

Southern story teller

By Michael Giltz

Today marks the final day of the Writer's Festival. There will be a reception this afternoon from 2-3:30 p.m. in the Rare Books Room of Library East, at which you can meet and mingle with the participating authors. Tonight, the wry Donald Barthelme will be giving a reading at 8 p.m. in Gannet Auditorium.

Peter Taylor is perhaps the foremost short story writer today. His restrained and spare prose quietly weaves unforgettable tales in a voice that is very accessible, but also intelligent and illuminating.

"The Gift Of The Prodigal," which is included in his latest best-selling collection *The Old Forest and Other Stories*, typifies the Taylor style. As with almost all of his stories, it is set in the South sometime between the two World Wars and involves society's upper class.

On the surface, not much happens: Ricky, the black sheep of the family, tells his aging father of his latest exploit and asks for help in freeing himself from the complications. But under Taylor's calm, masterful hand, small and seemingly insignificant events become dramatic, momentous and revelatory.

Robert Penn Warren has called Taylor one of the century's "real, and probably enduring, masters of the short story form," and he has been compared, by Randall Jarrell and others, to Anton Chekhov.

Furthermore, *The New York Times Book Review* named *The Old Forest and Other Stories* one of the best books of 1985, and declared, "Peter Taylor's best stories are like miniature novels—dense with observation and analysis. In this collection there are a number of the best, and the title story is as good as anything he has written... and that means it is a great deal better than most writing being done now."

Taylor was born in Trenton, Tennessee, in 1919. Though his family did not always live there, the South would continue to have a great influence on Taylor and his writing.

"My father was a great South-

ern patriot," he said, "and when we lived out of the South, we would take with us four black servants from Tennessee. We always lived that way and we were always aware of being Southerners."

For most writers, the first few years of their career are a time of struggle, a time in which they wait for their stories to be published and their names to be established. Taylor, however, found help from a very strange quarter: the coming of World War II.

"A lot of young writers I know have such a hard time. I was saved by one thing: I was drafted into the army during the second World War and was in for nearly five years. Actually, I was in before the war started and it was a great time to write. Soldiering—in peacetime, so

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— Peter Taylor

much of it is loafing. But even overseas I managed to get a typewriter. By the time the war was over I had written enough stories so that within a year or two I had a book of stories."

After quickly establishing himself, Taylor began teaching, and for 30 years he has been instructing students at campuses across the country.

Of course, his many years of teaching and his prolific output as a writer have given Taylor strong opinions of how literature should be taught. He has a strong aversion to teachers who concentrate on symbolism and motifs.

"Teachers talk about symbolic values too much," Taylor states. "I like to talk about the specific elements: the naturalism of the story, the plot, the interplay of the characters, and how all these things combine to create the poetry of a story. The symbolic element is only there to support it."

Taylor also has definite feel-

ings about public readings. "I think the best way to hear poetry or fiction is to have read it first yourself and then go hear the writer read it. You get intonations that you wouldn't have gotten otherwise," he said.

Taylor has been keeping abreast of his contemporaries—somewhat. "Well, let's see," he began. "I've read Padgett Powell. I liked his *Edisto* very much. He has a wonderful ear (for dialect), one of the best ears I know... I don't read many of my contemporaries, actually. I'm much more apt to read Tolstoy and Chekhov and Faulkner and writers I've read before."

Chekhov is certainly one name that invariably pops up when one is talking with, or about, Peter Taylor. "I aspire to be influenced by Chekhov. On the other hand, I don't have the poetic gift he had. I was influenced (by Chekhov) in the way I look at stories and the way I look at people; trying not to have heroes and villains, trying to see every side of every character... stories that aren't obvious. I suppose."

Clearly, his heart lies with the old masters—and with the short story. He happily admits to reading and enjoying short stories more often than novels. "I'll laugh at myself, for you'll hear me say, 'Faulkner's short stories are his great works,' and 'Hemingway's short stories are his great works.' And, later during the interview, he stated, apparently without irony, "Really, D.H. Lawrence's stories are too little known. I think they're better than his novels."

As for the young writers of today, Taylor believes he has something to tell them and, as one would expect, he has done so through his work.

"The story I've just written is called 'Influence,'" he said. It's really a memoir sort of story, and it's about whether young writers should influence each other. I think they should. If you're going to be a writer, what's inside you will come out and dominate the story, so you ought to learn from other writers, imitate them, steal from them, everything. In the end, if you have something to say and a way to say it, you'll find it."