

# ALLAN GURGANUS

— Author of —  
OLDEST LIVING CONFEDERATE WIDOW TELLS ALL



## WHITE PEOPLE

stories and novellas

WINNER OF THE  
LOS ANGELES TIMES  
BOOK PRIZE  
FOR FICTION

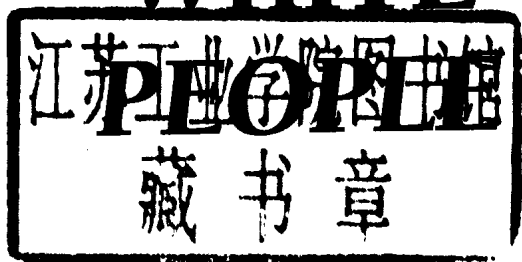
Gurganus, a storyteller in the grand tradition...  
can tell his stories as well as anyone alive  
in our time."

George Garrett

*The New York Times Book Review*

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**WHITE**



*Allan Gurganus*

IVY BOOKS • NEW YORK

*For my friends,*  
*especially for Daisy Thorp*  
*and for Paul Nagano*

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**WINNER OF THE 1991  
SOUTHERN BOOK AWARD FOR FICTION  
FROM THE SOUTHERN BOOK CRITICS CIRCLE**

**Critics everywhere love the stories in *WHITE PEOPLE*.  
Here's what they had to say about some of their favorites.**

**MINOR HEROISM: *Something About My Father***

"The first story examines a boy's relationship with his war-hero father, a deeply cruel man. It is a complex and poignant story, one of the most moving I have ever read, funny and heartbreaking. And as in the other stories, high-voltage emotion is accompanied and countered by a thorough intelligence that shapes and directs at every point. . . . Gurganus *knows* the South—with the intimate knowledge of someone who has grown up in it and has never stopped watching it for details. . . . A glorious collection, quite different from 'Widow' yet equally brilliant."

JOSEPHINE HUMPHREYS  
*Atlanta Journal & Constitution*

**BREATHING ROOM: *Something About My Brother***

"Dramatizes the growing split between Bryan and his younger brother, Brad. From an asthmatic child for whom protective brother Bryan feels complete responsibility, Brad turns into his father's favorite boy, sports-loving, model-building, goal-oriented. . . . I suspect many readers will feel as I often do about Walt Whitman: that Allan Gurganus' considerable skills as a storyteller and comic writer and his sympathy for a variety of white (and black) characters are pearls he has grown at great price."

JEFFREY RICHARDS  
*The Raleigh News & Observer*

*Please turn the page  
for more reviews. . . .*

## A HOG LOVES ITS LIFE:

### *Something About My Grandfather*

“When her senile father-in-law makes a grotesque incursion into the bridge tournament she is throwing for 88 clubbable women, the hostess in ‘A Hog Loves Its Life’ grimaces and dithers momentarily but then remembers her manners—and her soul. . . . Love and guilt commingle in an uneasy blend that inspired speech can barely hold in equilibrium. . . . Gurganus seems to have taken such care in getting them all down right that one thinks of Mark Twain.”

DENNIS DRABELLE

*The Washington Post Book World*

## NATIVITY, CAUCASIAN

“A brilliant, brilliant story, [it] recalls Bryan’s birth at a neighborhood contract-bridge tournament: His mother finds herself in her hostess’ kitchen, stretched out on one of those post-war counters stuck in the middle of the room, having her baby in a jungle of smashed dinner mints and half-smoked cigarettes. . . . Gurganus introduces ourselves to ourselves; lovingly, tenderly. . . . A major achievement: more appealing [and] more loving than his earlier novel, OLDEST LIVING CONFEDERATE WIDOW TELLS ALL.”

