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The Courting of Willie Morris:
Ole Miss' Writing Rebel

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Willie Morris' literary renaissance in the pages of *Harper's* in the 1960s had helped spark a new generation of writers whose voices—but for Morris' intuition and courage—might not have been heard. His fall from grace in 1971 came swiftly. Few realize Morris continued making significant contributions to American literature, influencing works of students and upstart writers and best-selling and critically acclaimed writers John Grisham, Donna Tartt, Greg Iles, Larry Brown, and Winston Groom. Additionally, Morris left American literature with one of the most important works of twentieth-century journalism, *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, which offers an early critique of collegiate athletic recruiting and a narrative about changing race relations in the Deep South.

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“The Courting of Willie Morris: Ole Miss’s Writing Rebel”

Writing is going to save your life. It’s an affirmation against the darkness. –Willie Morris

Willie Morris’ fall from literary grace in the spring of 1971 was swift and painful. The literary renaissance that had begun in the pages of *Harper’s* upon Morris’ arrival in the mid-1960s had helped spark a new generation of writers whose voices—but for Morris’ intuition and courage—might not have been heard.

This research shows while Morris, who became an increasingly tortured soul during the twenty years post-*Harper’s*, his influence on and contributions to the works of students and up-start writers cannot be overstated. Best-selling and critically acclaimed fiction and non-fiction writers that are familiar names to the American public today—John Grisham, Donna Tartt, Greg Iles, Larry Brown, and Winston Groom, and numerous others—sought him out in their earlier college and professional careers.

In addition, Morris left American literature with one of the most important works of journalism written during this era, *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, published in 1992, which offers one of the earliest critiques of the college recruiting process as well as a narrative about changing race relations in the Deep South. Yet, the destructive behavior in his life and the injury that ended Dupree’s career overshadowed the importance of the work.

Topics not formerly printed in mass-market literary magazines might have remained censored from the minds of mainstream America. Had it not been for his having even a brief moment in journalism history to have produced the writers and issues that are still being discussed

today, Morris’ untimely departure would have been worth it. Morris lost the battle at *Harper’s*, but continued his literary war.

Morris would spend the next few years after leaving *Harper’s* in 1971 trying to make a new life for himself—and often just trying to make ends meet. From the top of the literary world, Morris’ jolt into the life of a freelance writer would be harder than anyone would have imagined considering his enormity of support at *Harper’s*, as evidenced by the resignation of the entire editorial staff, with the sole exception of the newly hired Lewis Lapham, upon Morris’ departure.

Morris faced the toughest challenge of his life in living up to his own image, and he did not always do it gracefully. Bitter disputes with his ex-wife Celia, a long estrangement from his only child, the death of his mother and closest friend, financial distress, and his growing alcoholism would plague him as he fought to leave a mark on the literary world through his writing.

Still, through all his personal difficulties, Morris found time to be an encourager and editor to fledgling writers and writer friends. He read manuscripts, wrote notes of support, and authored blurbs for book jackets. Rarely did he say no to a writer in need.

Morris’ life and work during much of the 1970s through the early 1990s were a constant contradiction. He had risen from segregated rural Mississippi to the heights of the New York journalism world before the age of 30. Yet, his ego and alcohol-infused temperament often did

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him in. Morris continually pushed for issues far more progressive than the average American was ready for, while penning pieces proclaiming his undying love for the Deep South.

Few realize Morris continued making significant contributions to American literature after his departure from *Harper's* and New York. Writers and journalists, who worked with Morris during his time at *Harper's* and afterward while he was an instructor at the University of Mississippi, consistently praised his editorial abilities, which is perhaps his most important contribution to the body of literary journalism and late twentieth century American writing.

Falling into near-destitution in the decade after leaving *Harper's*, Morris eventually returned to his native South. He took a position as the first-ever writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi, known universally as Ole Miss. His desire to support and encourage great writing received a second-life. Yet, most literary critics paid no attention to Morris after *Harper's*, save a few comments on his own later writings, and none make note of his contributions as editor in these students' and writers' lives. Interestingly however, one of the most prolific Southern writers in the last twenty-five years, then-Oxford law student John Grisham, was among those who sought Morris' advice while writing his first novel, *A Time to Kill*. This was Morris' primary mission throughout his life—to encourage and allow writers to be who they were. *Forrest Gump* author Winston Groom also praises Morris for his most profitable book to date even making it to print.¹ Morris would later immortalize Groom in an essay as “My Friend Forrest Gump” in which he described the manuscript that he stayed up all night reading as “a work of power, comedy, and truth.”² The book became the fourth largest grossing Hollywood film in 1995 and had sold 1.5 million copies by the movie's release.³

David Rae Morris said he remembers vividly his father's relationships with many up-and-coming young authors—several with whom he still communicates.⁴ “I don't know how many potential writers there were he would write out a title of a potential book on a napkin and hand it to them,” David Rae Morris said. “I witnessed this. He was so encouraging to young writers.”⁵

Will Norton, who was a professor and chair of the journalism department with Morris during the 1980s, wrote that Morris' great strength was in teaching writers how to improve their writing. In the classroom, he read students good writing and explained to them what made it good. He encouraged them to use similar techniques in their own writing.⁶ “Willie also demonstrated his great ability as an editor. He knew a good story, and he knew whom to assign to each story. So he brought out the best writing in each student,” according to Norton.⁷ Because of this he has had many students who have become outstanding writers and reporters on their own accord. “He knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to craft each article.”⁸

Norton wrote it was Morris' own upbringing that helped him understand life, and this was helpful to him in helping students hone their writing skills to bring their own life experience into their writing. He had his students share things about themselves in class. By doing this he was better able to assign writing tasks suited to each person's individual personality. Norton wrote:

I think Willie's teaching ability was evident during his years as editor at *Harper's* magazine. When we talked about specific articles that had appeared in *Harper's* during his years there, he would tell me why he had chosen that particular person to write the piece. He told me the right writer was essential for a piece. He

worked very hard at finding the right writer. A writer might be right for one story, but not for several others. Willie knew how he wanted each piece written, and he worked with each writer to tell the story the best way possible. Under his tutelage, many well-respected writers became exceptional, and he helped several become very wealthy.⁹

In *The Literary Journalists*, published in 1984, Norman Sims called literary journalism the “new art of personal reportage.”¹⁰ Morris wrote all his work as personal works of art—weaving American history and his life experiences into one masterpiece after another. Today, readers want to know more information than traditional journalism generally produces. The public wants to know what is going on behind the scenes and in the minds of the parties involved in events.¹¹ Traditionally, the details and psychological minutia had been found in fiction writing and novels. Literary journalism marries the two forms. Few rules exist in this type narrative. Most importantly, however, literary journalists practice immersion reporting. They become intimately involved in the stories and with the subjects they write about. Much of the time the reporter’s voice comes through, and he or she is part of the story.

“Literary journalists bring themselves into their stories to greater or lesser degrees and confess to human failings and emotions,” according to Sims.¹² Throughout Morris’ non-fiction books and essays, no matter if it’s his personal memoir written at age 32 or his commentary on a teen-age football player and civil rights, he is making a symbolic confession of society and of his own soul. And the writers he elevated to national attention and some to star status while at *Harper’s* wrote with the same passion and purpose.

Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald wrote that Morris was the “quintessential Southern writer.” His writing is more direct and less symbolic than many of the well-known Southern novelists, like Faulkner.¹³ This would strengthen the argument that he was most definitely in the first camp of literary journalists, as defined by David Eason.¹⁴

Leaving Manhattan

Morris would later ask of himself of the articles that appeared in *Harper’s*, “Was there some common thread to all this diversity? I pray to believe there was: good writing that related to the larger community, to the civilization, writing that aimed toward clarity and relevance and truth. . . .”¹⁵

What Morris did not know in early 1970 was that his foundation at the top of the literary world would fail him just one year later. As his own desires to continue to publish the best journalism money could buy, he would finally have to confront the harsh reality that *Harper’s* had no money and had been running at a loss for some time even under his exuberant leadership. This, added to the dissolution of his marriage in 1969, would drive Morris to excessive drinking—a habit he had acquired as college newspaper editor, which would further exacerbate his professional woes. By mid-1971, Morris’s tenure at *Harper’s* would end abruptly.

The rest of the decade of the 1970s, Morris pursued his own writing, publishing several more books and essays instead of going to work as an editor for another magazine. Even though he received several offers, Morris recognized the toll that the pace of New York City life and the burden of putting out the hottest magazine in town had taken on him. Also, as good of an editor as Morris was, it was writing that was his passion—not the process, but the product. Morris wrote about his plans to write: “It’s not

much fun to do it, but it's immensely gratifying, and I do want to spend the rest of my life at it—and I'm going to. I don't ever want to work for anybody or any other institution again if I can make a living at this. If I can't make a living at it, I'll try to beg money off rich people."¹⁶

As a result of his decision to be a full-time writer, he was often nearly financially destitute. He depended on the kindness of his mother and close friends, including King, to pay his monthly bills. Morris was not wealthy even when at the pinnacle of his profession at one of the most-read magazines in the country, and he had made no financial preparations before his abrupt departure.

