

## Memories of ‘Luxor’: Willie Morris on James Jones in Memphis

*After serving in combat on Guadalcanal for about three months, James Jones was evacuated on account of an injured ankle to the States., and arrived at Kennedy Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee in May, 1943. There he met other veterans recovering from their wounds and traumas, and experienced the sometimes wild environment of wartime Memphis. These experiences were the basis of Jones’s final novel, Whistle, which was completed with the assistance of his friend, Willie Morris. This account of Jones’s time in Memphis is excerpted from Morris’ 1978 book James Jones: A Friendship, (currently available in a 1999 edition from the University of Illinois Press.)*

[Jones] was among the first large waves of wounded shipped back from the Pacific to California, and then by hospital train to various points in the States. In what, many years later, would become the novel *Whistle*, there are strong autobiographical echoes in the months he spent in the Kennedy General Hospital in Memphis,

which he would fictionalize as Luxor, and later when he was on Limited Duty at Camp Campbell in Kentucky. He was still reading extensively, and putting notes down on paper, a practice he had continued on Guadalcanal. He had brought some of these notes back with him, and later could hardly read them, they were so caked with mud. There was one small notebook which he kept in those days in Memphis, with a long list of girls and their telephone numbers, and a strange muted comment on one of its pages: “The Army is killing the creativity in me.” Whatever mystery it is that gets a man there, he was twenty-two years old and a writer.

The hospital in Memphis had a “grim and iron-clad mood.” The men did not laugh very much about their wounds, the way they did in *The Saturday Evening Post*. They knew and talked of the less fortunate ones who were blind, or paralyzed, or awaiting amputations. There were two full wards of foot and leg amputations alone from frozen feet in the Attu invasion in the Aleutians, “where some forgetful planner had sent the troops in in leather boots.” Many of the less serious cases,

too, lived with the knowledge that as “retreads” they would eventually be reassigned to new units and sent back to combat in Europe, just as Sergeant Strange would be in *Whistle*.

After a time the walking wounded would get passes from the hospital to go into Memphis. Everything rankled them: the unrealistic war movies which all seemed to have rules like football games, the home-front confidence. It was a different America altogether from the one so many of them had left before the war. There was an unexpected affluence everywhere. Everyone had a cynical, knowing grin. Everyone seemed to be getting rich. In the summer of that year—1943—he was riding on a street bus and heard one plant worker say to another: “If this son-of-a-bitching fucking war only lasts two more years, I’ll have it made for life.” And he could not get angry at the man. He felt he understood

See page 11 for the program of the 15<sup>th</sup> Annual James Jones Literary Society Symposium, Memphis, October 8, 2005

# THE JAMES JONES LITERARY SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Vol. 14, No. 2  
Summer, 2005

## Editor

Thomas J. Wood

## Editorial Advisory Board

Dwight Connelly  
Kevin Heisler  
Richard King  
Michael Mullen  
Hugh Mulligan  
David Nightingale

The James Jones Society Newsletter is published quarterly to keep members and interested parties apprised of activities, projects and upcoming events of the Society; to promote public interest and academic research in the works of James Jones; and to celebrate his memory and legacy.

Submissions of essays, features, anecdotes, photographs, etc., pertaining to the author James Jones may be sent to the editor for consideration. Every attempt will be made to return material, if requested upon submission. Material may be edited for length, clarity and accuracy. Send submissions to:

Thomas J. Wood  
Archives/Special Collections, LIB 144  
University of Illinois at Springfield  
P.O. Box 19243  
Springfield, IL, 62794-9423  
[wood@uis.edu](mailto:wood@uis.edu).

Writers' guidelines available upon request and online at the James Jones Literary Society web page:

<http://jamesjoneslitsociety.viu.edu/>

Information on the James Jones First Novel Fellowship:

<http://www.wilkes.edu/humanities/jones.html>

him—the man was just another worker who remembered the Depression. Some of the overseas men went back on crowded buses or trains to their towns on furlough, and often got drunk and in trouble because they could not talk with anyone, most of all their families. And they would return to the hospital glad to be once again among those who had lived through the same things they had. The future author knew about Greyhound rides home during these war years, and would write of one such journey in *Whistle*:

The ride itself was a long half-waking nightmare of heavy-smelling bodies, paper-wrapped bologna sandwiches, swollen feet, toilet stops, beers, half pints of whiskey, oncoming headlights flashing uneasily over the sleeping faces in the darkened interior.

