

Emmett Till Transcript

[Opening Music]

Susan Neville: Hello, and welcome to Naptown. I'm your host, Susan Neville, and our guest for this initial series of interviews is writer Dan Wakefield. Mr. Wakefield is the author of nine non-fiction books, two memoirs, five novels, including the best-selling *Going All the Way*.

Bill Moyers called Dan's memoir, *Returning, A Spiritual Journey*, "One of the most important memoirs of the spirit I've ever read." In his book, *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem*, James Baldwin wrote, "Dan Wakefield is a remarkable combination of humility and tough mindedness, it makes these streets and these struggling people come alive."

Over the next few episodes, we'll be talking to Mr. Wakefield about his life, including his deep friendships with writers such as Baldwin, Anne Sexton, Joan Didion, and Kurt Vonnegut, and his interviews as a staff writer for the Nation, the Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times, and other newspapers and magazines, with such luminaries as Bobby Kennedy, C. Wright Mills, Dorothy Day, Adam Clayton Powell, Joan Baez, and Golda Meir, some of whom became good friends.

Again, I'm your host, Susan Neville, welcome Mr. Wakefield back to Naptown.

[Transitional Music]

Susan Neville: Welcome back to Dan Wakefield, and today we're going to be asking Dan about his experience as a young journalist and, particularly, how he ended up covering the Emmett Till trial.

Dan Wakefield: I graduated from Columbia College, which is the undergraduate part of Columbia University in February 1955. The reason I graduated in February, I had to stay out the fall semester of what would've been my senior year because I had been in an automobile wreck and had an amazing survival. It turned out that I had a broken and dislocated fifth cervical vertebrae, which is really called a broken neck, and so I was in traction in the hospital for three months. Then, I was in a body cast that came up over my head and went down to my waist and had a hole cut out for my face.

And I was in that for three months and then I went back to Columbia with a neck brace. And so when I graduated in 1955 in February, you know, if you don't graduate in June, it's sort of hard to grasp that you're really graduated [giggle].

And the fact was when I finished my last course, which was my required science course in geology in which we made a field trip to the Palisades, that was very exciting, I had to tell myself, "Well, now you're out of college." And then the next thought was, "Now, I've got to earn a living."

That was sort of the unstated premise of the 1950s that your parents, if they could, would send you to college, pay for that, and then when you graduated, it was up to you, so I gathered my clippings from when I had worked summers during college at the sports desk of the Indianapolis Star, and as a general assignment reporter for the Grand Rapids Press in Michigan. And I took these clippings, and I went to every newspaper in New York, and at that time, I think there were seven or eight newspapers plus three different wire services, and I could not get beyond the outer secretary in any of those places. I remember all of them seemed to have beehive hairdos [laughter]. And it was very daunting. And I thought, "Oh my god, what am I going to do." So –

Susan Neville: Can I interrupt you for a second?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Did you ever think then of coming back to Indianapolis [multiple speakers] to work again for The Star, go to Grand Rapids?

Dan Wakefield: That never entered my mind.

Susan Neville: So the idea was that if you were a writer at that time, you'd be in New York?

Dan Wakefield: Exactly. I would be not only in New York, I would be in the Village. So in desperation, I called up Dorothy Peterson [assumed spelling] who was Shortridge history teacher and friend. And I think back now it's kind of odd that I didn't call Gene Grub [assumed spelling] who was the faculty advisor of the Shortridge Daily Echo and who had got me my first job as the high school sports correspondent for The Star and News.

But somehow, I guess Ms. Peterson seemed more worldly. And also I had had dinner with her and my parents a year or so before, and, anyway, that's who came to mind.

So I called her up, and there she is in Indianapolis, I said, "Dorothy, I've been to all these papers in New York, I can't get even an interview, what do I do?" She said, "Well, I went to DePaul with a man who is the publisher of a newspaper there called The Wall Street Journal. His name is Barney Kilgore," and he's quite a phenomenon in publishing.

He became publisher of the Journal when he was only 40, and in those days, that was considered very young. So next thing I knew, Dorothy called up and said I had an appointment to see Barney Kilgore.

