



Everything New Orleans

## Walker Percy sculpture to grace Serenity Circle outside the new Madisonville Library.

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'I think the warmth of our friendship showed through in the drawing. It's a privilege to be able to do this for Walker.' -- Bill Binnings

At his studio near Waldheim, Bill Binnings has nearly finished the textured clay statue of his friend Walker Percy. He has been working on it for two months.

"About 4 o'clock today, it started to look like Walker," he said, when I called to check on his progress two weeks ago.

The first time I went to see it, Binnings was working to get a curve in the fold of Percy's pants just the way he wanted it.

"My process right now is removing everything that's not right," he said.

Once the clay model is done, he will make a wax replica, and then, using the lost wax process, he will create the bronze sculpture that will grace **the Walker Percy Serenity Circle outside the new Madisonville Library.**

"The clay, that's the fun part," he said. "The wax and the bronze, that's hard work."

He **changed the design slightly from the drawing** I saw a few months ago. Originally, the author's dog Sweet Thing was lying quietly beside him, and Percy's arm was resting on the back of the park bench above her. Now, his beloved Welsh corgi has her feet in the air, and Percy is giving her a belly rub.

"I want a lot of energy in this piece, and it's a reclining piece so that's almost a contradiction," Binnings said.

"Walker had an energetic mind. He wasn't stagnant. He wasn't quiet in his mind."

No, he wasn't. The physician-turned-writer won the National Book Award in 1962 for "The Moviegoer," which was set in New Orleans and captured the essence of the city. He went on to write five more novels and three collections of nonfiction before he died in 1990 at 73. Like his characters, he was always questioning what it means to be human "in these peculiar times." He pondered how we can know so much about science and technology and so little about ourselves.

His cautionary tales are thoughtful, sometimes difficult and often hilarious. His books earned him numerous

awards and the respect of readers around the world. In 1988, he was invited to Rome by Pope John Paul II, and in 1989 he received the Jefferson Lectureship, the highest honor the federal government gives a writer.

But in Covington, where he lived with his wife Bunt for 40 years, nobody paid much attention to him. In a 1980 article for *Esquire*, entitled "Why I Live Where I Live," he wrote, "I've managed to live here for 30 years and am less well known than the Budweiser distributor." He loved that. He described the small town in western St. Tammany Parish as "a place where a writer can live as happily as a bug in a crack in the sidewalk, where he can mosey out now and then and smell the air just to make sure this is not any crack in any sidewalk."

Mainly scholars and students of his work sought him out. His daughter had a bookstore in Covington, and I would often see admirers from far-flung places sitting on the front porch poring over Percy's books, as if they might conjure him up by their devotion.

I was tempted to tell them they'd have better luck finding him at the local Waffle House, where he liked to listen in on the conversations of diners in nearby booths, or at the Covington Post Office, where he and Sweet Thing went every morning to pick up the family mail.

Binnings became friends with the esteemed writer in the 1970s, when he was asked to join a group of artists that met for lunch at Bechac's on the Mandeville lakefront.

"It was all about having a good trout and laughing and talking and sharing ideas," he said.

They sat at a round table, and everyone joined in the conversation.

"It was informal. There was no membership," Binnings said. "We weren't having lunch with Walker Percy. We were just having lunch with friends."

Sometimes, people would show up looking for Percy, and then he would be cordial, inviting them to join the group.

"I remember one man who hitchhiked all the way from California to meet Walker," Binnings said.

The only time he remembers sitting at a long table was when actor James Mason showed up and sat himself down next to Percy, and everyone took a seat "according to rank."

"I never heard their end of the conversation that day," he said. "I was stuck at the foot of the table with Mason's wife."

One of the things Binnings learned during their weekly lunch conversations -- where diverse ideas and personalities were always on display -- was layering.

"It's like different instruments playing their own parts in an orchestra, and the music ends up being more than

the sum of those parts," he said.

He often talks about his sculpting in musical terms.

"It's kind of like writing music, but you're doing it visually," he said. "I'm composing a piece of music note by note."

Binnings -- whose works of public art can be seen in Slidell, Covington, Gretna and Ponchatoula -- enjoys doing public commissions, and when the St. Tammany Library Foundation board put out a call for sculptors to create a life-size sculpture of Percy for the new library in Madisonville, he entered the competition.

"When I heard about it, I said, 'This is me. I was meant to do this,'" he said.

He was thrilled when the board selected his design.

"I think the warmth of our friendship showed through in the drawing," Binnings said. "It's a privilege to be able to do this for Walker."

When I learned that Binnings was doing the bronze sculpture, I thought it would be an ideal tribute. My only sadness was that Percy's wife Bunt didn't live long enough to know to know about it. She died in September, 2012.

In 1991 there was talk of renaming the Covington library in Percy's honor, but some residents spoke out against it. They called him "an outsider," even though he had lived and done his writing in Covington since 1950. "He didn't leave the library a nickel," they said, forgetting that he left it richer by several noteworthy books.

I always suspected that what some folks didn't like about him was that during the 1960s Percy helped start a credit union for African-Americans in Covington and worked on a committee to improve race relations and smooth integration in local schools. It was not a popular thing to do at the time.

He never chose the limelight and would have hated causing the controversy. Percy's family eventually asked the St. Tammany Parish Police Jury to forget the whole thing.

But now he is finally being honored. The new Madisonville Library includes a Walker Percy Reading Room that holds his works and the many books that have been written about him.

And, outside, the sculpture will be a lasting reminder of a gentle man who left the world richer by his words. It will be a permanent place for people to meet him and get their pictures taken with him. The Serenity Circle will feature benches, and he and Sweet Thing will be on one of them.

"Walker is completely relaxed, completely at ease, inviting you to come sit with him," Binnings said. "The sculpture will say, 'Come and join me.'"

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The St. Tammany Library Foundation is seeking corporate and individual donations to complete the permanent historic Walker Percy Serenity Circle project. Individuals are invited to buy pavers in different sizes -- Large Paver (12x12 inches) are \$250; Medium Paver (6x12 inches) are \$175 and Regular Paver (6x6 inches) are \$125.-- that can be engraved with personal names and messages.

*For details or to make a donation, visit the **St. Tammany Library Foundation website** or write to the foundation at P.O. Box 131, Mandeville, La. 70470.*

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