

SPECIAL 'GRIT LIT' SECTION

William Gay 1941-2012



IN FEBRUARY, THE SOUTHERN literary community said goodbye to acclaimed Tennessee novelist and short story writer William Gay, who died of a heart attack in his home at the age of 70.

A self-taught writer from the age of fifteen, his first book was not published until Gay was fifty-seven years old. His prize-winning first novel, *The Long Home*, was published two years later, and he continued to capture the beauty of the language of the South in print for the next decade.

Gay was the author of the novels *Provinces of Night*, *The Long Home*, and *Twilight* and the short story collection *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down*. He is the winner of the 1999 William Peden Award and the 1999 James A. Michener Memorial Prize and the recipient of a 2002 Guggenheim Fellowship. He also contributed to the *Oxford American* and *Paste*, as well as other literary magazines.

Rural Tennessee roots and blue collar jobs offered Gay an insider's view of regionalism, and he wrote with a sense of reverence for the culture of the South. He claimed William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy as his greatest influences, and wrote and talked in a self-effacing manner throughout his career.

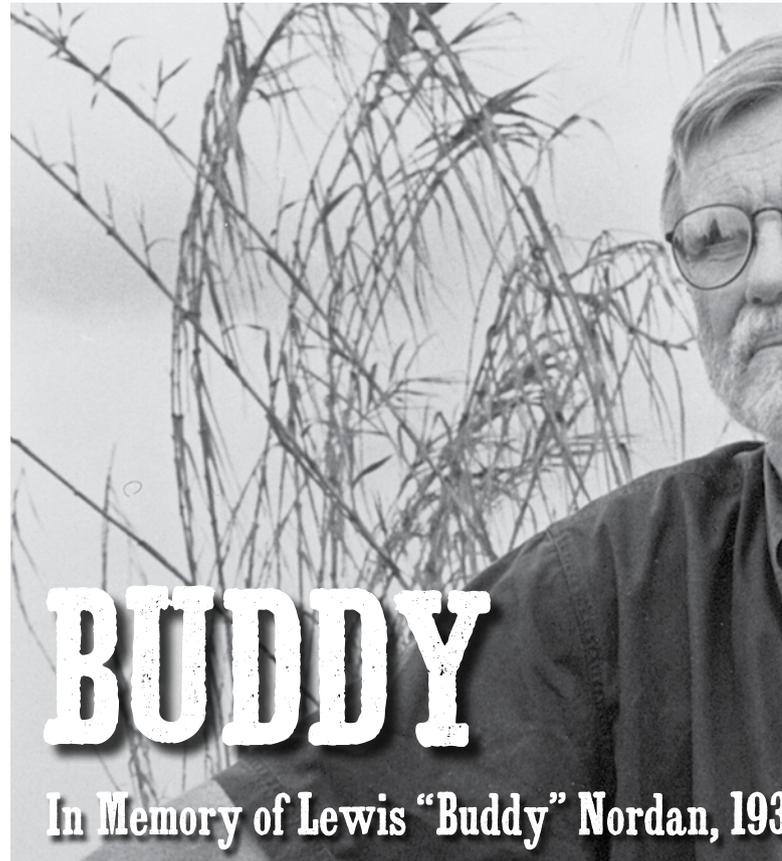
At a reading in Austin a few years ago, Gay told the story of a woman he knew asking him if someone was helping him write his books. "What do you mean?" he asked. She said, "I know your family and I knew you when you were younger, and your people are not that smart. I just wondered if you had someone from New York or somewhere who took out the little words and put in big words to make them better."

No. Gay didn't need anyone to help him write his books. Powerful words roll from his pages in a slow drawl, beautiful and unsettling, with an undertone of gothic evil that captures the best and the worst of the language of the South. —*Diana Hendricks*

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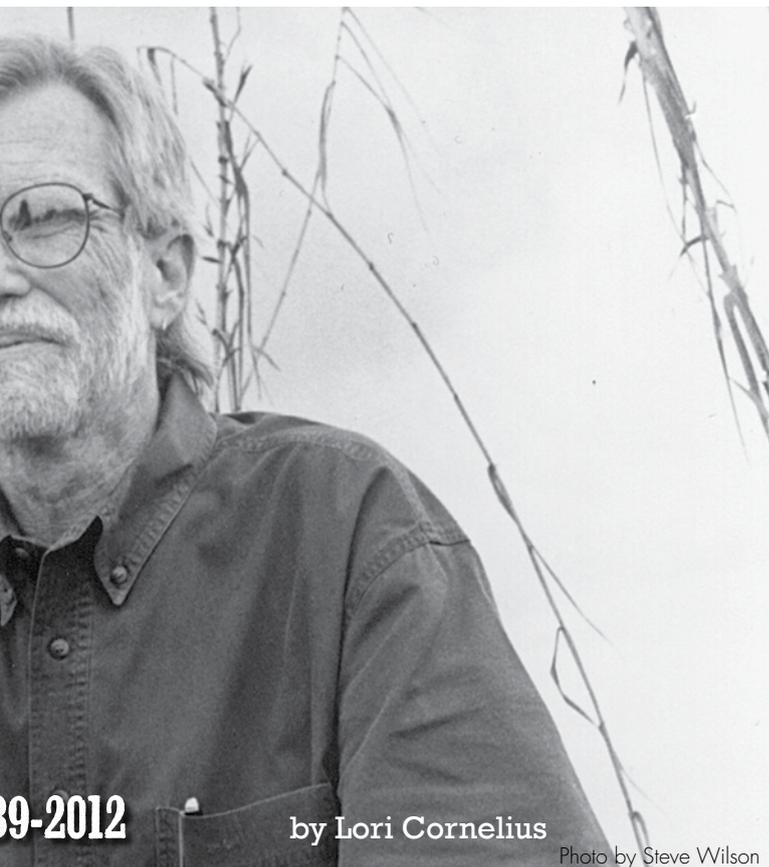
"Fenton's daddy was a undertaker, too, but they had plenty of money besides," Gay wrote about the creepy undertaker in *Twilight*. "That's one reason why I never understood him takin up undertakin. Why not medicine, or the law. Now I don't know if you choose your trade or the trade chooses you, but at the very least you've got to have an inclination for it. I've always believed that Fenton just liked foolin around with dead folks."

