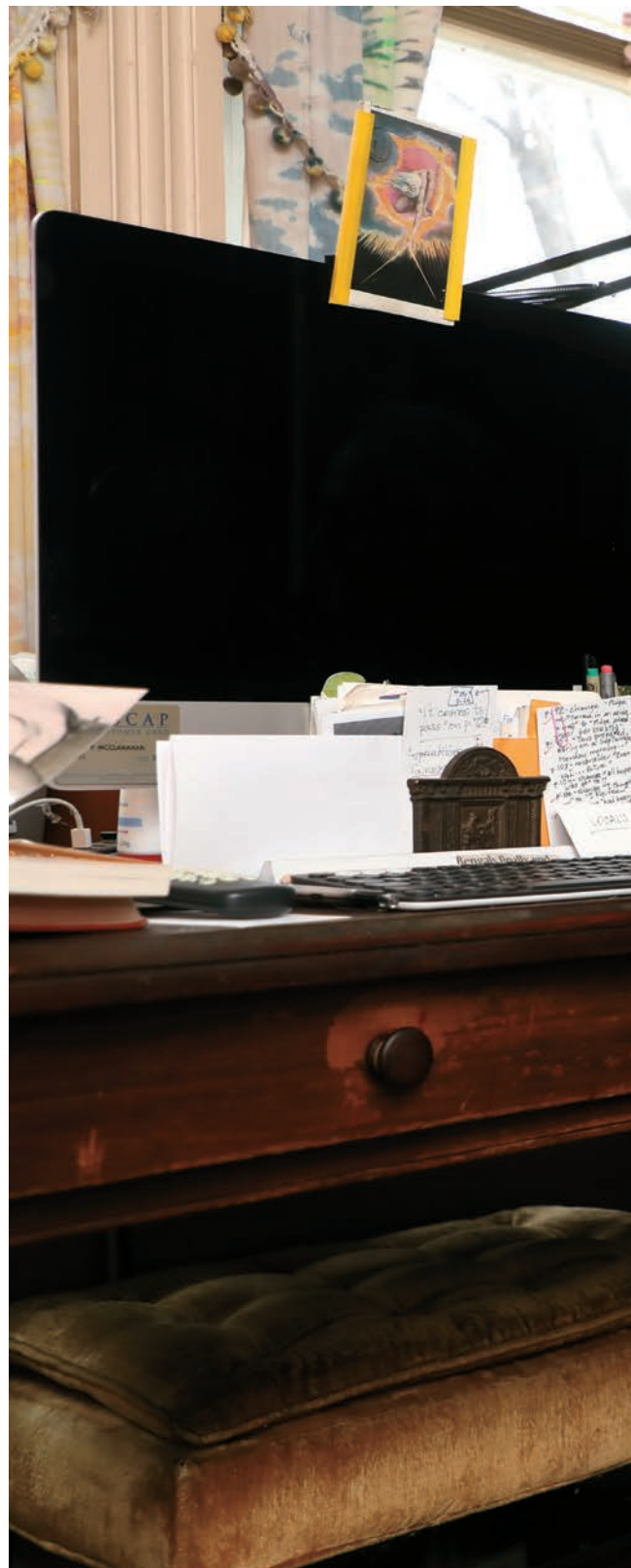


book
benches
project

life LIVED large

Ed McClanahan celebrates
a distinguished career as a
writer, teacher, and mentor

By Rena Baer / Photos by Kirk Schlea







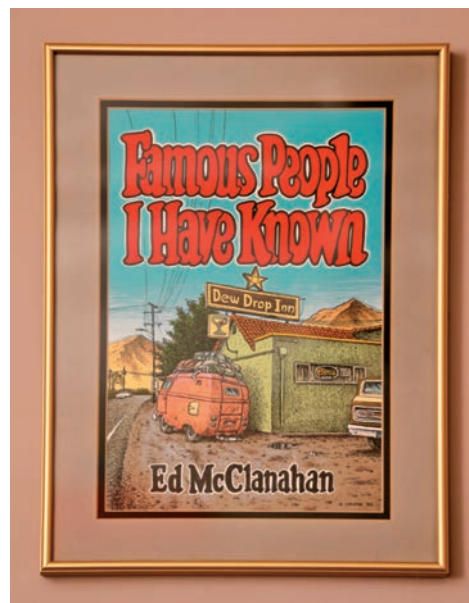
McClanahan and his wife, Hilda, have lived for decades in a house on Walton Avenue.

it took living on the West Coast for Ed McClanahan to write a coming-of-age novel about his native Kentucky and returning home to write it well.