During his solitary moments, he realized he could continue to wallow in his own self-pity and question his decision to leave *Harper's* or he could move forward and carve out a new life. "Perhaps our greatest personal strengths, I see now, also entail and embrace our greatest weaknesses," Morris later wrote about this period. He decided to confront his past in a way he had never done, by writing a book for children about growing up in Mississippi. In dealing with painful episodes from his childhood and putting them to paper, he was able to better express his feelings of hurt, anger, and guilt over his loss of *Harper's*. "My magazine was a living thing to me, and leaving it was like death," Morris wrote. "And it was palpable and inherent and symbol to me of its place: ineluctable town, sinew and fabric, of youth and dreams."¹⁷

Morris believed writers were imperative to a civilized society as they were the keepers of the country's conscience. Since he had left *Harper's* as a matter of conscience and dedication to solid journalism and good writing, it is not surprising he considered it almost an obligation to write in a similar vein himself. "Writers are the custodians of the memory of being a human being,"¹⁸ Morris said. Good writers and writing

were essential to a healthy society. Morris asked questions of himself that could only be answered in the language of literary journalism, which included a strong sense of place and belonging and exploring universal questions about where people fit into the scheme of things. His upbringing in the rural, segregated South, followed by his exile in New York where he watched and read about the civil rights riots and struggles for integration created in him an understanding and authority that added depth to his own writings on the era. He could now write about the South as a critical outsider who had gained the critical distance necessary to write both fairly and passionately on a place and people he knew intimately.

Morris' Renaissance: Teaching Writers

Morris left New York and returned to Mississippi in 1979. After struggling for the better part of the '70s with drunken run-ins with the law and the death of his mother and best friend James Jones, Morris retreated into the safety net placed by friends. Morris joined the staff of Ole Miss in Oxford, hometown of Mississippi's most beloved writer William Faulkner, in 1980. Larry Wells and his wife, Dean Faulkner Wells, the niece of William Faulkner, were largely responsible for Morris' relocation to Oxford. The publishing duo petitioned friends and business associates across the state to donate money to bring Morris to the University of Mississippi, including a \$5,000 donation from the journalism department. Larry Wells said he was ecstatic to have played a large part in getting Morris to Oxford.¹⁹

Academicians from around the country had rallied around Morris upon his dismissal from *Harper's*—crediting the greatness of the writing in the recent *Harper's* to Morris' encouragement of writers and considered *Harper's* the best magazine in the country since he had come to the

helm.²⁰“ A magazine is like a great university: its reputation is built over years and destroyed in days. You have almost destroyed *Harpers*,” wrote University of Chicago professor Thomas Schopf to Cowles.²¹ David Madden, the writer-in-residence at Louisiana State University, agreed and wrote that Morris was “one of the most brilliant editors in the country, and I am certain he has transformed *Harper’s* into the best magazine of its kind.”²² Now Morris would get the chance to mold and mentor a new generation of writers from the classroom rather than the magazine boardroom.

Morris taught writing courses at Ole Miss for several years but never truly enjoyed the classroom. “I don’t miss teaching, and I never particularly enjoyed teaching, per se. I did enjoy being around the students and the give-and-take with them,” Morris would later write.²³ He notoriously refused to hold seminar classes in a classroom for three-hour stretches. He thought that the students and he would be more comfortable in a restaurant or bar.

Many of his students went on to brilliant writing careers—most notably have been John Grisham²⁴ and Donna Tartt.²⁵ Many others have had outstanding journalism careers thanks to his coaching and encouragement. Morris encouraged Tartt, an aspiring young would-be author, to leave Oxford and pursue her dream of writing in the Northeast at Bennington College and study under renowned novelist and short-story writer Bernard Malamud.²⁶ After one year at Ole Miss, she transferred in 1981. She began writing what would be her first novel, *The God of Illusions*, at just nineteen. The title was changed to *The Secret History*, and she sold it eight years later for \$450,000.²⁷ In a tribute to Morris after his passing, Tartt likened spending time in Oxford with Morris to being in the company of a grown-up version of Huckleberry Finn. The pair met when Tartt was only seventeen, and Morris

in his forties had lived a lifetime of experiences in Manhattan, England, and Texas. Yet the experiences hadn’t hardened him, in her opinion. He was still quite the romantic about life and death and the world around him.²⁸

She recalled the day the met:

Back when I was introduced to Willie, when I was just a kid myself, he was a great, mythical Mr. Micawber²⁹ of a figure, walking the streets of Oxford in the late afternoons with his toes pointed out and his Ray Ban sunglasses on. He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me down the street, so that I had to run to keep up with him, and it was as if we had known each other always. He was like that, I think, with all his friends: he knew them when he saw them, fell in step right alongside them, and loved them forever. “Would you like a Coca-Cola, young lady?” he asked me on that first night, interrupting himself in the middle of a story, when his old pal Clyde the bartender came around to take our order at the bar of the Holiday Inn.

“No, sir, I believe I’ll have what you’re drinking.”

Terrific roar of laughter. “Why,” he shouted, staggering back as if dazed by my prodigy, rolling his rich old eye round at the assembled company, “this girl is a WRITER!” When the bourbons arrived, he insisted that we clink glasses: “A toast.”

“To what?”

“To you! To us! This is a historic night! Someday you’ll be famous, you’ll write about this very meeting, you’ll remember it forever. . . .”

I was a little overwhelmed, with this big drunk famous person towering over me at the bar, proclaiming blood brotherhood, offering eternal friendship, thunder-

ing outlandish prophecies. But—God bless you, Willie!—you were right, because here I sit at the typewriter nearly twenty years later recalling all this.³⁰

Tartt was amazed at the similarities they shared in their quest for and agony endured over finding the right words, and she felt lucky to have been taken under the wing of a great writer, who offered such encouragement. She realized Morris believed in her, and she could succeed in her dream to be a writer. Even today, Tartt said she doesn't think anyone save her own mother was prouder of her when her first novel was published.³¹

People felt a familiarity toward Morris throughout the South and especially in Mississippi. Being the first writer-in-residence Ole Miss ever had, Morris was sought after by many students and people in the community for advice and comments on their writing—something he never tired of offering. One man sent him a book chapter to read eighteen years after he had met Morris at a book signing in Yazoo City. Morris had offered offhandedly at the time to help him find a book publisher.³² So nearly two decades later, the man took Morris up on it.

Morris was still seen as a near demigod in the magazine world. In 1980, *The Washington Monthly* beckoned him to do a retrospective for the publication on the recent history of *Harper's* and the "current state of magazine journalism in general," despite the fact he had been gone from the magazine scene nearly a decade and was now geographically far removed from the New York literary world.

Still well-connected to the world of literati, Morris invited several award-winning writers to impart knowledge from their own writing experiences to his students at Ole Miss. Truman Capote, author of literary journalism masterpiece *In Cold Blood*, and Pulitzer-winning nov-

elist, Bill Styron, a longtime friend and contributor to *Harper's*, visited Morris' classes. Irwin Shaw, playwright and short story genius, and Southern novelist Walker Percy were also among the celebrated writers who paid visits to Ole Miss. Novelists James Dickey and John Knowles also spoke to Morris' overflowing classrooms. Students crowded into lecture halls to hear from award-winning authors Morris invited. "I've never seen that kind of excitement over literature," Wells said.³³

Like fellow Southerner Dickey, Morris infused the appreciation for a sense of place into his teaching. After brief stints at other universities, Dickey, a native Georgian, served as writer/poet-in-residence at the University of South Carolina at Columbia in the last 1960s, and it would be while there he would write and publish his most famous work, *Deliverance*, which became a major motion picture in 1972. Dickey and Morris were longtime friends, and it is clear both were influenced greatly by their rural Southern surroundings. Morris' book, *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, which he wrote while at Ole Miss, describes a "world of lynchings, dissent, and riots, fitfully described in the poems of James Dickey."³⁴

Styron was already an established writer by the time of his acquaintance with Morris in the 1960s, but their relationship developed into a mutual friendship from the *Harper's* years and lasted until Morris' death. Styron's next monumental work, following *Nat Turner*, was a novel loosely based on his own life, which he sent to Morris to read before publication. "I value your judgement [*sic*] over and above anyone I know, and your expression of confidence truly filled me with joy," Styron wrote. "As I recollect, you were dead right about *Nat Turner*, and I have the feeling that your predictions about *Sophie* will turn out to be accurate, too."³⁵ Morris' predictions did, in fact, prove correct. *Sophie's*

Choice, published in 1979, won the National Book Award and was followed by a major motion picture starring Meryl Streep, the hottest actress in America in the early 1980s. The movie won five Academy Awards.

