

Dr. Bernice Harris, Acclaimed Author, Claimed By Death

Dr. Bernice Kelly Harris, acclaimed author and playwright of Seaboard and well-known as the teacher of the Chowan College Creative Writing Class since the spring semester of 1963, died Sept. 13 in a Durham convalescent home where she had been a patient for five months.

Her death has prompted numerous tributes, both to Dr. Harris as an individual of warmth, and compassion and love for her eastern North Carolina, and as one of the state's greatest writers, in company with Thomas Wolfe, according to one editorial.

But one of the finest tributes was delivered by Chowan's president, Dr. Bruce E. Whitaker, who conducted the funeral of Dr. Harris. His remarks are printed elsewhere on this page as is an editorial that appeared in the Raleigh NEWS AND OBSERVER on Sept. 15. Dr. Whitaker was instrumental in encouraging Dr. Harris to begin the Creative Writing Class at Chowan.

Winner of the Mayflower Cup for Fiction and the North Carolina Award for Literature, Dr. Harris wrote always of the simple people of her eastern North Carolina.

Her short stories were published in national magazines and her novels were published in this country and abroad.

Her first novel, "Purslane," was the first novel ever published by the University of North Carolina Press. Her second novel, "Portulaca," was published by Doubleday after the publisher sent a representative to the small eastern North Carolina town of Seaboard, near Roanoke Rapids, to find her.

Other novels were "Sweet Beulah Land," "Sage Quarter," "Janey Jeems," and "Hearthstones." Many readers consider her moving autobiography "Southern Savoury" to be her best work.

She was born in the Mount Moriah community in Wake County and received a degree from Meredith College in nearby Raleigh. She went to Seaboard in the northeast part of the state near the Virginia line as a school teacher and there she met her husband, the Herbert Kavanaugh Harris. She is survived by a number of nieces and nephews.

Since 1963, she had been associated with Chowan College. The Creative Writing Class, under her patient and wise tutelage, spawned numerous authors of poems, plays, narratives, essays, short stories and novels.

Writing careers for a number of area residents were launched by the Class. Her pupils came from many walks of life including teachers, housewives, college students, civic leaders, insurance agents and physicians to name a few. They traveled from their homes in Murfreesboro and surrounding communities in North Carolina and Virginia to meet one night each week with their beloved and respected teacher.

To each she imparted a spark that, under her watchful eye and encouragement, led to the writing of many creative works. Through her influence, many individuals and their communities have been enriched by the writings of her students.

One student summed up the appreciation of Dr. Harris' pupils when she said: "Dr. Harris has shown me a new way of creativity, one that has been truly a source of pleasure and enjoyment." Since writing these words, Virginia Hamler Harding of Courland, Va. has published her first book, a novel, WHITE TRUMPETS. It was the first novel produced by a member of the class. The class itself wrote two books as a collective endeavor. The latest was the widely-acclaimed STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN.



Resolution of Appreciation

WHEREAS, The Chowan College Community, North Carolina, and the entire literary world has sustained a great loss in the passing of Bernice Kelly Harris; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Harris has enriched the lives of countless men and women — far and near — through her talents as novelist, poet, and playwright; and

WHEREAS, Patrons of the arts have recognized the uniqueness of her contribution to our literary heritage through the bestowal of multiple honors and credits, including the coveted Mayflower Cup, The Master Playwright Award, The North Carolina Award for Literature, and the Presidency of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association; and

WHEREAS, Mrs. Harris personified and communicated a depth of concern for and an appreciation of the dignity of man and his work on earth through her abilities as a classroom teacher, church leader, and personal friend:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES AND THE

BOARD OF ADVISORS OF CHOWAN COLLEGE, ASSEMBLED IN JOINT SESSION THIS TWENTY-FOURTH DAY OF SEPTEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-THREE:

1. That we honor and pay tribute to the memory of this one who so enriched the lives of many through both her literary production as North Carolina's "First Lady of Letters" and through her personal acquaintance and counsel with men and women of high estate and low.

2. That we pay special tribute to "Miss Kelly" for the unique contribution she rendered Chowan College and the immediate region through ten years of faithful service as distinguished professor of creative writing.

3. That these resolutions be made a part of the permanent records of these two Boards assembled, with copies distributed to Dr. H. G. Jones, Director, Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, State of North Carolina, for Publication or other appropriate usage.

'Miss Kelly' Made Readers Wealthy

The death of Bernice Kelly Harris at 80 deprives mankind's better portion of a marvelous writer, an innate humanitarian and a gracious Christian lady. At this moment it isn't germane to resurrect the impassioned contentions of the late James Street and other competent judges that Bernice Harris, not Thomas Wolfe, is the most gifted novelist ever produced in this state. There is fame enough for each of these rare, disparate talents, on earth and in heaven.

Wolfe went after the whole of existence as if his talent were giant, rhapsodic blotting paper drawing up creation's very innards. "Miss Kelly," as friends and neighbors called her, stuck to the distinctive mores of Eastern Carolina, with all its repressive racism, with all its capacities for ennoblement. And in a series of exquisitely crafted novels, plays and stories, a tiny geographical realm becomes an enduring fictional kingdom, rich, racy and always vital.

"Miss Kelly" laid it on with a trowel. All the indictments of smalltown life implicit in the acid fulminations of E. W. Howe and all the inimical parodies done by Sinclair Lewis are furthered in Mrs. Harris' extraordinary fiction. But the difference is that her novels, plays and stories are leavened with miraculous splendor, with a compassionate humanity for life's rejections that is always alien to Howe and Lewis.

The charming lady is gone, but she has endowed us all with an unblemished heritage. If you want to know "Miss Kelly," to know yourself, turn to "Purslane," "Portulaca," "Sweet Beulah Land," "Wild Cherry Tree Road," "Sage Quarter," "Hearthstones" and by all means, to "Janey Jeems." This truly remarkable novel of a black family is proof aplenty that Bernice Kelly Harris was "a light in the wilderness" years ago, as friends and national critics proclaimed.