



March 25, 2020

## Local Luminaries: Ed McClanahan

Celeste Lewis

The sheer volume of eccentric experiences and characters that McClanahan can recount could fill a vault; instead, many are gathered in the various novels and story collections that he's written over the years. Beyond "Famous People I Have Known" – a collection McClanahan calls "mostly true stories" – those works include "The Natural Man," a comedic novel published in 1983; "My Vita, If You Will," a collection of stories published in 1998; and "I Just Hitched in From the Coast" (2011). More recently, "Not Even Immortality Lasts Forever" was published earlier this year to rave reviews. Subjects of his stories include memories of his childhood in Kentucky, experiences across his varied teaching stints in California, Oregon and Montana, and tales stemming from time later spent in the Bluegrass State, where he returned in 1970s after an extended state-hopping adventure.



McClanahan owned a red VW van—nicknamed the McClanavan—which he drove back and forth from Kentucky to California several times in the 1970s. This photo was taken in Kentucky in 1973. *Photo by Guv Mendes*

Typically, at the center of McClanahan's tales are the characters he has met along the way, all filtered through the lens of a witty and observant writer's eyes. The word "rollicking" is often used when describing his books, a testament to his wry humor and his desire for his readers to have a good time along the way.

What is the role of the storyteller? To keep it interesting, McClanahan said.



McClanahan describes his office in his Walton Avenue home, where he is pictured here and enjoys spending much of his time, as what one would see if they “took [his] head and turned it inside out.” *Photo by Guy Mendes*



McClanahan in his home office with friend and collaborator, illustrator J.T. Dockery. *Photo by Guy Mendes*

“I try not to think much about the distinction between fiction and non-fiction when I’m writing,” he explained. “Instead, I remind myself of the advice of my late West Virginia writer friend Chuck Kinder: ‘Sometimes you just have to go where the story takes you.’ I write stories that come directly out of personal experience, but, inevitably, those stories get shaped in the telling and take on a life of their own.”

In 1962, McClanahan received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University to study creative writing, following the footsteps

of fellow Kentuckians Gurney Norman and Wendell Berry. McClanahan had become close with both writers while studying creative writing at the University of Kentucky in the 1950s, and they had both also received the same fellowship at Stanford.

While in California, McClanahan became affiliated with a crew known as the Merry Pranksters: a group of writers, musicians and counterculture figures with writer Ken Kesey (“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest”) at the helm. In his essay “The Day the Lampshades Breathed,” McClanahan describes them as “the sweetest, smartest, liveliest, craziest bad crowd I’d ever had the good fortune to fall in with.”

He continued, “And their great secret was simply this: They knew how to change the world.”

The Pranksters nicknamed McClanahan “Captain Kentucky” and heavily influenced his way of thinking with a zesty approach to life that centered on celebrating individuality and bucking social norms. McClanahan and fellow Pranksters – including Norman, ’60s icon Wavy Gravy, Grateful Dead frontman Jerry Garcia and many others – blazed through the 1960s, rewriting the rules for future generations. As friends, road trippers and residents in California (and later Oregon), the Pranksters inspired works like Tom

Wolfe's "The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test" and many of Kesey's own published recollections, as well as various documentaries and films.

Beyond his own published collections, McClanahan's writings have appeared in *Esquire*, *Playboy*, *Rolling Stone* and *Oxford American*, with his work having gone a pre-internet version of "viral" in the form of dog-eared copies passed around by fans. Today, the loyal fans of the now-87-year-old writer span generations – and McClanahan shows little sign of slowing down. Just a month after the February release of "Not Even Immortality Lasts Forever," McClanahan released yet another book in March: a graphic novella produced in collaboration with Kentucky comic book artist J. T. Dockery. Titled "Juanita and the Frog Prince," the book was released by South Limestone, a new imprint of the University Press of Kentucky.

The latest book is a move in a completely new direction for the author and something he is particularly excited about.



