

C.W. SMITH'S ACCEPTANCE SPEECH FOR THE 2011 LON TINKLE AWARD

TEXAS INSTITUTE OF LETTERS ANNUAL MEETING, APRIL 30, 2011

BY C.W. SMITH

I want to thank the Council for the honor of naming me a Lon Tinkle Fellow. I think I know now how George W. might've felt – or at least I like to imagine how he should've felt – namely, it's not so much that I don't deserve this, but it's more as though so many others chosen have been a cut above.

Nevertheless, I accept, with gratitude. I have to also say that for me there's more than a bit of serendipity to it, but that requires some back story:

In 1961, I was a sophomore English major at North Texas. I made pocket money on the weekends playing tenor and alto sax with a ten-piece band that operated out of Waco. One Sunday evening, I was making my way back to Denton by boarding a Trailways bus in Dallas. As I came down the aisle, I passed a passenger already seated – a smallish, dapper, patrician-looking fellow with white hair and a neatly trimmed moustache. Huh! I said to myself. That's William Faulkner! I took a seat two rows behind and studied the back of his head. I didn't know what the back of Faulkner's head might look like, but this fellow from the front had looked just like the picture of Faulkner on the paperback copy of *The Sound and the Fury* I was halfway through. I'd been devouring Faulkner for the past year and had one of those fabulously passionate attachments such as you get when you're young and everything a particular writer does sets you on fire. So I thought maybe the fellow might not be Faulkner, that I was just sort of seeing Faulkner everywhere, the way it is when you buy, say, a mini-Cooper and suddenly you see them everywhere. Also, since I hadn't slept in about 48 hours and had been propping myself awake with coffee and Mexican bennies, I wasn't sure my perception could be trusted. And it was dim in the bus. There were a lot of reasons why I might be wrong, not to mention how unlikely it would be that Faulkner would be on a Trailways bus heading out of Dallas on a Sunday evening in the first place.

But it *might be* Faulkner. I could settle this by asking him. If he wasn't Faulkner, then I'd lost nothing. If it *were* Faulkner, well, then I could shake his hand and generally make a nuisance of myself fawning over him. He'd let me know when to back off.

I went yes no yes no yes no yes no for about five minutes after the bus pulled away from the station, then I finally got up, walked up the aisle to just ahead of his seat, turned around and said, "Excuse me, sir, I know this is going to sound weird, but you wouldn't happen to be William Faulkner, would you?"

He laughed. "No," he said, "But we shay-uh a distant kinship. I am Lon Tinkle, book critic of the Dallas Morning News." I did know that name from reading the book page. What he didn't tell me at that moment or later was that he'd gone done his graduate work at the Sorbonne and Columbia, was a distinguished member of the SMU faculty, that he was a past president of this organization, and that his book "Thirteen Days to Glory" had scarcely two years earlier won our Carr P. Collins Award. While I was a tad disappointed to hear he wasn't Faulkner, the fact that he was, you could say, "almost Faulkner," spared me from embarrassment.

Then he asked me if I was an *aficionado* of Faulkner's works. He used that word. I don't know that I'd ever heard that word used in a conversation. I said yes I was, and he then invited me to sit beside him and talk about Faulkner. Since I was much more full of myself than even he was of himself, our conversation mostly consisted of my telling him which books I'd read and what I thought of them. I felt sure that a man who made his living writing reviews of books would be eager to hear my reviews of them.

And then it came to pass that he asked me what I did. Now, as I pointed out, he had told me a lot less than what he was when he introduced himself. I on the other hand told him a lot more than I really was. I said that I was a writer. What this meant was that I'd had the one creative writing course that our department offered, a course that none other than that McMurtry guy who'd just published *Horseman, Pass By* had taken. As a result, I was at that moment the author of three short stories. But I'd also recently acquired a girlfriend who was also an English major, and it seemed to me very important to be Writing a Novel if for no other reason than to keep her impressed. I'd reached page 78 in it. I'd been at that point for a good while, though I didn't know why. Now I do know. The novel's first-person protagonist was a college student who had a girlfriend and who was writing a novel containing all his wisdom and perceptive insights into all manner of things. He also was reporting all his earnest but witty dialogues

with the girl about books they were reading, dialogue that often consisted of the protagonist's monologues to the girl about why she was reading the right or the wrong book and how she was failing to completely understand what she read, and so forth. Generally speaking her role in the novel was primarily to listen to him talk. In that way it was sort of like *Atlas Shrugged*, though in this case it would be more on the order of *Archie & Veronica Shrugged* or *John Boy Shrugged*.

Well, 78 pages of this and no more. Looking back I know that this protagonist and his author had pretty well used up all the wisdom he'd managed to accumulate this far in his life.

So he asked me what I did, and I said I was a writer. Then – God bless him! – he did ask me what I was writing. And – oh my God! – I did tell him that I was writing a novel. It was about this young guy who is going to college who wants to be a writer, and he has this girlfriend who is an English major as well, and this young writer, he dates this girl and talks to her about books and such....

This man, Lon Tinkle book critic of the *Dallas Morning News*, never once tried to shut me up or even change the subject. When the bus arrived in Denton, he said he was going on to Tulsa to attend a conference that started the following morning. Just before I got off the bus, he said, "Be sure and send me a copy of your novel when it's published."

Well, that took another dozen years, and the book that eventually came to light was altogether unrelated to the nonsense I described to him that night. I wrote him to say that Viking would be sending him a copy of my first book, called *Thin Men of Haddam*, and I reminded him of our conversation over a decade earlier. I didn't expect him to remember it. And for all I know he didn't. But he did send the book out to be reviewed by some fellow named Marshall Terry, a professor at SMU, and shortly thereafter it won the Jesse Jones Award for 1974. And it's possible I told a version of this same story at the awards banquet then. But so far as I know, there might only be one or two people present here tonight who could or would recall that.

When I go into my class this Monday afternoon, I will be ending a career in teaching that stretches over four decades, most of it spent here at SMU, having been hired here by the same Mr Terry when I left the *Dallas Times*

Herald as a movie critic and feature writer. So, while I'm can't say for certain that I deserve this award through distinction in letters, there's a passel of what you'd call *triangulation* that makes it fitting in my mind.

Thank you.