

Cabell McLean
1952 – 2004

On December 1, 2004, Cabell McLean, writer and Ashé contributor, passed away due to complications from Hepatitis C. HIV-disease was listed as a contributing cause on the death certificate. He was 52.

McLean was a descendant of the visionary American writer James Branch Cabell (Jurgen) for whom he was named. While he was an undergraduate at the University of Virginia, Cabell's widow provided



Photo: Kirila Fach

McLean with one of three keys to the James Branch Cabell room. That enabled the young writer to have access to many first editions of modern classics and original manuscripts. It also provided him invaluable insight into the need for a writer to understand what had come before him.

After graduation, he attended the Naropa Institute. The poet Larry Fagin recognized McLean's talent. Fagin encouraged him to show his work to William S. Burroughs. That summer McLean attended Burroughs class on screenwriting. Although he was enraptured by what he described as "the overwhelming impression of ancient wisdom," that emanated from Burroughs, he was reluctant to approach him. One night

at 10 p.m. stoked by a sufficient quantity of vodka, McLean brought his oeuvre of youthful writings to the sage's apartment and knocked on his door. In a 1999 interview, he described what happened next:

"[Burroughs] opened it almost at once, looked at me with a sour expression and said, "Oh, it's you!" I could tell he remembered me from class. I was unsure what to do next, but then he stood aside and said, "Well, come on in." He offered me a drink (just what I needed!) and I took it. He was drinking vodka, and poured a tumbler nearly full, topped it off with tonic, and pushed it across the kitchen table to me where I sat. I told him I'd come to show him my work. He accepted this and opened my portfolio. My heart sank as he flipped through my carefully typed stories about the criminals and drug addicts I had known, each page receiving but a cursory glance before being flipped over and forgotten. He went through the entire collection of some twenty stories in less than two minutes!

"Is that it?" he asked. I just sat there, stunned, saying nothing.

"Very nice," he said, and I could tell he thought no such thing. I supposed they seemed terribly amateurish, and I was completely humiliated. I was already thinking about the best way to get out of there politely when he said, "Let's go out on the porch."

He stepped out onto the small, railed porch through the glass door and looked over into the Varsity Apartments courtyard. In spite of the hour, most of the apartments were active and the courtyard was brightly lit. Across the way, we watched a young boy, perhaps fifteen, naked but for a swimsuit, climbing up and around the trellises that covered the inner walls of the courtyard. "That's Beade, Spence's kid," Bill murmured to me as we watched the youthful body pull and stretch up the wall. "Like a little monkey he is. Climbs all over the walls out here all the time. I never know when he's going to climb right up and stick his head through the window to say hi." I had to admit the boy was beautiful, and said so. Bill smiled at me in a way I came to know well

later, the smile of a vaudeville showman, the smile of a gombeen man, and said, “Young boys do need it special!” He laughed and put a large, heavy hand on my shoulder, and suddenly I knew everything was going to be alright.”

McLean spent the next five years with Burroughs as both a student and personal assistant “to learn the craft of writing from a master craftsman.” During that time, McLean paid his own expenses, drawing from a stipend from his family. He was emphatic about not accepting money from Burroughs.

McLean participated in many literary experiments with Burroughs. He recalled: “I researched these periods and places [that were incorporated into Burroughs’ novels], and much of my early work with Bill involved learning his special techniques of researching a story idea. These included the usual background reading, but also included visiting locations, focused dreaming, cut up experiments, and “walk-throughs.” A walk-through was when Bill and I would act out a scene to see how things might go. I always had a lot of fun doing walk-throughs with Bill. This was during the early days of his work on *Place of Dead Roads*, which he called by its working title *Gay Gun*. We’d drive out to visit sites of interest to him, places where events happened in the history of the west. There we would do short re-enactments of certain scenes, such as a gun fight, for example.”

In fact the initial publication of the short story “Gay Gun” in the December 1978 issue of *The Washington Review of Books* gave both Burroughs and McLean by-lines.

McLean left Burroughs in 1983 to pursue his own career, although the two remained life-long friends and were in contact until Burroughs’ own death. McLean was always very reluctant to trade in on his association with Burroughs to gain attention. In fact he only gave one interview about his relationship with Burroughs, in spite of repeated offers to give paid interviews.

In New York, McLean became active on the alternative music scene. He acted as unofficial manager of the popular band the Stimulators (“Loud Fast Rules.”) His one-time partner, Patrick Mack, fronted the Stims. Mack’s early death from tuberculosis (most likely due to HIV disease) plunged McLean into a period of depression and marked the first intrusion of AIDS into his life.

When he began to see his way out of mourning, he sold the option on a screen treatment “L’Ornias.” The story centered on a gender-bending demon who is described in “The Testament of Solomon” as having a taste for effeminate young men. McLean’s story eerily reflected the devastation of the Gay community unleashed by the AIDS pandemic. The producers were unable to arrange financing before the option expired. In the last years of his life, McLean modified “L’Ornias” as a graphic novel script. He also collaborated with the late writer Miguel Pinero on a Miami Vice script that was not finished due to Pinero’s sudden death.

