On the night of December 16-17, 1944, Sargent James McConkey of the United States Army Infantry sat in a bombed-out farmhouse in the Ardennes Forest of northeast France, typing a feature for his division newspaper. The subject was a profile of Field Marshal von Rundstedt, German commander on the Western Front. Having finished the article Sargent McConkey went to bed in his sleeping bag, unaware that a major offensive by the German army was unfolding around him. Panzer forces and infantry, moving toward their objective, the port of Antwerp, in hopes of dividing the Allied forces, British to the north, Americans to the south, advanced so rapidly in a surprise attack in the dark that when Sargent McConkey awoke the next morning he and his unit were miles behind the German lines. The so-called Battle of the Bulge lasted about a week, and when the skies cleared the Allied Air Forces destroyed the enemy on the ground. Sargent McConkey survived, but was seriously wounded on April 13, 1945, when the jeep he was driving in Germany hit an explosive device. He returned to consciousness on the road as a hausfrau tenderly cared for him.

James Rodney McConkey was born September 2, 1921, in Lakewood, Ohio. He grew up in several towns in the Midwest and
Arkansas. While attending Cleveland College he enlisted in the U. S. Army and served as a journalist until wounded. Discharged in November of 1945, he completed a master’s degree in English at Western Reserve University in 1946 and a Ph.D. at the University of Iowa in 1950. The subject of his doctoral dissertation was the novels of E. M. Forster.

Jim’s first academic appointment was at Morehead State University in Kentucky, where he founded and directed the Morehead Writers Workshop. Besides his scholarly and critical work on Forster he published a number of short stories in the 1950s. In 1956, he accepted a professorship at Cornell and moved to Ithaca with his wife Gladys, a research chemist and editor, and their two sons, Larry and Cris. A third son, Jim, would be born in Ithaca.

At Cornell Jim taught courses in modern fiction and in the new creative writing program. He was also instrumental in the development and editing of *Epoch* magazine, one of the preeminent fiction journals in the country. Professor McConkey founded the Cornell Council on the Arts in 1965. One of his most important achievements was the two-year Chekhov festival of the late 1970s, bringing to Cornell distinguished writers such as John Cheever, Walker Percy, and Eudora Welty to lecture on the Russian master and read from their own work. In the 1990s he developed a very popular course called “Mind and Memory,” inviting a different lecturer each week to discuss a favorite book.

Over his long career Jim McConkey published 15 volumes, ranging from his study of E. M. Forster to the stories and memoirs collected in works such as *The Night Stand*, *Crossroads*, and *Court of Memory*. During his lifetime Jim was most celebrated for a number of autobiographical essays and narratives published in *The New Yorker* and *The American Scholar*, works he described as “autobiographical fiction” or “life writing.”

Though he had long intended to be a fiction writer, Jim experienced a life-changing decision in 1960, inspired by the horror of the resumption of nuclear testing by the Soviet Union and the United States. Rather than creating fictional characters, he sought to
develop a new kind of narrative, incorporating “intimate experience, through memory, and personal observation.”

Inspired by the rigor of the Confessions of St. Augustine, and the candor and surprising integrity and depth of Chekhov’s narratives, and by searching his own conscience and experience, Jim discovered a new genre and a new voice. Following the classical exhortation to “Know Thyself,” he examined and recorded the life he had lived, from the cruel years of the Great Depression when his family was split apart by poverty, to the wrenching memories of WWII, the loyalty and love of his mother, and of his wife, whom he called “Jean” in the essays.

As his art evolved and his audience grew, Jim came to realize that his most unsparing efforts to tell his story honestly and without illusion even so constituted a kind of fiction, by the very nature of narrative and the art of storytelling. He wrote, “Whatever my wish, I had not escaped fiction; I had simply made myself the central character of a story, finding in my own experience and dreams a greater authenticity than I could in those of any character I might invent.” Like fiction writing, “life writing” required artistry, selection, shaping, and exclusion.

There is a poignancy in Jim McConkey’s essays and stories uniquely his own, whether he is writing about the sacrifices of his mother in the 1930s, awaking after a near-fatal wreck in Germany, visiting Mammoth Cave with his fiancée at Christmas 1943 just before shipping overseas, or the special intimacies between animals and humans. Though he lived in a post-Darwinian, post-Freudian, and post-Holocaust world, and was in no conventional sense a “religious” writer, one underlying theme in much of Jim’s work was the quest for the sacred in our day-to-day lives. His stories build up to epiphanies of connection between people, unexpected recognitions, discoveries of allegiance and loyalties. In a world where supernatural belief is no longer possible, these moments of intimate trust and connection become all the more significant.

What made Jim McConkey’s work different from that of most contemporaries was not only his soul-searching honesty, his self-
lacerating confessions of failure and weakness, but like Augustine, he was on a quest to find the spiritual in a non-believing world. It is a quest whose grandeur is counterbalanced by the ordinariness of his details, the plainness and directness of his voice, the humility of his claims. Again and again through his writing Jim finds the extraordinary in the ordinary. A casual detail or overheard comments becomes a revelation. He is a poet without verse and a churchman without a creed.

Among the many honors Jim received were fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 1979 he received an award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. In 2008, the Master of Fine Arts Creative Writing Award was established at Cornell in his honor by a former student.

Though Jim published important works of fiction such as *The Tree-House Confessions* and *Kayo*, he is remembered most for the stories based on his personal experience in the multi-volume *Court of Memory*. Themes that run throughout his work are his long love affair with Gladys, his wife of seven decades, and the search for brotherhood. He had a special affinity for the poor and struggling, but was relentless in examination of himself, his motives and actions. His work was an ongoing self-critique. There is something at once deeply satisfying and deeply unsettling about Jim’s work. Like Chekhov he was rarely judgmental, except about himself.

What is unsettling about Jim’s work, I think, is the sensitivity of his search for the authentic, contrasting with the toughness of his honesty. Much of his writing is a kind of testimonial, often of failure, but sometimes of victory too. A very modern writer, as well as a classical writer, Jim offers no sure answers beyond the power of narrative and shared experience, human connection, and the miracle of being. Rather than preach, he is witness to his own struggles, recognitions, and discoveries. He is unsettling because he peels back layers of experience, deeper and deeper, risking pain. He is satisfying because he proves by example that virtue and value will always be found in the struggle, in the quest itself. Occupied with the thorniest existential and theological questions, Jim imposes no
answers. He gives us facts and poses questions.

Many of us have known Jim as a good neighbor, concerned with issues of energy, environment, and governance. Some of us have known him best as a wise master, who teaches by example and indirection. We are all grateful that he lived for 98 years, and that he was one of us. Jim liked to credit his longevity to his lifelong appreciation of red wines. He was always excellent company, and a gracious host.

Jim McConkey died peacefully at home October 24, 2019. He was buried four days later beside his wife Gladys and son Cris, at Greensprings Natural Cemetery Preserve, in Newfield, New York.

Written by Robert Morgan and Caroline Levine