

## **Interview with Kay Williams and Jerri Williams Lawrence, authors of *Once Last Dance: It's Never Too Late to Fall in Love***

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar is pleased to be joined by Kay Williams and Jerri Williams Lawrence to talk about the novel "One Last Dance: It's Never Too Late to Fall in Love," started by their dad, Mardo Williams, at age 92, and finished by the two of them after his death at age 95.

*Mardo had a distinguished career as journalist and author (for which he won an Ohioana Library Award). After he completed most of the first draft of "One Last Dance" he asked his daughters Kay and Jerri to finish the book if he could not. He died a few weeks later. His daughters honored his wishes.*

*Kay Williams is a professional actress who has played leading roles at regional theaters around the U.S., including the San Francisco Actors Workshop and the Pittsburgh Playhouse. Among her many credits are the title role in "Miss Jairus," Cybel in "Great God Brown," and Georgette in "The Balcony." She has acted in radio, television, and films, and she has worked behind-the-scenes as an assistant producer with an award-winning independent filmmaker in New York. Recently, she also co-authored the new mystery novel "Butcher of Dreams" with Eileen Wyman (read the review and interview for "Butcher of Dreams" here at Reader Views).*

*Jerri Williams Lawrence is a writer and has edited manuscripts in many genres, both fiction and non-fiction. She currently tutors high school and college students in composition. "One Last Dance" is her first book. A teacher of high school honors students in literature and composition, she was actively involved in curriculum development for gifted students. Among the many extracurricular activities she supervised, highlights included publications adviser for both the school newspaper and the literary magazine.*

*In conjunction with the novel, Kay and Jerri have developed a multimedia program which focuses on their father's philosophy of living life to its fullest no matter what one's age. "Keep Dancing!" continues to be well received by libraries, social organizations, senior centers, and civic associations.*

**Tyler:** Welcome, Kay and Jerri. I'm glad you could join me today. I have never gotten to talk to three authors before, and while your father can't join us, I'm sure he would be happy to know you have carried out his wishes in completing his book. To begin, will you tell us a little bit about the plot of "One Last Dance: It's Never Too Late to Fall in Love"?

**Jerri:** "One Last Dance" is about Morgan, aged 89, and Dixie, 79, two "mature" individuals on seemingly divergent paths. They have a disastrous first meeting, complete with insulting remarks, but it's obvious to bystanders, even then, that the two are fated for each other.

The book follows their relationship as they begin to date and ultimately decide to move in together. When a mysterious stranger, bent on vengeance for past wrongs, invades their lives, he becomes a catalyst, reconciling Morgan with his estranged Chicago family and eventually bringing Dixie and Morgan the love and pride they'd lost decades before with the loss of their children.

**Tyler:** How do Morgan and Dixie's situation evolve from their not getting along to their living together?

**Kay:** Morgan and Dixie collide at the entrance to Whispering Pines Retirement Center. Sparks fly. Dixie has a ruined birthday cake, Morgan's eyeglasses are broken. Still, afterwards, each savors what Dixie calls their "violent encounter." Morgan pays a return visit to Whispering Pines. Dixie, who's employed there part-time, is working that day. Morgan apologizes and the two begin to date. When Morgan sees her spacious, well-decorated home, he thinks she's rich; he's living in a cramped apartment on a fixed income. Dixie confides she has to work two part-

time jobs to maintain her lovely home. She asks him to move in with her (as an alternative to moving into Whispering Pines)—strictly as a paying guest.

Dixie's best friend Vera sees red flags. Morgan is almost 90, and a chronic asthmatic with little money. His past is troubling. Why did he leave Chicago at the peak of his banking career, Vera asks Dixie, and start over—at age 49—in Columbus, Ohio? Dixie pooh-poohs Vera but asks her former boss (with Chicago connections) to do some checking into Morgan's former life. Dixie proceeds with her plan of sharing expenses and household chores with Morgan. Morgan, after initial doubts, moves into Dixie's beautiful home, propelled by his fantasies of romance and lots of good meals prepared by Dixie.

