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"The Writer's Craft"

Jessica Mitford

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Jessica Mitford, "The Writer's Craft"
Portland State University
May 24, 1972

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HOST: [audio begins mid-sentence] ...eighth annual Nina Mae Kellogg student awards, and eighth annual Nina Mae Kellogg lecture. I will now present Professor Marjorie Nelson of the Department of English at Portland State University.

MARJORIE NELSON: It has always been my pleasure, since the awards were first given, to chair the committee which finds the girls who have so highly merited these awards. This year, as in the years past, we have a sophomore woman and a senior woman. The sophomore woman has to demonstrate proficiency in the English language; the senior woman is selected by the committee on the basis of academic excellence and must be an English major. Because the awards were first instituted for sophomore women only, and then the senior woman's award was added, we will present them in that order. So our sophomore woman this year is Robbie McKendrick. [applause] And our senior woman is Janet Fairstrand. [applause] Now I would like to introduce to you Nancy Hoffmann, who will introduce our speaker.

NANCY HOFFMANN: I'd like to make one announcement before I introduce Decca. Simply that there is an open meeting on women's studies tomorrow in 298 Smith Center, at 2 p.m., and anyone who is interested is invited. I suppose that's an appropriate announcement to make, since those of you who know Jessica Mitford's work know that she is the author of a book called *Daughters and Rebels*, and is very much an active woman herself, certainly a model of a woman who has not led a traditional kind of existence. I suppose those of you who know about her know that she is probably, in one way, noted for having run away to join the anti-Fascist forces in the Spanish Civil War, for which her father rewarded her by sending a destroyer after her to bring her back. He didn't succeed; he never did succeed in bringing her back to her conservative family tradition. She is the author of a number of works which are anything but conservative: a book on the trial of Dr. Spock; a book called *The American Way of Death*, and a piece in *Atlantic Monthly* which she has told us put to death the Famous Writers School of the

United States. She is going to talk today about “The Writer’s Craft.” She will talk relatively briefly and then says she would like lots and lots of questions. I’m very pleased to welcome Jessica Mitford to Portland State University.

[applause]

JESSICA MITFORD: I’m very glad to be here. [slight rustling sound] (Oops... chalk.. doing something.) I thought I’d talk about the following things. These are really the questions that people most often ask. One is, “How did you start writing?” and when, and why. Second, “How do you choose subjects to write about?” Third, a little bit about research; how you go into it, and fourth, a few problems of writing. To start with the first one, how I got started, actually I got started writing very late in life. That is, I wrote the usual sort of novel when one is a child, and then tore it up three years later, that kind of thing. But I didn’t actually start writing until I was about thirty-eight.

How I got started writing—so it came flashing back to me in a way, when, after *The American Way of Death* was published, I got a letter from *Who’s Who* requesting some biographical information about myself. And there was the kind of form that makes one’s whole life flash before your eyes, like a drowning man, pretty much. It started off, of course, with where you were born and who your parents were. Born 1917 in England, into a very conservative family, so I put that down. Then education. And it asks you what high school you went to, what college, what graduate schools, what illustrious theses you have written, and that sort of thing. Well, unfortunately on this one I had to put “nil.” Because the fact is that my parents, who were deeply conservative, didn’t believe in girls going to school. So, my mother taught us to read when we were about... starting us at the age of five, and by the time we were six we had to be able to read the *Times* without fault. We were supposed to learn all of the multiplication tables to twelve, but I never did get seven and eight. I still have to call up the University of California math department for that sort of thing. So then, we were more or less left on our own, with the exception of sort of a few hours of being kept busy by a so-called “governess,” who used to leave in droves.

So when I was eighteen, I ran away from home, as Nancy said, to the Spanish Civil War. Thereafter, my husband and I, for I eventually married the person I ran with... [laughter] came to this country in about 1939. The next thing on the *Who’s Who* form is “List the principal positions that you have held.” This is another stickler for me, because a person of eighteen or nineteen without any education, well, what sort of jobs can you get? Obviously, salesgirl or going door-to-door; once I was a bartender’s assistant for a while, and that sort of thing. And during the war, the Second World War, I got a job with the United States bloody war agencies. My actual job description was “Sub-Eligible Typist.” [laughter] These are the sort of sad things that I had to list. After the war, I came to Oakland, California, where from about 1949 to ’55, I

was the executive secretary of the East Bay Civil Rights Congress, which was sort of a forerunner of organizations like SNCC and CORE.

So the next thing on the *Who's Who* form is always "Honors, Awards, and Prizes." Well, in connection with the Civil Rights Congress, as it was listed as subversive by the Attorney General, we were constantly getting subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee. So I usually put those subpoenas down under the... [laughter] "Honors, Awards, and Prizes." It's the only thing I can think of to put, you know. In any event, the Civil Rights Congress folded up in 1955. And I found myself, I had a couple of children, but they were sort of out of the babyhood stage by now, and anyway, if I was a sub-eligible typist, I was always a negligible housekeeper. So that didn't suit my ideas, and my husband feared the thought of me keeping house, because of how messy it would get, since we'd tried that once with no success. He'd always done the cooking, so what could I do? There wasn't very much to keep one occupied. So I realized that by the age of thirty-eight, which I was then, you're practically unemployable anyway, because most of the ads contain the malevolent words, "Nobody over thirty-five need apply." So I thought to myself, what shall I do? I can't sort of just drop dead at the age of thirty-eight. So I decided to start writing, and that's how I came to write my first book.

