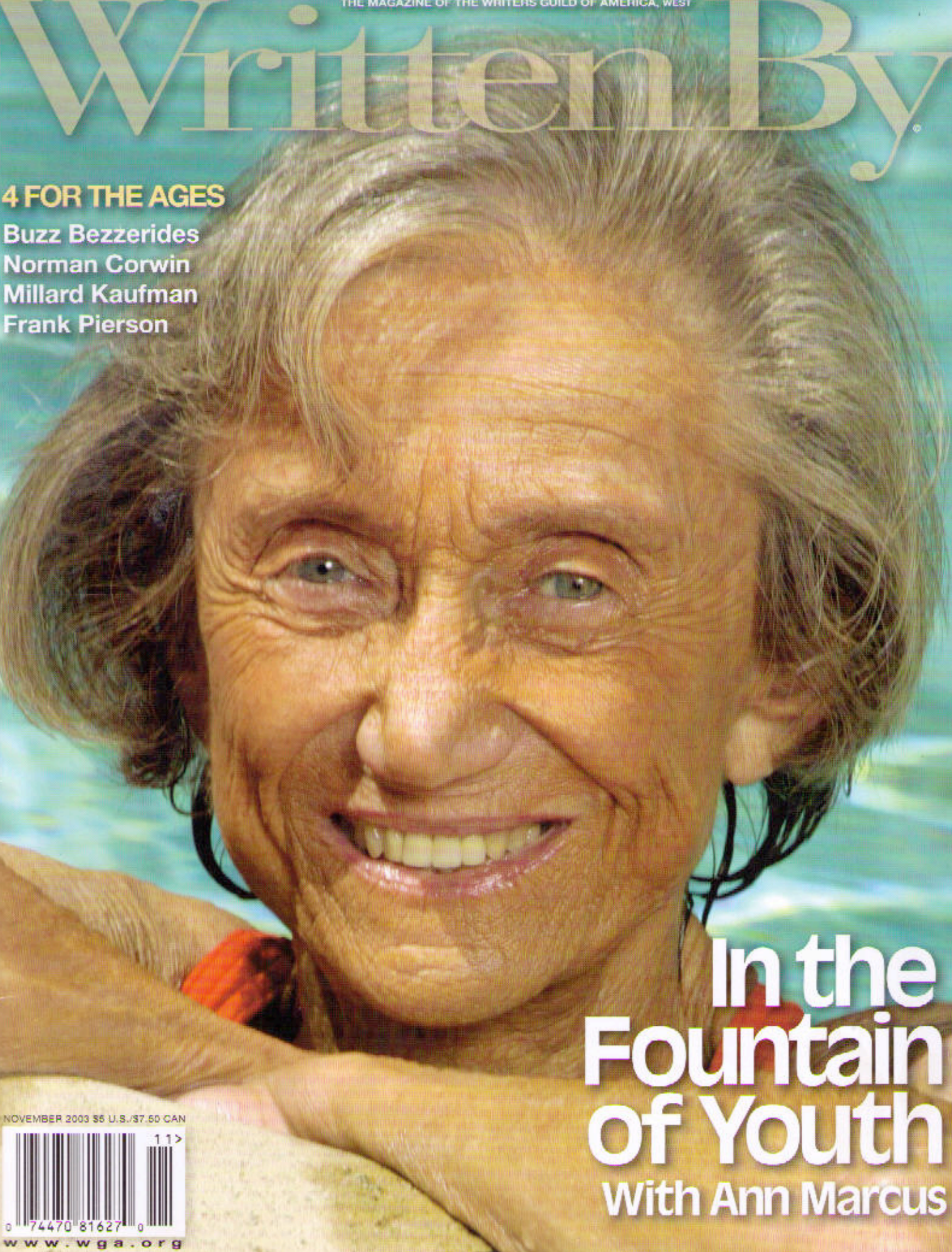


THE MAGAZINE OF THE WRITERS GUILD OF AMERICA, WEST

# Written By

## 4 FOR THE AGES

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In the  
Fountain  
of Youth  
With Ann Marcus

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She did it her way.  
And at 82, she's still  
doing it her way.

