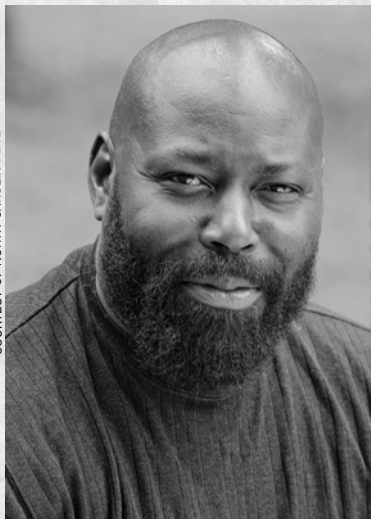


A *Visitation* with **RANDALL KENAN** an interview by George Hovis

with art by Antoine Williams

COURTESY OF NORTH CAROLINA LITERARY HALL OF FAME



Randall Kenan's debut novel, *A Visitation of Spirits* (1989), established him as a major voice in contemporary American fiction; the tragic story tells of a young gay black man's failed attempt to accept his emerging sexuality and follows the efforts of family members to understand their own complicity in Horace's death by suicide. Like *Visitation*, Kenan's second book, a collection of stories, *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* (1992), was set in the fictional community of Tims Creek, based on Kenan's hometown of Chinquapin in Duplin County, North Carolina. *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead* was nominated for the Los Angeles *Times* Book Award for Fiction, was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, and was among *The New York Times* Notable Books of 1992. Kenan is also the author of a young adult biography of James Baldwin (1994), and he wrote the text for Norman Mausekoff's book of photographs *A Time Not Here: The Mississippi Delta* (1997). His travelogue and "spiritual autobiography," *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (1999), was nominated for the Southern Book Award. *Walking on Water* chronicles Kenan's six years of travel across the American Continent visiting diverse communities of black Americans in search of an answer to the question "What does it mean to be black in America today?" His collection of essays *The Fire this Time* (2007) provides further meditation on this question. Kenan also edited *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings of James Baldwin* (2010) and *The Carolina Table: North Carolina Writers on Food* (2016).¹

Kenan is a professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. During the summers he regularly serves on the faculties of Sewanee Writers' Conference and Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Previously, he has taught at Sarah Lawrence College, Vassar College, Columbia University, and the University of Memphis. He was the first William Blackburn Visiting Professor of Creative Writing at Duke University in the fall of 1994. He served as the 1997–98 John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residence at the University of Mississippi, Oxford, and he held the 2003–04 Lehman Brady Professorship at the

ABOVE The portrait of Randall Kenan hanging in the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in Southern Pines, NC, 2018

¹ Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (Grove Press, 1989), *Let the Dead Bury Their Dead and Other Stories* (Harcourt, 1992); James Baldwin (Chelsea House, 1994); Norman Mausekoff and Kenan, *A Time Not Here: The Mississippi Delta* (Twin Palms, 1996); Kenan, *Walking on Water: Black American Lives at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century* (Knopf, 1999); *The Fire This Time* (Melville House, 2007); Kenan, ed. *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings of James Baldwin* (Pantheon, 2010); *The Carolina Table: North Carolina Writers on Food* (Eno, 2016; reviewed in *NCLR Online* 2018). Quotations from these books will be cited parenthetically.

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. Kenan is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a Whiting Writers Award, the Sherwood Anderson Award, the John Dos Passos Award, and the 1997 Rome Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He was awarded the North Carolina Award for Literature in 2005 and in 2018 was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame.

In the following interview, Kenan discusses his life and work, both the fiction and the nonfiction, as well as his literary roots and his family's roots in North Carolina. He also talks about his experiences with editing and what he has learned from others' works. We began this conversation in March 2004, en route from Murray, Kentucky, to Nashville, Tennessee. We picked it up again by email in July 2018.²

GEORGE HOVIS: *In the novella "Let the Dead Bury Their Dead," we learn that the town of Tims Creek, the heart of your fictional universe, was formed as a maroon society. Is there a similar legend about your hometown of Chinquapin? Is the character of Ezra Cross, who reportedly amassed one hundred acres by 1875, based on one of your ancestors?*

RANDALL KENAN: That was completely made up about the origins of Tims Creek, based on the various things I'd read about maroon societies. Actually, only recently are they discovering maroons in the Dismal Swamp that parallel what I made up, which makes me very happy. But the Dismal is much denser than Angola, the swamp closest to where we grew up. As for the parallels between Ezra Cross and my great-great-grandfather Richard Caesar Kenan, who was the manumitted ancestor, I didn't do any actual research. It was only based on received family lore, and the documents are probably there in Liberty Hall, but I figured I'd save that for a later date, for something done in nonfiction. I think he went farther southeast in the county than any of the former Kenan slaves. And his original holdings covered what could have been like ten miles. I don't think that was continuous. Again, this is all very anecdotal; my grandfather would say, "Well, granddaddy owned land."

Within the radius of ten square miles, he owned plots here and there. He didn't own ten square miles. But, again, to the white Kenans, I don't think that was diddly. I don't know how much of that was actually given, how much he worked to pay for. I found out a few years ago, and I haven't pieced this together, but there was a period where he went to Alabama. And I don't know what that was about. Apparently, he went there because there was some sort of big paying job. He moved to Alabama for a while, came back, and bought more land. But he had six children, and a lot of that land was sold and divvied up and dissipated by the time my father was born.

² This interview has been edited for style, clarity, and flow, while being careful to remain true to the voices and intentions of the speakers.