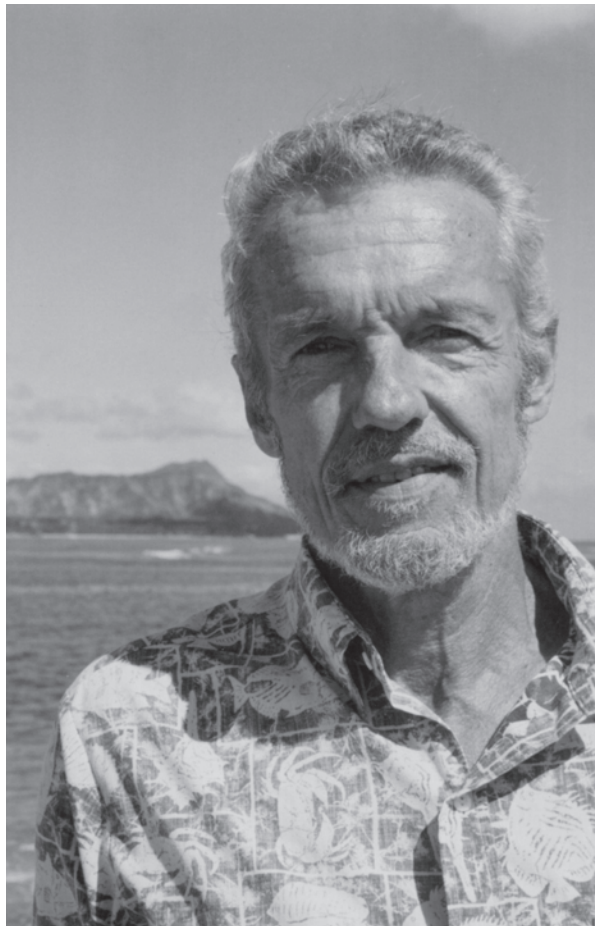

Julie Lynn Mitchell

IN THE MAIL

An Homage to Fiction Writer Ian MacMillan

Fiction writer Ian MacMillan was always a renegade when it came to writing. Stubbornly independent, mentorless, and just plain lucky, he stuck to his stylistic guns despite feedback from others—and encouraged new writers to do the same. His motto: "I am in the mail, therefore I am."

"If you have something you like, what's the point of leaving it in a drawer? The more you have in the mail the better your chances are. It's as simple as that," stated MacMillan, who, when he died of cancer on December 18, 2008, had been "in the mail" for over four decades.

A prolific writer, MacMillan authored eight novels and five short story collections. His short fiction appeared in over 100 literary and commercial magazines, and was reprinted in *Pushcart Prize*, *Best American Short Stories*, and *O. Henry Award* volumes as well as other anthologies. His books have been published by large and small presses, both with and without the help of agents.

MacMillan's most recent novels are *The Bone Hook* (Mutual Publishing, 2009), *The Seven Orchids* (Bamboo Ridge Press, 2006), and *The Braid* (Mutual Publishing, 2005). All three are set and published in Hawai'i, where he lived and taught for 42 years. Occasionally MacMillan flew from his home on O'ahu to teach and give readings on the Big Island for the non-profit Volcano Art Center.

MacMillan and I met on a rainy Sunday morning in a Volcano Village bed-and-breakfast, where he and his wife, Susan—always his first reader/editor and his photographer—spent the night. Skin tan and slightly weathered, MacMillan had an athlete's lean physique. Short silver-gray hair, beard, and mustache framed his sharp blue eyes, triangular nose, and broad forehead. He donned typical tropical attire: T-shirt, shorts, flip-flops.

He filled his coffee mug three times while we talked and, after bouts of fidgeting, took smoke breaks out on the lanai. During our meeting, MacMillan sat with his left elbow propped on the back of a chair—his left

hand gesturing from its spot up high, his right hand gesticulating in front of his torso as he spoke. He often ended his sentences with a rhetorical "right?" or "see?"

"My father was an alcoholic," said MacMillan, born March 23, 1941, in Teaneck, New Jersey. Since his father had difficulty keeping jobs, their family lived in a number of suburban New Jersey towns until MacMillan hit 14, when his father read *The Farm*, by Louis Bromfield, and got hooked on the notion of country life.

They moved into an old farmhouse in a remote section of upstate New York, which MacMillan described as "depressed dairy country." His mother passed away shortly thereafter, and his father found work in Syracuse, leaving MacMillan and his two brothers to tend the place on their own. The three boys cut logs and pulped wood to try to make ends meet, but the family lost the farm just after MacMillan turned 16. His older brother joined the military, while he and the youngest became wards of the state and joined a nearby foster family until high school graduation. Sick with cancer, his father died in 1960.

