

Guest Author

Ochsner in Literature – Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Ochsner and its physicians have figured in works of fiction: novels, plays, and music. A listing of these works, along with a description of each work, is provided.

Authors often include real people, institutions, and events in works of fiction. This may serve to identify locale (e.g., Mount Rushmore or the Empire State Building); provide prestige or authority (e.g., Harvard University or the U.S. Supreme Court); or connote activities associated with the institution (e.g., the Super Bowl or the State Legislature), or a combination of these motives. Authors who choose to create fictional institutions or locales may find that they take on a life of their own, but rarely to the extent of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth.

Ochsner and its people appear in several works of fiction as well as non-fiction (Fig.1). This article enumerates its treatment in fiction; a subsequent article will describe citation in non-fictional works.

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My interest in Ochsner's literary appearances was kindled in the early 1970s when a patient of mine asked me to evaluate medically his good friend and houseguest Tennessee Williams. I learned that Williams had been an Ochsner Clinic patient some years earlier and that the Clinic was mentioned in his play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. I later met the Southern authors Walker Percy

and Shelby Foote when each was a patient in Ochsner Foundation Hospital, but neither made reference to Ochsner in any of their works as far as I could determine. A few years ago, a very well-known author in the horror genre was a patient; I expressed my fervent hope that his experience with Ochsner's medical care would not provide material for one of his novels.

1. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Tennessee Williams. New York: New Directions, 1955.

The play was first presented on Broadway on March 24, 1955, directed by Elia Kazan. Barbara Bel Geddes had the role of Margaret (Maggie the Cat); Ben Gazzara was Brick; Burl Ives was Big Daddy Politt. The play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

Figure 1. *Slow Poison*, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.



Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is set on a plantation home in the Mississippi Delta, where the Pollitt clan is gathering to celebrate Big Daddy's 65th birthday. The medical storyline revolves around Big Daddy's illness. He has had abdominal pain for a year and has just returned from Ochsner Clinic. Modern-day medical readers will be surprised to find that the results of his evaluation were not provided to the patient but were sent to the referring family physician, who, in conjunction with the elder Pollitt son (a lawyer) and his wife, has elected to withhold the diagnosis and prognosis from Big Daddy and his wife, Big Mama, and to tell them that the patient has a touch of spastic colitis. Such medical paternalism was not unusual in the 1950s.

Early on, conversation between the younger Pollitts, Maggie and Brick, lets the audience know that the diagnosis of cancer has been established and that Big Daddy is dying. When Big Mama enters the scene, she gives the contradictory report that the results from the laboratory at Ochsner Clinic are completely negative, nothing wrong but some little functional thing they called a spastic colon. Big Daddy later echoes the erroneous news that all the instruments of science at that great Ochsner hospital could detect is a little spastic condition, aggravated by nerves from worrying about it.

When time comes to break the news to Big Mama, she is reluctant to accept it, and the family doctor notes the extreme thoroughness of the examination at Ochsner Clinic. The elder Pollitt son chimes in that it is one of the best clinics in the country, only to be overruled by his wife Mae's assertion that it is "THE best in the country, bar none."

The play deals with the ill-concealed squabbling among siblings, in-laws, and the local clergy over the disposition of the potential estate, the marital problems of Brick and Maggie, and the revelation of the diagnosis to Big Mama. In the midst of what he terms "such widespread mendacity," it is not surprising that Big Daddy comes to the realization of his impending death.

In the 1958 movie version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, starring Elizabeth Taylor, Paul Newman, and Burl Ives, Ochsner Clinic is not mentioned by name, and instead becomes the 'Oppenheim Clinic.' Maggie notes that Big Daddy spent "six weeks at that horrible old clinic where they cut him open."

2. *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. Ellen Gilchrist. Fayetteville, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 1981.

Ellen Gilchrist is a Southern writer who lived in New Orleans at one time and now resides in Fayetteville, Arkansas. Her first collection of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, is set in New Orleans.