When they were out on passes, they frequented the Peabody Hotel on Union Street (right down the way from the Gayosa, where Nathan Bedford Forrest had astounded the Northern officers during the occupation of Memphis by riding his horse through the lobby)—a place I myself remember well from my trips to Memphis when I was growing up 150 miles away down in Yazoo City, Mississippi.

The great influx of servicemen had taken it over from the local gentry, and at just about any time of day or night there were always between half-a-dozen and a dozen wide-open drinking parties going in the rooms and suites, where it was easy to get invited simply by

walking down the corridors on the various floors until you heard the noise.

Money was not much of a problem. Nor were women. There was always plenty of booze from somebody, and there were also unattached women at the hotel floor parties. You could always go up to the Starlight Roof and find yourself a nice girl and dance with her awhile and bring her down. Everybody screwed. Sometimes, it did not even matter if there were other people in the room or not at the swirling kaleidoscopic parties. Couples would ensconce themselves in the bathrooms of the suites and lock the door.

When they could get away from the hospital, it was to the parties in the Peabody that the wounded members from the old company—Winch, Prell, Strange, Landers—would come in *Whistle*.

As with many of the overseas men, he got eleven months' back pay at a corporal's rate. With this, and an allotment he had been sending home to a bank for quite a few years to go to college on when he got out of the Army, he had more than four thousand dollars. He and two others from the hospital rented a suite in the Peabody at full rates for two months. When they were unable to leave the hospital, they gave the keys to someone else. Their suite became one of the big party spots. Most of the girls who flocked to their suite were defense plant workers from small towns in the middle South who had migrated to Memphis for the jobs and the excitement.

*continued on page 6*

## **Anne Campisi Wins First Novel Fellowship On Her Third Try**

It's an ancient motto and Anne Campisi of St. Paul, MN, put it to good use this year: "If at first you don't succeed, try again."

A former finalist in the annual James Jones First Novel Fellowship competition, Ms. Campisi now has been named the 14<sup>th</sup> winner of the award for her work, "The Lime Tree."

She will receive the \$10,000 first prize at the 2005 JJLS symposium in the Memphis Peabody Hotel on October 8.

The fellowship contest, which is co-sponsored by the Humanities Division at Wilkes University in Pennsylvania and the James Jones Literary Society, drew more than 600 entries this year. Final judges were former Wilkes vice-president Dr. J. Michael Lennon; Dr. Patricia Heaman, Professor Emerita of English at Wilkes and JJLS director Kaylie Jones.

Ms. Campisi, who grew up in the San Francisco Bay area before moving to Minnesota, submitted "The Lime Tree" manuscript to the contest three times in all, revising it twice before it finally earned the top honor. She currently is working on a nonfiction book about Syria, where she recently traveled.

Dr. Lennon's description of the Campisi novel:

"Set aboard a prison ship en route to Australia in the late 1700s, and later in Australia, (it) is a multi-stranded narrative which traces the miseries of British and Irish convicts sent to the penal colony on the far side of the world.

"It also is a study of a scientist seeking to demonstrate the beneficial qualities of citrus plants for scurvy and other diseases. His cargo of lime trees represents a mission of enlightened hope while, beneath the decks, another tale of betrayal and debauchery as well as amazing charity and friendship unfolds during the long sea journey.

"Campisi's novel is a brilliant re-creation of a lost time presented via a rich tapestry of voices."

Runner-up in the 2005 First Novel competition was Irwin Greenstein of Baltimore, for his novel, "When The World Was Square." Set on the West Coast in the 1950s, it's a story of the Beat Generation, including Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and follows the adventures of a Korean War Air Force gunner and Benzedrine addict, and a woman who survived the Holocaust. Greenstein was a student of Jones's during the novelist's time at Florida International University.

The fellowship was established to "honor the spirit of unblinking honesty, determination and insight into modern culture as exemplified by (the writings of ) James Jones."

The First Novel Fellowship committee welcomes inquiries on the contest. Requests for guidelines should be sent, along with a stamped, self-addressed envelope, to James Jones First Novel Fellowship, c/o Humanities Department, Kirby Hall, Wilkes University, Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766, or via e-mail to [english@wilkes.edu](mailto:english@wilkes.edu). Submission deadline is March 1 of each year.

