



SPARTACUS

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Fred Chappell, Admired but Unsung Writer of the South, Dies at 87

He wrote lyrical poetry and novels about life in North Carolina's Appalachian Piedmont and was considered the South's "premier contemporary person of letters."

By **Clay Risen**

Published Jan. 25, 2024. Updated Jan. 28, 2024 in *The New York Times*

Fred Chappell, a poet, novelist and critic whose Faulknerian capacity to express universal themes of love, loss and memory through his evocations of North Carolina's rural, mountainous west earned him a reputation as the South's "premier contemporary person of letters," in the words of one reviewer, died on Jan. 4 in Greensboro, N.C. He was 87. His son, Heath, said the death, in a hospital, was from respiratory distress.

Mr. Chappell (pronounced like "chapel") was a leading figure among the generation of Southern writers who came of age in the 1960s, picking up the mantle of predecessors like Faulkner, [Flannery O'Connor](#), [Robert Penn Warren](#) and [Eudora Welty](#), all of whom influenced his work.

While his early novels paid fealty to the expansive, twisty prose of Faulkner and the unsettling Southern Gothic of O'Connor, his poetry and later novels moved toward the elegiac sentiments and literary precision of Welty.



Mr. Chappell, left, in 1997 when he was named poet laureate of North Carolina. With him were the governor at the time, Jim Hunt, and his wife, Carolyn. Credit...U.N.C.G., via Michael Frierson

Like Warren, he wrote in a wide variety of genres — including 12 novels, 18 books of poetry and two books of criticism — and was widely considered at the top of the game in all of them. Among other major recognitions, he [won the prestigious Bollingen Prize](#) for poetry in 1985, alongside [John Ashbery](#).

"Not since James Agee and Robert Penn Warren has a Southern writer displayed such masterful versatility," Frank Levering wrote in The Los Angeles Times in 1997.

Fred Davis Chappell was born on May 28, 1936, in Canton, N.C., about 20 miles west of Asheville. His parents, J.T. and Anne (Davis) Chappell, were teachers.

Fred started writing as a teenager, submitting science fiction stories to the pulp magazines he found in a local drugstore. Most were rejected, but a few were published, under a pen name.

He enrolled at Duke, but was expelled after two years for missing classes. He returned home and worked in the fields and furniture factories around Canton.

He married Susan Nicholls in 1959. Along with their son, she survives him, as does his sister, Becky Anderson.

Mr. Chappell eventually returned to Duke, receiving a bachelor's degree in 1963 and a master's in 1964, both in literature. That fall he joined the faculty at the Woman's College of the University of North Carolina in Greensboro, which was in the process of admitting male students and changing its name to University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



Mr. Chappell last year in his home with his wife, Susan Nicholls. The only significant period he spent outside North Carolina was a nine-month stint in Florence, Italy. Credit...Cyril Caine

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GHLIII note: In addition to the academic honors listed, Fred Chappell won two World Fantasy Awards for short fiction, "The Somewhere Doors" (1992) and "The Lodger" (1994). As will be seen, his genre roots went far back, and we turn now to his relationship to science fiction and its fandom.

ReConStruction hails some of the great science fiction fans and professionals to come out of North Carolina, and begins with one of the finest ...

LYNN HICKMAN BY FRED CHAPPELL



Art by JOE MAYHEW

We must have begun corresponding, Lynn Hickman and I, in 1950. My first introduction to SF was the Sept. '49 issue of *ASF* and I strayed to the other pulps immediately. It was almost certainly in the finz review columns of one of the latter that I found notice of Lynn's zine, *TLMA*. I submitted material to his Statesville, NC, address; he responded with letters; I replied.

In one letter he suggested that he come to visit me (about 150 miles distant). This was an exciting prospect. I told my parents the date and Lynn showed up about 4:30 p.m. He found our little farm without difficulty. As a farm equipment salesman, he was used to seeking out obscure corners of the landscape. I was laboring in the fields when he arrived, but my mother made him comfortable and invited him to supper.

He was at our house when I showed up, tired and dusty. I was surprised, having pictured him in my mind as tall, grave, scholarly figure. He was slender, almost slight, genial, humorous, and able to put my folks at ease.

He was surprised to find that I was 13 (maybe 14) years old. He had pictured me as a burly fellow in his mid-thirties. I think he was a little dashed to discover I was just a kid, but he made the best of it and during the meal broached the idea that I should accompany him and a couple of other guys to Nolacon (*the 1951 World Science Fiction Convention in New Orleans - ed.*). It is a measure of his salesmanship powers that he convinced my folks it would be okay for me to go, a punk kid weekendending in Sin City with a band of wild-eyed who believed that man would someday walk on the surface of the moon.

