Mill Valley Oral History Program
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CYRA McFADDEN

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2016

TITLE: Oral History of Cyra McFadden
INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 26 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: September 6th, 2016

In this oral history, author Cyra McFadden recounts her life in Mill Valley and the creation and reception of her satirical novel *The Serial*. Born into a rodeo family in Montana, Cyra describes moving out to San Francisco with her young daughter Caroline in the late 1950s and then subsequently over to Mill Valley after marrying her second husband, John McFadden. She recalls how in 1977 she started writing *The Serial*, which was initially published (serially) in the *Pacific Sun* newspaper before being brought out in book form by a New York publishing house. Cyra recounts the mixed reception of the novel, which engendered both wild enthusiasm and bitter resentment from some people in the community, and recalls the shock of suddenly becoming a public figure. Reflecting on her writing process, Cyra describes having sought to capture some of the faddishness and pretentiousness of the period — notably, the jargon of the Human Potential Movement — as well as to register the effects of second-wave feminism on family and social life. Finally, looking back at that period of Mill Valley history that she so memorably satirized in *The Serial*, she notes that for all its folly there was also a remarkable interdependence and social support system in the culture of the community.

Oral History of Cyra McFadden

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Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Cyra McFadden, who made minor corrections and clarifications.

0:00:01 Debra Schwartz: Today is September 6th, 2016. My name is Debra Schwartz. I'm sitting here with author, teacher, and houseboat dweller, Cyra McFadden. Cyra, thank you so much for including your story in the Mill Valley Historical Society and Mill Valley Library's oral collection. I'm really delighted to be sitting with you here today.

0:00:28 Cyra McFadden: Thank you very much.

0:00:29 Debra Schwartz: Now, your name, it is a name that harkens back to a time and an era long ago now. It has been some years. When did you write your book, *The Serial*?

0:00:46 Cyra McFadden: 1977. So you're right, it's a long time.

0:00:50 Debra Schwartz: It's been a while now since the book was originally published. And that book, *The Serial* — I open with this because it really sent a shock wave through the county, certainly, and the world, and it really marked an era, and marked a time, and it's funny as hell, you know. It's a funny, funny book. So I'm delighted to go back in time with you during this interview to explore how the book came about and your process with it. But first let's get a little information about you before you wrote the book. A little bit about your family and your life and where you were born and how you came to Mill Valley.

0:01:38 Cyra McFadden: Tall order. I was born in Montana, in Great Falls, Montana, into a rodeo family. My father's name was Cy Taillon and he was known as the "Dean of the rodeo announcers." He announced the Cow Palace rodeo here for many, many, many years. So we were on the road from the time I was a tiny child until my parents divorced. My mother remarried and I grew up in a more or less stable household in Missoula, Montana. Went to school there. Struck out on my own at 18 and eventually after a youthful marriage of my own fell apart, made it to San Francisco where my cousin was living. And I came down to visit for two weeks and I never went back.

0:02:34 Debra Schwartz: What year was that?

0:02:35 Cyra McFadden: It must have been late '50s, early '60s, something like that. Late '50s, I would say. I'm 78 now, almost 79, and I was in my mid-20s then, so, we can do the math.

0:02:54 Debra Schwartz: Wow. I'm a little shocked when you tell me your age. What

people can't see, but what I'm seeing now is you don't look it at all.

0:03:03 Cyra McFadden: Thank you, it's kind of you.

0:03:05 Debra Schwartz: But you've got the stories.

0:03:06 Cyra McFadden: Well, I'm a California 78.

0:03:08 Debra Schwartz: Yes. That's a hybrid of sorts.

0:03:10 Cyra McFadden: Exactly.

0:03:12 Debra Schwartz: I have to say about your father, that's very interesting, being raised on the rodeo circuit.

0:03:19 Cyra McFadden: It was. It was a very different sort of life and I missed it when we weren't rolling down the road all the time. And yet years later I wrote a book about my father and about the rodeo life, and there were people who considered me an abused child, because our lives were so improvised from day to day. I never saw it that way. As far as I was concerned, traveling with the rodeo crowd was just a perfect delight. We were rodeo brats, the children in this crowd, and our parents looked after us, more or less. And I thought it was a fun life.

0:04:05 Debra Schwartz: Did you go to school when you were on the circuit with —

0:04:07 Cyra McFadden: I was too young. I went to school after my mother remarried and we lived in Missoula. So I wasn't deprived of school. We lived on hamburgers. I suppose that wasn't an ideal diet, but I loved it. What kid wouldn't?

0:04:24 Debra Schwartz: I can't even imagine the — because there's so much flair with the rodeo: the clothes, the ambiance, the crowds, the drama.

0:04:34 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, it was fun. Those memories remain very dear to me.

0:04:42 Debra Schwartz: I have to ask, did you have a little rodeo girl outfit?

0:04:47 Cyra McFadden: I did. It's the cover photograph of the book that I wrote which is called *Rain or Shine*. Yes, I definitely did. And then my father, whose name was Cy, gave me his name. I was supposed to grow up as a cowgirl, which didn't happen. But I have a horse-crazy daughter who fell madly in love with the first horse she laid eyes on at about 4 years old and has never looked back.

0:05:16 Debra Schwartz: Wow, so you had a little cowgirl outfit, and your father must have worn — the visuals of those clothes back then it's — and the kind of people you were around. These were hard-working ranch people, by and large — yes? — that participated in the rodeos.

0:05:32 Cyra McFadden: Well, some of them were. Rodeo wasn't nearly as glamorous as it is now. It's now, as you know, very well-funded and it's televised by NBC and cowboys fly from one destination to the other. And of course we drove in, ultimately, a Packard, which was just considered a very classic car, so that was fun. I learned to read from reading Burma-Shave signs.

0:06:01 Debra Schwartz: Burma-Shave signs?

0:06:02 Cyra McFadden: Do you know about Burma-Shave signs? You're too young. There was a company that made shaving cream, for all I know it still does, and they had rhyming signs along the side the road. They were all quite funny most of the time and each one ended with the brand name, Burma-Shave. My parents would read them aloud to me. So I caught on fairly early that there was a kind of narrative in each one. There was a little story, and I'm going to read them myself.

0:06:34 Debra Schwartz: And your mother's name?

0:06:35 Cyra McFadden: Her name was Patricia Montgomery, and she was a dancer. She met my father when she was performing at the Great Falls State Fair. And she was very glamorous and so was he. So they were fun to travel with.

0:06:54 Debra Schwartz: Did you have siblings?

0:06:56 Cyra McFadden: I have two half-brothers by my father's second marriage. He and my mother flamed out fairly early. No, no siblings.

0:07:07 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so you're an only child traveling with two glamorous parents who were entertainers.

0:07:12 Cyra McFadden: They were indeed.

0:07:13 Debra Schwartz: And so, perhaps that's where you got your flair for language —

0:07:21 Cyra McFadden: Maybe. My father was a North Dakota farm boy, but he was an incredibly articulate man. I still have his debate medals. And he won elocution contests, straight out of *Anne of Green Gables*. Remember the elocution contest?

0:07:42 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm.

