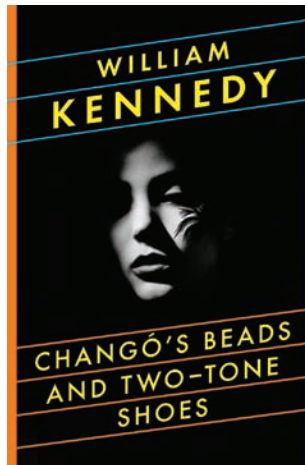


# Out on His Town

WILLIAM KENNEDY

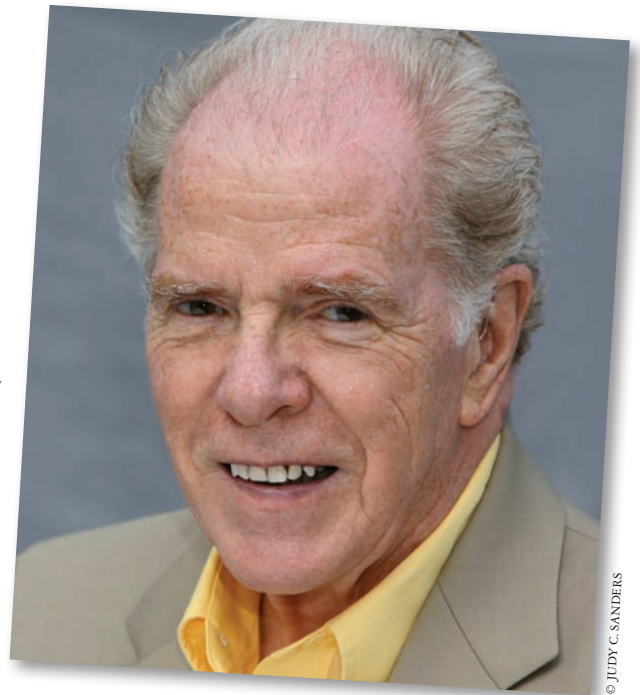
BY EDWARD SCHWARZSCHILD

William Kennedy, at 83, is about to publish his long-awaited new Albany novel, *Changó's Beads and Two-Tone Shoes* (Viking, Oct.), the eighth book in his celebrated cycle that has famously tracked the lives of ballplayers, bums, politicians, playwrights, prostitutes, gamblers, gangsters, bowlers, and more, all seeking to understand what it means to survive in the capital city they have no choice but to call home.



**T**he books are deeply rooted in Albany, but they reach far beyond the city limits, illuminating what it means to be human in this chaotic, corrupting, grace-starved world. Over the years Kennedy has won nearly every award out there, including the majors: the Pulitzer and National Book Award for *Ironweed*, and a MacArthur, to name just a few.

*Changó's Beads* follows firmly in the Kennedy tradition. The action starts in 1936 Albany, shifts to 1957 Havana (where both Castro and Hemingway make dramatic appearances), and returns to Albany on June 5, 1968, the day of Robert Kennedy's assassination. This 1968 section unfolds over the course of 12 hours as RFK hangs between life and death and several Albany citizens, including Daniel Quinn and his father, George, wander the downtown streets. They drink and talk, and occasionally they run and shoot and swing baseball bats while the city teeters on the edge of yet another riot.



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Over the past 40 years, it's become increasingly clear that Kennedy sees in Albany what Joyce saw in Dublin, Faulkner in Yoknapatawpha County, and García Márquez in Macondo. In the introduction to *O Albany!* (1983), his nonfiction tribute to his hometown, Kennedy describes the city that has shaped his artistic vision: "It is centered squarely in the American and the human continuum, a magical place where the past becomes visible if one is willing to track the multiple incarnations of the city's soul. I confront even a single street corner and there emerges an archetypal as well as an historical context in which to view the mutations of its trees, its telephone poles."

It's impossible not to yearn to see this troubled city through Kennedy's eyes, and he's happy to retrace the routes the characters of *Changó's Beads* wander. It's a hot Saturday afternoon in July and to the naked eye the streets appear deserted. Until Kennedy starts talking, that is. In his white guayabera, khaki slacks, and tan loafers, Kennedy sits behind the wheel of his car and once again effortlessly conjures those "multiple incarnations of the city's soul."

Near the top of State Street, he glances down the hill, the Hudson River off in the distance. That branch of Citizens Bank? It used to be the State Bank, where George Quinn attempts to cash a check at the start of his pilgrimage in *Changó's Beads*. "That's a very old bank," Kennedy says. "That was my first job. I was a messenger, carrying millions of dollars of checks all over the city."

