



IN MEMORIAM

Oakley Hall

Professor of English and Director of the Programs In Writing
UC Irvine
1920 - 2008

Oakley Hall grew up in San Diego and Hawaii loving pulp fiction and dime-store westerns; he loved reading Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett in *Black Mask Magazine* and aspired to being published there . . . until he read Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. Oakley Hall went on to write over 25 books, many of them westerns in the finest sense of that word. His fourth novel, *Warlock* (1958), published when he was just 38 years old, was greatly admired by Thomas Pynchon and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. *Warlock* was — and still is — a hugely influential novel for writers, a novel that not only insisted on revising our romantic and seriously delusional mythologies about the west, but also insisted on elevating the western, the genre of the western, to literature. *Warlock* was made into a film starring Henry Fonda, Richard Widmark and Anthony Quinn, and admirers of the novel have formed a band named after the author himself. New York Review Books Classics re-published *Warlock* in 2005 in recognition of *Warlock*'s revelatory importance as a major American novel. Robert Stone wrote the Introduction for this re-issue.

Separations, which received the 1997 Southwest Book Award, is set in the 1880s and intersperses early explorations of the Grand Canyon with scenes set in San Francisco's fledgling literary culture. It is a novel written with Oakley Hall's unerring attention to historical detail and captures — also unerringly — the atmosphere of the times.

Corpus of Joe Bailey, Oakley Hall's bildungsroman, was published in 1953 and continues to be read widely and to provide admirers with a scenic map of Depression-era and war-time San Diego that they follow in the Joe Bailey Bus in a yearly tribute to the novel's lasting influence on their lives. *Report from Beau Harbor* (1971) is a sequel to *Corpus of Joe Bailey*, and *Love & War in California* (2007), published late in Oakley Hall's life, is in some regards a bookend to both *Report from Beau Harbor* and *Corpus of Joe Bailey*. The novel starts on December 7, 1941, with the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and moves forward in time to the present day.

The Downhill Racers (1962), about world-class skiers and their fiercely competitive natures — also a classic among readers — was made into a movie by Paramount, but attribution for the film's content had to be won in court, and this was always a great sadness to Oakley Hall, that a writer would steal another writer's work.

Oakley Hall, always a great lover of mysteries, started out his career as O.M. Hall and Jason Manor, writing novels with titles like *Murder City* and *Too Dead to Run*. Late in his life he returned — and happily — to writing a series of novels loosely tied to Ambrose Bierce, his genius, and his disappearance into Mexico about which almost nothing is known. *Ambrose Bierce and the Ace of Shoots* (2006), *Ambrose Bierce and the Trey of Pearls* (2004), *Ambrose Bierce and the Death of Kings* (2001) and *Ambrose Bierce and the Queen of Spades* (1998) . . . to name just a few. Oakley Hall found writing mysteries relaxing, and hugely freeing from

the demands of writing more important work. Part of Oakley Hall's brilliance and agility as a writer was his ability to take a genre and probe it for literary possibility, to not only deliver the genre, but to undermine — or perhaps refine and sophisticate — its demands at the same time.

Oakley Hall was inducted into the Cowboy Hall of Fame in 1989 and given the PEN Center West Award of Honor for Lifetime Achievement in 1998, but perhaps his greatest professional achievement outside of his novels was the huge generosity he showed other writers and the massive number of hours he spent reading their writing seriously and helping them craft their work. Oakley Hall directed the Programs In Writing at the University of California at Irvine for over 20 years, from 1969 to 1990. He and Donald Heiney, who wrote under the name MacDonald Harris, mentored some of America's finest young writers and built a writing program of singular distinction. Richard Ford, Kem Nunn, Whitney Otto, James Brown, and Michael Chabon are just a few of the program's graduates. Hall's course on Structuring The Novel is still invoked by students lucky enough to have been in the program during his twenty year directorship.

Oakley Hall was married to Barbara Edinger Hall, a professional photographer, in 1944, and they were married for 64 years. They had four children, Brett Hall Jones, director of the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, the writers' conference that Oakley Hall helped found in 1969; Sands Hall, an accomplished teacher and novelist (*Catching Heaven*, 2000, and *Tools of the Writer's Craft*, 2005); Tracy, a school teacher; and Oakley Hall III, known as "Tad," a son and the author of the play, *Grinder's Stand*, whose tragic fall from a bridge and the brain damage suffered from this fall are documented in the film *The Loss of Nameless Things* (filmmaker Bill Rose).

Oakley Hall was remembered in three significant tributes around the state last summer and this fall. At the Squaw Valley Community of Writers, 2008, several hundred people gathered to hear a series of speakers read an excerpt from each of Hall's novels. On the stage, between two podiums, stood an old typewriter table holding one of Oakley Hall's typewriters. After each excerpt, the reader placed the novel on the stand. At evening's close, the table was mounded with books, the immensely important production of a lifetime.

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