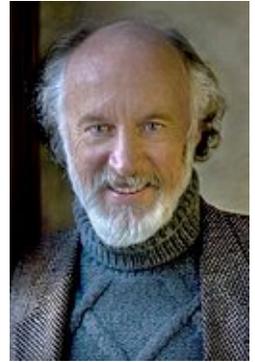




## Gurganus, Allan (b. 1947)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2005, glbtq, inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Allan Gurganus.  
Photograph by Roger Haile.

The critically acclaimed writer Allan Gurganus is perhaps best known for his novels *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, a comic epic about the history of the South, and *Plays Well With Others*, about the New York art scene in the 1980s, just as AIDS was emerging.

His mentor, the writer John Cheever, once described Gurganus as "the most technically gifted and morally responsive writer of his generation."

Gurganus was born in Rocky Mount, North Carolina in 1947 to a fundamentalist Baptist store owner and a retired school teacher. He originally trained as a painter, and had his first one-man show at the age of twelve in his hometown's Arts Center. He later studied painting at the University of Pennsylvania and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. His oil and water color paintings are now represented in many public and private collections, including the North Carolina Museum of Art and the Rocky Mount Arts Center.

Gurganus left art school in 1965 to join the Navy for a three-year stint. While stationed on the *USS Yorktown*, he became inspired to write after reading Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady* (1881), which he discovered in the ship's library.

Honorably discharged from the Navy in 1968, Gurganus moved to New York City to attend Sarah Lawrence College and study creative writing with the renowned writer Grace Paley. In 1972 he won a scholarship to the Iowa Writers' Workshop where he was tutored and befriended by the award-winning novelist and master of the short story John Cheever.

Cheever, a closeted bisexual, took a romantic interest in Gurganus, who is 35 years his junior. Although the two never had a sexual relationship, Gurganus appears in several admiring entries in Cheever's private journals, which were published in 1991.

Without telling him, Cheever submitted one of Gurganus's short stories, "Minor Heroism," to the *New Yorker*. The magazine accepted and published the story in 1974. It was the first story the magazine had ever published that featured a gay character.

After graduating from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Gurganus taught briefly at both Stanford and Duke universities before returning to New York to teach part-time at Sarah Lawrence College.

Gurganus went on to achieve national fame with the publication of his critically lauded and commercially successful first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All* (1989). Begun in 1981 while Gurganus was still teaching at Sarah Lawrence, the novel was first conceived as a 30-page short story, but was published eight years later as a 700-plus-page opus.

Alternating scenes of tragedy with those of comedy, the novel is narrated by 99-year-old Lucy Marsden from her bed in a charity rest home. Lucy recounts her marriage as a bride of 15 to a Civil War veteran more

than triple her age. She frequently interrupts her narrative to offer shrewd, and often irreverent, social commentary on the history and customs of the South, including the enduring legacy of slavery.

As Jay Tolson in his insightful review of the novel for the *New Republic* observed, "a Whitmanian or . . . gay sensibility," permeates the novel. This is especially evident in the stories Lucy narrates about her husband Will and his "angel-voiced" boyhood friend Ned, who was killed by a sniper's bullet while both boys were fighting in the Civil War. Will never fully recovers from this early loss. Lucy recognizes his pain and marries him as a sort of reclamation project, or as she explains, "I still believed I could rescue the boy in him."

The novel won the 1989 Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. A 1994 CBS-TV adaptation of the work won four Emmy awards, including one for Best Supporting Actress for Cecily Tyson, who portrays a former slave. A somewhat less successful one-woman version of the novel, starring Ellen Burstyn, opened on Broadway in the fall of 2003 for a limited run.

A collection of Gurganus's early short stories and novellas, written in the 1970s and 1980s, are included in *White People* (1991). Narrated in a startling range of first-person voices, the collection displays the depth and breadth of Gurganus's talents.

Several of the stories in the collection concern, either overtly or obliquely, same-sex desire. These include "Reassurance," a story in the form of two letters, one written by Walt Whitman and the other by a Union soldier to his mother, both purportedly composed in the summer of 1865, and "Adult Art," which concerns the erotic musings of a middle-aged married man for a young stranger in a small Southern town. As the married man in the story explains, "I've got this added tenderness. I never talk about it. . . . It sounds strange but feels so natural. I know it will get me into big trouble. I feel it for a certain kind of other man, see. For any guy who's even clumsier than me, than I."

In 1997, Gurganus published his second novel, *Plays Well With Others*. It is set in New York City from 1980 to 1995, and is narrated by Hartley Mims Jr., a young gay man from a small Southern town who longs to be a writer. After moving to Manhattan to seek success, Hartley quickly bonds with other struggling artists, two in particular: the bisexual Robert Gustafson, a gifted composer and "prettiest boy in New York," and the heterosexual Angelina "Alabama" Byrnes, a fiercely ambitious painter with real talent.

The early sections of the novel evoke an exhilarating pre-AIDS New York as the three friends pursue professional success and sexual adventures. Unrequited passions among the three further complicate matters.