## **Thomas Horan Winner of the 2005 Jones Creative Writing Award**

Thomas Horan of Murphysboro, Illinois, has been named the winner of the 2005 James Jones Creative Writing Award for his short story entitled "Ivy" in the contest co-sponsored by Lincoln Trail College in Robinson, Illinois, and the James Jones Literary Society.

The annual competition is open to past, present and would-be students at Lincoln Trail.

The 40-year-old Horan, who was raised in Palestine, Illinois, and who once attended Lincoln Trail where he was named Outstanding Literature Student of the Year, currently is finishing work on his B.A. degree in Creative Writing at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. He also is co-editor of the SIU undergraduate literary magazine. "In between? Well, I've had a lot of jobs including illustrator, actor, salesman and bartender—like a lot of writers," he said.

Horan once was a student in the LTC classes of Diane Reed, the school's current English instructor and chairman of the creative writing competition, but she made clear that she was no way involved in determining the contest winner and didn't know the results until the outside judges handed her their ballots.

Mrs. Reed will present Horan with his \$500 prize at a November assembly in the Lincoln Trail Zwermann Auditorium.

## SMELCER: 'JONES FELLOWSHIP THE TURNING POINT IN MY LIFE'

*With Two Novels Finished and Sold, The Alaskan Native American Ready to Start Work on Number Three.*

CHUGIAK, AK—A year ago, John Smelcer was quite active as a professor at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Anchorage, an English instructor at the University of Alaska Anchorage, the award-winning publisher of the nation's second largest literary quarterly (*Rosebud*) and the author of several short stories about his Native American ancestors in Alaska.

But at that time, he said, his self-esteem was starting to run on empty—something like his bank account.

"If you ever saw me squirming on stage at one of my speaking appearances, it probably was because I couldn't afford clean underwear," he joked.

Then, in a twelve-month flash, his life made a 180-degree turn ... maybe an even larger turn than that.

Last October, Smelcer was selected from among nearly 600 entrants as the 2004 winner of the James Jones First Novel Fellowship, a twelve-year-old competition sponsored by Wilkes University in Pennsylvania and the James Jones Literary Society, for his novel "The Trap."

"The victory in that contest was the most important thing that has happened to me; it was clearly the turning point in my entire life," the 42-year-old



Former JJLS President Dave Nightingale (L) paid an August visit to 2004 First Novel Fellowship winner John Smelcer (R) at the cabin in Talkeetna, Alaska, where Smelcer plans to begin his third novel this October. Smelcer, who lives 100 miles south of the cabin in the northeast Anchorage suburb of Chugiak, hosted Nightingale and his wife for two days. The author's award-winning first novel, "The Trap," will be published in early 2006 by Henry Holt, which will also publish his second novel (still untitled). Bidding for a third novel is still underway.

Smelcer told JJLS Director and former President Dave Nightingale (of Robinson, IL) when the latter and his wife Becky paid a two-day visit to John and his wife Pam and daughter Zara here in August.

“What made it so awesome wasn’t the initial prize money involved (\$6,000) but rather the reputation of the award. The Jones fellowship opened so many new doors for me. It provided so many introductions. And now, in the last year, it has led to a situation where I will have no financial worries for the rest of my life, which is a lot better than being just another starving author.”

The financial avalanche for Smelcer began a month after he received the Jones award: In November, 2004, “The Trap” was accepted for publication by Henry Holt of New York and will be in the bookstores at the beginning of 2006.

“The Trap,” drawn from the lore of the Pacific Northwest Ahtna tribe of the Athabascan clan—of which Smelcer is a member—centers around an elderly Native American who accidentally steps into his own wolf trap line and his grandson, who boards a snowmobile and sets out to rescue the old man.

But Smelcer’s first contract with Henry Holt was just the beginning. In 2005, with the help of an agent recommended by JJLS director Kaylie Jones, the initial financial terms for “The Trap” were discarded and replaced by a more lucrative deal.

Next, Henry Holt recently purchased the rights for Smelcer’s second novel—99 per cent finished but still untitled—for

future publication, probably in 2007.

“My second novel is about a late 19<sup>th</sup> century attempt by the United States government to ‘civilize’ young Native Americans by shipping them off to boarding schools around the country, like the one at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to teach them the ‘proper’ ways of the white man,” Smelcer said. “This novel really was a labor of love because no one had ever written one about this subject before.”

(Note: Steven Spielberg did produce a docudrama on the topic for cable TV, starring Donald Sutherland as the boarding school headmaster.)

