

Gurganus, Allan: Telling the Story from Birth ^[1]

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Allan Gurganus: Telling the Story from Birth

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) ^[2]," *News & Observer*. Published 2/9/2003. Copyrighted.
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When I visited his home in Hillsborough, Allan Gurganus and I talked about his growing up years in Rocky Mount, 50 miles east of Raleigh. Best known for his acclaimed novel "Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All," he is now one of the country's most accomplished writers. His beautifully crafted stories are enchanting and often make you both laugh and cry your heart out.

He told me how, as a child in Rocky Mount, he had the support of a remarkable group of schoolteachers and arts patrons without whom he could never have become a writer. "Those extremely brilliant ladies," he explained in vintage Allan Gurganus-style, "were exemplars of a certain kind of high intellectual seriousness that has not been seen in this country with George Bush as president in many a year."

In this part of the interview, I asked him to describe himself during those school days back in Rocky Mount.



Allan Gurganus. Photo by Chris Seward, 2003. To request permission to ~~reproduce or to purchase a print~~, please contact the *News & Observer*.

As a person who is reaching the age where you lose the car keys and can't remember where you parked and all that stuff, I have to say that I think I was probably smarter when I was in the third grade than I have ever been and I will ever be. I was something of an exaggerator. For instance, I saw in the Compton's Encyclopedia a picture of Jack London, and then I saw a picture of the natives of Tierra del Fuego, which I then thought was pronounced "del Fu-go." And at show-and-tell and so they inevitably said, "Well, say something." And I would say, you know, what do you want to hear? "What time do we go out for recess?" I go wyow weebee dow yow. But what's odd is that they were retentive enough to remember certain things. Of course for a man like my father, to have this little door-slamming, tantrum-prone, neurasthenic flibbertigibbet as a child could not have been easy. But happily, I was also very articulate, very presentable, totally eager to please, because I was very intelligent. I may have been seen as a sissy or as a flit, but the way I protected myself was to make myself central to everybody else's pleasure and happiness. I guess some people have greatness thrust upon them; I wheedled my way into it. I remember so I managed to become the nominator for Margaret Dudley for the secretary of the class. That got me on the stage, and I did an outrageous stunt that was a comic speech. I took a bird cage onto the stage with a stuffed bird in the cage. The teacher said, I mean, only somebody who was just totally desperate would or could have done this. It was like Jim Carrey or Jerry Lewis or Steve Martin. It was so outrageous, the unintentional effect was it completely threw every speech that had ever been given. I think the greatest thing I did -- it was when Elizabeth Taylor was making "Cleopatra" and she was in the process of leaving Eddie Fisher for Richard Burton, and it was all anybody was reading about. She would be in the fish-eye makeup and I had restaged "Cleopatra" in the high school auditorium with a very good-looking girl as Cleopatra. She was wearing only a halter and harem pants on a pallet carried by the entire football team with their shirts off. And all the football players were cheering. Her entrance into the auditorium, I can still say it was one of the happiest moments in my very happy life. The response was just, it was just fabulous. It was truly fablelike in the original sense of fabulous. And we had the whole thing played out. The biggest Victorian of all our teachers was the Latin teacher, Louise Parker, and I feared her wrath more than anybody else because "Caesar and Cleopatra" was very much her domain. I was called to the principal's office and told that Ms. Parker and she sat down and she said (he uses a pinched, nasally voice), "I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for interesting students in the Classics. I see my enrollments surging next year on account of this fascination with Caesar and Cleopatra."

Allan Gurganus website: <http://www.allangurganus.com/> ^[3]

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Origin - location:

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