Both are accustomed to living alone. For thirteen years Dixie has owned her beloved Lhasa Apso, Jiggs. Jiggs is the king of the castle, sleeping with his mistress in the master bedroom—a spot where Morgan would like to be. Dixie is a meticulous housekeeper. Morgan forgets to do his chores—the laundry, mop the floor, take out the trash—while Dixie is at work. These conflicts are the just tip of the iceberg.

Then outside forces begin to intrude—illness, intruders from Morgan's past—complicating matters even more.

**Tyler:** Tell us a little bit about why you think your father decided to write this book and what about the characters and situation would have appealed to him?

**Jerri:** When he was touring with his first book “Maude,” he met a woman who'd tracked him down after seeing him interviewed on TV. She came over to Jerri's house (in Westerville, Ohio) to get her copy of “Maude” autographed. Dad discovered that he knew her. She'd worked at the “Columbus Dispatch” as an executive secretary on the fifth floor while Dad had worked in the newsroom on the fourth floor. After they talked about old times and Dad autographed her book, he pecked her lightly on the lips. She said later, “It was a kiss goodbye that became a kiss hello.”

As the two shared living quarters, the challenges became apparent. What did it take for an older adult, set in his ways, to begin a new life living with someone just as rigid and needy as he was. Enough material to fill a book, Dad thought. He had a great deal he wanted to say about aging and what it means to be in your nineties with the body failing and the mind and spirit still wanting it all. And he wanted to say it as humorously as possible. So he dropped his first idea of writing a newspaper novel and “One Last Dance” was born. Dad said “One Last Dance” was about “about two old duffers trying to keep their independence,” but it's also about two people set in their ways who learn to change and grow and value their relationships.

**Tyler:** One theme of the book is about how the past can haunt a person. It seems an advantage to having older characters if they have more of a past for a novelist to build upon. Will you tell us about the past and secrets of the main characters, Morgan and Dixie, and how the past is integral to the plot?

**Kay:** Morgan wants a real relationship with Dixie, who fears intimacy. Morgan only finds out later why this is so. He also discovers that although Dixie owns her lovely home, other financial strings are attached. Morgan, too, has concealed important details—about his divorce, his estranged children, and why he lost his prestigious Chicago banking job. Dixie finds out enough while rummaging in his dresser drawer to give her qualms. Morgan explains, but still she's left with nagging doubts. A few weeks later, the two return from seeing a movie and find the house trashed—drawers ransacked, their contents dumped on the floor, furniture knocked over, lamps broken. Two antique figurines and most of the food in the refrigerator have been stolen. A message is painted on the wall: “Happy New Year, you pig.” Dixie blurts out to Morgan, “Nothing like this ever happened before you moved in.” Dixie is terrified. Morgan is worried. Is the break-in a random act, the work of vandals? Or someone with a grudge from Morgan's past?

**Tyler:** It is not often that senior citizens are the main characters in books. What appeal do you think the main characters have and whom do you think is the audience for “One Last Dance”?

**Jerri:** Several readers have commented that Dixie and Morgan are real people, not caricatures, as older people are so often portrayed in books, films and on TV. The reason they aren't caricatures is that “One Last Dance” was written by a man in his nineties who knew exactly what he was talking about. As the Reader Views reviewer wrote, “The audience for this book is every senior citizen and their children.”

**Tyler:** Our reviewer at Reader Views, Richard Blake, said the story was inspirational. What about “One Last Dance” may inspire people?

**Kay:** It could have been a dismal, discouraging story. Instead, Dad dealt with the issues of aging openly, honestly, and with humor and thoughtfulness. The book is uplifting and encouraging, reminding us to live every day and always be in search of new experiences, regardless of age. Our dad lived that philosophy by writing this, his first novel, at age 92.

