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Essay: Looking back on 29 years of the nation's greatest storytellers

Journalist Dean Nelson reflects on interviewing America's top authors at his Writer's Symposium by the Sea, which returns this week for its 30th year



Dean Nelson, left, loses control of his interview with author Ray Bradbury at the 2001 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (Dean Nelson)



By **DEAN NELSON**

UPDATED: February 23, 2025 at 7:14 AM PST



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What do you do when you lose control of an interview?

If you're a journalist, you get it back. You're in charge, it's your job to shape the trajectory, you

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don't retreat, you don't give in.

That's how it has been throughout my journalism career, and that's what I teach students in my journalism classes. I even wrote a book about interviewing, and that's one of the maxims – it's your interview.

But if Ray Bradbury hijacks the interview, what do you do?

I quickly gave up. I did the same when the recently departed Nikki Giovanni took over during our interview in 2016. Same with Bill Moyers in 2005. And I did it joyfully.



Dean Nelson, left, interviews Bill Moyers at the 2011 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

All of these were done in front of a live audience at our annual Writer's Symposium By The Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University, which returns this week with events Wednesday through Friday.

Moyers, one of my journalism heroes, at least had the foresight to let me know he was going to take charge. Just before we went on stage he said, in that soft, southern drawl, "Before you start asking me questions, I would like to say a few things to the audience."

What am I going to say at that point? "Forget it, dude. This is my interview, my stage, my ranch?" His "few things" took up almost half of our time.

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I gave up before the interview even started. And it was awesome.



Author Sandra Cisneros will be interviewed Feb. 27 by Dean Nelson at the 2025 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (Keith Dannemiller)

The Writer's Symposium By The Sea is in its 30th year, and this year we're hosting some of the best storytellers alive – Sandra Cisneros, best known for her book “The House on Mango Street,” but who has also written many volumes of poetry, short stories and other novels



Author Jesmyn Ward will be interviewed Feb. 26 by Dean Nelson at the 2025 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (Beowulf Sheehan)

Also on the bill is Jesmyn Ward, a MacArthur “genius grant” winner, whose novels like “Let Us Descend” and “Salvage the Bones” have drawn comparisons to Toni Morrison for the strong

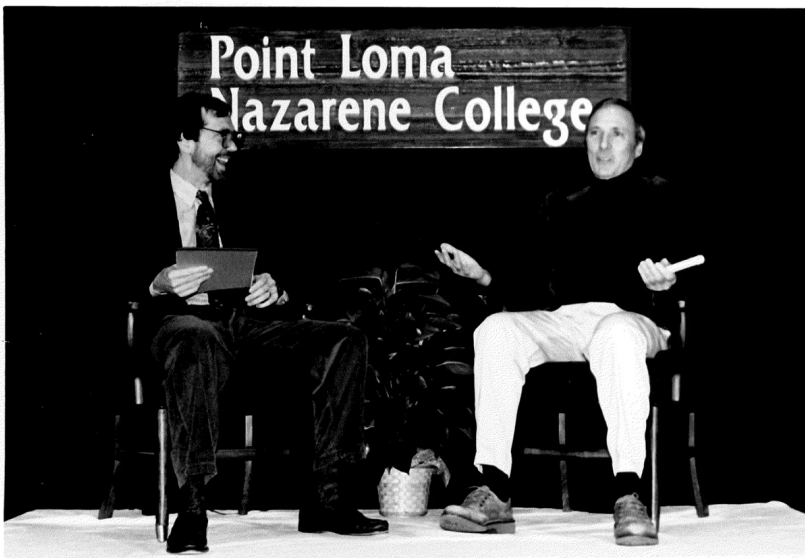
southern voice; and Mitch Albom, best known for his books “Tuesdays With Morrie” and “The Five People You Meet in Heaven,” as well as for his award-winning sports reporting. All will be in conversation with me in front of an enthusiastic audience of readers and writers.



Author Mitch Albom will be interviewed Feb. 28 by Dean Nelson at the 2025 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

When I started the Writer's Symposium in 1995, I wasn't thinking about the interview format. I just wanted to bring writers to our campus who could inspire and motivate our students about the value of great storytelling. The interview format was the result of another example where I didn't get my way.

I had asked Joe Wambaugh to come to campus to perhaps read something from one of his books, and then give a talk about the writing life. He immediately said “No.” He added this line at the end of his “Thanks but no thanks” note to me: “But if someone wants to ask me questions, I guess I could do that.”



Dean Nelson interviews author Joseph Wambaugh at the inaugural Writer's Symposium by the Sea in 1995. (Dean Nelson)

His book “Lines and Shadows” was already one of my favorites. I read it when I was doing reporting about the U.S./Mexico border for The Boston Globe. In preparation for my time of asking him some questions, I read every one of his other books. I saw some patterns in his writing. I saw an evolution of his worldview and craft, I thought.

We collaborated with UCSD-TV to put the interview on television. The audience loved the interaction, and so did Wambaugh. The Writer's Symposium format was born.



