



DTH/Charles Carriere

"All my life I have known I would write because it's the only thing I can do." — Max Steele

Max Steele: The write stuff

Many hopeful writers come to UNC each year looking for an outlet for their creativity. And inside the fortress-like walls of Greenlaw Hall, they will find UNC's creative writing department and the man who created it — Professor Henry Maxwell Steele.

When Max Steele arrived at UNC in 1942 as a sophomore transfer from Furman University, he knew that he wanted to become a writer. Over the past 45 years, he has not only fulfilled his dream but he has also helped many other writers to do the same. "All my life I have known I would write because it's the only thing I can do," Steele said. "Most writers I've talked to knew by the time they were 13 — writers don't have much choice, I guess."

Harper's Magazine published Steele's first short story, "Grandfather and Chow Dog," in 1944 while he was a junior at UNC. Since then, his stories have been published by many major magazines including The New Yorker, Collier's, Esquire and Paris Review.

Although well-known for his short stories, Steele first received critical acclaim by winning the Harper Prize for his novel, "Debby," in 1950 which was reprinted as "The Goblins Must Go Barefoot" in 1966. This \$10,000 fellowship enabled Steele to travel to Paris where he studied painting at L'Academie Julianne, and the French language at the Sorbonne from 1951-54. In 1951 he also served as the advisory editor for Paris Review.

Cathy McHugh UNC Authors

Steele returned to his alma mater in 1956 to serve as a lecturer for two years. After lecturing at the University of California at San Francisco from 1962-64, Steele returned to UNC as a writer-in-residence. In 1967, he accepted the position of creative writing director from which he retired in 1986.

"They offered me the position after the only creative writing instructor-in-residence, Gessie Rehder, had died," Steele said. "I initially accepted it on the condition that they allow me to recruit Doris Betts. I had never planned on becoming a teacher — I just sort of fell into it."

"After acquiring Doris Betts, I recruited a great many writers. I liked being able to give young writers a chance to write on their own. Unfortunately, I've also had to fire a great many (teachers) — the department kept cutting back while I kept trying to build it up."

Steele said that his greatest weakness (as creative writing director) is his dislike for the practice of paying speakers to read works of literature to a group. "It has always puzzled me why literate adults would want to sit in a room and be read to," Steele said. "I've never seen the charm in

it, so I've never tried to encourage it in any way. I recognize this as a defect on my part, but now that I'm retired, I don't have to go to them anymore."

As for his greatest attribute, Steele said that he has always tried to see the program from a student's point of view. "I think that's most important because they can get lost so easily."

In 1971, Steele was awarded the Standard Oil Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Award by the University.

Although he officially retired as creative writing director in 1986, Steele has a five-year contract to teach two English courses in alternate semesters. He is currently teaching English 29W and 35, but he hopes to rotate the courses he'll teach, because a teacher gets stale teaching the same classes, he said.

"Now that I'm partly retired, I can just teach, which is what I really like to do," Steele said. "I teach technique because that's the only part of writing that you can teach — or learn."

Jill McCorkle, a successful writer, UNC English teacher, and former student of Steele's, said that she decided to become a writer while

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