Morris' students had the opportunity to hear Styron speak about *Nat Turner* and *Sophie's Choice*, shortly after the latter was published. Morris' English class, which according to archived copies of his syllabus emphasized the contemporary American novel, had been a huge success in the spring of 1980. But Morris did not enjoy grading assignments and took a job as a lecturer and writer-in-residence in the journalism department in the fall 1981. His class preparations were lessened, and he had the opportunity to teach magazine feature writing.

Journalist-in-residence

Both faculty and students delighted in having such a stellar figure of American journalism proffer writing wisdom to them. Will Norton, then the chair of the Ole Miss journalism department, remembered feeling as if "a new world of writing" was opened to him each week while reading *Harper's* in Morris' era and was overwhelmed that Morris now would be in his journalism department. A star-struck Norton wrote that he "was greatly impressed by [Morris's] ability to select and assign stories that were reflective, informative, entertaining, and (most of all) well-written. I'm delighted that our students have the privilege of learning from you."³⁶ Norton also expressed great appreciation for the time Morris invested with students helping them develop their craft—as he had done with young writers at *Harper's*. Morris helped turn the *Ole Miss Magazine*, a student endeavor, into a professional, polished literary venture catching the eye of editors in New York. *Parade's* editor wrote it was "first-rate" and "unlike any college attempt I've witnessed."³⁷ Morris helped

produce the October 1981 edition of the magazine for the university.³⁸

Morris brought national attention to the Ole Miss journalism department, which helped attract students and scholarship donations from writers and alumni. Norton was impressed that while Morris taught students the fundamentals of great writing, he also showed them by continuing to have a prolific writing career.³⁹

Neely Tucker was a student at Mississippi State University when he met Morris at a football game in Starkville. Morris was so encouraging that Tucker applied to Ole Miss and was accepted on a journalism scholarship, transferred schools, and was selected upon his graduation in 1986 as most outstanding journalism student.⁴⁰ "I took Willie's suggestion to write for a newspaper for a little while to learn a little something. It has been twenty years and fifty-something countries since that conversation. I have found it to be good advice," Tucker recalled.⁴¹ Tucker, now a foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*, worked his way up from the *Oxford Eagle*, the smallest daily paper in Mississippi, to the heights of the journalism world.

Familiarity worked most definitely in Morris's favor back in Mississippi. Through his writing over the years, even those Southerners who didn't know him felt a shared heritage, as is evidenced in the numerous fan letters that read like friendly requests. Morris never met a stranger and hung out with neighbors and visitors alike in the Hoka, a warehouse café/bar in downtown Oxford. Students, drinkers, veterans, and local politicians could all be found in Morris' company.⁴²

A Writer's Editor

While in Oxford, Morris continued to offer his support and encouragement to would-be writers and working writers, alike. And there are

hundreds of writers who have written of Morris' contributions to their careers—some of them without Morris' knowledge—had been gently inspired from his writing and his courage. Others more fortunate actually had Morris' personal input and editorial expertise from which to draw. The following sections will offer research and interview material examining the students and then would-be writers who sought out Morris' editorial insight inside and outside the classroom.

John Grisham

Arguably, the most famous writer indebted to Morris is attorney-turned-novelist John Grisham, who attended Ole Miss law school while Morris taught writing in Oxford. While never officially enrolled in his courses, Morris recalled that Grisham was a frequent visitor. Grisham, who was a state representative while writing his first book, credited Morris with help, guidance, and friendship in the process of getting his first best-selling novel, *A Time to Kill*, published.⁴³ In fact, Morris was the only writer to provide a blurb for the first-edition book jacket of then-unknown Grisham. Morris wrote, "A powerful courtroom drama," and "a compelling tale of a small Southern town searching for itself."⁴⁴ This is testament to Morris' unflinching support of new writers and for recognizing the talent in good writing. *A Time to Kill* has since sold 7.5 million copies through twenty-five printings. Grisham's thirty-two books as of the early 2013 have sold a collective 275 million copies.⁴⁴ According to the CNN, Grisham was the best-selling author of the 1990s.⁴⁵ Ten have been made into feature films, and three have been adapted into television series.

While all but one of Grisham's books have been fiction, they have been inspired largely by real events Grisham knew about through his legal career. *A Time to Kill* was inspired by a 1984

DeSoto County, Mississippi, trial involving the rape of twelve-year-old girl. The book became a 1996 hit movie starring Samuel L. Jackson, Matthew McConaughey, and Sandra Bullock—all big-name celebrities.

Like immersion journalists, Grisham does thorough research in preparation for his novels. His fiction is not just the product of fantasy or fairy tale. Grisham's books have dealt with political and social issues, like the more serious works by Morris, which is probably why Grisham was drawn to him as a mentor. Despite the status as a novel, Grisham is essentially reporting details from months or years of research, transcripts, and interviews, along with rich dialogue of his characters.

Finally in 2006, Grisham turned the tables on the traditional desire of a journalist to write the All-American novel by becoming one of the most prolific novelists of the last twenty years to write a work of investigative journalism on the story of Ron Williamson, a hometown baseball star wrongly convicted of rape who spent a dozen years on death row in Oklahoma. *The Innocent Man: Murder and Injustice in a Small Town* is reminiscent of the kind of true crime made famous by literary journalist Joe McGinniss in his best-selling works *Fatal Vision* and *Blind Faith*. McGinniss's first book, *The Selling of the President*, was excerpted in the pages of Morris' *Harper's*.

Writers from all walks of life—from professional to academic to novices—still contacted Morris in the decades following *Harper's* to ask for guidance, reviews of their works—even outright editing help—and oftentimes sent lengthy manuscripts along. He was often asked to submit his own writing to magazines, newspapers, book chapters, and essays.⁴⁶

Winston Groom

Winston Groom said he has no doubts that

his life would be much different without the friendship of Morris. Groom left reporting to write full-time at the urging of Morris when the two worked together in 1976 at *The Washington Star*. "When he learned I was working on a novel about the Vietnam War, he not only demanded that I leave the paper to finish it, but found a literary agent to represent me,"⁴⁷ Groom wrote.

Morris' personal life might have been sloppy, but his editorial advice was spot-on every time. Groom wrote:

I have been edited by a lot of people. He just made things flow. In those days it would have been like me playing tennis with John McEnroe. He taught me how to play. I was a journalist, but writing is different. Hell, I'd been a rewrite man in Washington. I was supposed to be good at this shit. He was so very good at it. He had such a love for the language.⁴⁸

In 1986, Groom sent Morris the manuscript of *Forrest Gump* before anyone else saw it. Groom, who was accustomed to the depth of Morris' editing, was surprised this time. Groom wrote, "Instead of his usual blizzard of suggestions and corrections, he wrote back: 'Don't touch a word of it!'"⁴⁹ Still, Morris was right, and *Forrest Gump* has become one of the most enduring and quotable characters in American fiction in the last twenty-five years.

Groom said because of Morris' intuition he now gets to write for fun—historical nonfiction—as a result of the monetary windfall of *Forrest Gump*, his 1986 novel turned 1994 Academy Award-winning film starring Tom Hanks and Sally Field. The movie won six Oscars, including best picture and best actor. Groom's book has sold nearly two million copies and became a best-seller as a result of the film.

Groom said Morris never truly realized his

significance as a great Southern social historian and unfailing encourager of other writers. Quite possibly, many renowned works of American literature and journalism would not exist were it not for Morris' unceasing editorial influence and ability, according to Groom.

Larry Brown

In September 1981, Morris had a piece about graveyards in a national publication that sparked Larry Brown's interest—feeling a kinship—to contact Morris. Brown had long been fascinated with cemeteries and their stories. After writing incessantly for fifteen months with enough rejection slips to plaster a bedroom wall, Brown wrote Morris. He sent Morris the rewritten draft of this novel and asked for honest criticism, telling him if "it's unpublishable I'll believe you. I just want to hear it from somebody who knows."⁵⁰

Shortly after Morris moved back to Mississippi in 1982, Brown, an Oxford firefighter, wrote Morris, "I'm desperate for some help or advice from a published writer like yourself because I am a writer who is struggling to make it. I've never sold the first piece and I won't bore you with a long discussion of how many hours I've put in, trying to reach this goal I've set my mind on."⁵¹

Six years later, Brown again wrote Morris—only this time asking for a blurb for his collection of short stories. "I'm not sure if you remember me or not . . . I'm the fireman who writes short stories . . . Would you let Algonquin send you a manuscript to read with an eye toward giving them a comment they could use on the back?"⁵² Brown published this, his first book, *Facing the Music*, a collection of short stories, in 1988. His first novel, *Dirty Work*, was published one year later. Morris had encouraged and supported him along the way, and Brown wrote of his appreciation and influence.⁵³ The

author of eight books, Brown was working on his fourth novel when he died from a heart attack at the age of 53 in November 2004.

