

SOUL BOOTLEGGERS

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Bootlegger of the Soul: The Literary Legacy of William Kennedy

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He was the ubiquitous radical moralist, historian, and public scourge, his readers were legion, as were his enemies, and he was a singular mind, the literary phenomenon of his generation.

—“A Tribute to Norman Mailer,” William Kennedy

A COLLEAGUE WHO HAD WORKED ON HIS DOCTORATE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE and creative writing in the late seventies and early eighties at SUNY Albany once told me a story about William Kennedy—novelist, journalist, screenwriter, playwright—that any trench-toiling writer would immediately appreciate. Kennedy was an unspectacularly published, gently aging adjunct writing teacher who didn’t get much thought or respect from his colleagues in the SUNY English department. But no one worked longer or harder than Kennedy at his writing.

Then lightning struck. In the form of *Ironweed* (1983). Pulitzer Prize, MacArthur Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award, eventually a movie with Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. Money! Fame! Tenure at full professor! The Albany Cycle of novels reissued (and finally extended to eight books). Suddenly everybody knows Kennedy, loves the guy, wants him nearby. (Who can doubt that envy lingers too?). I was immediately reminded of something George Higgins said in a TV interview after *The Friends of*

Eddie Coyle was published. For a long time as a writer nobody knows you, returns your calls, solicits your work. George who? Then the lightning. And suddenly everybody knows you, calls you, wants you.

Ah, humanity!

Ironweed itself had been rejected thirteen times. A White Knight named Saul Bellow, with whom Kennedy studied fiction writing briefly in 1960 while a journalist in Puerto Rico, came to the rescue. Viking was all wet rejecting Kennedy's new novel, Bellow told the editors. Bellow echoed Mailer's own disillusionment with the American publishing industry, as well as Mailer's faith in fiction, when Bellow said: "At fault are the slack publishing houses who don't have skilled readers The publishing world counts on an old image of themselves, when they saw themselves as part of the intellectual literati. They were never like that, and are even less now." Kennedy, Bellow added, "doesn't latch on to subjects so the book can be sold. He's just a pure writer."

Kennedy is an obsessive writer—the kind whose dedication might win out. He certainly paid all the dues one can pay as a free-lancer, journalist, teacher, editor, writer, and as one in and out of penury. In his nineties in 2019, he's still writing at an age when, for example, Vonnegut and Roth had long before sworn off it while still living. The story of Kennedy's struggle, of his failures, setbacks, and successes, is well told in *Bootlegger of the Soul: The Literary Legacy of William Kennedy*, published by—you guessed it—SUNY Albany Press. It's a story colleagues, critics, and Kennedy himself tell throughout this book, divided into three parts—1) Reviews, Profiles, and Interviews; 2) Essays Speeches, Memorial Tributes, and Creative Work (Kennedy's own prose); and 3) Scholarly Perspectives: Critical Views of Kennedy's Novels. All three parts are of real interest, but none more interesting than Kennedy's own words as he talks and writes about his life and work throughout the second part. Douglass Brinkley's essay in Part Three is the best and most informative about Kennedy's life as a journalist as he prepared to become the novelist he is. Neila Seshachari in that final section lays out in admirable scholarly detail an argument for Kennedy's convincing creation of powerful female characters, a rare quality among Kennedy's male peers. Margaret Croyden kicks off the whole collection in Part One with "The Sudden Fame of William Kennedy"—the first treatment of that theme others (including Kennedy himself) will play their variations on as well. There is some unavoidable repetition as the reader makes his or her way

through the volume, repetition because each collected item is placed in its appropriate part whole from the original. In interviews, for example, Kennedy is often asked the same questions; in the profiles and reviews and essays, critics and scholars cover the same ground from time to time. But such repetitions are a small price to pay for the overall revelation of the book—the story and assessment of a man’s heroic struggle to become the writer he dreamed of becoming from his youthful years to the present day.

One of the delights of the book is a chronological collection of photographs—wedged in between the first two parts and entitled “William Kennedy’s Literary Biography”—that takes us visually from Kennedy’s time in the early fifties as a soldier writing for the Public Information Office at Fort Benning to his ninetieth birthday party at Albany’s Café Capriccio (dancing with his wife Dana).

Kennedy knew Mailer. There’s a full speech in Part II that Kennedy delivered at the Academy of Arts and Letters on Nov. 5, 2008, in tribute to Mailer, a speech in a shorter version also delivered at Mailer’s Carnegie Hall memorial service on April 9, 2008, a memorial that then appeared in *The Mailer Review* in 2008 as well. I recall some elements of the tribute also in Kennedy’s talk to the Mailer Society at an annual conference in Provincetown in, I believe, 2007. The two men met in 1968 when Kennedy was a movie critic and Mailer was editing *Maidstone*. His most poignant memories are of Mailer in Provincetown near the end of Mailer’s life. As a long-time journalist, Kennedy has worthwhile remarks on Mailer’s journalism and nonfiction, but this book is a tribute to Kennedy, not Mailer, and the editors have done Kennedy a real service. For one thing, readers like me who have not read enough Kennedy will be inspired to correct that lacuna in their literary consciousness.

Kennedy’s Albany depicted in this book through photos and prose descriptions is the pre-urban renewal Albany, an after-image in my own mind’s eye. In the 1950s I grew up in the Massachusetts Berkshires near the New York border; Albany was something like a half hour over the Taconic Mountains. It was a city of old-time architecture—imposing, blocky, granite buildings with turn-of-century flourishes. The photos here and the occasional descriptions awakened my memories of visits to a specialist doctor, to the train station, and to the city for vague reasons from my cousins’ home in Schenectady, New York. Little did I know then of the corrupt pols, the Irish mob heavies, or the gamblers and prostitutes and down-and-outs that pop-

ulate Kennedy's stories. The innocence of childhood is also ignorance. But Kennedy will set you straight. "One of my deepest beliefs about fiction," Kennedy said in a 1984 speech entitled 'Reinventing Albany in Fiction,' "is that unless you understand the environment in which the human soul flourishes, wanes, and dies, then you have very little to work with." Albany is his Dublin and his Yoknapatawpha, and he has the inside scoop of a native son who doesn't miss a damn thing.

Like Mailer, Kennedy sees the writer not only as historian but as rebel. In his lecture at University College Dublin in 1993, entitled "Gifts from Joyce," Kennedy quotes Joyce for a literary manifesto:

When we are living a normal life we are living a conventional one, following a pattern which has been laid out by other people in another generation, an objective pattern imposed on us by church and state. *But a writer must maintain a continual struggle against the objective: that is his function* [my emphasis]. The eternal qualities are the imagination and the sexual instinct, and the formal life tries to suppress both.

In his nineties Kennedy is working hard still—what else is a man like him to do? He's revising his *Ironweed* play, tweaking screenplays based on his novels, beginning that old illuminating slog of research on a new novel, and considering a short book on Cuba. Although Mailer didn't live into his nineties, he worked till the end too. Mailer believed that tenacity is the mark of the born artist; he believed that although productivity is often painful, it is "better than happiness." Perhaps Kennedy speaks for them both in his speech at the William Faulkner Conference in Oxford, Mississippi, in 1996:

I'm struck by how many people tell me they are buoyed, even inspired that, in spite of rejection, and no money, I continued to write novels. I did not think it so unusual. What I possessed was a simple truth: that I wanted to write more than I wanted to pay the mortgage. Time and again I put work aside to do temporary hack work. . . . I suppose I was tougher and more ruthless than I knew, for I would have done anything to finish that novel, and get to the next one.