0:07:43 Cyra McFadden: And he certainly taught me to be a listener, as well as to concentrate on language on the page very closely. He also wrote.

0:07:58 Debra Schwartz: But, as well, you're a watcher. This is evident in your book.

0:08:02 Cyra McFadden: I am a watcher and I'm an eavesdropper. [laughs]

0:08:06 Debra Schwartz: Because as a rodeo announcer, I think about 90% of what you're doing is watching and being able to translate quite quickly what you're seeing.

0:08:16 Cyra McFadden: I've never made that connection, but I think you're absolutely right. And I'd stand, on the rodeo nights, in the crow's nest, as the announcer's box was called, with my father. So we were high up over the fairgrounds. It felt quite regal to be up there, and I got to occasionally make an introductory remark or two over the microphones, so I got to —

0:08:40 Debra Schwartz: Did you really? Like what might have you said?

0:08:44 Cyra McFadden: "Ladies and gentlemen, the only reward this cowboy is going to get tonight is your applause." [laughs] That was after someone was bucked off a bucking horse.

0:08:55 Debra Schwartz: A little girl's voice is saying this?

0:08:57 Cyra McFadden: Yeah. So that was great. I got to be a bit of a rodeo princess, I confess.

0:09:02 Debra Schwartz: Wow, that's so wonderful. I've never heard that before from anybody. So you end up in San Francisco, you come here and you fall in love at first sight. Is that what happened?

0:09:14 Cyra McFadden: I just loved being in the big city. I loved my small town childhood. I was very lucky. Missoula was a marvelous place to be a kid. We were sort of feral children. We just ran free for the most part and those were obviously quieter or safer times. But when I came to San Francisco, I'd always had a yearning to see the white lights and the bright lights. I just really was enraptured with big city life. I saw the first professional play I had ever seen when I came here. I rode the streetcar downtown and saw Edward G. Robinson's *Middle of the Night*. And just could not get over all the marvelous opportunities there were.

0:10:02 Debra Schwartz: So you stayed?

0:10:04 Cyra McFadden: I'm sorry?

0:10:04 Debra Schwartz: So you stayed?

0:10:05 Cyra McFadden: I stayed.

0:10:06 Debra Schwartz: You stayed. I guess you took your boots, your spurs off, as they say.

0:10:14 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, I had to do that in Missoula, I led a much more regular life there. I traveled to meet my father on the rodeo circuit sometimes, but still that life was in the past. So I was no longer suited up in rodeo clothes.

0:10:30 Debra Schwartz: I bet you wish you still had those clothes.

0:10:33 Cyra McFadden: I have some of my mother's and they're marvelous. They're just a great collector's item.

0:10:37 Debra Schwartz: It should be noticed, I did do a little research on you before this interview, and I noticed that you were in line for a Pulitzer for the book that you wrote.

0:10:48 Cyra McFadden: Yes, I was. That was exciting. I was in, I think, second place and it was a year when it was just a monumentally important book that won. It was called *Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land.* And as a newspaper columnist at that point I had interviewed the writer — his name, of course, I can't remember at the moment[1] — and then his book won the Pulitzer and mine was — I don't know if they're ranked exactly — mine took second place in the category of biography. No, it was in the category of non-fiction, strangely enough. That was it.

0:11:29 Debra Schwartz: And the name again, please?

0:11:31 Cyra McFadden: *Rain or Shine*.

0:11:32 Debra Schwartz: *Rain or Shine*. Sounds very interesting.

0:11:34 Cyra McFadden: Which referred to my father's working in the crow's nest no matter what.

0:11:40 Debra Schwartz: Think of those people working out there on the horses, rain or shine. What that should be is "dry or muddy," I suppose. Okay, so now tell me a little bit, if you would, about your time in San Francisco and how you made your way to Mill Valley.

0:12:00 Cyra McFadden: I had a secretarial job when I first came to San Francisco, and of course I had my small child in tow from my first marriage. We lived in the Richmond district in a rundown apartment, whose gas heater blew up and removed my eyebrows, but then we got that sorted out. It was one of those old railroad flats. We lived on a very, very tight diet, but we made it. We survived. And I met my second husband, John McFadden, and he, being a very conscientious step-parent, thought that we should raise a small child in the suburbs, not in San Francisco. I put up a fight; I loved the city. I really did not fancy moving, but we got to Mill Valley and bought what was then a very expensive house, it was $25,000. [laughs] Our relatives thought we were out of our mind. We moved to the north end of Mill Valley, in an old tract called Sutton Manor, grandly

[1] The author was David K. Shipler.—Ed.

called Sutton Manor, on Lomita Drive, which means — Lomita means — "little hill," and the street was completely flat. But nonetheless, it was great weather. It was a cozy neighborhood. The school was right across the street. So my daughter just —

0:13:35 Debra Schwartz: Is that —

0:13:36 Cyra McFadden: Edna Maguire.

0:13:36 Debra Schwartz: Edna Maguire.

0:13:37 Cyra McFadden: Which was then a small school, of course. Now, it looks like the Pentagon to me, but in any case — [laughs]

0:13:44 Debra Schwartz: They've done some remodeling and enhancements.

0:13:47 Cyra McFadden: It's enormous. But it was a great neighborhood for her to grow up. So we had a lot of happy years there. And then in 1980 my husband died of cancer. By that time my daughter was grown up and out of the house. And I stuck it out here for a while, but I wanted to get away from the scene of the crime. So I bounced around for quite a while. I lived in New York for a while, I taught school in England, and eventually I came back to San Francisco and — I'm trying to remember what brought me back to Marin. Marin had not been too taken with me after *The Serial*. Lots of people were very supportive and thought the book was funny, which was its intention, but there were a lot of people who took it very personally. There were editorials in the *IJ [Marin Independent Journal]* that I should love it or leave it, and there were angry letters. I thought this would blow over quickly. Mind you, I was a very new writer; I'd had no public life; I was totally unprepared. People threw eggs at our house. [chuckles]

0:15:09 Debra Schwartz: It's like Truman Capote, when he wrote about his friends, and they published that article in the newspaper and all of a sudden it's a huge reveal.

0:15:16 Cyra McFadden: I got late night phone calls. One from a drunken neighbor, telling me what a disgrace I was. I had to unlist my telephone.

0:15:26 Debra Schwartz: Oh, my.

0:15:26 Cyra McFadden: The mailman dragged sacks of mail up the walk. And I had to say, "Is it ticking?" Because a lot of it was really angry, nasty mail. So it suddenly just jerked our family into the limelight in a way that we all found uncomfortable. It was horrible for a teenage daughter, at that point. I'm obviously backtracking here into the Mill Valley segment.

0:15:51 Debra Schwartz: No. It's okay, we can go back 'cause it's good to get an overview. You wrote the book probably — I don't know how long it took you, but it's published by about '77, as you said.

0:16:01 Cyra McFadden: Yeah. It was published over about three or four months in the *Pacific Sun*.

0:16:10 Debra Schwartz: Let's talk about that. This is a very interesting element to this book, 'cause nowadays the book is received differently, I think. But at that time it was released in segments. Will you talk about how that all came down?

