

OF LOVE AND DUST

I suppose every writer has been asked, sometime or another, how did he come to write that novel or that story? If he were a playwright--how did he come to write that play? The poet, how did he come to write that poem? The musician, how did he come to write that song? What was its origin-- what started the artist on his way? Is it autobiographical? Did he hear someone else tell the story first? Did he read it somewhere?

I don't know when the idea of the novel, "Of Love and Dust" came into my mind--I really don't know. But here are a couple of things which led up to my writing it. My hobby is collecting records--when I have the money. ^{to do so.} I collect jazz records, ~~popularkk~~ the spirituals, folks music--and blues-- especially the rural blues of the Negro. I was listening to one of Lightnin' Hopkins records one day, titled, "Mr. Tim Moore's farm". (Lightnin' Hopkins is one of the great folk and blues singer of this country--and someone whom I consider a great poet.) I was listening to his "Mr. Tim Moore's Farm" one day, and I remembered one of the verses going something like this: "The worse thing this black man ever done, when I moved my wife and family to Mr. Tim Moore's farm; Mr. Tim Moore's man never stands and grin; say if you keep out the

graveyard, nigger, I'll keep you out the pen." (Lightnin' Hopkins is from Texas, and he was singing about a farm he knew in Texas.) Now, a period of about ten years passed between the time I first heard that record and the time I started writing my novel, "Of Love and Dust". Here is another thing that happened to me around that time, give or take a year or two. I was visiting some relatives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, I think about 1958, and a friend of mine and I went to a bar out in the country. (This is the same Parish in Louisiana that Rap Brown comes from, this is the same Parish in Louisiana that James Farmer, in 1963, escaped from a lynch mob by riding in the back of a hearse as a dead man.) My friend and I went to this bar, and in this bar I saw a fight between two young men. This bar is surrounded by sugar cane fields, and most of the people who come here are from the country or from small towns not very far away. They come to drink, they come to dance, they come to gamble, they come to fight, they come to steal your woman, they come to steal your man. Some of them come, knowing they'll probably end up in jail that night; They come, knowing they might get cut or even shot at--but they come. They come to forget the hard work in the field all week; they come to forget the menial job they've work at in town all week. They come to forget to forget, and to forget. And they will accept whatever fate is waiting them. If nothing terrible happens, then the night has been somewhat of a success; if something bad happens, then these things are expected in a bar such as this one. So it was here that I saw the knife fight between the two young

men. Fortunately for both, the fight was stopped before either was fatally wounded.

Now, when I saw this fight, just as when I heard the record by Lightnin' Hopkins, I had no idea that either event would eventually lead me into writing "Of Love and Dust" or writing anything else. As I said, it was a period of about ten years between those events and the time I wrote one word of the book. During that time, I wrote at least four other novels--~~kkkk~~ only one, "Catherine Carmier"--was published. I wrote twelve or fifteen stories--of which only six were published. Now, it was early Spring, 1966. I had very little money, I had practically no money at all. I had been spunging off ~~kk~~ my friends and my brothers for drinks, and I had not bought one drink for them in over a year. I had not given my poor mother a birthday present, a Christmas present, or a mother's Day present in over two years. (My girl had dropped ~~my~~ quite a while back--a normal ~~kkkk~~ thing I think when her man is unable to buy ~~kk~~ her a hamburger at a place like Fosters.) I needed money, I needed money badly--but I didn't want go go out on an eight-hour-a-day job that would take me from my writing; I wanted the money, but I wanted to earn it by my wriging. Now, if that was the case, I had to get something done. There had to be another novel in me somewhere that a publisher would accept.

I don't know how the ~~kkkk~~ tune, "Mr. Tim Moore's Farm" got back into my mind. Maybe I heard it played again--I really don't know. Or maybe ~~kkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk~~ when I went back to Baton Rouge in '65 and visited that same bar in the country that I had visited in '58 begin to stir up my

imagination. Anyhow, in early Spring of '66 I got started on the novel. I started with these two ideas--"Mr. Tim Moore's man never stands and grin; say if you keep out the graveyard, nigger, I'll keep you out the pen"; that, and with the fight between the two young men in the bar. So, all right, I had two ideas--but where did I go from there? Where? Where? Where? I kept asking myself.

Then things began to fall into place.

I was born on a Louisiana plantation in 1933, and left from there in 1948. (The novel takes place the Summer of '48.) But during those fifteen years, I had learned a lot about plantation life and about the people who lived in that part of Louisiana. I knew that Mr. Tim Moore's man who Lightnin' Hopkins sang about didn't necessarily have to be an overseer on a farm in Texas, he could be a Cajun overseer on a Louisiana plantation. I knew that my young man in the bar could have landed on that plantation if he had killed that other boy in the knife fight. So I had him kill the boy, and I had the owner of the plantation bond him out of jail. (I won't tell you why he did this, I want you to buy the book and find out.) But bonding a Negro out of jail after he had killed another Negro and putting him to work in your field ~~okkyuk~~ was a normal thing in the 40s. Some of our best Southern gentlemen did it. This was still going on in the 50s--and as late as '63 when I was in Louisiana, a friend of mine pointed out a black youth who had killed another black youth, and who had been bonded out only a few days later. The only catch here, when the prisoner, the convict, found himself

bonded out of jail, was that he usually spent almost twice as much time on the plantation than he would have spent in the penitentiary. Many times he found himself working just as hard, and maybe even harder. And there was nothing he could do about it--because the day he decided to run the white man was going to put the sheriff on his trail again.