A self-described “man of extremes,” McClanahan has strong roots in rural northern Kentucky but found a second home in California among author Ken Kesey’s “Merry Pranksters” in the 1960s. He is known for a sharp-humored, expressive writing style reminiscent of the old “New Journalism,” yet his reading tastes are completely Victorian. He honed his literary skills early, writing for *Playboy* magazine and *Esquire*, publishing commentaries and short stories, and doing three or

four college stints. But, it took him 22 years to finish his first novel, *The Natural Man*. He proclaimed in an hour-long bio in 1994 on KET that he was done writing books and then went on to pen six more.

Needless to say, McClanahan is an interesting guy. He was inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame in a ceremony at the Kentucky Theater in February, along with his dear friend Gurney Norman, a fiction writer, filmmaker, and cultural advocate. Their names will join authors Alice Dunigan, Sue Grafton, Helen Thomas, and Jane Gentry Vance, who were also inducted this



Memorabilia, including a sketch of the author's father, Edward L. McClanahan, framed book covers, and an autographed copy of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* attest to McClanahan's literary-rich life.

year posthumously. Both he and Norman also were honored, each with his own book bench, in the Lexington project Book Benches: A Tribute to Kentucky Authors, a collaborative project among Arts Connect, LexArts, and the Carnegie Center for Literacy & Learning.

McClanahan moved to Lexington from Henry County in the early 1990s, after he and his second wife, Cia White, with whom he had two children, separated. He settled in a house on Walton Avenue, thinking it would be the perfect bachelor pad. Instead, two weeks after moving in he went to a Derby party where he met a woman "with a big dog and a grand piano." As soon as his divorce was final, he and Hilda married and still live in that house near downtown Lexington.

"There was always something exotic about Lexington, and I still think there is," said McClanahan. "There's something that lives in the atmosphere of this town, and I don't know any other place quite like it. It's manageable still. You don't get to know the mayor of the city as your personal friend in most places. There's just something about this town that tickles me and pleases me. It's get-



ting too big, but it's not yet too big."

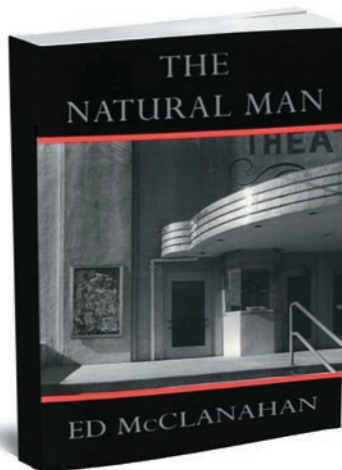
Born in 1932, McClanahan grew up in Brooksville, Kentucky, in Bracken County. He described his youth as "idyllic."

"I was free to roam, from the top of the water tower to the bottom of the reservoir," he said. "You knew everyone, and everyone knew you and looked out for you."

His mother's family was active in local politics, and his mother worked in the courthouse during World War II. McClanahan said

BOOKS BY ED McCLANAHAN

- **The Natural Man** (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 1983.
- **Famous People I Have Known** (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux), 1985.
- **A Congress of Wonders** (Washington, DC: Counterpoint), 1996.
- **My Vita, If You Will: The Uncollected Ed McClanahan** (Washington, DC: Counterpoint), 1998
- **Fondelle, or, The Whore with a Heart of Gold: A Report from the Field** (Monterey, KY: Larkspur Press), 2002.
- **A Foreign Correspondence** (Tucson: Sylph Publications), 2002.
- **Spit in the Ocean #7: All About Ken Kesey** (New York: Penguin Books), 2003.
- **O The Clear Moment** (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint), 2008.