0:16:27 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, I had done some casual writing for the *Pacific Sun*, most of it parody of one kind or another. And Don Stanley, who was an editor there, called me up and asked me if I would do a serial about Marin County. It was his idea, it was not mine. Armistead Maupin had briefly written a serial in a San Francisco newspaper that was —

0:16:56 Debra Schwartz: *Tales of the City*.

0:16:58 Cyra McFadden: Yeah. I can't remember if it was called *Tales of the City* at that point. It was a newspaper that might have been an offshoot of the *Pacific Sun* trying to do a small weekly in San Francisco. Somebody tried, anyway, and it went down in flames. And at that point, Don Stanley approached me about doing a serial. I had not read Armistead's work at that point. He became a good friend later. But I agreed to do this and it was going to be a week in the life of Marin County. It turned out to be a year in the life of Marin County because it picked up some momentum and people wanted more of it, the people who didn't want me strung up. So anyway, I began writing that serial.

0:17:53: Meanwhile —and I can't tell you what the exact timing was — Armistead was hired by the *Chronicle* to continue his San Francisco serial there, and of course it became an international phenomenon. And Armistead and I became good friends. We said that we divided up the turf at the Golden Gate Bridge. I'm sure we were writing serials at the same time, but mine was to be very short-lived. I was not planning an epic. And when an old New York friend came out and read it in the *Pacific Sun*, he thought it had wider potential and he hand carried it back to Bob Gottlieb, who was sort of the dean of the remaining great editors at Alfred A. Knopf. Bob Gottlieb called me up — I had no idea even who he was at that point — and said, "Would you like to come to New York and talk about this?" So I did and he said, "Can you make this a year in the life of, can you continue this serial for 52 episodes?" Which I thought sounded absolutely overwhelming, but I agreed to do that. I had to leave teaching because I couldn't —

0:19:18 Debra Schwartz: You were teaching in —

0:19:18 Cyra McFadden: I was teaching in San Francisco State as an instructor in the English Department. And I had to give up my few classes. I took leave. I've never gotten around to going back, but that's how it all began.

0:19:32 Debra Schwartz: It's just —

0:19:33 Cyra McFadden: And then Bob did a brilliant job of packaging the book. You

have it on your lap. It's the spiral bound version with a cardboard cover. It was an overlarge paperback book format, which meant that people piled it up next to the cash register. It was modeled on the old Simon & Schuster puzzle books, which Bob had also published. It was brilliant design, and Tom Cervenak, the illustrator, did a spectacular job of — he gave you the visual impressions I still have of the characters.

0:20:09 Debra Schwartz: Almost like a comic book, in the sense that you have pictorial going through, which is unusual for a book — usually there's a chapter and there's a photo that has some significance. But these pictures carry you through in a way that you are —

0:20:24 Cyra McFadden: Absolutely. He's brilliant, I think. And he revived a kind of — a comic book, yes, but also neo-realist artwork that started turning up in ads, and his work was very, very influential, his work in this book.

0:20:43 Debra Schwartz: Well, it's sexy. The pictures are sexy. The clothing, everything, it flows, it has a very much a '70s look to it.

0:20:51 Cyra McFadden: I think his artwork accounts in large part for the kind of half-life of this book, because the pictures really nailed the period wonderfully.

0:21:03 Debra Schwartz: It's sort of a surround sound experience. [laughs] I would say, this is unique when it comes — 'cause it's not a table book, a coffee table book.

0:21:16 Cyra McFadden: Right.

0:21:16 Debra Schwartz: It's not just about pictures with a little — this is an actual story with large, fetching pictures, where you start to become acquainted and connected to these characters.

0:21:26 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, it was just so fortunate. Tom and I just were in perfect sync about how this book should look. He did a drawing or two and I just looked at it and said, "That's it. That's it. That's exactly right. That's how they should look."

0:21:41 Debra Schwartz: So Tom is a local?

0:21:42 Cyra McFadden: Tom is now in Washington State, I believe. He taught graphic art for many, many years. I think he still does.

0:21:49 Debra Schwartz: But did he live here in Mill Valley?

0:21:50 Cyra McFadden: He lived in — I think Fairfax at the time. But I'm not absolutely reliable about that.

0:22:00 Debra Schwartz: So you're writing this book and you don't know really what you're doing, do you?

0:22:05 Cyra McFadden: I hadn't a clue [chuckles] which is why there was essentially no plot. I still can't plot my way across the kitchen floor. I still fly by the seat of my pants, pretty much. And that's what I did then. And one morning I remember I got a call from the *Pacific Sun* saying, "We're going to press at noon. Where is your episode of *The Serial* this week?" And I had somehow confused days, which I also still do; I thought it was Tuesday. And I just sat down, banged it out and took it down to the *Sun*. These were still typewriter days, mind you. You'll have to explain to your younger listeners what a typewriter is.

0:22:46 Debra Schwartz: Go ahead. They're listening. You've got their attention. [chuckles]

0:22:49 Cyra McFadden: Yeah. No power except your fingers. And I had forgotten to put carbon paper in my typewriter, so I didn't even have a copy of my own episode. I had to wait a week to read it, which meant I couldn't write the next one, because I didn't remember what [laughs] I'd left hanging a week before.

0:23:09 Debra Schwartz: Did you feel like you were a fraud writer? Did you feel like you were just bluffing it?

0:23:13 Cyra McFadden: I felt that I was an accidental writer.

0:23:16 Debra Schwartz: Accidental writer.

0:23:16 Cyra McFadden: I didn't feel like a fraud. I just thought, "How did I get into this? And how do I get out?" [chuckles]

0:23:23 Debra Schwartz: Well, some of your characters are a little aimless. Before we go forward, because there's going to be a lot of people here listening to this or reading this interview, that don't know about *The Serial*. For many of us it's an anthem of an era. There's just no way to describe the impact that it had for so many people. There was a movie made from it; there was a TV show.

0:23:48 Cyra McFadden: A terrible movie, alas.

0:23:49 Debra Schwartz: Yes, indeed. It was just the best worst movie ever.

0:23:53 Cyra McFadden: Oh. I'm going to insert Martin Mull's wonderful joke about the movie. Martin Mull starred in the movie as the husband of the couple who are the protagonists in *The Serial*. Martin Mull said in his comedy routine that they were showing the movie on airplanes and people were still trying to "walk out." [laughs] I thought it was glorious.

0:24:19 Debra Schwartz: But there really ought to be some kind of — there probably is some subgroup of the best worst movies.

0:24:21 Cyra McFadden: I interrupted you and broke your train of thought.

0:24:24 Debra Schwartz: No, no, it's okay.

0:24:31 Cyra McFadden: It has a cult following as one of the really awful movies. [laughs]

0:24:36 Debra Schwartz: But, unfortunately, it rather neutered the alacrity and the brightness and the cleverness of the book.

0:24:44 Cyra McFadden: It was very heavy-handed.

0:24:45 Debra Schwartz: It was. It did not have the spark that you so aptly put in. If you don't mind taking a moment to just describe what this book is and what it's about, who's in it.

0:24:58 Cyra McFadden: The book is about a family, a couple and their two teenage children. No, they have one teenage child.

0:25:05 Debra Schwartz: One.

