This guide accompanies the television series *Signature*, a production of KET, The Kentucky Network. "Bobbie Ann Mason," "Ed McClanahan," and "Marsha Norman" were funded by the National Endowment for the Arts, the Kentucky Center for the Arts, the Annenberg/CPB Project, and local viewers through the KET Foundation. "George C. Wolfe," "Lee Smith," and "Barbara Kingsolver" were funded by the Annenberg/CPB Project.

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## THE SERIES

Southern writers have brought distinctive voices to American literature, and that tradition of originality continues today. *Signature* profiles a diverse group of contemporary Southern writers—Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, Marsha Norman, George C. Wolfe, Lee Smith, and Barbara Kingsolver. These portraits of artists in mid-career humanize and demystify the creative process. Biography, process, and performance come into play as we learn where writers come from, how they go about their work, and how they perform, or read, their own work.

## GUIDE WRITERS

**David Todd** contributed the essay on Southern writing and the chapters on Bobbie Ann Mason, Ed McClanahan, and Marsha Norman. He teaches writing at the College of Charleston. A native of Louisville, KY, he earned his M.F.A. in creative writing at the University of Florida. His work has appeared in *The Boston Globe*, *The Sewanee Review*, and other journals. Research for this viewer's guide was supported in part by a grant from the Kentucky Arts Council.

**Mike Kelsay** was the primary writer for the chapters on Barbara Kingsolver, Lee Smith, and George C. Wolfe. He won the *Virginia Quarterly Review*'s 1993 Emily Clark Balch prize for fiction and received a 1995 Al Smith Fellowship from the Kentucky Arts Council. He lives in Lexington, KY, where he is finishing his first novel.

Additional writing and editing by Nancy Carpenter, Marianne Mosley, Ira Simmons, and Barbara Clifton. Photographs by Dave Crawford and Guy Mendes. Layout and design by John Dawahare and Barbara Clifton.

## SERIES PRODUCER

*Signature* producer Guy Mendes, who also directed the Barbara Kingsolver program, has worked at KET for 20 years as a writer, producer, and director of documentaries. Most recently, he completed *Mountain Born: The Jean Ritchie Story*, a documentary he wrote and co-produced that aired nationally on PBS in December 1996. Other documentaries include *Gentleman from Kentucky*, a one-hour program on the career of U.S. Senator and Ambassador John Sherman Cooper that premiered at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC in June 1990, and *FDR: An American Hero*, a co-production of KET and Pathé Cinema of France that aired nationally on PBS in 1985. He also wrote the instructional series *Kentucky GeoQuest* and wrote and produced the 15-program adult literacy series *Another Page*, starring Robert Townsend and Joe Seneca.

Under his supervision, *Signature* has thus far received a Worldfest Houston International Film Festival Bronze Plaque Award and a 1996 Gabriel Award from UNDA-USA (both for the Marsha Norman program). Both *Gentleman from Kentucky* and *Kentucky GeoQuest* were honored as outstanding productions by the Southern Educational Communications Association, while *Another Page* won a Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) local programming award. Mendes' credits as a producer also include two other CPB Award honorees: the one-hour special *Totally Radical Teenage Videos* and *Old Music for New Ears*, a 22-part instructional series. Mendes is also an accomplished photographer and teacher.

## MESSAGE TO TEACHERS/ VIEWERS

Each program in this series is 60 minutes long. For the convenience of teachers, and to encourage classroom use, each of the detailed program synopses suggests an appropriate point about halfway through the program where teachers may want to stop the tape.

For each program, this guide includes

- a synopsis of the program with segment headings (each program in the series is divided into segments separated by on-screen titles) and a list of readings included in each segment;
- a brief biographical sketch of the featured writer;
- a list of some of the writer's major works with a sampling of critical responses;
- excerpts from interviews with the writer talking about his or her work;
- "Writing Ideas," suggestions for writing assignments based on the program and the writer; and
- a reading list and brief bibliography.