With those two novels in the bank, and perhaps a Disney Company movie deal for “The Trap” just over the horizon, the Smelcers suddenly started taking a different look at the new, mid-six-figure home they have been building from scratch on the banks of nearby Peters Creek during the last year.

“We’re saving \$250,000 by building it ourselves,” Smelcer said. “And when it’s finished, we’ll own the whole place outright—no mortgage, not a cent of debt. I look at the dollars we’re spending on the home as if they were payments into a retirement plan.”

Smelcer now is champing at the bit to start on his third novel, the opening chapters of which probably will be created in a somewhat Spartan cabin 100 miles to the north on the Susitna River near Talkeetna. “You could call it either my writer’s camp or my fishing camp; either would be accurate,” he said.

The author refused to discuss the third novel’s content, other than to say: “It will not be about

Native Americans, because I don’t want to become totally stereotyped. However, it could well turn out to be as controversial as *The Da Vinci Code*. And, oh yes, we’re already negotiating with Random House for publication rights and, of course, the advance.”

Busy as he may be these days, Smelcer hasn’t forgotten who buttered his hardtack. He is now a mentor writer in the Wilkes University M.A. Creative Writing Program and will attend the school’s semi-annual residencies in January and June. In fact, he might even stick around in Pennsylvania longer than that.

“That might be a nice distraction-free place to work on my third novel,” he said.

“But then, you drive down the road to the Chugiak post office, face north and—on a clear day—there’s old 20,000-foot Mt. McKinley staring back at you. That’s a tough act to follow.”

### **“From Fear to Eternity” plays in Chicago.**

The latest comedy revue of Chicago’s Second City etc. is “From Fear to Eternity,” a humorous take on the difficulty of truth telling in a world inundated with communication devices. Directed by Second City veteran Sue Gillan

The cast of “From Fear to Eternity” includes Jennifer Bills, Frank Caeti, Matt Craig, Rebecca Drysdale, Ithamar Enriquez and Peter Grosz.

## Jones in Memphis

*continued from page 1*

I often shuddered to think what their trembling fingers might do next day to some piece of armament destined for some poor dogface in the mud of Italy or the Pacific. But in a mass war as mass as our war was a mass, one man couldn't take account of every thing. Besides, if they were cautioned to go home and sober up and get some sleep before going to work at the plant, they would only leave us and go down the hall to the next suite's party on the floor below. And we would be out a girl, and the poor Government Issue in Italy would be no better off.

He knew a fellow in the hospital who had had a hand nearly blown off in the Pacific from a faulty grenade with a short fuse.

When they finally let him out on pass, I went out with him drinking a couple of times. He certainly had a way with women. He was a cheerful, rapacious, malevolent type of a guy, and claimed that because of what the bad grenade had done to his hand, it was his project to screw every riveter, welder, lathe-operator, and fuse-cutter that he could get his one good hand on for the rest of the War. That was to be his revenge. The little I saw of him, it appeared he might realize his ambition.

On the dance roof of the Peabody, the band would end every evening by playing the national anthem. The wounded overseas men from Kennedy

General often would not stand up while it was being played; they felt they had done enough. One night he got into a bloody fistfight with a couple of sailors who challenged him to pay more respect to *The Star-Spangled Banner*. The fight raged out into the corridor and eventually into an elevator, and thirty-five years later this would become one of the most powerful scenes in *Whistle*.

A "wrenching social upheaval and realignment," he noted later of these years, "accounted for an almost total breakdown of the moral standard of prewar U.S. living." While he was based in the Memphis hospital, he spent a brief furlough with his older brother Jeff in Miami Beach.

Platoons and companies of young-looking OCS cadets marched through the golf courses and ritzy shopping areas shouting out old army rhymes to the command "Count off!" In marching rhymes and at the top of their lungs they sang songs like "I've Been Working on the Railroad" and "Roll a Silver Dollar" and "For Me and My Gal." The government had taken over most of the hotels along the beach, for the use of depleted and nerve-shattered flyers who had completed their fifty missions over Europe. Two Red Cross women (working under my brother) served each commandeered hotel, organizing "sing binges" (wiener roasts) and beer busts on the beach, and getting up fishing parties. My sister, having run away from home, worked as a barmaid and elevator operator at the Roney Plaza, lived with a

zapped-out flyer for a while, was married to him for four months, and never saw him again. Once, driving down to Key West on the overseas highway in a borrowed car, he had to pull over to the side and stop and let her drive the rest of the way because the whumps the tires made on the concrete joints of the roadbed sounded so like the flak explosions he remembered over Germany. Men and women every where—a lot of the women with husbands overseas—took what love they could get from each other on a day-to-day basis, and then moved on.