0:25:07 Cyra McFadden: And her awful boyfriend. They live in what was my 1960s tract house on the north end of Mill Valley. I was always accused of making unkind fun of people. I pointed out that my husband and I were very much not the characters in the book, but we were certainly included and it was set in my house. Well, if you're not an experienced writer and you need to describe a house, what better house than your own? So if you'd followed the trail at the beginning of the book to the characters, you would have ended up on my doorstep, which people started doing. [laughs]

0:25:52 Debra Schwartz: You just gave them free access, right?

0:25:54 Cyra McFadden: I did, indeed. But they are simply coping with the mood of the time and the onset of the Human Potential Movement not just in Mill Valley but Marin County, which was, believe me, the epicenter, when we were all sort of searching for our authentic selves through all kinds of disciplines, some of them still in existence today and some of them, such as a course in participatory salad-making at Heliotrope University, just gone with the wind. There was an awful lot of silliness. And there were certainly a lot of things that I now regard as perhaps less frivolous than I thought they were at the time.

0:26:52 Debra Schwartz: Yes. It's hard to be objective when you're right in the center of things to really see things. But time does give you that.

0:26:58 Cyra McFadden: I'd really like to emphasize that my target was not so much the Human Potential Movement as the language of the Human Potential Movement. The

serial is full of that jargon, and it was just fascinating to me. I think the single greatest impetus for *The Serial* — and I've told this story so many times I'm sort of ashamed to tell it again — but I stopped at my neighborhood supermarket on the way back from teaching — at the Red Cart Market, of sainted memory — and I was wandering the meat case trying to think of something to cook for dinner, and my butcher, who was a man probably in his mid 50s, early 60s, a nice, friendly sort of sturdy character, said to me, "Could you relate to a pork roast?" [chuckles]

0:27:54: I was just dumbfounded, and I thought, "Probably not." I had never heard that particular bit of language before. And then I started hearing it all, all, all around me. My San Francisco State students began pouring it out just, "Blah-blah-blah." I suddenly felt I was just living in this crazy house of echoes, where everybody was talking and talking a lot, but nobody was saying anything. My very favorite was later addressed in a notorious NBC documentary made about *The Serial* and about the Human Potential Movement here. It was a father who was being tugged upon by a small child, and the child would say, "Daddy, daddy. I need this, I need that," or, "Are we gonna go to the park?" And the man was proceeding at a rapid pace up a flight of stairs, shaking the kid off, and he was saying, "I hear you. I hear you." And he wasn't listening at all. [laughs]

0:29:00 Debra Schwartz: This book is like a dictionary of vernacular and idiom. It captures so much. I believe I wrote some of the terms.

0:29:13 Cyra McFadden: You'll have to remind me. I'm happy to say I've forgotten most of it.

0:29:17 Debra Schwartz: Oh, my gosh, they're so colorful. They really are. There's a lot of "really" — how back then people were saying "really" a lot. The language is a way of, just as you said, it's pretentious when you read it in the sense that people are saying the exact opposite of what they're really doing. [laughs]

0:29:44 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, very often. Yeah.

0:29:45 Debra Schwartz: They say they're listening, but they're really talking. They say that they've really come to their authentic self.

0:29:53 Cyra McFadden: "I know where you're coming from."

0:29:54 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:29:55 Cyra McFadden: They haven't got a clue. [chuckles] "I don't believe in value judgements." I had a student tell me about a failed grade, "I don't believe in value judgements." I said, "That's what I'm here for. To teach you and if you don't do the work," which he had not, "then you get a value judgement from me which is, guess what, you failed my course."

0:30:20 Debra Schwartz: Yes, in every way possible to skirt responsibility, reality

with language, this was a time.

0:30:29 Cyra McFadden: That's a very accurate way to put it. I think that's what the language did do.

0:30:34 Debra Schwartz: By coming across as slick and as sexy as these photographs, I mean these drawings. So you look fabulous. But when you read this book you have to understand that a lot of the characters, it seems to me, have lived one kind of world — they've grown in a more conventional world — and they're on the cusp of the movement, so they themselves are students of the time, but they're old enough to believe that they are authorities.

0:31:02 Cyra McFadden: Right. And Marin didn't, of course, invent the Human Potential Movement. Places like Esalen have always been — I'm not belittling, and I want to it make very clear about that. They've always been places for people to go and retreat and look inward instead of outward and set aside their ordinary lives and think deeply about what they want from their lives, and how to get it. But we gave it a special spin. [chuckles]

0:31:31 Debra Schwartz: In this, it's the people that use the language to really facilitate their own needs and wants, regardless of the circumstances.

0:31:40 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, that was another ethic of the time that you had to think about your needs, and unfortunately it was often — that was a sort of exclusivity: you forgot about everybody else.

0:31:55 Debra Schwartz: But you also include in this book the women's movement and the effect that it has on the men and that whole dynamic.

0:32:02 Cyra McFadden: Right. And the women's movement was so interesting then. I am obviously totally for the women's movement, but it took some really extreme turns. I remember when all the women were reading *Our Bodies, Ourselves* and having a set of *kaffeeklatsch* parties where you examined your vagina with a flashlight and hand mirror, because you should know what was going on up there. There was something so, to me, ludicrous about a group of middle class, Mill Valley women all sitting around with their flashlights and their hand mirrors. It wasn't that I thought this was lewd in some fashion, I just thought it was weird.

0:32:54 Debra Schwartz: And then there's the part about parenting in here. I've set aside this one paragraph because it really does such a wonderful job. Chapter 12, "Dealing with the Whole Child."

0:33:10 Cyra McFadden: Which is the one I'm always asked to read, that's the one that seems to have the most —

0:33:12 Debra Schwartz: Would you read this?

0:33:14 Cyra McFadden: Which paragraph?

0:33:16 Debra Schwartz: Right here about after the little boy has burned his —

0:33:20 Cyra McFadden: Oh, he spilled coffee on his phone.

0:33:23 Debra Schwartz: Yes, and this is the father's response.

0:33:25 Cyra McFadden: And Jason is the father. "Jason was super intelligent too, however. He had a PhD in Medieval Studies from Cornell and was currently teaching night classes in Bonehead English at the College of Marin. So he naturally dealt with Jon-Jon (the child) calmly, once he stopped driving. 'Jon,' he said, 'I can only surmise that your impulsive gesture in pouring hot coffee on your father was the result of some instinctual aversion to the use of stimulants. An admirable course of action in the abstract, but a painful one in actuality. I feel we should discuss the question of how one chooses the form of protest he employs as a vehicle for his convictions. It's difficult to entertain an honest difference of opinion on the rational level when one is suffering from third degree burns. Can you understand that?' [chuckles] Jon-Jon gave him the finger, snatched Martha (his mother's) baklava off her plate and began to pull Gregor's hair." Gregor is his little brother. "Martha thought it really spoke —" excuse me, that's the neighbor's child. "Martha thought it spoke volumes for the McGinnis,' Gregor's parents, that he was so uninhibited."