In the story "The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society," Gus, a teenager from the St. Thomas Project, lives for all practical purposes underneath the huge 200-year old live oak in front of Dr. Alton Ochsner's palatial stucco house on Exposition Boulevard, rather than in the apartment in the project with his mother and siblings. The tree is described as so old and imposing that people in New Orleans call it the President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society. From this site, he and a friend from an uptown school carry on a thriving trade in marijuana with the private school crowd.

The Ochsner home, at the corner of Pitt Street and Exposition Boulevard, looks into Audubon Park. The house is no longer in the Ochsner family; a pastel of it, rendered by Sandra Burshell (Mrs. Alan), hangs in the Riddick Room at Ochsner Foundation Hospital. The island in the lagoon at Audubon Park immediately in front of the Ochsner house is called Ochsner Island and is home to large numbers of egrets, herons, mallards, and geese. It was the locale of many Tom Sawyer-Huckleberry Finn exploits by John and Mims (Minnie) Ochsner in their boyhood.

3. *Slow Poison*. Sheila Bosworth. New York: Knopf, 1992.

Sheila Bosworth's novels are set in her native New Orleans. Modern Southern literature is replete with descriptions of eccentric and dysfunctional families, and the Cade family of New Orleans and St. Tammany Parish fits right in. *Slow Poison* is the tale of the Cades—ophthalmologist father, three daughters, grandmother, and aunt—during the dysfunctional 1960s and 1970s. The interaction of the family with the medical care system often involves Ochsner. The moderately deranged aunt develops a lifelong crush on the Ochsner surgeon who saves her by operating for upper gastrointestinal bleeding. A family friend is a plastic surgeon who dies when his car runs off River Road on the way to repair "some mangled creature out at Ochsner." There is a long description of the evaluation of the alcoholic Cade father by an Ochsner diagnostician, which leads to the diagnosis of gastric carcinoma.

4. *Now Let's Talk of Graves.* Sarah Shankman. New York: Pocket Books, 1990.

Sarah Shankman is author of a series of books about heroine Samantha Adams, a journalist-detective, set in the South and in San Francisco.

The story takes place in New Orleans during Carnival season. Samantha Adams has accepted the invitation of a college friend to visit and participate in the exclusive social events to which her family has access. The friend's brother, a physician, returning from the Comus Ball where his daughter has reigned, is run down by a masked driver, plunging Samantha into a journey through upscale and lowdown New Orleans to solve the crime.

Ochsner is mentioned as a social credential by a character describing elite bodies of New Orleans society. These include New Orleans and Metairie Country Clubs, the Southern Yacht Club; the mens' luncheon clubs, Boston and Pickwick; the ladies' Orleans Club; the old-line Carnival organizations, Comus, Rex, and Momus; membership on the board at Ochsner Foundation or Tulane; enrollment of the children at McGehee or Sacred Heart; and the Little Lake Duck Club.

5. *With Extreme Prejudice.* Fredrick Barton. New York: Villard Books, 1993.

Fredrick Barton is a faculty member in the Creative Writing Department and Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs at the University of New Orleans; he also serves as a film reviewer for *Gambit Weekly*.

With Extreme Prejudice is the story of a film critic for the *New Orleans States-Item*, married to a lawyer at a downtown firm who narrates the book. After his wife is struck by an auto while jogging on the neutral ground on St. Charles Avenue, the narrator discovers that shady real estate dealings involving public projects, building permits, local politicians, and large law firms, with both social and political connections, have led to her murder.

The narrator's wife is transported to Ochsner following the accident and undergoes neurosurgical intervention, but remains comatose and on life support. Earlier in their marriage, she had been evaluated in the emergency room at Ochsner for severe abdominal pain and found to have an ovarian mass. Following consultations and second opinions, she elected to have surgery, which went successfully, at the Tulane Medical Center.

6. *Blood and Thunder.* Max Allan Collins. New York: Dutton, 1995.

