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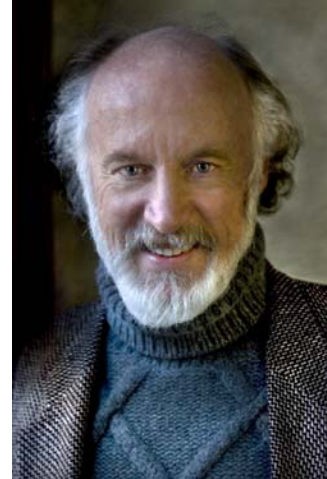
Diversions

Author reflects on a lifetime of laughter, relationships

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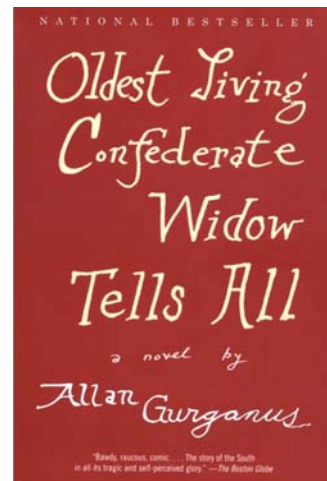


Allan Gurganus is 60 in human years, but only 20 in "novelists' years" because, he says, "Novelists don't really start life until turning 40."

"Short stories are about illuminating moments," says the author of the best-selling 1989 novel "Oldest Confederate Widow Tells All," which took him seven years to write. "Novels are about centuries; they're communities in time.

"Until you're 40, you don't believe you're going to die — that's for grandparents," Gurganus added during a recent telephone conversation from his home in Hillsborough, N.C. "You also haven't had your heart broken more than once, much less three or four times. And that's where wisdom comes in. You realize there's no escape from harm and a certain kind of trauma. All that earns you your driver's license for being a novelist. It's not that you understand life any better, but you acknowledge that's the landscape we live in."

Gurganus, who is finishing up a collection of short stories tentatively titled "Assisted Living," will read from and reflect on his work Wednesday at the University of Texas Health Science Center.



He says he'll read a story from the collection, which is about "caretaking and caregiving, how people help each other in small ways," that exposes "a very imaginative form of caregiving for an elderly patient." Fitting, since the lecture is sponsored by the Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics.

Gurganus, who is openly gay (in fact, his first published story, "Minor Heroism," appeared in The New Yorker in 1974 and offered the first gay character that magazine ever presented), learned a lot about loss during 12 years living in New York City.

"A lot of my closest friends and lovers died of HIV," he said. "I was at the funeral of the last of my circle, and I thought, 'This is God's way of telling me to get in the car and leave.'"

So he did, moving home to his native North Carolina, settling in an old house in a small village that was the capital of the colony in the 17th century. There, he writes and gardens, but continues to escape to New York frequently to "carbo-feed" on paintings and theater and restaurants.

Gurganus actually first wanted to be a painter. He studied at the University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and has works in private and public collections. But during three years aboard the USS Yorktown during the Vietnam War, he turned to writing. Gurganus subsequently graduated from Sarah Lawrence College, where he worked with Grace Paley, and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, where his mentors were Stanley Elkin and John Cheever.

He calls Chekhov "my great god," and has been compared to Twain, while Robert Wilson, editor of *The American Scholar*, has called him "the rightful heir to Faulkner and Welty." Gurganus writes epically and intimately of the South, the city, the suburbs, and his work is marked by his ability to write humorously about tragic events in life.

Is it important to laugh in the face of adversity?

"That's the only choice," Gurganus says. "Lucy, the narrator of 'Widow,' says, 'She who laughs, lasts.' Durability depends on a sense of humor.

"I find that any page without something funny or ironic — funny strange — is hard going."

Lucy is one of many strong female characters in Gurganus body of work. Esther, in the short story "My Heart Is a Snake Farm," describes herself thusly: "I myself had just retired from life as a grammar-school librarian. I was an unmarried woman of a certain age, imaginative as one could be on a fixed income. I'd felt a growing hatred of Ohio's ice, of shovelling the brick walk I knew would break my hip if I stayed another year. I was and am a virgin, my never-braced teeth too healthy. Toledo's secret nickname for me even as a girl: Little Threshing Machine."

"I was surrounded by women," Gurganus says of his boyhood. "I was of the generation where fathers were off working or playing golf, responsible for physical discipline, so we were raised by women. There so much wisdom revealed hanging out with women, and I was left with the voices of women, black and white. Men, especially heterosexual men, are about amounts and distances and outcomes. With women, it's textures and payoffs and revenge."

Don't get Gurganus going on the Bush administration, which he claims is "riding roughshod over the very tenets of decency and democracy they prefer to believe in."

"When the world went mad, my first impulse was to turn to the editorial pages, and I did a little writing there," he said. "But now I just try to tell that truth is love, as the Bible tells us, in fiction."

To that end, Gurganus fans will be elated to know that he's nearing the conclusion of "a companion piece" to "Widow." The second installment of "The Falls Trilogy" is called "The Erotic History of the Southern Baptist Church" (possibly one of the best titles ever put to paper).

"I'm very interested in the subject of war, both in the home and on the battlefield," Gurganus said.

Allan Gurganus: Readings and Reflections begins with a 6:30 p.m. reception Wednesday at the UT Health Science Center, Room 3.102. It's free and open to the public.