

Street, James Howell ^[1]

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by David Stick, 1994

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James Howell Street, author, journalist, and onetime Baptist minister, was born in the little sawmill village of Lumberton, Miss. His father was John Camillus Street, a lawyer of Irish Catholic descent later to become a judge. His mother was William Thompson Scott Street, a Scots-Irish Calvinist, whose father was so disappointed at not having a son that he passed on to his daughter his own name, as well as the attendant confusion resulting from a girl with a boy's name. Of his ancestry Street once said: "We have melted enough to have everything in us, except Chinese—and I could do with some of that."

When Street was nine, his family moved to Laurel, Miss. His early part-time jobs were concerned with newspapers—selling Sunday editions at first, and then at age fourteen going to work for the *Laurel Daily Leader*, where he was a printer's devil, general "handy boy," and reporter, if writing personal items on "who was in town and why" on Saturdays could be classed as reporting. Of those boyhood years he later said: "In those days boys worked. It was the age of idolatry of thrift. Somehow, it was believed that work was the sacred thing. A boy must work. Nonsense. It was a silly era. It's better for boys to play. They'll work soon enough."

After attending Laurel High School for three years he was enrolled at Massey School in Pulaski, Tenn., but he soon ran away, bumming around the country, working at odd jobs, and traveling as far as Honolulu. At age eighteen he was back in Mississippi holding down his first full-time job, as a reporter for the *Hattiesburg American*.

In 1923 he married Lucy Nash O'Briant of Hattiesburg and left newspaper work to become what one biographer described as the youngest ordained Baptist minister in the United States. In rebuttal to speculation that he had left the Catholic church for some psychological reason, Street later said: "Hell, I did it because I fell in love, and the girl's daddy was a Baptist preacher and I wanted to impress her."

In order to be better prepared for the ministry he attended Southwestern Theological Seminary ^[2] in Fort Worth, Tex., and Howard College in Birmingham, Ala., but did not complete his studies at either. After three years as a minister in St. Charles, Mo., in Lucedale, Miss., and in Boyles, Ala., he gave up the ministry, despite being a very popular preacher, because he was concerned that he had "neither the emotional, intellectual, nor spiritual equipment for this work."

After brief stints as a press agent for politicians, and as an advertising salesman, forest guide, and swimming instructor, he became a full-time newspaperman, serving as news editor of the *Pensacola Journal*, as assistant state editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, and as a correspondent for the Associated Press. While in the Atlanta division office of the Associated Press in 1932, he wrote a five-hundred-word story about the demise of the Panama Limited, a crack Chicago to New Orleans train, which had passed through his hometown when he was a boy. The story received honorable mention for the Pulitzer Prize awards that year and was so favorably received by his superiors that he was transferred to New York and given an assignment as a special feature writer.

Later he joined the Hearst *New York American*, working on a wide variety of assignments. On occasion, while covering major stories, he found that he had excess time on his hands, and during such a twenty-eight-day period while covering the Lindbergh kidnapping trial he wrote his first book, *Look Away! A Dixie Notebook* ^[3]. Concerning its reception Street later said: "I wrote my first book, *Look Away!*, and that's exactly what the public did." The following year, 1937, he left the Hearst organization and became assistant literary editor of the *World-Telegram*. While there he wrote a satire on doctors called "I've Never Lost A Father Yet," which has been republished many times, for which he received thirty-five dollars, a by-line, and no copyright.

A few months later, in need of cash, he wrote his first short story and sold it under the title Nothing Sacred ^[4] to *Cosmopolitan* magazine for \$450. Subsequently the story was made into a moving picture starring Carole Lombard and Frederic March, and with the \$2,500 Street received for the movie rights he embarked on a career as a free-lance writer. From late 1937 until 1940 he turned out a number of articles and short stories for such magazines as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*, including one of his more famous stories, The Biscuit Eater ^[5], and a second book, *Oh, Promised Land* ^[6]. Except for a brief stint in Hollywood his base of operations during this period was Old Lyme, Conn., but in 1940 he moved to Natchez, Miss., and then in 1941 back again to New York, where he remained until 1945, when he took up permanent residence in Chapel Hill ^[7].

By the time he became a Tar Heel seven of Street's books had been published, three of them, *Oh, Promised Land* (1940), *Tap Roots* ^[8] (1942), and *By Valor and Arms* ^[9] (1944) in the popular Dabney series. The others were *Look Away!* (1936); *The Biscuit Eater* (1941), an adaptation into a novel of his famous short story; *In My Father's House* ^[10] (1941), the book

Street considered his best; and a compilation of his *Short Stories*^[11] (1945). His eighth and most successful book, *The Gauntlet*^[12] (1945), was published soon after he moved to North Carolina.

For Street a literary dry spell followed his move to Chapel Hill, but in 1949 he collaborated with James Saxon Childers on a novel, *Tomorrow We Reap*^[13]. In the next four years he turned out at least one short story and two articles annually for national magazines and six books: *Mingo Dabney*^[14] (1950), the last of the Dabney series, *The High Calling*^[15] (1951), *The Velvet Doublet*^[16] (1953), *The Civil War*^[17] (1953), *Good-Bye, My Lady*^[18] (1954), and *The Revolutionary War*^[19] (1954).

Three of Street's novels and four of his short stories were bought by motion picture companies, and he wrote three other original scripts for the movies. His first short story, "Nothing Sacred," was not only made into a moving picture of the same name but also later was used as the basis for a Broadway musical comedy, *Hazel Flagg*, and a second moving picture, *Living It Up*. Nine of his books were book club selections, and one, *The Gauntlet*, sold more than a million copies. On a worldwide basis his most popular book was *The Biscuit Eater*, which was translated into twenty-seven languages.

On 28 Sept. 1954, after presenting awards at an Associated Press broadcasters' meeting in Chapel Hill, he collapsed with a heart attack and died a few minutes after being taken to the North Carolina Memorial Hospital.

Three other books were published posthumously: *James Street's South*^[20] (1955), a collection of articles on the South compiled and edited by his son, James, Jr.; *Captain Little Ax*^[21] (1956), based on five of his short stories that had appeared in *Collier's* and rewritten "according to Street's own plan" by Don Tracy; and *Pride and Possession*^[22] (1960), in which Tracy combined two of Street's earlier short stories.

James and Lucy Street were the parents of three children, James, Jr., John, and Lucy Ann.

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