0:35:00: And I might say there is a clear continuum, I think, from that chapter of *The Serial* to the whole helicopter parent phenomenon now. It was in full bloom when I stopped teaching. I would get very, very angry phone calls from parents — this was at the college level — when a child of theirs, a student I was teaching, got a grade that they didn't think reflected the child's absolute shining brilliance, which I should have had the intelligence to see through, despite his murky prose. It was that kind of thing. [chuckles] And I thought, "These are people dealing with 18-year-old kids, 17- and 18-year-old kids, and they are still hovering over their shoulders." And really to be ultimately controlling, even if to everyone who came in contact with them, they were raising little princes and princesses.

0:35:48 Debra Schwartz: And yet in this era, in the '70s and the '60s, children were more like accoutrements to a lifestyle in many ways. And the children in this book, the protagonist and his wife, Kate and Harvey, their daughter goes off. They have no idea where she is at all.

0:36:03 Cyra McFadden: True.

0:36:04 Debra Schwartz: She leaves the story.

0:36:06 Cyra McFadden: She does, and there were certainly a lot of people like Joan, the daughter in that book, who became rebel kids. That was certainly another element of

the time.

0:36:17 Debra Schwartz: Yes, and that it was factual. The history shows that great leaders and philosophers of the time, their children have grown up and they all have their own stories to tell about what happened at that time.

0:36:30 Cyra McFadden: True, they do indeed. And alas, it was the very beginning of the influx of casual drug use, and some of those children went off and just burned out. I had a dear friend, at San Francisco State, in fact, whose child became a hard-core heroin addict and ultimately died. All of that youthful rebellion was a good thing in lots of ways, but it had a dark side as well.

0:37:00 Debra Schwartz: Yet in this book now, with the passage of time, you can see even in the close of this book, where Jody, Harvey and Kate's daughter, her ex-boyfriend, who'd been a drug dealer, now he's into coke and he's not making much sense. Your book ends really right before a wave of harder drugs.

0:37:23 Cyra McFadden: Right before the breaking wave, but there were signs of it even then.

0:37:26 Debra Schwartz: Yep, so this book really captures in so many ways a lot of things that were going on in society at the time. And as truth-sayers may be often vilified, this happened to you. So will you explain a little bit more about the effect? Here you are making a book, writing a book, participating in something that's really quite new. You are, I guess you could say, sort of exploring it in your own way, and then the ramifications come.

0:38:03 Cyra McFadden: Well, it turned my life inside out, obviously. All of a sudden I, who at that point — I don't think we had a television set, although we might have broken down and bought one by then. My husband and I were readers, and my daughter was a reader, and we just hadn't bothered to get television. And I was flown off to New York to do the *Today Show*, which I'd never seen. So all of a sudden, I had a public life and I was completely unequipped to handle it. I was absolutely terrified of interviews, and ill-prepared to be sent off to be interviewed by a *New York Times* reporter as a sort of spokesman for the *Times*, which I wasn't. I was a woman writing for my own pleasure, because I had a lot of fun writing *The Serial*. I got to address a lot of things that I thought were funny, and I also got to incorporate all kinds of bits and pieces of my own life and my friends' life. There's so many private jokes for friends in this book, you can't imagine.

0:39:13: I was not prepared to be anointed a philosopher for our times. [chuckles] And that was very difficult. I just really wanted my own private life back. It was so hard on my daughter, because so many people in Marin were very angry about *The Serial*, and they would "ventilate," as we said at the time, by taking it out on her. She heard from her peers how angry and upset their parents were about the book and what an awful woman they thought I was, and then the kids would pass this on to Caroline. Every time the

phone rang it was for me, and this is an awful thing for an adolescent girl. And my husband, who sailed through all of this marvelously, he was so supportive, and so on my side, and he was so upset about people saying really wicked and insulting things about me, in his opinion. I would do things like take dry cleaning into the dry cleaner and the dry cleaner would come out from behind the counter, from the back of the store, and say, "We don't want your business anymore."

0:40:34 Debra Schwartz: Wow.

0:40:34 Cyra McFadden: I will not tell you which grocery store I got thrown out of, where someone also said, "Get out of here. We don't want you here. You've besmirched the name of Mill Valley, and the name of Marin County." And this was when all of a sudden cars began to be festooned with the bumper stickers, "Marvelous Marin" and "I love Marin." I don't think that was coincidental. There was just so much defensiveness and hostility that was very hard to take. I learned not to open any piece of mail that did not have a return address, because it would be more hate mail. As I told you, I unlisted my phone. We took a bit of a beating. There were certainly defenders, but it was just a tumultuous time.

0:41:30 Debra Schwartz: And then your husband gets sick, too.

0:41:32 Cyra McFadden: He was sick shortly thereafter. The book was published in '77 and John's illness began in '78, so we had about a year. I had started a second book, the rodeo book that I really wanted to write, and all of a sudden my husband was sick. And it was obvious that his cancer was already advanced. The money that I'd made for *The Serial* couldn't have been more welcome. It was manna from heaven that I had extra money when we needed it to see him through a long illness. We got through those two years and I fled to San Francisco. I just wanted to get away. I just wanted that much distance. And it's amazing to me now, living in Sausalito as I do, what a psychological distance it is just to cross the bridge. I think hard about it partly because of the crazy, new San Francisco traffic. But there is some removal, and a houseboat is a serene and wonderful place to be remote.

0:42:58 Debra Schwartz: Where you live now.

0:43:00 Cyra McFadden: Where I live now. It was nice to come back, but I needed that time away. And I still came back a little trepidatious about what kind of a reception I would have here. That was an old book by then, and things had quieted down. I had achieved enough local, or rather, national notice that I was now sort of the fair-haired daughter of Marin, and it turned out everybody liked the book. Everybody said, "Oh, I loved that book. I thought it was wonderful. I felt so bad for you with all those letters to the paper." And I thought, "You're sure you didn't write one?" Because all of a sudden I had nothing but fans, which was very nice. [chuckles]

0:43:52 Debra Schwartz: What a rollercoaster.

0:43:54 Cyra McFadden: It was. If I sound as if I'm complaining in any way about the hostile reception to the book, I was incredibly lucky. I was a first-time author who was hand carried by a friend to the top editor at the top publishing house in New York, which accepted my book. I sold the book as a movie and made what I thought at the time was a tremendous lot of money. Now it would cause a giggle in Mill Valley, but the money came just when I was going to need it at the worst time in my life. I have no complaints at all. On the contrary.

0:44:37 Debra Schwartz: The things you don't know about 'til you ask. This is interesting. And the people: tell me about your observations, how you actually got that context, the stories. Did you sit in the Depot restaurant and listen to people's conversations? Were these your friends?

0:45:00 Cyra McFadden: A lot of people I knew were going through a lot of life upheaval, with their children in some cases, but also with feminism making an impact on marriages, including mine. It took my husband a little time to adjust to a certain different lifestyle in our household — to use a word I almost never use, how did that slip in? In any case, all of a sudden, I had a full-time professional life.