Now on the question of choosing subjects, I always used to sort of slide into the subjects, just sort of by chance. I thought I would tell you a little bit about *The American Way of Death* because people so often say, "What made you decide to write about that?" Actually, it was my husband. He is a lawyer in Oakland, and among his practice there are many poor people and many working people. In about the middle fifties, he began to wake up to the fact and get very annoyed over the fact that when the breadwinner of a family died, and there were certain union benefits saying "a thousand dollars, two thousand dollars," that the union had fought for in the way of death benefits to the widow, but this amount would mysteriously end up in the pocket of the undertaker and not to the widow at all. So he started an organization called the Funeral Society, based on one that first formed up here in Seattle in the thirties. He took this rather seriously, and they would have weekly meetings and so on. I used to rather tease them about it, and called them the "Necrophilists," and sort of teased them about their layaway plan and all that sort of thing.

Then he started bringing home the trade magazines. Marvelous names, like *Casket & Sunnyside*, is one. There's one called *Mortuary Management*. And another one called, *Concept: the Journal of Creative Ideas for Cemeteries*. Sold—that's my favorite. So I started reading these things, and I found myself in a whole wonder world that I never knew existed. I started sending away for samples... There's an actual outfit in Columbus, Ohio, called the Practical Burial Footwear Company. I immediately sent away for a bit of footwear, and these two strange-looking shoes arrived. They're called the "Fitafut Oxford," F-I-T-A-F-U-T. The leaflet with them said that they were specially designed, after two years of research, to fit the deceased foot after rigor mortis has set in. [laughter] Unfortunately, they were of rather cheap construction, and my teenage

son ruined them by wearing them all over the house. [laughter] So I got fascinated with all this stuff, and thought this would be too good an opportunity to miss out. That's really what got me into that.

I'll tell you a little bit about doing the research on that, and then we might go into a few problems of writing and so on. Actually, my husband and I worked together very much. He took some time off from his law practice to help do the research on the book. We really should have been co-signed, but the agents and publishers don't like co-signed books for some reason. Anyway, it was really a joint effort. So he used to sort of duck around in and out of embalming schools and places, bringing home all sorts of juicy descriptions from textbooks and that kind of thing. I tried out various techniques of interviewing undertakers. I wrote at one point when I was trying to find out just how a funeral transaction would go, if you insisted on the absolute bottom—if you also said that you wanted to be cremated, and no need for a coffin in that case. Because why burn up good wood? So I called up one undertaker, and said to him that my aunt was very ill and not expected to live long, and that her daughter, my cousin, was coming out and had asked me to make some arrangements. They sound marvelous on the phone: "Oh, yes. Yes," tremendous sort of voices, full of sympathy. *Mortuary Management* was always having special articles on the importance of having a good telephone voice, and so this fellow had been reading those. So then I said, "We want the very cheapest thing you've got." And he said, "Well, that's all right. We can arrange that." And I said, "We want cremation, and since we're having cremation, we shan't be requiring a coffin." So now his voice got really different; he got quite alert, on the other end of the phone. And he said, "That would be against the law. It's against the law to be buried without a coffin. Besides, who would transport your aunt? How would that happen?" So I said, "Well, my cousin's got a perfectly good station wagon, so we could take her over in that." [laughter] Upon which the undertaker said, in a totally different tone of voice now, "Madam, most ladies have neither the inclination nor the facilities for hauling dead bodies about." Which I must say I thought was quite a good point.

Another little research item, for those of you who are writers, and those having difficulties with research, one of the more interesting aspects was going down to Forest Lawn, which as you know is the great, wonderful, super-duper cemetery in Los Angeles, the one that Evelyn Waugh wrote about in *The Loved One*. So I went down there. They pride themselves terrifically on sort of one-stop shopping. In other words, they have the mortuary and the cemetery all in the same place. They have marvelous wild billboards all through Los Angeles, advertising "Cheapest Funeral..." no, you know, they'd never say "cheapest funeral," no. "Funeral, with all our services, from \$145 up." *Up* is the strategic word in that ad. Somebody once told me, I didn't see this myself, but they noticed some billboards for Forest Lawn saying "August and September specials." [laughter]

In any event, there is a continual price war going on in Los Angeles, the Southern California area, between the great giant undertaking concerns. Forest Lawn was always a place of

fascination for me, so I went there, with a young English instructor from a nearby college. We decided to do a bit of what they call “pre-need shopping” in the trade, which means you go there and sort of arrange funerals ahead of time. A game, we made up the story that his mother, who was my sister, was dying of a terminal disease, and we wanted to make the arrangements and so on. So the salesman, of course, they’re not called salesmen. They’re called “counselors.” The word “salesman” would never come into their terminology. So he took us up to the casket display room, which I must say was absolutely smashing. They had these extraordinary sort of... they had one that was priced at \$16,500. It was all made of two kinds of copper with a tremendous inner-spring mattress and lining, anything the heart could desire was in that one casket. So then I said, “I’d like to see the \$145 one,” which he showed us. It was rather a sort of dismal purple-ish color, and undoubtedly very cheap construction. I said, “Well, my sister wouldn’t be caught dead in that.” [laughter]

