



Randall Kenan with his great uncle Redden Hall, 1966

Smitten by Victoriana:

Randall Kenan's
Down East Boyhood
with Books, Storytelling,
and the Power of Language

by Sheryl Cornett
notes contributed by NCLR

"I write out of a tension between rational and irrational ways of understanding, and how hard it can be to reconcile a rational view of the world with the irrational reality of lived, hands-on experience, where a lot of things don't make sense."

When Randall Kenan says to young people in his creative writing workshops, "read; read more than you write," he speaks from experience.¹ His own young life story testifies to the impact of reading and literature on a developing mind – in this case the imaginative mind of a "great artist" with "wide-ranging intellect," as UNC-Chapel Hill Creative Writing Professor Bland Simpson says of Kenan, remembering Kenan's energy both as an undergraduate and now as a fellow professor.² Randall Kenan's reputation as a man of letters – erudite and extraordinarily well read, knowledgeably and lyrically conversant on a thousand topics from comics to computer games and, of course, on writers and writing – has earned him a beloved place among the students he has mentored around the country at his various teaching posts.

Readers who have not yet had the good fortune of meeting Randall Kenan through his books of fiction and nonfiction have a tremendous pleasure ahead of them. He is known for his unique blending (and invention) of folklore, superstition, Bible-belt Protestantism, history, philosophy, and social inquiry in his stories, novel, and essays.

¹ Unless otherwise attributed all quotations are from Sheryl Cornett's interview with Randall Kenan, 4 Jan. 2005, at UNC-Chapel Hill, on an unseasonably warm and humid day, just before the start of spring semester classes. The quotations excerpted from this interview have been only minimally edited for clarity. Such small editorial changes are not noted, but as always, the author and editors have endeavored to be true to the voice and intentions of the speaker. The full-length interview can be found in *Image: Art-Faith-Mystery* 48 (Winter 2006): 57-69.

² Quotations from Bland Simpson, recipient of a North Carolina Award in 2005 (for Fine Arts), are from personal email correspondence dated 15 Sept. 2005.