

## Was: Jim Hinkle, 1924-1990

Given that Jim chain-smoked, exercised only when walking between the elevator and his car, lunched nearly every day in the booth under the fishtank at his beloved Dookies on shrimp in garlic butter, and worked every day of the week to 7pm—including holidays (I tested it periodically—he was there), most of us worried that Jim, over 60, would drop dead. Yet when news came last December 5 that Jim had fulfilled our most dire fears, everyone was surprised. Somehow we figured he would last through his projects; for those of us who held him dear and knew those projects would last him well until the middle of the next century—if he continued to work those Sundays and holidays—this was our way of knocking wood. Jim was systematically overseeing the fictional facts of his two favorite authors—Hemingway and Faulkner. He has been dead for nearly a year now and I still want to dial his office and see if he might just pick up the phone and answer a question about *The Sun Also Rises*, a book he literally knew by heart, or take a question about Faulkner, an author whose works he knew nearly as well. He is alive in conversations amongst those of us who were colleagues and friends, and most of us figure that wherever he is now, Faulkner and Hemingway are answering some of the questions that he had about their more obdurate passages—goat deals, card games, elusive pronouns. It would be just like Jim to look them up right away. There was never a man with a longer list of questions. And years of methodical and scrupulous research had provided him with a list of answers nearly as long.

For those who knew him only at a distance, he was possibly the most recognizable eccentric at the MLA—always in golf sweaters (all from his professional golfer son, Lon), a crew cut, casual shoes, and cigarette ash on the brink of igniting fabrics and programs; he denied, but resembled and cultivated, a rangy resemblance to Hemingway. Believing deeply in Hemingway's values of manly honor and decency, Jim was the figure in Faulkner and Hemingway studies notorious for posing questions that to the uninitiated sounded like bear-baiting: "Do you have any more reason to think that than you did when you gave that paper 10 years ago?" or, "I don't suppose you know how often trains made that run to Greenville in the twenties, do you?" Sounds daunting, right? Maybe vicious? But it wasn't. More than anyone I have ever met, he really wanted to know what—and how—people knew things. And he couldn't imagine people

not speculating on the same curious and compelling omissions that drove the fiction for him. Finally, for Jim, it was just a matter of getting all the information pooled, reading it again and again and again, and trying out versions; then—there was no deadline—we’d know at least, as he would put it, what we knew. Like his near-favorite character, Ratliff, Jim had settled in for the honor and the privilege of text watching. Ever vigilant, Jim felt his most valuable contribution as a critic and a teacher was knowing—as he read—what he didn’t understand. And for him that’s where the work and fun began. Determined not to settle for approximate readings or shrug off troublesome “minor” passages, Jim was nearly messianic in getting everyone involved in constructing meaning—though he never would have framed it that way.

He was fond of asking teachers of *Sun* who kicked Jake’s leg in an early scene in the novel. Invariably he would get different responses—it’s Frances; no it’s Robert. And if you had a doubt, even for a moment, he had you. Because Jim’s talent was contagious: by teaching us all that until we’d worked every particle of a sentence through, chased every connection down, what we assumed was only that—assumption. Essentially he taught reading—reading to Faulknerians as well as to 300+ students a term who competed to get into a course that would include, for many years, only two novels, *The Unvanquished* and, of course, *Sun*. Students often signed up because it sounded easy; and that was the beginning of the end of their assuming. Moving through the text at about 15 pages a day, he made grades depend on reading quizzes that would challenge professionals—not because they were about details, but because they asked how Faulkner and Hemingway made and moved their worlds. Having taught at San Diego State University for nearly 30 years, he literally taught thousands of students how to read and appreciate the fiction he valued above all.

Unlike most academics, Jim came late to the world of professional meetings, attended every session he could, and he listened. He listened closely and attentively, listening to learn, and to trade finds, and to pass along what all those years of studying closely had revealed to him. He had a way of making ordinary things seem amazing; he’d gone to Virginia and listened to tapes of Faulkner reading his own works so he would know how all those Yoknapatawpha names got said. Guessing on pronunciations seemed to him disrespectful. He published a 20-page essay called “Some Yoknapatawpha Names.” Humble work, no fancy interpretation. But as he would sit in meeting after meeting, clutching his head, doubled over in concentration, listening, he would still routinely hear mispronunciations—which came to amuse and fascinate him. Why would someone give a talk and not find out how to pronounce “Sartoris,” or “insentient.” He had followed routes in all the towns in all the books he esteemed to check on variances between the fictional account of a place and the reality. He’d pestered restaurateurs and clerks about the histories of their establishments. He wanted to get it right; he hated fakes; and he deeply respected knowledge. So if he pinned a speaker with his abrupt and candid query, he was only after information—maybe they’d found out something that would help him. He didn’t worry what people thought about him much and he didn’t have time to wonder about

