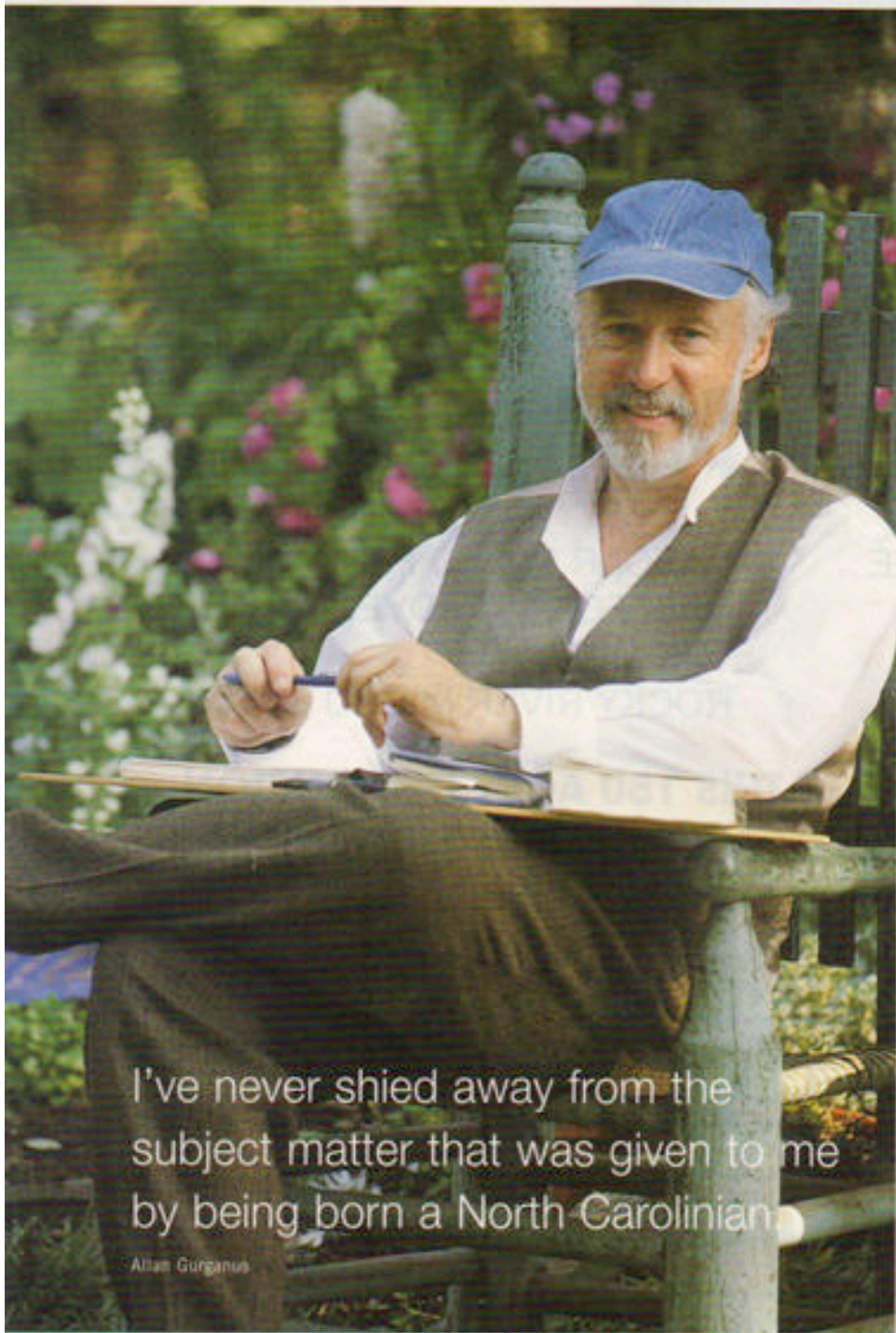


In the Garden With Author Allan Gurganus

This native writer creates a garden sanctuary for contemplation and hospitality.



I've never shied away from the subject matter that was given to me by being born a North Carolinian.

Allan Gurganus

I hope my books will be perennials, lasting as long as people are visually and emotionally hungry," says author Allan Gurganus. "But a garden stays alive only as long as the gardener. It's a mortal art form."

He leaves his bid for immortality to his acclaimed novels, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, *Plays Well With Others*, and *White People*, as well as his countless award-winning short stories. His latest book, *The Practical Heart* (Knopf), consists of four novellas. It comes out this summer.

As a teen, the Rocky Mount native left North Carolina to attend school at Sarah Lawrence College, Stanford University, and the University of Pennsylvania. He planned to become an artist, but the draft intervened.

"In the 2½ years I was in the Navy on an aircraft carrier, I read 1,200 books, taught myself how to write a sentence, and made the transition from being a painter to a writer," he explains. His works now appear in 14 languages.

A Transplanted Southerner Seeks Sanctuary

After his stint in the Navy, Allan lived "all over the world," including a Manhattan apartment.

"I found myself working in a community garden on the Upper West Side in a little patch that was about the size of a grave," he says. "You had to hack through 200 years of filth and coal soot to get down to actual

Some in town know Allan Gurganus is an international best-selling author. Others just consider him "the guy with the baseball cap at the post office."

