Preface

Conjuring Ghosts with William Kennedy

> I write this book not as a booster of Albany, which I am, nor as an apologist for the city, which I sometimes am, but rather as a person whose imagination has become fused with a single place, and in that place finds all the elements that a man ever needs for the life of the soul.
>
> —William Kennedy, opening of *O Albany!*

In the fading light of a blustery winter's day, I walked beside William Kennedy through the working-class neighborhood of North Albany where he grew up, an Irish Catholic enclave nicknamed Limerick. It was four days before his ninetieth birthday and Kennedy had spent the afternoon conjuring ghosts in old warehouses, mechanical shops, and alleyways. I was reminded of William Faulkner's famous line: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

We were joined by David Gersten, an architect and artist, who came of age amid the gritty labor of his family's heavy truck fabrication and brake shop, J. Becker & Sons, on Broadway, in the same neighborhood as Kennedy. The decades peeled away as they studied old black-and-white photos on the wall of Becker's shop, and Kennedy talked about Gersten's grandfather and uncle with affection. We walked back outside, and Kennedy slowly took the measure of rows of modest two-family houses. "This place looks the same," he said. We stopped at a small apartment building at 620 North Pearl Street, which has a plaque that reads: "This was the home of William Kennedy 1932–1935 and 1948–1956. Won the 1984 Pulitzer Prize for the novel *Ironweed* set in North Albany."

Childhood stories reflexively poured out of Kennedy, such as when a dog chased him down North Pearl, bit him in the leg, and bloodied him so badly that when his mother caught sight of him being carried home, she thought her

son was dead. He recalled the time a neighbor girl named Alice Moffatt came hurtling down a steep hill on a sled and out into traffic on North Pearl Street and was killed when she struck a car. He remembered the names of neighbors and shop owners and the priest at Sacred Heart Church and his childhood chums and hilarious tales of mischief they caused. He recalled these incidents from eight decades past in vivid detail and with lively description, the hallmark of a natural-born storyteller who knows how to inject tension and pace and color into his stories. Gersten and I stood transfixed on the sidewalk as Kennedy spun these entertaining childhood yarns from the deep recesses of his astonishing memory as a cold January wind reddened our cheeks and caused our eyes to water.

Even at ninety, Kennedy remains a writer at work, practicing his craft with a novelist's eye and a journalist's sense of documentation. He took out the nub of a pencil and an ever-present tiny notebook from a breast shirt pocket and pressed Gersten for details about his long-lost relatives and their truck business. He eagerly jotted down the information, logging it into his vast Albany database, searching for connections. He was starting to do legwork on a new novel set in Albany, and he never knew when a scrap of information or snippet of narrative might create a spark and ignite his creative imagination. Kennedy is never not working.

For Kennedy, this hardscrabble neighborhood was the start of an improbable journey. Kennedy rose from a humble upbringing as the only child of working-class parents to the pinnacle of success as a novelist who won the Pulitzer Prize and every other major literary award. Moreover, he received a prestigious MacArthur Fellowship and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His novels were published in three dozen countries. *Ironweed* was adapted into a feature film starring Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson, and Kennedy brought its world premiere to Albany. Critics hailed him as one of the great American novelists of his generation and he forged friendships with literary lions Saul Bellow, Gabriel García Márquez, and Norman Mailer, who accepted him as one of their peers. He took his literary skills into unexpected directions by writing screenplays for films, plays for the stage, and by collaborating on an opera based on *Roscoe*, his novel about Albany politics. Into each new arena where he carried his craft, he brought the relentless research and dogged reporting of his journalistic training fused with the countless revisions and painstaking polishing of a prose perfectionist. No matter what he is writing, he makes the words move on the page. "There are no dead sentences in his work," Bellow wrote of Kennedy. "He is just a pure writer."

This new volume of interviews, reviews, scholarly essays, previously unpublished speeches, a play, and a short story traces the long arc of Kennedy's extraordinary writing career and makes clear that he succeeded because he believed in his own literary talent and refused to let years of grinding poverty and dispiriting rejections by publishers destroy his ambition. "Rejection at the age of fifty and dragging his family down with him," recalled his longtime friend, the late Tom Smith, an English professor at the University at Albany. "In his mind he had become like one of his characters, a bum, a literary bum. In the middle of it all, he suffered horrendous financial difficulties. But through it all, he would climb up there and just plug away. And then the dam burst, somewhere toward 1981, and he knew that help was on its way."

What Kennedy discovered was a well of inspiration that had been there all along, the ability to animate his deep knowledge of Albany history, lived and learned, by reconstituting the past with his literary imagination. It took a hiatus of several years of living in Puerto Rico to gain a fresh perspective and appreciation for his hometown and to begin to understand the potent alchemy he performed by reimagining his city's rich past. Smith helped Kennedy establish the New York State Writers Institute at the University at Albany in 1983 with a portion of Kennedy's MacArthur grant. They brought the world's greatest writers to his hometown and built a renowned literary organization.

In the pages of *Bootlegger of the Soul,* a full-bodied portrait of Kennedy as a creative artist mastering not only the novel but a variety of genres, emerges through in-depth interviews, insightful reviews, and assessments by critics and fellow writers. "He consistently seeks the edge of his art," novelist Colum McCann writes in an introduction to a British edition of *Roscoe.* "He is one of the great verbal cinematographers of our times. He captures light, transforms it, guides it forward, shifts it around, and burns it down on to the page." The critic Thomas Flanagan writes: "Kennedy's art is an eccentric triumph, a quirky, risk-taking imagination at play upon the solid paving stones, the breweries, the politicos, and pool sharks of an all-too-actual city . . . Faulkner and Kennedy also share old-fashioned themes like honor, betrayal, the foreverness of the past."

"Drawn against a background of flophouses, bars and soup kitchens, Kennedy's winos are dirty, diseased, and depressed, searching for food, bath, beds, and warmth in their agonizing quest for survival; men in extremis—outsiders, outlaws—they struggle against a cold and rejecting world," critic Margaret Croyden writes of *Ironweed.*

The towering achievement of his Albany Cycle of novels has drawn frequent comparisons to the literary universe created in William Faulkner's

Yoknapatawpha County, James Joyce's Dublin, and Gabriel García Márquez's Macondo.

What this retrospective collection of Kennedy's work reminds readers of is that his long, hard climb to literary success traveled through an extended apprenticeship as a journalist, endured through early failures at novel writing, and persisted despite midcareer rejections. And then literary lightning struck at age fifty-five and Kennedy's place in American letters was assured.

"Recognition is everything you write for," he told Croyden for her 1984 *New York Times* article "The Sudden Fame of William Kennedy." "It's much more than the money. You want your books to be valued. It's a basic aspiration of the serious writer."

As Kennedy walked through the gritty urban landscape of North Albany on that January afternoon, with nothing left to prove, notebook in hand, the present merging with his memories of a distant past, the great verbal cinematographer captured an image and burned it down onto the page.

—Paul Grondahl