So I go up to The Wall Street Journal office, and instead of being stopped by the outer secretary, I'm led into the inner sanctum, which is a long, impressive, high-ceilinged room with a desk at the end where Barney Kilgore sat. And on the desk was a Dow Jones ticker tape. And I remember the rug was very plush, very deep as I walked to the chair opposite the desk.

And Kilgore was known for dressing, I would say, erratically. He put on this whole pose of trying to be like a hick from Indiana. He also had an uncomfortable kind of tic. He had to keep moving his head, sort of jerking it back and forth every once in a while, and he had on an unmatching sports coat and shirt and unmatching I think it was a hand-painted tie, and he certainly looked the part of your Hoosier— what you would imagine as the Hoosier hick.

Susan Neville: I've always thought that Vonnegut science fiction writer Kilgore Trout appears in so many of his books, he got the name from Barney Kilgore.

Dan Wakefield: Probably because Kilgore was a famous guy in publishing, and I guess in Indiana. But he was very nice, and he saw that I was clutching this 9 by 12 manilla envelope which had my clippings of things I had written for The Star and The Press. And he said, "What do you have there?" I said, "Well, these are stories I wrote in the Indianapolis Star and the Grand Rapids Press." He said, "Could I look at them?" And I said, "Sure."

Nobody else had even wanted to see them. So I gave him the folder with my stories, and I had my first byline was given to me by Bob Collins [assumed

spelling] in The Indianapolis Star. It was for covering the championship game of the Industrial Baseball League in Indianapolis in which the Allison Jets played the Link-Belt Warriors. And I remember I brought the story into Collins, and before reading it, he took a big, black pencil and wrote my name, by Dan Wakefield across the top.

Susan Neville: That's great.

Dan Wakefield: That was a great thrill. And in The Grand Rapids Press, I had written some pretty good feature stories. In fact, one of the stories I wrote in The Grand Rapids Press made a great impression on the rest of the reporters because it was the first anyone could remember that the managing editor, the very dapper M. M. Kesterson came out of his office, and came to my desk to shake hands and to congratulate me for a lead I had written for a story.

And the story was about a woman who had had a rosebush that somehow if you planted the seeds, I don't remember how it happened, but the rose, it produced other rosebushes. So my lead, the first sentence to the story, was, "A rosebush is a rosebush is a rosebush in the garden of Mrs. So and so of So and so Street." And Kesterson said, "You were the first person to ever get Gertrude's sign into The Grand Rapids Press."

Susan Neville: That's great.

Dan Wakefield: So that was my first great journalistic accomplishment. Anyways, so but The Grand Rapids Press did not have bylines. Nobody had a byline.

So Kilgore read some of these stories, and he looked up, and he said, "Did you write these?" And I said, "Yes, I did." He said, "Well, you're not quite ready for The Wall Street Journal, but it just so happens I just bought my hometown paper in Princeton, New Jersey. It's a weekly paper, and the man running it is really a photographer, so we need a reporter. Would you like to be the reporter?" And I said, "Yes, I would because nobody else had ever asked me [laughter] to be anything."

So I moved to Princeton, got a room in a rooming house on Mercer Street where every day out the window I can see Albert Einstein going to work. That was a nice throw. And so while I was at The Press, one of the high points was I

got to write the obituary of Albert Einstein, who happened to die when I was a reporter at The Princeton Packet.

But the most important thing to me was I got to review a book by Murray Kempton, who had just so happened to live in Princeton, New Jersey, and this was his first book. So I thought, "Oh, boy. This will be great because he was my hero." Every day I read The New York Post just so I could read his column. He was only in three days a week, but I wanted to never miss his column. And he was really great— he later won the Pulitzer Prize and should have.

Susan Neville: Can you just say a little bit about who Murray Kempton is, and what about his writing impacted you?

Dan Wakefield: Well, his writing was very elaborate and complex. He was very proud of the fact that someone sued him for libel, and there was a jury trial, and when the jury gave its decision, they didn't find him guilty because they couldn't understand the column [laughter].

Susan Neville: That's great.

Dan Wakefield: So anyway, he was a great friend of William Buckley, and they should have been sworn enemies. Buckley, the hero of the right-wing, had just started and was editor of The National Review, which was to be the great conservative magazine of its time. And Buckley later became a columnist, but at the time I knew him, and I wrote about him for Esquire, he was really thought of as a young, far out, wild man. He had written a book called, God and Man at Yale, but at any rate, he described Kempton as the pinup boy of the bohemian left. And they kidded each other, and they ridiculed each other's writing style, but they were really great friends and remained so for the rest of their lives.

