

*I Just Hitched In from the Coast: the Ed McClanahan Reader*  
Ed. Tom Marksbury  
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I first met Ed McClanahan in the mid-seventies when I read *Farming: A Handbook*, a collection of poems by the legendary Wendell Berry. Berry dedicated two poems in the volume to McClanahan. One, which he titled “The Mad Farmer Revolution,” he penned as a homage to Ed. It begins like this:

The mad farmer, the thirsty one,  
Went dry. When he had time  
He threw a visionary high  
Lonesome on the holy communion wine.  
“It is an awesome event  
when an earthen man had drunk  
his fill of the blood of a god,”  
people said, and got out of his way.

So I first met Ed as the long-time Dionysian friend of Wendell Berry.

Later, I came to know McClanahan as one of Ken Kesey’s Merry Pranksters, the ne’er-do-well social provocateurs, some of whom traveled the United States in the psychedelically painted bus named “Further,” including Neal Cassady, Ken Babb, Wavy Gravy, and Gurney Normam, one of a group of Kentucky writers known as the Kentucky

Fab Five. Of this group, McClanahan was known as Captain Kentucky. So I later met Ed as a pivotal connection between the Beat Generation and the Hippie Generation.

It wasn't until 2006 that I finally met the flesh and blood Ed McClanahan. We were both on the program at a Beat conference in, of all places, Logan, Utah, at Utah State University, a staunch Mormon community. Somewhat to our surprise, they treated us royally, even the young twenty-year-old married couples who dutifully wheeled their baby-filled baby strollers to our events, including Ed's reading of "Ken Kesey, Jean Genet, the Revolution, et Moi." I doubt that many of these young people had read about this infamous moment in American history: the meeting of Kesey, Genet, several university professors, and a group of dour-faced Black Panthers accompanied by their bodyguards. But I still hope the students appreciated what they heard, which was a wonderful social critic and a superb comic performance artist. I was delighted then when I learned that an anthology of McClanahan's fiction and essays was published by Counterpoint Press in October 2011. *I Just Hitched In From The Coast: The Ed McClanahan Reader* contains the "Ken Kesey, Jean Genet. . ." essay, as well as 13 other selections.

McClanahan is the author of numerous short stories and essays, and his work has been published in many magazines, including *Esquire* and *Rolling Stone*. He has twice won *Playboy's* Best Contributor of Non-Fiction award—in 1972 for "Grateful Dean I Have Known" and in 1974 for "Little Enis Pursues His Muse." The latter appears in the anthology but under McClanahan's preferred title: "Little Enis: An Ode on the

Intimidations of Mortality,” which clearly reflects his irreverent wise-cracking personality. His books include *The Natural Man* (a novel), *Famous People I Have Known* (a serio-comic autobiography), *A Congress of Wonders* (three novellas), and *My Vita, If You Will* (a miscellany of previously uncollected fiction, non-fiction, reviews, and commentary). He has taught English and creative writing at Oregon State University, Stanford University, the University of Montana, the University of Kentucky, and Northern Kentucky University. He has also been awarded a Wallace Stegner Fellowship, two Yaddo Fellowships, and an Al Smith Fellowship.

According to Wikipedia, McClanahan has frequently thanked Northern Kentucky University for firing him as it allowed him the opportunity to finish *The Natural Man*, which he completely rewrote from first to third person. When I included this fact in my introduction to a reading that Ed gave at The College of Wooster last March, he smiled and nodded, clearly an affirmation of Wikipedia’s attention to the truth.

McClanahan’s writing can be described as autobiographical fiction/humorous memoir. The William Maxwell epigram that introduces the anthology suggests that McClanahan sees little fundamental difference between the two: “If any part of the following mixture of truth and fiction strikes the reader as unconvincing, he has my permission to disregard it. I would be content to stick to the facts if there were any.” No matter what he’s writing, he sees it through the veil of the foibles of human kind, an Aristotelian extravaganza of humans acting badly. His best writing leaves no prisoners, and that includes himself. In the Kesey-Genet essay, Kesey comes across as a pompous blow-hard who tries to school

the Panthers; Genet is a shrimpy, bald foreigner who hypocritically castigates capitalism; the Panthers self-impressed military cartoons; the university faculty so silly that they deserve names such as Cheesewitz and Mackrelham; and McClanahan a fence-sitter extraordinaire who doesn't even have the courage to toss his replacement draft card into the wastebasket for ritual burning at a 1968 anti-war rally – he surreptitiously throws in his fishing license.

The writing, whether labeled fiction or non-fiction, projects what some have described as a documentary quality, and there is a distinct way in which McClanahan's style provides a highly detailed, realistic portrait of specific moments in history, such as the late sixties LSD culture and the early nineties waning of the sixties mystique. But there is nothing *Nanook of the North* about his writing, except for the staged nature of it. More than anything else, the collection showcases McClanahan as a true descent of Johnson J. Hooper, Artemus Ward, and Mark Twain, one who with great skill and verve sustains the oral American folk culture in fine literary guise.

