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Knoxville, in so many words

Walking through the Tennessee city's rich literary history

By Kathy Shorr, Globe Correspondent | September 17, 2003

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. -- "We are speaking now of summer evenings in Knoxville, Tennessee, in the time that I lived there so successfully disguised to myself as a child."

Ask most Knoxvilleans about their city's literary claim to fame, and they will point to this passage, which opens James Agee's autobiographical novel, "A Death in the Family." It is set mostly in Fort Sanders, the neighborhood just a short walk from downtown where Agee (1909-55) spent his childhood. Published posthumously, the book won a Pulitzer Prize in 1958.

"A Death in the Family" is one of many literary treasures with Knoxville roots, and a visitor can find traces of several while wandering around downtown and its vicinity.

There's no better place to start than the 150-year-old Market Square, in the heart of downtown. Over its rich history, it has held, among other things, a farmers' market, cafes and restaurants, stove factories, boutiques, boarding houses, fancy apartments, saloons, nightclubs, movie theaters, a police station, and a steam-engine fire hall. It is a pedestrian-only block, ringed with brick, Victorian-era, two- and three-story structures that currently house a mix of shops, restaurants, pubs, businesses, and a few apartments, with a small park at one end.

"Market Square is the most literary spot in East Tennessee," says Jack Neely, a writer who for more than a decade has been tracking down the city's literary lore and other items of historical interest for the "Secret History" column he writes in Metro Pulse, the weekly alternative paper.

Neely says the square's single greatest distinction is that it launched the journalism career of Adolph Ochs. Ochs got his start working in the square at the now-long-defunct Knoxville Chronicle around 1870, more than a quarter-century before he bought another newspaper, The New York Times.

Market Square, says Neely, is described in five notable novels, including "A Death in the Family" and "Suttree," Cormac McCarthy's fourth novel. Joseph Wood Krutch, the critic, biographer, and essayist, writes about it in his autobiography. "Carl Sandburg was fond of the Square," Neely says, "and praised it [as] the only place in America . . . where you could buy ginseng root from real country people in a central business district."

Neely's columns have revealed a number of other literary connections to Knoxville. Take Frances Hodgson Burnett, the author of the children's classics "The Secret Garden," "A Little Princess," and "Little Lord Fauntleroy." Burnett may have been born in Britain, but from age 15 to 28, she lived in and around Knoxville, and she began her career as a writer here.

Then there's Tennessee Williams. He never lived in Knoxville, but his father was born and raised here. His sister Rose, a model for the fragile young women in many of his best plays, had a disastrous coming out party in Knoxville, an event that seems to have led to her psychological deterioration.

Novelist Peter Taylor never lived in Knoxville, but he used his mother's stories of growing up in the city in much of his fiction. His grandfather Robert L. Taylor, former governor of Tennessee and a US senator when he died, was for a time buried in the Old Gray Cemetery in North Knoxville, where you can also find the graves of Tennessee Williams's father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, and Burnett's mother, Eliza Hodgson.

Neely says Taylor put his grandfather's burial to work as fiction. "He commenced his last novel ['In the Tennessee Country'] with a description of this burial, and the subsequent exhumation of his grandfather, which the family was apparently divided over. Some thought it was a terrible idea. In fact, it *was* a terrible idea, because when they pulled him up, the coffin fell apart, and it was awful."

"All the Pretty Horses," a Western novel, put Cormac McCarthy on the literary map. His fans around here, though, tend to focus on "Suttree," in which the protagonist leaves his wealthy family home, moves onto a houseboat on the Tennessee River -- in one of the town's seedier sections -- and hangs around with the "city rats" living downtown. It takes place in 1951, the year McCarthy graduated from Knoxville's Catholic High School.

Neely and several friends and colleagues have organized an informal literary walk, the Suttree Stagger. They read passages and point out where the Huddle bar, Comer's Pool Hall, and other places in the book stood. Unlike a typical literary walk, this one draws about 70 people, lasts eight or nine hours, and, Neely notes, "Most of the reading is done in bars." Plans are underway for a Silver Stagger as

part of the Cormac McCarthy Society's 25th anniversary celebration of the publication of "Suttree," to be held here Oct. 14 to 17, 2004.

The group has also put together several Agee Ambles, in which participants start out downtown and walk past the old L&N railroad depot into the Fort Sanders neighborhood. There's no sign that Agee was ever here; his boyhood home on Highland Avenue between 15th and 16th streets was torn down decades ago to make way for boxy apartment buildings. Many of the houses, "middle-sized, gracefully fretted wood houses built in the late '90s and early 1900s, with small front and side and more spacious backyards," as he described them, have been torn down or burned out.

But a number of them still stand, like the majestic Laurel Terrace, at Laurel Avenue and 15th Street (now renamed James Agee Street).

The parking lot that stands beside 1511 Laurel has recently been planted with grass. After years of public discussion, the city of Knoxville and the University of Tennessee, which owns the lot, are turning it into a park. Agee is finally being honored by the city he wrote about so lovingly.