Written by Nat Christian

Portraits by Leroy Hamilton

**I**n 1987 I drove toward Ann and Ellis Marcus' house in Sherman Oaks on a late summer afternoon—the kind of afternoon that seems to slow time a bit, which probably made me aware that their neighborhood looked like it came right out of one of those wholesome 1950s TV shows. Might I bump into Thorny or Eddie Haskell? Inside the house, no Nelsons or Cleavers. But there were lots of television executives and producers, including a particular network executive waiting impatiently to talk to Ann, one of the few women writers who, in the early, prerevolution 1960s started to rise in television when there weren't many women writers doing much rising anywhere. With post-“Purple Rain” Prince intercouring from a boom box at one side of the house and Doris Day crooning through a stereo on the other side, this party was to be part fun and part networking opportunity. But where was the host?

I found Ann in the backyard, engaged in a fierce game of Ping-Pong, smashing the ball across the net at her nine-year-old grandson. Ann started arguing about a foul. I'm not sure if it was going after the “win” that Ann was caught up in, enjoying the moment with her family around (I lean toward the latter), or her seeking justice on the foul (she felt she was in the right), but she would not

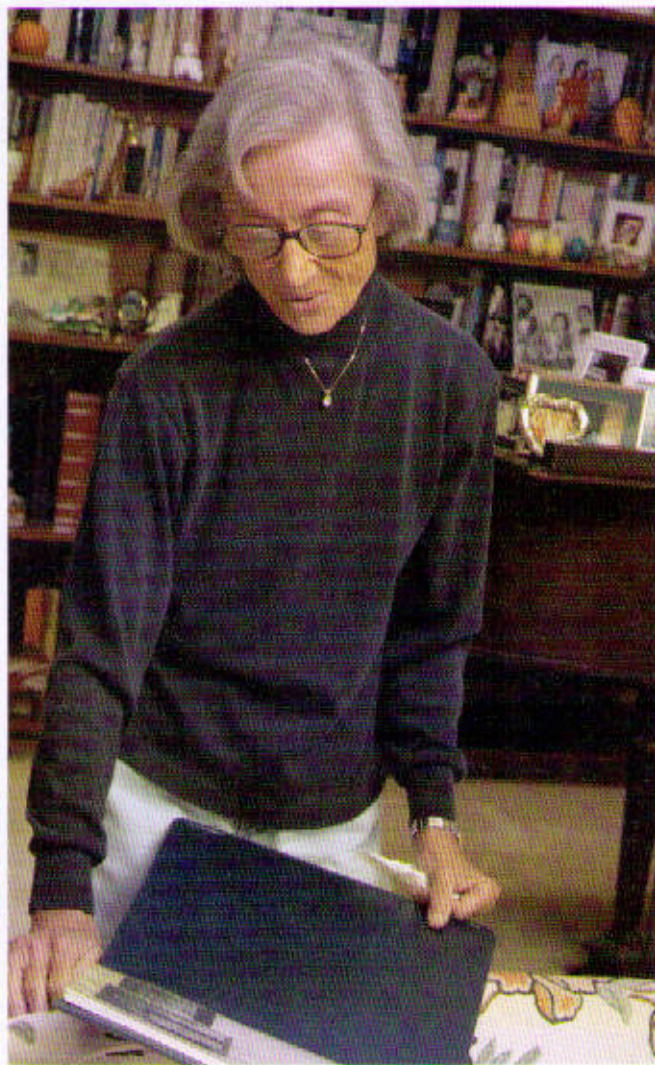


budge. She refused to leave the Ping-Pong debate to tend to important "career" matters with the producers and executives.

