

BY ELISABETH BENFEY

## DISCOVERING *the* STORY: A FILM ADAPTATION OF RANDALL KENAN'S "THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE EARTH"

Novelist Michael Malone once said to me, "There are so many writers in Hillsborough, you can't swing a rubber chicken on Churton Street without hitting one." We were eating shrimp gumbo at Tupelo's, the favorite Hillsborough hangout, where Michael had taken me to talk about ideas for film courses we could co-teach at Duke University. I had been a fan of Michael's work ever since discovering his "Justin and Cuddy" mystery series, and I was aware that he has a penchant for the picaresque hyperbole. But was he serious about the writers? Was Hillsborough truly so rife with them that it was impossible not to bump into one?<sup>1</sup>

Michael was not exaggerating: Acclaimed novelists and short-story writers Allan Gurganus, Randall Kenan, Frances Mayes, Jill McCorkle, Lee Smith, David Payne, and Daniel Wallace all live in the small radius encompassing Hillsborough, Durham, and Chapel Hill. As Michael rattled off their names, an idea took shape in my mind: What if we asked them for permission to adapt and produce a few of their stories into screenplays in my production class?<sup>2</sup> About seventy-five percent of movies are derived from works of literature,

and there is a good reason for this: the story already exists. The screenwriter can rely on tested material, with a structured narrative in which fully formed characters speak in well-shaped sentences, living and struggling in accordance with the rules of the idiosyncratic universe created for them. What worked for the professionals could work for my students, too. I could give them a head start on the creative process by saving them the time of coming up with an idea of their own. And in a tight academic schedule, they could use the advantage.

*Sometimes you have to rethink everything you thought was true.*



*The Foundations of the Earth*

FROM CINEMAS TO THE SCREEN BY RANDALL KENAN  
WITH CAMERADONS BY ELISABETH BENFEY AS THE DIRECTOR  
CAST BY KATHY WEJWS AND BRET RISCO COSTUME DESIGNER LAMAR WRIGHT AND JAMAR BROWN

LEFT Film poster designed for this essay by NCLR editorial board member Donna Kain

<sup>1</sup> See the interview with Michael Malone in NCLR 2011.