Over on that corner is where the Waldorf cafeteria once stood. "That's in *Ironweed*," Kennedy says. "It's where Helen goes." A

## Author Profile

few blocks further on there's Green Street, the scene of something like hand-to-hand combat in *Changó's Beads*. "This was what was known as the Red Light district. This was the most famous of the streets. This isn't quite where Bleecker Street was in the novel. I placed it down there. I think Trixie's [from *Roscoe*] house may be right up here. It might still be standing. And Hapsy's, the saloon, I invented that. I moved it from somewhere else."

Kennedy drives on, time whipsawing the buildings in and out of focus, making it easier to "view the mutations." What looks like a row of vacant storefronts is actually the site of the old Kenmore Hotel. "This was where Legs Diamond was hanging out," Kennedy says, as if the guy had just blown town on the morning train. "Sinatra played, the Dorseys, Duke Ellington. It was the hottest nightclub between New York City and Canada. In the '20s you could go in there in tuxedos at lunch and dance, and it was on the radio, WGY, which was General Electric's station."

*Changó's Beads* is filled with singing. The book opens with Bing Crosby riffing through the song "Shine" late at night, waking eight-year-old Daniel Quinn, who will later become a journalist and then a writer (not unlike Kennedy himself). Both Quinn and Kennedy were born in 1928. Is Quinn, whose story stands at the center of *Changó's Beads*, the closest thing there is to a Kennedy persona? "I always had the concern that anybody who was exactly me was going to be boring," he says. "I just find my own experience stultifying to write about. So I have to reinvent myself, or my own experience, in some way that challenges the imagination. But, yeah, this is the closest I've come."

There's nothing remotely stultifying about the new novel or about this tour of New York's capital. Kennedy glides the car around another corner and continues his live magic show, demonstrating again how to use invention and imagination and encyclopedic knowledge to make the past visible. He points to a bar. "Now, McGeary's is the place [in *Changó's Beads*] where George hits the guy with the bat. And this is the Federal Building, but it used to be the Memorial Hospital, and that's where they bring Tremont."

As he draws closer to the house in North Albany where both he and Quinn were born, Kennedy seems ready to grab one of the pens and pencils that fill his guayabera's breast pocket, maybe jot a few notes. He points to a train track that looks as if

it hasn't been used for decades, the dark wooden ties overgrown with weeds. "This," he says, "is the sort of track where Francis, in *Very Old Bones*, almost commits suicide. I think I'm going to use this. This is a good setting."

Asked if these streets felt haunted to him as a kid, Kennedy repeats the question. "Did it feel haunted? You know, down here is where the other part of my family lived. This is Main Street where Francis lived, and this is the house where he dropped Gerald, and this is also the street in *The Flaming Corsage*."

But as a kid, was this just where you grew up, or was the place already haunted then?

"It was a very busy neighborhood. You know, there was a lot of stuff happening in it. There were factories on the edge of it. And bars all over the place. Here's the church. That's the parish house. This is where the nuns lived and taught. And right there lived the girl I was in love with in the sixth and seventh grade. She called me about 50 years after I'd last seen her and she said,

*I want to hear what's going on. And this is the old United Traction Company trolley barn. That's where the trolley comes out in Ironweed during the strike in 1901.*

It's probably wise to accept that the word "haunted,"

**Kennedy's Albany today.**

like the word "now," like the city of Albany, means something different for Kennedy. Invention and imagination are required. Even cold, hard numbers can be mysterious. That's what he'd been talking about before getting into the car, when I ask what the future looks

like to him at 83. "I don't feel like I'm in my 80s," he says. "I know I am, and I creak like an 80-year-old, but I don't think like an 80-year old, or an 83-year-old. Something else is going on in me. I don't know what it is. I lasted for a while. I don't know how it happened. I don't know why it happened. I don't have any models for this. Bellow wrote *Ravelstein* when he was about 84. It wasn't his greatest book, but it was a pretty good one. I mean, if you're not dead, and your writing's not dead, you just keep going because that's what authors do. I'm actually writing a play now. It's a play I've been writing since the '90s, and it's only half done. Well, it's more than half done, but half of it is well done, and the other half is rare and needs to be cooked. But I'll get there."

For the moment, though, he's in the car, driving on through his ever-thrumming city. He gazes down another street. "I could name everyone who lived there," he says. And then he does. ■

*Edward Schwarzschild is the author of Responsible Men, a novel, and The Family Diamond, a collection of short stories.*