A circa 1971 photo shows McClanahan, left, and Gurney Norman. Below, ceramic statues depict McClanahan, right, and Little Enis, who was featured in one of the author's stories.

he had the run of the courthouse, which included the clock tower. He snuck into trials, caught conversation at the jail, and encountered infamous characters like the banished Roy “Two-Nose” Lucas, an intelligent man with a facial malformation who had gone to school with his mom, taken off later with a carnival sideshow, and returned home twice only to make himself unwelcome both times.

But it wasn’t a youth rich with characters and storylines that pulled McClanahan to writing. It was more of a gift for expression, along with a love of literature nurtured by his family.

“My grandfather, despite an eighth-grade education, was a student of law and literature who wrote poetry and read Shakespeare all the time,” McClanahan said. He died before McClanahan really knew him, leaving behind a vast library.

“He died when I was very young, but his books were very much a part of my life,” he said.

One aunt had also gotten her master’s degree at the University of Kentucky and was a college English teacher.

“She was an intellectual by the standards of the day and read to me a whole lot when I was young and encouraged me





FAST FRIENDS

Writers Ed McClanahan and Gurney Norman forged a friendship at the University of Kentucky that has lasted more than 60 years and many changes of address.

"He first turned up in my life in creative writing class," said McClanahan. "Of course, he's quite a lot younger, by which I mean three or four years. He was just a kid, and I was a graduate student.



McClanahan and Norman in Gratz Park

"I had been to Stanford already ... sort of," he added with a chuckle. "And Gurney showed up in his ROTC uniform, but he wrote these wonderful Appalachian stories that were just so charming and touching and real. He was just somebody you wanted to get acquainted with."

In McClanahan, Norman saw a glamorous figure. "We were sophomores and juniors learning to be articulate," he said. "And here was someone three years older than us who had arrived at a level of sophistication that we didn't know about. In my case, it inspired me to want to

know and have experiences beyond Kentucky. Kentucky had always been home."

Norman said he had become interested in writing as a means of making sense of his childhood, during which World War II had spread chaos as far away as the Eastern Kentucky hills where he lived, alternating between grandparents.

"I felt a sense of urgency to express experiences and feelings," Norman said of becoming a writer. "Country people can be very articulate and expressive. I grew up in a family of really great talkers. They weren't educated people, but they were people who were articulate in a colloquial way ... The richness of the spoken language has much to do with it, also deep feelings when everyone you know, their lives are dramatic."

Those were the stories that caught McClanahan's attention, and the two became fast friends. With McClanahan having been to Stanford and hearing his experiences, Norman felt empowered to apply for a creative writing fellowship there in 1959.

"I never would have done it or thought like that if I had not met Ed," he said. "In 1960 I was accepted and granted a fellowship. It changed my life. I wound up living in Menlo Park in Palo Alto [California] for 20 years after that, which is a measure of Ed's influence, and not just on me."

to read," he said. "It got into my head that language was kind of 'it.' Writing seemed to be the one thing I really took to and that came to me."

Following a very short stint at Washington and Lee, he got his bachelor's degree in 1955 from Miami (Ohio) University, where a professor there took him under his aegis and allowed him to take English classes long after he'd met the requirement. With that professor's recommendation he received a fellowship to a three-week writers' conference in Boulder, Colorado. There he was singled out as being only one of two "real writers" in attendance. The other guy was a Stanford University student who told him about its graduate program in English that allowed a creative writing major. McClanahan immediately applied for that fall, though he was still waiting to hear back from Columbia University.

As summer drew to a close, he began packing to leave, not knowing whether he was headed east or west. The Friday afternoon before he'd have to go one direction or the other, he called Stanford and found out he'd just been admitted as one of the last students to get in the program.

"So, I went to Stanford and promptly flunked out, again," he said, the "again" in reference to his brief time at Washington and Lee.

Well, not quite flunked out, but McClanahan realized he was not quite ready for the program. Thinking he was going to be drafted during the Vietnam War, he returned home to Kentucky and took a few summer classes at UK, making A's. When he wasn't drafted, he decided to attend graduate school there, falling under the tutelage of professors Robert Hazel and Hollis Summers. The pair became the nucleus of an exclusive coterie in the college's creative writing program that also included Wendell Berry, James Baker Hall, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Norman.

