

A Mark Twain for Our Age

Posted on **February 8, 2012** by **Marla Akin**



Allan Gurganus, author of “Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All,” “Plays Well with Others,” and other works of fiction, will teach on campus as **Michener Residency Author** this February for three weeks. He is slated to meet with MFA students in weekly craft seminars and to hold manuscript conferences to discuss their work individually.

He will also read at **7:30 p.m. on Thursday, February 9, 2012** in the **Avaya Auditorium, ACE 2.302**, on the southeast corner of Speedway and 24th Street on campus. The event is free and open to students and the public. Parking is available in the nearby UT Garage at San Jacinto and 24th.

Gurganus's work has been translated into twenty languages. His first novel sold two million copies. Adaptations of the fiction have won four Emmys, his books awarded the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the O’Henry Short Story Prize. Paris *La Monde* said of Gurganus, “A Mark Twain for our age, hilariously clear-eyed, blessed with perfect pitch.”

With this type of endorsement we thought no one would be a more suitable interviewer for his Q&A than Gurganus himself. ShelfLife@Texas is proud to present **an interview with Gurganus, by Gurganus**.

Welcome to campus. You yourself studied with authors as gifted and various as Grace Paley, John Irving, Stanley Elkin and John Cheever. Do you bring their examples into your classroom?

Their voices and wisecracks go with me everywhere. Sentence by sentence, I know what each of them would say about my next line. This holds true in my own classes and student conferences. I

can literally hear what the now-deceased Grace Paley is urging me to tell a given student. The one way to repay great teaching is trying to perfect that art yourself.

By now, my students are growing famous as my teachers were. Elizabeth MacCracken of the Creative Writing Department here, was my own pupil a few decades back at the Iowa Writers' Workshop. She remains not only among the most gifted students I've ever taught; she is also easily the kindest. I remember where I was sitting when I read certain of her start-up stories.

Have you looked over the fiction of your UT students you'll work with during your residency?

Oh yes. I've covered pages with many checkmarks and, to earn my keep, some questions. I'm now eager to see if each of them resembles the person I imagined wrote each tale. (Sometimes I can pick a writer out of a group of other strangers on the basis of her prose. Just showing off!)

One thing that wowed me—how different each writer is. Here there is no median talent or typical story. Everybody seems wildly themselves. Talent! For me, that is the holy of holies. I literally worship it, valuing it over physical beauty. It sure lasts longer.

Though I will be in Austin less than a month, I hope to encourage students to build upon their own best instincts. Everybody is launched already, and obsessed.

After writing myself for forty-four years, I've bumped into certain technical shortcuts, some simple insights that—if presented dramatically and modestly—might prove useful.

You are slated to give a reading on campus on February 9th. Will you be offering a selection of "Oldest Living Widow," your most famous work?

Oh no. Just as students find the nerve to show me brand-new work as yet unpublished, I'll return the favor. Only fair. No matter how many books a writer has in print, the blank page never grows less abashing. In fact, that whiteness leaves you ever more snowblind. You have used up all your charm and tricks; you fear you've already plundered the true ore of autobiography.

It is important to demonstrate to students that I'm still a student. I'll read from a long novel in progress called "The Erotic History of a Rural Baptist Church." It investigates the confusion between spiritual longing and the raw upsurge insistence of sexual desire. That makes for a combustible mix. I plan to read a passage based on an actual incident from my hometown circa 1900. A baby elephant escapes from a visiting circus. It gets pursued by a posse of local boys and girls and farmers. It takes a local preacher to pray over this event, to try and justify or explain the random violence we all wade in daily.

What advice can you offer beginning or graduate writers? It seems a field with one long apprenticeship, then rewards unevenly distributed.

Well-said. Yes, people write because they have to. There is no other excuse for it. American culture only valued Faulkner once he'd won the Nobel, once Hollywood hired him to make his own brilliant novels terrible movies. His books were out of print. Suddenly he became 'hot' then valid.

I've been needing to put things on paper since 1966. If tomorrow I learned that no other word I wrote would ever be published, my daily schedule would not change. I'd still rise at six thirty and cohabit with my desk till early afternoon. I rarely even take the Sabbath off. Stopping and starting is the hardest part of writing. Far better never to turn off the tap.

Universities provide one essential ingredient all writers need: an interested enlightened audience. I encourage people to find a group of others, working at their same level of experience. To meet alternate weeks at least and read new work aloud. Sometimes our ears know more than our brain does. There are two of them! Music is truly what we seek to write. Fiction rests somewhere between being a Law and a Song. By hearing other people hear your work, you learn to make it rock or sway or pound. The goal is helping others Laugh, Cry, Wait and Know. Seeing that happen, in real time, thanks to sound-waves, is one great reason to endure all its attendant tortures.

This entry was posted in [Author Interviews](#), [In the News](#), [Literary Events](#) and tagged [Allan Gurganus](#), [Michener Center for Writers](#), [Michener Residency Author](#), [visiting writer](#) by [Marla Akin](#). Bookmark the [permalink \[https://sites.utexas.edu/shelflife/2012/02/08/a-mark-twain-for-our-age/\]](https://sites.utexas.edu/shelflife/2012/02/08/a-mark-twain-for-our-age/) .



About Marla Akin

Senior Program Coordinator, UT Michener Center for Writers

[View all posts by Marla Akin →](#)