McClanahan in 1996 at the courthouse in Bracken County, the county where he grew up amongst a family of court clerks. This photo—and all the others in this article—was taken by Guy Mendes, a dear friend of the author's. *Photo by Guy Mendes*



McClanahan poses at home with a display of special family photos. *Photo by Guy Mendes*

"This is a new thing for me," McClanahan said, referring to the underground comic-style format, which combines his words with Dockery's illustrations. "I have really enjoyed collaborating on this graphic style of storytelling – it has amazed me how [Dockery] has turned this story into a visual art form."

McClanahan was inducted into the Kentucky Writers Hall of Fame in 2019 and is considered an esteemed member of the "Fab Five," a group of influential

Kentucky authors who have continued to inspire new generations of writers, also including Berry, Bobbie Ann Mason, Norman and James Baker Hall.

"It's a great honor to be named in such company. These people are great writers and great friends," McClanahan said.

A favorite way for the author to spend a day is to be in his home office, which is a museum of sorts – every shelf and inch of wall space containing the fascinating archeology of McClanahan’s life.

“If you took my head and turned it inside out, it would look like the interior of this room,” McClanahan said with a laugh. Among the books, posters and photos, near a tall lamp draped with the name tags that McClanahan has worn at dozens of speaking engagements, are well worn, comfortable furnishings that you can be assured have hosted many lucky visitors, hungry for a great tale.

*Smiley Pete* writer Celeste Lewis recently sat in that office and chatted with the illustrious McClanahan.

**Tell me a little about growing up and some of the early experiences that helped inform your writing career.** I spent my childhood and adolescence in Brooksville, Kentucky – a town of only about 700 people, but by the time I was 9 or 10 years old, I knew every single one of them and had free run of the entire place, from the courthouse clocktower to the town dump. So, I was immersed in 700 ongoing stories, and I sort of took them in by osmosis.

**How did you fall in with the group that became known as the Merry Pranksters in California? What were some memorable experiences from that time?** I lived with my first wife, Kit, and my young family just off the [Stanford] campus in a little Menlo Park neighborhood that included a somewhat infamous Bohemian enclave called Perry Lane, where my friend Ken Kesey, who had just published “One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest,” was the leading citizen. In 1964, the Keseys bought a place 20 miles west, in the coastal redwood country. A few months later, my family and I followed suit. Ken and the Pranksters took their epic bus journey east that summer and then came back and famously got busted [on drug charges]. Eventually, Ken decamped and took his entourage to Oregon, and I and my burgeoning family soon moved back over the mountains to a big old redwood house in downtown Palo Alto. That house became a waystation for a steady five-year parade of hippies, writers, artists, revolutionaries, and assorted rogues and ne’er-do-wells of every size and description, from Wavy Gravy to Tom Wolfe to Richard Brautigan to Chocolate George of the Hells Angels. Maybe it will suffice to say that Ken Kesey met Tim Leary in our living room.

**What made you ultimately decide to come back and make Kentucky home? How did you get the nickname Captain Kentucky? What have your Kentucky roots meant to you, and how did you keep in contact with those roots when you lived away?** During all the years I was out West, I made a conscious effort to maintain my Kentucky accent – specifically, my Ohio Valley twang – to the point that being “Captain Kentucky” became a sort of job description. It also helped immeasurably that my Kentucky writer friends Wendell Berry, Gurney Norman and Jim Hall were bouncing in and out of California all the time, visiting or sometimes settling in for longer intervals, and they kept me mindful of where we all came from. Meanwhile, of course, I was

regularly returning to Kentucky, often for extended stays. Like Antaeus (if only in that one respect), I recharged my strength (such as it was) by touching down on Mother Earth – and in my case, that meant Kentucky.