Susan Neville: So you wrote a review of Kempton's first book?

Dan Wakefield: So I wrote a review— Kempton's first book was called Part of Our Time: Some Monuments and Ruins of the 1930s. And I loved the book. It was about the people of that time, of the '30s. There was a chapter on Alger Hiss and Whittaker Chambers, a chapter on The Hollywood Ten. It was about the left-wing movements during the 1930s in Kempton's very, I thought, eloquent style.

To give you an example of Kempton's style, just remember one column he wrote, he covered a lot of stories in the South in the Civil Rights Era, and he wrote about a woman who had come to some Southern capitol to sue for her rights. I can't remember whether it's to vote or to get her child into school, and she had lost the case. And Murray Kempton went to interview her, and she wouldn't talk to him. And now in his column, he described the case, he described the woman, and the last sentence was, "So hard, so hard, so terribly hard to have come so far and to have lost and to not be able to tell the visiting stranger who you are and why you came here."

Susan Neville: Beautiful.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. Yeah. He was something.

And anyway, so I wrote this extensive review. It took up a whole page. And I remember the editor of the paper who was the— had been just the photographer and editor, and he didn't know anything about Kempton or didn't care about this book, and he saw I was really taking great pains with it and looking over the proofs and the copy, and I'll never forget, he stopped by my desk, and he says, "What's so all-fired important about that review?" And I remember I had to say, and my voice was very good, I said, "Well, nothing really, sir." But I knew it was everything.

And the review came out, and the next morning, Mrs. Murgatroyd [phonetic], who was the owner of the rooming house where I lived, called me and said, "There's a phone call for you." And there was only one telephone for the roomers, the people who roomed there, and I went to get it, and it was Kempton.

And he said, "Hey, listen, you really dug the book in your review. You should come over sometime and have a beer." And I said, "How about this afternoon?" And he said, "OK." And I went over and became a long friendship.

And when I saw that summer these headlines about the Emmett Till murder trial, Emmett Till was a 14-year-old black boy who had gone to Mississippi to visit his grandfather. And he — being from Chicago didn't know all the rules of behavior in the Deep South, and in Sumner, Mississippi, he went with some other young black boys to a grocery in a nearby town called Money, Mississippi. And there was a young attractive woman behind the counter, it

was the only salesperson there, and Emmett Till had sort of boasted that he was quite the young man with women, and the other boys said, "Oh, you'd be afraid to say anything to her." And supposedly, he either made a wolf whistle to her, or he said something suggestive like, "Hi, honey" or something, and she later complained to her husband about this.

And her husband and his cousin, these two white men, went to the house of Emmett Till's grandfather, and they said, "We want the boy from Chicago." And the grandfather woke up Emmett Till and told him he had to get up and get dressed. The two men, by the way, had come into his house with a flashlight, and the boy had to go with them. I mean, this was Mississippi in 1955. And white men had the authority of police or soldiers or troopers or whatever.

And they took Emmett Till with them, and the next time he was seen, he was found at the bottom of the Tallahatchie River with a 50-pound cotton gin around his neck. And it was later learned that he was not only murdered, he was tortured, and his mother insisted that he have an open casket for the funeral. She said, "I want them to see— I want people to see what they did to my boy." And people did see.

So I really wanted to go to this trial. I wanted to cover it. I wanted to write about it. I knew that it was going to be part of American history. It was the first sort of racial story after the Supreme Court decision saying that segregation was unlawful in the public schools. That decision had come down in 1954, so this was a year later. And it seemed like the whole country was holding its breath waiting to see what was going to happen, you know, even was there going to be another Civil War or something. And this was the first thing that happened. And so the trial was really a big deal.

And I didn't know what I could do to get there. I mean, as I said, my only experience was The Star and The Grand Rapids Press and now The Princeton Weekly Packet, New Jersey's oldest weekly, which was hardly credentials for getting to cover a major story for a national magazine. But in desperation, I called up Kempton, and I said, "Is there any way I could get there? Is there anyone who would let me write about this?"