Then we asked to see over the grounds of Forest Lawn, and choose a nice gravesite for her. Well, these are priced—they’re zoned, and each zone is given a name like “Garden of Memory.” That’s the most expensive. That’s where all the big movie stars and gangsters are buried. You have to have a golden key to get in and that sort of thing. Of course, the view lots are considerably more expensive than the ones down below. The cheapest of all is a place called “Brotherly Love,” which is sort of down a rather steep hill, where the graves are \$340, \$360... we’re now talking ten years ago; it may have gone up considerably since then. So we looked all this stuff over. I said to the counselor, “Are there any Black people buried in Forest Lawn?” He gave me a sort of half-shrewd look, you know, to try to see which way I was going to jump on that, and he said, “No. There aren’t. We used to have a white-only clause in our contract, but the court cases above ground have been going the other way recently, so we eliminated that clause.” But he said, “I don’t think that there will ever be any Blacks buried in Forest Lawn, because they’re so much happier among their own people.” [laughter] These were some of the choicer moments of the research thing.

The thing I’m working on now... Incidentally, I can—in the question period, if some of you happen to have read any of these books, or have any special questions, I’d gladly answer them. It’s really up to you to say which aspect you are most interested in, because... whether you are interested in the problems of chasing down information for an article, or more specific problems of writing and so forth. We can discuss any of that. I’ll just indicate a couple more things.

At the present time, I’m working on a book about prisons. Actually, funerals was a far jollier subject. I got into this thing of prisons about two years ago when the American Civil Liberties Union asked me to do a run-down on the civil rights of prisoners. And I remember being forcibly struck by the fact that the first person I asked about this, a criminologist, said, “That’s a very easy assignment. All you have to do is to turn in a sheaf of blank papers. They haven’t any civil rights.” Which is exactly what I discovered in the course of my research. Having done the

article, which came out in the *Atlantic* about a year ago in March, I think it was, I became completely sort of mired in the subject. I began to get letters from prisoners from all over the country, and I determined to go on forward for a book. Later on, again, in the question time, I'd love to answer anything about that.

I did want to cover a couple of problems of writing. I know some of you are writers, and in any event, I guess all students are writers to a degree, because you have to do a lot of writing in the course of your work. So maybe some of these ideas might be helpful, I don't know. The first book I wrote, called *Daughters and Rebels*, I felt terribly insecure about writing at all in those days. I'd never written anything, really. I had various friends, I don't think many writers work this way, but I do; various friends who were interested in it. For example there was a journalist, and he'd come over and read what I'd done and make some suggestions. There was a librarian and she used to do the same. These are people whose editorial judgement I trusted a lot, and rightly so. I think they were just as good as any editor would be, maybe. Although you'll always find that people have different opinions, as you'll see.

In any event, I'd got to the part in my autobiography where I'd run away to Spain with Esmond Romilly. We were in Bilbao which is where we landed in Spain, and I thought—now this had happened many, many years before, because that was in 1937. I couldn't seem to sort of... I was wracking my memory for what this place looked like. Because for one thing, my journalist friend-critic was always saying, "You haven't got enough description in the book." He loves to know where he is and have the place described. So I started thinking to myself, *Now what the devil did Bilbao look like?* Well, I don't know, I simply couldn't really remember too much about it, although we lived there for some weeks. So I sort of lifted it out of the encyclopedia. Then I wrote something like, "Bilbao is a large port town, surrounded by mountains, with a river running through it." So the journalist friend read this, and he wrote in the margin, "Good! At last we've got some description." [laughter] So then, the librarian friend read it, and she wrote in the other margin, "This sounds as though it had been copied out of an encyclopedia." [laughter]

So I'll read to you how I finally resolved it. You see, the thing is, you do get caught out if you don't write truthfully. So I did it this way. "Life in Bilbao had for me far more of the quality of a dream than of a dream come true. It seemed so absolutely extraordinary to be there with Esmond, to realize that this was actually me living in Spain, and to think that a few hundred miles away over the sea, there was Rutland Gate, unchanged: the quiet, smooth life of the family flowing on unrippled, marked only by breakfast, lunch, tea, the six o'clock BBC news, dinner, bedtime, all following their normal progression. I could visualize aunts coming to tea, casually asking my mother, 'Where's Decca?' 'She's staying in Dieppe with the Padgett twins,' my mother would answer passively. 'She seems to be having a very nice time, from her letters.'" (That's where I'd said I was.) "Reality still seemed to be centered at home, with the family, and had little to do with the rattling third-class French trains, the crowded Bayonne

hotel, the swaying, grinding cargo boat of the past ten days, or now, with the grim, serious town of Bilbao. It was like living in a protracted vision.” That’s about all I put about the town, in the end. Still, I thought it came off better perhaps than the encyclopedia bit.

