Sitting at the feet of the master storyteller
Author McMurtry teaches students at his Archer City home

By GEORGE GETSCHOW and CANDACE CARLISLE

A group of craggy-faced ranchers and roughnecks milling about the sidewalk in front of the Wildcat Café in Archer City stared at the caravan of cars snaking its way toward “The Mansion” – the mysterious residence of a reclusive writer who spends his days penning unflattering novels about them and the town.

“We usually come across as illiterate, drunkards and philanderers,” groused one rancher in bib overalls and T-shirt. His sidekicks on the sidewalk nodded in agreement.

As the caravan pulled up alongside The Mansion, the writer Larry McMurtry, wearing a stained and rumpled shirt bearing the logo of his favorite beverage, Dr Pepper, stepped outside to greet the passengers – a group of UNT journalism students who had enlisted in a three-week writing boot camp in Archer City in mid-July.

The students flocked around McMurtry, shaking his hand and introducing themselves. Their writing instructor, George Getschow, had told them that meeting McMurtry was the literary equivalent of meeting the Pope. “Take it all in,” Getschow told them. “You’re going to speak to one of the greatest writers of our age.”

McMurtry took the students on a tour of The Mansion, walled with 32,000 books of Th e Mansion, his days penning unflattering novels about them and the town.

But he said he’ll “never be himself again.”

McMurtry emphasized that writing is a painful process that demands patience, persistence and constant revision. The first draft is “exploratory,” McMurtry said, just getting the characters and scenes down on paper. The second draft is a “cutting draft,” – cutting out repetition and mistakes. The third draft is “the style draft” to make the prose sing.

Journalists often spend hours perfecting their leads. But McMurtry said he “always starts with an ending – a scene that forms in my head.” Once he’s got the ending scene, McMurtry creates a conflict among the characters to open the narrative and keeps an undercurrent of tension stirring in the story from beginning to end. It’s a formula he’s employed in every novel set in and around Archer City – from his debut, Horseman, Pass By, to his Last Picture Show to Lonesome Dove.

In later novels, McMurtry has taken on the demon that has haunted him since a heart attack 15 years ago: depression. McMurtry survived open-heart surgery. But he said he’ll “never be himself again.”

McMurtry said after spending the first 20 years of his life as a cowboy on the McMurtry Ranch, the cowboy work ethic had become ingrained in him. He said he simply wouldn’t allow depression or anything else stop him from jumping into his writing saddle each morning.

| Continued inside. See McMURTRY. |
The Mayborn 2007
Literary Nonfiction Writers Conference of the Southwest

Manuscript winner Donna Johnson (left) with UNT Press Director Ron Chrisman and Sue Mayborn

Manuscripts
• Donna Johnson, Book Contract from UNT Press and the Mayborn Institute for “The Holy Ghost Girl” – $5,000
• Susanah Charleson, First Runner-Up for “Scents of the Missing” – $2,000
• Kathleen Hawkins, Second Runner-Up for “Six Feet Above” – $1,000

Research and Reporting-Based Articles
• Gary Borders, The Dallas Morning News First Place Award of $3,000 for “Tobacco Queen of Texas”
• Spencer Campbell (pictured here with Rob Kaiser (right)), Ann Ricco Second Place Award of $2,000 for “Troubled Heart”
• Erin Burdette, Mayborn Third Place Award of $1,000 for “Borrowed God”

Personal Essays
• Julianne McCullough, The Dallas Morning News First Place Award of $5,000 for “Slaime”
• Joan Donaldson, Ann Ricco Second Place Award of $2,000 for “St. George and the Dragon”
• Jere Pfi ster, Mayborn Third Place Award of $1,000 for “The Mystery of the Black Book”

Congratulations to the winners!
More than 20 manuscripts and 95 articles and essays were submitted to the Mayborn Conference Writing Contest this year.

Personal Essays

[ McMURTRY. Continued from cover.]

Students attending the three-week seminar in McMurryland discovered that writing literary nonfiction requires a leap into a deep well of memory and feelings.