And Kempton said, "Well, The Nation Magazine asked me to write about it, but I'm writing about it for The New York Post, and I don't like that practice of

people writing the same story for two different places, so I'll tell The Nation they should send you." And I thought, "Well, that's a fat chance." But a day or so later, he called me up and said, "Go to The Nation office and ask for the managing editor, and he'll give you your fee and instructions."

Well, my fee for writing this story for The Nation and going to Sumner, Mississippi, was a roundtrip bus ticket from New York City to Sumner, Mississippi, and that thing folded out like an accordion, and it stopped in every little burg along the way. It took two days and three nights. Actually, it didn't really go into Sumner. It left you off about two miles outside of the city limits. And there was this sign that said, "Sumner, Mississippi, A Good Place to Raise a Boy." Rather ironic.

Susan Neville: So you knew – you were right when you earlier said that the piece you wrote about Murray Kempton's book was everything.

Dan Wakefield: Yes.

Susan Neville: You didn't know how right you are. And I wanted to say too that it's impressive that still after all these years of – from having known him and read his work that you could still give that quote, which I'm sure applies in some ways to your experience of the Till trial as well from memory which you have gone so far.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. To come so far and have lost. I'd later like to say something about that book I reviewed.

But at the Till trial, it was, of course, great for me that Kempton was there. He was sort of like my guide, but in fact, I did not ask advice for the most foolish thing I did.

I heard that two sheriff's deputies were going to drive to the nearby town of Itta Bena because there was an alleged witness to the murder who was being held in prison in Itta Bena. So I said to the deputies, "Oh, hi, I'm Dan Wakefield from The Nation Magazine in New York, could I ride along with you?" And one looked at the other and said, "Sure, boy." So I got in the car, and we drove about five miles out of town on this dusty road, and they stopped the car, said, "This is where you get out, boy."

So I got out and walked back to Sumner. And when I walked back, I saw for the first time as I was coming into the outskirts of the town, to the left of the road was where the black people lived, and it was, you know, tar paper shacks, and dark cobbles really, like lean to's almost.

And I got back, by the way, I stayed in Sumner in the one rooming house. I was big those days in rooming houses because that was the cheapest way to do. And Kempton, the next day, when I told him what happened, he said, "You're lucky that they just let you out."

Later in the, what was called the Freedom Summer, of course, three Civil Rights workers were killed for being there. Every outsider was thought of as an outside agitator. And the people in the town were very unhappy about all these reporters and, you know, what's the big fuss about because really a black boy being killed in Mississippi was not that unusual a story as they made clear, and say, "Oh, what's all the fuss about?"

There was a large contingent of people gathered around the courthouse every day. It was sort of like a circus or something. Some people were selling lemonade, and some people were renting lawn chairs. And the courthouse itself was packed and segregated. Black people had to sit up— there was a kind of balcony. And the two white men, Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam sat in the front row. They often smoked cigars, yawned, looked very calm, like they were the kings or something.

Susan Neville: I read the town itself had jars in all the stores and businesses for people to donate to the costs of the trial for the two men who had beaten and killed Emmett Till.

Dan Wakefield: Yes. Yeah. They were sort of heroes to the town. And I must say, I believe it was the Attorney General was the prosecutor, and he really presented an excellent case against the murderers, and yet everyone knew that they were going to go free. And in the summation to the jury, the defense — one of the defense attorneys, I think he was the last one to speak, said to the jury, "I'm confident that every one of you Anglo-Saxon men in this jury will set these men free." And, of course, they did.

Susan Neville: How long did the trial last?

Dan Wakefield: It was just a little bit over an hour.

Susan Neville: Oh!

Dan Wakefield: And I was told that the reason it took that long is that the jury couldn't figure out how to fill out the form to say that they weren't guilty.

Susan Neville: That there was no deliberation.

Dan Wakefield: So they had to—not really—they had to go ask the judge how to fill out the form. And, of course, later when I met James Baldwin, and he asked me about the Till trial, and he said, "Well, what'd the people in the town think about the verdict?" I said, "Oh, Jimmy, that was the amazing thing. They all thought it was great that the men were set free," and he said, "You mean the white people in the town." And I realized he was teaching me to see more than I had been taught to see.

