

# A SENSE OF PLACE

*William Cobb Wins 2007 Harper Lee Award*

by Danny Gamble

Folks in Montevallo have grown accustomed to spying William Cobb tooling around town in his Mercedes Benz, his skillet hat perched atop his thick silver hair, his writer wife Loretta—the picture of eternal youth—sitting beside him, her beret slightly askew. These sightings have become less frequent, though.

“I’m the biggest hermit of all,” said Cobb. “As I get older it becomes more and more important to me to get said what I want to say. I rarely go out, except with my father during the day for coffee. And that’s usually a thirty minute break from the keyboard.”

William Cobb—“Bill” to his friends—is the tenth recipient of the Harper Lee Award for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year. Named for the Monroeville native and author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the annual award recognizes the lifetime achievement of a writer who was born in Alabama or who spent his or her formative years living and writing in the state.

In his letter of nomination, Don Noble, host of the APT literary interview show *Bookmark*, wrote, “I think it is important to mention that Cobb’s work, while sometimes very funny, for the most part has real gravitas.”

Noble noted that Cobb’s body of work—six novels, a short story collection, and three plays produced off-Broadway—has examined such weighty topics as the civil rights movement, toxic waste, religion, metaphysics, and the Klan. Readers, like Noble, know that Cobb generally approaches such subjects with a nod and a wink.

“I think in this day and time,” said Cobb, “people want to find something to laugh at. Have you seen *Borat*? Irony is not dead. I have difficulty writing really serious stuff.”

Cobb admits that his often wildly grotesque characters even crack him up.

“If they don’t tickle me, I figure they won’t tickle anybody else,” he said. “I think most of my major characters have a comical element to them. I really got a boot out of Brother Bobby (from a recent short story “Brother Bobby’s Eye”) and all those bizarre characters in *Coming of Age at the Y*. I got a lot of laughs out of Bud Squires in *Harry Reunited* and all the characters in *A Spring of the Souls*.”

Born in Eutaw, Alabama, in the throes of the Great Depression, Cobb moved with his family to Demopolis—his fictional Hammond—at the age of six weeks. He received his early education there and later earned degrees from Livingston State (now the University of West Alabama) and Vanderbilt.

Cobb wrote his first work of fiction after a six-month bout with rheumatic fever at age eight.

“I presented my mother with my first novel—four bound pages—sometime after that illness,” he said. “I do not recall what it was about, and it is nowhere to be found.”

Anyone who has had even the most casual conversation with Cobb immediately tags him an honest-to-God, fixin’-to, Black Belt Southern boy. His drawl crawls as slowly as the Tombigbee River through his hometown. One can finish a plate of buttered grits before Cobb makes his point. He rushes

nothing. His rural Southern upbringing means something to Cobb, and this sense of place informs his work.

“I think for every Southern writer—for me, certainly—place is paramount,” he said, “because it shapes what we’re doing. I do write about the rural South and Southerners, and people in this place called the South are different from people anywhere else in the world. They talk different. They act different.

“I’m often reminded of what Flannery O’Connor said when someone asked her why there are so many freaks in Southern fiction. ‘Because we still know one when we see one,’ she said.”

Some writers may shy away from the label “Southern writer.” Not so Cobb.

“I don’t mind being called a Southern writer,” he said. “Some of my friends don’t like it because it’s sort of a qualifier, like a ‘woman writer’ or a ‘male nurse.’ I’ve never worried about that. People outside the South love our literature. Great Southern literature is universal. Welty, O’Connor, Warren, Percy (both of them), Conroy—none of these is limited by being Southern. After all, the South has produced America’s greatest writer to date: William Faulkner.”

So Cobb is not shy of dropping the F-bomb. In his early days, critics often compared his work to Faulkner. He resented it. Then, he said, he “held himself back, not wanting to be a Faulkner imitator.”

“Somewhere along the way, I realized I had my own voice,” he said. “It might be similar to Faulkner’s, and why not. I don’t worry about that anymore.

“When you have a body of literature like ours was in the first half of the twentieth century, it is both a curse and a blessing.”

Cobb made a legend of himself teaching those influences in his creative writing and Southern literature classes at the University of Montevallo

from 1963 until 2000, the last dozen or so years as writer-in-residence. His legacy looms large, but those years took their toll.

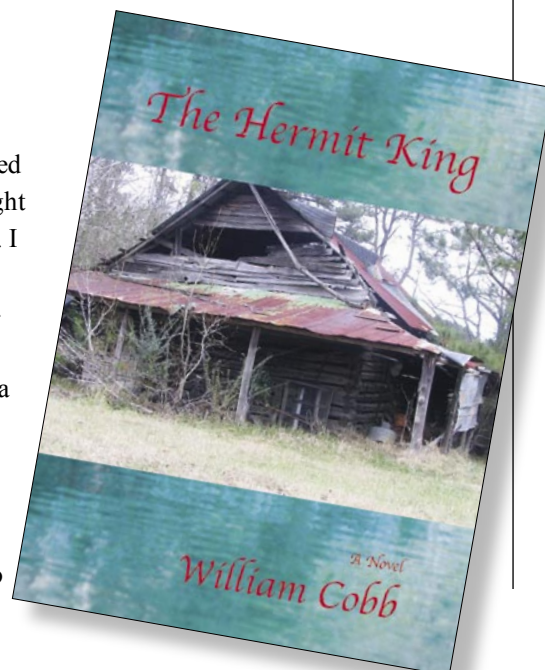
“During the early years, I was loaded down with general education courses with lots of papers to grade, so I didn’t have much time to write. I wrote many short stories and my first two novels late at night and on weekends.

“I loved teaching, though. When I was appointed writer-in-residence, I had more time for my students, and more time for my writing. Retirement has given me the opportunity to write full time, which was a lifelong dream.”

The Harper Lee Award for Alabama’s Distinguished Writer of the Year, presented annually by Alabama Southern Community College at the Alabama Writers Symposium in Monroeville, is made possible through a generous grant from George F. Landegger, Alabama River Pulp Company, Inc.

William Cobb will receive the Harper Lee Award at the tenth annual Alabama Writers Symposium, May 3-5. For more information, see [www.ascc.edu](http://www.ascc.edu).

*John Wendel, a writer and ESL instructor in South Korea, contributed to this story. Danny Gamble is managing editor of First Draft.*



## WILLIAM COBB

### BOOKS

*Coming of Age at the Y*, re-issue, Livingston Press, 2007

*The Hermit King: A Novel with Five New Stories*, Livingston Press, 2005

*Wings of Morning*, Crane Hill Publishers, 2001

*A Spring of Souls*, Crane Hill Publishers, 1999

*Somewhere in All This Green*, Black Belt Press, 1998

*Harry Reunited*, Black Belt Press, 1995

*A Walk Through Fire*, William Morrow and Company, 1992

*The Hermit King*, Portals Press, 1986

*Coming of Age at the Y*, Portals Press, 1984

### PLAYS

*A Place of Springs*, 1988

*Early Rains*, 1987

*Sunday’s Child*, 1987

### AWARDS AND HONORS

The Alabama Library Association Book of the Year in Fiction (*Somewhere in All This Green*), 2000

*The Dictionary of Literary Biography* Notable Novel of the Year (*A Spring of Souls*), 1999

The Yearbook of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Honor Roll (*Harry Reunited*), 1995

Fellowship in Drama, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1994

Fellowship in Fiction, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, 1989

Fellowship in Playwriting, the Atlantic Center for the Arts, 1985

University of West Alabama Alumnus of the Year, 1984

Fellowship in Fiction Writing, the National Endowment for the Arts, 1979