“In the process of writing personal essays, I realized I hadn’t been tapping into my emotions,” said UNT journalism alumnus Daniel Rodriguez, who wrote a moving elegy to his grandfather in Archer City. Before writing the seminar, “I was almost approaching (writing) scientifically or clinically.”

McMurry encouraged students to make literature the central focus of their life, just as he has. Anyone who wants to be a writer, he said, has to be a reader. He left his giant book ranch, Booked Up, unlocked so that students could roam his literary world all night. Many did. He also encouraged students to roam his ranch on Idiota Ridge, where he conceived and wrote Loneymoon Dove.

“Arriving in Archer City I felt uncomfortable as a writer and was afraid of my own writing,” said Sarah Junek, a journalism news-editorial student.

Candace Carlisle is a Mayborn scholar and news-editorial student.

During the Q & A following Joyce Carol Oates’ keynote speech, conference speaker Nan Talese, publisher and editorial director of Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, responded to a statement from a conference attendee.

Talese requested the microphone. She said, “I really, really am bothered by the sanctimoniousness of Oprah Winfrey because it simply does not exist.” [When James Frey, author of A Million Little Pieces (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday), and I were on Oprah,] I was just appalled in terms of basic manners.”

The recording by C-SPAN’s BookTV on YouTube drew more than 431,000 views. The Dallas Morning News, TIME magazine, Publishers Weekly, Chicago Tribune, Newsweek, the National Enquirer and others reported the event. National visibility has drawn attention to the Mayborn Conference and the University of North Texas. Register early next year! – Sarah Whyman, Mayborn scholar and conference assistant

If you missed it...

Join alumni, faculty and friends of the Mayborn Institute at our UNT Homecoming Tailgate reception Saturday, Oct. 27, from 2 p.m. to 5 p.m., in the southeast corner of the blue parking lot at Fouts Field. Look for a 30-foot mobile home, compliments of McClain’s RVs. Light refreshments will be served.

What’s happening at The Mayborn?

The Dallas headquarters of The Dallas Morning News and KERA have welcomed Mayborn students for weekly hands-on learning, opening new doors and extending our educational resources.

The Morning News Investigative Reporter Doug Swanson leads advanced reporting students in an original investigative project each Monday night. KERA Director of Multimedia Arts Unit Yolette Garcia teaches management of media entities, with unique emphasis on the history of public radio and broadcast.

Unveiling Ten Spurs BEST of the BEST
Excerpt from the Foreword

Joyce Carol Oates maintains that the alchemy of writing occurs when nonfiction writers employ the aesthetic strategies of fiction in their prose to enable our readers to see, hear, witness, as if at first hand, what the writer has witnessed.

Literary nonfiction, she says, demands a heightened attention to detail and a cinematic eye to make reality come alive on the page.

The pieces selected for our literary journal, Ten Spurs, were chosen because, the judges felt, they meet the highest standards of literary nonfiction. Take George Newswon’s innovative narrative, ‘Voir Dire’. The author bares his soul to the reader through the anxiety of jury duty, the misery of prostate cancer, his adolescent fascination with young men and alligator hunts.

…”In ‘After the Ceasefire,’ Dorie Bargmann asks the reader, ‘How do you witness a war?’ You’ll find out. Bargmann paid attention to sensory detail—the sound of an engine, physical dust—to make her story more tactile, and thus more real to readers so they can ‘see, hear, witness’ as if at first hand, what the writer has witnessed,” as Oates puts it.

by George Getschow

Visit Amazon.com or call the Mayborn office at (940) 565-4564 to order Ten Spurs.

Fall Calendar

October 12
Comps Exam for graduating students

October 20
MaybornFest for all students at the Lands’ home in Hickory Creek

October 27
UNT Homecoming at Fouts Field & Mayborn Tailgate in blue lot

November 7
Holocaust survivors William and Rosalie Schiff present the 2006 Mayborn Conference winning manuscript William & Rosalie (right) December 3-7
Holydays at the Mayborn and Colegrove Collection Dedication

by George Getschow

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Artwork by Michael Hogue, courtesy of The Dallas Morning News.