



Dan E. McCall

January 14, 1940 – June 17, 2012

Dan E. McCall, noted scholar and Cornell professor emeritus passed away on Sunday, June 17, 2012 at the age of 72. Dan was born in Stockton, California, the son of Roy and Velma (Hooper) McCall on January 14, 1940. The McCalls moved twice during Dan's boyhood; to Eugene, Oregon a few years after Dan's birth and to Modesto, California in the summer of 1954. By the time he enrolled in Modesto High that fall, Dan had become something of a West Coast *Wunderkind* (and adorably looked the part) who competed in dozens of quiz shows and collected dozens of trophies as recitalist and public speaker (including in '56 the National Speech Tournament Championship). One of his most devoted students and lifelong friends described the Dan he first met, lovingly and kiddingly, as "a whiz kid fraternity boy from California."

When Dan McCall formally retired from teaching in 2005 he had served on the faculty as professor of English and American Studies for forty years. Thanks not only to his meticulous scholarship and his sensitivity as a practicing (and successful) novelist but not least to his marvelous performative skills, Dan excelled alike as a mentor to the Happy Few in graduate writing seminars and a spellbinding lecturer to the 200-odd undergrads who flocked to his courses in the American novel.

Dan must have inherited a large part of his gift for mimicry from his father: a Professor of Speech in Stockton before he was chosen to head a junior college in Palm Desert, Roy McCall published a widely used textbook, Fundamentals of Speech, which appeared four years after Dan did and with which Dan grew up. And in a perhaps unacknowledged tribute to Father McCall, Dan persistently singled out as his favorite book by a Cornellian (well: two Cornellians) Strunk and White's 1918 classic Elements of Style—while Scott Elledge's White biography took pride of place as Dan's best loved book by a colleague in the Department.

From 1959 to 1962 Dan attended Stanford as an English major. Dan's love for American literature almost certainly dates from his years at Stanford. Among his teachers the god of Dan's idolatry was the saturnine and brumal poet-critic Yvor Winters, Dan's Bible Winters's daunting In Defense of Reason, a book from which Dan quoted pages on end in a flawless imitation of Winters's sullen and uncompromising voice. By then Dan had already revealed himself to be a thoroughly gifted writer of fiction. A former teacher of his—he and Dan were to become long-time colleagues and friends at Cornell—recalls a writing workshop of his at Harvard which Dan attended in the summer of 1959:

From the first, weeks before he read from his fiction, Dan stood out from among his mates as class pet, class mascot, a wonderfully friendly, funny counterfeit naïve Sunday child. During our two final class meetings he read hilarious half-hour extracts from a work in progress about a teenage public speaking contestant and quiz kid, i.e., about Dan, more or less. The audition had the class in stitches; the second one provoked an ovation—in my 50-odd years in the trade the only such Happening.

Dan graduated summa cum laude in 1962. He received his M.A. from Columbia the year following, his Ph.D. in 1966, the year he entered on his long career at Cornell. He was promoted to assistant professor in 1967, associate professor in 1972, professor in 1978.

In the summer of 1965, as Danforth Fellow at Columbia, Dan, together with his young wife, had been invited to teach English at Langston Hughes University, the only historically black college in Oklahoma. Dan's interest in black literature was to be reflected in his first scholarly work and his first novel, both published in the spring of 1969: The Example of Richard Wright, a pioneering study of Wright which got itself on the Times list of ten best non-fiction books, and The Man Says Yes, a fictionalized account of the summer of Langston and Dan's friendship with one of his eminent resident colleagues, the modernist poet and educator Melvin B. Tolson (the Henri Prudhomme of Dan's book and its dedicatee). What needs to be remembered here (and after 35 years is all too easily forgotten) is the fact that Dan was the first to teach a course in black literature at Cornell.

If The Man Says Yes remains Dan's most fugitive novel, his next, Jack the Bear (1974), remains his most popular: a funny, touching, beautifully "felt" narrative about (and by) an adolescent whiz in an Oakland-based dysfunctional family. The book has been translated into more than a dozen languages as well as into a middling-good film.

Jack was followed by half a dozen novels, a number of them reflecting Dan's specialty as Americanist, notably Beecher (1979), a concisely exhaustive, minutely researched novel about the adultery trial of Henry Ward Beecher, the pillar of the American clergy; more recently, what is perhaps Dan's finest novel, Messenger Bird (1993), which records the trials of a young surgeon on a Native American reservation. Between Beecher and Messenger Bird Dan produced a much loved novel, Triphammer (1990). The book contains one of the funniest scenes in the McCall repertoire, in which the two ill-matched lovers, a sergeant on the Ithaca police force and his young woman-professor friend, throw their disastrous first joint dinner party.

