

*In Faulkner's
Shadow*

————— *A Memoir* —————

LAWRENCE WELLS

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RIVALS IN RESIDENCE

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT INVITED HANNAH TO JOIN THE faculty. Soon he became a familiar sight riding to class on his Harley in a sleeveless T-shirt and sporting a Blue Angels tattoo. His classes were the stuff of legend. Then weeks into the semester Hannah began complaining about his rival-in-residence. “Willie is an essayist, not a fiction writer. Why not call him ‘Journalist in Residence’ or something like that?”

Willie did not respond publicly but in private observed that the university could call him “any damned thing they like—sports-writer in residence or gag writer in residence.”

After Hannah’s first semester things settled down. For a while it appeared that the writers had reached an accommodation. When *Ray*, Hannah’s latest novel, was published Willie invited him to celebrate at the Gumbo Company, a new bar on the square (later to become Syd and Harry’s). Hannah sipped a martini, ate the olive, and said, “Willie, I write the truth and you write public relations.”

“*I felt like slugging the guy!*” Morris told us. “There I was, doing my best to be nice and he comes out swinging with his . . . his . . . relentless one-up-man-ship.” Hannah’s problem as far as we could see was that to the press Willie had become the university’s unofficial spokesperson. If a campus incident occurred it was Morris that the *New York Times* or *Newsweek* contacted, not Hannah, who with his penchant for exaggeration was not to be taken seriously.

It was as if Hannah's characters were speaking for him. His own super-creativity had taken him hostage.

For the most part Morris refused to recognize that a rivalry existed. As a former editor his first instinct was to support writers, not compete with them. Experience had taught him that writers, in particular fiction writers, were high maintenance. For example, his pal Norman Mailer, trapped by fetishes and bored with ordinary life, attacked those closest to him. To Morris such emotional outbursts were a hazard of the trade. All that mattered was a writer's life on paper, what he or she left on the printed page.

After the "public relations" remark Morris suppressed his resentment, paid the bar tab, and escorted Hannah to Square Books. He even bought the first copy of *Ray* and asked Hannah to inscribe it. One would like to believe Barry was touched by Willie's magnanimity.

Hannah became a regular at Square Books, which was soon to be named the "Best Independent Bookstore in the U.S." At the coffee counter upstairs he chain-smoked, drank cinnamon coffee, and scribbled story ideas about drifters, dope dealers, whores, thieves, killers, and ordinary tradesmen with violent tendencies. "My work is about pain," he said.

One summer night when I was out of town Hannah pulled up at 510 South Lamar in a convertible. "Get your daughters ready," he told Dean (meaning Diane, twenty-two, and Paige, twenty). "I'm taking y'all to the Jimmy Buffett concert on Mud Island."

Diane's fiancé, Michael Cawley, was there, and Dean agreed to go if Hannah let Michael drive. At 6'4" a graduate student in psychology and part-time bartender, Cawley was the ideal designated driver/peacemaker. Hannah sat in the rear seat between Paige and Dean. He poured margaritas into Dixie cups while Diane lit cigarettes with the car's lighter and passed them back. The radio was playing music Dean did not recognize.

"Heavy metal," Michael murmured diplomatically.

"What planet have you been on, Mama?" Paige asked.

At Mud Island having switched to daiquiris they danced in the aisle, shouted the lyrics to “Margaritaville,” and made Jimmy Buffett sing until his voice gave out. After the concert Hannah talked his way backstage while Paige and Diane collected the stories of Buffett-groupies whose mothers, Paige reported, wore tie-dyed T-shirts identical to those of their daughters. “Before Buffett came along they were Elvis freaks!” added Paige. When Dean remarked that she’d attended an Elvis concert in Tupelo in 1956, Paige gave her a playful shove. “The point is, Mama, you got over it!”

Emerging from the dressing room Hannah grinned as the groupies peppered him with questions about Buffett. When it was clear he wasn’t in the band, they lost interest. “Aren’t there any *readers* here?” he lamented. Dean was miffed that Hannah hadn’t taken her to meet Jimmy. “Why didn’t you come get us?” she said.

Hannah looked stricken. “I thought you preferred fiction writers.”

Returning to Mississippi the group turned off I-55 at the Sardis exit where they were stopped by local police. When an officer shined a flashlight into the car, Hannah handed Dean his Dixie cup. Spotting a tequila bottle the officer ordered Michael to follow him to the station. Dean’s designated driver-in-law had limited himself to a couple of beers, but just in case, on the way to the station, Hannah fed him doughnuts, saying, “Sugar burns alcohol, baby.” Dean was about to telephone for help when Cawley emerged from the station. He’d passed the breathalyzer test.

As they drove away from the station, Hannah yelled into the Sardis night, “*What the hell does it take to get arrested in the state of Mississippi!*”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lawrence Wells began his publishing career at Yoknapatawpha Press by editing the photo-biography *William Faulkner: The Cofield Collection*, by Jack Cofield. Author of two historical novels, *Rommel and the Rebel* and *Let the Band Play Dixie*, Wells received the 2014 Faulkner-Wisdom award for narrative nonfiction at the Words and Music Festival. He scripted an Emmy-winning 1994 Mississippi ETV documentary, *Return to the River*, narrated by James Earl Jones. His magazine articles have been distributed by the New York Times Syndicate.