

Columbia Years 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]

Dan Wakefield: We were talking about some of my great professors at Columbia and I think I just started talking about Lionel Trilling. Lionel Trilling, he was considered the literary critic of the country, I mean, everybody knew of him, he had a book of essays, called *The Liberal Education*, with really wonderful accessible essays.

I remember in particular one on the Masters and Johnson work that was really fabulous and he also had written a novel that got a great deal of attention, called *The Middle of the Journey*, and it was based on the Whittaker Chambers and Alger Hiss case.

Chambers had actually been a student of Lionel Trilling at Columbia, so he knew him very well. Chambers, in real life, wrote a book called *Witness*, where

he had claimed before the Un-American Activities Committee investigating communism in America and he claimed that Alger Hiss had been a fellow communist with him in the 1930s. And Hiss, to his dying day, denied that. And nobody has ever totally affirmed either point of view and it continued to be debated.

But one thing telling about this era in New York, this was an era of... Everything was about Freudian analysis, Freudian interpretation, and there was a rumor among the students, that Lionel Trilling had, for a long time, wanted to write a novel but was blocked or something and he couldn't write the novel. And the rumor was that he then underwent Freudian analysis, and that enabled him to write the novel, *The Middle of the Journey*. But it didn't enable him to write any other novels.

You know, I just finished reading Kate Jamison's biography of Robert Lowell.

Susan Neville: Yeah.

Dan Wakefield: And I don't know, it just strikes me that one of the things he said is that he, I mean, he went through decades of Freudian analysis and then finally started taking Lithium, and he said it had been like, you know, decades of just wasted talk.

Well, you know, I had a chapter in my book, my memoir called *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*, and it was about my experience with Freudian analysis, which was very destructive and I feel like I was lucky to get out of it alive, frankly.

Susan Neville: I know this is an aside, but can you explain a little bit why? I remember mostly from the chapter, just being fascinated by the way you describe New York, the skies at night being filled with dreams, you know, waiting to be taken in to someone to interpret.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, especially over the Upper East Side, where all the analysts were. But, Freudian analysis, in New York at that time, that was its hay day and people talked about it all the time.

I remember being at a party and there was a woman who had supposedly been in a successful analysis, who said that, at the end, it was like she had been

swimming in a big body of water and your hand touched the shore and everybody wanted to be the person whose hand touched the shore. But boy, my hand never touched the shore.

When at Columbia, I had seen a psychiatrist who I liked very much and we just talked like human beings, and that was very helpful. And I wanted to continue that, but he said no, you're the perfect candidate for psychoanalysis and he recommended an analyst who I really didn't like and I said to the analyst, "Does it matter that I don't like you?" And he said, "No."

And, finally, after I think about 3 years, I sat up on the couch and said I couldn't keep talking to this guy... I know what happened. I had been in the waiting room and the door, I thought, was opened a crack. And so I went in to his inner sanctum, to his office, and he got very angry and I just thought, and that's it, this guy is such a jerk. So he recommended another guy.

And, so, the next guy I went to was a nicer man, but he was, you know, I was very honest with these guys. I said to the second guy, "You know, you don't seem especially intelligent or perceptive, does that matter?" And of course, whatever you said, they would say yes, go on. And never was there any human interchange and as this was going on, I was drinking more and more,

I was really drinking myself to harm, and that wasn't a part of it, you know? I mean, it was crazy to be able to be drinking like that and think you were undergoing some treatment. I don't think anybody would do that today.

But, I think, Anne Sexton was another victim of this, by the way. I love her poetry, I knew her. I thought she was great and I always felt Sylvia Plath was unfairly overrated compared to Anne. They were contemporaries and I just, I really loved Anne's poem.

And one of her poems, in particular, I remember was called, "You Doctor Martin." And Anne had been in one of the famous mental hospitals. And in the hospital, this doctor, Dr. Martin used to come every day and evidently, she saw him having breakfast first in some kind of cafeteria and then going to see patients. So, she has a poem called, "You, Doctor Martin."

The poem begins: "You, Dr. Martin, go from breakfast to madness."

And I always loved that Anne Sexton's poetry is so seemingly plain. She's like the Orwell of poetry. I mean, there are no fancy words. There's nothing you don't understand.