MacMillan attended what he affectionately called a "cow college" because of its rural location. The State University of New York at Oneonta was the state normal school, training future public schoolteachers. "Most of the people there were 'normal,'" joked MacMillan, "but fortunately there were about 10 or 12 freaks at my school. You know, people who were into art and drama and stuff like that. So I moved over to hanging out with those people." And became, he said, a "surly, quiet freak" himself.

MacMillan's first passion was art, but in his junior year he started writing fiction. "I never took a creative writing class. It's just that the freaks were writing, so I wrote. There was a small literary magazine that they ran. And I suppose I have to admit that some of the most exotic girls hung out at the literary magazine, one of whom is standing right over there," he said while pointing to Susan, to whom he was married 46 years.

During his senior year, MacMillan wrote a short story that his cohorts suggested he send out, and on a whim he submitted the piece to *The Carolina Quarterly*. "But the magazine took it, see?" he marveled. "So, that changed everything. That's why I'm here. Because I got the one story published."

Donald Petersen, a poet teaching at SUNY, encouraged him to apply to the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, which he didn't know exist-

ed. MacMillan—a poor-to-middling student who'd never taken standardized tests like the SAT—had no idea how to apply to a graduate program. Peterson advised him and, an Iowa alumnus himself, wrote MacMillan a letter of recommendation. On the strength of his application and single published piece, MacMillan got invited to the most prestigious Master of Fine Arts writing program in the country.

Entering in 1963, his fellow students included Raymond Carver, Andre Dubus, and Joy Williams; his teachers, R. V. Cassill and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. MacMillan recalled being called into Cassill's office about one of his stories: "He wrote this sentence out and said, 'Here's how you begin this story.' But I couldn't make myself do it. So I sent the story out and it was accepted, almost immediately. And I thought, 'Oh my god, I can't ever let him see it' [laughs]. Because I left the first page just as I had written it."

MacMillan realized then that, where his words were at stake, he could never do what anybody said he ought to. "I'm not sure that I ever really had what people called a mentor. In fact I always felt a little funny because I remember I was always more sort of mulishly self-directed."

In his final year, an acquaintance encouraged MacMillan to sit for a job interview with a representative from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. And on the first (and only) interview of his life—without knowing a thing about Hawai'i or having any teaching experience—he got hired as a writing instructor. When MacMillan landed on the island of O'ahu in 1966, his first assignment was a senior level workshop. "A third of the people in class were older than I was," stated MacMillan, who at 25 had less than a handful of published stories to his name.

MacMillan eventually became a tenured professor of English and taught creative writing to countless students during his four-plus decades at the university. He was the fiction editor for *MĀNOA: A Pacific Journal of International Writing* and the recipient of the 1992 Hawai'i Award for Literature, the state's highest literary honor, as well as the 2007 Cades Award for Literature from the Hawai'i Literary Arts Council. MacMillan also won awards for his teaching, and the literary journal he started in 1973, the *Hawai'i Review*, honored him recently with a double issue in his name that featured dozens of writers sharing stories about how he inspired their craft.

MacMillan had a sort of split literary personality, with his mainland published work on the one hand and his Hawai'i published writing on the

other. The mainland work consists of his World War II novels and what he called his "cows and chainsaw" stories—all spun from his teenage experiences of farm life.

"For years they'd be in magazines like *Carolina Quarterly* and *Missouri Review*. And I would just write them and send them out, and they'd take. I have a . . . [new] collection that I'm playing around with. And then I have all these other stories, 20 or 30 or 40 of them lying around. So that's a whole literature for me, that upstate New York stuff, and I keep going back to it," said MacMillan, whose first book, *Light and Power* (University of Missouri Press, 1980), won the Associated Writing Programs Award for Short Fiction. His latest collection, *Our People*, was released in November 2008 by BkMk Press of the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

These stories are full of conflicts between fathers and sons, struggles to survive as small dairy and timber farmers in poor, rural America, and tangible longings for the often unnamable. An excerpt from "The Proper Axis" (*Our People*), reads, "He could not explain to his brother, who loved shooting birds with his .22, what it felt like in spring to walk through the woods with the chickadees following him, each one so close that he could see every minute detail of eyes and feathers and toothpick-thin legs. He could not explain how he felt that day when he walked along a gully one late winter morning and saw a buck twenty feet away, standing there steaming in the bright morning sunlight, the breath vapor shooting from its snout and the steam leaving his back like tongues of white fire."

