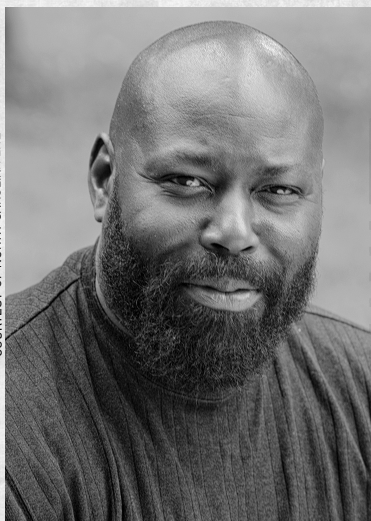


A *Visitation* with RANDALL KENAN

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.