I remember one of her poems inspired by Thoreau. It's called "Kind Sir: These Woods." And it's about playing a game as a little girl where you turned around and around as fast as you could with your eyes closed, and then you stopped and opened your eyes to try to see where you were, reorient yourself...

And she described that process and then said, "And then what you found was only yourself, caught between the grapes and the thorns."

Anyway, I wish more people would read her poetry now. In fact, this is the kind of thing that drives me nuts: people who write biographies of writers, who don't like the writers. Why would you do that?

I mean, the biography of Vonnegut is that way. It's very negative. And the author only knew Vonnegut in the last few years of his life when Vonnegut was very ill and not in great shape or feeling great. And it's as if that's who Vonnegut was all his life.

Anyway, but I remember that in the introduction to the biography of Anne Sexton, the one that I think was the first one, the writer says that she really didn't much admire Anne's poetry. So why, in the name of God, are you writing the book?

And anyway, I feel like Anne Sexton is very underrated. I think anybody, if you were going to write fiction or journalism or whatever, you would benefit by reading Anne Sexton's poems. And her first book of poetry, which in a way was one of the greatest, is called *To Bedlam and Partway Back*.

And some of the poems that are just stunning. And, then, I think her last one was called, "Live or Die," and the epigraph was: "Live or die but don't poison everything."

And I remember she had a necklace with a medallion that said, in Latin, Don't Let the Bastards Get You."

She had bad reviews but she was very brave. And I remember toward the end of her career, she assembled a rock band that went with her and it was called Anne Sexton and Her Kind.

Susan Neville: Oh, would I have been her kind?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, it was great. It was on college campuses everywhere. I remember I had the privilege of introducing her once at a talk at Harvard. I had dinner with her first with a friend, and the friend was really worried that she was going to drink too much and that I was going to drink too much. And I remember the only thing to drink was the Sangria, and Anne and I just guzzled this Sangria.

And Anne was terribly worried. She didn't think enough people were going to show up. She didn't think that there... You know, it was in too big an auditorium, people wouldn't come. We got there and there were people standing around outside, and she said, "See, there's just that little group of people, they're waiting to go in." Well, it turned out, the whole place was filled to the rafters.

And she was a great reader, too. So...

Susan Neville: You know, what really interests me, and I'm not sure why, the 50s and, in some ways, the early 60s, but in particular... I mean you were talking about Lionel Trilling going through analysis and you going through analysis. So you have these poets who are writing about madness and then you have a fascination with analysis.

I mean, does that have any... Do you know why you lived through it? Was it a post war thing? Was it just a fascination that human beings get now and then with—

Dan Wakefield: Themselves.

Susan Neville: Yeah, with themselves. You think that's what it was?

Dan Wakefield: And it was... Well, May Swenson, another great poet and a great friend of mine, wrote a poem I always loved called, "The Key to Everything."

It starts out: “Is there anything I can do or has everything been done? Or don't you want me to do it? Or what? You're waiting for the right person, the father, or the person whose name you keep mumbling in your sleep. Maybe that's my name really. But when you find it, I'll be gone and I'll be far away.”

Susan Neville: I love that.

Dan Wakefield: And it was like, it was supposed to be the key to everything. It was like, you know, you'd wake up in this great, you know, like a god or something. You would wake up without any of the human errors and false starts and neuroses, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

Luckily, that kind of five day a week analysis is very rarely done now. I heard five or six years ago, that there was a small group in San Francisco doing it, but it was deadly, and I swear, I think I was really lucky to live through it.

Susan Neville: Wow, because it allowed you to not focus on the drinking?

Dan Wakefield: No, because it opened some nightmare stuff in my mind. And one of the images I'll never forget... I was lying on the floor of the analyst and I had picked up a leg of a chair, and I was hitting myself with it. And the analyst, at the time, the hour was about up and he wanted to get me out of there and he said, was there a friend he could call? A friend of mine he could call to come and help me get home?

And I told him to call Robert Phelps, who was a great mentor, a writer and editor. And Robert really hated analysis and sort of ironic that he's the guy, but I knew he would be home. And so I... And Robert came and he looked at me on the floor. He was furious, and he said to the doctor, he pointed to me and he said to the doctor, “You did this!”

