

I earned a pilot's license to write *The Sounds of Rescue*, *The Signs of Hope*. I drove the cattle trails and walked parts of them from Texas to Kansas and Montana. A dentist in Newton, Kansas, left patients in the waiting room to show me what Newton looked like when it was the trail's end for cattle drives, including bullet holes in what had been the saloon.

But the book I researched most was *Wanderer Springs*. I took photographs of houses, talked to old-timers, and read histories of West Texas counties. Most of them were not well written, but almost all of them contained a mystery—an animal, a person, a strange occurrence that only a few people ever saw but everyone talked about. These were not urban myths that many know. These were close-held rural myths that a few knew and believed.

The role of place seems to figure prominently in works like *Growing Up a Sullen Baptist*. Could you discuss how location shapes your fiction?

Everything happens somewhere, even if it is an imaginary place, and some stories could happen only in that or a similar place. I see it as the writer's job to create that place. Except for time in the Marines and two years in North Carolina, I have lived in Texas. I have also been to every state in the US and have been on all seven continents. If I'm going to live in the same place then I need to know what other places are like, even if I'm an outsider. Someone said to write about a place you need to live there a lifetime or a week. If you spend your life there you know in your bones what it is like. If you are there for a week you see all the differences that make that place unique.

At the beginning of your teaching career you focused a lot of time and energy writing and directing plays. Does your work with drama affect the way you write fiction?

When I returned to Baylor after the Marines, Paul Baker and Eugene McKinney encouraged me to write, something I decided I wanted to do. McKinney taught playwriting, and I decided that was what I wanted to do. I had a sense of vocation or call at an early age, but I couldn't discover what it was. I thought perhaps I could teach religious drama and write plays on the side. I didn't think of writing as being a vocation. I timidly told two pastors what I was thinking and they thought religious drama was fluff and writing religious plays was even lighter. I told a lawyer friend who was a mentor when I was in high school and college. He said when I had children I would forget things like that. That deeply troubled me. I wanted to be a good husband and a good father, but I already suspected that if I wrote what I wanted to write rather than what others wanted me to write, I would have to support writing like a bad habit. There would always be a conflict between what Jean wanted for us as a family and what our children wanted and what I wanted for myself, which was time to write. Jean was willing to compromise, but it made me feel selfish.

I directed plays only when required to do so because directing is like writing; it controls your thoughts. You go to bed thinking about it; you wake up thinking about it. It was almost impossible to write while directing a play. Teaching in summer school for extra money meant directing a play.

I did teach religious drama at Baylor and Trinity but, of course, I quickly discovered that the "great" plays are religious drama: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Our Town*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *The Crucible*. By that time I had begun writing short stories,

so at Trinity McKinney and I co-taught fiction writing. My first novel, *North to Yesterday*, began as a play. I knew how to write a play. The narrative setting of scenes became longer and more interesting, important action took place offstage, and the animals became crucial to the story. It could be staged, but difficult and expensive, and the correct form for it was fiction.

Humor plays a role in all of your novels. How do you use humor to advance the story?

Humor is always an accident when it occurs in novels. I have intended humor in some essays and stories but never in novels. Because I am sometimes described as a humorist, one reviewer wrote that while *The Last Klick* had humorous moments ultimately the humor failed. I guess there wasn't enough death and gore. I have never thought anything in that book was humorous.

My father knew the Wild West. He detested the mythical and romanticized "Wild West." Dad was born the year of the Short-Courtright shoot-out in Fort Worth. He was six when a Texas Ranger and a county sheriff had a shoot-out in downtown Quanah, less than 20 miles from where he was born. Dad was nine when Rangers began an investigation of the San Saba mob that had murdered 25 people. He was 20 when the Reese-Townsend Feud ended, 27 when the last survivor of the Horrell-Higgins feud died.

North to Yesterday was going to be a grim, realistic portrayal of a dreary, dangerous trail drive with wild cattle, semi-wild horses, bad water, monotonous food, long days in the saddle, and short nights sleeping on the ground punctuated by snakes, centipedes, scorpions, chiggers, ants, ticks, storms, and stampedes. Then on the fourth draft a calf broke through the roof of a starving squatter's dugout and his ill-treated wife. The sodbuster sees it as a miracle, God's manna falling almost on his table. The scene struck me as funny, and I realized that was the tone of the book and I needed to get all of it in the same tone. Humor has more to do with tone and voice than with plot, except when the plot provides the humor.

Do you have favorites among your works? If so, why do you prefer them?

When a book reaches the stage in production where I can no longer change a word or sentence, I see all the flaws in it. Invariably, a few weeks after publication I discover something that would have made the book much better. For a while I don't like the last book; then another is published and it's the new book I don't like much, and the previous book begins to look better. I like the books that were hardest to write and the ones that are unloved. Those would be *Wanderer Springs*, *Tie-Fast Country*, and *Echoes of Glory*.

Which writers have influenced your work most deeply? Why?

William Faulkner and Thornton Wilder. I love Faulkner because of his language. When I am waking up in the morning, words, sentences run through my head. I haven't read Faulkner in years because when I did, those words and sentences sounded like Faulkner. I am aware of that influence and have tried to avoid it. I liked Wilder for the simplicity and honesty of his words and his gentleness with his characters. Some writers seem to have contempt for some or all of the characters they write about. I often disagree with what my characters do and sometimes dislike what they do, but I try to understand why they do things that they dislike when others do them.

continued on p. 10 ...