Teachers are encouraged to preview each program before using it.

## SERIES ADVISERS

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# EDUCATIONAL USE

## DISCOVER THE WRITER WITHIN: *SIGNATURE* IN THE CLASSROOM

*Signature* has found a place in high school and college courses on contemporary literature, advanced composition, American studies, creative writing, speech and drama, women's studies, and career exploration. Teachers find that the programs are easily tailored to classroom presentations and often use segments of the videos to elaborate on or reinforce ideas.

Clearly the series can be used in literature classes to give students insight into the writers they are reading. But helping students see themselves as writers is the most common reason many teachers use the series in English and creative writing classes. Teachers say the authors help motivate students to write about what they know. The programs on Ed McClanahan, Bobbie Ann Mason, and Lee Smith, for example, allow rural students to feel more secure about writing from a small-town experience—about the people and places most familiar to them.

Teachers prepare students by having them read the writer's work ahead of time, and some show movie versions of the writer's novels and plays. (Bobbie Ann Mason's novel *In Country* and Marsha Norman's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *'night, Mother* were made into movies and can be rented on tape. Check your local video rental stores. George Wolfe's play *The Colored Museum* has been televised on PBS, which also aired a documentary on *Jelly's Last Jam.*)

Teachers also are using the series in an integrated approach with social studies to talk about boundaries, cultural attitudes, and customs.

### What teachers say about *Signature*

"*'night, Mother* is a favorite piece for my students to use in speech competition. Marsha Norman gives them an opportunity to learn about her influences and inspirations and what drove her to write the play."

"Ed McClanahan helps students discover where they are as writers. Segments with Ed reading from an early piece let students see how he has progressed."

"Change and growth in writers is addressed well in the series. It's necessary for students to study themselves as writers and to see how they evolve."

"The writers help students realize that it usually takes many failures to become successful."

"My students were interested in the many different approaches to writing and how normal the writers themselves seem."

"The series shows just how human these writers are. My students are amazed that these people actually practice their craft and are approachable. I use most of these authors' works in my instruction already."

"Students are impressed that these people are not a bunch of old, dead, white guys—they write books people actually read. They live life and write about it, which is one of the biggest benefits of the series. It also converts my [college] students from the North to see the culture we have here."

"These programs make the authors seem 'real.'"

"The program on Ed McClanahan inspired my students to finish some of their pieces. They liked to hear the authors talk about struggling."

"Once you hear the author's voice reading his or her own work, you never read the work in the same way again. It forever influences you."

# ED MCCLANAHAN

## PROGRAM SYNOPSIS

The exuberant humor and style of Ed McClanahan's work show the influence of Dickens and Sterne, as well as his experiences as a member of Ken Kesey's Merry Pranksters in California during the 1960s. In this program, McClanahan trades stories with old friends, recalling his boyhood days in Brooksville and Maysville, Kentucky and talking about how those experiences influenced his writing. He also reads from his sprawling novel *The Natural Man* and his autobiographical *Famous People I Have Known*. The program includes excerpts from a film version of one of his short stories, "The Congress of Wonders."

### Part 1

Ed McClanahan, his mother, and a boyhood friend begin the program with stories of McClanahan as a boy growing up in a small rural town in Northern Kentucky. The first segment, "Brooksville," includes readings from *The Natural Man* and a short story, "Juanita and the Frog Prince." In the second segment, "Maysville," McClanahan visits his alma mater, Maysville High School, and trades stories with his high school buddies, many of them centering on high school basketball and the origin of one of his characters, Monk McHorning.

The third segment, "Rebel," traces McClanahan's journeys through various universities as a student, a teacher, a writer, and an editor (of the magazine *The Free You*). McClanahan talks about his first draft of *The Natural Man*, in which Monk is portrayed as "pure villain." This segment also includes comments by writer and friend Gurney Norman and readings from the nonfiction piece "A Misdemeanor Against Nature."