CAROLYN SEE  
*Newsday*

## REASSURANCE

“‘Reassurance’ is in the form of two letters, one an actual letter by Walt Whitman, the other a ghostly or dreamed or, anyway, imagined letter from a dead Union soldier, Frank H. Irwin of company E, 93rd Pennsylvania, to his mother, both from the early summer of 1865. . . . It is very hard to be ample and accessible these days and to sound smart at the same time. In his novel and now in the eleven stories gathered together in *WHITE PEOPLE*, Mr. Gurganus manages to do that gracefully and skillfully. . . . Trust these tales and through them you will come to know and enjoy the teller.”

GEORGE GARRETT

*The New York Times Book Review*

## BLESSED ASSURANCE: a moral tale

“The true jewel in this collection . . . a novella with the weight of a much longer work. Jerry, a 19-year-old white boy who is putting himself through college, gets a job collecting funeral insurance payments from black customers who live in an area of town known as ‘Baby Africa’ . . . [Gurganus] is a fine writer . . . in love with the language.”

JUDITH FREEMAN

*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

*Please turn the page  
for more reviews. . . .*

### ADULT ART

"The conflict between human sexuality and social convention is dramatized ... in 'Adult Art,' [in which] a married, middle-aged father describes his erotic attraction to a younger man whom he meets by chance in his office building. ... WHITE PEOPLE is shaped by a singular storytelling energy, and it proves as well that [Gurganus] is a remarkably versatile writer. Ranging from family memoirs to historical pieces, from satire to surrealism, WHITE PEOPLE celebrates American culture in all its humanistic vibrancy and grotesque contradictions. Blending trenchant satire with outrageous humor, Gurganus' stories recall both Mark Twain and Flannery O'Connor."

GREG JOHNSON  
*Chicago Tribune*

### AMERICA COMPETES

"Many of the stories are quite humorous, and 'America Competes,' an attack on the 'National Fundament of the Arts,' is one of these. Here the central character, besieged by human mediocrity and need, concludes 'We are one big unhappy family, and poor, aren't we?' 'Stories,' another character remarks, 'maybe offer us a little deal-making revenge on Time.' But we are left with his final lament over the passing of those he has loved: 'Where've they all gone?' This question haunts the stories in this disturbing collection, fine and sensitive studies that solidify Gurganus' position as a chronicler of America's nostalgic hankering after happiness—and immortality."

JOHN C. HAWLEY  
*San Francisco Chronicle*

## ART HISTORY

"[A] story about desire and spectatorship, 'Art History' tells of a schoolteacher and 'respected gentleman' (his daughter's description) and his own search for sublimity. But the reality is riskier here and Gurganus fragments it through a contrapuntal structure, shunting between the gentleman, his daughter and the arresting officer. . . . Gurganus writes without a safety net; no precautions are taken against pathos, bathos, authorial indignity. As a result, his best stories command a sort of sublimity of the mundane; they locate the dangerous glamour in ordinariness."

HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.  
*The Nation*

"The work of the very best writers leaves a taste in the mouth. . . . Critics and fans keep trying to stick Allan Gurganus in [the] kitchen with Flannery and Bill [Faulkner] and Miss Welty. Like Faulkner, Gurganus is concerned with myth and memory; like Welty, he strip-mines layers of Southern manners to get at the naked truth; like O'Connor, his characters' actions always imply a larger scheme to the world than mortals can understand. But Gurganus' work has its own distinct flavor. *WHITE PEOPLE* overflows with the buttermilk of human kindness. The velvety sentences just come rolling out, smoothly folding and lapping over at the ends, but it's more than a matter of sentences. It's a hundred tiny moments of kindness bestowed and withheld, and keenly observed. It's a writer reminding you that sweet good writing can even make you feel better about your own existence. . . . Allan Gurganus has been an important writer for a while now. It's just taken the world a while to catch on."

