

Text

Ellen Douglas on *Conversations* #608

Gene Edwards: Hello, I'm Gene Edwards and next on *Conversations* author Ellen Douglas and a wealth of writing experiences she says she is finally old enough to share. All coming to light in her latest offering *witnessing*, a collection of 16 illuminating essays, in which she reflects her conviction that observing life around us is a writer's essential calling. Author, Ellen Douglas, on *Conversations*, next.

Gene Edwards: Ellen Douglas is here. She is the author of *Truth: Four Stories I'm Finally Old Enough to Tell*, and many other offerings, more than 10 in all. She's with us with her latest which is called *Witnessing*. Sixteen essays-- out of the filing cabinet.

Ellen Douglas: Over the years I've given these. I grabbed them from my filing drawer.

Gene Edwards: These were lectures, essays.

Ellen Douglas: Some were lectures. Some were introductions to other works. Some were essays—just odds and ends.

Gene Edwards: I've had such a wonderful time reading all of this material and I want to ask you all about it. But I want to ask you first about changing your name.

Ellen Douglas: Oh, changing my name.

Gene Edwards: Josephine.

Ellen Douglas: A.k.a. Ellen Douglas...also know as...

Gene Edwards: Why did you change your name from Josephine Haxton for your writing public? Was that the fashionable thing to do then?

Ellen Douglas: There is a very simple reason.

Gene Edwards: What was that?

Ellen Douglas: When I finished my first book I kind of sold it by accident. Gave it to a friend of mine, Charles Bell, who took it home with him and read it, and gave it to his editor at Houghton Mifflin. The first I knew of it was when the editor of Houghton called me and said they wanted to enter it into their competition for a new book. I realized when he said that to me that I would not be able to give it to them without going to my two aunts who, in a way, were fictionalized characters in the book. I would have to ask their

permission. So I got on an airplane. At that time southern airways had a plane down to Natchez. I went down to Natchez and asked my aunts if I could publish this book. They said yes with two conditions: one that they wouldn't have to read it; and two that I use a pen name. So, that's why I have a pen name.

Gene Edwards: So there was no fancy Hollywood reason or anything like that.

Ellen Douglas: No, no. It was not that.

Gene Edwards: Tell me about the pen name. Why did you choose Ellen Douglas?

Ellen Douglas: Well, Ellen was my grandmother's name. She wrote children's stories and some romances that were published in little magazines around the turn of the century, and gave me the conviction that it was possible to write and sell what you wrote-- or at least publish it. So I used her name, Ellen. Douglas is a Scottish name and my own maiden name Ayres was a Scottish name. My editor had a son named Douglas.

Gene Edwards: So there you go.

Ellen Douglas: There you go.

Gene Edwards: Never changed it. Never went back.

Ellen Douglas: No, as a matter of fact my editor told me that time, "You're stuck with this. We'll not change it." Once you do it you've got to keep it.

Gene Edwards: So have you felt stuck with it over the years.

Ellen Douglas: It's okay, it's okay.

Gene Edwards: You have always, though, been interested in names, haven't you?

Ellen Douglas: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: And finding the right name. In the sister's essay in here, you talk about...

Ellen Douglas: Fictional sisters and real sisters, yeah. I remember when I was first working on my first book I was thinking about place names. I was looking for a place name for the farm that I was going to put in the book. I named Forest Sauvage, French for savage forest, which of course, the world was at the beginning of the nineteenth century when that place got its name. It was also another name for the forest, which was a farm that one member or another of my family owned over the years.

Gene Edwards: Remember the first book you read?... Because you've always loved to read.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah, yeah.

Gene Edwards: What was the first book you read?

Ellen Douglas: The first book I read-- in my life?

Gene Edwards: In you life. Do you remember?

Ellen Douglas: I mainly remember reading fairy stories when I was a little girl.

Gene Edwards: Really.

Ellen Douglas: I loved fairy stories but then when I got a little bit older I liked *Tarzan the Ape Man*, and *Adventures in Jungles*.

Gene Edwards: Trips to Mars and things like that.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Why?

Ellen Douglas: Have you ever read John Carter, *War Lord of Mars*?

Gene Edwards: I have, I have and Edgar Rice Burroughs and all of that.

Ellen Douglas: That was very popular when I was a girl.

Gene Edwards: I have a copy that was my grandfather's that was absolutely beat to pieces from being passed down.

Ellen Douglas: But there's just something so releasing about having your adventures on Mars. It's wonderful.

Gene Edwards: So, did you always hear those adventures going around in your head.

Ellen Douglas: In a way, yes. But I was always the heroine.

