



## Texas Institute of Letters Memorials 2020

### Wendell Mayo (1953 – 2019)

After reading Jack London in the eighth grade, Wendell Mayo wrote a story from the point of view of a wolf-dog, an effort that so impressed his teacher she sent it to *Highlights* magazine. With the ensuing, first-ever, professional rejection letter they returned, Wendell was hooked on the writing of short fiction. He would become over the course of his career an oft-published, award-winning master of that genre.

Born in Corpus Christi, Texas, the son of Anglo and Latino parents, Wendell moved first to Pennsylvania, then Cleveland, Ohio, following the career appointments of his father, a University of Texas trained NASA atomic physicist. Convinced at first he also needed a STEM profession, Wendell studied chemical engineering, then worked for a decade in that field, continuing all the while, however, to write stories, including on lunch breaks. “I didn’t like myself in that job very much,” he admitted, but the wages did allow him to collect a nest egg that would eventually keep him, his wife, and two children fed as he pursued full time both an MFA and PhD in fiction writing. “I timed it perfectly. The day I graduated, I had literally nothing left in my bank account.” Wendell went on to a career in academia and to publish over a hundred stories in journals and magazines, a bit fewer than half of which appear in his five (soon to be six) award-winning collections. He once told me he’d written a story in an hour that had quickly been accepted for publication, but, on the other hand, another had taken ten years to “get right.”

South Texas is probably best represented in his work by the first collection, *Centaur of the North*, winner of the Premio Aztlán in 1996, a book that led scholar Theresa Delgadillo to list him alongside Pat Mora, Alicia Gaspar de Alba, and Tomás Rivera as practitioners of an important body of Texas exile literature. Because he came from a literally “nuclear” family, or perhaps because he hailed from a border region, Wendell’s works commonly framed the world as a zone of juxtaposition and fusion, with many of his stories overshadowed by the lingering threat of conflict, including global conflict. They also managed to be, as Saikat Majumdar put it, “disastrously funny.” *B. Horror and Other Stories* featured characters enamored of monsters in cheap B-rated horror films, such as Godzilla, the archetype of fear of nuclear proliferation. His most recent book, *Survival House* took up the legacy of lingering Cold-War dread set in an absurdist yet shockingly familiar American heartland where small town festivals celebrate radioactive weapons testing, and a Soviet-themed bar opens for business in Whitehouse, Ohio.

Wendell’s wife, Debbie, a Lithuanian-American, encouraged him to take advantage of an opportunity to teach English in Vilnius in 1993, and the experience introduced a new dimension to his body of work. Aided by a Fulbright fellowship, he returned many times over the following years, resulting both in the novel-in-stories, *In Lithuanian Wood*, called “a powerful merging of



history and folklore with everyday life” by the *Los Angeles Times*, and the collection *The Cucumber King of Kėdainiai*, lauded by Anthony Doerr as “a significant, exceptional, ravishing book.” Both contribute to our understanding of the lingering effects of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also celebrate art’s irrepressible power, even in the most repressive of regimes. Wendell once told an interviewer, “I feel like part of my soul is in Lithuania.”

A professor of fiction writing for many years in the BFA and MFA programs at Bowling Green State University, in 2017 that institution’s Jerome Library created “The Wendell Mayo Collection” as a student resource, and the fact that it required three catalogue areas—stories of US Latinas/os, stories of US contemporary and popular culture, and stories of Post-Soviet Lithuania and Eastern Europe—demonstrates his far-reaching interests and influence. That influence always extended to Texas. I first met Wendell over twenty years ago when he inaugurated a reading series at Houston Community College, doing his bit to get it started by forgoing the fee. And, though living in Ohio, in recent years he presented thirty-five times in Texas-based venues and workshops, including at the University of Houston, the Dallas Public Library, Gemini Ink and Nuestra Palabra to name only a few. In 2014, in Conroe, Texas, he sat down for an interview with the staff of Lone Star College’s campus literary magazine (of miniscule circulation) and did what he did so well: transferred writerly wisdom to students.

“When I started writing stories about Lithuania I had no idea how many Lithuanian-Americans there are. Now they buy my books. Don’t try to chase waves. Write about something you are interested in and let the waves come to you.”

“Writing is hard; you have to go deep. I use the goose bump test. Watery eyes are optional, but goose bumps on the back of the neck mean the story is done.”

“If it isn’t provocative it isn’t literature. If it doesn’t make you think in a new way, it isn’t literature.”

Wendell was proud of his 2019 induction into the TIL, and that injuries resulting from a fall kept him from attending the banquet in McAllen was a great disappointment. “Heck, in January I had my plane ticket and hotel reservation. I’ve paid dues. I even got a sixteen-dollar haircut day before yesterday!” Though not present, he was introduced with acclaim at both the inductee reception and the following day’s new member reading. He passed away peacefully nine days after the banquet.

In addition to his legacy of awards (Fulbright, NEA, state fellowships, residencies at the MacDowell and Yaddo) and his legacy of publications, at least as important is the influence he’s had for many years on students, colleagues and friends. And then there’s that eighth-grade teacher who sent the wolf-dog story to *Highlights*. Browsing Facebook one Christmas, Wendell came across her and re-established contact. “She had no idea I’d become a professional writer. She bought my last book and introduced her book club to my writing.”

Here’s hoping even more shall be so introduced. *Atsisveikinimas*, Wendell. International treasure. Lone Star icon.

-- Cliff Hudder