Well, I suppose there is a "rosebud" in everyone's life (except the one attributed to Mr. Hearst, or rather Mr. Kane), and I'm not looking to find Ann's here. Yet it is interesting to note that, while many in the industry move ahead by not offending people and by never rocking the boat, Ann's passion, competitiveness, and sometimes confrontational manner when fighting for whatever she thinks is right has not interfered with a long career. But it was no smooth ride. She has stirred the pot more often than not. A pioneering creative force? Perhaps. A headache? Probably. A bore? Never.

Ann always wanted it all: a career as a writer while having a sit-at-the-dinner-table-with-her-husband-and-kids lifestyle.

At 82 she's trim and chic. She's sophisticated on the outside while remaining on the inside a kid, the eternal tomboy. Her house has witnessed close calls, from her own battles with cancer to personal losses—her writer husband, Ellis Marcus, and more



**Ann's first television assignment was co-written with her husband. In the beginning their collaboration was so joyful that they made love on their office desk. But after they had creative differences on an episode, they didn't professionally collaborate for another 20 years.**



**All in the Family:** A pioneer on many fronts, Ann Marcus strived to balance her career and her family (above), ensuring quality time was spent playing games, practicing yoga (below right, with sister Tracy Roberts), or collaborating professionally with husband Ellis (right).

recently, the loss of her sister, the beautiful actress-director and legendary acting teacher Tracy Roberts (my subjectivity results from Tracy and I having shared some years of our lives together).

There have been great joys, such as the addition of six grandchildren (from daughter Elyn and sons John and Steve). Ann Marcus also witnessed an upward career climb as a television writer, such as the premiere in 1976 for *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* [developed by Norman Lear], which she co-created with Gail Parent, Jerry Adelman, and Daniel Gregory Brown and for which she earned an Emmy. Or when she and Ellis created their own show, *L.A.T.E.R.* Or the myriad other shows from sitcoms to soaps to hour dramas and TV movies that Ann worked on as either a creator, producer, or head writer. The list is long and includes *Knots Landing*, *Forever Fernwood*, *All That Glitters*, *Susan Farr, M.D.*, *Falcon Crest*, *Women at West Point*, *Days of Our Lives*, *General Hospital*. Many writers Ann mentored or gave their first writing assignments have passed through her house, such as Diane Frolov (*The Chris Isaak Show*), Merrill Markoe (*Late Night With David Letterman*), Bill and Jo LaMond (*Hart to Hart, Hotel*), Peggy Goldman (*Mary Hartman*), and others.

And Ann has racked up more than 40 years as a WGA member. She is one of those writers who voted to strike even though she was employed and then walked on picket lines. She served on the Board of Directors for eight terms (one as Secretary-Treasurer). Board meetings, so I'm told, can be long and tiring and sometimes generate heated arguments. And I've heard of members who have wanted to pull out their hair or, more accurately, Ann's hair because of the passionate way she will fight for something she believes in.

By the way, only once in the many years I've known Ann have I witnessed her doing something less than worthy. She cheated at Scrabble. If not for her husband, Ellis, she would have gotten away with it. She had been losing, and I guess that Ann just doesn't like that. Incredibly, at endgame, she came up with a wonderful seven-letter word, using one blank square and placing it over a double-word space. As Ann was being congratulated, Ellis, who knew her better than anyone, flipped over the blank square to reveal that it was not really a blank square, but one of those damn redundant vowels! Like Claude Rains in *Casablanca*, I was "shocked." Oh, well. No one said she was a saint. However, as far as this writer knows, she never, except for that one Scrabble game, did anything unprincipled for personal gain. She really is one of the good guys.

