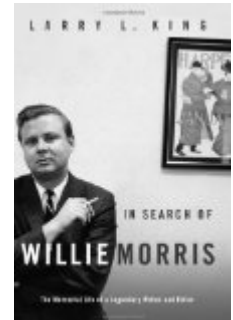


**Larry L. King.** *In Search of Willie Morris: The Mercurial Life of a Legendary Writer and Editor.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2006. 353 pp. \$26.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58648-384-5.



**Reviewed by** John M. Coward

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When Willie Morris ascended to the editor's desk at *Harper's* in 1967, he was perhaps the brightest star in American magazine journalism. At thirty-two, he was the youngest editor in the magazine's 117-year history--and perhaps its most audacious. A small-town Mississippi boy of prodigious literary talent, Morris was also a painfully complex man ill-suited to the editor's chair. In the first place, he was an individualist in a business that required teamwork. He hated meetings. He avoided office correspondence. Morris was also an inveterate raconteur, far too fond of the bottle to become a stalwart of the magazine industry.

But Morris loved *Harper's* and he was determined to re-energize the venerable publication. Morris also loved writers and, in the late 1960s, he nurtured his authors and made *Harper's* required reading for the *litterati*. Under Morris's stewardship, *Harper's* published important fiction and literary journalism by the era's leading lights: Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Joan Didion, Philip Roth, Alfred Kazin, David Halberstam, William Styron, Pete Axthelm, Gay Talese, Sara Davidson, Larry McMurtry, Bill Moyers, and many others.

For a glorious cultural moment, *Harper's* and its brilliant young editor were the talk of New York publishing. Morris dined at Elaine's and partied with the likes of Lauren Bacall, Leonard Bernstein, and Mickey Mantle. Larry L. King tells of one Manhattan party where Senator Ted Kennedy mistook the shirt-sleeved *Harper's* editor for a bartender and asked him for a scotch and soda. Morris complied--prompting a Kennedy apology once the laughing stopped.

Larry L. King, Morris's long-time friend (and occasional antagonist), tells these stories and more in this clear-eyed biography of Willie Morris, a magazine editor who in many ways embodied the idealistic fervor of the Sixties. King, a Texan best known for his play, "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," was one of the first four hires Morris made at *Harper's*. (The other three were Halberstam, John Corry, and Marshall Frady.) Morris, it is clear, had a talent for spotting talent. After *Harper's*, Morris went on to befriend a host of established and novice writers, including Robert Penn Warren, William Styron, George

Plimpton, Barry Hannah, John Grisham, Winston Groom, and Donna Tartt.

Morris also loved his native South. As a child of the 1940s in Yazoo City, Morris came of age in a Tom Sawyer world, rich with boyhood adventures he would romanticize in his acclaimed mid-life memoir, *North Toward Home* (1967), and other books. But Morris's home life was not at all romantic. Drawing on interviews, his own knowledge of the Morris family, and *Taps* (2001), Morris's posthumous autobiographical novel, King describes a household that held "too many secrets, too many problems unspoken, unacknowledged and unresolved" (p. 3). Willie's father, Rae, was an emotionally distant man who drank. His overbearing mother, Marion, fretted about her social status and nagged her son mercilessly even as an adult. The turmoil of Morris's boyhood plagued him all his life, King suggests, contributing to Morris's many erratic episodes.

Despite this upbringing, young Morris proved to be an excellent student with a knack for storytelling. In high school, he edited the school paper and worked as a sportswriter at the *Yazoo Herald*. Yet Morris's white, middle-class boyhood also insulated him from the racial earthquake that would soon rock the so-called "Mississippi way of life" (p. 9). Morris's intellectual awakening owes much to an unexpected bit of advice from his father: "get the hell out of Mississippi" (p. 11). Morris's chance came when he was accepted at the University of Texas, where he excelled both socially and in the classroom. In Austin, King writes, Morris was something like "another bright-eyed, personable, talkative young man out of a small southern town, one William Jefferson Clinton" (p. 18).

Morris's campus activities paid off when he was elected editor of *The Daily Texan*. Fired with the bravado of a self-righteous undergraduate, Morris shook up Austin's sleepy political culture. *Texan* editorials browbeat the governor and the state's all-powerful oil lobby. Morris's editorials,

King reports, even managed to shame the legislators "for permitting rich Texas to lag near the bottom of states in care for the aged, the infirm, and the children of the poor" (p. 25). Morris also attacked new natural gas legislation—despite the fact that the university profited from the tax breaks in the bill. University of Texas officials censored his piece. Morris responded by running a blank space on page one with the headline, "This Editorial Censored." Other college papers and some dailies published the editorial, making Morris, in King's words, "a brave young martyr—a literary David taking on a crassly commercial Goliath" (p. 27).

Morris topped off his college career by winning a Rhodes Scholarship. Yet Oxford proved a difficult place for Morris. Perhaps he was homesick, King surmises, or perhaps he was simply lonely. Whatever the problem, Morris rushed back to Yazoo in 1958 as his father was dying of cancer. After Rae's death, Morris returned to Oxford, this time with his new bride, Celia Buchan. If Morris hoped that Celia's presence would make him happy in England, both parties soon found out otherwise. As newlyweds on the transatlantic cruise, Celia later wrote, Willie "would take to his bed and throw up an impenetrable barrier of silence" (p. 39). In retrospect, King concludes that Morris was probably clinically depressed, though few people saw this at the time.