Susan Neville: One of the amazing things is that the woman who originally accused Emmett Till wasn't allowed to — her testimony was declared inadmissible, and in her testimony, she said something about that he had grabbed her and whispered obscenities. And years later she said that she'd been lying, and of course the two men years later admitted to having killed Emmett Till.

Dan Wakefield: They not only admitted it, they sold the story of their admitting it to Look Magazine and were paid something. It wasn't any huge thing, but they were paid something for it, but everyone knew all along that they had done it, and there were others involved who never did come to trial.

Susan Neville: Can you tell a little bit about the writing of the piece itself?

Dan Wakefield: Well, I was going to stay in the rooming house and write it, and Kempton says, "The trial started on Monday and was over Friday afternoon." By the way, there were reporters there from every major paper in America, The New York Times, The Detroit Free Press, and anything you could think of, and I think there were some from European papers. But when the trial was over, and I told Murray I was going to write it in the rooming house, and he said, "No, you've got to get out of here. It's not going to be safe to stay here overnight."

So he suggested I go into Jackson, Mississippi, where the other reporters were staying in motels. So I upgraded from the rooming house and got a motel room.

And so I got there Friday night, and I wrote all Friday night, Saturday, Saturday night. I don't know, I must've slept a couple hours, but I mainly just wrote, and I had to — the terminology, I had to file the story on Sunday morning so that it would be in The Nation on Monday, and the way you — in those days, this is of course long before anybody had ever thought of a computer, and the way you filed your story, you typed it up, and then you took it to the Western Union office, and they sent it to the magazine.

So since I knew that it would come out on Monday and the trial would be over, and everybody knew the verdict, I had to write like retrospectively. But the first sentence I still feel is the best sentence I ever wrote, which is kind of either good or depressing[laughter] no matter whichever way you look at it, but the sentence was, "The crowds are gone, and this Delta town is back to its silent solid life that is based on cotton and the proposition that a whole race of men was created to pick it."

Susan Neville: As you read that, and it's a great lead, I am kind of watching you speak, and you're very conscious of the rhythms almost like you're reading poetry. That was — and it is poetry and was true of the Murray Kempton quote as well. But go on.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, well, I didn't know that was going to lead to so much else. It led to me covering Civil Rights stories for almost the next decade for The Nation— well, really from 1955 to 1963. That's when I got a Nieman Fellowship in journalism and went to Harvard for a year.

Susan Neville: And in '55, as I'm recalling —

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: — that's also the year you graduated from college, so it was—

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, well, that was that February, yeah.

Susan Neville: So you were 23-years-old when you were sent to write this article for The Nation.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. Right, right.

Susan Neville: Which was astonishing.

Dan Wakefield: And when I got back from the trial, I didn't immediately start writing Civil Rights. There was kind of hiatus before other things started erupting in terms of the South and the racial situation, but the first thing I wrote when I got back, well, first of all, everybody on The Nation was very relieved and pleased that I had written this.

And they had a new publisher, George Kirstein, and I really hit it off with him, and I'll talk about him again in a minute, but he was the brother of Lincoln Kirstein who was the famous one of the family who started The New York City Ballet and was very big in the arts world, and George was more the businessman of the family and so didn't get the acclaim. But I really respected him. And I want to say more about him.

But when I got back, I knew I wanted to write more, and I wondered what I could write about. There I was in New York, and my good friend from Columbia, Sam Astrachan, who was a writer, in fact, he had published his first novel when he was a senior at Columbia, and it was published by Farrar Straus, one of the great publishing houses. It was called *An End to Dying*. And I remember his first sentence. "There is an end to dying and a fullness in death." Sam was a great guy.

And he was the editor of the literary magazine when I was at Columbia, and I remember I had sent a short story into a contest of the literary magazine, and it had not won. It would've come in second, but the winning story was so long that it took up the whole issue [laughter].

So Sam took me for a beer and apologized that my story couldn't have run, and we had a good time talking. And I remember afterwards, we were walking down Broadway, I said something to him, I don't know what it was, but it was something kind of self-deprecating. And he put his hand on my back like a comrade, and he said, "Wakefield, you're a Jew." And I thought, "Oh my god,

this is it. I've graduated [laughter]." That was a great compliment— a great thing.