However, fiction remained his dominant form of expression. Much of his work explored the New York Draft Riots. He wrote over twenty-five short stories centered on that event and the Irish gangs in New York. Those stories form the core of his yet unpublished novel, Riot. He described his interest in the Draft Riots and the Irish Criminal Gangs that had developed in New York in the preceding years. “It is....period of great change in criminal life, the advent of the first truly organized criminal groups, and the consolidation and establishment of corruption as a major part of American political life. It is also the period during which the first major organized effort at racial genocide was attempted.

That is, in fact, what the Draft Riots were: a blatant attempt by the Protestant power structure in New York City to remove the poor Catholic Irish from the city.”

McLean was keenly aware of the effects of political oppression of minorities, although it was not until 1990 that he devoted his own life to political activism. Then McLean's life was turned upside down when he was diagnosed with full-blown AIDS while visiting a friend's family in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time, he prognosis was especially bleak. His T-Cell count hovered around 100 and he had PCP. He was given a prognosis that he had six months to live. However, McLean informed himself as best he could about his disease. (As a former pre-med student with a sharp intellect, he was able to make sense of his medical condition the way few patients at that time could.)

He adopted the moniker, "Lee Hardy" for this phase of his life. (His birth name was Cabell Hardy.) He developed ACTUP Baltimore's Treatment and Data Committee. The experience caused Hardy to realize that there was a lack of access to readily comprehensible information about HIV and its related disease treatments. This motivated him to form his own non-profit organization AIDS Research Information Center (ARIC), Inc. The organization handled up to hundreds of requests weekly from patients and their care-providers for explanations of existing and experimental treatments and treatment options for HIV and its related sequelae of diseases. Hardy handled each request personally. The inquiries inspired him to create *ARIC's AIDS Medical Glossary*. The publication was an exhaustive omnibus defining aspects of HIV, HIV medicine and opportunistic infections. It featured nearly 2,000 definitions. In the five years prior to the advent of widespread Internet access, it filled a critical void in the lives of many living with HIV disease. He also wrote a column on HIV treatments for the local Gay paper, *The Baltimore Alternative*. He was a founding member of three community advisory boards at John's Hopkins. He established the first community advisory board in the nation specifically dedicated to the treatment of children with HIV disease at Hopkins. He was a constant presence at national level treatment conferences.

McLean actually viewed his activist work as a practical application of what he learned from Burroughs. He frequently commented that all he was doing was being a Johnson. Burroughs explained the idea in his introduction to *Place of Dead Roads*. “A Johnson honors his obligations. His word is good and he is a good man to do business with. A Johnson minds his own business. He is not a snoopy, self-righteous, trouble-making person. A Johnson will give help when help is needed. He will not stand by while someone is drowning or trapped in a burning car.” McLean took these words as gospel, and everyone around him seemed to be trapped in a burning car.

His commitment to social activism cost his literary career dearly. Excessive client demands, conference commitments, and his own failing health robbed him of valuable time that he could have spent writing. Fortunately, McLean’s literary work was rediscovered by musical innovator (and “Wrecker of Civilization”) Genesis P-Orridge in 1999. Orridge presented McLean’s unpublished manuscripts to the committee selecting the talent who would appear at the prestigious Spoken Word Poetry Festival in Stockholm, Sweden. Even though an outstanding international reputation was prerequisite for the authors chosen to read, Hardy was selected to appear on the obvious merit of his talent. He occupied a featured spot on an evening bill and received an outstanding audience response. The reading aired on national television in Sweden. Offers to appear at similar functions throughout Europe soon followed, as did publishing offers. Unfortunately, McLean’s failing health necessitated him to turn down the performance offers.

The engagement inspired McLean to write extensively about his experience with Burroughs in an autobiographical account entitled *The Machine*. A section of *Machine* appeared in *Ashé*. He also wrote many science fiction stories and even began work on a children’s picture book inspired by his life-long affection for dogs.

McLean's writing was not a knock off of Burroughs. He seriously devoted himself to writing as craft, and read as many as five books a week until the last year of his life. He had a clear understanding of his personal style. He described it in the following terms. "Over the years, I think I can honestly say that I have succeeded in creating my own unique writing style, my own special take on Bill's teaching. My style now depends almost wholly upon a concise narrative, and my use of cut up is severely limited. In my work, cut ups are used to indicate extraordinary experiences: dreams, sex scenes, fights, complex action scenes like battles, and so forth. For me, the cut up is the most accurate way to describe the nature of thought, both conscious and unconscious, at times of stress, excitement, and contemplation."

In the end, the majority of his work remains unpublished. The truth is he hardly ever submitted it for publication. He was never very good at engaging in platitudes, a quality that did not always endear him to the literary community. Given the short span of his life, he probably didn't have the time.

McLean leaves behind his brother, Willis Hardy, Jr., of Florida, his aunt Virginia Vance, of College Park, MD, his life partner of the past 18 years, Eric K. Lerner, of Baltimore, MD, and his two beloved dogs, Butter and Biscuit.