I’ll tell you another one. In *The American Way of Death*, we had the problem of describing the embalming procedure. It was an amazing thing to us that although embalming is the ultimate fate of 99% or more of all Americans, there’s never been any description of it written up anywhere, except in the textbooks of the embalmers themselves. We thought that it would be only fair and right to level with the reading public on this whole matter of embalming, and tell them exactly what goes on. However, it is not an easy thing to do with any elegance, as you’ll see, because it’s really rather a revolting subject. Nevertheless, we thought that it would be important to do. So we decided to resolve that, and I’ll tell you how this was done. First of all, we’d gone into, in a previous part of the book, the marvelous euphemisms of the world of undertakers. There are no more “undertakers,” there are “funeral directors,” or in fact “grief therapists” too. There are no more “coffins,” they’re all “caskets.” No more “hearses”; they’re called “professional cars,” and that kind of thing. The undertakers published whole lists of OK words that should be used, in things like *Casket & Sunnyside*; that’s where I got these lists from. The deceased is never to be referred to as the meat, or the cadaver, or the corpse, but preferably by name, as Mr. Jones. That’s what get get a lot of [...] And the embalming room, of course, is the preparation room, and so it goes.

So we decided to do a little bit in this spirit. I’ll read out a bit. “The drama begins to unfold with the arrival of the corpse at the mortuary.” This is all done in terms of a sort of drama, like a stage play, with the corpse at the center, which is really what it is. “Alas, poor Yorick! How surprised he would be to see how his counterpart of today is whisked off to a funeral parlor and is, in short order, sprayed, sliced, pierced, pickled, trussed, trimmed, creamed, waxed, painted, rouged, and neatly dressed, transformed from a common corpse into a beautiful memory picture.” (A “beautiful memory picture” is another undertakers’ phrase which was coined in the middle 20s by a public relations man for the industry.) This process is known in the trade as ‘embalming and restorative art,’ and is so universally employed in the United States and Canada that the funeral director does it routinely, without consulting corpse or kin.” Then we go on a little bit, now... Then we go on to say that the undertakers have succeeded in getting a law passed that nobody can observe these procedures; they are done sort of in secret. All except apprentices are excluded by law from the preparation room. “A close look at what does actually take place makes plain in large measure the undertakers’ intractable reticence concerning a procedure that has become his major *raison d’être*. Is it possible he fears that public information about embalming might lead patrons to wonder if they really wanted this service? If the funeral men are loath to discuss the subject outside the trade, the reader may understandably be equally loath to go on reading at this point. For those who have the stomach for it, let us part the formaldehyde curtain. Others should skip to page 74.” And we sort of go on... “The body is first laid out in the undertaker’s morgue; or rather, Mr. Jones is reposing in

the preparation room, to be readied to bid the world farewell.” We discuss these... all the marvelous equipment that they have, “ingenious aids to prop and stabilize the cadaver. A [...] head rest. The Edwards Arm and Hand Positioner. The repose block to support the shoulders during the embalming, and the Throupe Foot Positioner, which resembles an old-fashioned stocks.”

Then we do the quote from textbooks. I’ll go on with a bit more of this stuff. “Speaking of fears entertained in early days of premature burial, the textbook writer points out, ‘One of the effects of embalming by chemical injection, however, has been to dispel fears of live burial,’ to which we say, ‘How true!’ If the blood is removed, chances of live burial are indeed remote.” Then we say, “To return to Mr. Jones, the blood is drained out through the veins and replaced by embalming fluid pumped in through the arteries. As noted in *The Principles and Practices of Embalming*, ‘Every operator has a favorite injection and drainage point, a fact which becomes a handicap only if he fails or refuses to forsake his favorite when conditions demand it.’ Typical favorites are the carotid artery, femoral artery,” etc. Then we tell about the cosmetic stuff. The velvety appearance of living tissue. Suntan, in three separate tints: suntan, a special cosmetic tint; a pink shade, especially indicated for young female subjects; and regular cosmetic tint, moderately pink. “About three to six gallons of a dyed and perfumed solution of formaldehyde, glycerin, borax, etc. is soon circulating through Mr. Jones.” And so on.

I want to tell you that the book almost foundered on this paragraph. In fact, all these paragraphs, a few pages. I didn’t read the whole thing; I skipped over it just to give you the sort of... because you are a captive audience, you can’t skip to page 74 if I read it out to you. Anyway, I sent in... When *The American Way of Death* was first commissioned, what you do is you write a first chapter, and then a sort of table of contents, and send it to a publisher to see if they’re interested. Well, if you’ve already written a book, which I had, you’re already under contract for your second book with the same publisher. So we sent the first chapter and table of contents to my English publisher in London and American publisher in Boston, Houghton Mifflin. And I got a letter back almost by return of post, as quick as it could come from London from the publisher, saying “We think this is so bad, that we just don’t want to publish the book after all.” He said, “We’ve thought very hard about trying to find out a way that we can recommend to you, by making some changes, you could still make it publishable. However, we can only urge you to give it up, and to stop writing it. For our part, we would like to be relieved of our obligation to go through with the contract to publish.”