Alice Walker being interviewed at the 2020 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

Since then, we have hosted novelists including Amy Tan, Nick Hornby, Amor Towles, Nnedi Okorafor, Jane Smiley, Anthony Doerr, Elizabeth Gilbert, Alice Walker, N. Scott Momaday, Joyce Carol Oates, David Eggers and many more. We also hosted such poets as Billy Collins, Nikki Giovanni, Christian Wiman, Mary Karr and others, along with nonfiction writers David Brooks, Maria Hinojosa, Anne Lamott (three times!), Michael Eric Dyson, Susan Orlean, Krista Tippett, Cornel West, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and many others. We have also hosted songwriters and screenwriters.



Author Anthony Doerr being interviewed by Dean Nelson at the 2023 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

We still collaborate with UCSD-TV, and those interviews have more than 6 million online views. Last year we won a Telly Award for the interview with N. Scott Momaday in his home in Santa Fe, N.M. We also work with Warwick's bookstore and La Playa Books, who are also great promoters of reading.

This is all in the midst of a revolution of how people get their information and their reading materials. While print versions of newspapers and magazines have declined dramatically, as millions of people now get their information through social media on their mobile devices, the popularity of books has increased.



Dean Nelson, left, interviews poet Billy Collins at the 2013 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

The publishing industry reported a revenue increase of 7% for hardback books last year compared to 2023, and more than 4% for paperbacks, along with an approximately 3% increase for e-books. [Statista](#), a site that compiles information on books and the publishing industry, says that 75% of U.S. adults say they have read a book in the past 12 months in any format, a figure that has remained largely unchanged since 2011. About three in 10 get their books electronically, the site says.

What this tells me is that stories still matter. Storytelling still matters. Stories are how we understand the world and each other. And when a story is well told, we are connected to something bigger than ourselves.



The year after we hosted Joe Wambaugh, we invited Anne Lamott. She was both hilarious and deep. Then we hosted Otis Chandler, owner of the Los Angeles Times. He wasn't a writer, but he knew what great writing was and why it mattered. His wife was an alum of our school. And the timing was perfect. Just before he came to the Symposium, his family sold the Los Angeles Times (in March 2000). This was his first public appearance since the sale.

Once we had significant voices like these, others were happy to join us in following years.

We've been able to stick to our criteria for why we invite certain writers and not others. We want to bring in writers who have a body of work, and whose writing can be a model and inspiration to the rest of us. For each great storyteller we host, the not-so-subtle message to the audience is: "aspire to this."



An overview of author Sonia Nazario being interviewed by Dean Nelson at the 2020 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

Our audience has grown considerably over the years. We started out with our students and a few members of the community. Now we routinely fill an auditorium that seats more than 1,000 people – members of the writing community, fans of the authors, and anyone who has been swept away by beautiful storytelling. The event has become a celebration of the power of stories.

We have benefitted from other collaborations throughout the city. George Mitrovich of the San Diego City Club (also a PLNU alum) helped us get authors such as George Plimpton, Peter Matthiessen, Gay Talese, Christopher Buckley, Will Willimon and others. UC San Diego let us collaborate with them for a program with Siddhartha Mukherjee. The Balboa Theatre let us collaborate with them for a program with Elizabeth Gilbert. So it's not just me who thinks great writers are society's true rock stars.



An overview of the audience at Dean Nelson's interview with author Isabel Allende at the 2020 Writer's Symposium by the Sea at Point Loma Nazarene University. (PLNU)

Not everyone has been crazy for the writers we host, though. When Bill Moyers was about to arrive, I got anonymous threats that said they would ensure that the event would not take place. Moyers had his enemies for having the temerity to criticize Ronald Reagan. I ended up hiring extra security for that one. No incidents occurred.

Even more protests were threatened when we brought in Rob Bell, a former pastor who had the gall to question our traditional view of hell (a similar view voiced by C.S. Lewis half a century before), in his best-selling book "Love Wins."

The value of all these interviews, in my opinion, is that they capture the authors' authentic voices talking about their work, and about why stories matter. Several have died – N. Scott Momaday, Nikki Giovanni, George Plimpton, Rachel Held Evans, Dick Enberg, Otis Chandler, Peter Matthiessen, Eugene Peterson, Paul Farmer, Ray Bradbury – which makes these conversations even more compelling.

Bradbury's hijacking is still one of the highlights for me. He went on a rant about why we should write: "We are here to be an audience to the miraculous," he told the crowd. "Now get the hell out of here and do that and you'll have a good life."

Then he turned to me (finally) and said, "Now what in hell was the question?"

I couldn't remember, either. All I knew was that I got to do what he had just demanded. And it's what I get to do every time I interview one of these great writers.

I am a witness to the miraculous.

Dean Nelson is the founder and director of the journalism program at Point Loma Nazarene University, and the founder and host of the annual Writer's Symposium By The Sea. His new book, "Talking To Writers," is a compilation of the wisdom gleaned from the Symposium interviews. It will be out in November, published by Bloomsbury Press. His most recent book is "Talk To Me: How To Ask Better Questions, Get Better Answers, and Interview Anyone Like a Pro," published by HarperCollins.

WRITERS SYMPOSIUM BY THE SEA

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday: Jesmyn Ward; 7 p.m. Thursday: Sandra Cisneros; 7 p.m. Friday: Mitch Albom

Where: Brown Chapel, Point Loma Nazarene University, 3900 Lomaland Drive, San Diego

Tickets: \$16.74 and up

Online: <https://www.pointloma.edu/2025writers>

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