Greg Iles

Greg Iles, best-selling novelist who lives in Natchez, counts himself fortunate to have been a student of Morris at Ole Miss. As of 2012, Iles has published thirteen novels that have been published in thirty-five countries. Most have been on the *New York Times* Bestsellers List, including 1993's *Spandau Phoenix* and 2010's *The Devil's Punchbowl*, which both reached number one. Sitting in the company of lecturers like Styron, James Dickey and John Knowles was inspiring and allowed would-be writers to pick the brains of legends in different genres of writing, he recalled.⁵⁴ Iles has written several newspaper articles published over the years in his hometown newspaper, *The Natchez Democrat*, about the influence Morris' instruction at Ole Miss has had on his success as a writer.

Stephen Kimber

Stephen Kimber, an award-winning reporter and writer, has written five non-fiction books and one novel. He serves as Rogers Communications Chair in Journalism at the University of King's College in Halifax, Canada. Kimber said his greatest influences were the "magazine writers of the late sixties and early seventies, people like Joan Didion, Gay Talese, David Halberstam, Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, and others who wrote for *Esquire*, *Saturday Evening Post* and *Rolling Stone*. But my favourite magazine was *Harper's* under the brilliant southern American editor Willie Morris. Reading Dan Wakefield, Garry Wills, Larry L. King, Norman Mailer and Morris himself made me want to write like each one of them."⁵⁵

Kimber devoured *Harper's* during his late teens and early twenties, he said. Through

reading them with religious fervor, he said he "began to realize it might be possible to use nonfiction to tell powerful stories that mattered. . . . Mailer's madly self-involved but incredibly innovative nonfiction, Garry Will's provocative essays, Larry King's earthy stories all showed me possibilities I hadn't even imagined and set me off on my own pursuit of a nonfiction writing career."⁵⁶

Kimber said "Morris' dilemma as a liberal Southerner—a man who loves where he comes from but is repelled by it, too—also resonated with me."⁵⁷ So much so, in fact, that Kimber drove to Mississippi to experience what he had read about in *Harper's*. "I set out with my dog in a VW van and headed south to see Yazoo and a lot of other places I knew only from reading *Harper's*. . . . Those three months wandering through the South were important to my development as a writer and as a person."⁵⁸ Following decades of literary nonfiction, Kimber's most recent book, *Reparations*, is a novel. In it he tells the story of a poor black community that existed in Halifax that was bulldozed in the 1960s "in the name of urban renewal and progress." Kimber said, "I think it owes a debt to my reading of Willie Morris and *Harper's*."⁵⁹

Paul Ruffin

Celebrated Texas poet and English professor Paul Ruffin met Morris only once—in the late 1990s—but his idolatry began much earlier. Morris's tenure at Texas newspapers was legendary. "In an era when it must have taken one hell of a spring-steel backbone to do what he did with *The Daily Texan* there, and Lord knows, that backbone had to be stiffer yet for him to stand at the helm of the *Texas Observer* at precisely the most perilous times for a liberal editor," Ruffin said.⁶⁰

Morris' editorial skills overshadowed what an excellent writer he was, in Ruffin's mind,

until he read *North Toward Home*. From that time on, he read most of Morris' books. Years later, in 1985, Morris provided the only blurb for a poetry book he ever wrote for the cover of Ruffin's second book of poetry book.⁶¹ "As prominent a figure as Willie was, he never hesitated to pitch in and help struggling writers make their mark," he said. "Not many great writers are willing to do that; when they do, to my way of thinking it earns them the title of Literary Saint. Saint Willie, bless him."

Rick Bragg

Many writers have credited Morris for inspiring their personal-style writing—a hallmark of literary journalism. Alabama native Rick Bragg, Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* reporter and book author, has written both a family history and memoir in literary narrative. *Ava's Man*, a biography of Bragg's grandfather, and *All Over but the Shouting*, a memoir about his rise from a poor Southern upbringing to the heights of the journalism world, used "lyrical language and storytelling prowess," according to reviewer Elfrieda Abbe.⁶²

Reminiscent of *North Toward Home*, Bragg, like Morris, was a Southern boy who rose to journalistic prominence in New York in his 20s. Bragg is cognizant of their similarities. He wrote briefly for the Jacksonville State University college newspaper as a sportswriter, and by the time he was twenty was a full-time reporter in Anniston, Alabama, followed by a stint at the *Birmingham News*, Alabama's largest paper. Bragg considered Morris a mentor. "He would spend hours and hours and hours on someone else's work. . . . Willie Morris was a reader, a sage, a supporter" for many writers," Bragg said.⁶³ Like Morris, Bragg agreed the story should tell itself. He let the people on his pages tell their own story in their own words—he was just the messenger with skill at tying it all together.

Mark Childress

Even after he had settled into a much slower routine in Jackson in the 1990s, Morris was besieged with editorial requests from writers. Recognizing the potential boost in credibility and sales it might bring, established Southern writers sought out Morris for comments and blurbs for book jackets. Mark Childress found Morris through his publishers and sent his manuscript for 1990's *Tender*, a saga about a young musician—not unlike Elvis Presley—growing up in Mississippi. "A word from you would be immense help to this book," Childress wrote.⁶⁴ *Tender* was a bestseller and appeared on several Top Ten lists for 1990. It put Children on the literary map. His next novel, for which he also wrote the movie screenplay, *Crazy in Alabama*, came out in 1993. It, too, was on several bestseller lists in 1993 and was a *New York Times* "Notable Book of the Year." Childress has written seven novels.

J. Brent Clark

It was not uncommon even two decades removed from the Big Apple for Morris to receive "fan letters" from readers relaying personal stories his books had inspired or brought to mind. J. Brent Clark, an attorney in Oklahoma City, inspired by *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, wrote Morris to share of his acquaintance with Dupree and to ask for input on his year-long biographical work on Joe Don Looney, a rebellious professional football player killed in a motorcycle accident in 1988. The book, which was tentatively titled *Crossfire Hurricane*, was published less than three years later as *3rd Down and Forever: Joe Don Looney and the Rise and Fall of an American Hero*. It was awarded the 1994 Oklahoma Book Award for nonfiction. Clark likened his research and writing of the book to Morris'. "Just as *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* is not a 'sports book,' neither is *Crossfire*

Hurricane," Clark wrote Morris.⁶⁵

Morris did not entertain every would-be writer who asked for help or time. One man in particular repeatedly sent him packages of letters on *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* letterhead (yet wrote that he was writing the letters from his home in Valdosta, Ga.), and he included his own meandering narratives for editorial advice and money. Morris kept them all—adding his own commentary in ink in the margins. "This man is nuts," Morris wrote.⁶⁶

Morris did answer most requests, though, and he assisted in editing and proofreading articles and chapters for various publications and writers on a variety of topics. Even would-be writers with lucrative careers in other fields solicited Morris for editing advice. A North Carolina doctor who had previously published just one article in a medical journal and medical textbook sent Morris a seven-page work of fiction, telling Morris he would take no offense at red pencil marks.⁶⁷ Dykers, who has his own website now, has written dozens of articles since that time on various subjects published in national and regional magazines and newspapers.⁶⁸

Raad Cawthon

Journalist Raad Cawthon met Morris in 1982 in Oxford to do a story for *The Clarion-Ledger*, following the release of *Terrains of the Heart*. What he got was the experience of Morris rather than an interview, Cawthon said. Morris drew him in like an old friend and was as similar in person to his persona on the pages of his books. Cawthon said:

Back in Jackson I pondered whether I should write the 'true' story about my encounter with Willie with all of its boozy and . . . somewhat pathetic overtones. Should I, I ask myself, write Hunter Thompson-style about a savage journey into the heart of a man who was obviously

desperately lonely, fearful, and all too human? I didn't. I decided in the end it wouldn't be fair. It's a decision I never regretted.⁶⁹

What Cawthon gained—a lifelong friendship and mentor in Morris—was worth more than the sensational byline he could have produced. "He was always very, very human and loving and kind and gentle," Cawthon added. "And he remained the smartest man I have ever known."⁷⁰

Lindsey Nelson

Lindsey Nelson, a renowned sports broadcaster and sports columnist from Tennessee, published his memoirs in 1985 after encouragement and advice from Morris, giving Morris much of the credit. The baseball stadium at the University of Tennessee is named after Nelson, and many believed his writing ability was second only to his sports casting flair. He was recognized as one of the top sportscasters in the country in the 1950s and 1960s. Still, when it came to putting his thirty years in writing, Nelson went to Morris. He wrote that Morris "is one of our very finest writers, editors, teachers, raconteurs and bon vivants. And one of the things that makes Willie Morris so great is the fact that he is one of the world's great listeners and supportive to a fault."⁷¹ Morris encouraged Nelson to write a book for several years before he actually did so and told him to start keeping notes on index cards, a practice many great writers do. *Hello, Everybody, I'm Lindsey Nelson* was published in 1985.

W. K. "Kip" Stratton

W.K. "Kip" Stratton said Morris was a significant figure in his life as an aspiring young writer in the 1980s "trying to figure out what the hell I wanted to do and how to do it."⁷² He has

since authored three book-length journalism works and many essays that have appeared in *Sports Illustrated*, *GQ*, and other magazines.