Gene Edwards: But of course, you were. That was in Louisiana. Then you moved to Natchez after that?

Ellen Douglas: Well, I was born in Natchez. My parents were both from Natchez but my father was a civil engineer and we were living in Alexandria because that's where his work was.

Gene Edwards: Where did you meet Kenneth?

Ellen Douglas: We both went to Ole Miss, as did my father and my older sister. So we had a connection over the years.

Gene Edwards: What did he mean to your life-- everything?

Ellen Douglas: Who?

Gene Edwards: Kenneth.

Ellen Douglas: Kenneth. Oh, Kenneth. Kenneth was a remarkable man. He certainly made it possible for me to have a writing life that was as easy to manage as it was. He was a collector of books and a great reader and did some writing himself.

Gene Edwards: Did he expect you to write.

Ellen Douglas: He expected me to do whatever I wanted to do.

Gene Edwards: (laughing)

Ellen Douglas: If I wanted to write it was all right with him.

Gene Edwards: Because you were and are pretty darned independent.

Ellen Douglas: Yes, but I chose a husband who wanted an independent woman for a wife.

Gene Edwards: Living in Greenville had to be the most fortuitous thing.

Ellen Douglas: Greenville... Was ever a lucky break for me to live in Greenville because it was a really interesting town at that time, particularly. There was a large Jewish community, an Italian community and a sizeable Asian community.

Gene Edwards: Had you been exposed?...

Ellen Douglas: It was kind of live and let live in Greenville which wasn't necessarily true of a lot of Mississippi towns.

Gene Edwards: Had you been exposed to those cultural elements before?

Ellen Douglas: No, not really.

Gene Edwards: So that went into the memory bank and then you got to meet all these wonderful writers, up and coming.

Ellen Douglas: Well, I was fortunate to come along when I did right after the Second World War when my husband and I moved back to Greenville. Of course, everybody had

been in the service for four years prior to that. Shelby Foote was coming home to Greenville, also. He'd been in the service. And Walker Percy, who was from Greenville, had been in the hospital in New York. He was recovering from tuberculosis. And he came back to Greenville for a while. It was an interesting place to live.

Gene Edwards: I always had a feeling that Eudora Welty had a huge crush on Shelby Foote.

Ellen Douglas: Shelby was a good looking young man—beautiful blue eyes.

Gene Edwards: What was it about him, though? He wrote with such conviction about everything he believed in. What was it he called it?... The primary source. Is that what he called it? What did he mean by that?

Ellen Douglas: What he said was that he never wrote in one of his historical books-- in the history of the Civil War—he never put anything down that he hadn't found a primary source. That is, either in letters or words from the people to whom it happened. He was very, very accurate in how he handled his material.

Gene Edwards: Very meticulous.

Ellen Douglas: He was meticulous in other ways, and still is, I presume. He had a beautiful hand and he wrote all of his first drafts of his manuscripts he wrote in long hand-- very beautiful manuscripts.

Gene Edwards: Beautiful to read. How did he mold you? How did these writers in Greenville?...

Ellen Douglas: Mainly we just sat around at night and drank whiskey and talked about books.

Gene Edwards: Which was okay.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah.

Gene Edwards: Which one of them helped you? Was it Charles?

Ellen Douglas: Charles, of course, was instrumental in selling my first book, as a matter of fact, because he gave it to the editor at Houghton Mifflin. That was very instrumental. I really followed Walker's work. In the 1950's he was writing the essays that were eventually collected in a couple of books of essays of his. So, I was reading those and that was something I was really interested in, too.

Gene Edwards: What made you think you could do it?

Ellen Douglas: Oh, I had been writing long before I met either one of them. As a matter of fact, I started writing when I was about 10 and wrote poems about little girls who got guns and shot red birds and other things. I think most of my poems were based on rhyme schemes of hymns because I'd heard a lot of hymns in my life. Then I fortunately realized I was a very bad poet and began to write stories.

Gene Edwards: You had a lot of luxury-- luxurious time to write. I guess is what I'm looking at.

Ellen Douglas: It was a good time to be writing during and after the Second World War and up into the 50's when I was raising my children and writing books.

Gene Edwards: But in all was the children there and when did you have time to write?... Or did you feel guilty.

Ellen Douglas: I mainly worked in the winter time because the children were in school. I really didn't start writing seriously until my youngest was in kindergarten and that gave me mornings with the house empty. That was when I began to work on that first book that came out some years later.

Gene Edwards: Did you love the struggle of it?