The old morality was changing in Memphis too. The Southern girls were getting liberated, although they probably would not have used the word. He had a girl who worked in one of the defense plants. She lived at home with her parents and two sisters, who worked in defense plants also. No one in the family cared if he slept with her right there in the house just so long as she was on time for the next shift.

I spent the last seven months of 1943 in the Memphis hospital. I was in love at least six times. I learned a lot about living on the home front. When I was shipped back out marked for Limited Duty, my four thousand dollars was gone and all I had to show for it were two tailored tropical worsted officer's uniforms with shoulder straps that I couldn't wear on the post. That, and a lot of memories. Memories I didn't want particularly. It was during a period when nobody wanted to remember things.

When I was a small boy in these years, my father used to take me up to Memphis to see the Ole Miss football games at Crump Stadium in the fall, or the Chick baseball games in the summer. We stayed right down the way in the old Chisca Hotel. We might easily have passed him on Union Street, or in the lobby of the Peabody where we came to look at the crowds, or in Forrest Park by the river where they and their girls had their boozy picnics. Once, years later, in the farm house in Sagaponack when we were talking about Memphis and I was trying to help him remember the name of some streets, I mentioned this to him. "Well, I don't think you'd have liked me too damned much then," he said.

When he was transferred to Camp Campbell, Kentucky, Nashville was their liberty town, but since he was pretty broke, life there was not so flamboyant as Memphis had been. Several months later, in July of 1944, he was mustered out of the Army. He was living alone in the cabin outside Asheville, North Carolina, when he heard the news that the war had ended. He had started working on a novel.

*Copyright 1978 by Willie Morris. Reprinted with arrangement from the author. Used with kind permission of the University of Illinois Press.*

Have you moved?

Planning to move?

Send your change of address to:

James Jones Literary Society  
P.O. Box 68  
Robinson, IL 62454

## “Absolutely Indomitable”:

### Peter Matthiessen’s Reminiscences of Jones from the 1999 Symposium.

*Peter Matthiessen, naturalist, explorer and writer, author of At Play in the Fields of the Lord and the National Book Award Winner The Snow Leopard, first met Jones in New York in 1952. In this piece, edited from the talk he gave at the 1999 Jones Symposium at Long Island University, Mathiessen recalls the many years of their friendship, but particularly Jones’s last days and his race with death to complete his final novel, Whistle.*

I think the first time I ever spent an evening with Jim was with Bill Styron. Whenever they used to give the old National Book Awards; the publisher would send all the young writers around to beef the place up a bit, and Bill and I went with Jim. When we went out there in New York, Jim was assaulted; this was after *Some Came Running*. He’d had the extraordinary reception for *From Here to Eternity*, so now he was really beset by these critics, these book reviewers that came up to him. I suppose they were the meanest of the mean. These people really wanted to snipe at him, just to ask him how he felt after having such a big seller and a well-received book, to have a book that had been received so badly.

And I remember, we got very cross with these people, and we

tried to drive them off Jim like flies. Styron was saying: “Don’t answer them, don’t even answer them!” We already knew about book reviewers by that time, but Jim was amazing. He knew what they were doing; he knew what they were up to. They said: “What were you trying to do in *Some Came Running*? How do you explain a book like that?” And Jim almost had notes in his pocket. He just very earnestly took them on, one after the other. He refused to get mad, and it was amazing, because he did have a temper, but he just somehow had a dignity about it. He didn’t get mad, he didn’t get shrill and strident; he just handled it beautifully. I was enormously impressed. At first, I thought he was naïve, that he just didn’t get the meanness in those questions, like Styron and I did. But Jim had a kind of deceptive naïveté.

I think that before I met Jim, I was in Paris. It was in the old *Paris Review* days; and John Marquand, who was a friend of ours, had a letter from Jim, and he showed it to me. And Marquand, being a very sophisticated sort of east coast person, said: “Look at this!” I think he was torn about laughing at it, because there was also something about it that touched him. In this letter, Jim was describing a letter that he had from a young writer, a young fan. And this fellow had said: “What’s the meaning of life?” very earnestly. And Jim had answered back just as earnestly, and he described this to Marquand as if he’d just discovered an extraordinary truth. He said: “Life has no meaning.” Well, we felt like laughing, it was so very, very earnest. But you know what the

meaning of life is after a while, and you begin to sense that this is really what Jim was after.

