

Writing the next chapter

English professor Willie Steele poised to publish biography of iconic baseball author



THE WEEK OF SEPT. 11, 2016, WAS A WEIRD ONE FOR LIPSCOMB ENGLISH PROFESSOR WILLIE STEELE ('95).

He knew his friend Bill was suffering the long-term effects of diabetes and not likely to recover, but he never expected to get an e-mail from Bill's daughter letting him know that that Friday would be his last day on earth.

Bill was taking advantage of a new Canadian law allowing him to undergo assisted suicide on Sept. 16. The notice would be a sad and shocking message for anyone, but it was made all the more shocking for Steele due to the fact that he was Bill's biographer.

Steele's week started with general concern and ended with phone calls from the Wall Street Journal about the death of W.P. Kinsella, the author of *Shoeless Joe* (adapted into the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*) and various other works of baseball fiction.

Kinsella had tapped Steele in 2012 to be his biographer because he had seen a copy of Steele's 2011 book, *A Member of the Local Nine: Baseball Identity in the Fiction of W.P. Kinsella*, the most comprehensive work on Kinsella's writings to be published to date.

At the time, Kinsella, known for being something of a curmudgeon, e-mailed Steele to tell him, in Steele's words: "I didn't mess it up too bad." That was high praise coming from Kinsella, who spent five years teaching at a university and walked away with a lifelong hatred of academia. "You didn't jump to absurd conclusions like so many academics tend to do," Kinsella wrote Steele.

The two began a four-year relationship that included Kinsella turning over his diaries spanning 34 years to Steele, an endless stream of interviews with

business colleagues, friends and family members, two visits to Kinsella's homes in British Columbia and countless e-mails with follow-up questions. The author gave Steele more access to his personal life than any other non-family member alive.

Now several months after Kinsella's death, Steele is poised to release the first and most comprehensive work on Kinsella's life ever published. Steele's literary agent, who previously represented Kinsella himself, is in talks with several U.S. and Canadian publishers.

Steele had no idea when he chose father/son relationships in the novel *Shoeless Joe* and the film *Field of Dreams* as the topic for his 1998 master's thesis that he was setting his academic career on a course that would make him today's most knowledgeable expert on W.P. Kinsella.

Steele had always been a big fan of baseball, and he wanted to do his master's thesis on a topic he would enjoy throughout the process, he said. "I was not that good of a player, so I thought, 'If I can't play baseball, I can at least write about it.'"

"Through baseball, you can see many of the substantive changes in our society through the years—religion, gender, race, class and politics. It's really an interesting way to be able to explore American identity through its national pastime."

After earning his master's, Steele taught writing and literature at Cascade College and Oklahoma Christian University, all the while publishing papers and making presentations, more often than not on baseball literature. His 2006 dissertation on Kinsella's four baseball novels became the 2011 book that Kinsella liked, and Steele has presented numerous times at the Annual Symposium on Baseball and American Culture, the nation's premier

academic conference on baseball literature, held at the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, N.Y.

Despite his ornery reputation, Kinsella was quite an agreeable interview subject, Steele said. "He never said no to any question." His personality had many facets, from cantankerous to generous, said Steele. "His agent called (Kinsella) one of the most complex friends she's ever had," he said.

Steele says he didn't quite know what he was getting into when he agreed to write the biography. The process has been long and more consuming than he ever imagined. Steele has researched all of Kinsella's writing and his presentations, visited the Canadian National Archives twice and organized boxes and boxes full of Kinsella's old papers and notes, even old junk mail. He has interviewed Phil Alden Robinson, the director of *Field of Dreams*; Dwier Brown, who played Ray Kinsella's father in the movie; and Lawrence Kessenich, Kinsella's editor for *Shoeless Joe*.

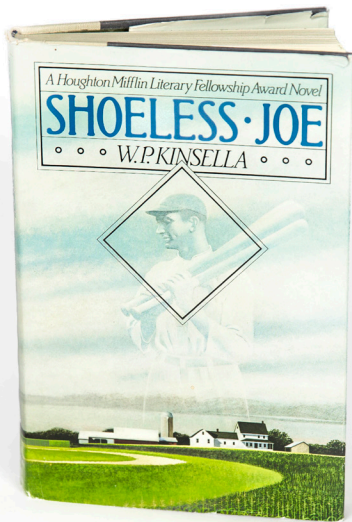
"Every interview leads to four others, which leads to seven others," he said.

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Steele was grateful to be awarded a 2016 Lipscomb Faculty Summer Grant that allowed him to get the bulk of the biography down on paper this past summer, an extra blessing considering Kinsella's death in September.

Throughout Kinsella's career he published almost 30 books of fiction, non-fiction and poetry, which were

(continued on page 12)



translated into many languages around the world.

Steele said he also admires Kinsella's practicality. "I write to make a living and entertain people," he once said." Kinsella wasn't really an expert on the game of baseball, Steele said, but once he became connected to the sport in people's minds, "He was going to mine that vein of gold until it was gone."

After Kinsella's death, Steele found himself as a sought-after expert when Kinsella's literary agent referred media to his biographer for comments on his death. Steele's name appeared in media throughout Canada and the United States including the New York Times and the Washington Post.

Steele says the experience has helped him counsel Lipscomb students who may be struggling with research topics.

"I have students who get frustrated by a research topic because there is little previous research out there. I tell them, 'Great! Someone has to be the first,'" Steele said. "After this experience, I can help them work through the issues. I understand having to carve a lot of time out for research. I understand how it feels to see pages of editor's notes. I tell them, 'You may be so tired of this topic, but don't dismiss it. This topic may become your expertise!'"



Psychology graduate students (l to r) R Mansfield, Mary Rodgers and Ife Kehinde took the unusual step of carrying out a joint thesis project to earn their master's degrees.

The science of sleep

Psychology students partner with Lipscomb School of Nursing to study sleep deprivation

THIS PAST NOVEMBER, THERE WERE SEVERAL LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY NURSING STUDENTS WITH SOME HEAVY BAGS UNDER THEIR EYES, ACQUIRED FROM STAYING UP ALL NIGHT FOR SCIENCE.

The student nurses were part of a research project by three psychology students to explore how sleep deprivation affects the physical, emotional and mental state of working nurses.

In a highly unusual approach, Master of Psychology students **R. Mansfield, Ife Kehinde** and **Mary Rodgers** banded together to carry out their master's thesis project, and the result is likely the largest and most comprehensive human subjects study ever completed by the department, said Shanna Ray, chair of the Department of Psychology, Counseling and Family Science.

The three students are in the same cohort (which graduated in December) and all three planned to pursue Ph.D. degrees in psychology, so they wanted to carry out an impressive master's

thesis project that showed their ability to think innovatively and to coordinate a large-scale study, said Mansfield.

Each student is writing about one of three aspects of how sleep deprivation may affect the performance of nurses—physical effects, emotional memory recall and declarative memory recall—and combining their work into one thesis.

The students contacted Lipscomb's School of Nursing, which provided access to equipment and to one of their nursing labs for the experiment and allowed the trio to recruit participants from among the junior and senior student nurse population.

In one weekend in November, the students took baseline measurements of the participants' heart rate, blood pressure, pulse and skin conductivity (a physical symptom of stress); memory recall; and emotional responses to stimuli. Then after a period of 24 hours of sleeplessness, the student nurses were asked to quickly treat a mock patient who is coding, involving two minutes of CPR, use of a breathing device and checking charts for patient information.

After the "patient emergency," the students then took the same physiological, memory recall and emotional response measurements again.