And, in fact, Sam and I and another guy in our class named Ivan Gold was a great writer who wrote a wonderful book called Nickel Miseries. One of my classmates was Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote When Bad Things Happen to Good People. And I didn't know him at Columbia. It turned out that he wrote for the Columbia Jester, the humor magazine, and I wrote for the Columbia Daily Spectator, the newspaper, and so it was two different sorts of groups who many of whom didn't know each other.

But he gave a great talk at the 35th reunion of Columbia. And he said, "In our day, Columbia was made up of two kinds of men, young, Jewish intellectuals from Brooklyn and the Bronx who wanted to become mainstream Americans, and high school hotshots from the Midwest who wanted to become New York Jewish intellectuals, and everybody got their wish."

Susan Neville: That's great. And sometime I'd also like to talk to you about all the people you knew at Columbia and your undergraduate education that led you to where you are and what you've done in your life.

Dan Wakefield: Anyway, Sam took me around New York. He was from the Bronx, and he knew Manhattan. He knew all the things I didn't know about New York, and he knew I was looking for stories to write.

So he took me to the Catholic Worker House in the Bowery, and this was—well, they called them mission houses in the Bowery for— that's where the winos gathered and the homeless people. And in those days, they weren't called homeless. They were called winos and hobos.

And Sam introduced me to— well, the Catholic Worker was started by Dorothy Day, who was a great figure in the 1950s and onward. She was a great figure in Civil Rights and all progressive politics. She was a Catholic who was always getting in trouble politically with the Bishop of New York. An outspoken, unafraid woman. She had started a penny newspaper. It cost a penny, called The Catholic Worker.

And one of the great things about the Catholic Worker house, it was different from all the other mission houses in the Bowery because the other ones, they

didn't call themselves a mission house. They called themselves a hospitality house. And in all the mission houses, in order to get fed, you had to proclaim that you had become a Christian and were saved by Jesus. At the Catholic Worker House to get fed, all you had to do was be hungry.

And this sort of right-hand man of Dorothy at the house was a man named Ammon Hennacy, and somehow Sam Astrachan knew him and introduced me, and Ammon Hennacy had written a book called *Memoirs of a Catholic Anarchist*. And he was a great character and very jolly guy.

And Dorothy Day I met who was very stern in her visage. She had grey hair. She looked to me like a character Dostoevsky, and I admired her, but she was not somebody you buddy up to [laughter].

And so I wrote my second article for *The Nation* was called *Miracle in the Bowery*, and it was about Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. And it was very complimentary. I admired their work. And I was really shocked and despondent when after the article came out, Dorothy Day wouldn't speak to me. So I asked people there what was wrong, and they said, "Well, she didn't like that quote you used about her."

And I had read in a book by Malcolm Cowley called *Exile's Return*, which was about American writers who had gone to Paris in the '20s and come back. And in that book, he said, "The only one in those days who could drink Eugene O'Neill under the table was Dorothy Day."

And I thought that was great and sort of an honorable thing, and she didn't like it. And it wasn't that she was being prudish, it was that in those days, young writers like me were told if you want to be a serious writer, you have to be a serious drinker. And I mean that was literally what was said.

Pete Hamill, a reporter for *The Post*, and later a novelist, wrote a whole book about it called *Those Drinking Days*, but Dorothy didn't want to promote that fable. And by the way, there's a writer psychiatrist in Boston, Robert Coles, who wrote a whole book about Dorothy Day, and the first scene he writes really is a great description of her. He had gone — he was at Columbia Medical School, and he was kind of disillusioned with medical school, and he heard about Dorothy Day. And so he went to the Bowery to see her, and he went to the Catholic Worker, and when he walked in, she was sitting, talking to a

woman who was obviously drunk, but Dorothy Day was paying full attention to this woman and knew that Coles was standing there waiting. But after— it was quite a while before she looked up at him and said, "Which one of us did you want to speak to?" And he said that was—

Susan Neville: That's great.

Dan Wakefield: So the Catholic Worker House was one of the most interesting places in New York at the time. About half the people who lived there were recovering winos, and the other half were young intellectuals who had come from all over America because they had read the Catholic Worker, and they had heard about Dorothy Day and her work, and they wanted to be there, and they wanted to be in New York, and they wanted to be part of what Dorothy Day was doing.

