

**Text**

**Steve Yarbrough on *Conversations* #531**

**Gene Edwards:** Author, Steve Yarborough is here with his latest work called *Prisoners of War*. It's a look at the prisoner of war camps in the Mississippi Delta during the Second World War. I am delighted to have you here.

**Steve Yarbrough:** I'm pleased to be here.

**Gene Edwards:** Meet you in person. We talked on the phone by remote thing.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Pieces, yeah.

**Gene Edwards:** Tell me how it was the day you got the phone call that said you were going to be the Grisham Writer-in-Residence up there in Oxford.

**Steve Yarbrough:** That was a great day in my life. I didn't know how badly I wanted to come back until somebody dangled it before me.

**Gene Edwards:** You'd gone to Ole Miss.

**Steve Yarbrough:** I'd gone to Ole Miss. Got two degrees there and had been away for too long. The only sad part was having to leave at the end of it.

**Gene Edwards:** So they made the phone call and you?... Did you negotiate or what?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Oh no. Are you kidding? No sir. I just said, "Yes."

**Gene Edwards:** We had Willie Morris was one of your teachers up there.

**Steve Yarbrough:** He sure was.

**Gene Edwards:** Your story about the prisoners in the delta reminded me about the story that Willie told. Willie told two prisoner of war stories. You know, there's a prisoner of war camp in Clinton near by here and Willie always said that he went over there and traded things with the prisoners.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Well if you know Willie it's hard to imagine that he wouldn't, actually.

**Gene Edwards:** That he wouldn't, or that he might have remembered that or whatever.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Well, I imagine he embroidered on it. But he wouldn't have passed up a chance.

**Gene Edwards:** The other story he told, and he told it in an interview we had on television once, the story of one of the camps up in the delta where one of the prisoners escaped and somehow got

onto a bus and was caught because he went to the back of the bus to try to be inconspicuous. Of course at that time...

**Steve Yarbrough:** That was the wrong place to go.

**Gene Edwards:** That was the wrong place to go.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Yeah, there were a lot of escapes from those camps. Two guys walked off from the camp at Indianola because they were diesel mechanics and they heard a cotton gin fire up. So, they went to see the cotton gin and examine it and then they went back and turned themselves in.

**Gene Edwards:** Go check it out.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Go check it out.

**Gene Edwards:** How many prisoners of war were there in this country? It was an amazingly high number.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Depending on who you believe, between 350 and 425,000.

**Gene Edwards:** Really? All over the country?

**Steve Yarbrough:** All over the country. They were concentrated more in warmer parts of the country because they just didn't want to have to worry about paying for heating those camps. There were a lot of them in California.

**Gene Edwards:** How many here in Mississippi, you know?

**Steve Yarbrough:** I'm not sure exactly how many. I think probably something like seven or eight.

**Gene Edwards:** Could you write anyplace other than the delta--or about any place other than the delta? Because *Oxygen Man* was about the catfish farmers and this book about the...

**Steve Yarbrough:** I've written some stories that were set different places-- in Poland. I live in Poland part of each year. Occasionally something will come to me with a California setting but I have a hard time imagining writing a novel sitting anywhere other than the delta to be honest.

**Gene Edwards:** Place is so important.

**Steve Yarbrough:** It is. It's mine and I'm its.

**Gene Edwards:** And you grew up there.

**Steve Yarbrough:** I did.

**Gene Edwards:** Was your dad an engineer for ETV?

**Steve Yarbrough:** My dad worked for this very organization for many, many years.

**Gene Edwards:** Really?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Yes, he did.

**Gene Edwards:** In which--Inverness, was it?

**Steve Yarbrough:** In Inverness even though I believe he helped build the one down in Booneville. Maybe one of the others as well.

**Gene Edwards:** Well, you're part of the family.

**Steve Yarbrough:** I am.

**Gene Edwards:** Tell me about the story of *Prisoners of War*. What was it that fascinated you about it and made you feel you had to tell this-- make this a part of the story?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Well, you know, when my dad first met my wife, who I wasn't yet married to back in 1984, he told her a story I'd never heard. I didn't even know there was a POW camp in Indianola. But he told her that when he was a young man, before he went away to join the navy, his father had hired a detachment of German POW's to work in the cotton field. My dad would pick 'em up each day and take 'em back to the camp. And he told my wife that one guy out of the group finally pulled him aside one day and told him in broken English, "I'm not German. I'm really Polish and they made me fight." My dad said he'd never been able to forget it and he wanted to know if indeed it was possible. And my wife told him yes it was because in Western Poland there were a lot of people with German names and German ancestors but they considered themselves Poles. When Poland was overrun a lot of those people were given the choice, "You want to do forced labor or do you want to join up?" So they did. So that story contained the element of mystery that for me at least as a writer is just essential in writing a novel. I felt I should write it because I couldn't quit thinking about it. I think that's the story you want to tell.

**Gene Edwards:** I didn't go into the notebook, It went into here and went into here.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Yeah, I think going into here is more important.

**Gene Edwards:** Tell me about the buses that you used.

**Steve Yarbrough:** The rolling stores?

**Gene Edwards:** Yeah, because they really existed.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Oh, they did. I think, I may be wrong, but I think that somewhere in one of Willie's books he talks about a rolling store. Maybe *North Toward Home*. I just don't know.