0:45:36: When I was teaching, I was teaching part-time. Yes, I spent a lot of time reading papers and working at home, but we still had an active social life, and I still ran a pretty tight ship, our domestic life came first. And once I had a much more professional life and it was much more time-consuming and devouring, there were lots of adjustments to be made in our household, which had to do with things like, "Pack your own lunch. I've already cooked dinner. I've cleaned up the kitchen. I really need my time now. There's all this food on hand. There's this, there's the other thing, pack your own lunch." I remember one of our very rare fights when I said to my husband, "Do you think — ?" The issue was that I'd stopped packing his lunch at night. He worked in the Mission in San Francisco, which was then a God-forsaken place, way out toward Candlestick Park, to find a meal at lunchtime. So he always liked to carry a lunch. And I said to him, "Do you think if I send your shirts to the laundry instead of washing them and I stop packing your lunch at night that I don't love you anymore?" And he said, "Yes." [laughs]

0:46:57 Debra Schwartz: There's a lot of that in the book where Harvey —

0:47:00 Cyra McFadden: We had to straighten that one out in a hurry.

0:47:04 Debra Schwartz: Where the husbands are sort of just standing around waiting for things to go back to normal.

0:47:09 Cyra McFadden: Well, the husbands are like colonials and the natives were suddenly taking over the countryside. And they'd stopped saying, "Yes, bwana, and of course, I'll run this list of 14 errands you've just given me in my spare time," because I didn't have any anymore.

0:47:26 Debra Schwartz: Yes, and that's an interesting thread through the whole

book, the adjustments everybody's making.

0:47:32 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, and I have to admit that in *The Serial*, of course, I had women friends who went overboard, and I'm sure I did in lots of ways, too. It was that ridiculous period when women would take offense because a man held a door open. This is idiocy. I hold doors open for men if they've got an armload full of groceries, for heaven's sake. I never objected to anybody scuttling around and opening the car door. It wasn't because I was too weak to open the car door; it was a learned courtesy and men enjoyed practicing it. And I thought it was still that some of these tiny, little nit-picky issues took on such heavy weight and significance.

0:48:21 Debra Schwartz: And therefore your characters in the book, the menfolk, are scuttling off to the fern bars [laughs] to try to find their — to get clear and —

0:48:32 Cyra McFadden: It was the early man cave, yeah.

0:48:33 Debra Schwartz: Yes. [chuckles] Another aspect of this era is there's no computers, there's no cellphones, people are actually meeting each other all the time and they're in each other's business all the time.

0:48:48 Cyra McFadden: Right.

0:48:49 Debra Schwartz: In this world we live in today, that is sort of a lost art. The people connect on a different level, through devices.

0:49:00 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, they do, and I have powerfully mixed feelings about it. I couldn't live without my cellphone. Oddly, I'm not on it all day, the way lots of people are, but just having it with me for the phone call I urgently need to make, or the emergency or whatever. It's a great comfort. I like that a lot and I use it to keep up with email and that sort of thing during the day. I like all these conveniences. I would not like to have to go back to pounding my old manual typewriter again, but I do think that life is more impersonal in a lot of ways, and that's a shame. I was a great letter writer in my day, and so were all my friends, and I have a marvelous collection of wonderful literate letters from friends that are chronicles of their lives and I am not going to have — or rather, I should say, the email generation is not going to have — those chronicles, unless like Hillary Clinton, we make the mistake of using our servers for the wrong reason.

0:50:15: We don't keep records of our lives anymore. Biographers are gonna have a hell of a time in another decade or so, and that's a shame. Those letters are still very valuable to me, because they were from a friend who's now an aging friend, as I'm an aging woman, and here's a little slice of life when somebody was 30, and the children were young, and we were all writing about our lives and our experiences, and I've recaptured those friends in their youth through their letters.

0:50:52 Debra Schwartz: Well, I really urge people listening to see to this, if they haven't read the book *The Serial*, to read the book, to also recapture another time here in

Mill Valley. You include the names of the stores and the restaurants, you describe what it is, and also there's a sense of social responsibility that is in your book where, if somebody's having a trouble, like the wives put their husbands to use, sending them off, to go find this person, go take care of that. Talk about that a little bit.

0:51:27 Cyra McFadden: I'm sure that a lot of that happens still, that a friend has some sort of an emergency or a crisis and one person or the other is dispatched to go help. I'm sure that happens. It would be a bleak world if it didn't. But we were a lot more interdependent somehow, part of that was that my friends and I were young, we were young families raising young children and that creates a very different web of association and a web of shared responsibility. "Can you pick up the kids? Can you drive this excursion?" I used to be asked to cover classes when a teacher was sick and I would get the phone call sometimes at 8:00 in the morning and go in and take a fifth grade English class or some such thing. I hadn't a clue what I was doing there either, but they just needed somebody.

0:52:20 Debra Schwartz: The school would do that?

0:52:21 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, there was a lot of covering for each other and looking out for each other's children and somebody's car broke down, you might get the phone call at 11:00 at night. I don't know why we didn't all have AAA at that time, but we didn't. We all lived like mice at the time, nobody had money to spare, but I insist that that kind of human kindness still exists, maybe not to the same degree when you get older and you don't need so much of a support system in the same way. I suppose I'll need it again as I get older still, but it's a different kind of autonomy now.

0:53:07 Debra Schwartz: There's also attention that the women have to the statement they make with their clothing.

0:53:16 Cyra McFadden: Well, we were certainly all doing that. I think we took away from that era — all of us — we never gave clothes a lot of thought. We learned self-presentation. I say that as someone who lives in jeans and T-shirts on the docks, where I live, but I can scrape myself off, if I need to and send myself off. [chuckles]

0:53:41 Debra Schwartz: Take the barnacles off.

0:53:42 Cyra McFadden: Take the barnacles off.

0:53:43 Debra Schwartz: Put some polish.

0:53:44 Cyra McFadden: But I loved that era of dressing. I loved the flamboyance of it, the costumey element of it, and I had costumey clothes myself then. I might have been right on the cusp of when I was probably a little too old to wear such thing. But I loved my yard-wide bell-bottom pants. I never wore the headbands, but I loved the beads and the jewelry and the — dressing oneself is an act of personal art. That was a lot of fun. I liked that and I think a lot of it's carried over and it pleases me. I love the era now of girls

with pink and green and yellow hair, all three at once. And I think, "Go for it." Because it's so much fun for the rest of us to look at.

0:54:38 Debra Schwartz: Do you miss the days of catered garage sales? With wine served?

0:54:45 Cyra McFadden: I miss garage sales in general. I was a great garage sale shopper in my day and, as we discussed briefly when I first met you, eBay has taken pretty much care of garage sales. And I have so many artifacts left still that I'm sorry I can't go out and do my magpie number and find some more.

0:55:09 Debra Schwartz: Because in the book they talk about everything. In this book, things are presented. It's almost like there's a ceremony for the daily, is how, to me that comes across — and maybe I'm infusing something here — but the daily events of the cocktail parties, and the luncheons, and the interventions —

0:55:35 Cyra McFadden: Oh, yes, there were lots of those. There was a lot more social interchange, certainly for me at that time. But, again, that's a function of age and not being connected into a parent network or an academic network anymore. I still have friends, obviously, in both of those worlds, lots of them, and they're longtime friends, but it's not the same kind of connected, as we really lived a lot in each other's living rooms and around each other's tables and at each other's wine and cheese garage sales.

