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The Pull of Home

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He's written three books and lived all over the world, but when Neely Tucker thinks of home, he thinks of Starkville

Story Birney Imes | Photographs Luisa Porter



Novelist and Washington Post journalist Neely Tucker

At quarter past 10, writer Neely Tucker pushes through the

front door of the Starkville Public Library, a rush of energy.

He pauses for a moment to look around. The place is thick with memories. “Let’s go somewhere,” he says, “somewhere we can get coffee.”

He’s due back at the library at noon to speak to the Friends of the Library.

We get two coffees and the last croissant on the shelf and take a sidewalk table. It’s early November, a postcard-perfect fall day. The Mississippi and U.S. flags in front of the courthouse across the street ripple in the wind, mirror images of each other.

Tucker, 52, moves quickly, with an aura of self-assurance. There is a small earring in his left ear. Strangers in airports frequently mistake him for Billy Bob Thornton. Clearly, he’s not from around here. Except that he is.

Tucker, a Washington Post writer, novelist and Oktibbeha County native, seems glad to be on the answering side of the equation for change; ideas, opinions and memories flow from him without pause. There is no trace of an accent; 30 years of living in the North and abroad has taken care of that. He is a seasoned public speaker and occasionally leads writing workshops. As such, he has his own repertoire of stories.

Like his encounter with Willie Morris at a Mississippi State baseball game.

“I was in awe,” says Tucker, then a student at MSU. “He was the first person I’d ever met who wrote for a living. I told him I wanted to write and get out of Mississippi, not necessarily in that order.”

Morris, author, Yazoo City native and former editor of Harper’s magazine, instructed Tucker to transfer to Ole Miss. He told him to major in journalism and do everything a professor named Tommy Miller told him to do.

“I was so young and naïve, I did everything an inebriated Southern author at a baseball game told me to do ... and it actually worked out.”

If Neely Tucker’s life has a devil-at-the-crossroads moment, it was that meeting with Mississippi’s Good Ole Boy in Left Field Lounge at Dudy Noble.

His writing has taken him to more than 50 countries; he’s lived in Europe and Africa; he’s published three books, and he’s a staff writer for one of the nation’s most important and respected newspapers.

But, if you want to really know about someone, give their mom a call.

BORN TO WRITE

“I know who you are,” Betty Tucker interrupted as I tried to introduce myself on the phone. We had met at the library.

The writer’s mother is not without stories of her own.

In 1969, she and her late husband, Duane, moved their young family from Lexington to Starkville where Duane took a job with the MSU Extension Service. Betty taught piano. They bought a sandstone ranch-style house and eight acres on Highway 12 near Longview, a rural community about six miles southwest of town. Betty still lives there.

A few years later, when he was in the third grade, Neely wrote a story about himself and Robert Reese, a neighborhood friend. The young writer took his “book” door-to-door. He didn’t sell a single one.

“It was just born in him,” Betty said. “He couldn’t help but write.”

When he graduated from Ole Miss in 1986, Tucker was named the top journalism student in his class. Charlie Mitchell, assistant dean of the Meek School of Journalism and New Media, remembers Tucker as formidable student.

“Neely was among the first students in the first classes when I first taught at Ole Miss in the 1980s,” Mitchell said. “I was nervous enough, but when I called on him in class and he quoted a Kurt Vonnegut novel in his response, I knew I was in trouble.”

While in school, Tucker worked for the local newspaper.

“I was the Yalobusha County correspondent for the Oxford Eagle,” he said. “Not everyone gets to say that.”

The Yalobusha posting turned out to be a fortuitous resume item. Four newspapers later, when he applied for a position at the Washington Post, it caught the eye of metro editor Bob Barnes.

“I’m hiring this guy,” said Barnes, who now covers the Supreme Court for the Post. “I just want to see what happens.”

What happened was a 15-years-and-counting career at the Post.

There Tucker has written on subjects as disparate as the recent and controversial publication of Harper Lee’s *Go Tell a Watchman*, a family battle over the location of Jim Thorpe’s grave, a profile of the artist and photographer William Christenberry, and the similarities and differences of the political careers of professional wrestler and Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura and presidential candidate Donald Trump.

Those pieces, often written for the Sunday magazine, are erudite and, at times, ethereal. Here are the closing sentences in Tucker’s profile of agnostic, Bible scholar and best-selling author Bart Ehrman:

He thinks that when you die, there are no Pearly Gates.

“I think you just cease to exist, like the mosquito you swatted yesterday.”

On this particular morning, he turns his attention to his new book, the story of Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Christ. Judas resides, according to Dante, in the ninth circle of hell.

Ehrman’s desk is filled with open books. His study is sun-filled, with a glass door giving onto a patio and the gentle pines of the Carolina forests.

Where does faith reside? Does it leave a residue when it is gone?

Bart Ehrman begins writing, the day unfolding, shafts of light falling through the window, the mysteries of the Gospels open before him.

WORLD TRAVELER

Prior to the Post, Tucker traveled the world as a foreign correspondent for the Detroit Free Press, first based in Poland, then Zimbabwe. There he and his wife, Vita, volunteered at an orphanage in desperate circumstances.