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RIGHT: "One of the paradoxes [of writing] is this: You think you're going to make up a character and find they've invented you," says Allan, who often weeds in his garden as he ponders plot development.

dirt—and then there was only about 2 feet of it before you hit rock."

Genes predisposed him to keep searching for pay dirt, however. His grandfather farmed, and his mother, a debutante from the Chicago area, considered gardening a sacred pastime. Allan and his three brothers were forbidden to interrupt their mother when she planted and pruned "unless we had a broken arm."

After the incredibly successful *Widow* debuted—the 1989 book became a best-seller and a film—Allan could finally afford land of his own. After decades of absence, the prodigal son returned to North Carolina.

"I like to think I spent the first half of my life leaving home and the second half coming back," says the 53-year-old. He found a beautiful 1900 Arts and Crafts home in a village near Chapel Hill. Best of all, the site included a ruined backyard garden covering almost an entire acre.

Here Allan now leads a typical small-town life. "I go to the funerals; I attend the christenings," he says. "At Halloween, I keep the front three rooms of my house open to trick-or-treaters, and we have huge, elaborate tableaux and scary theatrical events for the kids."

Most locals already considered the house haunted, he explains. The previous owner, a "sweet, addled old lady," let brambles take over the yard. When squirrels invaded the attic, she "thought the squirrels were ghosts, and she would call her employer and say, 'I can't come in to work because I'm staying home to fight the ghosts today.'"

In the best Southern tradition, the town embraced her eccentricity. "People looked after her," Allan says.

Home Sweet Home

When the author bought the house, the yard "was all mud and sticks." A 5-foot cedar tree grew out of the gutter. ▶

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There is an inherent optimism in gardening. You assume, when you plant bulbs, you're going to be around next May—or else the lucky people who buy the house are going to get a surprising bonus.

Allan Gurganus

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"I started out as a painter," says Allan Gurganus. "I still draw, but it's difficult to serve two masters. To write well means to think about it 24 hours a day."

Allan transformed the untidy lot to "a garden that does not look pruned or clipped or manicured like a poodle that's been shaved into little fakey tufts and balls," he says, laughing. Instead, "I'm looking for natural inevitability." He "dug, borrowed, and stole" plants, using shrubs and evergreens to fill in around hardy old roses, Asian and Madonna lilies, Dutch iris, sweet Williams, herbs, hellebores, and foxgloves. "I love those stalky cottage garden flowers that always look so candy-box optimistic," he says.

Peonies, however, rate among his most prized garden treasures. The author fondly recalls how his mother made his father promise to transfer peonies from her parents' home to the Gurganus homeplace. In 1946, Allan's father hired a man to drive a flatbed truck clear to Illinois to dig up the ancestral peonies. He stopped to water them at most gas stations along the way. When his parents died, Allan and his brothers subdivided the fabled flowers.

"The Lord is happiest when his children are at play."



As a tribute to the memory of his good friend Charles Kuralt and the fond affection they had for their alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Bob Timberlake has created a very special reproduction entitled "Kuralt at White's Creek."

This beautiful work will be offered as a time-limited edition with proceeds benefiting the Medical Programs of the North Carolina Children's Hospital and the Educational Foundation.

"Kuralt at White's Creek"

BY

Bob Timberlake

"Kuralt at White's Creek" has an image area of 11" x 30" on 100% rag paper stock measuring 16 1/2" x 34 1/2".

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Of Words and Weeds

The author writes seven days a week from 6:30 a.m. until 3 p.m. "I go out to weed between sentences," he says. When composing, he finds it necessary to avoid idle chitchat. "As soon as I have the morning's first conversation, I feel that's the end of the day's writing." Neighbors honor this creative quirk.

Not that he's antisocial. Graciousness comes naturally to the author. "As a Southerner and as a North Carolinian, I was brought up knowing how to talk to absolutely everybody," he says in his soft drawl.

"As my grandfather used to tell me, 'If you know who you are in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, you'll know who you are in the world,'" he says. "I've been all over the place, and he was weirdly right. I was reared in a tradition that says no one must ever be humiliated." Whether he's talking with a service station attendant or martini-drinking New York glitterati, Allan's courtly manner is as tangible as the old-world vest he wears. "That's part of being a decent person and a decent artist—you try to make every person and character feel comfortable and honored."

He occasionally hosts large garden parties complete with tents and jazz combos. At these events, hardware store clerks mingle with the author's better known friends.

"I think welcoming a reader into a book is like escorting a pal into your house or garden," he says. "There is a path, a progression, a building of surprises. This is a kind of courtesy you extend to any kind person who has paid \$25 for your book.

"A writer," he continues, "should make some sheltering connections for the reader. You must somehow make your guest feel that life is extremely difficult, but possible and worthwhile."

Whether he's sharing the fleeting beauty of his garden, or offering immortal words to last the ages, this North Carolinian understands the fine art of gracious welcome.

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Nobody with
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curiosity can own
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property without
making one of
them a garden.

Allan Gurganus



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