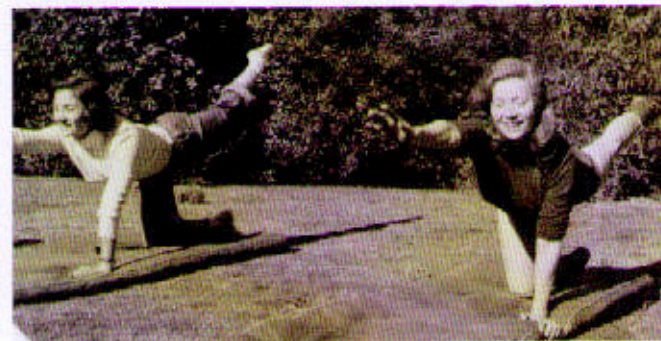
Now Ann has retired from the WGAW board after 16 years.

### A Rich, Full Writer's Life

Born in 1921, in Little Falls, New York, the year that women got the right to vote, Dorothy Ann Goldstone joined her older brother, writer (and also longtime Guild member) Raymond Goldstone, and their older sister, Blanche (later to become Tracy Roberts). Ann's childhood was wonderful in that Sinclair Lewis small town until her father died when she was 11. Then Ann moved with her mother and her mother's new husband and his kids to Teaneck, New Jersey (her brother went off to college and her sister to Broadway). She hated New Jersey but got through it and escaped to college, where she majored in sociology. At school Ann couldn't make up her mind between acting and writing, so she did both and saw a lot of movies too.

Those movies in the 1930s, which gave us the screwball comedies, where women were empowered and independent (as portrayed by the likes of Barbara Stanwyck, Jean Arthur, Katherine Hepburn, Rosalind Russell, and others), must have had an effect on a teenage Ann. She was also influenced by Eleanor Roosevelt and the writings of Dorothy Thompson, Lillian Hellman, Jean Kerr, Clare Booth Luce, Dorothy Parker, Willa Cather, and suffragettes Elizabeth Stanton, Eleanor Cody, and Susan B. Anthony.

After graduating from college, Ann worked for several months as a copy boy with the *New York Daily News* (she was referred to as "the only copy boy with a D cup"). Then Ann walked into the offices of *Life* magazine, fibbed about her work experience, and was hired as a reporter. She worked with such famous photographers as Alfred Eisenstadt. And she met a young soldier named Ellis Marcus, who was in an Army unit that included future screenwriters Ed North, Daniel Taradash, and Len Speiglegass.



Within six months, they were married. They settled in Scottie Fitzgerald's (F. Scott's daughter) fifth-floor sublet in Manhattan where Ann wrote for *Cosmopolitan* and other magazines, eventually giving birth to two sons.

At the same time, she began a long battle with cancer and fought through several serious operations. In 1951 she and Ellis moved to California, where sister Tracy gave some of her New York stage credits to Ann and got her into an acting group. A few decent TV roles came her way, including one for *The Highway Patrol* where she struggled over a line that has become her family's favorite: "They found the body near Greenbrier Trestle!"

But a desire to write was imploding within her while her days were filled with family life: waking the kids, getting them off to school, picking them up, homework, being a den mother, the PTA, running a household, and being a loving wife.

And there were more serious operations. When doctors couldn't offer her assurances that the cancer was gone, Ann decided to have another child "to prove" that she would be okay. She figured that if they thought she was going to die, they'd warn her not to get pregnant. She came through on all fronts. She refers to her daughter, Elyn (now a federal prosecutor), as her "Life Baby."

Still, Ann's talent as a writer and her ambitions were not yet realized. But she squeezed in the time to write a play about a woman's chances of having a real family and a real career simultaneously. In 1960, Tracy produced *A Woman's Place* at the Desilu Playhouse. In classic Hollywood fashion, an agent saw the play and got Ann her first television writing assignment: *The Hathaways*, which she wrote with her husband, Ellis. In the beginning their collaboration was so joyful that they made love on their office desk, but after they had creative differences on an episode, they didn't collaborate for another 20 years (that is to say, professionally). In 1962 Ann was hired to write for the TV series *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* (adapted from the book and play by Jean Kerr), and her career was off and running as a television writer and producer.