**Tyler:** Was it difficult for you to finish a book he had written? What concerns did you have in finishing it?

**Jerri:** It was very difficult. His death was sudden, two weeks after he, Kay, and I had agreed to meet. He was going to dictate to us his ending and needed our eyes to help him start revisions. By then Dad was 95, ill and frail, and blind from macular degeneration. (He’d had to dictate into a small tape recorder what turned out to be the last 11 chapters of the book, everything that happens after The Accident.)

After his death, we couldn’t bear to look at the manuscript for over a year. But we’d made him a promise to finish the book. We didn’t know if we could do it and do it right—maintain Dad’s humorous tone and his pithy style while fleshing out what needed to be fleshed out. It was like walking a tightrope. But we felt we had guidance. It seemed almost as if he were looking over our shoulders as we worked.

**Tyler:** I understand your father wrote the entire rough draft. What role did the two of you then play—did you just edit and proofread the book, or did you do some major rewrites and add or delete scenes from the book?

**Kay:** Yes, Dad wrote the entire first draft—except for the last chapter. He had been undecided for some time—about whether to have a sad, happy or in between ending and still be realistic. Just before he died, he told us he wanted a happy ending. One comment he made in one of his tapes was: “About here, we need a big celebration to perk Morgan up.” That’s when Jerri and I came up with the ending—which is more than happy, it’s joyous. I know it’s an ending Dad would approve of.

The plot is totally Dad’s...and was sparked when he began to share living quarters for parts of two years with a significant other and her little dog. He knew there’d be some humor as each tried to adjust to new living arrangements and to each other’s friends (and to the little dog who seemed to be the Master of the household). And he realized there’d be humor and tension in the couple’s differences of opinion, power plays, and fights. And he realized there’d be worries as the health of one or the other deteriorated.

Before we started revisions, we took a long look at the entire manuscript and saw that his three main characters—Morgan, Dixie, and Tony, the mysterious stranger—were totally there; we felt it was an important book—not too many books feature an 89-year-old and a 79-year-old as leading romantic characters. We changed from Dad’s bird’s eye view to being in the heads of three main characters, so they could indulge in a little more introspection than Dad allowed. Also, the readers would have the fun of knowing what they were thinking, despite what they said to one another.

While many parts of his manuscript read like a final draft, underdeveloped sections remained. (Since I’d just finished writing a suspense novel, I knew that this is usual for first drafts—you really don’t know what you have until you near the end of the book.) We fleshed out some characters, added a character that we discovered we needed to build more tension. We cut scenes, rearranged scenes. Dad’s keen wit and sense of humor shines throughout the book, starting in the very first chapter.

We worked two more years on it. (Dad had worked on the book for four years—between hospitalizations.) As we finished a second draft, I read it aloud to my writers group in NYC 10 pages at a time for feedback. We did third, fourth, and even fifth drafts. Finally, when we thought the manuscript was ready, we farmed it out to other readers for their input and received valuable feedback—which resulted in more changes. We both had stacks of papers—various versions of the book—all over our homes. Finally, after 6 years, the novel seemed ready for publication—and we submitted it. We believed in it. We didn’t know if anyone else would.

**Tyler:** Kay, since you also co-wrote “Butcher of Dreams” what did you see as the major difference in the collaboration process working with your sister versus working with Eileen Wyman? Was there a difference, or do you think the collaboration process of writing is always different?

**Kay:** It must always be different because of the difference in chemistry and writing styles between the collaborators. It was a real plus that Eileen and I have been long-time friends. We knew each other very well. Of course, my sister and I have known each other all of our lives and we've always been very close. So we all felt very comfortable with each other and comfortable with being honest. I'm not sure how well I'd collaborate with a stranger. Eileen and I live in NYC so we could get together face to face and sort stuff out. Jerri and I did much of the collaboration via e-mail. That was really time-consuming for Jerri. We didn't want to send chapters over the internet so Jerri had to mark the pages on the manuscript itself, then type off page by page her comments, really spelling out what she meant, re-writing passages showing the original and her suggestions. Then e-mail the lot to me. She's really a gifted editor. Then we might get on the phone to fight over changes or to hash out complicated matters. I think one person has to be in charge, so in both cases I was in charge of making the changes on the master file.