This spring, Southern literature—affected legends. William Gay passed away on February 28, followed by Lewis Nordan weeks later on March 28, followed by Lewis Nordan. We could launch a Southern arts/literature festival in his legacy in the sublimely dark, witty work. We are pleased to present a never-before-published



I WAS STANDING IN THE NEW FICTION SECTION OF A library in Naples, Florida, in the spring of 1992 when I read the opening line of *Music of the Swamp*, Lewis Nordan's novel-in-stories. The effect was tremendous: Nordan's young character, Sugar Mecklin, stretched out a hand and offered to show me a world that had existed for me until then only in those moments between asleep and awake, those moments when reality and imagination become skewed and wonderfully interlaced. It only took a sentence. Granted, it was long sentence, but I was hooked, and reading on, I became caught up in a place where arrow-catching is a high school sport, where swamp-elves live in families in the Mississippi Delta, and where characters of Nordan's fantastic imagination look for answers to their utterly hopeless love by digging in the earth with secret entrenching tools to uncover mysteries bigger than can be contained in the heart. There is a rhythm to Nordan's work, both in language and in content, which is undeniably the rhythm of the

tionately known as ‘grit lit’—lost three
February 23, then Harry Crews just a few
Lewis Nordan on April 13. There’s no way
ature magazine without a tribute to their
rld of Southern fiction. We’re especially
ished interview with Lewis Nordan.



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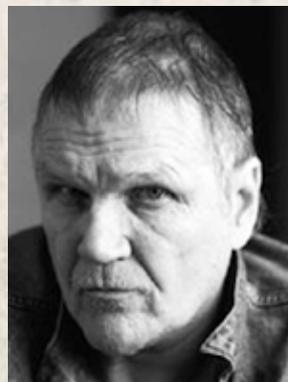
by Lori Cornelius

Photo by Steve Wilson

Mississippi Delta; but it is also the rhythm of all the greatest stories of humanity, the rhythm of love, loss, and finding our way.

I interviewed Lewis “Buddy” Nordan in Chattanooga, during the Biennial Conference on Southern Literature, on April 4, 1997. Earlier in the day he had been on a moderated panel discussion with Yusef Komunyakaa, Naomi Wallace, and Alan Wier. There are some references to that panel in the following interview. Later that evening he received the Hillsdale Prize for fiction, dressed as usual in blue jeans, but with jacket and new shoes—shoes that he claimed were “rather uncomfortable considering they cost \$200.”

Buddy Nordan was an enchanting person, the embodiment of mystical charm. He was completely approachable. If you were on the receiving end of his good-natured teasing, you could count yourself fortunate. During the extended weekend that I spent in his company in Chattanooga to obtain the interview, I counted myself fortunate many times over. My perception of him (*continued on page 60*)



Harry Crews 1935-2012

SOUTHERN CULT NOVELIST HARRY CREWS died from complications of neuropathy in March. *The New York Times* consistently sets a high bar as the bastion of obituary writing. Margalit Fox wrote in the *Times* (3/30/12), “Harry Eugene Crews was born on

June 7, 1935, in Alma, Ga., a rural community near the Okefenokee Swamp where, he later wrote, ‘there wasn’t enough cash money in the county to close up a dead man’s eyes.’”

Over the course of his career, Crews wrote seventeen novels, along with numerous novellas and short stories, and a highly acclaimed memoir, *A Childhood*, all of which carried dark, violent, and often brutal themes. He developed a cult following with his no-holds-barred style, and vivid descriptions of rednecks, snake oil salesmen, and other characters of the gothic South.

His first published novel, *The Gospel Singer*, appeared in 1968, and sixteen followed in his signature, dark form. He published a popular memoir in 1978, and wrote essays for *Playboy* and *Esquire*. In the 1970s, he wrote a regular column in *Esquire* called “Grits,” covering such topics as dogfighting and cockfighting.

A writing professor at the University of Florida for more than three decades, he was passionate about his craft, inspiring generations of students with such memorable lessons as, “A writer’s job is to get naked, to hide nothing, to look away from nothing, to look at it ... Strip it down and let’s get to where the blood is, where the bone is.”

Crews was often drawn to the subject of death, wondering how he would be remembered. In *A Childhood*, he talked about going to his father’s funeral, listening to relatives and lifelong friends tell stories. He wrote, “Listening to them talk, I wondered what would give credibility to my own story, if, when my young son grows to manhood, he has to go looking for me in the mouths and memories of other people. Who would tell the stories? A few motorcycle riders, bartenders, editors, half-mad karateka, drunks, and writers.”

He added, “Even though I was gladdened listening to the stories of my daddy, an almost nauseous sadness settled in me, knowing I would leave no such life intact. Among the men with whom I spent my working life, university professors, there is not one friend of the sort I was listening to speak of my daddy there that day in the back of the store in Bacon County.”

Harry has a different sort of legacy. It is not that of lifelong friends, but the permanence of his books that will speak volumes and keep his memories alive long after the dust has settled. —Diana Hendricks