And he took me home. And Robert was so furious, he didn't even stay with me, he just took me home and left. He was... You know, anyway, that's enough of that.

Susan Neville: Yeah, we can get back to Lionel Trilling actually because there's, you know, there's something very literary, like literary exegesis to that kind of analysis. So...

Dan Wakefield: Well, I wanted to say about Trilling... I didn't realize this until later, I think, that he was the first Jew who was made a professor in the Columbia English department. I mean, and that was in I think the late 40s. So that time was so repressive and so... I mean, in a way it was the opposite of repressive, but culturally, you know....

This was a time where my good friend, Meg Greenfield, who later became editorial page editor of the Washington Post and a columnist for Newsweek... She went to Smith and had a Fulbright, and she wanted to go to England to study with a great English literary critic named F.R. Leavis. And she got there and was told that women couldn't study with F.R. Leavis.

Susan Neville: You're kidding!

Dan Wakefield: No, the only way women could come to the popular class of Mark Van Doren, this was Barnard students, would be if they got a date with the guy in the class who brought them.

Susan Neville: To class?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: You would bring a date to class? I mean, I'm horrified by the fact that women weren't allowed to take the class, and also horrified by the fact that people used class as an opportunity for dating, but...

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, and well, imagine the level of academic interest in students at Barnard who wanted to go to the trouble to butter up some guy to get to be able to go hear Mark Van Doren give a lecture.

Susan Neville: The guy's a dweeb, but I want to hear Mark Van Doren about Yeats.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, but at any rate, the Trilling... For a long time, I was afraid of taking one of his courses because at Columbia, at that time, if you were an English major, you either thought Mark Van Doren was God, or Lionel Trilling was God. And I was one of the Van Doren acolytes.

And, so, Trilling had the image of being this ultra-literary guy. And the students who were his followers were the ultra-literary, I felt, pretentious kind

of students, but I felt I had to take one course of his. So, I took a course called “Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats.” And it turned out to be one of the best courses I ever had.

And the very first class, first thing Trilling said was, “During the course of this class, I don't want any of you to read any criticism, literary criticism of Wordsworth, Keats, or Yeats.”

And one of the ultra-literary students said, “Well, Professor Trilling, what then shall we read?”

And Trilling said, “Every poem written by Wordsworth, Keats, and Yeats.”

And that was where I learned to read poetry. And it was really... It was a great course. He was a great teacher. And these guys, nationally known professors, they graded their own papers, they taught their class, they had office hours, they were accessible, which is the total opposite of Harvard, where I spent a year as a Niemen Fellow. And where the professors were like movie stars: gave a great lecture, walked off and graduate students taught the classes of Harvard. And I've always felt Harvard is the most overrated, pretentious, institution in North America.

Susan Neville: That's funny, I'm thinking about, how did Lionel Trilling teach a Yeats poem? Do you remember? I mean, you weren't looking at it through a critical lens... Was it... Did he have you memorize things? Did he look at each sound? I mean—

Dan Wakefield: No, he... One of the things he said was, “When I say read this poem, I don't mean read it once, I mean read it twelve times or fourteen times, until you have really absorbed it, incorporated it into yourself.”

And there was no special technique. It was human understanding of the words and it, you know... The famous poem, “The Second Coming,” I realize that was, you know, where in the part that says: “And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?”

And before that, says: “Somewhere in sands of the desert, as shaped with lion body and the head of a man, is moving its slow thighs, while all about it. Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds. The darkness drops again; and now I

know that twenty centuries of stony sleep were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle. And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?"

And that's what we're experiencing now: Islam, and the West. The East and the West. And Yeats saw that and that's what that poem is about.

Every single line in that poem, I mean, I know Joan Didion used a couple of them for book titles, but every single line is so resonant. "The best lack conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

So you just, as a class, you would discuss the poem.

Susan Neville: Yeah. Obviously, take it in in some ways. I'm always amazed because when we get in here and start talking, you have so much poetry in your head.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: I mean that was again from memory.

Dan Wakefield: And also, it was part of New York at that time. That was the good part as opposed to analysis. I remember seeing in different kitchens, people had taped up copies of Dylan Thomas's poem... What's that famous poem?

Susan Neville: "Do Not Go Gentle?"