He wanted to go very deep, as Bill says, but he was not a stylist at all. Sometimes his efforts to go deep seemed superficially very clumsy. But consider the effect that the book *From Here to Eternity* had on everybody I knew – on writers, on fans -- and myself included. It just knocked me absolutely cold. We didn't care about the style; I mean, who *could* care about the style? You were just tremendously moved. I think Prewitt became the prototype for all the laconic, quiet, mysterious, basically tragic heroes populating almost every novel there is now. They're very common indeed, and Prewitt really had a tremendous influence. I see rickety Prewitts showing up in all kinds of fiction.

Jim could be irreverent, and cynical, but he had the courage to talk earnestly about things like the meaning of life. And Bill was quite right, this would often happen quite late in the evening, when you'd go to Gloria and Jim's house. We'd have a ball, and we'd all get pretty drunk. But Jim, I can remember; would get to the point where he was sort of holding himself up behind his own bar. About that time we'd get into some real deep talk, and he'd want to talk about books and the meaning of life.

I remember a dinner party given by a woman in New York, and we both felt great. We'd had a lot of whiskey, no question about that. Jim was trying to teach me how to – oh, I've forgotten the name of that dance (laughs). He gave up on me as completely hopeless, so I said:

"Well, let's go down to the sidewalk and spar!" I guess maybe this was after he'd done this with Norman. I said: "It'd be really fun, let's just go down there and spar, just for the fun of it!" And he says: "Well, you know, it would be fun, no question about it, really good fun." He says: "But the first time one of us gets hit on the nose, the fun is gonna stop!" So, as a very poor second to doing that, we put a huge ceramic frog belonging to the hostess in her guest toilet. So this frog was peering up at the men who used the toilet.

I think it was probably shortly after that, that Jim and Gloria went to Paris. I hadn't been back from Paris very long – I should never have gone to Paris. I left Paris with a real thing about the French. I thought they were such wonderful people and charming, but I thought there was such meanness towards everything and everybody, especially helpless people and old people, and I got fed up with them. I came home very suddenly after living there for about three years. As a matter of fact, Jim did the same. He suddenly got fed up with Paris. We compared notes on that, how we both suddenly had enough of that kind of attitude.

*The Thin Red Line*, of course, came out in that period, and again, I was knocked out, it was just terrific. And I remember it inspired me to write one of the very first, and pretty near the last fan letters I ever wrote. Jim was teaching at Miami, when I wrote him this terrific fan letter, and he never bothered to answer it. I brought it up with him later. I said: "I wrote you this great fan letter one time." And

he said: "Oh, I never answer." He said: "It's just the biggest waste of time and energy." And I knew he was absolutely right. He kept his eye on the ball; he didn't get distracted by that sort of thing.

---

...I think Prewitt became the prototype for all the laconic, quiet, mysterious, basically tragic heroes populating almost every novel there is now ...I see rickety Prewitts showing up in all kinds of fiction.

---

He was a very gallant man. In that last year or so before, when he was dying, he went on an odd book tour, and I think that really helped speed him along. In those days, I was very arrogant and snotty, and I wouldn't go on book tours. I never had gone on book tours except very recently, now that the publishers are all crying poor-mouth. But I told him: "Don't go on that, you know it's a killing job from what I hear." But he did go, and on a long one, too. But he never complained, he never said: "Oh I shouldn't have done that;" or: "I wish I hadn't done that." He really wanted to talk to people about his book, he really wanted to communicate. He just felt that these were important books, saying "I want to get the message out," and so forth.

So, he then got very sick, and I remember what I think was the last dinner before he left his own house for the hospital, and

it was not very long before he died. And we sort of plotted with Gloria, and we thought up this great dinner. We gave him Steak au Poivre, with a beautiful sauce. Alongside this very hot pepper steak, we had a plate of ice-cold oysters. It was absolutely mind-blowing. And Jim was very, very, happy.

During that supper, he told us a story: he'd come very near death already and more than once. And he described a machine you use for shaking the water off salad. It's an amazing machine. You shake it, and its leaves fly open and close all in order. He was using the machine to describe his own condition, saying: "You know, a few times when every leaf had opened, I thought: 'Oh my God, I only have one left!'" And the last leaf closes -- that was his last hold on life; and he said he really fought and came back and click, and another one, click, and another leaf would open again, and then click, click, he forced it back open again. It was amazing, the way he told it, just an amazing metaphor. He had this ongoing heart condition, and he knew he was going to die. I think he had made his peace with it a long time before because I never heard anything like a complaint or self-pity. He was, in a way, enormously detached from it.