Dan happens to be a master at exploring professional specifics, whether he deals with physicians or lawyers or small-town policemen. One of Dan's colleagues recalls a student of Dan's, the daughter of a distinguished cardiologist and herself a topnotch fiction writer, leafing through Messenger Bird and wondering out loud, "How does he know all that?" Though Dan had already published a number of highly crafted scholarly pieces in his apprentice years as Cornell instructor—notably studies of Hawthorne, Conrad, and Fitzgerald -- the bulk of his book-length work appeared in the decade before his retirement: his lively 1997 edition of Henry James's 1879 study Hawthorne (the only title in the "English Men of Letters" series to devote itself to an American writer and per Edmund Wilson one of the best books on Hawthorne). James on Hawthorne naturally enough provoked two years later a book on Hawthorne and James: Citizens of Somewhere Else—the title is taken from Hawthorne's Preface to The Scarlet Letter and Dan uses it as a springboard to examine the exemplary American character of two writers who were or regarded themselves as quintessential expatriates. Dan's last work, his 2002 Norton edition of Melville's Short Novels with the famous Killer B's (Billy, Benito, Bartleby) went into ten printings in its first two years. Somewhat earlier than any of these: Dan's splendid, uncharacteristically austere study The Silence of Barnaby (1989), which Dan's young Columbia colleague Andrew Delbanco, in a tribute Dan cherished above all others, called "the single most sensitive response to Melville's genius [in the past twenty years]."

At Dan's retirement party one of the speakers remarked that she had never known anybody so passionate about literature as Dan was. As has been suggested, Dan's eye and ear for great prose and his elocutionary gifts combined to make him a marvelous teacher of the classic passages in the American novel, what Harold Bloom calls the "secularized epiphanies" in a given text: the final meeting of Isabel Archer and Casper Goodwood; the famous scene in which Strether discovers Chad Newsome's relation with Madame de Vionnet; Huck's mortifying self-reproaches. It can be seen from this that Dan's pedagogy and his whole attitude to teaching were as impeccably conservative as his politics up front were impeccably left of center. Dan himself had been brought up in the school of close reading associated with Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, and even though he knew this method to be unfashionable, he stuck to it as the only method congenial and indeed available to him.

As a matter of fact, Dan hated—really hated—the humorlessness that he felt had come to infiltrate American universities—his university, the only one in which (visiting stints apart) he taught. In a long interview conducted at the time Citizens of Somewhere Else appeared, Dan aired his distaste for writer-teachers "whose political agenda controlled everything," who ignored the most obtrusive "facts" of a given text in favor of far-out political proprieties and modish irrelevancies. Perhaps in an effort to compensate for the critical overkill to the left and the right of him Dan brought to his own texts an often conversational, chatty, even slangy vocabulary, with the result that Dan the novelist often peeks out of his impish homework. Put another way, Dan refused to recognize any difference between the craft of writing and the craft of teaching. "My voice on the page is my voice in the classroom." Given his penchant for writerly self-indulgence, it's not surprising that Dan fell into the other extreme of unloading a dozen uncritical interrupters and raw expletives and coy rhetorical questions on the typescripts

of his academic texts—which his friendly colleagues had then to expunge. Nor is it surprising that the reviewer in Publisher's Weekly lavished praise on Citizens of Somewhere Else precisely for providing the reader with “a salutary balance between traditional and innovative approaches to literature.” And the passage Dan underlined for the benefit of his friends: “McCall’s splendid new book . . . demonstrates a passion for literature, not politics.”

Among Dan’s last public performances at Cornell two or three may suggest a certain coherence in Dan’s universe. On the thirtieth anniversary of the Straight takeover, Dan turned up as one of two speakers by the Cornell faculty on a symposium, largely attended by undergraduates, about the 1969 student uprising. In addressing some embattled incidents which occurred during the feverish days following the “siege,” Dan took the most nearly “incorrect” political line imaginable. And about a year before he left us Dan gave a hilarious talk on Mark Twain to an audience mostly of senior citizens at Kendal in Ithaca—specifically on Mark’s irreverence toward the Boston brahmins. A subject tailor-made for Dan. Between the two performances a lecture to undergrads sponsored by the Cornell Libraries on the textual sins visited on Huck Finn and his maker by the partisans of an admittedly blinkered rectitude.

At the time of his death Dan left some eight or nine unfinished or near-finished books. These include a massive study of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, a reprise of the 1969 campus tumult, a book on Jokes, and a much-praised memoir, Boy on a Unicycle.

Dan is survived by his beloved son Steven and Steven’s wife Meg of San Luis Obispo, his nine-year-old grandson Evan and his seven-year-old granddaughter Ava, his nephews Michael and James McCall, as well as his former wife Dorothy Kaufmann and his longtime companion Betty Friedlander. A younger brother, David, pre-deceased Dan; a novel-fragment about him, Sing, David! survives the two brothers.

Edgar Rosenberg, Chairperson; Roger Gilbert, Lamar Herrin