Following their time at UK, Berry and Norman had both received fellowships to



Stanford. And McClanahan was aching to get back there.

"I fell for California," he said. "It was quite wonderful at that time. The weather was just astonishing, and there was something about being on that campus that was like a dream, somehow ... it was all so new and different. I wanted so much to be a modern person, and I thought the more California I could get on me, the more modern I would be."

After getting his master's at UK and also marrying his first wife, Katherine Andrews, with whom he later had three children, McClanahan made it back out west, but not to California. He taught freshman comp at Oregon State College, where he began writing *The Natural Man*, finding an agent and a publisher, and receiving an advance.

It wasn't until 22 years later that he finished the book after the publisher asked for its advance back, and not having the money, McClanahan found another publisher and used that advance to pay back the original publisher.

A lot had happened in the meantime, just not the completion of the book.

McClanahan found his way back to Stanford on a fellowship and remained there as a lecturer until 1972. He had become friendly with Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; their exploits as Merry Pranksters were well documented during the heyday of the '60s. Many of those stories can be found in

McClanahan's book *Famous People I Have Known*.

McClanahan later taught at UK during the 1972-73 academic year, during which time he received accolades for two magazine pieces he wrote for *Playboy*: the first on The Grateful Dead; the second on a wild man named Little Enis, a left-handed Boyle County rockabilly artist whose real name was Carlos Toadvine. Both stories garnered *Playboy*'s best nonfiction award.

From UK, McClanahan taught at the University of Montana for a few years before coming back to Kentucky.

"When we came back to Kentucky, we really came back," he said of himself and second wife, Cia White. "We ended up living in a little tenant house next door to Wendell [Berry] up in Henry County, which we lived in for five years and made into a really nice little hippie home. It had

an outdoor privy and was very basic, but I loved living there. It was right on the bank of the Kentucky River, and we had a little beach down at the bottom of a hill."

The house belonged to Berry's uncle, who let them fix it up and live there for free, but they had to be part of the farm community. "We killed hogs every year, cut tobacco, and housed tobacco," he said. "We had to do our share."

During one snowbound winter McClanahan discovered his love for Victorian authors such as Jane Austen, Charles

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Dickens, and Anthony Trollope. He devoured their books, he recalled.

McClanahan got a visiting lectureship at Northern Kentucky University from 1979 to 1980. When a promised tenure position didn't work out and the first publisher came calling for that advance 20 years earlier, McClanahan had to finish *The Natural Man* for the new publisher. "I kept working on it all the time," he said. "Any time I had down time between my other little writing projects, the nonfiction stuff I was doing, what I tried to work on and thought about was that novel."

Trying to write about his boyhood in Ken-



McClanahan is working on a sequel to *The Natural Man*.

tucky while being out West, McClanahan said it was irresistible to satirize Kentucky.

"But that wasn't really what I wanted to write. Once I got back here, I thought, these are my friends and neighbors I am writing about, after all, and I don't like the tone of it. It was the tone that writing in the first person allowed me to do, a kind of sniggering tone, if you will, that had become distasteful to me. I didn't care for it. Finally, I realized that I wanted to write affectionately about my history here and my friends and people. And, to

my mind, that's what saves the book and saved me."

It also meant he had to take everything he had written and change it to third person, removing himself from the emotional center. "It was like going in to a musty old room and opening all the doors and windows and letting in all the light and air," he said. "And bang! It just changed everything."

Well, just about. He said it didn't change the action in the novel, but it changed the perspective completely.

"It was amazing to me. Within a day

I was just flying on the rewrite. It took about a week to rewrite the whole book in third person," McClanahan said, the relief still apparent in his voice.

He hadn't come up with an ending, but when he changed the voice, "it fell in to my lap; it was built in to what I was doing. Suddenly I had a novel, and the novel was a winner. It wasn't a best-seller, but it sold very, very well and made me a little bit of a reputation, which I have been riding for a long time."

So long, in fact, that he is now in the process of writing a sequel. **KM**