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Something About Books-the late Willie Morris

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Something About Books

by Jack Walsdorf (Library Relations, Alibris) <jackw@alibris.com>

When Willie Morris died last year (August 2, 1999) America lost one of its finest Southern writers, although Willie preferred to say that he considered himself to be “an American writer who lives in the South.” With his death has come a number of books, many in the works before his early death of heart failure at the age of sixty-five. Later this fall, the University Press of Mississippi will publish My Mississippi by Willie, with photographs by David Rae Morris, his son.

Earlier this year the same press published two other books relating to Willie, the first was Remembering Willie, a book of memorials collected in the form of twenty-seven eulogies and tributes from President William J. Clinton, William Styron, David Halberstam, Ellen Douglas, Mike Espy, Ed Yoder, Donna Tartt and others. The second book, the subject of this review is Conversations With Willie Morris, edited by Jack Bales, the reference and humanities librarian at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

When Jack Bales undertook this project even he did not realize the magnitude of material available. Willie Morris was everywhere. In This Is a Book, in books and magazines, in movies and videos. All of his work, and work about him are in the University of Mississippi’s Department of Archives and Special Collections, which acquired Willie’s papers in 1995, all seventeen thousand documents! As Elizabeth Mullener pointed out in her 1981 essay “Willie Morris’s heart seems to be wherever his typewriter is.” And Willie added: “I couldn’t live without writing. I’d have no reason for living. I can’t do anything else.”

He could, of course. He could be the magazine editor he was, the youngest editor of Harper’s, America’s oldest magazine. He could be the teacher he was at the University of Mississippi where he would introduce his students to William Styron, Shelby Foote, James Dickey, Peter Matthiessen, John Knowles, George Plimpton, Beth Henley or Ellen Gilchrist. The introduction to these writers came through their books, but better yet in person as visiting writers. And sometimes his class would have a young and unpublished writer attending, John Grisham, who used Willie as his first reader of A Time To Kill.

But in the end Willie was a writer of stories, be they novels, memoirs or short stories. “I happen to be perhaps the United States’ oldest living sixth grader. I’m obsessed with childhood and I’ve written a lot about it . . . .” This may have been true of Willie all his life, but at a very young age he had his most famous book, North Toward Home, published to much critical acclaim, and John Kenneth Galbraith summed it up by saying: “No one at thirty-two should write his memoirs; Willie Morris is the only exception.”

Along with Willie’s life long passion for writing came his belief in the written word. As he said, “The written word, when well done, is one of the few endeavors of the human race that lasts and matters. If you write something good, it’s going to last; it’s that simple.” Willie’s words will last, and finding his published works is easier than ever. A quick check of the Alibris website found hundreds of O.P. Willie Morris books for sale, and the Amazon site offered over 40 titles, while eBay listed a few items up for auction. But it is the spoken words, the interviews, the out-of-the-way newspaper articles, which may be more easily lost in time. And it is with these sources that Jack Bales has done such a masterful job of finding and reprinting the often lost or forgotten works by and about Willie.

In Conversations with Willie Morris, University Press of Mississippi, 2000 we find a total of twenty-five interviews starting in 1967, with one of the earliest pieces by Leslie Cross of the Milwaukee Journal. There are two television interviews with Charlie Rose, along with a delightful and entertaining interview done in 1966 by Whad”Ya Know host Michael Feldman. Feldman asked Willie: “What if Faulkner had been born in Hibbing, Minnesota? Would that have changed the course of Southern literature?” To which Willie replied: “No, his name would have been Garrison Keillor. He would have written The Sound and the Snow.”

Studs Terkel, during a 1983 radio interview got Willie to talk about his multi-layered book The Courage of Marcus Dupree: “I began to perceive that it really wasn’t a book about football, although football is the thread that runs through it. It’s a book about two Mississippis; a seventeen-year-old black and a middle-aged white. The seventeen-year-old black’s odyssey into the great outside world almost coincided with the middle-aged white’s return to his soil after a long exile.”

This book ends with Jack Bales own 1997 “Conversation with Willie Morris.” This is the longest single section of the book, twenty-eight pages, and in many ways the most informative, covering, as it does, the whole range of Willie’s life as editor, teacher, and writer.

On a personal note, I knew Willie somewhat, helped get his limited edition book, My Two Oxford, published; spent one memorable night with him and his wife, along with Larry Brown and his wife at the Warehouse, a pub in Oxford, Mississippi, talking about books, writing, publishing and bookselling. I will miss him dearly, but he will always live in his written words.

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Click One, Get One Free
by Sandra Beehler (Old Dominion University)

Internet commerce in books is forcing changes in the book club business. When Doubleday Direct, one of the main U.S. book clubs, saw a big drop in enrollment in 1999, it moved quickly to grab a piece of the Web market. Though general-interest clubs find it hard to compete with online retailers, the Internet offers advantages to clubs which cater to special interests. Several specialty clubs offered by Doubleday online late last year have already exceeded expectations in online enrollment.


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SLIC FOR NIC
by Sandra Beehler (Old Dominion University)

A startup company called Alacritech is offering a new way to connect computers to the Internet that could increase server performance by 800%. Its Session Layer Interface Card (SLIC) would replace the Network Interface Card (NIC) that has been standard for the last 20 years. The SLIC includes an Internet Protocol Processor (IPP) and 8 mbs of memory, which takes over the burden of protocol processing from a server’s CPU. Test results have been very positive, though there are still some technical problems to be worked out.


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