We did go to Nolacon I, in Lynn's spiffy, brand-new, red convertible. I was so dazed with excitement that I missed half the experience, but many years later Lynn referred to the adventure as one of the happiest times of his life.

We remained friends, though our destinies made personal contact infrequent. I never forgot that he was perhaps the first to read my goofy scribbles with attention and I remain grateful. He never forgot finding me a pesty adolescent instead of a drinking and gossiping companion his own age. He thought of our first meeting as a sort of joke on himself - and he never minded that, as an equable, good-humored man who enjoyed the charms of women, the camaraderie of men, and anything else that brought a smile.

(Fred Chappell is the former poet laureate of North Carolina.)

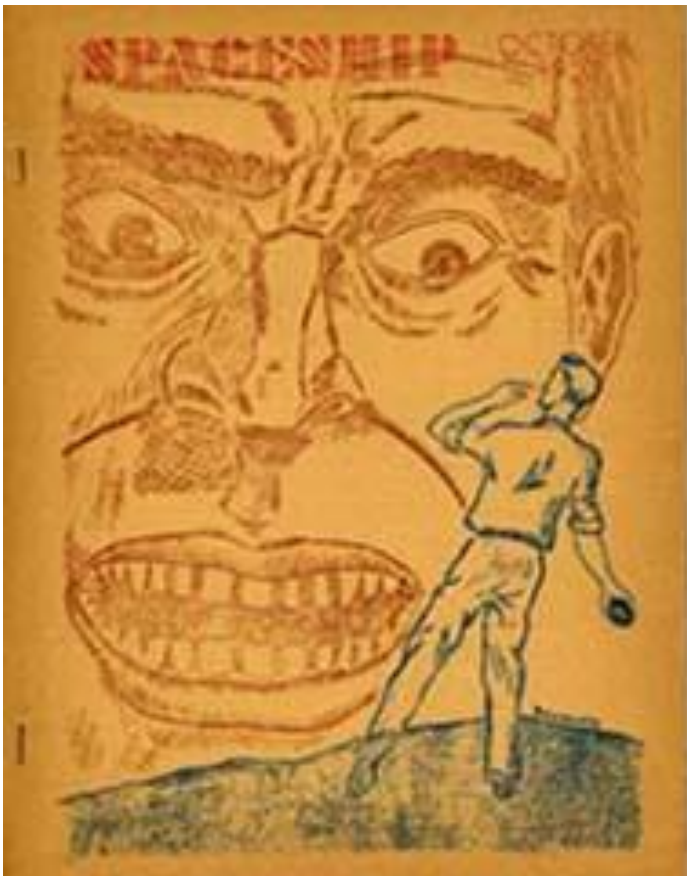
Sweet Freedom

Wednesday, January 31, 2024

Patti Abbott

SSW: Fred Chappell's 3 (earliest published?) short stories in Robert Silverberg's SPACESHIP, April 1952, April and October 1953: Short Story Wednesday

Fred Chappell (born 28 May 1936/died 4 January 2024) and Robert Silverberg (born 15 January 1935) were teenaged fantastic-fiction fans in 1952, but were already showing some promise of the kind of writers (and editors) they would soon and continue to become...both had discovered the fiction magazines, among other reading, that would help shape a notable part of both their careers, and were involved in the (somewhat!) organized fantasy/sf/horror-fiction-fandom culture of the late '40s and early '50s...so much so that three issues of young New Yorker



Silverberg's fanzine (or amateur magazine meant for other fans and any other interested parties) *Spaceship* (first published by Silverberg in 1949) would each offer one of three vignettes from young Canton, North Carolina resident Fred Chappell, in *Starship's* 4/52, 4/53 and 10/53 issues. Prof. Shirley Bailey Shurbutt, in the online "*Kunstlerroman as Metafiction: The Poetry and Prose of Fred Chappell and the Art of Storytelling*" misunderstands a line (she conflates professional fiction magazines with amateur fanzines) in John Lang's *Understanding Fred Chappell* in which Lang notes Chappell's statement that he had published two early stories under pseudonyms that Chappell insisted he would not divulge, and also notes that Chappell had two (rather than three) short stories in Silverberg's fanzine (almost correct, though under the byline "Fred Chappell") and Harlan Ellison's fanzine *Dimensions* (apparently untrue, but a closer look at *Dimensions* issues here will come soon)...if Chappell also

had two early, pseudonymous stories in non-amateur magazines such as *Weird Tales* or the other sf and fantasy magazines of the early '50s, his attempts to keep them hidden have (as far as I know) succeeded.