All he cared about was finishing the book *Whistle* that Willie Morris was helping him with: he was a writer to the end. As long as he could do it, he was working on that book. And we were out there at the hospital; we had a gang out in the waiting room. Debbie was out there, I've forgotten who else; people sort of came and went you know. We'd

take turns going in to visit and see him. I have this image of Jim: he was quite a small man in terms of height, quite short in the lower part of his body, so when he sat up in the cranked-up hospital bed, you just saw him from the waist up. And I'll never forget it, he was just kind of pinned on that white, upright bed like a butterfly. By this time he wasn't strong at all, he could hardly move: but he was absolutely indomitable. He gave a smile when you came into the room, and he could talk and so forth -- we even snuck some whiskey in for him; I think Gloria took some whiskey in.

We were having a real vigil, and a wake outside: we were already mourning, and here's this cheerful fellow, and we'd go in there for a hit of good spirits and gallantry, and then go out and mourn again. And then of course, he died. With Irwin Shaw and William Morris, we went to the undertaker's. It was one of them right over here (in Southampton), and there we got his little casket. He'd been cremated, and we took the casket back to my house. I have a little Zen meditation room, and my mother's remains were in a casket there; we hadn't quite buried her yet, either. (As a matter of fact, people come and go in that room. We've had several people in there for a while. We have my old editor; he's been there for about three years now. And I'm kind of anxious for somebody to come and get him!)

But anyway, we stashed Jim up there, it was terrifically moving. Irwin Shaw was a charming, delightful, fellow, but was pretty tough in his way. I never saw Irwin break down until that one time. Willie hadn't either,

but he just broke down and sobbed when we did that. And of course, those of you who were at the funeral, with the bugles, it was quite a thing.

Meanwhile, we had a logistical problem, and that was getting Jim buried. In Sagaponack, there are two graveyards. One of them is an old one right on the highway. It's an old and very pretty cemetery, that hadn't been used in many years. They weren't burying people there anymore. It was a bit overgrown, and little bit seedy. But as it happened, I used to be a commercial fisherman, and there was a guy I used to fish with called Bobby Tillotson. He was a craggy, tough old guy, but with a lot of integrity.

I went down there, and saw that this old cemetery was closer to the Jones's house than the other one was. So I found out that Bobby was the chairman of the graveyard committee. It was probably about eighteen years since this group had met, but he was the chairman of the board. So I went to see him, and I said: "Bob, a friend of mine died recently, and we'd like to see if we couldn't get him buried down here." He said: "Uh-uh, ain't anybody been in here in over a hundred years." He says: "I don't think we're going to go back to that kind of stuff!" He says: "Anyway, it's all taken up here in the front. There's still a few old people that want to put themselves in here." I said: "Well, what about the back? The whole back is practically empty." And he says: "Well, there ain't nothin' but Injuns back there!" He shook his head.

Finally I said: "Listen, I'm serious; this was a real good guy, and a veteran, a World War II

veteran.” This kind of perked him up, and he says: “Well, I’ll have to take it up with the board!” He went back, and he took it up with the board, and he comes back and says: “Well, they want to know if you’re going to bury him?” And I said: “Yup, I’m going to dig the grave.” And he says: “Well, you gotta keep it in line.” He says: “We can’t pay a lot of money out for mowing grass all the time; you’ve got to line him up with them others back there!” “Well, we’ll get him lined up,” I said, “Don’t worry about that.” So he says: “OK, I’ll go back to the board again.” So he went back to the board, reporting about the lawn mower, and then they had to have another meeting, and we were just waiting around, working with Cathy Ann Mosley; Gloria didn’t want any part of the whole thing. So finally, I got back to Bobby and asked: “Bobby, what did the board say?” I’d give my eye teeth to have seen that board meeting, to have been there at that meeting; and Bobby says: “Alright, they’ve agreed to it; we’ll let him in on one condition.” I said: “What’s that, Bob?” He says: “He’s got to be dead!” That’s very old-fashioned “Ponack” humor.

