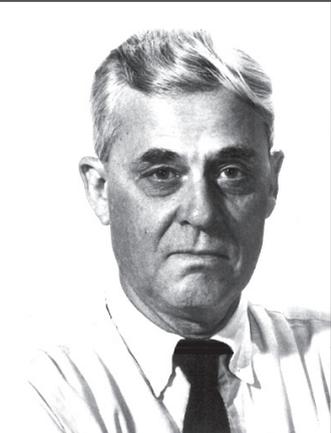


“IT DIDN'T SELL MUCH”?

THE PUBLISHING STRUGGLES OF NOVELIST TURNED NEWSPAPERMAN JAMES ROSS

BY ANTHONY HATCHER



COURTESY OF ANTHONY HATCHER AND THE ROSS FAMILY

ALTHOUGH JAMES M. CAIN AND JIM THOMPSON ARE AMONG THE WRITERS TYPICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH NOIR FICTION, AN OBSCURE AUTHOR FROM NORTH CAROLINA IS VIEWED AS A MASTER OF THE GENRE BY OTHER WRITERS, particularly in the area of noir that deals with murder in a rural setting. Despite the fact that the book never sold well, James Ross continues to receive critical acclaim for his crime novel *They Don't Dance Much*, published by Houghton Mifflin in 1940. Born near Norwood, North Carolina, in rural Stanly County in 1911, Ross died in Greensboro in 1990. He wrote a few short stories for magazines, but he published only the one novel. Ross eventu-

ally turned to newspaper work in order to earn a living, and although he became an award-winning editorialist for the *Greensboro Daily News*, Ross's heart remained in fiction writing.

Writing was in James Ross's genes. He was the eldest sibling of a respected regional literary dynasty dubbed the "Writing Rosses" in the 1950s. James, Fred, Eleanor, and Jean Ross collectively produced essays, criticism, poetry, short stories, and novels from the 1930s to the present. James Ross was also personally acquainted with the writers Flannery O'Connor, Robert Lowell, Caroline Gordon, Allen Tate, Peter Taylor (who married Ross's sister Eleanor), and Donald Justice (who married Ross's sister Jean).¹ Though James Ross had several literary champions over the years, many of them highly placed, sales for his sole book were miniscule. Indeed, the book sold poorly both in 1940 when Houghton Mifflin



COURTESY OF ANTHONY HATCHER AND THE ROSS FAMILY

ABOVE James Ross, early 1970s

RIGHT The "Writing Rosses": left to right, James, Eleanor, Fred, and Jean, Stanly County, 1960s

ANTHONY HATCHER, an Associate Professor of Communications at Elon University, grew up in Duplin County, NC. A significantly briefer version of this essay, "My Search for James Ross, One-Hit Wonder," was previously published in the *Oxford American* 11 Sept. 2012: web.

Author's Note: Much of the biographical material in this essay comes from the author's personal interview with Marion (Marnie) Ross, widow of James Ross (Greensboro, NC, 8 June 2010), and from the unpublished (typescript) memoir of Jean Ross Justice, sister of James Ross.

¹ For information on Eleanor Ross Taylor and the other "Writing Rosses," see Georgann Eubanks, *Literary Trails of the North Carolina Piedmont: A Guidebook* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010) 173–85; subsequent references to this source will be cited parenthetically.