0:56:10 Debra Schwartz: And how about the individuals in the book? Who are they? Are these your friends? The doctors, the therapists. Reading through this, just little hints, if you were around at the time, you might make some assumptions that you know who this person or that person is.

0:56:31 Cyra McFadden: I have to be very careful answering that question. The characters are inventions. I did not know a Kate and I did not know a Harvey, and I didn't know the children. Well, yes, in fact, I did know some of the children in the book, but they were composites. I wasn't painting a picture, even a subversive one, of anybody in particular. I learned after I wrote *The Serial* that there were lawyers preparing libel suits against me. A lawyer told me cheerfully at one of those cocktail parties one night, "Oh, I almost sued you out of your house." There is a supermarket checker in the book named Marlene. I didn't know a soul named Marlene. I don't know where the name came from. But anyway, she's a health food fanatic, and she lectures Harvey about his diet and finally ends up living with him for a while when he and Kate separate.

0:57:43: Apparently, this lawyer was contacted by a young woman who said her name was Marlene. She didn't work at the supermarket where I had —it was an actual supermarket where I had placed that checker. But she worked at a supermarket in Marin, and she claimed that I had ruined her life and caused her to be ridiculed and lampooned and laughed at. "Why didn't you sue me?" I said, shaking all over. And he said, "Well, it turned out her name hadn't always been Marlene." She had apparently changed her name and approached a lawyer. And I had muttered threats from one other man who saw

himself as the character in the book, and since the character was not a likable character, I said, spontaneously — and as it turned out, it was the right defense, I said — "Why would you want to be identified as X?" And he thought about it for a while and decided that he didn't. But I was probably skating pretty close to the edge there because, again, I was a green new writer. Did I worry about libel? Certainly not. Fortunately, I didn't libel anybody. I didn't paint a portrait of anyone that in my mind was identifiable. And the few people who really sort of stretched and thought they saw themselves did back down, thank heavens.

0:59:20 Debra Schwartz: Well, it's a credit to your writing but these people seem so vivid, I have to say.

0:59:25 Cyra McFadden: Thank you. It seemed vivid to people who took dire exception.

0:59:28 Debra Schwartz: Because I'm sure they had to have been real. [chuckles]

0:59:31 Cyra McFadden: No, no. I swear to you, I was not poking fun at anyone I knew.

0:59:43 Debra Schwartz: Well, seriously, it is a function of your writing. These people are clear; they have their personalities; they seem so very defined and distinct; so, kudos to you about that.

0:59:56 Cyra McFadden: Well, thank you very much, but their personalities got invented over a frantic hour-and-a-half at the typewriter every Wednesday morning. [chuckles]

1:00:04 Debra Schwartz: Some people work well under pressure, apparently.

1:00:07 Cyra McFadden: I used to. I don't anymore. I now need leisure and reasonable calm around me.

1:00:14 Debra Schwartz: So I'm holding this book in my hand, and I have to look at it now with new eyes. I see a problem child here, in a sense. Somebody you created out of love and imagination that brought all kinds of unexpected torment and worry. And yet, the years have gone.

1:00:32 Cyra McFadden: And many rewards. Many, many rewards.

1:00:33 Debra Schwartz: Many rewards. Is this your problem child? How would you describe it?

1:00:38 Cyra McFadden: Not anymore. I have outlived the problem child aspect. The problem child has grown up. Kate and Harvey would now be — let's see, they were in their late 30s, early 40s, when I wrote this book. That was 1970. They're geezers.

1:00:53 Debra Schwartz: Where are they?

1:00:54 Cyra McFadden: Good question.

1:00:56 Debra Schwartz: Well, who are they? Where are they?

1:00:58 Cyra McFadden: Rossmoor.[2] They're all in Rossmoor [laughs], which I'm told is a great place to be a geezer. The book has grown up. There are generations who haven't read it. Anybody in their 30s says to me, "Oh, my parents read that book." I just consider it a relic of that time, and I think most people do now. It has had a weird half-life. It made a great hit in England. The English loved *The Serial*. It was a bestseller in England and I was brought over to publicize it again.

1:01:44 Debra Schwartz: What year was that?

1:01:46 Cyra McFadden: Probably '78, '79, and this was wonderful to somebody — I had never been in London, where I now spend as much time as I can. But the English were just behind Marin County in glomming onto the Human Potential Movement, in particular, and onto some of the jargon. And everybody who saw the book after the fact is very appreciative about English towns and how English society was changing, and the language was changing, the culture was changing, some elements of it, at least. And the other thing was, as I wrote in a preface to a later English edition, it confirmed everything they thought about airhead Californians, that we were all a bunch of Botoxed and plastic surgeoned lightweights without a brain in our heads. And so they liked the satirical edge and embraced it. I've now spent how many years explaining to the English [laughs] that this book was about a very, very small segment of American society that didn't even last that long.

1:03:11 Debra Schwartz: But actually, the British are pretty good at poking fun at themselves.

1:03:14 Cyra McFadden: They are. It's one thing I love about the country.

1:03:16 Debra Schwartz: They don't take it so personally, I don't think. Yes. But have these people really gone away or have they just changed the vernacular? Is it not the human condition to find a way to skirt what needs to be done and —

1:03:34 Cyra McFadden: I can't really address that because, again, I was writing about people in their 30s and 40s, and obviously my contemporaries now are much, much older. As I told you, I'm 78. I always have to stop and figure that out, because it astonishes me.

1:03:52 Debra Schwartz: The look on your face.

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[2] Rossmoor is a senior community in Walnut Creek.—Ed.

1:03:53 Cyra McFadden: And I'm inclined to say I'm 87, because I [laughs] haven't quite absorbed this. But I don't know that group of young strivers that I wrote about way back, all those decades ago. So I really can't comment on that.

1:04:13 Debra Schwartz: Well, now the young strivers are like these strivers on steroids.

1:04:19 Cyra McFadden: And they're workaholics, yeah.

1:04:22 Debra Schwartz: It's a different world.

1:04:23 Cyra McFadden: And they can buy and sell their parents five times over, a lot of people in the technical world. We look on with absolute astonishment. But it's, as you say, it's a very, very different world. And *The Serial* really was about a period of fads, and those fads are long gone.

1:04:49 Debra Schwartz: Communes are gone.

1:04:50 Cyra McFadden: The communes are gone, exactly. Nobody that I know lives on macrobiotic diets anymore. It smells terrible. [chuckles] I don't know what it is about macrobiotic diets. But I have a friend who's a masseur and he said he could walk into a room and know which clients were going to be on a macrobiotic diet. And it was an ordeal. He'd throw open all the windows.

1:05:19 Debra Schwartz: Oh, interesting.

1:05:23 Cyra McFadden: We're now all gluten-free, but that doesn't seem to have the same effect.

1:05:27 Debra Schwartz: Not in the olfactory systems, I suppose. So looking at this now as we look at a changing world, to read *The Serial* there's almost an innocence to it.