Morris's success in Austin provided the link to his next job, editing the crusading populist weekly *The Texas Observer*. *Observer* editor Ronnie Dugger, also a former *Texan* editor, was intellectually and physically exhausted after years at the helm and asked Morris to take over. One of Morris's main contributions to the *Observer* was humor, King notes, something Dugger's *Observer* usually lacked. Morris's rising reputation soon brought him to the attention of Jack Fischer, editor-in-chief at *Harper's*. Fischer brought Morris to New York in 1963, grooming the young Southerner as his replacement. By 1965, as executive editor,

Morris produced a special issue on to the South with essays by Walker Percy and C. Vann Woodward as well as three black writers, Arna Bontemp, Louis Lomax, and Whitney M. Young Jr. But as King points out, Morris missed the chance to include either black militant or women writers.

Morris also published 45,000 words of William Styron's soon-to-be controversial novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), signaling that *Harper's* was, in King's words, "serious about counting for something in the court of public opinion, and thus influencing events" (p. 80). King also tells how Morris commissioned Norman Mailer to report on a massive anti-Vietnam War rally. Morris stuck with Mailer even as the article ballooned from its 10,000-word limit to 90,000 words. But Morris loved the piece, devoting the entire March 1968 issue to "On the Steps of the Pentagon." It turned out to be the longest article in the history of magazines, longer even than John Hersey's "Hiroshima," published by *The New Yorker* in 1946. The book version of the article, *The Armies of the Night* (1968), won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. *Harper's* writers produced a string of other important articles in the Morris years, including Axthelm's "The City Game," about basketball as an escape for young blacks (1970), and King's own "Confessions of a White Racist," which became a book and a finalist for the National Book Award in 1971. In 1970, Morris also published Seymour Hersh's important investigation, "My Lai: The First Detailed Account of the Vietnam Massacre," an article that King, for some reason, does not mention here.

These were heady times for Morris, executive editor Midge Decter (who, King notes, functioned as "the earth mother" for the writers), and others in the *Harper's* orbit. But Morris's unreliable behavior ensured that the successes would not last. King recounts many acrimonious battles between Morris and his boss, John Cowles Jr., over the magazine's expenses (too high) and its circulation

(too low). Not surprisingly, Cowles won those battles, but not without considerable histrionics from Morris. By spring 1971, just four years after taking control at *Harper's*, Morris was out. He did not handle this defeat well. As King tells it, Morris retreated from the world, refusing to take calls or answer letters. He drank. His marriage disintegrated. In time, with the help of his many friends, Morris returned to writing. In 1973, he published a novel, *The Last of the Southern Girls*, which was widely criticized as an inferior version of *Laughing All the Way* (1973), a memoir by Washington socialite Barbara Howar, with whom Morris was having an affair.

Morris, ensconced on Long Island throughout the 1970s, continued writing and drinking, often with James Jones, author of *From Here to Eternity* (1951) and *The Thin Red Line* (1978). Morris's own books during these years were a mixed lot. His *Good Old Boy: A Delta Boyhood* (1980) won him devoted readers in the South. His years with Jones, led to *James Jones: A Friendship* (1978), a book that received a mixed reaction from the critics. Writing from Mississippi in the 1980s, Morris returned to sports—a subject he loved—with *The Courting of Marcus Dupree* (1983), following a gifted African American high school running back from Philadelphia, Mississippi, a town with a notorious racial past. But the book, like the football career of Dupree himself, largely fizzled, though, as King notes, it received kinder reviews in the South than in the "Yankee" press.

Morris's biggest literary payday—an advance of \$135,000—came from another memoir, *New York Days* (1993), an inside account of his glory years at *Harper's*. The book was stuffed with famous names from the 1960s—Dick Cavett, Woody Allen, Tom Wicker, Jerzy Kosinski, Irving Howe, and many more—and it won a positive front-page review in *The New York Times Book Review*. But King, who lived through those days with Morris, argues that Morris pulled his punches in the book, unable or unwilling to confront the personal and

professional failures that haunted that part of his life.

At Ole Miss in the 1980s, Morris finally found a person who could provide the stability he needed. An editor herself, JoAnne Prichard was the perfect companion for Morris, and the couple married in 1990. With JoAnne, King writes, Morris was content, and looked forward to more writing and new books. One of those was *My Dog Skip* (1995), a well-received book that also became a well-reviewed family movie. But the years of abusing his body had taken their toll. Willie Morris died suddenly of a heart attack in 1999, at the age of sixty-four. His writing friends and colleagues were stunned, and the tributes were numerous and elaborate. Whatever his personal failings--and they were numerous--Morris's death proved that his life in letters meant a great deal to a great many people, from Mississippi to New York and beyond.

King's biography reveals Willie Morris as a tormented writer unable to outwit his demons. Brilliant and effusive, Morris could also be maddeningly unreliable and irritating. King, who loved the man, knew this as well as anyone. To his great credit, King has constructed an unsparing but compelling biography that shows Morris as an editor of rare talent, with a sensibility that captured the crusading spirit of magazine journalism in the 1960s. When Morris was in his prime, King shows, he was also a gifted observer of the human condition and a writer who put his whole heart on the page.

Beyond interviews with Morris's family, friends, and colleagues, King's portrait draws on Morris's papers in the Willie Morris Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, John Davis Williams Library at the University of Mississippi in Oxford.

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