



## When Willie Went to Elaine's

The Rhodes Scholar from Yazoo City was an editorial prodigy, taking over Harper's at 32.

By Edward Kosner

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SAVE PRINT TEXT

1 COMMENT

Willie Morris wrote like an angel, drank like a fish, and edited with rare flair and conviction. A white Southern liberal bred in deepest Mississippi and educated at the University of Texas and Oxford, he became a darling of the New York literary set. During his short run as editor of Harper's magazine in the late 1960s and early '70s, Morris published dazzling pieces that are still regarded as paragons of New Journalism.

He gazes out from the cover of "Willie," Teresa Nicholas's slender biography. He is 28, hair neatly combed, boyish and slightly moonfaced, with an ineffably sweet sadness in his gaze, as if he could see the sorrow to come.



PHOTO: PUBLISHER

Morris was a bright, athletic boy, popular and gregarious. He edited his high-school paper in Yazoo City, covered sports and had a show on a local radio station. Ambitious for him, his father pushed him to go to the more sophisticated University of Texas rather than Ole Miss. There, he starred on the Daily Texan and won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, where he spent four years before returning to work on Ronnie Dugger's maverick Texas Observer.

He was editing the paper in 1963 when John Fischer, the aging editor of Harper's, lured him to New York to be his eventual successor. It was an inspired choice. Morris, not yet 30, turned out to be one of those provincials like Harold Ross, Clay Felker and Helen Gurley Brown who venture to the media capital of the world and make magazine history.

At first, Morris and his wife found the city claustrophobic and harsh—he called it "the Big Cave." They went to their maiden Manhattan book party and were studiously ignored by the literati.

But soon enough, he hit his stride, producing special issues for Fischer, befriending big-name writers and penetrating the holy of holies, Elaine's saloon on the Upper East Side, equally celebrated for its mediocre pasta shells and its best-selling regulars.

At 32, he was named the editor of Harper's and soon published a memoir called "North Toward Home" that cemented his reputation as a literary star in his own right. "There were eight million telephone numbers in the Manhattan directory, and every one of them would have returned my calls," he exulted at one point, but he also confessed: "I drank too much, ate too much, talked too much."

Even so—or perhaps as a consequence—over the next four years Morris turned the staid monthly into a "hot book," trade talk for a magazine that has caught the spirit of its times. Each issue was its own sensation. In quick succession, he published pieces by William Styron, Bob Woodward, Walker Percy, Langston Hughes, Milton Friedman, Oscar Lewis, George Plimpton, Pauline Kael, Maya Angelou, John Updike, Isaac Bashevis Singer and more.

But the real astonishments were the long pieces Morris drew from Norman Mailer, David Halberstam, Gay Talese and Seymour Hersh. Mailer's solipsistic 90,000-word account of the anti-Vietnam War march on the Pentagon—later published as "The Armies of the Night"—filled 100 pages of the March 1968 issue. Eight months later, Mailer returned with his phantasmagoric report on the 1968 presidential conventions, which became "Miami and the Siege of Chicago." Gay Talese's 1969 profile of the New York Times, "The Kingdom and the Power," ran in two parts, and Mr. Hersh, then an obscure freelancer, fleshed out his scoop on the My Lai massacre in Morris's pages.

Harper's had a circulation of about a quarter million and ran a modest deficit when Morris took over. Its longtime owner, the book publishers Harper & Row, had swallowed the losses without complaint but sold the magazine to the Cowles publishing outfit, which squeezed Morris in the hope of turning a profit. The pressure turned into an explosion in early 1971, when Morris devoted most of his March issue to Mailer's febrile meditation on feminism, "The Prisoner of Sex." Though the issue set sales records, it sealed Morris's fate. He was hauled on the corporate carpet and berated by one executive: "No wonder it's such a failure. Who are you editing the magazine for—a bunch of hippies?" Ordered to change the magazine drastically, Morris resigned. "It all boiled down to the money men and the literary men," he mused later, "and, as always, the money men win."

His ouster touched off the predictable uproar. Most of the small staff and stellar roster of contributors resigned, with the conspicuous exception of Lewis Lapham, who was no Morris idolater and would later run a much different Harper's with distinction for decades.

For the next eight years, Morris, now divorced, exiled himself to a small cottage next to a potato field in Bridgehampton on Long Island, a beach town that then bore no resemblance to today's hedge-fund Eden. He had many job offers, Ms. Nicholas writes, but preferred to stash his telephone in the refrigerator or oven, faced Elaine's for Bobby Van's, its East End equivalent, and try to write fiction.

He labored for years on two novels. One, called "Taps," was inspired by his boyhood years playing the trumpet at military funerals back home in Mississippi. The other, "The Chimes at Midnight," was based on his years at Oxford. He published a novel called "The Last of the Southern Girls" that mirrored the life of Barbara Howar, a Southern gal-about-Washington with whom he had a Hamptons romance. It was not a success. To help pay the rent, he wrote magazine pieces and a young-adult novel.

Morris's fortunes improved when he moved back to Mississippi to teach writing and journalism at the university in the other Oxford. He was popular and successful with his students, among them Donna Tartt and John Grisham. He remarried, this time to a woman who had worked as a book editor in New York and, like him, had returned home to Mississippi. Over the next decade, he turned out all sorts of stuff, including books about his dog and his cat and a magazine article about Medgar Evers's killer that evolved into the movie "Ghosts of Mississippi." But his major accomplishment was a second memoir, "New York Days" (1993), which evoked the Harper's years.

The book was a hit with the New York crowd, especially the doyenne Elizabeth Hardwick, who raved about it in the New York Times Book Review. This prompted a long, scathing letter from Lewis Lapham, who essentially argued that Morris was a sentimental parvenu who had cheapened American journalism, comparing his fanciful version of the Harper's episode to a window display by Ralph Lauren.

Mr. Lapham's acid response—summarized in passing in "Willie"—is a bracing chaser for Ms. Nicholas's dutiful book, which was subsidized by literary patrons who give out an annual Southern fiction award in Morris's name and is published by the University Press of Mississippi. It has the distanced feel of an official biography with none of the texture of Morris's soulful life.

When Morris died of heart failure at 64 in 1999, his home state honored him by having his body lie in state at the capitol in Jackson. Along with William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, Richard Wright, Tennessee Williams and Mr. Grisham, Morris must be counted in the small circle of major writers from Mississippi. Still, he is most remembered for a brief shining moment as yet another brilliant but doomed magazine editor.

—Mr. Kosner's memoir, "It's News to Me," recounts his career as the editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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