And I met there three young women who had started a daycare center for the children in East Harlem, and meeting them led me to writing my first book, *Island in the City: The World of Spanish Harlem*. But I want to say something about those women, one of them was named Helen Russell, and she was, I think, from the state of Washington, from Seattle, and she was a painter. But she had started out to be a nun in Seattle or wherever it was in Washington, and the Mother Superior recognized that Helen was not like the other novitiates, and she once found Helen listening raptly to Ravel's Bolero, and she suggested that she go to New York and be with Dorothy Day [laughter]. And the others were Eileen Fantino, who was an Italian girl from the Bronx, Mary Anne McCoy, an Irish girl from the Bronx. And the three of them started this daycare center for children in East Harlem. And they would take turns. One would have a job to make the money to pay the rent and buy the food, and the other two would run the daycare center. And that was all inspired by Dorothy Day.

Susan Neville: I'm afraid we're out of time again.

Dan Wakefield: Oh my!

Susan Neville: So— you're such a great storyteller. The next time we'll kind of go on with your Civil Rights writing career and talk a little bit about your work with C. Wright Mills and your time spent in Israel, and that will kind of lead us, I think, into your writing in the '60s and your knowledge of Eve Babitz and Joan Didion and your novels. So thank you very much, Dan.

Dan Wakefield: Could I say one thing that you might –

Susan Neville: Say, yeah, yeah.

Dan Wakefield: I'd love to get in there after I talked about Sam Astrachan, who said to me, "Wakefield, you're a Jew," and I wanted to say that, I think this is important, George Kirstein really became my champion at The Nation. It's funny. I didn't sort of hit it off with the editor, Carey McWilliams, who was a great liberal hero. It was just I guess a personality thing, but I guess, you know, you respond to people who like you, and George seemed to get it about me. And that was a lot of fun.

The poet W.S. Merwin who wrote for The Nation, and he also was a big fan of George Kirstein, and he wrote a really lovely piece about him. And I wrote about George in my book New York in the '50s and always wanted to give him his due. The really key person in my whole life was C. Wright Mills, who I had had. He was a great sociologist. He was very well known in the '50s. He had written a book called White Collar about the American middle class that was a bestseller, and then he wrote a book called The Power Elite, and that phrase then became part of the language about the moneyed upper class, and I got to tell you it's really relevant today.

He has a section called The Higher Immorality about men making much more money than they needed. But Mills was a great character, a professor at Columbia, and he came to school every day riding his motorcycle, and he never wore a suit and tie. He was dressed sort of like a guerrilla warrior, and he had a great sense of humor but could not abide fools gladly. And he had a kind of rivalry with Lionel Trilling the great English professor who I had a great class with and talk about, but Mills, I wanted to get into his, he had a seminar called Liberalism where you read these really heavyweight books and had to report on them and talk about them, and you had to write a precis of all these books, and one of the books was The Rise of the Masses by Ortega, and I remember, I was kind of tired of writing these little precis', so I decided to do something more offbeat, and I had just read and loved a Hemingway story called A Clean, Well-lighted Place.

And somehow I can't— I wouldn't be able to tell you now, but I had this theory that everything Ortega had said in this book, Hemingway had really said in that

short story, so I called my report Ortega's Banal Story, and, in fact, because there was a Hemingway story called Banal Story.

So anyway, after I wrote that, Mills, after class, said, "Who's Wakefield?" I said, "Me." And I thought, "Oh my god. He's going to be mad." He called me into his office, and he said, "Why did you write this?" I said, "Well, I was just kind of tired of the other stuff. And he says, "Oh, thank god. I wish you'd write these all the time [laughter]. I'm so bored reading these damn student reports. Who are these guys?"

So then he said, "What are you going to do? You want to be a sociologist?" I said, "No, I want to be a writer." He said, "Well, I have a friend who lives near me, a good friend named Harvey Swados, who is a writer." I said, "Oh, yeah. He has a novel coming out called Out Went the Candle." Mills said, "How did you know that?" I said, "Well, I read a story of his in New World Writing," which was a great publication at the time. It came— sort of a mass-market paperback of great writing. And Mills said, "Wow, that's amazing! Listen, you should come out and meet Harvey. We'll have dinner." And I thought, "My god." And he lived in Valley Cottage, New York, about an hour away. Mills said, you know, "Take the bus. I'll pick you up at the bus, and we'll have dinner with Harvey and his wife."