MacMillan debuted as a novelist with *Blakely's Ark* (Berkeley Books, 1981), a dystopian science fiction novel about a catastrophic virus that decimates the human population. Next came *Proud Monster* (North Point Press, 1987), which evolved from a single short-short composed after a friend asked him, "Have you ever written a story of three pages or less?" The resulting piece, "The Unknown Soldier Passes," appeared in *TriQuarterly*, won a Pushcart Prize, and became the final chapter in the first book of his World War II trilogy.

"If *Proud Monster* is going to be called a novel, it's very experimental," MacMillan noted. "It's 70 short-shorts and over 500 characters. All are intended to be distinctly short stories rather than chapters in a book." The stories—poignant, stark, and masterfully (if excruciatingly) rendered—depict almost exclusively common people and their plights

throughout Europe, since MacMillan perceived the war as so broad that it could only be told in a multiplicity of voices. Like all his writing, the prose is highly kinesthetic, anchoring the reader solidly in place with precise sensory details.

Second in the trilogy is *Orbit of Darkness* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), which moves beyond the short-shorts of *Proud Monster* to a series of 15 interrelated short stories about Auschwitz interspersed with 14 standalone stories. The final book in the series, and the most "novelistic," is *Village of a Million Spirits: A Novel of the Treblinka Uprising* (Steerforth Press, 1999 / Penguin Books, 2000). Without a doubt *Village*—favorably reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*, *L.A. Times*, and *Publishers Weekly*, among others—garnered MacMillan the most widespread recognition to date, including the 2000 P.E.N. U.S.A.-West Fiction Award.

The prestige of a book like *Village*, however, didn't necessarily pave the way for MacMillan's short story collections or Hawai'i novels. For example, Steerforth Press knew about one of his "cows and chainsaws" short story manuscripts, but passed on it. Similarly, his New York literary agent, Neil Olson, of Donadio & Olson, never handled MacMillan's short or regional fiction. "If he doesn't know what to do with something then he'll just say, 'Why don't you go ahead and do this one by yourself?'" shared MacMillan.

Although he was a self-identified WASP with no personal connection to the Holocaust, MacMillan nonetheless became obsessed with the subject. After completing the WW II trilogy, MacMillan finally declared the war "over" for him. Only then, after a 30-year residency, did he turn to his island home for subject matter.

When MacMillan wrote about Hawai'i, he tried to practice mindfulness. "If you're an outsider, you better represent it correctly. I've been here for years but I'm still a transplant. Most of my characters themselves are transplants," he stated. "The first thing I want to make sure is that I'm not being presumptuous."

The protagonist in MacMillan's first Hawai'i-themed novel, *The Red Wind* (Mutual Publishing, 1998), is a newcomer to the islands who apprentices with a master canoe builder. "Kenika's attitude is my attitude," said MacMillan. "Be careful, show respect. He understands he's dealing with sacred cultural meanings and doesn't want to misrepresent them." In fact, there's a double meaning underlying the book: the Red Wind—a traditional Hawaiian canoe Kenika builds—rests in the hands

of an immigrant craftsman, just as this novel of Hawai'i was crafted by an immigrant author.

A hefty 456 pages, *The Red Wind* has sold over 4,000 copies to date. In the novel's author's note, MacMillan wrote, "Although I have lived in Hawai'i since 1966, the idea of writing a book set in Hawai'i did not seriously enter my mind until the early 90s, and then only as a possibility. I had written books set in places I have never visited, about events I could have no firsthand knowledge of, had even written a science fiction novel set in the future. The other things I wrote, short stories mostly, were set in upstate New York, a place I had lived in only about seven years. But then at the back of mind I reasoned that more than a quarter of a century of familiarity with Hawai'i stood for something."

His short fiction collections *Exiles from Time* (1998), *Squid-Eye* (1999), and *Ullambana* (2002) were un-agented and published by the very small Anoai Press. These stories often include dialogue in pidgin, a unique dialect of English evolved from Hawai'i's multi-cultural mix (Chinese, Japanese, Portuguese, Hawaiian, and others), and explore issues of race, class, culture, coming of age, and every sort of relationship. Often MacMillan's work focuses more on a subtle shifting within or between characters than on some major plot device. An avid spear fisherman who lived in the seaside town of Kailua, he often used the ocean as a setting in his work.

MacMillan's novels *The Braid* and *The Seven Orchids* both feature protagonists who struggle with alcohol addiction, aimlessness, and self-annihilation. MacMillan characterized *The Braid* as "just a regular mainstream book" about "a boy growing up in, well, upstate [laughs] New York. The young man promises his dying mother that he will return her braid of hair to Hawai'i, where he was born." Upon arriving in Honolulu, the now homeless Adrian Branch meets a local runaway prostitute; and with her help, he searches for an appropriate spot to bury his mother's braid. Spanning two vastly different locales, this novel, more than any of MacMillan's other work, seems to bridge his "cows and chainsaws" motifs and his island themes.

