

DETOUR at DOBIE

Chance encounter turns struggling cabbie into fellowship winner and keeper of writers' retreat

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The story wouldn't work as serious fiction, because it is too hard to believe. It begins last January, with a cabbie and a passenger who asked to be driven to the Texas Center for Writers. The cabbie was an aspiring writer of short stories, and though he wasn't in the habit of chatting up his customers, he asked the passenger his name.

Here is a sample of some of the Paisano Fellows and work published after their residencies:

- **Sandra Cisneros** – *The House on Mango Street, Woman Hollering Creek*
- **Stephen Harrigan** – *Aransas, Jacob's Well, Comanche Midnight, The Gates of the Alamo*
- **Dagoberto Gilb** – *The Magic of Blood, The Last Known Residence of Mickey Acuna*
- **Laura Furman** – *Ordinary Paradise, Tuxedo Park, Watch Time Fly*
- **Lisa Sandlin** – *Message to the Nurse of Dreams*
- **Gary Cartwright** – *Blood Will Tell, Dirty Dealings*
- **Jan Reid** – *Deer in Water, Vain Glory*

The passenger hesitated, then told the driver that he was Denis Johnson. The cabbie not only recognized the name of the visiting author at the University of Texas that semester, he was familiar with his work (which includes the *Jesus' Son* collection of stories and the novel *Already Gone*), and proceeded to praise one recently anthologized story in particular.

After bidding each other farewell and good luck, the cabbie took heart from the chance encounter. He had recently read about the deadline looming for the Dobie Paisano Fellowship, which includes a six-month residency at J. Frank Dobie's former Hill Country ranch and a stipend of \$1,200 per month. For a guy who had been spending a couple of years working seven-day, 70-hour weeks - driving everywhere and getting nowhere - the opportunity to do nothing but write sounded like an impossible dream.

So impossible, in fact, that he hadn't planned on entering. Feeling exhausted from months of overwork, he'd lacked the energy to pull a submissions packet together, until he interpreted the encounter with Johnson as a sign. This was the life he wanted, a literary life of self-sufficiency. Recognizing that his chances were slim, he sent his stuff off. A few days later, he suffered congestive heart failure, which put him into

the hospital.

A couple of months later, he was announced as the fall's fellowship recipient. Instead of working so hard that he couldn't write, he would be paid to write so he wouldn't have to work. (He also heard that Johnson had left him a book, after hearing of the cabbie's good fortune).

"I'm really lucky to be out here," said the 40-year-old Lowell Mick White, a man of rumpled dress, ruddy complexion and plain-spoken understatement. "I'd been living in teeth-grinding poverty the last couple of years, so I feel pretty lucky just to have a roof over my head. I wanted a place where I could concentrate on my work."

What he discovered is a place where a writer can lose himself in his work, a 254-acre spread of limestone bluffs and native grasses, where the main intrusions on one's solitude come from the wild turkeys that roam the property and the occasional roadrunner (the "paisano" that Dobie honored with the ranch's name and adopted as his personal symbol). Just 14 miles southwest of Austin, it might as well be the other side of the moon, for the world of difference it has made in White 's daily routine.

Not all of the Dobie Paisano recipients experience a similarly dramatic transformation, but the fellowship frequently has provided a pivotal experience. According to A.C. Greene, a Dobie fellow from the spring of '68, Paisano Ranch is "a place where the creative process can reinvent itself . . . where the artist can return to the earth, and thus better enable himself to pour out his art for the world to use." It is a place, he writes, of "seeding and reseeded."

Sandra Cisneros, fellowship recipient in the fall of '85, subsequently wrote that "Dobie Paisano is what altered my destiny."

Paisano's past and promise

"Most Paisano Fellows regard their time at the ranch as one of the great experiences of their writing lives," writes Don Graham, president of the Texas Institute of Letters, and chairman of next year's judging committee, in a letter to prospective applicants. "The place is part of a powerful tradition, a link with Texas' past and a promise of its future."

To be selected is to be enveloped within that tradition, to live amid Dobie's desk and his books, his walking sticks and his fireplace; to explore the acres of wilderness and to scan the starry sky, so deep in the heart of Texas. To be selected is to have one's work validated, to give it the stamp of "Dobie Paisano Fellow" that sets it apart from the slush-pile submissions of all the other aspiring writers. To be selected is to be given the gift that is most precious to a writer: time.