MARK CHILDRESS  
*Los Angeles Times Book Review*



**Also By Allan Gurganus**

*Published by Ivy Books*

**OLDEST LIVING CONFEDERATE WIDOW TELLS ALL**

There is a kind of success that is indistinguishable from panic.  
EDGAR DEGAS,  
as quoted in Daniel Halévy, *My Friend Degas*

One inexorable rule of etiquette is that you must talk to your next-door neighbor at a dinner table. You MUST, that is all there is about it! . . . At dinner once, Mrs. Toplofty, finding herself next to a man she quite openly despised, said to him with apparent placidity, "I shall not talk to you—because I don't care to. But for the sake of my hostess, I shall say my multiplication tables. Twice one are two, twice two are four—" and she continued through the tables, making him alternate with her. As soon as she politely could, she turned again to her other companion.

EMILY POST (Mrs. Price Post),  
*Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage*,  
illustrated with private photographs and  
facsimiles of social forms, 1922 edition

Very late that fall, my grandfather and my father and a great many more went down to the Humboldt River to fish. . . . When they came back, they brought us more news. They said there were white people at the Humboldt Sink. They were the first ones that my father had seen face to face. He said they were not like 'humans'. They were more like owls than like anything else. They had hair on their faces, and had white eyes. My father said they looked very beautiful. . . .

PRINCESS SARAH WINNEMUCCA HOPKINS,  
in *Life Among the Paiutes* as quoted by Joanne  
Meschery in *Truckee, California: A History*

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# ***Minor Heroism***

## **Something About My Father**

*For William Maxwell*

### **1. AT WAR, AT HOME**

**I**MAGINE HIM IN HIS PRIME. A FAIRLY RICH AND large-eared farm boy newly cured of being a farm boy by what he called Th' War, meaning the second one. He'd signed up in Charlottesville when most of his fraternity had done it as a group, and up till then he had been somewhat humorlessly typical. He had been hung up with the rest of them in the fraternity of the university that Jefferson designed, and he was as lean and carefully prepared as all the very best Virginia hams. And it would seem to follow that, in 1942, my father began being made more valuable by several years of smoke. But this smoke was not the curative Virginia kind; it was the high-flying smoke of German cities burning. My father was a bombardier. He became a minor hero in the Second World War and a major hero in Virginia/Carolina. He was photographed as Betty Grable stood on tiptoe to kiss him. He was tall. He still is. But his height meant most when he was dressed as an officer in our Army Air Corps. Today, in civvies, he is just another mildly handsome businessman. It was in uniform that Father looked most like himself.

Heroes should have looks. His were better than most,

better than wholesome. It was one of those faces that fit handsomely into photographs and under a brimmed cap. It seemed to know in every pose that captions would be under it eventually. His profile, nearly as good as a Barrymore's, was better for being blunted slightly by boarding-school boxing. With very combed blond hair waving back in the way hair did then, his was a face that even from the front told much about itself in silhouette. Many of the photos still exist.

When I was a child in the years just after that war, people cornered me with accounts of my father's valor. They told me in front of other children how, though everybody's father had certainly helped with it, mine had done more than most to insure that the Nazi plot to rule the world—to rule the very ground on which this birthday party was now taking place—had been crushed by the Americans. They mentioned the Freedoms, four in all, and promised that the whole white world was now capable of worshiping in whichever ways it chose. They said to me, "Do you know what your father did?" I was told how people had printed "Welcome Richard!" on broad banners made of sheets that stretched all the way across Main Street.

But before the war was won and he came home, there was the business about what they made my grandmother do. Though bossy when alone with family, she was a remarkably shy woman, even for then. In North Carolina, in 1942, shyness was less unusual than it is today. Both her parents' families had been equally distinguished and austere, and, as if to commemorate this, she parted her hair impartially down the middle and most always wore the same rare brooch at the exact center of her collar and throat. I once saw her hiding in the dark back hallway of her house; eyes opened very

wide, she stood against a wall, as unwanted guests on the front porch repeatedly rang the door chimes.

She had been reared at home with her three sisters, on a Raleigh side street in a house cool most of the year with the amount of marble in it: veined tabletops, hearths arched and white as tombs, classical statuary, athletic and luminous in dark corners. The marble hearths and statues floated upright in the house's murk. Tabletops rode the gloom like oval rafts. It seemed the marble objects were the rooms' true residents, directing every household current into eddies split around themselves and cooling off whatever drifted past them.