Stratton became a reporter for his hometown daily newspaper while a senior in high school, followed by four years at the University of Central Oklahoma where he read *North Toward Home*, which he called one of the most influential books he had ever read.

Stratton spent hours poring over bound volumes of *Harper's* at the Oklahoma State University library learning how to write. "That's how I learned the nuts and bolts of nonfiction writing beyond newspaper journalism.⁷³ Stratton said he learned from reading Morris and the writing in *Harper's* from his era that sports journalism could be written in a literary way:

It could be treated as an important topic because it is important in American culture. I learned from him that small towns in the middle of nowhere and the people who live in them can be and are important. He encouraged me to always consider the importance of sense of place, and that's one of the things I pride myself on in my writing. . . . I'm sorry Willie didn't live to read my book *Backyard Brawl* (or for that matter *Chasing the Rodeo*) because while it was ostensibly about a football rivalry, it really is about cultural clashes and sense of place and history. The whole tone of that book I owe to Willie, with nods to Larry L. King. . . .⁷⁴

Years later, Stratton wrote a review of *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* for the *Texas Observer*, where Morris had served as editor. Morris read it. Over the next few years, Stratton said Morris and he corresponded via letters and postcards with Morris offering advice and encouragement to him every step of his career. Morris saved his letters from Stratton in his archives.⁷⁵ The only

time, Stratton says, that Morris let him down was after his first novel was rejected by Doubleday after the re-writes Morris' publisher-friend had suggested. Morris agreed to meet Stratton, and then he did not show for the appointment. Stratton drove more than five hundred miles from Oklahoma to Oxford, at Morris' request, yet Morris was unavailable in person or via phone upon Stratton's arrival. "At the time, I was naïve about alcoholism, and all the evidence to the contrary staring me in the face," Stratton explained. "I didn't realize Willie was an alcoholic; the reason he failed to meet up with me had to do with his drinking."⁷⁶

Drinking was having a growing and significant effect on Morris' personal and professional life throughout his tenure at Ole Miss. His teaching and his own writing suffered. Arguably, one of Morris' most significant books, *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*, would not have ever been completed but for the unconditional support of a few of Morris' friends.

The Courting of Marcus Dupree

After settling in to his new writer-in-residence position at Ole Miss, Morris was ready to tackle his first book-length project since returning to the South. He chose a topic with several layers. On the surface the book is arguably about the most sought-after high school football player in the country in the 1980s and the college recruiting process. High school football was and remains a serious business in the South, and the recruiting of prize athletes has notoriously been a dirty and lucrative business. But there was much more to this story. "The book is a narrative accounting of a slice of America's social history,"⁷⁷ wrote Patrick Lally for the *Minneapolis Tribune*. Dupree played halfback in Philadelphia, Mississippi, in Neshoba County in the early 1980s. Neshoba County had been the site of one of the most infamous civil

rights slayings in 1964. Three civil rights workers were murdered and their bodies not discovered for months. A mere seventeen years later, the most sought-after high school athlete in the country was a black student in a newly integrated world. Dupree was in the first graduating class to attend all twelve grades in an integrated school in Neshoba County. Morris, himself, grew up less than one hundred miles from Philadelphia, in Yazoo City, so the book and its social implications took on a deeply personal meaning to him, as well. He had written about them to some extent in his earlier work, *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town*.

Morris felt deeply affected by *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* and wrote to friend Styron that he was completing "the best nonfiction book out of the American South in a quarter of a century."⁷⁸ He praised the virtues of the South, which he believed responsible for producing great writers because of the isolation from "egos of the East," "briefly powerful shits" and big-city publications.

Morris was saddened by what he perceived as a move by mainstream journalists—even in the South—to take liberties with the truth. A column by Washington Post reporter James Conaway that reappeared in part in *Time* magazine shattered his Southern naïveté that people were basically good.⁷⁹ Conaway, who had ingratiated himself on Morris in the past praising *North Toward Home* and calling his years at *Harper's* some of the magazine's best ever, came to Oxford in 1983 purporting to write an article on Morris' new work-in-progress and life in Mississippi. What he wrote this time, however, was an unflattering—albeit true—article on Mississippi's most beloved living writer. Because Conaway had written such a positive story on *North Toward Home*—which again was his opinion piece on the book—Morris wrongly assumed that they were "buddies" and let down his guard—

forgetting Conaway was a reporter for one of the most respected newspapers in the country.

In a two-column width full-page space in the *Post*, Conaway wrote that Morris had gotten fat and repeatedly mentioned his excessive drinking. Conaway even got a dig in on Morris' beloved dog Pete, writing he was "a black Lab with the canine equivalent of a beer belly." Morris had become a disappointment to his admirers, according to Conaway, writing less-than-satisfactory books and having chosen to exist "on the cusp of his own notoriety."⁸⁰ Further, he wrote that Morris "auditioned the bartenders around town"⁸¹ before choosing his regular haunts, and he suggested Morris often held class in an Oxford bar. *The Post's* executive editor, Ben Bradlee, defended the column as a great piece of journalism, which further infuriated and hurt Morris.⁸² A disillusioned Morris responded by writing a scathing letter to the editor of the *Post* and several other newspapers:

I've been stung badly by a recent spate of journalistic pieces of my returning home to live. Even in the South these days, the reporters lie and dissemble, and they just seem to want to do you in; much of it is the young, deracinated guys trying to make their reputation at your own expense. They can't write, and they are mean, very mean. . . . I don't know how to deal with this—except I consider it criminal—and my trust is gone.⁸³

Despite the attack on his professional reputation, many respected writers thought *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* was an amazing work. Renowned Southern writer Walker Percy wrote his congratulations to Morris for writing it. He said it was not only an engrossing story of a talented athlete, but more importantly it was "the story of a transformation of sorts, of a town and perhaps a nation by, of all things

sports."⁸⁴ Percy wrote: "The fact that the transformation is somewhat farcical—hundreds of coaches and recruiters and an entire state after a 17-year-old boy who can do things with a ball, that it is not necessarily the reform of an evil town, which it wasn't, into a town of brotherly love, which it isn't makes *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* all the more honest and absorbing and strangely, not so much Southern as American."⁸⁵

Dupree had eighty-seven touchdowns in high school, bettering Herschel Walker's record of eighty-six. Dupree initially attended the University of Oklahoma for his freshman year and did not perform to expectation, returning the next season to play for Southern Mississippi. At Oklahoma he had been an early favorite for the Heisman Trophy. *The Chicago Tribune* review stated:

If you think this book is about Marcus Dupree, you are mistaken. Nor is it about the madness that surrounded his recruitment out of high school by every college football power in the nation, or at least about 100 of them. . . . It is true Marcus Dupree is a kind of centerpiece of the narrative, but he is not its subject. As Willie Morris says in the book's penultimate sentence, "I see now that this has been, after all, a tale about the South." More specifically, it is about the changes that have come about in the South since 1964, the year Marcus Dupree was born in Philadelphia.⁸⁶

The reviewer, in this case, actually faulted Morris for his extensive personal reflections in the book. However, this is a common technique used in literary journalism, and Morris was a master of nostalgia. Having a vested interest in the subject matter continues to be a mark of this genre, which Morris had brought to the fore-

front at *Harper's*. The author is often present in the work. The *Dallas Morning News* believed the book was a touchdown, and the reviewer wrote it needed about as much promotion as the Dallas Cowboys did.⁸⁷ In one of the first interviews where Morris admitted the nearly half-year delay of getting the book out (which would later come back to haunt him), he said he appreciated Dupree's unbearable need to come home from Oklahoma after only one season. In fact, he credited him with realizing in his youth what it took Morris himself decades to acknowledge. "He's an amazing young man. At least he had the good sense at age nineteen to come home. Hell, I was 45 years old before I was smart enough to come home."⁸⁸ Accepting a one-year eligibility penalty seemed a small price to pay to Dupree who missed his mother and sickly brother. He signed with the University of Southern Mississippi to be near his family.

Dupree was arguably Morris' best work of literary journalism, and he used Dupree as a symbol of "slave athlete" victimized by the white system of recruiting and those who bought into it—parents, students, and the community. "Marcus Dupree was to become a marketable commodity instead of a hero,"⁸⁹ book reviewer Beth Brown wrote. Morris took painstaking efforts to fully research old newspaper archives and interview Philadelphia residents from all walks of life, both black and white. "Sharp sports reporting is mixed with literate comments based on chronicles extracted from the novels of Ellison and Faulkner,"⁹⁰ according to Brown. Dupree did not speak much in the pages, which further added to the theme Morris wanted the reader to experience—that of Dupree as victim. "Morris' effort culminated in a tremendous piece of reporting, historical analysis, and biography in an exciting, although cumbersome, combination."⁹¹

As passionate about people as about the

South, Morris celebrated his return home to a changed South—and that is largely the change that comes through in the *Courting of Marcus Dupree* and later in *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers*. The Mississippi of the Neshoba County murders had evolved into the Mississippi that now championed its black hometown hero, Dupree. However, Morris pointed out that much change still needed to take place—as evidenced by the unethical nature of football recruiting practices. This work was one of the first serious critiques of collegiate athletic recruiting practices.

