

Gurganus to return for fundraiser

Rocky Mount native Allan Gurganus considers himself the luckiest person in the world.

He once described that person as "a novelist who is born into a small, shabby-genteel town on a major railway connection with 24,000 souls and a bird sanctuary and whose grandfather owns a farm and whose father owns a business — whose family is mildly prosperous but not rich, which means you can leave the town."

He'll be back in Rocky Mount on Friday, Nov. 19, to participate in an evening fundraiser at North Carolina Wesleyan College.

Gurganus will read from *The Practical Heart*, a new novella to be published by NCWC Press, at a reception honoring Daisy Thorp, retired Wesleyan art instructor. Specifically, the funds will contribute to the creation of an Outsider Art Gallery in the new fine arts complex.

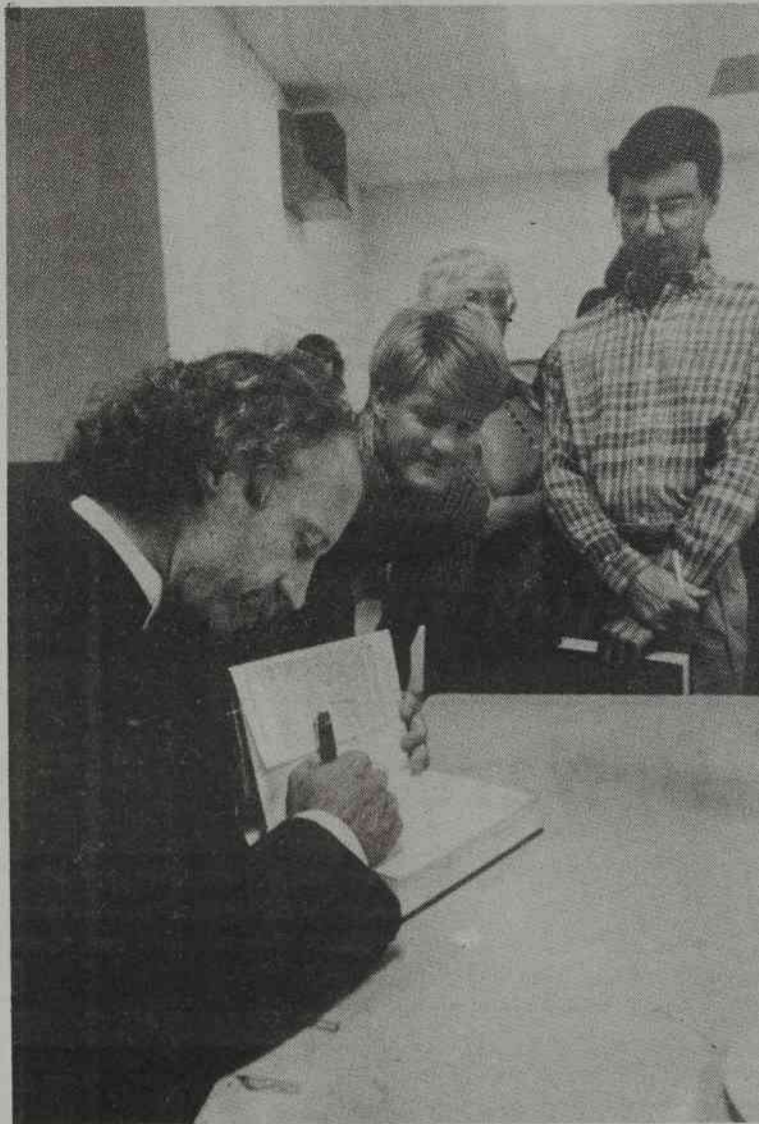
According to Wesleyan President Dr. Leslie H. Garner, Jr., "There is no more fitting way to honor Daisy's contribution to our students, colleagues, and community than in the creation of a gallery that will give us space to display and study a fine collection that, without Daisy, might not have come to Wesleyan."

Tickets for this event are \$150; more information can be obtained from Sylvia Parker at 985-5110. Every donor of \$150 will receive an inscribed copy of *The Practical Heart*.

Friday afternoon, from 3-5 p.m., Gurganus will be inscribing copies of *The Practical Heart* at the Book Shoppe in Englewood Square.

The Practical Heart is a work in two parts. Part one appeared this past summer as a *Harper's Magazine* folio, receiving wide acclaim. Complicating that account of one family member's quest to be painted by John Singer Sargent, Gurganus added a retelling of his actual relation's more unvarnished misadventures. The result is an ambitious, immensely readable meditation on history itself — history as family history.

The Practical Heart is to be published in a handsome letterpress edition printed by Heritage Printers in Charlotte and designed by Peter Andersen of Alfred A. Knopf. It is limited to 1,000 copies, each numbered and signed by the author, featuring family photographs of the principals, including Singer Sargent. The com-



WRITER RETURNS — Popular writer Allan Gurganus, here signing books on a previous Wesleyan visit, will return to Wesleyan College and his native Rocky Mount for a fundraising reading on Nov. 19.

plete novella will appear in Gurganus' forthcoming collection of novellas, *Angels Are Among Us*, to be published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1994.

