

July 4th, 2015
Gambier's Citizen of the Year Commemoration
by Perry Lentz

My dear old friend:

You first returned to Gambier in 1987 as a visitor, accompanied only by your **Dog. Day, Afternoon** and evening thereafter though, your unmatched experience, your gregarious friendliness, your sense of humor and your edgy eloquence wove themselves into the fabric of this Village, and in time you brought your wonderful wife Pamela here and established your home.

But given that you also adopted the role of the “Salman Rushdie of Knox County,” the H. L. Mencken of College Township, I always thought that **The Day That I Die** would come before a 4th of July that would see you chosen for this particular honor. But we always have to be r-**Eddie, and the Cruisers** speed, the PT boat speed, the jet-plane speed at which time passes can bring about extraordinary surprises.

You've always been openly disdainful toward current figures of authority and administration and the professoriate, and in your mind Denham Sutcliffe's presence looms just as dauntingly over the College today as, say, Douglas **MacArthur's Ghost** does over the Philippines. But we puny contemporary inhabitants of this village have nonetheless come to cherish you, fascinated for example by your ongoing struggle to protect your flora against the local fauna, which makes each spring a **Season for War** at 221 Ward Street, when with chicken wire and Hav-a-hart traps and weaponized coyote urine, you seek to defend your own garden of Eden, your own **Edge of Paradise**, against woodchuck and deer and raccoon.

As acerbic as you are, your service to your **Alma Mater** has been extraordinarily valuable by any measure that it at all fair or **Final. Exam**-ining your record both here and in the Village, it is hard to know which contribution has been the **Biggest. Elvis** Presley, say, or John Wayne (whom you once interviewed) or John Green (whom you once taught) have in their different spheres millions more fans, of course, but none of theirs are more intelligently and personally devoted than those fans you've won for yourself from generations of Gambier Villagers and Kenyon graduates—among them John Green, who in public appearances and national magazines always acknowledges your crucial influence upon him.

Were you to be **Gone Tomorrow** from our midst, responding say to a **Call From Jersey** or from Saipan or Singapore or Semester at Sea, we'd miss you terribly, even though your sardonic commentary about us and your effective sleuthing into our secrets are those of a **Master. Blaster** though you are of all administrators younger than Tom Edwards, and of all those village or collegiate changes toward which time has inevitably compelled us, you are deeply cherished.

What I've just read incorporates the title of your article which begot one of the most famous films of all time, and also the title of every one of your books—and I know that you would want everyone here today to know that every one of those books is currently available for purchase.

My task would have been far, far easier had you written books and articles with different titles. Since your peculiar virtues are unlikely to dissipate, here are some possible titles for your future books—feel free to use them as you wish.

“This is a Country for Old Men,” or “Driving Miss Mavis.” You always treat the elderly with an old-world courtesy, with unfailing respect and genuine interest and warm good humor.

And so too do you treat the very young, as witness your warm and spontaneous inclusion of Tom Lockard's grandsons in your memorial tribute to Tom. In the matter of such memorial tributes, “It is not

by chance,” reads a document supporting this award, “that [your] penetrating, poignant observations on individuals are often quoted in college obituaries.”

Other possible titles, which I surely could have used today: “Return of The Native Who Happens to be a Contributing Editor to National Geographic Traveller,” or—with a nod to George Orwell—“The Road to Wiggin Street” or “You Can Go Home Again (if you don’t care what the folks there think of you).” You have “the detachment and truth-telling of a travel writer,” yet you are passionately attached to this place. So we often find ourselves under your gaze and under your ball-point pen. To see ourselves as others see us, others who care enough about us to give us an honest accounting, is not always comfortable, but it is always beneficial.

Other titles, which are yours for the taking: “The Ballad of the Happy Café,” or “The French Toast Also Rises,” or perhaps “Plant It Again, Sam.” You have met and engaged with some of the most famous people of our culture—John Wayne and Ann-Margaret and Peter Falk and Jane Smiley—yet you have taken just as much interest in, and you have just as fully honored and celebrated, the people hereabouts who have prepared your French toast, sold you your fir trees, maintained your classrooms, and did your typing.

Other possible titles: “Plays Surprisingly Well With Others,” or “A Man for All Readings”: you are always very generous in giving your time locally: to local book clubs, and to hosting off- hand, off-line, or off-Kenyon-Review literary events. And you handle such things richly and generously, as when a Mt. Vernon lady at one of your presentations at the library said that reading *Master Blaster* made her “never ever want to go to Saipan.” Your warm smile in response said it all: she was that independent, crusty, quirky, and courageous reader in whose company you delight.

Other titles I could have used: “The Gossip Archipelago,” or “An Abundance of Confidences,” or perhaps—in the fashion of *I, Robot* or *I, Claudius*— “I, Vacuum-Cleaner.” The following statement supporting this award needs to be quoted: “He is... a public personality who adds to the liveliness and intellectual elevation of the village, at the same time that he vacuums-up information and distributes it, thereby contributing to mostly well-informed gossip.” And don’t we all agree that every village needs “well-informed gossip”?

And a final suggested title: “Gambier is Not a Paper Town.” You have made Gambier Ohio as famous as Winesburg Ohio. The crucial difference is that Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg was completely fictitious—Anderson didn’t know that there really was a Winesburg, when he wrote his novel—while your Gambier is altogether real.

And today it honors you, P.F. Kluge, as its citizen of the year.