Then I got a letter from my agent, saying, “For my part, I should like to be relieved of the obligation to show it further to publishers.” This is the most depressing thing that can possibly happen to you, you know, when you’re in the middle of a book. So I thought, “Well, the Boston publisher will understand, because after all, this is an American problem, and they won’t take the same position as the English ones did.” So I waited for a month or more before I got a letter from the Boston publisher. I used to go out and choke the mailman, saying “I know you’ve got a

letter from Boston in there! Give it to me!” They really took their time, and when they wrote back, although it was much more diplomatically phrased, essentially what they said was, “We don’t think that stuff’s any good. You’ll just have to omit the part about embalming, and go on and write something else about funerals.” So my husband and I decided that we were just going to stand firm on this, and that we were going to mimeograph it ourselves if need be and just send it to our friends, but we weren’t going to change it. So I wrote back and told the publisher this, and meanwhile my brilliant agent got Simon & Schuster to take it, and they loved the embalming bit. Mr. Jones was one of their favorite characters in the whole book.

The moral of it is now come. A couple of years after the book was published, I received in the mail a textbook called *The Essential Prose*, which is sort of a college textbook, I believe, of readings for students. And there, between Plato and Sir Thomas Browne, was Mr. Jones and the embalming bit. So the only moral, I think, there is this: if you are serious about writing, while it is marvelous to get the advice, counsel, and criticism of whether it be a teacher or a publisher—it’s most helpful, in fact invaluable, and it really often saves you from terrible things—in the last analysis, whatever you write has got to be your own judgement. Even if it means you’re going to have it turned down, or rejection from a publishers, or a D grade from a teacher, to me it would be more important in the long run to stick by your guns on something that you might feel was a matter of principle in writing.

Now, why don’t I sort of knock it off here, and see what questions people have, what other areas you’d like to discuss? The famous writers’ school was mentioned, and I’ve mentioned the prison thing. I don’t know if any of you have read the Famous Writers School or are remotely interested in it, or whether you’d rather discuss prisons, or whether you’d rather get back to some stuff about funerals or what. So suppose we had some questions, and find this out? Yeah.

[inaudible; audience member speaking]

MITFORD: The question was “Are you doing anything specifically about women prisoners?” Well, in the book, probably not, because the problem is, you have to define a territory, an area. This is easily the most complicated thing I have ever tackled, this book on prisons. What I’ve pretty much done is to arbitrarily decide to take on the male felony prisons: San Quentin... I don’t know what the name of the Oregon prison, the state penitentiary, is. These are the ones I am primarily writing about. I have got something coming up on women’s prisons; I’m glad you asked about that. In Washington D.C. I was part of an amazing conference that was sponsored by an organization with the extremely off-putting name of the “National College of State Trial Judges.” In any event, it was an organization to do with D.C. prisons; it was conference to do with D.C. prisons. It was an eight-day meeting, and one of the requirements of going to the meeting was that every free-world person—by the way, there were eight convicts who came... I mean, sorry, sixteen convicts who came every day by bus. Some men from Lawton, which is the felony prison, some young men from juvenile, and some women from the women’s detention

center. They called themselves the “con”-sultants to the group. Anyway, as part of the rules of the conference, we all had to agree to spend 24 hours behind bars as a prisoner. So nine of us went to the women’s detention and did spend 24 hours there. I’ve got a piece about that coming out shortly in *McCall’s* magazine. I think it’s going to be in the August issue. It’s going to be called “Women in Cages.” So that’ll be one thing. But whether I’ll get it into my book, I’m not at the stage of deciding.

[audience member speaking in background]

MITFORD: In other words, you’re saying that—did I make any rebuttal to the letters that came in about the article? Well, I didn’t—there were several letters. In the first place, when that article came out, I mean nothing had happened like since *The American Way of Death* in terms of response. The thing about *The American Way of Death* was, we didn’t really think it would sell very well. We thought it might be of interest to people who were interested in funeral reform, and how many is that? You could probably name them on the fingers of one hand! So we thought it would sell three or four thousand, broke even, it would be fine. We were simply astonished when it just took off and went to the top of the bestseller list, and stayed there a long time, and sold thousands of copies. What I was getting at was, the astonishing numbers of letters that I received about *The American Way of Death*, absolutely floods of them. And some of them even just came to “Jessica Mitford, Cheap Funerals, Oakland,” and they still were delivered by the mailman. [laughter]

The same thing happened with the Famous Writers article. I’ve written lots and lots of other articles, and many of them in magazine with far larger circulation than *Atlantic*. For example, *McCall’s*, which claims to have some six million readers. Honestly, I’ve never met any of them, but they still say they have six million. Well, the *Atlantic* only has what? Three hundred thousand or something. I’ve written quite a lot of articles, and on some controversial subjects, I’d say at least half a dozen in *McCall’s*, and maybe received a smattering, five or six letters. I’ve written a lot of articles in the *Atlantic*, too. For instance, a big chunk of my book about Dr. Spock’s trial was in the *Atlantic*, and maybe I got six or seven letters about that. But with the Famous Writers, letters started pouring in the minute it hit the subscribers. I got a call from the editor saying, “The issue is not yet out on the newsstand, but we’ve already had fifty letters from the subscribers.” Most of them actually were from irate students of the Famous Writers School who’d been gypped [sic], you see. Then they started writing to me. I thought the selection of letters in the letters column was very good, it was a real cross-section.