Before they can begin to enjoy their hard-fought triumphs, however, AIDS casts its shadow, forcing the characters to reevaluate their ambitions and confront their limitations. "We--being this talented and so young, " as Hartley recounts, "found but one roadblock to our careers. It was called getting sick."

Yet, as critic Michiko Kakutani remarked in the *New York Times*, the novel "is not solely concerned with the effects of the disease on its characters' lives." Rather, it "aspires to capturing the pulse and beat of an era and a world . . . a world of ambition, extravagance, hilarity and disillusion."

Gurganus has explained in interviews that the impetus for writing the novel was to celebrate, and commemorate, the "complicated love we have for friends when we're in our twenties . . . when everybody is a sexual object in one form or another."

The *Times Literary Supplement* called *Plays Well With Others* "the best work of fiction ever written about AIDS, and certainly the funniest." The novel was nominated for a Lambda Literary Award.

In the fall of 1997, prior to the novel's publication, an excerpt titled "Thirty Dildos," was scheduled to appear in *Harper's Magazine*. Just before it went to press, however, the magazine's editor Lewis Lapham

asked Gurganus to change the title to something less blatant. Lapham explained that the magazine had published a photograph of a lesbian couple in the previous issue, which had angered advertisers. He did not want to further alienate them with Gurganus's "contentious" title. Lapham suggested changing the title to "Thirty Friends."

Gurganus refused to change his title. As he later explained, "As a good team player, I was supposed to immediately say, 'Well, in that case, Lewis, please just let me write about my wife and three children because advertisers like that sort of thing.' What happens is that magazines . . . want the cachet of publishing hip gay writing, but with none of the risks. They don't want any of the toxic aftermath, they just want the coolness of being thought liberal and forward-looking and enlightened."

Lapham pulled the story. *GQ* magazine later published the excerpt, title and all. Although *Harper's Magazine* had published more than ten stories by Gurganus up to that point, it has not published anything by him since.

Gurganus's most recent work is a volume of four novellas, *The Practical Heart* (2001). The title novella, about a woman who may or may not have had her portrait painted by John Singer Sargent, won a National Magazine Prize when it originally appeared in the July 1993 issue of *Harper's Magazine*.

The collection includes "He's One, Too" which recounts the ruin of a local businessman arrested after making sexual advances to a 15-year-old boy in the men's room of a department store. Gurganus discloses these events through a narrator who as a young boy idolized the man and even projected onto him his own first feelings of homoerotic desire. As a grown man and out of the closet, the narrator reclaims this story from his youth as an object lesson: desires denied and concealed often lead to tragedy.

Also in the collection are "Saint Monster," about a son confronting long-concealed family secrets, and "Preservation News," in which an elderly widow eulogizes a young gay man who spent his life, cut short by AIDS, rescuing and restoring historic houses.

As the *Library Journal* explains, "each of the tales explores the impact that one individual can have on another, and how courage and beauty can arise from the most unexpected sources." The collection won the 2001 Lambda Literary Award for Gay Men's Fiction.

Gurganus's short stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *Paris Review*, and *Granta*, among other publications, as well as in anthologies such as *Faber Book of Gay Short Fiction* (1991), edited by Edmund White; *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (1994), edited by David Leavitt and Mark Mitchell; *Best American Gay Fiction 3* (1998), edited by Brian Bouldrey; and *Best American Short Stories* (2000), edited by E.L. Doctorow. His writing is also represented in *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction: Sixth Edition* (2000), edited by Richard Bausch and R.V. Cassill.

Gurganus was recently inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

He lives in Hillsborough, North Carolina.

## **Bibliography**

Canning, Richard. *Gay Fiction Speaks: Conversations with Gay Novelists*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Eder, Richard. "The Lost Generation." *The Los Angeles Times* (November 9, 1997): 2.

Frumkes, Lewis Burke. "A Conversation with . . . Allan Gurganus." *The Writer* (June 2000): 20-23.

Garner, Dwight. "The *Salon* Interview: Allan Gurganus." *Salon.com* (December 8, 1997): [www.salon.com/books/int/1997/12/cov\\_si\\_08gurganus.html](http://www.salon.com/books/int/1997/12/cov_si_08gurganus.html).

Garrett, George. "The Curse of the Caucasians." *The New York Times Book Review* (February 3, 1991): 14.

Kakutani, Michiko. "That Magical Isle of Talent, Exhibitionism and Doom." *The New York Times* (November 4, 1997): E8.

Keehnen, Owen. "Allan Gurganus Tells All." 1997. [www.glbtc.com/sfeatures/interviewagurganus.html](http://www.glbtc.com/sfeatures/interviewagurganus.html).

Miller, Tim. "Heart Specialist." *The Advocate* (September 25, 2001): 83.

Parker, Peter. "'The Distinguished Thing'." *The New York Times Book Review* (October 7, 2001): 7.

Plunket, Robert. "Love in the Time of H.I.V." *The New York Times Book Review* (November 16, 1997): 12.

Tolson, Jay. "Wounds of War." *The New Republic* (October 30, 1989): 37-41.

Wilcox, James. "Her Whole Life Passes Before Our Eyes." *The New York Times Book Review* (August 13, 1989): 7.

### **About the Author**

**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.