"The opportunity to have time is the most valuable of all," said Audrey Slate, who administers the program for the University of Texas (in conjunction with the Texas Institute of Letters), and who generally receives between 75 and 100 applications a year for the two fellowships awarded. "There are no obligations on the fellow. They don't have to produce or lecture. They are mainly just given the chance to live out there."

(Entries for 1999 fellowships must be postmarked before Jan. 22. Application forms and instructions are available by writing Dr. Audrey Slate, Dobie Paisano Project, J. Frank Dobie House, 702 E. Dean Keeton St., Austin, TX 78705.)

At least in theory, a writer who is out there doesn't even need to write.

"That would be a great disappointment, because they have projected what they will do (as part of the application)," said Slate. "Sometimes people change their minds, but almost all of the fellows have produced something."

With a half-dozen or so stories previously published (from literary journals to *Gray's Sporting Journal*) - and with 30 more that he has sent out for consideration - White is using his time at Paisano to pull together a short-story collection. He also hopes to finish the first draft of a novel before he leaves the ranch at the end of February.

Stories of the outdoors

"I just like to write stories," says White, who describes his style as "direct narrative" and lists Jim Harrison and Thomas McGuane as two of his favorites. "A lot of my stories revolve around the outdoors. They're not fly-fishing stories, but there's fly fishing going on in them. The story I'm working on now is about two guys going squirrel hunting."

Providing an appropriately natural spur for White's muse, Paisano was Dobie's weekend retreat for the final five years of his life. After his death in 1964, it was decided that preserving the Hill Country expanse as a writer's sanctuary would be a fitting memorial for the storyteller and humorist and educator, revered as the patron saint of literary Texana.

With the enthusiastic support of Bertha McKee Dobie, his widow, and many of his close friends, a campaign raised the money to purchase the property from the Dobie estate and to deed it to UT. In May 1966, an auction of donated paintings at a gala dinner in Houston raised almost \$40,000, more than half the purchase price. In August, the property was established as a "permanent memorial" to Dobie, to be preserved in its "more or less natural state," its house "kept in a simple style, very much as it was when Frank Dobie occupied it."

Since then, UT has maintained the property while the Texas Institute of Letters provides the fellowship's stipend. A judging panel of six - three chosen by UT, three by the institute - determines the two recipients per year, either native Texans, those who have lived here at least two years or have published work concerning Texas. (In March, White will give way to Amy Adams, a screenwriter and essayist.)

"Though idyllic in many respects, there are times and seasons when the rural facts of (the ranch's) isolation can present problems to the unwary," Graham warns prospective applicants. "Rain can flood the creek, making the low-water crossing impassable for days at a time. Rattlesnakes have been seen in the vicinity, quite near the house; fire ants are a possible

nuisance; skunks and raccoons and deer live in the fields nearby. The point is not to frighten anyone but simply to state that this is the country, not the town."

When so much of the Hill Country flooded this fall, White was "down to eating oatmeal and dirt" after two weeks of confinement to the property. Though the road winding through the ranch to Dobie's house had been dry upon White's arrival in September, by the following month it was submerged beneath the raging river that Barton Creek had become, some 150 feet wide.

During his stay, *White* also has needed to call UT to deal with an increasingly pesky population of mice. His girlfriend proved resistant to the ranch's rural splendors; she broke up with him, he says, because she couldn't take the hassle of opening and closing the two gates with their combination locks that keep intruders from the property. Paisano isn't a place to be pampered; it's more of a loner's paradise, an isolated retreat where even the Austin Zoo a few miles up the road seems like a civilization's remove. And the routine of an Austin cabbie seems like another lifetime.

Tales of urban Texas

"I'm sure the cab stuff is going to come out in my writing as I go along," said White, who came to Austin from his native West Virginia in the late '70s to study journalism at UT. "It's amazing, until I started driving a cab, I didn't know Austin at all. I'd been living here for 18 years, and I didn't know where Highland Mall was. Driving a cab can be pretty rough. People sneer at you a lot, spit at you, throw things at the cab. You're just available, especially for drunks. I've definitely enjoyed not having the pressure of making money every day."

Instead, he tries to write 750 words a day. And he has read Tom Wolfe's *A Man in Full*. Twice in one week. All 742 pages of it.

"So many Texas writers look back to sort of a rural past, but Texas has been an urban state for 50 years," he said. "It's increasingly urban all the time. You stand out here at night, and you can see the whole sky lit up with pollution from Austin. Even here, you're not that isolated. Texas today has more in common with Tom Wolfe than it does with Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove*."