Ellen Douglas: As a matter of fact, it wasn't exactly a struggle. What happened-- how I got started on my first book is a little bit odd, as a matter of fact. It doesn't make me out to be a committed writer. We were sitting around one night with another friend of ours, who's an artist, named Elizabeth Calvert, who tended to put off doing things. My husband said, "Why don't we all write a story? I'll write a story and you two write stories, and I bet you a steak dinner that neither of you two finish your stories, and I'll finish my story."

Gene Edwards: Those are fighting words.

Ellen Douglas: Of course, I finished my story and she didn't finish her story. So, she got to give him the steak dinner. I realized when I finished that story that, in fact, it was part of what might become a novel. I began fiddling around with it. Of course, it took me six years to write it because the children were young and I didn't have all that much time to write.

Gene Edwards: Everybody wants to talk always about the southern writers and what is it about the southern writers during that time. Some say it was because we lost the war. What in your idea of the magic? What is that?

Ellen Douglas: It seems to me there was so much tension in southern society, so much contradictory material in the world of the south, which came out of the end of the Civil War, the loss of the war, the reconstruction, hatred and hostility toward black people, or white people. That's all terrible stuff, certainly in the real world, but it's also the stuff that produces very dramatic behavior and dramatic stories. I think that was doubled by the

habit that southerners seemed to have had from the beginning of orating and listening to sermons and caring about the language. All that went into it, too.

Gene Edwards: Caring very specifically about words.

Ellen Douglas: For me it was certainly true. This may sound like-- like all southern writers say, story telling was something that went on in my family. Both my grandmothers were really interesting story tellers. They told stories about the real world, not the fairytale world. I was fascinated with those.

Gene Edwards: Richard Wright. Did you know Richard Wright?

Ellen Douglas: No, I never met him.

Gene Edwards: But he was what?... four or five years older than you?

Ellen Douglas: Yeah, maybe ten.

Gene Edwards: Tell me about your Natchez and his Natchez.

Ellen Douglas: Of course, that in a way is what I mean when I say that those tensions were what produced so much of southern writing. It's almost incredible to me that there could have parallel lives in a little town like Natchez and I would have absolutely no knowledge when I was a child and a young person of the kind of thing that Richard Wright and all black people were living through in that period.

Gene Edwards: And the kind of literature he was capable of writing.

Ellen Douglas: Yes, yes, that too.

Gene Edwards: It's also interesting to me that you talk a lot in one of your essays about reading the literature of the time, which was really making moves and changing writing styles and things like that. But it wasn't the accepted literature, was it? People were supposed to be reading those old dead writers.

Ellen Douglas: Oh, my goodness, yes. When I was in high school none of the writers who interested me were really being read by people in our part of the world—or anywhere but maybe New York City. The writers who influenced me most in those years were like Robert Penn Warren, Catherine Ann Porter, Eudora. But not many people in the south were reading those writers. They were reading colonial...

Gene Edwards: Those people.

Ellen Douglas: And Hawthorn, but of course, I went back and read Hawthorn too. Poe, etcetera.

Gene Edwards: The first time you read Faulkner-- what?

Ellen Douglas: I think, I can't remember for sure, but I think I was about sixteen when I read... Uh... What's the name of the Faulkner book that I'm thinking about?

Gene Edwards: Was it the *Sound and the Fury* or *Light in the Forest*, oh way ahead...

Ellen Douglas: The very first one that's so romantic, about the grandmother who goes out and steals horses and sells them.

Gene Edwards: What did you think when you read it?

Ellen Douglas: It was about the world that we lived in. It was immediately understandable. It was something we were all living through. The kind of world that came out of the colonial past, civil war, Indians, and black people. To find that somebody could write about that world so you thought, "Well, that's the way it really was." It made you think, "Well, maybe I could write about the way things really are now." That's the kind of thing that happened.

Gene Edwards: And the first time...

Ellen Douglas: *The Unvanquished*. That's the name of that first one.

Gene Edwards: The first time you saw him?

Ellen Douglas: I guess the first time I saw him was when I was a sophomore at Ole Miss and I would occasionally see him walking across the square if I was downtown.

Gene Edwards: How did he present himself?

Ellen Douglas: I didn't see him many times in my life but he always presented himself, it seems to me, as kind of standing back in a corner, away from everybody and watching. He was watching. He was listening. He didn't talk very much. Every other time that I saw him he didn't say much. He was just mainly listening, or maybe he was unhappy and wanted to go home. I don't know.

Gene Edwards: Could have been. But there were times-- you went hot and cold on him, didn't you?

Ellen Douglas: Yes, I did.

Gene Edwards: Why?