Well, I did dig the grave, and Kaylie Jones and I worked on it, and we had a wonderful burial, with a simple ceremony. And it was a great chance to get to know Kaylie and Jaime even better. It was terrific, and we became kind of a team there, getting this job done. I was grateful to have this chance to get close to the family.

And I just want to close by saying: if you judge Jim by *From Here to Eternity* and *The*

*Thin Red Line* especially, I think he *did* find the meaning of life. That’s the residue, that’s what it comes down to when those books are put away. If you were a snotty critic from Kentucky or someplace, sure, you could shoot him down in terms of his style and stuff. But the meaning just came through, and he thought it through deeply. There was a kind of metaphysical quality: almost as if he wanted to see the religion and the richest elements behind it; and I think he kind of found it. I think that’s why those books are so strong, and why they stick with us -- and why Jim Jones is going to stick with us a lot longer than some of these very fashionable writers today.

**From the Question and Answer Session with Peter Matthiessen:**

Q. You mentioned the metaphysical aspect of Jones’s writing, like he was talking about something transcendental in his experiences with war and life. Is this what he was looking for, and do you think he ever found it?

A. In a way that he could articulate it as such, no, I don’t think so. At least I never saw that kind of thing. But, I had a long and very interesting letter from a young guy who was doing a study on Jim: Steven Carter. He felt there were a lot of parallels in where I was trying to go, and where Jim did too. What I think I sense in *From Here to Eternity*, is that in a way, he did find it. But it should never be named. It should always be kind of an aura in the background. But I don’t think in terms of his phi-

losophy that he ever meant it to get in the way.

Q. What were some of your most memorable speeches Jones gave from his pulpit, at some of the parties you attended? You alluded to it in your address. . .

A. We weren’t giving speeches from the pulpit; we were talking to each other. . . Well, people would get up and make speeches from time to time. I mean, everything happened at those parties. I remember that Norman Mailer and I were having a good time talking one night, but we got kind of drunk, and we thought: “Hey! Let’s go outside and spar!” And we had this plan to do that. But the next thing we knew, there was this terrible squalling, and my girlfriend and his sister-in-law were in the biggest hair-puller you ever saw! And we went in there and cheered them on, and by the time they got through, we’d lost interest in our plans. I think it would have been pretty feeble after that!

*This completes the 1999 Jones Symposium Speaker Series. The past installments in the JJLS Newsletter were:*

**Joseph Heller**

Vol. 9, #2 (Winter 1999-2000)

**Budd Schulberg**

Vol. 9, #3 (Spring 2000)

**Betty Comden**

Vol. 9, #4 (Summer 2000)

**Norman Mailer**

Vol. 10, #4 (Fall 2001)

**William Styron**

Vol. 14, #1 (Spring 2005)

*15th Annual Symposium of the*  
**James Jones Literary Society**  
**The Peabody Hotel Continental Ballroom**  
**Memphis, Tennessee, October 8, 2005**  
Program

- 9:30 to 9:50 JJLS Business Meeting
- 10:00 to 10:05 Welcome and Introductions
- 10:05 to 11:00 Overview of the Life of James Jones  
Kaylie Jones, Author of ***A Soldier's Daughter Never Cries***
- 11:00 to 11:30 Review of the novel, ***Whistle***  
Dr. Judith Everson, Professor Emerita, University of Illinois at Springfield
- 11:30 to 1:15 Lunch Break
- 1:15 to 1:30 Presentation of the 2005 JJLS First Novel Fellowship Award
- 1:30 to 2:00 The James Jones Trilogy: ***From Here to Eternity, The Thin Red Line, Whistle***  
Dr. Michael Lennon, Co-author of ***The James Jones Reader***
- 2:00 to 3:30 Panel: Return of Wounded Soldiers Portrayed in Literature  
Ray Elliott, Author of ***Wild Hands Raised to the Sky***  
Larry Heinemann, Author of ***Close Quarters*** and ***Paco's Story***  
Ron Kovic, Author of ***Born on the Fourth of July*** (tentative)
- 3:30 to 4:00 Book Signings

**Other events:**

Friday, Oct. 7, 2:00 p.m.

Reading by Kaylie Jones, University of Memphis campus

Saturday, Oct. 8, 7:00 p.m.

Celebrity Suite at The Peabody. Reserved for private cocktail party for board and guests

Sunday, Oct. 9, 9:30 a.m.

Board Meeting in the Celebrity Suite (Focus on 11/06 Film Festival)

11:30 a.m.

Tour of Kennedy Hospital for board members and guests