Morris had written a fiery critique of the recruiting practices in which he stated that he still worried for Dupree once he moved back to Mississippi—that he might fall victim to United States Football League recruiters, despite the promise "that they're not going to meddle with Marcus."⁹² Morris watched as recruiters stopped at nothing to entice Dupree to sign with their respective schools—offering the moon and willing to shoot down any other school in the way. Morris' book was definitely a call for reform in the football recruitment industry.

King referred to the book as Morris' "best and most mature work . . . combining history, memory, reporting of the best sort and a grand human interest story" and a "work of poetry and history."⁹³ The powerful message was skillfully mastered through Morris' own voice and knowledge of Southern people and places. Marshall Frady, another *Harper's* alum, wrote to Doubleday publisher Carolyn Blakemore:

At its simplest, Willie Morris' extraordinary chronicle will forever alter the eye with which we look on the character of college football. But the real marvel of this pageantory [*sic*] book is that Morris has managed to keep it moving so powerfully about so many things at once—not only the Borgian machinations of college recruitment, the America demireli-

gion of football itself, but the amazing human odyssey of this nation's mythic region of the South since the furies of the Sixties, and Morris' own old great themes of home, honor, and the elegiac musics of time. . . . Willie—the good ole Merlin of those remarkable *Harper's* days in non-fiction literature in this country—is back.⁹⁴

Noted historian and author C. Vann Woodward wrote that no one other than Morris could have captured the "many paradoxes of Mississippi and America in the metaphor of a black athlete not yet twenty years of age."⁹⁵ Morris' work was literature and journalism at its most basic—using race and football—to tell a personal and age-old story. Baptist minister Will Campbell, a civil rights activist and notable author, compared Morris' depiction of Philadelphia, Mississippi, to reporting a town that had born again.⁹⁶ Loraine "Peets" Buffett, singer and author Jimmy Buffett's wife, wrote of the story's potency and "stimulating ideas."⁹⁷

The *Jackson Clarion-Ledger-Daily News* (now *The Clarion-Ledger*) bought the serial rights to *Dupree* for \$600—more than the newspaper had ever paid for similar works. The newspaper ran four 1,500 word excerpts across four Sundays beginning October 16, 1983.⁹⁸ It initially appeared that Morris was back on top of his game. However, the book's early praise wasn't enough to save it from Dupree's own personal fate or from the book's six-month publication delay. Just three games into the 1984 season, Dupree left talks with Southern Miss to sign a five-year contract with the USFL New Orleans Breakers for \$6 million. However good he was, though, it only took one game—February 24, 1985—the season opener against the Arizona Wranglers—to end his career for good. With torn ligaments and hamstrings, Dupree's injuries were equivalent to three serious knee injuries at once, according to

doctors. Lying in the hospital, Dupree decided to cut his losses and retire on a \$4.5 million insurance policy.⁹⁹

Dupree believed it all worked out for the best, although not everyone agreed. And while Dupree may have ended his football career a millionaire, his retirement essentially diminished the profitability of Morris' book, regardless of the larger social implications to which it portended. "When asked about Dupree leaving Oklahoma, Sooners' assistant coach Lucious Selmon, who recruited him, said: 'Had Marcus stayed four years here, he would've probably rewritten every record, not just at Oklahoma, but in the history of college football,'" Cawthon wrote in the newspaper.¹⁰⁰ Although some critics outside the South questioned Morris' interweaving so much of his life and Dupree's life into the narrative,¹⁰¹ had Dupree achieved his promise, the book would have been a bestseller and most assuredly would have changed Morris's life as well.

Morris believed *Dupree* was the best book he ever wrote,¹⁰² receiving the Christopher Award, given in New York City in recognition of an excellent book, film, or television program that recognized the human spirit. But Morris had more riding on this book than anyone realized. By the time *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* was published in 1992, Morris had not filed federal income taxes for a decade and lived in constant fear that federal officials were going to throw him in jail. King wrote that Morris believed if *Dupree* became a bestseller he would be able to pay off all his back taxes and rid himself of the psychological torment.¹⁰³ In 2010, Dupree became the subject of an ESPN documentary, "The Best That Never Was," as part of the *30 for 30* series of films commemorating the network's thirtieth anniversary.

Speculation would also remain that it was not only Dupree's dismal professional showing

but also Morris' procrastination in getting the book to his publisher on time that greatly lessened its impact and sales potential. Morris' out-of-control alcohol consumption was again the culprit in a major professional setback. The book would never have seen the light of day if not for Morris' Ole Miss student, confidant and sometime-bartender Robert Miskelly stepping in. Sterling Lord, the publisher, had repeatedly asked Morris for the book, eventually calling Miskelly to find out the hold up. King wrote that Miskelly said, "I told him the trouble was drinking—a fifth or two of bourbon every day and sometimes some vodka. As long as Willie hung around Oxford, where he had so many drinking pals, he never would finish the book."¹⁰⁴ Miskelly admitted to King that he eventually took Morris to a wooded cabin and secretly disabled his car and left him without radio, television, or books so he would write. Miskelly brought him a single pint of George Dickel bourbon each day, and he averaged about thirty-six pages over a six-day period. Miskelly allowed him Sundays off and a fifth of bourbon as reward. He told King, "I wouldn't take him anywhere. It was too far to walk to any store or town, and there was no telephone in the cabin. And that's how *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* got finished."¹⁰⁵

Morris eventually stopped teaching the one class he had agreed to and stopped paying his rent for his faculty housing.¹⁰⁶ If not for his friends in high places—the mayor, a Congressman, and a few wealthy alumni and businessmen, Morris would have been ruined. As it was, Morris' enablers did not want to lose the publicity that Morris' presence brought the university.

By the late 1980s, alcohol had begun to affect Morris' life on a daily basis.¹⁰⁷ Newspaper accounts of his alcoholism and brutish behavior became more common. Ed Yoder recounted a

drunken conversation he had with Morris one evening in which Morris denied having a problem with bourbon. Morris told Yoder, "Hell, I don't have a problem at all. I can get all the bourbon I want."¹⁰⁸ People around Oxford commented on his increasingly erratic behavior after the publication of *Dupree*. "Mr. Morris drank too much bourbon and red wine, smoked too many Viceroys, stayed up too late and caroused too much," *New York Times* writer Peter Applebome would later write in his obituary in the newspaper. "Indeed, friends have marveled at his ability to defy most of the conventions of good health."¹⁰⁹ Even strangers apparently became concerned. A Hattiesburg, Mississippi doctor wrote Morris:

You don't know me, but you have been on my mind for some time, and I have decided to risk writing you. . . . I am a recovering alcoholic. I am also a board certified general surgeon, and my medical degree is from Harvard Medical School. . . . I had a very successful general surgery practice in Laurel, Mississippi, a big house with a swimming pool, all the stuff. I destroyed all that because I couldn't stop drinking. I finally let someone help me after everything was gone except my life. I really didn't care if I lived or not, life was so painful.

My recovery began June 17, 1985. I am now sixty years old; I have a lovely wife again, and for the past fourteen months I have been medical director of the alcohol and drug unit at Pine Grove in Hattiesburg. Life is really neat again, with peace and joy.

I sat behind you at a football game on campus this past season. I hope my letter and intrusion into your life does not make you too angry. If you would ever like to talk, please call.¹¹⁰

David Rae Morris finally dealt with the de-

mons in his relationship with his often-absentee father, when he encouraged his father to seek help for his disease of alcoholism. He pleaded with his father to seek help a decade before his death. David encouraged and begged his father to stop hiding behind excuses and get help for his chemical dependency on alcohol. David wrote:

I hung up on you, partly because I was shocked by the angry tone in your voice when you said: "Fuck Maryemma," but mainly because you were so drunk. Bad drunk. I had to watch you get that way every night we were there, and I was tired of it. As much I try to detach with love, it still hurts me to watch you get drunk night after night after night. You have continually refused to acknowledge the pain that I, and may [*sic*) of your friends go through watching you to [*sic*] this to yourself. Over the course of an evening, we are forced to watch you make the transition from a wonderful and sincere friend to a loud, sometimes rude, but almost always a sloppy drunk. It is not pleasant.¹¹¹

He spelled it out for the first time, "You are an alcoholic," and refused to accept his father's past excuse that all writers drink. David told his father that many of his friends over the years had asked about him and his drinking. David reminded him that his own friend, James Jones, had to stop drinking because of his heart condition. He ended by telling his father that he believed his drinking had affected every aspect of his life,¹¹² which is similar to what Bob Kotlowitz had said about the fallout at *Harper's* many years earlier.¹¹³ David said he hoped Morris would realize how hard it was for him to address those issues with his own father and that he would realize it was the truth. As a young child, David had been an eyewitness to liquor's

effects on Morris.¹¹⁴ David said in 2007 that he had not had a drink himself in more than ten years because he realized from watching his father what it could do to him, too, if uncontrolled.¹¹⁵

