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The Wide World of Randall Kenan

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Finding Signs. "It was a very odd experience," he says. "I'd be called up by my editor at Grove and he'd put me through certain paces, then I'd hang up and call Sharlene and put her through the exact same thing."

A Visitation of Spirits was published by Grove in 1989. Although it didn't receive much attention initially, it was impressive enough to allow Kenan to leave the hectic pace of the publishing world and take on the relatively leisurely task of teaching writing at Sarah Lawrence College and Columbia University. "It certainly changed my work habits," he says. "I work much less than I did before!"

It was Kenan's next book, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead*, published in 1992 by Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, that brought him to the forefront of American letters. Not only was the book nominated for the 1992 National Book Critics Circle Award, it won a Lambda Book Award for best gay fiction.

The stories in *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* are told through a multitude of characters and narratives that reveal the imaginary history of Tims Creek—its legendary origins as a runaway slave camp in the swamps and its growth into a thriving agricultural town. Kenan's characters cover the entire spectrum of the community: There's the upstanding, the outsiders, the pillars of church and business, male and female, black and white, gay and straight.

Kenan's literary forebears may have much to do with his ability to encompass so many points of view: He lists Marquez, Toni Morrison, Flannery O'Connor, Yukio Mishima, and even Steven King among them. "I never really saw the necessity of getting into one bed," Kenan says of his literary influences. "I guess I'm promiscuous. I'm attracted to so many different things."

But the first and largest literary influence on Kenan was that of the Bible. "I grew up with this strict Calvinist world view, and anything antithetical or contrary to that was suspect," he says. "So, when I came to school and about

halfway through rebelled against that upbringing, it took a lot of knitting and sewing and suturing to put some view of the world back together. So I think the writing is a way of reconciling that very strong hegemony of thought with this new view of the world, which is that it is essentially existential, absurd and chaotic."

Part of that process includes keeping Tims Creek alive in his work. Kenan has already begun work on another novel with ties to his fictional North Carolina town. But first, he is finishing up an even more ambitious project.

"Right now I am working on a travel book, for lack of a better term, about Black America," he explains. The book, which is under contract with Knopf, is tentatively titled *Walking on Water: A Journey into African America*. Kenan easily becomes engrossed in describing the project.

"I just sort of took off in the summer of '91 and traveled all over the continent," he says. The resulting book "asks questions about what it means to be African American," he says. "So it's a big book!"

"It's an exploration of and a dipping into the diversity within various black communities. There's this idea that we're becoming more and more alike and that we're all becoming bland and milled out. But I think this is opposite from the truth."

During his travels and research, interviewing hundreds of African Americans all across the country, Kenan became convinced that there is no monolithic "black community." "I think that people are becoming more tenaciously local," he says, "and that locality becomes one way that people keep a grip. No matter how much the malls may look alike, what people are motivated by and interested in are very radically different, and geography has a lot to do with it."

As in his fiction, Kenan seems determined to transcend divisive categories. Though it began as a study of black America, he intends *Walking on Water* to go beyond blackness. "I subversively hope," he says, "that this book will really be as much about all Americans as any one group of Americans."

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