### Part 2

In the segment entitled "Little Enis," McClanahan is featured at a tribute to Little Enis, the guitar-playing rock-a-billy singer from Lexington, Kentucky profiled in *Famous People I Have Known*. McClanahan reads several excerpts from "Little Enis: An Ode on the Intimidations of Mortality."

The segment entitled "Writing *The Natural Man*" continues the story of the book's evolution and that of the character of Monk. McClanahan talks about facing a deadline from his publisher—20 years after he began the book—and finally seeing that the story needed to be told in third person, not in the first person of the initial drafts.

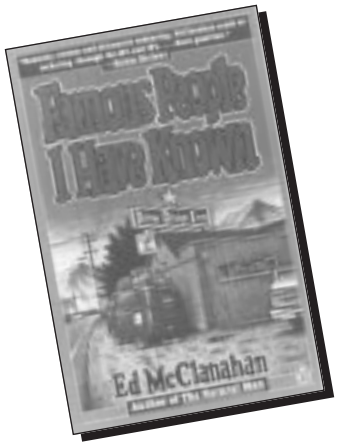
Two of the final three segments—"Home" and "Today"—show McClanahan with his family and talking about his future plans. The remaining segment, "The Congress of Wonders," features excerpts from Paul Wagner's film of the same name as well as McClanahan reading from the short story.

## ABOUT THE WRITER

Ed McClanahan remembers himself as a 6-year-old sitting beside his aunt while she read him poetry. "It was a summer afternoon; a breeze was blowing the curtains over the daybed. She was reading Shelley, Longfellow … Shakespeare. I've always thought, 'Well, okay, something was passed on from that.' I wanted to write or to be an artist."

He was born in 1932 and grew up in Brooksville, a small rural town in Northern Kentucky. His father ran an oil distributorship; his mother was a schoolteacher. A childhood illness held him back a year from entering school, but, he recalls, "I had all these aunts who were schoolteachers, so I could read like a stormtrooper by the time I started first grade."

Although he was lonely as a boy and "not much of a slugger in fights," by the time McClanahan got to high school, he says, "things started turning around for me. I got tall all of a sudden, girls were interested, and I made the high school basketball team." He found his new




home of Maysville "a hip place to be." His family lived within a block of the local soda fountain, the town movie theater, and the high school, and he wrote for the school newspaper.

After a year at Washington and Lee University, McClanahan transferred to Miami University of Ohio to study creative writing. He got Cs on his first short stories, but eventually wrote one good enough to win the college fiction prize. He then enrolled in a graduate English program at Stanford University, but soon discovered he wasn't ready and dropped out. After brief stints as a school bus driver and then a construction worker, he came home to study literature at the University of Kentucky. He wrote more fiction there and earned his master's degree.

In 1958, McClanahan went to work full time as an English teacher at Oregon State College. In the ensuing three years, he published only one short story, and by 1961 he had begun to feel "overwhelmed" by the prospect that he might never succeed at writing.

Spurred by his anxiety, McClanahan began working nights on a long story. "I wrote in a white heat," he says, "500 words a day, seven days a week. I would teach all day, drive 80 miles to teach a night class in Portland, grab a hamburger and eat it walking down the hall on my way to class, teach three hours, then jump in my car, dash back to Corvallis, go straight to my office and write till 5 or 6 o'clock in the morning, go home, sleep an hour, then get up and go teach an 8 a.m. class. It was an incredible period in my life. I lost 45 pounds and drank 25 cups of coffee every day. I was absolutely wired, just buzzing, flying around through the world."

In five months, he completed a 100-page novella titled *From a Considerable Height*. A publisher gave him a contract to develop it into a full-length novel, and he won the prestigious Stegner Fellowship, enabling him to return to Stanford to write fiction.

As a student at Stanford, McClanahan wrote more short stories; then, in 1963, the university hired him to teach creative writing, a position he held for the next decade. It was a time of rapid change in American society. The civil rights movement was gathering strength, the country was becoming embroiled in the Vietnam War, and the hippie culture was flourishing on college campuses.