I don’t generally—I don’t really like writing rebuttals. Editors of magazines, out of courtesy, if you get a letter blasting something you’ve done, they always send it to you and say, “Do you want to reply to this?” but I always say no. That’s their opinion; they’re perfectly entitled. The thing about the letters made me think that there’s a great deal in common between undertakers and Famous Writers, you know. I think the thing that seems to be in common is

that both of them offer their customers, or imply that their customers will get immortality, and then they overcharge for it and don't come through with the immortality. I think this is what makes Famous Writers and undertakers alike.

Anyone else? Yes. Nancy.

[audience member speaking in background]

MITFORD: The question is, in the book on prisons, is there any specific recommendations in change in the prison system? Essentially, I think—it's always difficult for me to talk about a work in progress, because I've only got about half of it done, you know. And so much can seem to happen to it in the meantime. I think my conclusions are getting clearer to me all the time, and they are difficult ones to arrive at. In the first place, the book is essentially going to be an attack on liberal prison reform. The liberal reformers from the early days up until the present time like Ramsay Clark and so forth, every time they have tried to get something done in the prisons, the prison administration has co-opted these ideas and managed to turn it into the opposite.

For example, the indeterminate sentence. The whole idea of the indeterminate sentence is that you... has enabled the authorities to look at the man rather than the crime and to judge by his progress in prison when he's ready for release, this sort of thing. It's a real sugar-coated, humanitarian-sounding thing. In every single jurisdiction where the indeterminate sentencing has been adopted, prisoners serve longer sentences, longer terms. In California, where there's a very extreme form of indeterminacy, like one year to life, or, one year to fifty years, I think, for rape, for example. Five to life for robbery. That kind of term. California is supposed to lead the way in prison reform for the nation. The result in California has been that the median times served by prisoners has totally risen, and it now stands at 36 months, which is the highest in the world. That's one reform.

Another reform, the introduction of psychiatric treatment into prisons. I wrote two or three chapters on this; this is a subject that really fascinates me. The psychiatric treatment is used solely as an additional method of a) securing compliance from the prisoners, conformity to prison rules and that sort of thing, and b) as a very definite means of punishment. My feeling, having been through all of this... and I even found that governmental reports will tell you these three things about prison, this is not just something that radicals or prison... or convicts are saying. This is what, say, the person's crime commission report says. That prisons do not protect the public. The reason is that a tiny minority of all criminals, all people who commit crimes, are in the prisons. For instance, in 1966, of six million major crimes committed ended up with one-half of one percent of that figure being imprisoned. So they're all around you in the streets, and of course, half the criminals are never caught; more than half the people who

commit infractions of the law. So you're not protected, because the murderer who is going to be in tomorrow's headline is right among you today. That's one, I think, fairly proved thing.

Then of course you have to think of what kind of crime you are talking about. Well, the FBI and the President, they know what kind of crime they're talking about; they're talking about crime in the streets. They're talking about crimes committed by poor people. They're not talking about killings committed by the rich and powerful against the rest of the population, such as when that mine explosion took place, and we read in the papers afterwards that the mine owners had been warned over and over again by technicians of the dangers of the mine, and all those men died in there. I don't see why that's not just as plain a murder as any other. So this all comes in under the idea of what kinds of crimes are punished? Well, then we find out that it's not so much the kinds of crime, it's the people who commit them that are punished; that the prisons are primarily a place to keep, a place to contain and [...] what the establishment perceives as the dangerous classes. That are primarily poor people, young people, non-conformists, political dissidents, Blacks, browns... this is what fills up the prisons today. You don't find very many rich people in prison. So it does not protect the public.

The second objective of prison is to deter from crime. Because the repeater rate of people who get out of prison is absolutely vast. It's called recidivism in the trade. They always have these euphemisms. What it means is backsliders, people who come out and then they commit another crime, so they go back into prison. The rate here is estimated at about sixty percent. So quite honestly, prison, or the fear of it, does not deter the people who are in it! Otherwise they wouldn't have committed the crime in the first place, if they were scared of going to prison. Or if they were deterred, rather.

Thirdly, prisons—and I think we all know this by now—do not rehabilitate. Thus, they are filling absolutely none of their stated functions. So in my view, it would be safer, in the long run, to let out everybody who is in prison today without distinction and... [it would be] safer, cheaper, and everything else than to keep these horrible bastions of cruelty going. This I believe is going to be some some sort of conclusion. I know that I've got to express it and think it through far more convincingly than I've been able to tell you here today, and that's really what the book is about. Perhaps I won't be able to tell it, except in the full-length book itself, but this is what I believe my conclusion is going to be.

Yeah?

[audience member speaking]

MITFORD: The question is, Have I got a working title for the book? Well, I thought it might be... the title for my *Atlantic* article was "Kind and Usual Punishment." It was mostly about California. Obviously, it's a play on the idea of "cruel and unusual," so it's "kind and usual" is

what the Californian system has. And look where it's got them. So I thought that it might be *Kind and Usual Punishment: the Menace of Liberal Prison Reform*. I'm working on that kind of title. Essentially, it is an attack on these misguided do-gooders who've been making reform proposals and then allowing them to be co-opted by the prisons.