**Gene Edwards:** I think so, too.

**Steve Yarbrough:** But my dad drove a rolling store at one point in his life. I remember the rolling stores. I don't remember-- I think he may have driven one again after I was born. But I remember getting on the stores and buying stuff. I'm going to say maybe in '59 or '60.

**Gene Edwards:** They were school buses.

**Steve Yarbrough:** They were school buses, yeah.

**Gene Edwards:** Or whatever kind of bus they could get a hold of.

**Steve Yarbrough:** They were usually school buses that were falling apart.

**Gene Edwards:** What would they do to the inside of it?

**Steve Yarbrough:** They would equip them with candy counters and you know, those old soft drink boxes that would have a chunk of ice in them and be filled up with water. You'd have those things in there and I think earlier, back in the '40's they really were selling everything. Tires...

**Gene Edwards:** They probably had to.

**Steve Yarbrough:** They did because people couldn't get to town very often.

**Gene Edwards:** The rationing was going on.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Rationing, right.

**Gene Edwards:** Sugar was a very big commodity on those busses, right?

**Steve Yarbrough:** That's right.

**Gene Edwards:** Why was that?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Uh, well people were known to make illegal liquor and you need sugar for that. So, there was some of that going on, and you know because of the rationing there just wasn't enough of it to go around.

**Gene Edwards:** And there they were out here driving around. How important is it to have a whole lot of people involved in one of your novels because there are a lot of stories going on.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Yeah. Uh, I guess in general I'm much more comfortable if I have things confined.

**Gene Edwards:** How's that?

**Steve Yarbrough:** If I don't have that many characters involved.

**Gene Edwards:** So you would prefer just doing a short story or do you feel like you need to drag a lot of people into the act?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Usually I haven't felt like that but in a sense this novel became bigger than I expected it to be when I started it. I thought it was going to be a little bit more confined. I think that the inclusion of the blues musician was something that made the novel a little bit bigger than I had originally conceived of.

**Gene Edwards:** When did you find out that he was going to be there? Did he surprise you?

**Steve Yarbrough:** He did surprise me a little bit. I knew early on that Dan was going to have a young African American man that he worked with. But I didn't know he would be a blues musician. Honestly, I can't remember when that came to me.

**Gene Edwards:** That's the best way, isn't it?

**Steve Yarbrough:** I think so.

**Gene Edwards:** I'm sorry. I interrupted you in your progress of talking about the difference in the kinds of stories you like to write. Again the difference between the novels and the short stories.

**Steve Yarbrough:** I think that what's so thrilling about a short story is if you make one wrong move you're in trouble. I think as a writer you're on the high wire in a short story. The form itself is exquisite. It's like writing a poem. It becomes an incredible challenge, I think, to try to suggest more than you say in a story. Stories work by omission rather than by inclusion. When you have a great short story writer like a lady we were talking about earlier, Miss Welty, there's just pure magic involved. You know, you read a story, one of her stories, and ask yourself how much you know about the characters. Then look at what she's actually said about the characters and you realize through some kind of magic she's managed to make you think you know things that aren't actually on the page. And it's the power of suggestion that can really carry a story in an incredible way; whereas, novels work by accumulation. I think that when you've been writing novels for a long time, I really have the feeling that you almost have to go back and learn how to write a story again. That's how it's been for me anyway. I think somewhere Miss Welty said, "Every story you write teaches you only how to write that story." It's not going to teach you how to write the next one. You got to figure it out all over again.

**Gene Edwards:** Every one is a new beginning.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Right.

**Gene Edwards:** So, what is your own particular style, what is your particular system that you follow? because you've got a couple of kids and a busy wife and a busy life out there in California. How do you carve out time for it and what is your routine?

**Steve Yarbrough:** Uh, I tell people that a few years ago things were a lot busier than they are now. There was one year-- I think it was the year I was writing *The Oxygen Man*, where several days a week I only had about an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes, maybe even less, to write. Then the other days were free. At the end of writing the book I discovered that 85% of the book was written on those days when I only had 45 minutes or an hour. The rest of the time I was sitting around-- I don't know, looking at the sky or putting off work or whatever. I don't write for long periods at a time but I try to just be complete in my concentration. My wife has said that house could burn down and if I were writing I'd just burn right up with it. That's how I am.

**Gene Edwards:** Do you outline things or do you sit and free form it? What do you do?

**Steve Yarbrough:** I usually think I know the whole story before I begin to write. But I think that if you never get surprised along the way you are probably just putting foot in front of the other. So those moments when things take a turn that I didn't expect I've learned to really treasure. Because I think those moments are when you find yourself moving away from the most obvious possibilities.

**Gene Edwards:** And that's where you want to go as a writer.

**Steve Yarbrough:** That's where you want to go.

**Gene Edwards:** This is a complicated, interesting, puzzling, sad and happy moments-- just a great third novel.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Thank you very much.

**Gene Edwards:** Where do you go next? What are you working on now?

**Steve Yarbrough:** I'm working on a book called *The End of California* that's set almost totally in Mississippi. It's about a man who goes to California and stays there for many years and then comes home.

**Gene Edwards:** Steve Yarborough, thanks.

**Steve Yarbrough:** Thank you.

**Gene Edwards:** Great to see you.

**Steve Yarbrough:** My pleasure.