

The Days of Wine and Whiskey

By Larry LaRue

The people who write good fiction often live it, and if I hadn't known George Cunningham for close to 40 years, I might have enjoyed making him up.

We worked together in the '70s and '80s on two newspapers and innumerable projects, and he was a larger than life presence in everything we did – including drinking.

Want a ready-made character for a tough-but-funny reporter?

One night we bar-hopped our way into a Navy hangout, and were minding our own business when a fellow just a few drinks ahead of us approached George's bar stool.

"That's one hell of a head of hair you got," the man said. "In fact, if I met the man who cut your hair like that, I'd kick his ass."

George didn't skip a beat, just wagged his thumb at me.

"Meet my barber," he said.

And off we went.

We worked together at two Southern California newspapers, The Orange County Register and the Long Beach Press-Telegram, and when I joined The Register I walked into a bureau and found George sitting behind a desk knitting.

Eccentric, I thought.

A terrific writer, George was given the kind of assignments bad editors gave reporters who could tell a good tale – ridiculous stories that, written just so, would entertain a reader.

George could always tell a tale, but what I may have admired most was his effortless way with people.

He did a story on a female private eye, back when that was novel, and she became a source for occasional news tips that paid off. When a goofy rich guy decided to make himself a superhero – Captain Sticky! – George was assigned a feature.

The Captain, who weighed 315 pounds and wore tights and a cape, hit it off immediately with George, who weighed about 275. And when Captain Sticky staged a raid at a retirement home where he said elderly tenants were being abused, George was the reporter he called.

We had a drawer in one office file cabinet that contained a bottle of Jack Daniels, and we were tough, hard-nosed men. Or so we thought.

When we began doing stories on what were called the Playgirl Club murders, we were told at one point that a ‘hit’ had been put out on us. Working late at night in a store-front bureau, George and I were at desks facing that store-front window.

Slowly, a huge black Lincoln Continental pulled up in front.

There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. I think George and I even gave one another a quick glance as we prepared to die together.

And then the office janitor stepped out of that car, popped his trunk and brought in his mop and bucket.

Years later, a sadistic little editor assigned me to spend the night in LA’s skid row, where a handful of homeless men had been stabbed and killed. He wanted me to dress the part, walk the walk and come back with a color piece.

I talked it over with George, then went, pretending to sleep on the sidewalks with other lost souls. Just down the street, George sat in truck with a .357 magnum in his lap.

That’s a friend.

No one ever rebelled against foolish assignments better than George.

Asked to visit a small college campus the day after a shooting – despite the fact that the school was ordered closed – George went, wandered the deserted quad, tried all the locked doors, then found a tree and napped for an hour.

His lead that night?

“It was a sleepy campus”

The Register used to come up with ‘insta-polls’ on any topic that flitted across an editor’s mind, and they amounted to each reporter on staff calling five people out of the phone book to ask a question.

George and I quickly tired of the regimen. So one day he took items of clothing, I took animals, and we scoured the white pages for names that fit.

I found a Lanie Duck, he found a Bernard Shortsleeves. We found five such people each – called and quoted them and sent the quotes to the main office.

Editors often skipped us in future ‘insta-polls.’

The best fiction for me has always been about characters, the more colorful the better. George met and interviewed a great many of them over the years and treated each with a unique sensitivity.

Whether it was the proud owner of Pierre the Singing Dog, or the elderly gardener whose two-foot green bean turned out to be a squash, George was respectful.

But then, he was the most colorful character he ever met.

At a Friday night beach bonfire to say farewell to a good friend, Susan Pack, who was leaving our paper, most everyone present shared plastic cups of wine.

George drank half a bottle of Jack Daniels. I know, because I drank the other half.

Late in the party, precisely when it could have turned maudlin, my best friend injected his own brand of silliness. He stood up, ripped off his shirt and headed for the water, bellowing.

I can't explain why everyone followed him, or why they followed his lead in stripping as they raced into the surf. I will never forget what he yelled along the way.

“Let's swim to Baja and spawn.”

And now, the man has injected that kind of character in a book he wrote during some of those years. As fiction, he lived it and I got to watch much of it.

My best advice to you today: Read it.

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