But Grandmother's wish for the stillness of 1909 was inappropriate in 1942. There was a war going on and her son, they told her, was crucial to the local view of it. They put much unnecessary pressure on a lady so easily swayed. All it took was one unscrupulous question about how much patriotism she really felt as, after all, a longtime member of the DAR. At this, she said that yes, yes, she would do it, but only if they did not ask her to speak. Of course, those present assured her, she wouldn't have to utter one syllable she didn't rightly feel she could or should utter. But no one believed she would stay silent once she got up there and got the feel of it from all the bunting hung around. They forced her, in this way, to sit on public platforms. When the speaker selling war bonds acknowledged her, seated there as formal as her central brooch, she winced in recognition of her name and nodded back to him and tried to smile out at the audience like a mother, but she looked like a potentially bereaved one.

Mrs. Roosevelt herself came through on a decorated train and got off and walked over to the platform they'd set up outside the station, and not even then would my grandmother speak a public sentence to those gathered

on the street and hanging out the windows of the Bank and those who dangled legs like extra letters over the sign usually spelling Ekstein's Finer Men's Apparel. Suspended from four lampposts were giant photos of my father in uniform, in profile. When Mrs. Roosevelt came over as the ceremony ended and said how handsome my father must be, to judge from his pictures over there, my grandmother finally spoke. She was nodding and thanking Eleanor Roosevelt as an equal when she noticed Mrs. Roosevelt wore no hat, which seemed odd in one of her station. What she was wearing, its weight tugging at the fabric of one shoulder, was a huge pale, wide-mouthed orchid which, some suggested afterwards, had looked much like her.

But Mrs. Roosevelt had won them over nonetheless, and it was lucky that others overheard what she said to Grandmother about my father's good looks. Grandmother would never have repeated it to anyone. Though she acknowledged things graciously, she never started them. In this way, she had become an adult and then a wife and, quite soon after that, a mother. Some were annoyed by this belief of hers that silence was always in good taste, but most people felt it was probably fine the way she was; that somehow it was more patriotic for a wife and mother not to say too much—except, of course, for Mrs. Roosevelt, and some people even felt that way about Mrs. Roosevelt.

The photograph of Betty Grable kissing my father's flat cheek seemed to hold the house up. I was born in 1947 and, as far as I knew, it had always been there. People who did not come often to the house would sometimes ask to see it. They were led back to the den, where it was hung with the medals. Smiling, they stooped to get the picture window's reflection off of it,



and they'd shake their heads and nod appreciatively. I remember someone's saying that when you were young during a war it is hard to know later if you liked being young during a war or liked just being young or maybe even the war itself, who knows?

In the picture, he does not return her kiss but stands there; a statuesque soldier, newly decorated for minor heroism, accepts the homage of a distant voluptuous country. He is enjoying it probably, but he does not smile, for at that moment the fate of the Western world as we now know it still hung in the balance. But Betty Grable could smile. It was all right if she did, and the official Army photographer, whose job it was to photograph the wake of morale she left behind, snapped an Army camera, and there it was—on most front pages in either Carolina and with practically the whole page to itself in our local *Falls Herald Traveler*. And though manliness and the national moment forbade he show it, yes, certainly my father was enjoying the kiss synchronized with flashbulbs, just as local boys too young to go themselves were not too young to go at themselves several times a day upon finding this hometown representative in a favorite national fantasy with a Grable whose legs were here not even photographed to advantage, though the boys knew them well enough from other pictures. The local boys looked over at the grainy photograph they'd cut out and pinned up to the wall-paper beside their beds, and for a while there, several times a day, any number of them were replacing my father in his uniform, with Grable breathing right there beside them in her WAC's outfit shortened way beyond regulations. And after the ceremony, as the dots of flashbulbs were still dying out of their vision, there the boys were, there he was, the local high-school valedictorian, in the south of England, wearing my father's