

## Wilderness House Literary Review 13/3

*Dwight Martin*

### **An Audience with Shu**

*An excerpt from a work-in-progress memoir*

JIM SHUMAKER may have been the most popular professor on campus when I took his Basic Reporting class in the summer of eighty-six. By that time, he had already been canonized by "Shoe," the syndicated comic strip created by a UNC dropout who had gotten his start drawing editorial cartoons at the Chapel Hill Weekly, when Shu was editor there. Undergraduates revered him. At times, their fawning seemed to chafe – like his comic-strip namesake, Shu could be a gruff old bird -- but he also enjoyed the leverage their adoration provided. Shu wore sneakers to class every day and eagerly disparaged much of academia. Unlike many UNC professors, he made his mark in the real world. Shu had spent nearly three decades editing and writing for newspapers, mostly in his native North Carolina. After joining the J-School faculty, he continued to crank out copy. Shu still wrote a weekly column for the Charlotte Observer. He knew the state.

When I took his class, Shu was in his early sixties but looked much older. The tobacco habit he had given up had taken its toll. Though still tall and rangy, Shu had gone soft around the middle, his large bald head looked as fragile as an egg, and he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Usually, Shu addressed our class standing beside a lectern, which he leaned on for support. But his blue eyes still pierced and his stare could intimidate. On the third day of class, Shu leaned against his lectern and reamed us out in his gravelly, ex-smoker's voice. Our first stories were completely unacceptable, he grouched. Too many spelling errors, way too sloppy. Then Shu looked straight at me.

One of the worst was by a graduate student.

I felt my face glow as I forced myself to meet his gaze. Shu had scrawled a big red F on the first page of my story.

Though he was a stickler for clean copy, Shu showed little reverence for UNC's hallowed reputation. He pronounced the word professor with great derision and complained about faculty colleagues who gave little thought to teaching then complained when their students failed to meet their lofty standards. Shu sometimes advised students who had been admitted to the J-School's master's program to spend a semester or two taking the basic skills courses then go out and get a newspaper job. In other words, chuck the degree. Shu had followed that route as an undergrad. He had entered UNC after coming home from World War II and still bristled at the high-and-mighty tone of some of his professors. Once that summer, Shu described what it was like sitting in classes surrounded by students who attended Carolina on the G.I. Bill.

Some of those guys had seen some bad things, Shu told us. When their professors tried to tell them what's what, they laughed in their faces. Those guys didn't give a shit.

Shu never told us what he had seen in the war. Several years after taking his class, I read in one of his Observer columns what he had experi-

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enced shortly after V-E Day. Shu had spent roughly a year in a POW camp deep inside Germany, where he lost a lot of weight. His column stayed away from the privations he suffered and focused instead on what it was like to travel by train through that bombed-out, disheartened country with hundreds of other former POWs. Few people spoke, Shu wrote. Most just looked out at the passing countryside, but when they rolled past other trains filled with emaciated G.I.s, everyone headed for the windows to cheer. They had survived the madness. I believe that's why Shu decided to work in newspapers. He had seen what the high-and-mighty were capable of.

Though he had long since given up cigarettes, Shu's cheeks and orbital bones had been hollowed by years of smoking. When seen from certain angles, his face resembled a jewel. Each shrug or gesture brought miniscule changes to his expression, hinting at his emotional depth. Though he exuded a practiced gruffness, Shu loved teaching and laughed often. But he could be quick to anger. At times, Shu bristled at how fervently some people associated with the university guarded its elite reputation; he aimed some of his sharpest barbs at fellow professors who seemed obsessed with promoting themselves. Ranting about them made Shu's eyes smolder. Once or twice that summer, his face became so sharp it must have offered a glimpse of what he looked like as a kid on that train.

No doubt, Shu had heard about my inauspicious J-School beginnings. During my first semester, I struggled to compose at the keyboard and turned in stories riddled with spelling and comma errors. Much to my horror, I barely managed to pass the mandatory spelling-and-grammar test on my third and final try. That same summer, I misspelled a public figure's name in the first dummy page I created for Editing class, a major factual error that lopped fifty points off my grade. Other problems further reduced my numerical score to a six on that assignment. Though I ended up with a C in the course, I had to take the class again. Graduate students earn no credit for C's. Spelling would remain a major liability. I poured over all the stories I wrote in J-School, to little avail, but as the summer session wound down Shu began to recognize my efforts. Though my copy remained rough and uneven – in Shu's parlance, it didn't sing – I impressed him with what I chose to write about. Shu recognized I had decent news judgment. Unlike some of my younger classmates, I felt an affinity for the little guy.

One day after class, Shu said he wanted to talk. I felt a rush a pride then – the great man was requesting an audience – and silently wracked my brain for things I might say as I slowly followed him up upstairs. But as soon as Shu opened his office door I felt crestfallen. Four or five undergrads had jumped ahead of me and were already sitting around their hero's desk waiting for a word. A hint of exasperation crossed Shu's face, but it passed quickly. After easing himself down, Shu took the kids in stride. I remember a chubby guy of Asian descent from the D.C. suburbs who spoke with a sport writer's bluster and kid from Santa Monica whose cool demeanor masked a California-sized ambition. Shu seemed to enjoy his acolytes. When one of them repeated a bit of gossip or described something he had read, he responded with Goddamn, or, What the hell did they expect?

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As Shu bantered with the kids, I looked around. J-School was still located in Howell Hall then. Shu's top-floor office overlooked McCorkle Place, an old leafy part of campus dotted with colonnaded buildings. The view was postcard public ivy, but the walls of Shu's office were bare. Stacks of newspapers lay about in various degrees of disarray. The place looked messy, workmanlike.

After a couple of minutes, Shu turned to me. The latest story I had written for his class had mentioned the Southern Baptist Convention, which appeared in the papers on a regular basis then. A group of self-proclaimed biblical inerrantists was in the process of wresting away control of the denomination from a more moderate faction. Shu realized the story went beyond religion. It had major political implications. He questioned me about my interest in the ongoing schism, and I told him some of what I knew. Then Shu asked about my background.

When I mentioned my father was chaplain at Broughton Hospital, he perked up.

Your Dad's a preacher?

Yeah.

What denomination?

Ah, Southern Baptist.

Shu laughed so hard I could see the gap in his teeth where his molars used to be. I felt my face glow, but seeing Shu's eyes glisten made me laugh too. The old guy had sized me up. Obviously, I struggled with spelling and commas. For a time, I wondered if my copy would ever be clean enough for newspaper writing. But Shu saw that I was like most Southern preacher's boys – I had been razed as a kid – he just didn't know to what extent. Shu also understood that a childhood spent being groomed and combed and hauled off to church had given me something to prove. That, he assumed, would serve me well. I would make me a decent watchdog.

As the two of us enjoyed our little moment, the kids just looked at us, dumbfounded. Except for attending UNC, they had little connection to North Carolina and no idea why we were laughing. Shu and I thought that was hilarious too.