professional motives. According to legend, Jim, skeptical about critical fashion, once told a room full of his SDSU colleagues that if every word they'd published was put on a barge and sunk in the Pacific, no one would miss it. Funny, but serious—a lot like *Sun*, and Ratliff too. I just reread a response he made to an informal note of complaint I sent him about a special issue of this journal on Faulkner and the military. I wanted to know, for the sake of consciousness-raising, why there weren't any women contributors. His reply was sterling Jim. He told me the proper folk to whom I should direct the complaint and then said he "didn't know how to get women to have something valuable to say. Do you?" It was an enduring debate for all the years I knew him. And one of the last letters (you seldom got only one note from Jim but a barrage—you asked a question and then were assailed for three or four days with notes, follow-ups, clarifications) I got from him captures his vitality, energy, and humor. Paired with Chip Arnold for the *Sanctuary* volume in Jim's mega-reading of Faulkner under contract with University Press of Mississippi, I had been trying to convince Jim of some feminist readings of Temple Drake. I sent him a passage from a radical feminist text on power and this is what he wrote back:

The grasp of reality in \_\_\_\_\_, while it is not exactly insane, seems to me the product of a very nearly insane mind—compared to which mine could stand as an illustrative example of normalcy. . . . I suspect she has seen too many post-midnight movies, or read *Story of O* too many times too literally, or maybe, she was brought up in Iran. Still thanks for sending it to me. It was good for my own occasionally faltering sense of my own reality.

Then followed two highly detailed pages of his progress on his own work on *The Unvanquished*. I hadn't convinced him yet, but he was listening and watching. And in fact one of the last discussions we had on the subject had to do with the possibility of a feminist issue of *The Hemingway Review*. Curiosity, fairness, and an abiding faith in people, in a community of readers who ultimately loved the same books, made Jim the most accessible of all chauvinists.

Because of Jim's obsessive habits of research and communication, all of us have mounds of letters and drafts of his work. Sometimes he leapt right in—"Some more thoughts"; or "I had a lot of time to think while driving up and down and around the Alps and it did wonders for clearing my mind." One note I have asks,

Did you ever get a 20-page letter I sent about three months ago to all Faulkner annotators? Only Kartiganer has ever mentioned receiving it—and one of fifteen is not a big response. My intent was by overkill to forestall [misunderstandings]. . . . It seems that either San Diego's outgoing mail one day didn't all out-go or my overkill operated in a way I didn't intend.

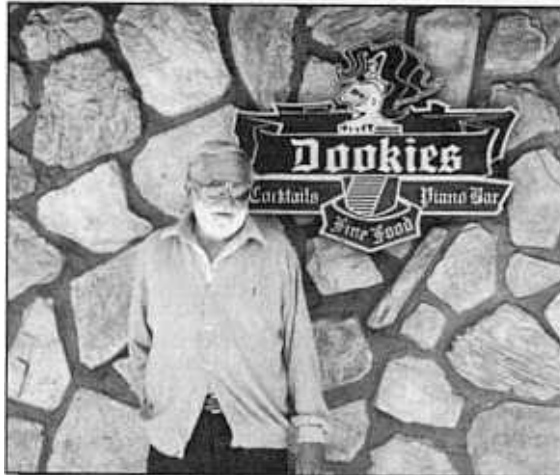
If you ever find yourself in San Diego, skip the ocean and head for Dookies. It is closed only three days a year, Jim noted more than once, with the pleasure near-perfect routines gave him. Take along some Faulkner or some Hemingway and ask for Doc's booth. Get the shrimp if the special isn't good, and remember

Jim and the dimension that forever after we will always miss—as Faulkner explains it in *The Town*:

losing dimension now, onto or rather into the shadow of the little gallery and losing even substance now. And then I heard the door and it was as if [he] had not been. No, not that; not *not been*, but rather no more *is*, since *was* remains always and forever, inexplicable and immune, which is its grief. That's what I mean: a dimension less, then a substance less, then the sound of a door and then, not *never been* but simply *no more is* since always and forever that *was* remains. . . . (T334)

Thank you, Jim, and good bye.

Dawn Trouard



Jim Hinkle at Dookies, May, 1990