While MacMillan's Hawai'i literature tends to feature male protagonists, *The Seven Orchids* was the first written entirely from a female's perspective, the cause of some discomfort for MacMillan. "It didn't make me feel strange to write from a woman's point of view in any of the World War II things. I felt perfectly natural with that. But in this book every word is from a woman's point of view. I would have to admit that it makes me

uneasy, you know, just the existence of it. How can I know I'm right? How can I be absolutely sure?"

The Seven Orchids, at 46,000-something words, is more novella than novel and follows Danielle Baker, a half-hearted canoe paddler in self-imposed exile on the sleepy island of Molokaʻi. After leaving her drug dealer boyfriend and life of constant partying on Oʻahu, she moves to her father's fixer-upper property with her half-brother Kimo, taking her drug of choice—gin—along with her. She discovers an old, abandoned koa canoe with a tragic history and, together with a gang of other misfits, seeks redemption by returning it to the waves to race.

When he worked on a novel, MacMillan said he liked to know its beginning and maybe its middle, but not the end. He preferred the process of writing to direct what was going to happen next. Perhaps that's why, in his decades-long career, MacMillan never suffered from a bout of writer's block, always having more ideas than he could execute. "I have a whole list in my mind of really neat novels I never wrote because I never have the time," he quipped.

Unlike those with set writing schedules, MacMillan worked in spurts. He wouldn't write for weeks but then produced for several days on end. "If somebody told me I had to get up every morning and spend from six until nine writing, the first thing I would do would be to fail to meet that expectation," he noted. MacMillan didn't keep a schedule because the majority of his writing happened in his head—he thought about a piece for a month or two before it ever saw paper.

"By the time it's been so much beaten to death to the point that I'm already writing the first sentence, then I get out the spiral notebook. My hand just keeps on going until it's tired—three, four hours, or whatever—and I have 30, 40 handwritten pages. Then I let that rot for a while. Then I go over it and I start putting stuff in the margins and go over it again until I can barely read my own handwriting." That's when MacMillan transferred his work into the computer to create the first printed draft.

What counsel did MacMillan give aspiring writers? "Know that what you're doing takes guts. Once you understand what you're doing, ignore outside influences . . . don't let anything distract you. It's just you and the universe you're creating. You have to trust yourself." Only at that point, he said, should you give your work to another for judgement.

"The other bit of advice I give to students is to be very suspicious of everybody's advice, including mine," he joked, seriously. The aver-

age M.F.A. writing program, he believed, often approaches teaching by hovering over the writer with the underlying message of 'Don't do that.' MacMillan tried to do the opposite, pushing students to cultivate unique voices. "I tell them that if they're doing something that looks like an anomaly or looks a little bit strange or a little bit whacked out, you know, or off to the side of what is done by other writers, you have two options: change it and make it conventional or take that apparent weakness and try and make it into a strength. The point is, you're the writer, this is how you do things, this is your stylistic fingerprint. My job is to figure out how to make that work, not to change it."

Finally, MacMillan encouraged: submit, submit, submit. "You can take a good short story and try and calculate what the probability would be that the chemistry would be right between you and the editor, and you might say it's one in 15 or something like that. So, get 30 stories in the mail. Guess what? You're going to get something accepted."

Following his own advice, MacMillan continued to work on his fiction even after he was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer in January 2008. He traveled to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, and according to a statement by his daughters, Laura Crago and Julia MacMillan, "The successful treatment he received there allowed him to spend the last eleven months with his brother in New Jersey, playing golf, taking Susan to theater productions and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and spending time with all his family." With the story collection *Our People* and the novel *The Bone Hook* awaiting publication, he continued to write and edit throughout that summer.

MacMillan's death came a mere 20 days after his wife's, also from cancer. The daughters' statement affirmed, as anyone who knew them had seen, that the two "never liked to be apart for long." The 67-year-old author was held by his brother and two daughters as he passed on. They said, "True to his spirit throughout this battle he gripped our hands tightly to the end."

With a yet-to-be released novel and other still unpublished work waiting in the wings, MacMillan is likely to stay, as he proclaimed with relish, "in the mail"—for many years to come.

The MacMillans were honored at four celebrations of their lives, accompanied by a scattering of their ashes, at Kailua-Lanikai Beach, Hawai'i;

Crested Butte, Colorado; East Atlantic Beach, Long Island; and Morningside Cemetery in Syracuse, New York. Contributions may be made to the Ian MacMillan Creative Writing Scholarship for Morris Central School, in care of: Judy Matson, District Clerk, Morris Central School, P.O. Box 40, 65 Main Street, Morris, NY 13808.