordon: Five years, yeah. Four more years after his.

(Phone rings)

1:22:21 Q: Okay, so you were just saying you're looking forward to more rest. And you're thinking at seventy you'll—you'll leave Barnard.

Gordon: Yes.

1:22:31 Q: Do you still have students who—that inspire you?

Gordon: Absolutely, absolutely.

1:22:42 Q: Yeah? Talk a little more about than that. What are the qualities you're seeing in this generation that are very positive? You've already mentioned some differences of opinion on feminism, yeah?

Gordon: They're the same qualities that were wonderful always: just a love of learning, a

love of literature, curiosity, willing to try things, devotion to the highest ideals. I think that they are in some ways less constrained than we are. They certainly have more cultural imagination than we did. The world—you know, they're citizens of the world in a way that we weren't. It's terrible—the whole economic world is a nightmare for them though and it just breaks my heart because I think that they are as wonderful—but the world is much harder for them. But I have, you know, last year I taught a course called “American Writers and Their Foreign Counterparts.” I had them reading Proust and I told them to keep a journal—it was called The Difficulty Journal—and I told them every time they found themselves rebelling against the text, not liking it, I told them—I wanted them to stop and examine what they did and then what they did to get through it. And I had a class of almost a hundred and I had forty or fifty excited about Proust.

1:24:12 Q: That's quite an accomplishment.

Gordon: And one of the things that I really like, that I'm glad to do—is I can introduce them particularly to women writers, that are not taught—Katherine Anne Porter, Jean Stafford, Eudora Welty, Willa Cather even. You know, nobody teaches Katherine Anne Porter anymore.

1:24:33 Q: My goodness! She's so good.

Gordon: Yeah. I'll get these kids saying, “Katherine Anne Porter—I love her.” And, “I'm going to read more of Willa Cather.” That's thrilling. And I feel like I can do that because,

you know, it's not like bean counting; it's that there're these wonderful voices that they don't have access to. When I can do that, and I get somebody saying, "*Pale Horse Pale Rider* is the best thing I've ever read in my life!"—that's thrilling.

1:25:06 Q: That's real discovery.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:25:08 Q: Let's see, Nadeem Aslam? Was he in the department for a while or was he a guest? He's a Pakistani writer? I heard somebody—

Gordon: No. We have Hisham Mitar.

1:25:10 Q: Oh, you have Hisham Mitar, the Tunisian.

Gordon: He's Libyan, actually.

1:25:23 Q: He's Libyan, actually. Okay. Yeah, you're right, you're right. Different person—totally different writing.

Gordon: Yeah.

1:25:35 Q: You get a lot of—it seems like the department brings in a number of guest writers

from all over the world.

Gordon: Yeah. We like to do that.

1:25:42 Q: Now, are you part of that decision, do you help select people?

Gordon: Yeah.

1:25:48 Q: Oh, okay. So who's up—who's in the pipeline now? Anybody in particular?

Gordon: Well, I can't tell because if they say no, then we'll be embarrassed.

1:25:50 Q: Oh, of course, right, right, right. No, that's a foolish question. Sure, sure. Okay.

Well, good, let's see, are there any parts of your life that we haven't covered that you feel are really reflective of you that you want to see included?

Gordon: I don't think so. Unh-huh. Nothing.

1:26:08 Q: All right. Okay. What about—what advice would you have given to yourself entering Barnard and leaving it?

Gordon: I think everything happened just right. If I had known how hard it was going to be I probably would have been scared, but I was too dumb to be scared. No, it was—"the"

transformative event of my life was coming to Barnard. And I feel an enormous debt to it which I think I'll never be able to repay.

1:26:48 Q: Oh, I think you have. I think you have.

Gordon: I wouldn't have done anything differently. I wish they had given me more money so I wouldn't have had to work so hard, but that I guess wasn't their fault.

1:26:09 Q: No.

Gordon: But, you know, I got such—I think we got extraordinary attention.

1:27:12 Q: Yeah.

Gordon: And that's the greatest gift.

1:27:16 Q: Yeah. Absolutely. Okay, any advice that you would give to this generation? I mean, as a professor and somebody who deals with young women weekly?

Gordon: What I would say is make sure that they support each other, what really lasts through your life, I think, are your women friends, and just to keep reminding each other that you're there and that you're not alone. Don't isolate yourself.

1:27:49 Q: You know, I've had a number of people I've interviewed from our class who said that it would be a whole other interview if I asked them only about their women friends. Is there anything you would want to say about that? People you've kept up with, the class—

Gordon: Well, yeah, Maureen is still my best friend. I haven't actually kept up with—

1:28:05 Q: Maureen and I—I've been trying to catch her—I was in Boston last week and I missed her, so we're still working at it.

Gordon: I haven't actually, bizarrely, kept up with a lot of Barnard people.

1:28:15 Q: Well, it doesn't have to be Barnard people. It can be anybody.

Gordon: My women friends are absolutely a constant in my life.

1:28:21 Q: Yeah. Now, are these also writers or—?

Gordon: Some and some not. Yeah, I have friends who are writers, painters, social workers, nuns, gardeners—many different kinds.

1:26:41 Q: Right, right. You spoke about the—sort of the street life as being very exciting to you. What are some of the other cultural things that you try to keep up with, with your very busy schedule? [Unclear]

Gordon: Museums are very important to me. Just to be able to go to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] or the Frick [Collection] any time I want to is a real sustenance and a joy to me; the music, which I don't get to do enough; you know, to be able to see movies from all over the world is great. So it's always a—there's always a well of nourishment, sometimes too much. That's very important to me.

1:29:24 Q: Okay, and as someone who has such a mastery of language and of images, what are some—could you maybe pick three pictures that you would maybe leave us with, leave me with, leave the students here with—of places or scenes that you— that are just really embedded in your mind from different periods of your life even? It's kind of hard to put you on the spot but, you know, if something comes to mind—

Gordon: As a little girl, I was taken to a convent and I saw a nun who happened to belong to an order that had a habit that was sort of sky blue and I saw her kneeling by herself in a chapel all by herself in a pool of light, and I thought, That's it, that's it. I think when I got here and I stand from that day to this, I stand on top of the hill at 116th and Broadway and look down and see the river—that is very, very delightful to me. Just walking on Fifth Avenue is delightful to me. There are times in—there are places in Rome—the fountains of Rome give me endless pleasure. I have a house in Rhode Island now, so just walking by the ocean—

1:31:06 Q: Where's the house in—Rhode Island?

Gordon: Rhode Island.

1:31:10 Q: Oh, in Newport or—?

Gordon: No, in the working class part of Rhode Island, the other—. So walking near the ocean particularly at twilight—are great joys to me. And of course, you know, when I first gave birth to my babies, holding these new creatures in my arms—those are the great moments that surprise and delight—the exhausted delight of that. Those were really great.

1:31:42 Q: Great, well, this has been delightful. I've learned so much and I appreciate your taking the time to do this. So thank you!

Gordon: Oh, it was wonderful for me.

[End of Interview]

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