One afternoon, a critically ill infant arrived at the orphanage. The child had been abandoned and left to die. Tucker and his wife would eventually adopt the child. He recounts the story in *Love in the Driest Season*, his first book.

Publishers Weekly named it one of the 25 best books published in 2004.

He's also written two crime novels set in D.C., in part an outgrowth of his friendship with pulp fiction virtuoso Elmore Leonard, who Tucker wrote about and became friends with when he lived in Detroit.



Neely Tuckers signs books following a Friends of the Library Books & Authors talk at the Starkville Public Library in November 2015.

ON HOME

And then there is the issue many Magnolia State expatriates struggle with, his relationship with home.

Last summer Tucker logged 1,100 miles within the state to report a story about attitudes on the state flag. Mississippi is the only remaining state in the union that incorporates Confederate imagery in its flag.

“This is one of the central complications of my existence,” he says, looking across the street at the courthouse. “I’m sitting here looking at that state flag, and it’s getting on my every last nerve with every flap.”

“The racial intolerance, it drives me nuts,” he says. “The Mississippi that I love is the most predominantly black state in America, and I’m really happy about that. I think African Americans have contributed so much to America and have endured so much.”

And yet, Tucker is quick to assert his love for the state.

“If I describe myself in five words or less, ‘Mississippi’ would be one of them,” he says. “I really, really love this place.”

Willie Morris told an interviewer in 1979: “If there is anything that makes Southerners distinctive from the main body of Americans, it is a certain burden of memory and a burden of history. I think sensitive Southerners have this in their bones, this profound awareness of the past.”

Tucker is squarely within this group. He’s a seventh-generation Mississippian. A great, great grandfather lost a leg at Gettysburg. Yet, his relationship with Mississippi is nothing, if not paradoxical.

Tucker has been married twice; both have been interracial marriages. Vita, his first wife, is African American; his present wife, Carol is Jamaican-born. Both of his spouses love coming to Mississippi; both have close relationships with his mother, but they wouldn’t live here, he says.

He tells the standing-room-only group at the library writing was his passport out of Mississippi, though he returns to his childhood home to write.

Another tether to home is his lifelong love for Mississippi State football. He and his brother sold programs at MSU home games when they were kids. They rarely missed a home game.

“Going to a State football game for me is adult Christmas,” Tucker says.

MEMORY TRAIN

For photographs to accompany this piece, Tucker suggests we go to Longview, a childhood haunt.

We turn off Highway 12, cross a set of railroad tracks no longer in use and park next to a roofless brick building that once housed a country store. There’s not much left here.

He remembers those long afternoons of boyhood when he and friends would walk the tracks, either toward town to climb the fire tower a mile away or here, to these abandoned buildings.

Even then, Boyd Neely Tucker knew he would somehow, someday, leave this place. “He used to stand out on that track when he was a little guy,” Betty Tucker said. She remembers watching him trying to jump on a caboose once.

The tracks with their rumbling freight trains remain very much alive in the writer’s memory.

“I remember hearing it blow from the clearing at night as a kid and sneaking up to the front door to go outside and watch it come through the trees and pass us,” he says.

Years later, after he had traveled the world and made a life for himself in the North, Tucker was home for a visit. He and his mother were standing in her front yard by the tracks.

“This will always be part of me,” he told her. “I am from here.”

The photo session is relaxed, playful even.

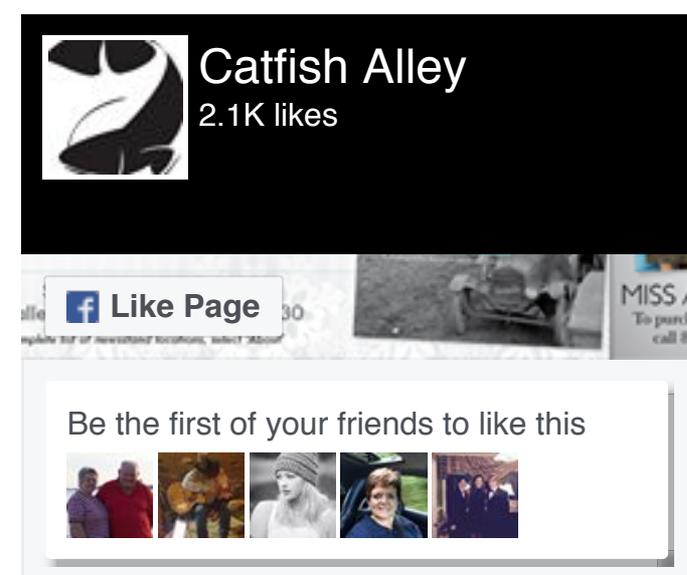
Despite the suit, the demands of the photographer, commitments that evening in Jackson, he is in no hurry to finish.

Neely Tucker is, at least for the moment, home.

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The image shows a Facebook page header for 'Catfish Alley'. On the left is a profile picture of a stylized fish. To its right, the page name 'Catfish Alley' is displayed in white text on a black background, with '2.1K likes' underneath. Below this is a 'Like Page' button with the Facebook 'f' logo. To the right of the button is a small thumbnail image of a person sitting on a bench. Below the 'Like Page' button is a white box with the text 'Be the first of your friends to like this' and a row of five small profile picture thumbnails of various people.

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