Dan Wakefield: "Do not go gentle into that good night." And also, you know, a lot of other poets were very miffed that Dylan Thomas... Records of him reading his poetry, sold more than their books. And those, I still have them, they were just astounding. His voice, his delivery, it was mesmerizing.

Susan Neville: Was that the voice, I'm just really curious about, I mean, I'm sitting here thinking, okay, inside that head there's this amazing sponge of a brain that has kept all the poetry for years. And, then, I also wonder, when you mention the records, was it the sound of readings that helped those poems become lodged in you? Like you heard a—

Dan Wakefield: Maybe, but—

Susan Neville: I guess you probably can't know. Like asking Oscar Robertson, how do you jump? Or, how do you get the ball in the—

Dan Wakefield: I think, you know, in that, when I took Trilling's class at Columbia, I don't think I'd heard any readings, any poetry readings at that time.

Susan Neville: So is that the point at which you started kind of collecting the poems by memory? Or did you start that when you went to Columbia?

Dan Wakefield: You know what, when I went to Columbia, well yeah. In those days, in grade school, you read poems. In the first grade at school, there was a poetry contest and you had to recite a poem. And it was won by Susan Fox, who recited Carl Sandburg's "Fog." You know, it was the shortest poem.

Susan Neville: Right.

Dan Wakefield: I recited this long damn thing... All I remember is a line: "Poor old Jonathon Bing, he got in his carriage to visit the king." I don't even remember what happened.

And then at scout camp, there were poems. There were these corny poems in the Boy Scout manual by Edgar A. Guest, and his... Oh, we made fun of... And I remember, you know, we'd sit around in the cabin and one of them started out; "He may not be an office boy, a messenger, or clerk. The smallest paid in the employ of him who gives him work." And then he could rise to be a captain of industry or something.

And, I remember, a guy in my cabin at camp once named David Lewis. And he used to recite a great poem that I've never heard since, called "Ivan Skavinsky Skavar." And it was something about the mightiest man in the ranks of the tsar, was Ivan Skavinsky Skavar.

But poetry was part of normal life in that era, in the 1930s and '40s. I was in the first grade with Mrs. Roxie Lingle Day in, let's see, 1938, and that's when we had the poetry contest.

Susan Neville: This makes me think about, you know, our education system and what it'll be like 10-20 years from now. Who knows? Do you want to talk a little bit, since we're focusing on the teachers at Columbia today, about how you ended up going to Columbia? Why Columbia? What attracted you to the curriculum?

Dan Wakefield: It was a very simple thing. I had read an essay by Mark Van Doren called "Education by Books." And it talked about how you could get an education just by reading the great books of the world and that became the model for St. John's University.

And then Van Doren, I think, created... It was a requirement of the first two years at Columbia. A humanities course where you read the great literary artists and then it was accompanied the first two years called "Contemporary Civilization," where you read the great thinkers.

I remember it was... CCA was Plato and Aristotle and the boys. And then CCB, the second year, was Freud and Young and Veblen, and so on. And one of the students said, CCB is all the guys who are trying to someday be in CCA.

But, anyway, then Van Doren made me feel at home because he was from Illinois and he had that flat Midwestern accent. His first class I went to with two new friends, classmates at Columbia, and we came out of that class, I said, "Oh, Van Doren was great, wasn't he?"

And one of the guys, they were both from New York... One said, "Well, he was too Midwestern."

And I said, "Yeah, that's it, that's it."

And then Van Doren... I remember going into his office and I heard he'd said in class that he had given a talk at Dartmouth, so I went into his class and said "Well, I went to high school with a friend who's at Dartmouth now and I told him all about John Seigler, later of the CIA."

And Van Doren said, "Oh, I wish I had known he was your friend, I would have said something to him."

And Van Doren... Yeah, his classes were very popular. I mean, he had like 80 or 100 students. And he not only graded every paper, he not only wrote a comment on them, he handed them back at the next class. It was Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. If you handed in your paper on Monday, you got it back Wednesday, with a comment from Mark Van Doren.