As McClanahan has written, many of these cultural changes started in San Francisco. While he continued to work as a teacher at Stanford, he lived with his wife and children in a "big old house" where people constantly dropped by to visit, including Ken Kesey, author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and other writers, professors, gurus, and political activists.

With a friend, Fred Nelson, McClanahan began producing a local magazine called *The Free You*, for which "I composed my rhapsodic odes to the revolutionary spirit of the times." One of the earliest of these essays, "Highway 52 Revisited," told of his encounter with some conservative young men at a bar in Kentucky one summer when he made one of his annual visits home.

"It was a major breakthrough for me to write that piece," he later said. "Addressing people in my hip community in California, having an audience that was friendly, not judgmental … made all the difference. I learned a more personal and direct, original voice than I had ever had before." He continued to develop that voice in other creative essays for *The Free You*, *Esquire*, and *Playboy*.

McClanahan left Stanford in 1972. He taught college in Kentucky for one year and then in Montana for three before returning to Kentucky for good in 1976. He had discovered, "I wanted at last to write *lovingly* of Kentucky." When, in 1980, his publisher put him under a deadline either to finish the novel he'd started 20 years before or return the money he'd been paid, McClanahan found he was ready to do it.

He extensively revised his earlier work to produce *The Natural Man*, which was published in 1983 to unanimous praise. In 1985, he published his comic memoir, *Famous People I Have Known*. Recently he saw the film of his 1988 short story, "The Congress of Wonders," completed. And his new book, also entitled *A Congress of Wonders*, was published in 1996 to widespread praise. In *Newsweek*, reviewer Malcolm Jones Jr. wrote: "McClanahan lightens not merely your wallet but your heart as well. Quaff of this literary elixir. You won't regret it."

## MAJOR WORKS

Set in a small Kentucky town during the 1940s, *The Natural Man* (1983) is the story of Harry Eastep, a shy, scholarly 15-year-old, and Monk McHorning, a hulking, swaggering orphan who has been recruited by the high school principal to play for the basketball team. Monk stands 6′5″, weighs 238 pounds, and seems to have an endless supply of raunchy jokes to tell. He also plays basketball "with violent abandon, felling friend and foe alike," and the town looks eagerly to him to break the high school team's losing streak.

To Harry, Monk is "the most *accomplished* personage" he's ever met, and he soon becomes Monk's most devoted fan. Harry does Monk's homework to keep him eligible for the team. After hours, he hangs out with his hero at the local pool hall.

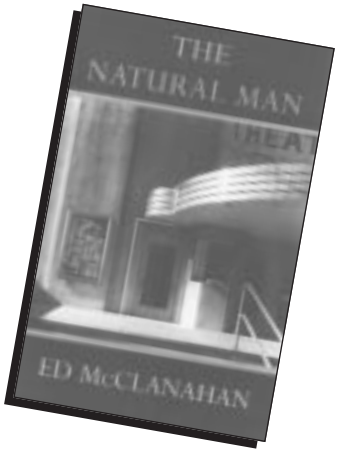
Soon, though, Harry finds himself in competition with Monk for the attention of Oodles Ockerman, the dim-witted, corpulent daughter of Newton Ockerman, who runs the town movie theater, where Harry works. Along with the rest of the town, Harry eagerly awaits one of the theater's coming attractions, a purported sex-education film. Meanwhile, as Monk's successes on the basketball court begin to add up, the pool hall proprietor starts trying to bribe Monk to cheat in some upcoming games.

These complications add suspense to the story, but, as *Newsweek*'s reviewer noted, "It's McClanahan's treatment of it that makes it a thing to marvel at. Hardly a sentence lacks a comic effect." But though the novel is comic, McClanahan portrays human foibles and virtues with equal sensitivity. Characters one might have predicted would end badly reveal unexpected virtues. The novel concludes on a note of faith, in wry acceptance of the inevitable change in human fortune.