[audience member speaking]

MITFORD: Yes, I've had a great deal of non-cooperation. This has been one of the... [...], no, research, well. I seem to have gone around the country, in fact, sort of scattering lawsuits against the prisons. I've got about four of them pending now, lawsuits against them for not permitting me to go in and interview the prisoners. I think the best example of this was when I was up in Seattle, more than a year ago, at McNeil Island Federal Penitentiary, which is not a state prison, but is under the Federal Bureau of Prisons, so therefore it's controlled from Washington D.C. [audio skips] full-fledged strike there. And of course anybody who knows anything about prisons realizes that it takes immense courage, determination, and fortitude, and no doubt immense provocation, to go on strike in a prison, because you thereby lose years of good time that you've accumulated, or on an indeterminate sentence be held in forever as a troublemaker. One knows that something really serious is afoot when there is a strike. I got a letter from the strikers asking me to come out and see them, so I then decided to come. So I rang up the warden of the prison when I got to Seattle, and he said, "Absolutely not. You won't be able to see them." So, first thing in the morning, I rang up the U.S. Bureau of Prisons, and asked them about it. They said, "No, the warden is correct. You won't be able to see the prisoners. There's a long-standing rule, enacted in 1930, against allowing any reporters to interview prisoners." I said, "Why is that?" He said, "It's a rule for the protection of the privacy of the prisoners." I said, "That's the most specious thing I've ever heard! I know whose privacy you are protecting. It's yours and the warden's. Those walls are there to keep people out, as well as keep prisoners in, so we can't see the true conditions of the thing." Anyway, I wasn't allowed in, so I filed suit. There's another suit in Massachusetts, against the prisons there.

Really, in the long run, to me, the mentality of the keepers is far more interesting than the mentality of the prisoners. My feeling is that the prisoners are—and I believe this, from meeting lots and lots of ex-convicts, whom I know now, and also from letters I have received—I think that prisoners are very much a cross-section of their community. There are some absolutely brilliant people in prison, there are some very sensitive and fine people in prison, and there are some very unpleasant people in prison, just as there would be on any block in the city. But the mentality of the keepers is something else. Of course, common sense would tell us that a field of this kind, where you are all-powerful over the powerless, is bound to attract a goodly share of rather simplistic-minded people. And this is no doubt true. After all, it would be an odd little boy, if you said, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" who would answer, "A prison guard." Or an even odder one who would answer, "Embalmer." [laughter]

I think that these prison officials have morally sort of conned themselves into believing that they're in there for the good of the prisoners. There's a wonderful little thing on a [...] long-playing record that I heard the other day, which I'm going to use in the book. He is discussing an interview that Dave Galloway had with the warden of the Ohio penitentiary. Galloway says to the warden, "What motivates a man to spend forty years of his life in prison work?" And the warden answers, "I guess I just like people, Dave." [laughter] Sort of says it, you know. So I'm going to go rather after their mentality in the book, I think.

I had such a wonderful time—I must just tell you—this is the sort of research that I enjoy. I went to a five-day meeting in Miami Beach at the Americana hotel of the American Correctional Association. It was their 101st such meeting. In other words, they've been going since 1870. And they had their first one, the first great reform convention, in Cincinnati in 1870. So I'm calling my first chapter "101 Years of Prison Reform," because everything that was said at that 1870 meeting has been parroted ever since by the same people, you see. That was really some experience. It had aspects of a trade hall, these meetings, because they have exhibits, things for sale for prison use. All manned by various [...] Which very much point out, I think, the schizophrenia in this prison field. For example, you'll see a booth saying, "The World of Work," with examples of how people can learn typing, how they can learn various trades and this kind of thing. "The World of Work." Next to that will be one advertising the use of the Bible in correctional institutions. They all have been terribly strong for the Bible, lots of *padres* and that. Next to that is a veritable torture chamber of chains, showing seven different ways to tie a man up, stun guns, a sort of device for giving you a great punch in the head, handcuffs, all that stuff, irons, you know. With very gung-ho descriptions of how to use these things. A high point to me of the convention was an all-night cocktail party that was given by the handcuff people in their penthouse suite. [laughter in background] And watching this parole agents and wardens getting absolutely sloshed as the night wore on. I was thinking to myself, "They'll never be able to meet parole conditions." [laughter]

We seem to have gone on about Famous Writers, undertakers, and prisons. Yes?

[audience member speaking]

MITFORD: Between what? [question continues in background] Well, I think that's a marvelous compliment; I'm very pleased to hear you say that, because actually writing comes terribly hard to me. It takes ages to finish a book. I rewrite everything about eighteen times before I've got it exactly the way I want it. As long as all that pain doesn't show in the book, I'm glad! Yes.