Susan Neville: That's kind of amazing. I mean, I was just thinking when you said that the whole first two years of the curriculum at Columbia, that he had started that. That's kind of an amazing kind of service approach, I guess.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: You know, a lot of people, let alone writers, who have their own obsessions, wouldn't necessarily do so... Says a lot about—

Dan Wakefield: I have to say, another great thing that happened in one of Van Doren's classes. One of the friends in my class who's a writer, who became a friend throughout life, was Ivan Gold. And he had had a tremendous story in the Columbia Review, the literary magazine.

So one day, in Van Doren's class called “The Narrative Art,” in which we read Homer, the Bible, Dante, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, Van Doren one day comes in and starts the class by saying, one of you has written a story that is very powerful and that is a kind of landmark of this era we're living in.

And I believe Mr. Gold has captured something important. And Mr. Gold was sitting right in that row in front of me and he kind of slunk down in his seat like, “Oh, my God.” And the point Van Doren wanted to make, that in this story of Ivan's, it was about basically what, in those days, was called a gang bang.

It was a rape, except the woman was, I guess... I don't know... Technically, the woman was willing to have sex with the boys in this gang in the Bronx. And after she did that, there was some kind of breakdown and she was gone from the neighborhood for a year. And it was understood that she was in some kind of a hospital.

And when she came back, she didn't want to have sex with anybody and everybody was amazed at how she had changed. How this genuine, deep personality change had come from her being in a psychiatric hospital.

So what Van Doren said was, “In our stories, up to this era, that people who were changed, whose whole personality was changed, the change was credited to God. That some god or gods had affected a change that completely changed

this person. Now, it's not a god, it's psychiatry that changes the person and we've entered a new era when that happens.”

And he was right, of course.

Susan Neville: It's sort of disturbing, too. I mean, I remember that phrase from when I was a kid, “gang bang,” it was so awful. It seems like another era would be understanding that whatever happened to the woman, that changed her. I mean she was changed by the violence before she entered the psychiatric hospital, otherwise she wouldn't have gone.

Dan Wakefield: But, at first, the first change was simply that she had to be sent to the hospital because she couldn't function, you know. It was that she was so devastated by this experience that her family, the only recourse they could imagine, was to send her to the hospital to have psychiatric treatment.

Susan Neville: So in this story, the first change is that she actually was accepting of what was going to happen to her in the point of view of the story?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, yeah. And then affair, it happened, she was so devastated that she couldn't function and then she's sent to the hospital and she comes back and she's able to function, but she no longer wants to have sex with anybody.

Susan Neville: And we would look at that and say it was from the trauma of the event itself, I guess.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah, but you're leaving out the step that she was not able to speak or function until she went to the hospital.

Susan Neville: No, yeah, I understand, I understand. Yeah, that I get.

Dan Wakefield: So that was—

Susan Neville: So did Ivan Gold, what did that turn him into? No longer a person who wrote stories, getting all that attention from his teacher. Or did he continue to write?

Dan Wakefield: Oh, he wrote great stories, in fact, and in that story, Van Doren himself sent the issue of the Columbia Review that had this story, to an editor at a great publication of the era, called New World Writing. There were two mass market

paperback literary magazines; New World Writing and Discovery. And I was really awed to be invited to write something for New World Writing.

When I was writing for The Nation, and I wrote a piece about Salinger, called "Salinger and the Search for Love," and New World Writing published, you know, Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal, many great writers they published. They were the first publication to publish a part of *On the Road*, and so Ivan's story was in there.

And then he continued to write these long stories of like 40-60 pages, which was called an awkward length. And it was awkward in the sense that it was too long for most magazines and too short for a book. So, he finally had a book of them published, called *Nickel Miseries*. And Lionel Trilling wrote a blurb for it that Ivan and his friends later decided it ruined his career.

Susan Neville: Why?

Dan Wakefield: Because Trilling said, "These stories show that Mr. Gold will become one of the commanding writers of his time." And Ivan used to say, when he sat down to write, he felt like he had his mother looking over one shoulder and Lionel Trilling looking over the other.

But I remember one of the great thrills I had is that Ivan was in London, and this is amazing, he's the only person I've ever heard who could pull this off. He got the GI Bill to go study Japanese in London.

Susan Neville: What?

Dan Wakefield: He had been in Japan after the Korean War and he wrote some stories set there, and then somehow he parlayed the GI Bill into sending him to London. But when he was in London, he sent back to me, he didn't have an agent and he sent to me and said, "Can you see if you can get this published?" And it was a great long story, called "The Nickel Misery of George Washington Carver Brown."