Drinking and *Dupree*

Ole Miss could not have purchased the publicity Morris had provided the small-town university. This, no doubt, influenced Ole Miss officials to turn a blind eye when Morris' personal antics were less than scholarly. Still, his brief respite from heavy drinking while finishing *Dupree* did not last. As soon as the book was completed, Morris' belligerent behavior intensified. One night a drunk Morris was walking down a sidewalk and thought an Oxford police officer stared at him a little too long, and Morris attempted to assault him. The punch landed on friend Rocky Miskelly instead. Larry Wells, who was also present, made up a story and explained who Morris was, and begged the officer to have pity on Morris.¹¹⁶ The officer forgave him that night, but the town police officers did not forget. Shortly afterward, an inebriated Morris was driving home and was stopped by two policemen. This time the police were no longer impressed with a famous author trying to throw his weight around town and endanger other residents. He was taken to jail and charged with DUI. He was within one hundred yards of his home, which was on the campus of Ole Miss.¹¹⁷ Morris called Oxford Mayor John Leslie and state representative Ed Perry incensed at his mistreatment. He told them the police told him he had taken a swing at an officer before, and their mercy had worn out. Morris claimed no memory of that event.¹¹⁸

Unfortunately, shortly thereafter, Morris suffered another emotional devastation. His beloved black Labrador retriever, Pete, died, sending him on a three-day drinking binge. By

this time many friends had become greatly concerned with his binge drinking.¹¹⁹ Morris had also become known as a drunk in town gossip,¹²⁰ known for drinking Jack Daniel's while visiting William Faulkner's grave and getting intoxicated with students and bragging about his accomplishments.¹²¹

Conclusion

As the 1980s drew to a close, Morris' most prolific letter-writing friend, Larry L. King, mused, "Can't believe we're approaching the end of another year. I got to thinking about that last night, which led me to the startling recognition that come spring it will have been eighteen years since we all told John Cowles to stuff it. I'd say we have done better than he has or certainly better than his magazine has."¹²² King wrote that four of the writers who left *Harper's*—himself, Halberstam, Frady and Morris—in the years since leaving the magazine had collectively produced twenty-seven books, two movies and with two more on the way, five plays, twelve television documentaries, and numerous magazine articles and awards, and he "would like to be able to challenge Cowles to pick out any of the writers and/or editors he's had since we left *Harper's*—any four he'd like—and try to match us!"¹²³ These numbers, of course, do not take into account the untold volumes that were published or at least improved by Morris' instruction or encouragement.

To be a good writer, Morris had often told students, "you have to have a reporter's eye and instinct and above all you have to have that commitment in the gut to stick with it every day. There's no substitute for discipline."¹²⁴ A living contradiction, Morris' own lack of discipline, both professionally and personally, had proven his biggest enemies. While he had a good message, Morris as a messenger had become mercurial, ineffectual and unreliable as an in-

structor at Ole Miss. By the end of the 1980s, he had begun neglecting many of his responsibilities to the university and rarely held class.¹²⁵

In March 1988, old friend JoAnne Prichard, a book editor at the University Press of Mississippi, wrote Morris to inquire if he would participate in a new author and artist series she was planning. The collaboration became the book *Homecomings* and included essays by Morris and artwork by William Dunlap. During the work on the book, Morris and Prichard fell in love.¹²⁶ Ironically, as Morris had spent so much of his professional life inspiring others to greatness, Morris would find his own savior in Prichard. She began helping Morris put his life back together.

As the 1980s drew to a close, the decadence in Morris' lifestyle was also ending. His bachelor days of few responsibilities and alcoholic binges would end both out of circumstances catching up with him but more out of the love of a good woman, who provided for him what he had given many others—unconditional support and encouragement. He had finally found contentment with a woman whom he had ironically met shortly after the publication of *North Toward Home* in 1967. What he did not know, however, was that this would be the last decade of his life.

Leaving Oxford: JoAnne and Jackson

Between 1989 and 1991, Morris spent a lot of time traveling between Oxford and Jackson, where JoAnne lived. Morris and JoAnne married in April 1990, and he resigned his writer-in-residence position at Ole Miss in February 1991, despite the pleas from Larry Wells and willingness of JoAnne for him to stay on in some capacity.¹²⁷ In the time he had spent with

JoAnne far from the bar scene in Oxford and the bluster of the university campus, it was evident that Morris wanted to return to a more serene Southern lifestyle. His personal turmoil for decades had threatened to destroy not only his livelihood but his life, and Morris was ready for a change.

The last decade of his life would prove to be one of the most prolific of his life. In 1998, he published *The Ghosts of Medgar Evers*, which followed the making of the major motion picture *The Ghosts of Mississippi*, similar in style to Lillian Ross's 1952 *Picture*, which was about the filming of Ernest Hemingway's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Morris was named Mississippi's favorite nonfiction writer by *The Clarion-Ledger* readers' poll in June 1999 ahead of historian Shelby Foote.¹²⁸ People of a younger generation are aware of Morris—yet do not realize his significance—because of the 1999 family film “My Dog Skip,” based on Morris' recollection of childhood shenanigans alongside his beloved canine companion. He died weeks before the film was released, and became the first writer to lie in state in the Mississippi State Capitol rotunda.

Morris has earned a distinct place in both communication history and literary journalism. His most important contribution, however, was his significance as an editor and encourager of other Southern writers and journalists. Much biographical information was included in this research because it was Morris' own life and experiences growing up in a segregated Southern world and realizing he had the power to change some of the ills of the world through progressive writing and thoughtful editing, that made him such a significant influence on like-minded writers.

Notes

- ¹ Winston F. Groom, essay in *Remembering Willie*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2000, 33-34.
- ² Morris, *Shifting Interludes*, 66.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 68.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Will Norton, "Willie Morris: A Great Teacher," *The Southerner*, Vol. 1, No. 3. (online journal www.southerner.net).
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Norman Sims, editor. *The Literary Journalists*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1984, cover.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 6.
- ¹³ Fred Brown and Jeanne McDonald, "Growing Up Southern," *The Southerner*, 2.
- ¹⁴ Eason.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ Lew Powell, "On Being the Famous Writer Willie Morris," *Conversations with Willie Morris*, 25.
- ¹⁷ Morris, *New York Days*, 367.
- ¹⁸ James Dickerson, "Willie Morris Comes Home Again to the Delta," *Conversations with Willie Morris*, 40.
- ¹⁹ Larry Wells, e-mail, June 9, 2007.
- ²⁰ Thomas J. M. Schopf, assistant professor at the University of Chicago, typed letter to Cowles (copy to Morris), dated March 5, 1971, Chicago, Willie Morris Collection Box 7, Folder 10. Paul Carroll, University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, signed letter to Morris, dated March 6, 1971, Chicago. Willie Morris Collection Box 7, Folder 14. Other similar letters exist in Folders 10 and 11.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² David Madden, typed letter from to Cowles, dated March 6, 1971, Baton Rouge, La., Willie Morris Collection, Box 7, Folder 14.
- ²³ Jack Bales, "A Conversation with Willie Morris," *Conversations with Willie Morris*, 177.
- ²⁴ John Grisham was never enrolled as a student in Morris' classes, but he sat in on classes, especially when visiting writers like Williams Styron, Shelby Foote, James Dickey, Peter Matthiessen, John Knowles, George Plimpton, Beth Henley or Ellen Gilchrist would speak. Grisham was a law student at Ole Miss at the time.
- ²⁵ Donna Tartt is an internationally best-selling author of *The Secret History*, 1992, which she wrote in college, and *The Little Friend*, 2002. Her third novel, purchased by Little, Brown remained in publication in late 2012.
- ²⁶ Malamud was a Jewish-American author who taught courses at Bennington College in Vermont until his death in 1986. He wrote the novel, *The Natural*, in 1952, which was later made into a major motion picture starring Robert Redford. He also won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and National Book Award in 1967 for his book, *The Fixer*. He won another National Book Award for *The Magic Barrel* in 1969.
- ²⁷ Gary Pettus, "Off to a blazing s-Tartt," *The Clarion Ledger*, July 19, 1991, 1-2E.
- ²⁸ Donna Tartt, "Willie Morris, 1934-1999," *Best of the Oxford American* 2002, 143-151.
- ²⁹ Mr. Micawber was a character in Charles Dickens' novel *David Copperfield*.
- ³⁰ Tartt, "Willie Morris, 1934-1999."
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 149.
- ³² Gene Powell, typed letter to Morris, Jackson, Mississippi, March 27, 1991. Willie Morris Collection, Box 37, Folder 1.
- ³³ Charles Chappell, "Lawrence Wells of Oxford: An Interview," *Mississippi Quarterly: The Journal of Southern Culture*, Spring 1995, 334-335.
- ³⁴ Beth Brown, Book Review of *The Courting of Marcus Dupree*. *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 4, June 1987, 511.
- ³⁵ Styron, handwritten letter to Morris, Roxbury, Connecticut, April 2, 1979, Willie Morris Collection Box 19, Folder 8.
- ³⁶ Will Norton Jr., typed letter to Morris, University, Mississippi, Nov. 18, 1980, Willie Morris Collection, Box 20, Folder 24.
- ³⁷ Walter Anderson, typed letter to Morris, New York, Jan. 15, 1982, Willie Morris Collection, Box 23, Folder 5.
- ³⁸ Bales, *Willie Morris*, 51.
- ³⁹ Norton, typed letter to Morris, University, Mississippi, Feb. 14, 1984, Willie Morris Collection Box 28, Folder 3.
- ⁴⁰ Kellee Usher, "Biography of Neely Tucker," Neely Tucker: The Mississippi Writers and Musicians Project at Starkville High School, May 2004.
- ⁴¹ Neely Tucker, e-mail interview, July 12, 2007.
- ⁴² Bales, *Willie Morris*, 52.
- ⁴³ John Grisham, Jr., typed letter to Morris, Southaven, Mississippi, Dec. 22, 1988. Willie Morris Collection, Box 30, Folder 19.
- ⁴⁴ <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/grisham/main.php>