Then co-producers Norman Lear and Al Burton invited Ann to take a meeting about a new style of soap. "We had already met with the *creme de la creme* of comedy writers," remembers Burton, "who were invariably puzzled, if not put off by the storyline. One couple had looked at us and said, 'No, seriously . . .' We gave Ann the sentence that we gave to every other writer: 'In the first week we discover that Mary Hartman's Grandpa Larkin is the Fernwood Flasher. Meanwhile, there has been a mass murder of an entire family, plus eight goats and five chickens, then in the second week . . .' That was the sentence no comedy writer could fin-





ish until Ann came in and said, 'and in the second week...' and just went on with a wild plot-line!"

Ann defied the notion that one's anatomy might dictate her destiny.

**Nat Christian:** *You're championing the fight against ageism in Hollywood. A writer doesn't just wake up one morning aged like Rip Van Winkle. What signs can writers look for that may indicate they're judged on age?*

**Ann Marcus:** A) When your writing awards are for shows that aired before the network executives were born; B) when your agent dies and you can't get another one; C) you look in the mirror and the person you see is not your mother but you.

*You said that when you were a kid, life was grand in Little Falls. Did you encounter prejudice in those days?*

Absolutely. There were no people of color and there was quite a bit of anti-Semitism, although the kids that we played with were not anti-Semitic. Overall, I loved it. But if you touched that nerve in me, boy, I would react. I would fight back.

*A lot of your characters are mothers with a family, juggling a career. Could a woman have it all in the 1950s? Can she now?*

It's really hard and not getting easier even though most husbands and fathers help a lot more. That's because there is this psychological pull for you to be there for your kids: be a part of their schooling, soccer games, be in their lives more. When I was a kid, you didn't have play dates. You just went out and played. But things have changed. You have to worry about terrible things happening. So child activities have to be supervised. And that makes it difficult for today's woman to have a family and succeed at her profession. One part of your brain is always asking, "Are the kids okay? Are they sick? Should I pick them up from school? Should I stay with them?" The difficulty of having it all was impossible in the '50s, and it is impossible in the 21st century.

*Impossible?*

It's impossible to be guiltfree. If you're lucky enough to have a job that allows you to pay for a housekeeper/nanny, someone who can act like a wife, that solves a lot of problems.

*In 1965 Peyton Place was a landmark show. Did you know that when you were hired as staff writer for that series?*

Yes, because it was sensational and trashy. It was the cushiest job I ever had. Staff writers only had to write one half of a 30-minute episode a week!

**Ann Marcus earned an Emmy for the Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman pilot (page 21).**

## The Unsinkable Ann Marcus

*"Ann has the facility of not going away. I think of the Unsinkable Molly Brown. Ann is just as feisty, unsinkable, and courageous. She is remarkable. We are all aware that people want to be on the winning side, the popular side. She just wants to be on the right side of the issues."*

—Larry Gelbart (Creator-Writer-Producer)

*"Like anybody with a dry, slightly sarcastic wit, I think Ann approaches life with a tough and skeptical eye. She doesn't take anything for granted and I think that sometimes leads her to push people to really come up with serious answers as to why it is they want to do what they want to do. She was a very tough member on the board of the Guild. And she's also hilariously funny."*

—Frank Pierson (Creator-Writer-Producer)

*"Knots Landing was going down the tubes when Ann came in. She has the best story mind that I ever worked with. It was her stories that saved the show. I think that sometimes she risked her own career, because she stood up to network executives for the writers."*

—Lisa Seidman (Writer and WGAW Board Member)

*"There was a great deal of intrigue behind the scenes of Falcon Crest. There was a lot of ambition, backstabbing, betrayal of trusts, and downright meanness. So it was especially gratifying to me that someone joined the group who was more interested in the show than in destroying fellow writers."*

—Earl Hamner (Creator-Writer-Producer)

*"She started us in the business."*

—Bill and Jo LaMond (Writers-Producers)