Chappell makes the claim about two hidden stories himself (with implication that they are to professional magazines) in the 2022 documentary *Fred Chappell: I Am One of You Forever*. Chappell's sister recalls that Fred first attended a convention, the 1953 Philcon in Philadelphia, the WorldCon for that year, when he was 14 years old, which Bob Silverberg (in correspondence)

suspects is a memory-slip on her part, as Silverberg recalls meeting Fred for the first time face-to-face at the '53 convention, when Chappell would've been 17 years old.

The three Chappell stories in *Spaceship* are juvenilia, but (unsurprisingly) relatively deft fiction for a promising teen writer. They are worth reading, certainly for any fan or would-be scholar of Chappell's work.

"The New Frontier", in *Spaceship* #17 (1952) (which features contributions by other notable writers and fans as well--not least western and fantastica writer and folk-music critic and magazine editor/publisher Ms. Lee Hoffman), is a bit of a psychodrama, as the widow of an astronaut will find herself triggered into fugue states of communication with her dead husband.

"The Tin Can" in *Spaceship* #21 (1953) is young Chappell in a somewhat comic mood, albeit also exploiting adolescent insecurities as they persist with his protagonist, who acutely feels his lack of sophistication and self-worth in the company of his fellow astronauts...even after he discovers what looks like an enormous tin can through one of their spacecraft's viewports. A bit of an anticipation of Pop Art here, too. The online reproduction of this story features some rather odd scanning, in (I suspect) an attempt to not damage the fanzine issue too badly, but it's legible. This might also be the least assured of the three Chappell stories in Silverberg's fanzine.

"Brother", in *Spaceship* #23 (1953) is a slightly more straightforward story of brothers' rivalry (in a sense), with the middle brother of three boys no little vexed by his elder brother's consistent recounting of the rigors of the elder's life as an astronaut, to the rapt attention of their parents and the youngest brother. Middle brother is both jealous and rather less invested in and actively questioning the glamor of the experience. (Though it had begun earlier, the 1950s were a good period inside and outside the sf community for considerations of how there might not be so very much glory in space exploration, for a number of reasons, most of them inherent in humanity.)

If these were the stories Chappell would rather not be seen, well, they are both promising efforts by a writer in his mid-teens, and are short enough as well as deft enough to make reading through the typewriter-layout of the fanzine issues worth the look (and enlarging the image on your computer, if necessary) for more than simply historical purposes.

Thanks to Robert Silverberg, Gordon Van Gelder and Rodrigo Baeza for drawing attention to these early Chappell publications.