- 45 http://articles.cnn.com/1999-12-31/entertainment/1990.sellers_1_book-sales-cumulative-sales-copies?_s=PM:books
- 46 Sheena Gillespie, typed letter to Morris, Bayside, New York, Aug. 8, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 3.
- 47 Winston Groom, "Willie Had His Quirks," *The Southerner* online magazine, 1999.(www.southerner.net 1999, retrieved May 20, 2007).
- 48 *Ibid.*
- 49 Groom, "Willie Had His Quirks."
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 Larry Brown, typed letter to Morris from Larry Brown, Oxford, Mississippi, January 8, 1982. Willie Morris Collection Box 23, Folder 4.
- 52 Brown, typed letter to Morris, Jan. 27, 1988, Willie Morris Collection Box 28, Folder 5.
- 53 Brown, typed letter to Morris, May 16, 1988, no return address, Willie Morris Collection Box 30, Folder 2.
- 54 Greg Iles, "Willie's story important for us all, says former student," newspaper clipping without date or title from Willie Morris Collection, undated folder.
- 55 Elsa Franklin, "Interview with Stephen Kimber," *The Joy of Writing*, 2003 (online).
- 56 Stephen Kimber, e-mail interview, July 25, 2007.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 *Ibid.*
- 59 *Ibid.*
- 60 Paul Ruffin, e-mail interview, Aug. 13, 2007.
- 61 *Ibid.*
- 62 Elfrieda Abbe, "Rick Bragg on the art of storytelling," the *Writer* magazine, online magazine printed May 20, 2007.
- 63 "Writers Remembering Willie Morris," Mississippi Public Broadcasting website, pulled March 7, 2008.
<http://www.mpbonline.org/television/series/writers/111-Morris/index.htm>
- 64 Mark Childress, typed letter to Morris (and Larry and Deanie Wells), San Francisco, May 8, 1990, Willie Morris Collection Box 34, Folder 15.
- 65 J. Brent Clark, typed letters to Morris, Oklahoma City, Jan. 9, 1990, (Dec. 11, 1989), Willie Morris Collection Box 34, Folder 1 and Box 33 Folder 18.
- 66 Thomas Newsom, numerous packages from of Saint Louis, Missouri, Willie Morris Collection Box 22, Folder 7.
- 67 John R. Dykers, Jr., M.D., typed letter to Morris, Siler City, North Carolina, March 15, 1982, Willie Morris Collection Box 23, Folder 11.
- 68 www.dykers.com.
- 69 Raad Cawthon, e-mail interview, July 25, 2007.
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 Lindsey Nelson, "Willie Morris . . . and Another Joyful Letter," unknown newspaper clipping, Willie Morris Collection, Box 28, Folder 4.
- 72 Kip Stratton, e-mail interview, July 12, 2007.
- 73 *Ibid.*
- 74 *Ibid.*
- 75 Stratton, typed letters to Morris, Stillwater, Oklahoma, Jan. 5, 1989, Feb. 15, 1989, Willie Morris Collection Box 31, Folder 2 and 5.
- 76 Stratton, e-mail interview, July 12, 2007.
- 77 Patrick Lally, "Portrait of an athlete—and a metaphor," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Jan. 15, 1984, G11.
- 78 Morris, handwritten letter to Styron, University, Mississippi, Jan. 1, 1983, Willie Morris Collection, Box 45, Folder 18.
- 79 James Conaway, "Willie Morris in the Land of Faulkner," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 28, 1982, C1. Thomas Griffiths, "Cutting Down to Size," *Time*, Jan. 17, 1983.
- 80 Conaway.
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- 82 Griffiths.
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- 84 Walker Percy, handwritten letter to Carolyn Blakemore (copy to Morris), Covington, Louisiana, Sept. 2, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 3.
- 85 *Ibid.*
- 86 Harry Crews, "A pet peeve: Morris fumbles recruiting story," *Chicago Tribune Book World*, Nov. 20, 1983, Section 14, p. 31.
- 87 Kent Biffle, "Willie Morris writes the saga of Marcus Dupree," *The Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 13, 1983, G1.
- 88 *Ibid.*, G6.
- 89 Beth Brown, "The Courting of Marcus Dupree" book review, *Journal of Black Studies*, June 1987, Vol. 17, No. 4, 512.
- 90 *Ibid.*
- 91 *Ibid.*
- 92 Kent Biffle, "Willie Morris writes the saga of Marcus Dupree," *The Dallas Morning News*, Nov. 13, 1983, G1.
- 93 King, typed letter to Morris, Washington, D.C., August 3, 1983, Willie Morris Collection, Box 27, Folder 3.
- 94 Marshall Frady, typed letter to Carolyn Blakemore, New York, Sept. 14, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 7.
- 95 C. Vann Woodward, typed letter to Carolyn Blakemore, Hamden, Connecticut, Sept. 2, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 7.
- 96 Will Campbell, typed letter to Carolyn Blakemore, Sept. 28, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 7.

- ⁹⁷ Lorraine "Peets" Buffett, handwritten letter to Morris, Daphne, Alabama, Nov. 1, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 10.
- ⁹⁸ Stuart Krichevsky typed letter to Morris, New York, Sept. 27, 1983, Willie Morris Collection Box 27, Folder 7.
- ⁹⁹ Raad Cawthon, "A Torn-Up Dreamer," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 30, 1989, Sec. C1,20.
- ¹⁰⁰ Cawthon, C20.
- ¹⁰¹ Harry Crews, "A pet peeve: Morris fumbles recruiting story," *Chicago Tribune Book World*, Nov. 20, 1983, Sec. 14, p. 31-32.
- ¹⁰² King, *In Search Of Willie Morris*, 262.
- ¹⁰³ King, *In Search Of Willie Morris*, 261. JoAnne Prichard Morris phone interview.
- ¹⁰⁴ King, *In Search Of Willie Morris*, 262.
- ¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.
- ¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 273-274.
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- ¹⁰⁸ Ed Yoder, Jr., *Telling Others What to Think: Recollections of a Pundit*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994, 199.
- ¹⁰⁹ Peter Applebome, "Willie Morris, 64, Writer of the Southern Experience," *The New York Times*, Aug. 3, 1999.
- ¹¹⁰ John McRae, M.D., typed letter to Morris, no return address, Jan. 3, 1991, Willie Morris Collection Box 36, Folder 1.
- ¹¹¹ David Rae Morris, typed letter to Morris from David Rae Morris, May 5, 1989, Minneapolis, Willie Morris Collection Box 32, Folder 6.
- ¹¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹¹³ Kotlowitz, phone interview.
- ¹¹⁴ David Rae Morris interview.
- ¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹⁶ King, *In Search Of Willie Morris*, 274-5.
- ¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.
- ¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 275.
- ¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.
- ¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 276.
- ¹²¹ Ronnie Dugger, "South Toward Home: Goodbye to Willie Morris," *The Texas Observer*, Aug 20, 1999.
- ¹²² King, typed letter to Morris, Washington, D.C., Nov. 13, 1989, Willie Morris Collection, Box 33, Folder 15.
- ¹²³ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁴ Ron Harrist, untitled article, *The Clarion Ledger/Jackson Daily News*, Oct. 18, 1981, from the Jack Bales Collection, Box 1, Folder 4.
- ¹²⁵ Bales, *Willie Morris*, 54.
- ¹²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹²⁷ Joanne Prichard Morris, phone interview, Sept. 17, 2008.
- ¹²⁸ Billy Watkins, "Mississippi's Favorite Writers," *The Clarion-Ledger*, June 14, 1999, 1-2D.