



Breece Pancake
Faculty 1976
(1952 - 1979)



On Palm Sunday, 1979, Breece Pancake was 26 years old and had just completed a graduate writing program at the University of Virginia when he committed suicide in Charlottesville, VA. Four years later *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* was published, a collection of twelve stories that posthumously established his literary reputation as one of the finest short story writers in twentieth century American literature.

Pancake grew up in the hollows of West Virginia and each of the carefully wrought stories in this collection deals with the seemingly desperate lives of the working poor in that part of the country. They are remarkably crafted stories, written with a deep sense for the locale and the people from which they are drawn. They are also models of precision, the kind of stories that deserve to be read over and over, studied for the way in which they use foregrounding and the mundane details of everyday life—albeit everyday life that quietly screams with the desperation of poverty, dead-ending work, drinking, promiscuity, and brutality—to draw complex portraits of people who endure, even when endurance is no more than a substitute for hope. As he writes in "A Room Forever," the story of a tugboat mate spending New Year's Eve in an eight-dollar-a-night hotel room where he drinks cheap whiskey out of the bottle and eventually ends up with a teen-aged prostitute: "I stop in front of a bus station, look in on the waiting people, and think about all the places they are going. But I know they can't run away from it or drink their way out of it or die to get rid of it. It's always there."

[Most critiques consider that] the best of these stories are "Trilobites," "The Honored Dead," "Fox Hunters," and "In the Dry." But there really isn't a weak story in the bunch. Every story is captivating; every one an exemplar of what good short story writing should be. At the end, the only thing that disappoints, that leaves the reader discomforted, is the thought that Pancake died so young, that these are the only stories we have by a truly remarkable writer.

It is nearly impossible to overstate the importance of Breece D'J Pancake to modern Appalachian fiction, despite the shortness of his life ... and the fact that before he died he had published only a few short stories. The publication of his single collection of stories, four years after his death, sparked renewed national interest in regional literature and helped writers like Denise Giardina, Richard Currey, and Pinckney Benedict to find national audiences and critical attention. His style and power have been compared to such twentieth-century literary giants as William Faulkner, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Samuel Beckett. But who was this brilliant and troubled young man, who made such an impact on the literary world with his life and death?

Breece Pancake was raised in Milton, WV, a small town in Cabell County. He briefly attended West Virginia Wesleyan College, then moved on to Marshall University, where he completed a B.A. in English in 1974. He spent the next two years as an English instructor at Fort Union Military Academy and Staunton Military Academy [1976]. He left teaching in 1976 to enroll in the masters program at the University of Virginia. At UVA, Pancake began to write fiction, seriously and prolifically. His first published story, *Trilobites*, appeared in *The Atlantic* in 1977. This event would bestow on him the unusual middle initials D'J, a mis-punctuation by the *Atlantic* editors of the initials for "Dexter" (his middle name), and "John" (the name he adopted after his conversion to Catholicism in his mid-twenties). Pancake chose to adopt the misprint and used it afterwards on all his published works.

But despite finding publication success, and earning the respect and friendship of his professors, Pancake did not have an easy time at UVA. In his *Foreword to The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake*, James Alan McPherson writes about the University's struggle to reconcile its new make-up -- a generation after the admission of middle-class males and less than a decade after the admission of women and minorities -- with its "traditional" upper-class Southern identity. In this struggle, Pancake, like others from the Southern middle- and lower-classes, felt "isolated and insecure." Pancake did not fit in well with other graduate students at the university, though many admired his work. He seemed to deliberately cultivate a "hillbilly" persona, rough and unkempt, telling people of his "poor" origins, though his parents were in fact closer to the middle class than to the poverty and roughness of the people whose lives he captured. He lived in a single room equipped with a shower that was attached to a larger home in a wealthy suburb outside of Charlottesville. The room contained little furniture; he slept on a cot and wrote at a desk placed under the room's only window. His personal relationships tended to be private and intense, Pancake bringing the same passion to his life that he did to his writing.

Breece D'J Pancake died on the night of April 8, 1979, from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. His death was officially judged a suicide, though some family members and childhood friends believe his death was a tragic accident. Others friends, including UVA faculty member John Casey, believe that they received "suicide" notes from Pancake in the weeks before his death, notes only understandable through hindsight. Whatever the true reasons behind it, Breece Pancake's death was a huge blow to the Appalachian literary community. All those who read his work believed he was on the cusp of a brilliant career, full of promise and potential. Though that potential was in many ways unfulfilled, Breece D'J Pancake lives on -- in the lives he touched, the work he left behind, and the influence he has exerted on the Appalachian writers that would follow him."

Author Kurt Vonnegut (*Breakfast of Champions*) wrote in a letter to John Casey, novelist and one of Pancake's mentors at UVA, "I give you my word of honor that he is merely the best writer, the most sincere writer I've ever read. What I suspect is that it hurt too much, was no fun at all to be that good. You and I will never know."

Honors and Awards:

- Governor's Fellowship in Fiction Writing from University of Virginia 1976
- Jefferson Society Fiction Award from University of Virginia 1977
- Hoyns Fellowship for Fiction Writing from University of Virginia 1978
- West Virginia Library Association Annual Book Award 1983 (posthumous)
- Nominated for the Pulitzer Prize for *The Stories of Breece D'J Pancake* (posthumous)

From www.wvwc.edu/library/wv_authors/breece_pancake.html and *Wikipedia*.
Edits by Kelly McGavock, SMA '59 (August 2014)

“Pancake ... once wrote home to his mother: ‘I’m going to come back to West Virginia when this is over. There’s something ancient and deeply-rooted in my soul. I like to think that I have left my ghost up one of those hollows, and I’ll never really be able to leave for good until I find it. And I don’t want to look for it, because I might find it and have to leave.’” Alix Lambert, *hilobrow.com*, 6-29-2011.

For more about Breece Pancake go to: <http://johndcasey.com>