After the enthusiastic reception of his novel, McClanahan published a memoir, *Famous People I Have Known* (1985). Starting with an incident from his freshman year in college, when he met a famous singer one evening, McClanahan tells stories of the '60s culture at Stanford, of the changes he observed in the country and in himself during those years, and of his decision to move back to Kentucky in the mid-'70s.

McClanahan's 1972 essay on performer Little Enis, which he calls "a personal all-time favorite of mine," appears as a chapter of the memoir. McClanahan found Enis to be a perfect subject to write about, since profiling Enis afforded him a chance to contrast his unique style of elegant narrative description with comic, country talk. At one point, for example, he describes Enis as "this pugnacious-looking little banty rooster with a skin-tight gold-sateen cowboy shirt and an underslung lower jaw and a great sleek black-patent-leather Elvis Presley pompadour," then quotes Enis: "People sometimes asks me what I think of these people like you, which has got the long hair and all. And … actually, see I've had long hair my own self."

The recently published *A Congress of Wonders* (1996) includes two novellas and a short story: "Juanita and the Frog Prince," "The Finches Song," and "The Congress of Wonders." First published in 1988, the short story, "The Congress of Wonders," is set at a carnival in rural Kentucky in 1944. A young teenage boy, Wade, tags along with his older brother Sonny, who is



# *Program Director:*

## PAUL WAGNER

Paul Wagner, director of "Ed McClanahan," is an accomplished documentary filmmaker on subjects in American history and culture, produced for the Smithsonian Institution and public television. His credits include the recently completed *Out of Ireland*, a history of Irish emigration to America; *Miles of Smiles*, the story of America's first black labor union; and *The Stone Carvers*, a portrait of Italian-American artisans which won the 1985 Academy Award for Best Short Documentary Film.

Wagner was born and raised in Louisville, received a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Kentucky, and worked as a researcher/writer at KET, his first job after graduating.

About his approach to the program, Wagner writes:

"The greatest (only?!) advantage films and videos have over written works is their ability to simply let the subject 'live' in front of the camera. In Ed's case, particularly, I think you could read about him forever and never catch the essence of him that you can by hearing and watching him tell one joke or relate one story.

"My strategy, therefore, was to bring Ed together informally with people and places that I hoped would stimulate his memories and musings on life and art, and then simply turn on the camera and let him talk. For many writers that approach might not lend much insight. But for Ed, I think it does.

"As one of the film's interviewees, Tom Marksbury, says, Ed's 'writing voice' is essentially the same as his 'cocktail hour voice.' So perhaps the viewer would do well to think of this as a chance to spend cocktail hour with Kentucky's King of the Small-Town Baroque."



leaving soon to fight in World War II. McClanahan's distinct mix of "overblown" language (as he once put it), comic exaggeration, and genuine pathos is abundantly evident in this poignant story of a younger brother's yearning to keep his older brother from harm. All three stories feature, as one critic describes him, "that colossus of chicanery, Professor Philander Cosmo Rexroat, B.S., M.S. and Pee-Aitch-Dee, herpetologist, philatelist, minister of the Gospel and licensed practitioner of colonic irrigation."

## ED McCLANAHAN: IN HIS OWN WORDS

While recognizing that the novella he wrote in 1961 was much improved by his revision of it 20 years later, McClanahan recalls that writing it while teaching composition full time constituted a critical stage in his development as a writer. Though teaching grammar was "an onerous chore," he found himself "interested in the mechanics of the language in a way I never had been before.… I was really getting my hands into the machinery of the language."

He also drew inspiration from the companionship of several poets on the college faculty. "Language was falling out of these people … one of them was always assonating and alliterating. It was wonderful."

Though he concedes that the novella's style was "poetic," it also had a "gloomy … confessional tone." He'd intended it as "a searing indictment of Southern small-town values." Monk McHorning was a villain. "He represented all the insensitive louts who mistreated me in my childhood. It was … about rejection and alienation."