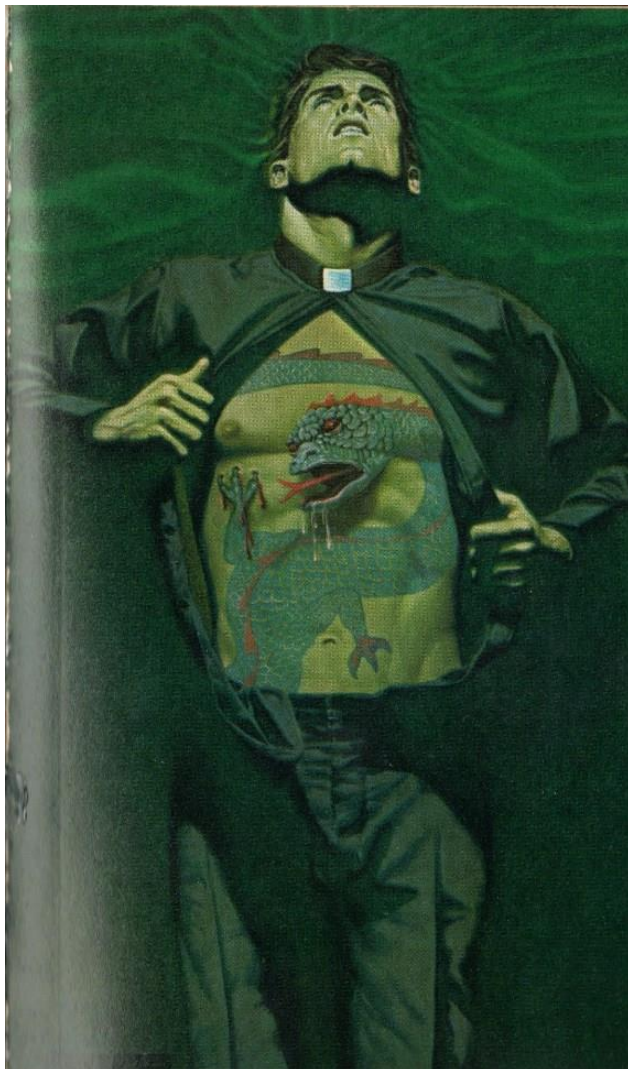


GHLIII note: Spartacus makes no claim of authorship or ownership of any of the material by others in this memorial fanzine. All rights revert to those authors. The sole purpose of this issue is to memorialize Fred Chappell. It is distributed gratis to all.

Chappell clearly loved SF and fantasy as he achieved adulthood – but his education and inquisitive intelligence demanded he aspire to serious literature. How about he merge the two and see what emerges?

DAGON

From the cover of the paperback edition of Fred's 1968 novel, you couldn't differentiate it from an early book by Robert MacCammon or Whitley Streiber. The blurbs alone evoke popular pedestrian horror fiction – "An Ancient Secret / A Living Nightmare" ... "A Novel of Blinding Terror." "Heir of Evil." But such an impression could not survive a reading of the opening, a 5½-page Faulkneresque paragraph describing Peter Leland and the house he's



inherited. No writing designed – as Heinlein said – to compete with a six-pack for a customer's money could ever do that,

Not that *Dagon* isn't, indeed, horrifying and disturbing. Leland is a minister and author obsessed with Dagon, an ancient pagan god, half man, half fish. He sees the secular deity as a demon infecting the society with its mindless, conscience-less hedonism. Inheriting his grandparents' home, he finds clues to their connection with a Lovecraftian cult, and meets Mina, a seductive but loveless local girl with ties to the group.

At near this point in the novel, Peter accidentally entraps himself on a chain handcuff in the isolated attic of the home, a desperate and fearful premonition of his suffering to come.

He is not only seduced, but captured by the girl Mina. She feeds him moonshine of such potency that he abandons, in effect, his former self, and leads him into utter will-less degradation and murder. Mina and another cultist cover Leland with cryptic, terrifying tattoos. It appears he's meant to

host the god Dagon when it comes, and enable it to move upon the Earth. Peter faces the god, and recognizes it for what it truly is: a ruptured idiot stubby reptile. Leland's rejection of the imbecile god and his re-assumption of his self brings Peter his death, but is not the end of the novel.

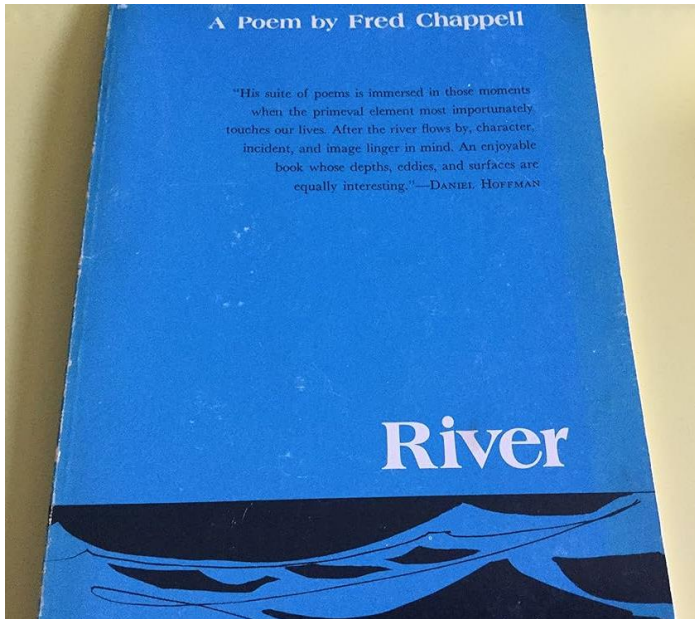
The book follows Leland into death and beyond, where he comes to understand and accept the value of suffering, which he believes the essence of human experience. He assumes the form of Leviathan and "sports upon the rich darkness that flows between the stars."

It is a complex and manic story, written with a poet's command of the language and an abiding awareness of human frailty. The book's familiar epigram is straight out of Lovecraft and bespeaks the evil ever-looming over the species: "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn." One reviewer called the book depressing, but unforgettable. Is it depressing? Does Leland's posthumous revelation counter Lovecraft's terrible warning?