All the selections, which provide an autobiographical survey of McClanahan's life from his teenage years to more recent times, rely on tropes and trellises of folk narrative, such as highly structured plot sequencing, jokes, magical devices, puns, onomatopoeias, frame stories, and satirical jabs at the larger society as well as folk cultures. Local color abounds, from Berkeley's Perry Lane, where McClanahan met Kesey et al., to Port Royal, Kentucky, and environs, McClanahan's home territory. Colloquial voices dominate (e.g., "I grew me a mustache and a big wig" 39; "dat ole debbil Mr. Mortality"

197; “fer crissakes” 203; “*Any-hoo*” 38; “Eye-talian Spanish” 56), representing many registers and creating a sense of folkloric immediacy. The oral tradition of a voice of naïve wonder emerges through these registers as well as through baroque descriptions that focus the narrative on the visual image deftly woven into a peritactic style with coordinating conjunctions (e.g., “Right then it wouldn’t have surprised me in the least if Old Blue himself had come dancing out on Enis’s knee, spiffy as Mr. Peanut, with a little top hat and a monocle and a tiny black bow tie and a walking stick, Stage-Door Johnny Blue doing a springtly buck-and-wing to the tune of “Fit as a Fiddle,” . . . [67]).

However, the vernacular is consistently entwined with high-brow diction and grammar (“So it came to pass that over the years Harry’s dedication to pedagogy eventually eroded to such an extent that when his mother first hinted, in a letter, that he might want to consider taking early retirement and coming home to Kentucky to go into the antiques business with her, he found himself, he confided to his office mate Gil Burgin, seriously entertaining the possibility” – 109). The effect, as in the following from “Juanita and the Frog Prince,” is a comic bark at both high and low, with high taking the brunt it of:

I was that Miss Gantley, Juanita reminds herself grimly as she feeds another pair of coveralls to the wringer, Miss Gantley the eighth-grade homeroom teacher, which was just plain j-e-double-l-o-u-s when Juanity came back for her second year in either grade bigger in the bustline than old puny-tits Miss Gantley her own self, and when Sharky Vance tried to feel of them in the cloakroom, and she kicked him in his textacles the way her own daddy told her to before he went and died of

scleroisis of the liver, Miss Gantley sent her—Juanita!—to the office with a note that said that *she* was a bad influent! (79)

Akin to a romp through *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, McClanahan's anthology presents a panoply of folk types, despite the focus on real world figures such as Kesey, Genet, and Cassady. The very names, including Mackrelham, Cheesewitz, Mademoiselle Deadbolt, Reverend Hoakem, Dr. Peckler, Two-Nose Jukes, Bobby One and Bobby Two, are straight out of the flat, yet deadly, humor of in-sider folk characters taking aim at the unsuspecting "other" who thinks he or she is morally superior. Amongst these types we have the Trickster and Man of Words (Kesey plays these roles a number of times); the Bumpkin (McClanahan, aka "Clamhammer the Redeemer," plays this role many times!); the Whore with Heart of Gold and the Wise Old Woman, alongside the empty-headed Young Woman and her ubiquitous beau, the Vapid Young Buck (McClanahan plays this role as well). In combination, the types mock not only 1950s academic culture but also institutions such as the family, artist, teenage clique, law, government (including the Smithsonian Institution), and public relations industry. In true American folkloric fashion, the little guy and gal emerge as winners—of sorts. No pot of gold exists at the end of their rainbows, but they're at least wily enough to end up one step ahead and at least two steps smarter than where they started.

Most noticeable, however—and that which places McClanahan squarely in the grand Twainian tradition of literary folklore—is McClanahan's fondness for narrators who know that they are speaking to an audience. Much like oral storytelling, McClanahan's

narrators not only speak but also, and more importantly, *perform* for the audience, drawing explicit attention to the act of story telling. Consider, for example, the following three passages from the anthology:

“Well, from this point forward our story—okay, *my* story—will progress at a greatly accelerated pace.” 36;

“When I was twelve years old (Stop me if you’ve heard this) 127; and

“Do I hear someone out there muttering that all this seems a bit. . . well, old hat? Permit me to remind you, friends, that in the mid-1960s the chapeau was brand-spanking fresh-off-the-rack new, and that the Acid Tests spawned. . . Life As We Know It” 192.

This trope is so essential to all kinds of oral storytelling, both historically and globally, that one suspects that McClanahan’s narrators know they’re addressing a real flesh-and-blood audience, not the abstract “implied reader” of modernist rhetoric. This may actually be more than a wishful articulation of the intentional fallacy on my part, since, as McClanahan has told me, he found his literary voice in the context of an audience of real readers.

Here’s the story: Years ago, he was scheduled to have some minor surgery, and on the day of the surgery his doctor prescribed a healthy dose of Demerol. Now Demerol, mind you, belongs to the chemical family known as narcotic analgesics, which can be habit

forming and drastically alter the way the body feels pain. If you look up Demerol on the National Institute of Health web site, you'll find that the drug carries with it a suitcase full of side-effects, such as sweating, confusion, vomiting, flushing, and paradoxically, extreme calm. For reasons that this storyteller can't remember, the surgery was postponed for a day. But not the effects of the Demerol! To kill time, Ed started to write, and in his Demerol-induced state of freedom from inhibitions he began writing for his friends in Berkeley – a sympathetic group that he knew would be eager to hear his words. They were the audience to whom he was telling his stories – real people in real time. Voila! The Voice of the Clamhammer was born.

It's a great voice, about a great time in American history. And it's conveyed through the oldest literary genre that we have. Who knows how much longer the oral folk tradition will last, what with the viral nature of our current post-literary world of cyberspace. So for those who care at all about the intersections of orality and literacy—and the interstices where Beat meets Hippie—Ed McClanahan's hilarious and socially disarming writing deserves all the attention we can give it.

#### Works Cited

Berry, Wendell. *Farming: A Handbook*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970.