Of *The Practical Heart*, Gurganus said, "In 1888, my mother's grandfather moved from Scotland to Chicago in search of the Wild West. He brought along his wife and children. On the eve of their return to Scotland, after a rough stay in what was then a very wild town, my great-grandmother was struck by a runaway streetcar. This rendered her an invalid for life.

"In this way, I became an American, not a Scot," he said. "Cut off from the homeplace and the pleasures of their comfortable former life, this little band adapted in ways both natural and grotesque. Their lives are changed forever by this single mishap. *The Practical Heart* is my tribute to them across the boundaries of time and facts. It is intended as a gift to my dead."

Gurganus said he appreciates

the way North Carolina Wesleyan College Press treats his works.

"One of the many reasons I love doing chapbooks with the North Carolina Wesleyan College Press is how Terry Smith allows me to shape every detail of the book," he said. "Most writers have no hand in how their works appear, and both book and author suffer as a result.

"Peter A. Andersen, who supervises my works for Knopf, designed the new work. He is a brilliant artist," Gurganus added. "On *The Practical Heart's* cover, we use my Fraser family's tartan plaid; we show the jackets of the very cowboy novels that brought my professor great-granddad to America in the first place.

"A writer cares as much how his book appears as any mother worries how her children look on their day of First Communion," Gurganus said. "Publishing with NCWCP is one way I remain close to Rocky Mount — the source of so much of my outlook, ethos, and energy."

"The ongoing health of the College remains the truest gauge of Rocky Mount's continuing energy and imagination," he said. "Both seem to be thriving. It's a joy to feel connected to both."

Gurganus' works have been discovered by the movie industry. CBS is now shooting his 1989 best-selling first novel, *Oldest Living Confederate Widow Tells All*, at ante-bellum plantations and a small town in Georgia. The cast includes Donald Sutherland as Captain Marsden, Ann Bancroft as Lucy old, Diane Lane as Lucy young, Blythe Danner as Lucy's mother, E.G. Marshall as Captain Taw, Gwen Verdon as Lucy's friend, and Cecily Tyson as the widow's best friend, the freed slave Castalia.

Gurganus will appear as a conference officer with two lines of dialogue. "But I wrote them," he said, "and they're spoken from a fine horse while I wear an authentic uniform."

Joanne Woodward has just optioned his story from his second book, the collection of stories and novellas, *White People*. The tale, "Nativity, Caucasian," chronicles the birth of a baby at a bridge party. Woodward intends to act in and direct the project for the Arts and Entertainment network.

"I feel sure that Woodward will get all the cloisonné ashtrays absolutely right," Gurganus remarked. "She's from a good Southern family, after all."

Finally, *The Practical Heart* is being developed as a feature film by Paramount's Mirage Pictures — produced by Sidney Pollack's company, with the original treatment by Gurganus himself.

Gurganus' first two books have been greeted with both prizes and praises, among them the Sue Kaufman Prize, awarded by the American Academy of Arts and Letters for the best first work of fiction in 1989, the 1991 *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for Fiction, and the Southern Book Award in the fiction category presented by the Southern Book Critics Circle.

Of *Confederate Widow*, Kirkus Reviews called it "a modernist version of *Gone With The Wind*," Its author thought of it as "a celebration of the durability of the self." No less a critic than Harvard University's Henry Louis Gates, Jr. said of *White People* that it "collects short stories and

novellas Gurganus has published over the past two decades, and they suggest that he can do pretty much whatever he sets out to do as a writer."

Underlying all of Gurganus' fiction is a fundamentally moral vision of human life. "Our times are amoral," he said. "In recent years we have turned away from a sense that we are all responsible for each other. But I believe we are. That moral frame, which is visible in novels, shows how the deeds of one member of a community have a continuing impact on the lives of other members. This moral vision has been out of fashion for a long time, but it is essential."

NCWC Press Director Dr. Leverett T. Smith is enthusiastic about the Press' association with Gurganus and *The Practical Heart*.

"It's really wonderful to be able to publish something by a local author who's also both nationally known and a distinguished writer," he said. "Our association with him is really the basis on which we've built the Press."

In 1988, the NCWC Press published as its second book Gurganus' *Good Help*, a chapter from *Confederate Widow*. This was followed in 1990 by *Blessed Assurance*, a limited chapbook of the concluding novella from *White People*. Though *Good Help* is long out of print, copies of *Blessed Assurance* are still available for \$20.

Gurganus does more than write fiction. His essays have appeared on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* and in *Granta*. His political commentaries have aired on PBS' "MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour" and CBS' "America Tonight." He is the recipient of two grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, an Ingram Merrill Grant, a Danforth Scholarship, and Stanford's Wallace-Stegner Fellowship.

Gurganus attended the public schools in Rocky Mount and was vice president of the high school student body in 1965. Thereafter he served on the USS Yorktown during the Vietnam War and was educated at Sarah Lawrence College and the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

He has taught at Duke, Stanford, Iowa Writers' Workshop, and Sarah Lawrence College. He lives in Chapel Hill and New York City.