And it was about a black guy in basic training in the army, who is killed when he falls off some tower that he's spaced to climb. At any rate, and his name was George Washington Carver Brown, but I can tell you still the first sentence of that story, which was: "The day that Carver Brown fell backwards from the

freshly painted pinnacle of failure, was the day before Thanksgiving Day, it dawned in frozen reds and blues, without portent.”

And you know, just the rhythm of that, and I took it to Harold Hayes at Esquire, he was the features editor, not the fiction editor, but I said, “Listen, this is a great story.” And he gave it to the fiction editor, recommending it, and it got published in Esquire and it was a great triumph because you know, and they paid \$750, and I was able to send him that in London.

Susan Neville: So when you think back to days like, if you had gone to a different college it would have like made—

Dan Wakefield: If I had gone to Harvard, I'd have been a numbskull.

Susan Neville: A numbskull, why?

Dan Wakefield: Because I would have been taught by a bunch of graduate students, not by real professors, who had this incredible fund of knowledge and experience of teaching. And also, the other thing is, what I realized in my year as a Neiman Fellow at Harvard, is that the faculty of Harvard could imagine they were the most important people in the world because in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard was the most important thing.

So they were stars in that little world. At Columbia, you're in the midst of Manhattan, you were no more than any of the next fabulous institutions. And, as a matter of fact, Columbia... Van Doren and Trilling would recommend publishers.

I remember one of my classmates, and the three of us: me and Ivan Gold and Sam Astrachan, were great friends throughout our lives. And Sam had his first novel accepted when he was a senior at Columbia and that's because it was either Van Doren or Trilling sent the novel to Robert Giroux, who was a partner in the great literary firm of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

It was for a long time. And Bob Giroux had been a student of Van Doren and they published Sam's first book. And again, that was a kind of risk because he thought everything was going to be easy from then on, and his next two novels never got published. And then—

Susan Neville: Everything's a curse. I mean, that's what I got from reading Tillie Olsen's book, *Silences*. You know, you're silenced by being too good, you're silenced by publishing too early, there so many things.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: By having someone praise you too much or too little, it's just, it's hard.

Dan Wakefield: That's something, because I'm now trying to write about Joan Didion. She had a damn will of iron.

Susan Neville: It's will, it really is.

Dan Wakefield: A will of iron, nothing was going to— And the other thing, she had a clear eye. And also rereading her work, she did the work. I remember we used to talk about how we hated to go to, what we called, the Hall of Records, you know, or we had to do the research.

But Joan, even at the last, she was going to the damn Hall of Records. She never just wrote anything out of fluff in her mind. She had exactness, 10 point exactness. So that's really awesome.

Susan Neville: Yeah, actually you don't think about will that often, but it's like well, you were in my Vonnegut class this morning, from *The Sirens of Titan*. The thing that powers the universe, the universal will to become. I think yeah, that's what it is. There's something inside you that's a universal will to make, or to become, or to do.

Dan Wakefield: Look at Vonnegut. He didn't go to any writing class, writing school. He kept writing and he had rejections from everybody in America. And it wasn't until he was 27, after writing steadily from Shortridge High School on, continuing to get rejections, continuing to write new stories, continuing to send them out. Yeah, he had that kind of will.

Susan Neville: I mean it's partly I guess a belief in yourself, do you think? But partly it's, I don't know, it's just like this is what I'm supposed to do and it's just pure stubbornness. Or you don't even notice after a while, all the times you've been rejected. I mean if you look at it and say, "Oh, my God, that's a list!"

Dan Wakefield: Well I feel I lost it for a long time and we can figure out 65 reasons why, but I was thinking when I'm doing this piece on Joan Didion, that I started out and I realized this is really going to be hard. And then I realized I just had to sit there until it happened and that's what I've been doing. And it was like a great feeling of relief, yes! This is what you do.

Susan Neville: I think I've commented on this before, but with you, this is something I bet I've seen. Like you're always working on something, you're always thinking about something new. I mean, you will say, oh there are times when I wasn't, and maybe that's true and probably is true, but still, I mean that will is still there. It's like probably harder on yourself than—

Dan Wakefield: No, I tell you, it's, I'm at an age now that I feel like anything I'm going to do, I've got to do it now. I'm really lucky to have lived this long. Nobody, including me, would have ever foreseen that I would be sitting here at 87 damn years old and you know, it's incredible.