And my god, this was such an amazing thing. It was just one of the great nights of my life. I mean Harvey Swados was a great guy. He became a great friend, and his wife, Betty, became a great friend, and Mills' wife, Ruth, who was wonderful. And it turns out that Mills whole hobby was motorcycles, and he had all this motorcycle gear, and Harvey was kidding him about having all this crazy gear he didn't need, and Mills had just gotten in the mail some motorcycle helmet, and he put it on and was butting his head against the wall to show how great the helmet was. His wife was telling him to stop, and it was great hilarity, and everybody was drinking a lot of wine and bourbon. It was just one of those great nights.

And Mills really became a great friend. He was an amazing guy. And I remember once— he had a lot of personal— I mean his wife had to be in a mental hospital for a while, his wife, Ruth, who I knew, and he was living by himself for a while near Columbia in an apartment.

And he invited me up to lunch, and he had made lunch, and he had baked a loaf of bread. I said, "My god," I said, "you baked this bread?" He says, "My god, man, you mean you don't bake your own bread?" Well, of course, he knew very well.

And also, he had advised me when I was doing that research for him in '55, he said, "Listen," he said, "I can tell you're not eating right." I was very thin in those days. And he said, "Here's what you got to do." He said, "I want you to get seven mason jars, and I want you to make a big pot of stew, and you've got to have a lot of vegetables in it and a lot of good lean beef, and then after you make this stew, you fill seven mason jars with the stew, and every day you have one of those mason jars of stew, and that's what you should do." So [laughter] —

Susan Neville: So did you do it?

Dan Wakefield: No. I would instead go to the Whitehorse and have a meatloaf sandwich. And I remember just before I went to Israel was when Mills was going to Europe— was going to be in Sweden on a lectureship or Denmark I think it was, and he was very proud of the fact that I was going to Israel and people used to come into the office when I was there, into Mills' office, and he'd say, "This country is leaving for Europe."

Susan Neville: Can you just say a little bit about how you got the gig in Israel? Or did you just decide to go?

Dan Wakefield: Well, here's how it happened. Murray Kempton had said something about people who never had anything happen to them. And I thought, gee, I mean I was only 23 or 24, but I thought, "God, not much has happened to me, so I should do something. You know, I should really get out there." And I had also read something Hemingway had said, "If you want to be a real writer, you have to be shot at." So I thought—

Susan Neville: And you believed him?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. And I thought, "Well, where could I go where I might be shot at." And at that time, the Middle East and Israel was the prime— now all you have to do is walk down the street, but in those days, that seemed to be the big thing. The

new— Israel was only eight-years-old, and everything was uneasy with the Arab countries surrounding it.

And so I read a book by Arthur Kessler, and Kessler was a great writer of that era. He wrote a huge bestseller called *Darkness at Noon* about a man jailed by the Communists. And Edward G. Robertson played the part. And, in fact, I saw that play in Indianapolis one summer.

Anyway, Kessler had also written an autobiography called *Arrow in the Blue*, and he wrote about when he was a young journalist I think in Poland where he grew up, someplace in Eastern Europe, and he wanted to go what was then Palestine, which, of course, became Israel, but Kessler went to Palestine. He didn't have much money, but he found he could live there by going from one kibbutz to another because a rule on a kibbutz was if somebody came, you had to put them up for three days without question and feed them, and after that, they had to work at whatever job you had for them.

And so Kessler then, he would go to a kibbutz and then write about it and get paid, for the writing, send it back to papers in Europe, and I thought, "My god, that's what I could do." And that's what I did.

Susan Neville: Thanks again to Mr. Wakefield and thank you to our listeners for listening. Naptown is taped at Butler University's Irwin Library with the help of Megan Rutledge-Grady. Funding for Naptown was provided by the Heritage Fund, National Endowment for the Humanities, and Indiana Humanities.

This is a Dominique Weldon, Rory Dashmer Production. Again, this is your host, Susan Neville. See you next time in Naptown.

[Closing Music]