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 Guggenhein 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.

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This spring, Southern literature—affecting legends. William Gay passed away on February 23, followed by Lewis Nordan on March 28, and Harry Crews on April 1. There’s no way we could launch a Southern arts/literature magazine without a tribute to their legacy in the sublimely dark, witty world of Southern fiction. We’re especially pleased to present a never-before-published interview with Lewis Nordan.

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...
In Memory of Lewis "Buddy" Nordan, 1939-2012

This spring, Southern literature—affectionately known as ‘grit lit’—lost three legends. William Gay passed away on February 23, then Harry Crews just a few weeks later on March 28, followed by Lewis Nordan on April 13. There’s no way we could launch a Southern arts/literature magazine without a tribute to their legacy in the sublimely dark, witty world of Southern fiction. We’re especially pleased to present a never-before-published interview with Lewis Nordan.

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)