**Tyler:** You mentioned that Tony is the mysterious stranger—can you tell us anything more about him without giving away the plot?

**Jerri:** The reader sees him three times before he comes face to face with Morgan and Dixie. And up until that meeting, the reader only knows him as a question mark, alienated, discontented, almost thug-like, someone who's looking for trouble and finds it. Readers sense that a confrontation between him and Morgan and Dixie is inevitable and worry how he will impact their lives. That kind of tension keeps readers turning pages. Although one reader said she was so worried about what Tony might do to the vulnerable older couple that she had to look ahead to see what was going to happen.

**Tyler:** Kay and Jerri, I bet your father would be very happy with how well the book has done. Will you tell us a little bit about the awards it has won or for which it has been a finalist?

**Jerri:** We were thrilled in May 2006 when we learned that "One Last Dance" had won the 2006 Independent Publishers Award for Best Regional Fiction. Kay traveled to Washington D.C. on May 19th to attend the awards reception held at the Women's Museum.

The book was also one of five Finalists in the National Readers' Choice Awards for 2005, sponsored by the Romance Writers of America. Dad was the only man in the list of finalists. We think he would have been amused, flattered, and slightly stunned to know that many Romance Readers of all ages loved his book.

Plus the book was on the "Akron Beacon-Journal" list of the best novels of 2005 from new writers.

**Tyler:** While "One Last Dance" was your father's first novel, he also wrote other books. Will you tell us a little bit about his other writing?

**Kay:** Dad's writing career spanned 73 years. At age 21 and recently married, he lost his job at a Kenton, Ohio car shop due to the Depression. Always having an inclination to write, he answered an ad, "Wanted: young man who can type and knows English." He became the only reporter for the "Kenton News-Republican," a small Ohio daily. Nineteen years later, after World War II ended, the "Columbus Dispatch" recruited him to the copy desk. So we all moved from the small town of Kenton, Ohio to Columbus, Ohio. He moved up the ranks from the copy desk to travel editor ...and in 1954 he was asked to develop and write stories about the world of business. Columbus was booming at this time. Dad, familiar with pounding the pavement to search out stories, did just that. Within the year, he was writing a daily business column with byline.

After he retired from the "Dispatch" in 1970, he freelanced for several years, editing a newsletter and doing publicity. He began his second career, writing books, at age 88, when our mother died after a long illness. At our urging, he learned to use a computer and began writing his first book, "Maude." It was about his mother—our grandmother, who lived to be 110—and also life at the turn of the century when everything was done arduously by hand. This was to be for family, but I read a few sections to my writers group. They loved it, and wanted more.

The manuscript grew from 50 pages to a 334 page book with a 32 page picture insert. The finished product was published in 1996—"Maude (1883–1993): She Grew up with the Country." It won an Ohioana Library award (their first posthumous award) and has been adopted by some college American history classes as a supplemental text "to put a human face on history."

Then Dad wrote an illustrated children's book, "Great-Grandpa Fussy and the Little Puckerdoodles," based on the escapades of four of his great-grandchildren. He decided at age 92 that he would try something completely different—a novel. His magnum opus.

**Tyler:** Kay and Jerri, would you each individually answer this question? How would you describe your father's influence as a writer on your own careers as writers, actor and educator?

**Jerri:** We've probably inherited Dad's love of words, of reading, of self-expression—and I know I've learned more about writing from Dad than any teacher. Possibly the most useful advice for me personally—and in my teaching of writing was how to begin putting ideas to paper. Even now when I'm not sure how to begin, I can hear his voice telling me: "Don't worry about how to start—just start." Once the brain is engaged, words flow—sentence and paragraph order can easily be transposed when ideas are down." (Of course, during his career, he had to rely on scissors and a paste pot to "cut and paste.") His news-style "editing" suggestions during my high school and college years were also invaluable: Be precise. Get rid of unnecessary words. Can you rephrase for clarity? Avoid needless repetition. And he was always encouraging, praising my writing when it was warranted. My teaching career allowed me to earn a living using these strengths and interests.