**Who have been some of the major influences in your life and why?** It's been my good fortune to have had many great teachers – Malcolm Cowley, Wallace Stegner, Mae Sarton, Hollis Summers, and Bob Hazel among them – but I believe the two most influential figures in my adult life have been Ken Kesey and Wendell Berry. Kesey came into my life just when I was seeking a new way to present myself to the world and showed me how to do exactly that. And then in the mid-1970s, when I and my second wife, Cia, desperately needed a place to land, we somehow found our way to Wendell and Tanya's doorstep in Port Royal, Kentucky. They helped us arrange to live in the vacant tenant house next door. Wendell taught me how to make myself useful to him and to our new neighbors, and, in my case, how to be a Kentuckian again. We stayed in the Port Royal community for the next 15 years.

**Tell me about your process. What is a writing day like for you? How does your work evolve?** As to my work habits, I'm shamefully undisciplined. When I was working on the first draft of "The Natural Man," I was writing 500 words every single day, even though I was simultaneously teaching three freshman comp classes and two creative writing classes the whole time. Nowadays, though, I just sit and wait and ponder the next sentence until it begins to shape itself in my mind. Usually, once a sentence takes root in my head, it starts to grow on its own, internally, sprouting dependent clauses and parentheticals like Jack's magic beanstalk. Next thing I know, my fledgling sentence has become a whole paragraph!

**Many people talk about your wit and your turn of phrase. Where do you think that came from?** I was a puny child – not sickly, just not vigorous. My mother was one of six girls, so I had my mother and all these aunts, four of whom were schoolteachers, focused on me, and I was read to a lot. It all found a place in my head.

**Tell me about hanging out with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead? How did you meet?** When the Grateful Dead were still the Warlocks, they took to hanging around Kesey's place in La Honda over in the coastal redwood country, where I also lived at the time. I had already published a couple of pieces in Esquire, so the editors asked me to undertake a substantial article about the band. I worked on the piece for a solid year. It wasn't what Esquire had in mind, and they rejected it. Playboy immediately stepped into the breach, though, and published it in 1972. I had a great time working on the piece. I had a camper then, so I parked it in Jerry Garcia and Mountain Girl's front yard for the weekend of their epic "Three Evenings with the Grateful Dead" at the Fillmore. Members of the band came and went all the time at that house, so I could hang around with them during the day and then go to the Fillmore at night and hear them play three straight sets. One day we went to a ballfield, and the Dead played a softball game with the Jefferson Airplane. It was all a real blast.





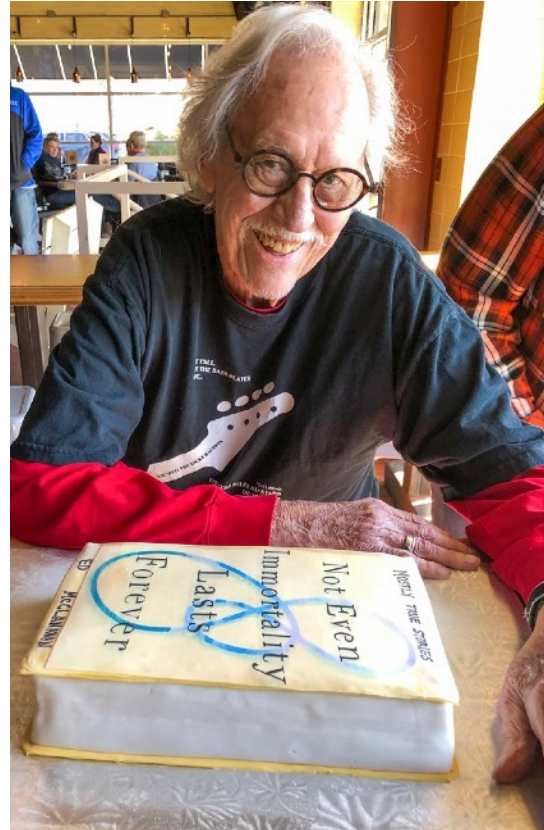
McClanahan, his wife Hilda and their late dog Tilley, at the Bell Court Park bench painted in tribute to "Famous People I Have Known." *Photo by Guy Mendes*