So, I brought my young killer to the plantation. I knew the kind of house he would have to live in--I had lived there fifteen years myself; I knew the kind of food he would eat, I knew the kind of clothes he would wear in the field, the work he would have to do, the people he would come in contact with day in and day out. So, I had a good starting point--but was that enough? Where would things go from there? What am I going to do with my young killer? He's no plantation worker, he's not even a country boy--he's from the city--Baton Rouge. He's a playboy, he's a lover, and he hates authority--especially when this authority is given out by a Cajun--whom he considers White Trash. So what am I going to do with these two ~~black~~ people? I have two people on my hand who will never, can't ever get along with each other--what am I going to do with them? Well, let me see now: my young killer is going to be here five, seven, maybe ten years of his life. He will need a woman--yes, yes--he will need a woman--and she will be my third character. Now, he must start looking for that woman--but he doesn't want just any woman, not he, he wants the most beautiful woman on the plantation. But when he finds her, he finds that he can't have her. And why? Because she's the overseer's mistress.

woman; I with your white one. Because I know that you'd rather I slapped your face than to ^{even} look at her. Well, I won't just look at her; someway, somehow, I'm going to have her. Yes-- I'll clown for her, stand on my head for her, walk on my hands for her--then take her; take her with all the viciousness that you and men like you have forced into me all of my life. Yes, overseer; yes, my country--yes, yes, yes.

What my young killer doesn't know is that this White woman wants him to take her. Have been trying to ^{get Black} ~~make~~ men take her for the past ten years, because it has been that long since she found out that her husband was sleeping with this black woman in the negro quarters. She doesn't want herself a Black lover--no, that's not it at all: she wants trouble between the two men, and maybe her husband will be killed. (I ought to interject here that once Gaines's imagination starts moving, it really travels fast.) But why does this particular White woman want a Black man to help her destroy her husband? There are other White women of the South who know that their husbands have in the past and who are now sleeping with Black women, and they aren't seeking revenge: why does this woman want revenge?

That will take us back to a little bit of history. When the first shipload of Africans were brought here 349 years ago, they were not looked upon as human beings, but as animals to work the field. The White overseer in the Southern fields had the right to do whatever he wanted to do to the Black man or with the Black woman. If he beat the Black man, crippled him, or even killed him, little or nothing was done about it. If he raped the Black woman,--the conclusion was this: it was not

he raping her, but she seducing him. Not he having an interest in her, but, she, ~~unkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk~~ the animal that she is, unable to control her passion, found ways to seduce him. Because, you see, once they admitted to themselves that the White man did find interest in the Black woman as a human being, then they had to admit that slavery was wrong, and the subhuman position that they had ~~put~~^{forced} her and her race into was also wrong.

Now, let us say that one little White woman of the South felt differently. I'm not saying two or three, I'm saying one. Now, maybe she feels differently because she does not have all up here--but still she feels differently. She knows for a certain that her husband not only looks at that Black woman as a human being, but he looks upon the Black woman as someone far superior to her. (Ladies and gentlemen, I'm speaking of individuals here; not as a race of people.) Now, what does my little white woman do? She can't go out and tell White society that she's jealous of A Black woman. They would laugh her out of the community. They might even commit her to the insane asylum for even suggesting such a thing could possibly happen. So what does my little woman do. According to my(Gaines's) imagination, she tries to run away. She tries one, two, three times. But each time she does, her husband brings her back. (Not because he loves her, mind you, and she knows this; he brings her back because he needs her in that house. He needs her there because he cannot bring that Black woman there, because society does not allow it. Society has told this man he has the privilege to rape this woman, but not to let his heart lose control, which, obviously, his heart

has done. My little woman knows that his heart has flipped, because of the way he lies in bed with ~~his back toward her~~ his back toward her and falling sound asleep a minute after his head touches the pillow. No, not from the exertion of field work, but from the exertion of bed work in the quarters. ~~One time, three years before our story begins, she did get him to touch her, but his heart could not have been in it when you consider the production of those few moments. A little thing, so pathetic and so sickly that they call her Teete day in and day out. When the little thing was born no one expected it to live, and now three years old, and can play and talk, no one who knows it still expects it to live for much longer. . . . But still my little White woman cannot go away. She cannot go away, and she cannot even talk about it. So she begins to watch black men. For ten years, she watches Black men. There must be one--one on that plantation who will have the courage to free her.~~

So she and my young killer comes together. No love for each other--~~and not hatred either.~~ They come together to destroy a man whom this society has forced to hurt both of them.

The story is told by Jim, a tractor driver on the plantation. The reason Jim tells the story is because when Marcus is brought to the plantation, he is put in the same house with Jim--in adjoining sides. Marcus godmother ~~also has asked Jim to look after Marcus on the plantation. Jim has promised to do his best, but he knows the task will be hard. Other characters~~

will become familiar to the listener as I read from the book.