And so yes, there's a lot I want to do and I don't know, here's another Columbia hero, when I was there, was Herman Wouk.

Susan Neville: Oh, I loved Herman Wouk.

Dan Wakefield: And when I was at Columbia, he had only written a couple novels and the one we all talked about, he wrote a novel about the advertising business, called *Aurora Dawn*. And this was before the Caine Mutiny, but yeah, he was writing, he was publishing when I think he was 101.

Susan Neville: Was he really?

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: What was, do you know, what his last novel is? I don't.

Dan Wakefield: I don't, the last one I checked out was with *The Winds of War*. He was probably only 80 then. But I just know, reading about him really publishing something.

Susan Neville: I loved *The Winds of War* and *War Remembrance*.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah.

Susan Neville: Yeah. He was pretty amazing, I didn't realize he was teaching at Columbia.

Dan Wakefield: No, he didn't teach, he was a student.

Susan Neville: Oh, he was a student.

Dan Wakefield: Yeah. So you heard about him just like at Shortridge, you would hear about Madeline Pugh.

Susan Neville: Yeah, that's funny.

Dan Wakefield: So we probably overran did we?

Susan Neville: No, I think we didn't really overrun, but you know, if there's anything you want to add about your college years. Did you take science and math classes?

Dan Wakefield: Oh, God. Let me tell you, when people say you know, when did you know you wanted to be a writer? I knew in the first grade, because it was the only thing I could do. I mean, literally, numbers were like a shroud of mystery. I loved pictures but I couldn't make them. Musically, you know, they used to have something called a rhythm band in the first grade and people were given the triangle, the bells, and if you had no talent at all you were given the rhythm sticks, which is just—

Susan Neville: Oh, I remember those, yeah.

Dan Wakefield: Just two pieces of wood that you banged on the floor. I, of course, was given the rhythm sticks. And then I tried to play the clarinet. I played the clarinet in like the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, and there were say five chairs. Five clarinets in School 80 orchestra, and as younger people came up, they would pass me by.

I was always 5th chair. And there would always be a little puddle below my clarinet, which is when you don't play very well, that's what happens that you somehow saliva comes out, I don't know, but yeah, I was hopeless with that.

Susan Neville: I could never see through a microscope in science class. I loved... Actually I didn't love science class. I like reading about science but I hated the smell of the lab. And but, you know, put my eye in front of a microscope and I could go

to the left, the right, up, down, I could never get it to focus and see something down there. It just was impossible.

Dan Wakefield: So this was pretty amazing. I remember I could do addition, subtraction, and multiplication. When we got to long division, I was out of it. And so as a freshman at Shortridge, I had to take algebra. Algebra 1 was taught by a wonderful man who was also a school guidance counselor named Claude M. Keasling, and he was such a nice guy.

At the end of the semester, he called in my parents for a conference and I joined them. And Mr. Keasling told my parents, while I sat there... Said, "I know your son has tried, but if I were to pass him into Algebra 2, it would be a crime." A crime!

So, the only way I got through geometry was I volunteered to give a report on Pythagoras. So, I got up and gave a talk which was my strong point, and got through that.

At Columbia, you were allowed to take one course a semester in the night school, which was called general studies. And you knew that was going to be the easy one. So it came to the dreaded math. I had to take a year of math, so I went to general studies and I looked in the doorways of all the teachers doing the math and I saw one woman who looked very friendly and nice, and I was really right. Because I took her class, I really tried, I couldn't... I didn't understand anything. After the final, she called me in and asked me if I had been drunk.

Susan Neville: Oh no!

Dan Wakefield: So, I told her that I wanted to be a writer, that I needed this to graduate. And she said, "If you will promise me never to have anything to do with numbers in your life... Like, please don't be working on rockets or something. Yeah.

Susan Neville: You could create—

Dan Wakefield: So I'll give you the lowest passing grade.

Susan Neville: Oh, that's great.

Dan Wakefield: Absolutely true.

Susan Neville: Well, with that, we end here. 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]