Dagon is controversial and has been since its first publication. Several doubted the success of Chappell's attempt to combine his love of fantasy with the themes of "serious literature" – but the French Academy, no less, dubbed the book the finest foreign novel of its year.

Though Fred tried his hand at fantasy at least once more – in his 2016 novel, *A Shadow All of Light* – most of his work was firmly based in the pastoral fields of his native North Carolina, and confronts matters of language and family. *Dagon* can therefore be seen as a deviation from Fred's realm of success, in tone and topic. Perhaps so, but Dick Lupoff's evaluation of the novel as "unforgettable" rings forever true.





Selected lines from

Science Fiction Water Letter to Guy Lillian

From "River", a section of *Midquest*, LSU Press,
1976

This poem/letter addressed to a stubborn student – me -- shows Fred at his most critical and cantankerous towards SF, the field he would forever love and reject. Here he instructs his student, a fellow true believer, in the nature and value of language itself.

I've edited the first half of the work but the section called "The Novel" is complete, the better to reveal Chappell's fundamental metaphor. Read ... comment.

May 28, 1971

Dear Guy,

It

is not quite true I said science fiction images
lack imagination. What they lack is resonance.
The usual s-f novel is as numb, deaf, and
odorless as a patient readied for surgery.
Surely imagination is sensual, truthfully
septic, like a child wallowing his dog. S-f is
self-indulgent also, but less pleasurable to
the fingers; a deliberate squeamishness obtains;
finally nothing is at stake. Intellectual,
is it? But why propound ideas no one would die
for or live with? The most unblinking hedonist stakes
at least his body. –Maybe what s-f needs is a
martyr, someone to risk his vanity for what he
believes an improbable truth. Then science fiction
could degenerate into religion, where they keep
imagination burning white as acetylene.

It's not the skeleton that rattles me, but the flesh- or
want of it ... And why are bureaucracies treated
as admirable or even necessary? Why
are there no devout women mentioned? Why do children
never starve or burn?

... science fiction has no feel for pastness, and at most a high school textbook notion of cause-and-effect; its heroes are always blatant bloody prodigies like Patton, Napoleon, Xerxes -- *always Moloch*; vulgar pains, almost without exception, in the ass. Which partly accounts for s-f's garish surface (when it has a surface), and for omnipresence of blood (its color but not its taste). -It counts suffering out.

Old buddy,
here I stop bitching. No use to fault stuff that never aimed at anything much in the first place. Probably what troubles me most is the poets; usually everything's their mucking, anyway. They let it get by them, all that pure data, those images, that new access to unplumbable reaches of space-time. They're still whining, like flawed Dylan records, about their poor lost innocence, and the manifold injustices continually visited upon them, and their purple-murky erotic lives. ...
The heart of it is, if the stuff's not employed by poets, it'll find *somewhere* a position, if it has to be among the anti-poets. Fresh wonders clamor for language, and if the word-order is second rate, they'll take it in lieu of braver speech.

I bet you've guessed it. All these too-many pages of flaccid syllabics are apologia for my own absolutely magnificent science fiction novel.
... Counting on your tolerance,
I append a five-stress summary.

THE NOVEL:

Know ye, Lillian, that once upon this earth
Words had not the shape that now they shine in,
And men had earless only holes to balance
The wind that whooshed their heads, and a single eye
On the lefthand side blinked in the cheek. Strange
Beings, men of matter not of flesh,
Such creatures that walked when void and atom married;

And nothing then of the comforting mud that chinks
Our bones. Nor had they mouths to say or slobber.
Up and down the diamonded soil they ran,
Aimless and endless in a kind of Brownian motion.
And words lay all about the landscape, lay
Half-buried in glittering ground, or propped cockeyed
Against metallic trees ... For words were objects
In that crystal season, great lunking hulks
Unmanageable. Slabs of matrix unnameable,
Discrete, and silent as a birdless sky.
No one, know ye, knew what they were. The notion
Of *word* had not yet squiggled into being.
But there they were, twitchy to be discovered,
All words that in the world ever were or will.
Take "is," for example. Here was a frost-on-iron-
colored dodecahedron forty feet long
With faces unreflecting which stood at the center
Of that senseless tribal scurrying, an obstacle,
If they'd known what "obstacles" were. ("Obstacle" itself
Was a globular little pebble streaked with blue.)
Let us take "like." "Like" was everywhere,
An abrasive glinting dust bitter to taste-
Had there been mouths--cloaking all the objects
That were really words. Or think of "soul":
Small solid round cuddly boulder
You'd hug to your chest. All tongue was there:
"Tovarisch," "shantih," "amo," "Chattahoochee,"
Lying connectionless upon sterility.
No man paid them any mind.

