

Steele, Wilbur Daniel ^[1]

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by Richard Walser, 1994

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Wilbur Daniel Steele, writer, was born in [Greensboro](#) ^[2], the third of four children (Arthur, Beulah, Wilbur Daniel, and Muriel) of Rose Wood and Wilbur Fletcher Steele, both of New England ancestry. His father, a clergyman and then principal of [Bennett Seminary](#) ^[3], a Methodist Episcopal school for African American girls, took the family to Germany in 1889 for additional study, and there the boy attended kindergarten. In 1892 Steele's father joined the faculty of the [University of Denver](#) ^[4], where his son was a student from 1903 to 1907, majoring in history and economics, with heavy participation in athletics and fraternity affairs. Thinking he wished to become a painter, young Steele enrolled at the [Boston Museum School of Fine Arts](#) ^[5] and went on a sketching trip to Italy, but an interest in writing gradually thwarted his plans for a career as an artist.

His first short story was published in 1910. During the summer of 1913 in Provincetown, Mass., he shared quarters with [Sinclair Lewis](#) ^[6]. There he was a close friend of [Eugene O'Neill](#) ^[7], and the two of them were among the original playwrights for the [Provincetown Players](#) ^[8]. Meanwhile, encouraged by his success as a writer of short stories, he married the painter Margaret Thurston, by whom he had two sons, Thurston and Peter.

A consummate professional writer as well as a rigid technician, Steele met the demand of his market by submitting short stories to both women's slick magazines and the literary journals, then turned to novels and plays when the time seemed propitious. Though he always returned to his base on the Massachusetts coast, a wanderlust took him to Ireland, England, France, Switzerland, Tunisia, the Caribbean, and South America, providing the tall, bespectacled writer with a wide variety of settings for stories. His first novel was published in 1914 and his first collection of short stories in 1918. Between 1916 and 1933 he won numerous O. Henry awards and citations in the annual *Best Short Stories*, edited by Edward J. O'Brien.

After two winters in Charleston, S.C., Steele returned in late 1929 to North Carolina and rented the Greenlaw House (729 Franklin Street) in Chapel Hill, where he enjoyed the friendship of [Paul Green](#) ^[9] and the [university](#) ^[10] community. He wrote in the morning, played golf after lunch, and attended the movies (he had never seen a bad one, he said) or "partied" in the evening. For "The Man without a God," a two-part story whose central character was based partially on Paul Green, the *Ladies' Home Journal* paid him the unprecedented sum of \$10,000. It was only after the death of his wife in 1931 that Steele decided he could no longer remain in the village. Twice during his four years in the Carolinas he returned for short visits to Greensboro. In 1932 he married in London a family friend, the writer Norma Mitchell, then lived at her home in Hamburg, Conn. In 1956 he moved to nearby Old Lyme, where he died fourteen years later.

Like [O. Henry](#) ^[11], also born in Greensboro, Steele often provided for his stories an unexpected but logical ending. In addition to "Light" and "A Way with Women," two of his most highly acclaimed stories also have North Carolina settings: "How Beautiful with Shoes" and "Man and Boy," whose earlier titles were "Town Drunk" and "The Man without a God." By 1955 he had published seven volumes of short stories, ten novels, and three books of plays. Martin Bucco's authoritative critical biography (1972) indicates that a number of unpublished stories and plays are among the Steele Papers at the Stanford University Library. A portrait of him used in promotion was painted by W. Langdon Kihn.

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