Ellen Douglas: I guess I was a freshman in college when I began to read the major books. I was just smitten. I think every young southern writer of my generation was smitten with Faulkner. Of course, we all got to be Faulknarian instead of ourselves. But after a while it seemed to me I had to get my own voice. So after reading Faulkner for about 10 years or so I stopped reading him for about 20 years. Then I was invited to come to Ole Miss for the Faulkner Conference in the summer and give a lecture. I decided that I had to re-read everything of Faulkner's. I went back and re-read a lot of the books and began to think about what it was that had held me and what it was I didn't like. I distanced myself from the parts that didn't seem to belong to me and began to write my own work.

Gene Edwards: Did it seem to you that later on he was rewriting himself, in a way?

Ellen Douglas: The later books never seemed as strong to me as *I Lay Dying* and the major books of the middle period.

Gene Edwards: Tell me about Miss Welty.

Ellen Douglas: What a wonderful lady she was! A wonderful, wonderful lady. My husband and Hodding Carter and Ben Wassen, who was a friend in Greenville, who had been an agent in New York in the 20's. In fact, he roomed with Faulkner the one year he went to Ole Miss. Started a small press in Greenville. We were going to publish southern writers in limited editions. Ben got us a book by Faulkner-- really a long short story, which eventually became part of *A Fable*. We published that and then Eudora let us have *Music from Spain*, which later became a part of *The Golden Apples*, I believe. So, that was when I first met Eudora. She came up to Greenville to sign the books when they were ready to be signed. She was a young woman then, and I was a young woman, too. But I had been reading her works since I was a teenager in Natchez because so many of her stories are set along the Natchez trace.

Gene Edwards: Right.

Ellen Douglas: Everybody, all us young people read those stories and were crazy about them.

Gene Edwards: You made me think about something I'd never thought about with her. That is, there were really two Eudoras, weren't there?

Ellen Douglas: Oh, I think definitely. It's curious to me that people who've read her books very often miss the second Eudora. They didn't recognize the ironic, strong, severe intelligence that was behind those stories. Just because Eudora was soft spoken, very gentle and retiring, they made her into somebody she could be if she chose to be but was not the Eudora who wrote the books.

Gene Edwards: The Eudora...

Ellen Douglas: The Eudora that wrote the books had a very ruthless, ironic intelligence.

Gene Edwards: And had an edge to her.

Ellen Douglas: Yeah, definitely an edge.

Gene Edwards: Could kill somebody along the Natchez Trace if the need arose.

Ellen Douglas: Right, right.

Gene Edwards: You wrote an essay that was rejected by *The New York Times* in this collection. It's the night that James Meredith was rejected at Ole Miss. Why did they reject it?

Ellen Douglas: They said it was arranged to point a moral. I guess I shouldn't have done that-- according to them. What I really did with that story was practically just to transcribe what the young guy, Dee Gorton, who was at Ole Miss when the riot occurred, what he told me. Exactly what he'd told me about what happened to him that night. From my point of view it was not arranged to point anything. It was just what Dee told me.

Gene Edwards: It's interesting too that James Meredith was really not even a part of the story.

Ellen Douglas: Right he was invisible. He was up in Baxter Hall. Of course, if he had been out he might have been killed.

Gene Edwards: How did you come to do *The Magic Carpet Stories*?

Ellen Douglas: Well, the University Press asked me-- and it's a beautiful book, isn't it?

Gene Edwards: It's a gorgeous book.

Ellen Douglas: They asked me to write the text for-- they were going to do a collection of Anderson's wood cuts—Walter Anderson's wood cuts illustrating the fairy tales. So the fairy tales were chosen because Walter Anderson had done those illustrations. They asked me if I would write the text and give them a consistent text for the fairy tales, which delighted me. I went back to writing fairy tales and I love fairy tales.

Gene Edwards: It had been a long time since you had written fairy tales. Why not go back and do one again? You love the process of it, don't you?

Ellen Douglas: Yes. The first strives are agony. The process of making things work that I really get most interested in doing.

Gene Edwards: What do you tell young writers?

Ellen Douglas: What do I tell young writers? Read! Read! Read! I tell them to read everything, good and bad and then read some more and try to decide why it's good and why it's bad. What you can use and what you can't use. What you must discard. Look up every word that you don't know the meaning of. It's essential. You have your life and you've got what you read and what you see. I don't know if any of the three can be left out. I worry that young people don't read as much as they used to because of television and the movies.

Gene Edwards: They should read this. You've been on this train some 80 something years now. How do you feel?

Ellen Douglas: I'm still going down the track.

Gene Edwards: Great to have you here. Ellen Douglas, *Witnessing*. Thank you... Thank you.

Ellen Douglas: Thank you.

Gene Edwards: And thank you. See you next time.