1:05:39 Cyra McFadden: An innocence. I think, to some extent, that's true. Certainly, the things that people were pursuing so desperately weren't money-focused, in the same sense, which is something that saddens me a bit. Making money is such an enormously important ambition in people's life, I mean, beyond the level of reasonable comfort, which we all want, and reasonable luxury in the sense of not wanting for things. But it seems to me it's a cut-throat world out there. It's reflected in so many ways, the amount of aggression and competitiveness. Try driving in Mill Valley these days.

1:06:32 Debra Schwartz: Well, if you were to say anything to anybody in the community listening, to young people today about your experience and what you went through, chronicling this time in the '70s, all of your experience, what would you say? I mean, your lessons learned for anybody that might be embarking on creatively expressing themselves, perhaps taking a chance.

1:07:03 Cyra McFadden: Oh, go for it, obviously. [chuckles] I believe anybody who has an urge to write, or to paint, or to sculpt, or to dance, or to sing, or to do anything creative should do it. There's always a risk involved. I told you that my second book, which got a lot of critical attention and was very important to me on that level, sank like a stone in the marketplace. People were hoping very much for "Son of Serial." That's what they wanted.

1:07:36 Debra Schwartz: "Son of Serial." [chuckles]

1:07:37 Cyra McFadden: That's what they wanted from me and I did not want to write a series of sequels. I wanted to do something else. I still don't want to repeat myself as a writer. I had the luxury of writing a newspaper column for a few years, and that was marvelous because every day that I wrote it, I got to start again. Anyway, the rewards for me certainly outweighed the disadvantages, and it was worth scraping eggs off my car.

1:08:09 Debra Schwartz: Was it?

1:08:10 Cyra McFadden: Yeah, it was. It was hard to be the target of all that hostility at the time but it also — it was sort of being born by fire because after that, when I wrote a newspaper column and I got a nasty letter, I was a much tougher character by that time, and I wrote back and said in effect, "Go soak your head in a toxic waste dump," until my editor grabbed hold of me and said, "You can't do that." So then, I wrote, "Thank you for your poison pen letter," and he said, "You can't do that either." [chuckles] I was a much tougher person to be in the public eye as the result of my first experience with it.

1:08:56 Debra Schwartz: You matured.

1:08:57 Cyra McFadden: It was useful in that sense.

1:08:58 Debra Schwartz: You matured, I suppose, in some weird way. You'd been forged by fire.

1:09:03 Cyra McFadden: I hope so. I hope I matured. This is an awfully frivolous book, and when I look back on it now, I can't tell you how I'd like the chance to rewrite it. I think I was certainly less skilled as a writer when I wrote this book, just in the sense of craft. It's overwritten.

1:09:28 Debra Schwartz: You think it's overwritten?

1:09:29 Cyra McFadden: I do.

1:09:29 Debra Schwartz: How about would you change the story at all? If you had a chance, right now, to make a couple of alternations, could you think of anything?

1:09:35 Cyra McFadden: No. It's so hard for me to invent a story that I wouldn't think of putting myself in the position of having to invent another one. I'd merely edit

this book for style and I would strip away some of its excesses.

1:09:52 Debra Schwartz: I wouldn't want you to change a thing.

1:09:55 Cyra McFadden: [laughs] Thank you.

1:09:56 Debra Schwartz: I really wouldn't. It is what it is at the time.

1:10:03 Cyra McFadden: I think writers always do that, though. I remember before I sent things off by computer, I'd write an article and I'd take it to the mailbox, drop it in the mail and hear that *thunk*, and I would just be dying to get my arm in there to pull it out. [laughs]

1:10:18 Debra Schwartz: The finality of the *thunk*.

1:10:18 Cyra McFadden: Because as the envelope dropped, I thought of rewriting the last sentence.

1:10:23 Debra Schwartz: Does it ever stop?

1:10:25 Cyra McFadden: I doubt it for anybody, for musicians, for singers, for anybody at all. You always want to make it better, if you can.

1:10:33 Debra Schwartz: Yes. Well, Cyra, this has been a great interview and really interesting to hear how it came down, what your process was, and what you went through.

1:10:43 Cyra McFadden: Well, you've been a very kind interviewer. You haven't said to me, "Please tell me how you came to write that nasty, malicious book of yours."

1:10:52 Debra Schwartz: [laughs] Well, I'm a California girl. I'm pretty clear about stuff like this. I think that you've done — really, regardless of what people may say about who you decided to focus on, what you decided to focus on, the vernacular you decided to capture so aptly, this is historical. From a historical point of view, this is a historical snapshot of a time, an era that really happened, and there aren't that many books that really capture it in the way that you have.

1:11:31 Cyra McFadden: Well, I appreciate the compliment. The language part has been important to linguists. The editor of the OED called me up, way back in early *Serial* days, called me up from London and said, "Could you please explain this locution, "Go with the flow?" [laughs] They were deciding what contemporary usage would be included in the latest edition of the OED. So, I had to write him a glossary of a number of terms. I don't know what they did include.

1:12:12 Debra Schwartz: I really wished I had written down so many of the terms just to say out loud, but I think the last line of the book says —

1:12:24 Cyra McFadden: Which I can't remember.

1:12:28 Debra Schwartz: "This is the end of the book where they've been through a journey together as a couple, Harvey and Kate, and they've come full circle. And they've just had their — " I don't want to spoil the plot, but they're together, and they're exiting from their last event and she can't see very well, and he's had double dose of his valium, and they're both kind of helping each other along. "And Harvey rocked gently, back and forth in his Earth shoes." Remember Earth shoes?

1:13:06 Cyra McFadden: I do, indeed.

1:13:09 Debra Schwartz: He's responding to his wife, who says, when she realizes that they're really not fit to drive or go forward. She asks, "'We can't go back in there. That's tacky. I mean, wow, what are we going to do?' And he rocks gently back and forth in his Earth shoes. 'Hang loose?' he suggested vaguely."

1:13:35 Cyra McFadden: I've forgotten that entirely.

1:13:37 Debra Schwartz: Hang loose.

1:13:39 Cyra McFadden: Hang loose. I'd forgotten "Hang loose."

1:13:40 Debra Schwartz: That's just one of the many little sayings. You can get pelted with these little sayings through the whole book. "Hang loose," "getting clear," which I've said so many times.

1:13:55 Cyra McFadden: Pelted, interesting.

1:13:55 Debra Schwartz: Yes. It's just all through it, it's just wonderful little — for those of us who lived through the time, really, you interview older people and they have certain phrases and certain ways of saying things that tell you where they were born and what the era that they lived in when they were young, because those things stay with you. I have an entire generation of friends, we still use many of these terms.

1:14:21 Cyra McFadden: I'm delighted. [laughs]

1:14:23 Debra Schwartz: So, you've captured them. You put them into print. Anyway, I think that just about covers it. Is there anything we haven't talked about that you'd like to say?

1:14:33 Cyra McFadden: Donald Trump? [chuckles]

1:14:34 Debra Schwartz: You want to talk about Donald Trump? [laughs]

1:14:39 Cyra McFadden: No. I'd like to keep a civil tongue in my head, so I thank

you very much.

1:14:44 Debra Schwartz: I thank you very much. On behalf of the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Library, Cyra McFadden, thank you for your book, and thank you for your oral history.

1:14:55 Cyra McFadden: Thank you.