But 20 years later, no longer embittered, McClanahan changed the point of view to the third person and, searching for a way to write kindly of Monk, found the answer in the nonfiction portrayal he'd already written of Little Enis, whom McClanahan had found endearing though also "rude and crude." In profiling Enis, McClanahan had been content simply to quote and describe his subject without criticizing him. Likewise, he now decided, "The way to render Monk was simply to *let him be himself*, to lighten up on him, to leave off judging him."

Of his work now, McClanahan says: "For me, where the act of writing really goes on is in the interplay between the written voice and the spoken voice. I like for there to be a counterpoint between those two things … to write in a deliberately overblown literary voice which plays off against these really earthy voices of my characters. And, to some extent, I like to amalgamate the two voices, so that sometimes I can get both of them going at once in a kind of weird harmony."

Reflecting on his affection for detailed description of small-town life, he says: "There exists this amorphous, shapeless mass of human experience. There's not an atom of it that isn't potentially a work of art. All that's required is an artist to single it out and … reveal it for what it really is."

## WRITING IDEAS

1. Mark Twain once said, "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Ed McClanahan keeps three thesauruses at his writing desk. He says that, when he's writing, he uses a thesaurus sometimes not just to find "the right word," but to find synonyms, "to see what other nuances I can come up with. You can't use a thesaurus haphazardly. But I find the thesaurus is like a little mine of ideas."

   To discover the variety of expressions a thesaurus offers, look up these words: *run*, *light*, *fair*, *green*, *tranquil*. Thesau-

> As one of the film's interviewees, Tom Marksbury, says, Ed's 'writing voice' is essentially the same as his 'cocktail hour voice.' So perhaps the viewer would do well to think of this as a chance to spend cocktail hour with Kentucky's King of the Small-Town Baroque.
>
> —*Paul Wagner*

ruses are arranged in different ways. You may find it easiest to use one published in dictionary form.

2. The protagonist of *The Natural Man*, Harry Eastep, loves sports writing for "the *assonance*, the *alliteration*, the sheer mythmaking *hyperbole*, the splendid excess of it all" [emphasis added]. Look up these terms and the term *consonance*. Try writing a paragraph that displays these qualities.

3. McClanahan describes an early draft of *The Natural Man* as containing language that was "jacked and pumped.… I had a lot of wind in my sails." For the fun of it, try writing a paragraph that could be described that way. For instance, try using two or three similes where ordinarily you might use only one. In *The Natural Man*, for example, McClanahan wrote not just that Newton Ockerman was fat, but that he "was as ponderous as three hundred pounds of vanilla custard on the hoof, the sort of fat man whose girth was greatest just below the belt, like a gravy boat or a soup tureen."

4. Using the first-person point of view, write a story about a time when you were treated unfairly by someone bigger than you. Write the story again, but from the point of view of that bigger person. Then write the story yet again, using the third-person perspective.

   In writing one of those versions, consider exaggerating what happened or how it felt to one of the characters. What other adjustments do you have to make—in someone's personality, in dialogue or setting—for that version of the story to be interesting?

5. Practice reading what you write aloud to someone at home, then read it aloud to a group.

## ED McCLANAHAN READING LIST


*One Lord, One Faith, One Cornbread*. Doubleday, 1973. (This anthology of works by McClanahan and others, co-edited with Fred Nelson, includes essays which later became chapters 3 and 4 of *Famous People I Have Known*.)

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*Famous People I Have Known*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1985. (memoir formed partly from previously published material, including articles listed below)

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"How To Weave a Tangled Web." *The Free You*, 196-. (later collected in *One Lord, One Faith, One Cornbread*; became chapter 4 in *Famous People I Have Known*)

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> McClanahan lightens not merely your wallet but your heart as well. Quaff of this literary elixir. You won't regret it.

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