**Kay:** When Dad worked as reporter at the "News-Republican" in Kenton, Ohio, I loved being at the office, watching him pound out his stories on the manual typewriter, seeing him throw the metal type into the fire to be re-melted and used again, going down to the basement with him to hear the roar of the presses and watch them spew out the printed pages. It was magical. In the sixth grade I decided I had to be part of it. I became the first papergirl in that small town.

Dad was always typing in his basement office when he wasn't at the newspaper. That influenced me to write (by hand) small plays. We did neighborhood shows—kind of like the kids did in the old Mickey Rooney movies. Someone said, "Let's put on a show," and we did just that.

I learned a lot by having Dad give my writing the once-over. In junior high school, I'd show him a finished paper for English and he'd come up with better adjectives or verbs or a different or unusual thrust. If the teacher happened to read it aloud, the class would say, "I'll bet your dad helped you with that."

When Dad was working at the "Columbus Dispatch," I sporadically freelanced for the newspaper as a reviewer of movies and plays. By then I knew I wanted to try to make it as an actor, so I turned down a full-time job with the "Dispatch." I'm glad I did. Then newspaper jobs for women were writing for the Society page, or the Food page. I might have gotten a few jobs reviewing—as a second stringer. But reviewing had a downside. You usually had less than 12 hours to see the show and write your review. I didn't like the idea of writing with a deadline.

**Tyler:** Jerri and Kay, what is next for the two of you? Will you write any more books together or separately?

**Kay:** Dad said with a chuckle while he was writing "One Last Dance" that he hoped readers would be so intrigued by the situation at the end of the book (we don't want to give away the ending) that they would want a sequel. And, of course he imagined himself writing it. "One Last Dance" has a great word of mouth and more and more people are discovering it so maybe Jerri and I ought to be drafting out this sequel together. Or maybe we first should work on a screenplay of "One Last Dance." It would make a great movie with terrific roles for older actors. We picture Jack Nicholson in the role of Morgan and Diane Keaton in the role of Dixie.

**Jerri:** Recently my creative efforts have centered around "One Last Dance"—and the inspirational program that Kay & I have been presenting to various groups. As far as my writing, I've made several pages of notes that I think have some potential—and that center around three main characters. I need to start developing one or two of the episodes I've outlined to see where it leads. (The inspiration has evolved from family events, some humorous, some potentially tragic that could be woven into a novel—or a series of short stories.)

**Tyler:** Kay and Jerri, thank you for joining me today. Before we go, will you tell us about the website for "One Last Dance" and what additional information may be found there?

**Jerri:** The website is [www.calliopepress.com](http://www.calliopepress.com), and on it you can find out more about Dad, his life and his books: "One Last Dance," "Maude" and, "Great-Grandpa Fussy." You can find information about the program Kay and I offer, "Keep Dancing!"; there's a video interview of us by Merle Grace Kearns, Director, Ohio Dept. of Aging; a radio interview of Kay by Carol Marks for "A Touch of Gray," an article "My Accidental Career," written by Dad

about his long career in newspapering and all the changes he saw along the way. Of course, there are also photos of Dad (and Kay & Jerri), and excerpts from all of his books, and book discussion questions for reading groups.

**Tyler:** And to conclude, let's give your father the last word. What do you think he would want to say to people interested in "One Last Dance"?

**Jerri:** Dad once told an interviewer: "Life is for living, no matter what our age or condition. If we can sing, we should sing. If we can write, we should write. We should always be in search of a new experience, always be ready to commit ourselves to a new interest." He lived this philosophy right up to the day of his death, February 3, 2001.

**Tyler:** Thank you, Kay and Jerri, for joining me today and for carrying on your father's spirit and writing.

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