[audience member speaking]

MITFORD: The question was, did I get any letters from people in the Famous Writers school, and the answer is no. They seem to have stayed away from me rather considerably. That was a

sort of weird experience altogether. [questioner continues in background] No. That was the shocker. We thought that—for example, you'd think that Phyllis McGinley, who's a terrific sort of Christ-er and she's all for white motherhood in the suburbs and things... [laughter] Here she's caught with her hand in people's pockets. You would have thought she might resign out of decency, but no, she didn't. I was telling at lunch how I got—here's another sort of research item. When I first decided to do it, I went down the public library and looked up the names of all the Famous Writers, and about six of them were listed in *Who's Who*. They give home addresses for them, and most of them were in sort of remote towns in Connecticut somewhere. Some of them, like in the case of Faith Baldwin, were listed in her husband's name. So this way I got all their telephone numbers from the phone company. The next morning, I got up quite early as I usually do, about 7 my time, which would be 10 o'clock Famous Writers time since they all live back East, and I started dialing Famous Writers, you see. I started off with Faith Baldwin. As an English friend of mine said, "Her name comprises the two things we most dislike: one is Faith, and the other is Baldwin," thinking of the conservative Prime Minister, pre-war. Anyway, I called up Faith Baldwin. My husband said, "You're absolutely crazy. They're not going to talk to you, why should they?" I said, "I don't know. I expect they probably will, let's see." So I dialed Faith Baldwin's number, station-to-station, thereby saving seventy-five cents or whatever it is, and said, "Is this Miss Baldwin?" Yes. "This is Jessica Mitford speaking. She said, "Oh! How nice to hear from you!" She's got a sort of whisky voice, you know. I said, "Yes, so I was calling about the Famous Writers School." She said, "Oh yes, well, it's a very good school; we do a really good job, students love it," and that sort of thing. I said, "Well, it says here in this brochure, 'If you are studying fiction, Faith Baldwin is literally looking over your shoulder as you write, helping you.' To me, that means that you will be reviewing my paper if I enroll in this school, and helping to grade them." And she said, "Oh, anybody would be out of their mind to think we could do that." So I said, "Thank you very much," and hung up. That was my quote from her. [laughter]

And then I called up Phyllis McGinley. I'd met her, as a matter of fact, in New York, so we knew each other very slightly indeed, but we had met once. So I said, "I'm calling you up about the Famous Writers School," and she said, "Well, I don't know anything about it. I'm just a figurehead." I said, "Well, it says in *Business Week* of several years ago—I have this clipping from *Business Week* in 1965 or something—that the Famous faculty make around four or five thousand a year out of the school, are paid that much." And she said, "Well, I may have a price on my soul, but it's not *that* low. We get a lot more than that." So I said, "Thank you very much," and hung up. [laughter]

Best of all, of course, was Bennett Cerf. By now I'd decided to go back East and actually go to see the school in operation, and I did; I spent the whole day there. At the same time, I went to see Bennett Cerf. He's chairman of the board at Random House, which in turn owns Knopf, which is my publisher. I thought, Oh, dear. Goodbye, Knopf. But I still had to go and see Bennett Cerf about this Famous Writers School. So I called him up from Oakland, where I live, and I said,

“Could I come and see you?” and he sounded perfectly delighted. We made the appointment, and he said, “What do you want to see me about?” When I said it was about the Famous Writers School, I could sort of rather hear his face dropping on the other side of the phone. Anyway, so I went to see him. I had a long interview with him; the others I did more by phone. At one point in our discussion, he said—first of all he was saying that the school does do a good job; it really teaches people. What I felt he was trying to do was to put us two on a different plane, with those people down there who sign up in the hopes that they will become writers. He said, “After all, they get a lot of pleasure out of it. It doesn’t hurt them at all; it’s good for them to improve their writing style,” and that. They’re charged nine hundred dollars for this rotten and worthless course, which is the whole reason I got interested in it. He then said, “Well, let’s face it. Mail-order selling only appeals to very gullible people.” And he saw that I was writing that down, and he said, “For god’s sake, don’t quote me on that, that I put ‘gullible,’ because I’ll have all the mail-order houses in the country on me if I say that.” So I said, “Would you like to try to paraphrase it, then?” So he said, “Well, you could say that in general I don’t like the hard sell, but this is what American business is about.” I said, “Well, I don’t consider that a paraphrase. I shall use them both.” Which I then did! So he wasn’t best pleased at all.

[audience member speaking]

MITFORD: Well, the Famous Writers School has gone broke. It’s gone bankrupt. Hm? Any other cases? Well, I suppose everybody hopes to create some effect; otherwise, why write, you know? On the thing of the funerals, I did have occasion to do a bit of post-mortem as you might say on the subject, which was when the *Atlantic* asked me to write an article about whether it had had any effect, a couple of years after the book came out. What I did discover was that clergymen and other people who know about funerals on a big scale did seem to feel that the public had a far greater awareness of being fleeced than they had before the book came out. Most of which, I must say, I put down to the extraordinary way the subject was suddenly taken up by the media. There was a big TV program called “The Great American Funeral,” which was seen by millions more people than would ever buy a book. I think that there has been that sort of change. But the trial of Spock, I certainly can’t claim much credit for anything that’s happened to conspiracy law, because I don’t think the book was widely enough read. However, it is true that conspiracy law seems to be—I shouldn’t say on the way out, but prosecutors must be aware that they are losing conspiracy cases all over the place, and that was the chief thrust of that book. I can’t take any credit for that, I don’t think. I don’t know if any of the jurors read it.

[brief speaking in background; applause]

HOST: Thank you, and goodbye.

[program ends]