Beyond the moon a race of beings superior
Then thrived, and observed the plight of human men
With pitying hearts. *Archamens* they were called,
Of the planet *Nirvan*, which circled the deeps of Aquarius
Constellation. Flitted the galaxies
Faster than love can whisper the loins in
spaceships Constructed of intellectual soap bubbles.
Knowledge
They'd gained, of the transitory and sempiternal,
And they decided to take a hand. Accordingly,
They sent an envoy, a lady who'd been
awarded

Mother of the Year (on Nirvan seven

Thousand seven hundred forty days).
For her it is a simple task. She brought her ship
Downily to couch upon our prickly planet,
Stepped forth splendid in radiant gossamer
And took the hand of the first dumb joe who came
Along. (Later, when names came into fashion,
He spelled himself Adam.) She led him a mile
Through clanking desert to the foot of a mountain taller
Than Pishgah, hill of blue-green-gray-white flashing,
A single mineral.

"Now listen to me, honey,"
She said. "I'm going to say this once, so try
To get it. What you're looking at is *water*.
You understand me? This is *water*. *Water*."

Brother, you shoulda been there!
Obviously,
It blew that dim ember of brain he had
To highest heat. Certainly it was water.
Why hadn't he figured it out before? *Water*
So simple a notion ...

And in that instant everything
Occurred that still occurs and shall occur.
From his holey head his ears began to peep
Out, tentative as snail-horns. Featureless chin
Blossomed a mouth like a red red rose, mouth
Suffering to speak. And a second eye
Bulged brightly, setting in order the face that now
We know. He struggled; sweat suffused his form.
At last he got it. "Water," he said.
(Or maybe "wodor" or "wat-tar" or "wazzar" or "wawa.")
And the mountain itself began to change, rumbling
Gushy, and rippling majestic as borealis,
Finally collapsing, like jello in an oven, to liquid;
And began to search the secret veins of earth.
Everything changed! Palm trees sprang forth, and lilies.
Elephants, tigers, cows, green beans, papaya ...
Whatever name you like to name took root,
And the world filled up with glorious language, bleating
Like a million million trumpets.

Our Lovely Mother,
Satisfied (almost smirking, is my guess),

Remounted her ship and starward rode off silent.
Adam didn't even notice, so joyed
He was, so battered with delight at names
Which on every flaming side struck both his eyes.

Over and over he said it: "Water. Water."
And other words: "Pomegranate. Baseball. Mouse.
Cadillac. Poem. Paradise. Cinnamon Doughnut."
When he said, "Man," everyone changed to persons
Like himself. (Except the women, of course.)
But that one word he loved, and said again:
"Water. Water. Water. Water. Water."

THE END

So there you have the main drift of it, at least. I'd be
curious to know what you think, so long as it is
favorable and congratulatory. If it's
not, you dog, don't even bother to answer

old Fred.

A final note. I hesitate to add it, as anything personal will make it seem as if this Spartacus is all about me. It's meant, of course, to note the passing of a great teacher, great man of letters, and a solid friend. But a personal postscript seems appropriate when talking about an influence on one's life that exceeds most others. Outside of my family, Fred Chappell ranks with Julius Schwartz. Harlan Ellison and Lillian Hellman at the pinnacle of such mentors.

The two years I spent getting my Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro were about more than writing fiction. There were people in my class – particularly the late Eve Shelnutt – who were, like Chappell, the Real Thing, artists touched by Amadeus, keyed into organic living language and the human experience and essence it serves. I was a antisocial Berkeley boy with barely discernible talent, moderately good brainpower. goofy ideas and a glib energy that poured forth in words. I could recognize and appreciate Genius, but alas, only from without.

Nevertheless I love and appreciate those two years listening, arguing, critiquing, on class, trying to pen fiction in private, and talkingtalkingtalking at post-class bull sessions at a local bar. I did have some success; I published a story in The Greensboro Review with a shameful title I thought artsy, a story considered a "short story of distinction" by the editors of Best American Short Stories. Though I ended up, years later, engrossed in the real world – in law – I never lost the spirit Fred Chappell imparted at UNC-Greensboro. Forget yourself – listen – tell the truth. And use and love the language.

Thanks, Fred. You were among those who informed my life. I'll miss knowing you're there. And so goodbye.