*"She had been a pain in the ass for some of the producers. She didn't unquestioningly do something that they wanted her to do. You know if they wanted her to re-write a scene or whatever and if she didn't think the same way that they did, she'd speak up."*

—Dorina Mills (Actress-Producer)

*"Ann has never lost her passion or her feistiness for the Guild or for writers. She has been profoundly committed to improving the working lives of writers ever since I first met her. She's gone through some difficult times at the Guild during internal political debates. A lesser person might have thrown up their hands and walked away, but she never did. I have the utmost respect for Ann and affection for her as well."*

—Vicki Riskin (President of the WGAW)

*"What's great about working with Ann is that every day there is another idea and a continual effort to stay in the game. She brings an incredible energy and preparedness to the table."*

—Tony Etz (Literary Agent, CAA)

*"My mother took on incredibly challenging jobs that carried huge responsibilities as far as time and mental commitment, but she also devoted herself to her husband and children and never made anyone feel gypped. On top of that, she kept her sense of humor, her femininity, and her sense of herself as she achieved great success in what was then almost exclusively a man's world. She's my role model in every aspect of my life, from the way I conduct my family life to the commitment I bring to my career. As far as parenting children, she always made me feel I was the single most important thing in her life, even when her work was most demanding. She set a tone of love and laughter in our home that caused all my friends to want to be adopted by her. And as far as career, my mom showed that it was OK for a woman to love her job and believe passionately in what she did. Bottom line: she's just the coolest woman I know."*

—Ellyn Lindsay (Assistant U.S. Attorney)

"Things have changed, so child activities have to be supervised. That makes it difficult for today's woman to have a family and succeed at her profession. One part of your brain is always asking, 'Are the kids okay? Should I stay with them?' For women, the difficulty of having it all was impossible in the '50s, and it is impossible in the 21st century."

*Winning an Emmy for Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman put you on the proverbial map. Were you Norman Lear's first choice to co-create it?*

No. Gail Parent had come up with the main character and her family. There was no story or other characters, no idea on how to do this soap. No one had a clue. Through Al Burton, I met Norman.

*You were the supervising producer on Falcon Crest. Why did you leave a hit show?*

I was promised the executive producer job the next season. Earl Hamner asked me to meet him for lunch. I ordered the most expensive champagne on the wine list because this was supposed to be the celebratory luncheon where I was to be dubbed executive producer. Then I was told that I was being let go for some lame reasons.

*What are the differences between writing soaps and primetime?*  
They're similar because primetime dramas today have ongoing stories.

*You've discovered or mentored many writers. Diane Frolov calls you her writing parent. What do you look for in a writer's work?*  
Originality, humor, whether I'm moved, dialogue, wit.

*You define yourself as a secular humanist. What does that mean?*  
I believe in trying to do my best and trying to be a good person without all of the religious trappings and paraphernalia. I'm no Communist, but I believe religion is the opiate of the people. Look at the messes it—all of 'em!—has gotten us in through the ages, especially now, all over the world.

Rumors were flying around about things I had said on the set, which were total bs. I excused myself to go to the ladies' room and just left the restaurant, leaving Earl alone with the \$100 champagne. But everything turned out just great because Lormar, which produced *Falcon Crest*, immediately hired me to a lucrative three-year development deal.

*As a Guild board member, you have a reputation for fighting for what you believe in. And I'm sure there have been soured relationships. Do they ever sweeten again?*  
Maybe not sweeten, but they even out. As Popeye would say, "I yam what I yam."

*Does the WGA have more or less clout than the DGA or SAG when it comes time to negotiate?*

More. We mostly hang tough and are not afraid to strike, which we've done time and time again. The other guilds have the WGA to thank for leading the way in standing up to the AMPTP.

*Why are you retiring from the Guild?*

After 16 years, I need a break and it's time for a younger writer to step into the breach.

*When do you plan to retire from writing?*

When the guy with the beard and the scythe comes after me. **WB**