**Can you describe a time when you knew you had found your voice as a writer?**

Yeah, I can. When I was visiting my parents' home near Maysville in the summer of 1968, I had a rather unsettling encounter in a local beer joint with three menacing young guys who took exception to my California hippie 'Outer Man.' It turned out OK – we ended up becoming buddies and drinking beer together far into the night – and I knew immediately that I wanted to write about it all as soon as I got back to Palo Alto. First, however, I was scheduled for some minor oral surgery a couple of days after my return. When I went to the Stanford hospital for the surgery, they gave me a shot of Demerol, and then it so happened that there was an emergency of some sort, and my surgery was postponed for a couple of hours. During those two hours, riding that Demerol I wrote more than half of a story about my recent encounter, and when I read it after I came out of surgery, I realized that it was in a very new and different voice – looser, more intimate, and at the same time more inclusive, longer sentences, which break open to accommodate self-contained asides, etc. I saw right away that I was onto something new and very different from the boilerplate prose I'd been slipping into. And I owed it all to a single shot of Demerol!

**What are some of your favorite places in Lexington?** I don't go out much these days, except for a weekly lunch with friends at West Sixth Brewery and an occasional Thursday night at the Henry Clay Pub to hear Nick Stump's great little blues band.

**You are a walking man! Is that more than just exercise? Is it meditation for you? What do you think about on your walks?** Lately, I mostly concentrate on just putting one foot ahead of the other. But before I somehow got to be 87 years old, I speculated endlessly, as I walked in the neighborhood, about what went on in those rundown old



McClanahan celebrated his recent release "Not Even Immortality Lasts Forever" with a version he could really sink his teeth into. *Photo by Guy Mendes*

buildings on Indiana Avenue. There's a story, "Snarly Pete at the Ramparts," about those meditations in "Not Even Immortality Lasts Forever."

**You are famous for your wit; what makes you laugh?** I have uproarious phone conversations with Wendell, and Gurney often blindsides me with astonishingly acute, hilarious observations. My friend Nick Stump is always good for a few chuckles, as are most of the regular crew – all of them, actually – that I meet for lunch every week. And television is a laff riot if one pays attention. Just the other day, for instance, Hilda, my very excellent wife, heard a plaintiff on Court TV say, vehemently, 'It's the truth, your honor, as god is my waitress!'

**If you could have tried a totally different career, what might you have liked to try?** I once tinkered with the notion that I might become a cartoonist, or even a visual artist. But it didn't take long to discover that I really had no discernible talent.

**Who are some of the new writers on the scene whom you are currently impressed with?** Locally, I think Chris Holbrook is a great undiscovered talent. And although I haven't yet had a chance to read Wes Browne's "Hillbilly Hustle," everything I hear about it suggests that it's something very special. I'm eagerly looking forward to it.

**Is there something you still want to write that you haven't gotten to yet?** I worked for years on a latter-day sequel to "The Natural Man," titled "The Return of the Son of Needmore," in which my protagonist/alter ego, Harry Eastep, returns to his hometown after years of teaching out West and becomes a juror in a local murder trial. I still have hopes of finishing it someday, if time allows.



Original artwork by Ed McClanahan

### **Out of Hand: The Schizophrenic Drawings of Ed McClanahan**

This month and next, Lexington gallery Institute 193 will host Ed McClanahan's first-ever show as a visual artist. The exhibit will showcase drawings of psychedelic hands that McClanahan created in 1965 in his studio in La Honda, California, aptly naming them "McClanahands."

The exhibit will be on display April 9-May 16 at Institute 193 (193 N. Limestone St.), barring any COVID-related delays. No receptions will accompany this exhibit, but the gallery is typically open Wed.-Sat., 11 a.m.-6 p.m.