Max Allan Collins is an award-winning author of mysteries and also a screenwriter ("Road to Perdition"). In his series involving private investigator Nathan Keller, the detective encounters real situations and unsolved crimes of the 1930s and 1940s.

In *Blood and Thunder*, Keller is hired by Senator Huey Long to investigate a rumored murder plot against him. Keller is in the vicinity of the shooting at the Louisiana State Capitol and, following Long's death, is hired by the widow and Long's insurer to help determine whether the death is accidental under the terms of the policy.

In the course of his investigation, Keller conducts an extensive interview with college student Tom Ed Weiss, brother of Dr. Carl Weiss, supposed killer of Huey Long. In the fabricated interview, Tom is adamant that his brother is innocent. Thomas E. Weiss, MD (1916–2004), had a long, distinguished career as Head of Rheumatology at Ochsner Clinic. In the "what became of them?" epilogue, Collins incorrectly reports that Tom Weiss practiced in New York City. In the book, detective Nathan Keller reaches the conclusion long held by the Weiss family that Dr. Carl Weiss was not an assassin.

I conversed with Max Collins at a book signing at Maple Street Book Shop; he asked me to comment on whether he had captured the flavor of Louisiana politics. In correspondence, I told him that his fictional version of Tom Weiss as a profane, angry young man was at variance with my knowledge of him as a soft spoken, thoughtful, considerate physician. He acknowledged that his characterization was based on how he felt a college student would react under the circumstances, rather than on personal knowledge of Dr. Weiss himself.

7. *And the Mountain Cried.* George Montgomery. Hicksville, NY: Exposition Press, 1978.

The author, an Atlanta industrialist, was a classmate of John L. Ochsner, MD, at Darlington School in Rome, GA.

The book is a fictional account of the fate of D.B. Cooper, the 1971 skyjacker who parachuted into oblivion over the Sierra Nevada mountains with a ransom of \$200,000.

In it, a main character is a sportsman/adventurer who learns that his younger brother, a helicopter pilot, has been shot down in Cambodia and evacuated to the States. He vows to see that his brother gets the best of care and proposes to have him moved from the military hospital to Ochsner, putting in a call to

Dr. Ochsner (presumably John). The transfer proves unnecessary.

8. *Blood Memory*. Greg Iles. New York: Scribner, 2005.

Greg Iles is a Southern writer whose works are often set in New Orleans or Natchez.

Blood Memory is a tale of serial murders in New Orleans; the investigator is a forensic orthodontist, consultant to the New Orleans Police Department. One of the suspects in the serial murders is a New Orleans psychiatrist, whose curriculum vitae lists both undergraduate and medical degrees from Tulane and a residency at Ochsner Hospital. He is eliminated from suspicion when he becomes the next victim in the series of killings.

9. *Condominium*. John D. McDonald. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1977.

John D. McDonald was a prolific writer, author of the noted and colorfully titled Travis McGee mysteries.

This book is the story of a catastrophe in which the impact of a hurricane on a West Florida community reveals years of failed planning, corrupt government, and shoddy construction practices. One of the main characters in the book reminisces about the fate of his three best friends and contemporaries, noting that “Bill went next. They took out his lung at Ochsner in New Orleans, hoping to give him two or three years more....”

10. *Big Easy Backroad*. Martin Hegwood. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Martin Hegwood is a Mississippi attorney turned author whose first offering was *Big Easy Backroad*. This book takes its private investigator protagonist through the underworld of New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast to investigate a mob-related murder. The wife of one of the characters suffers from a malignancy and is undergoing chemotherapy in a program which her health insurer terms experimental and refuses to cover. A favorable prognosis is indicated by the mention that “the doctors at Ochsner say she's got a good chance of recovery.”

11. *The Big Kiss*. O'Neil De Noux. New York: Zebra Books, 1990.

O'Neil De Noux is a member of the New Orleans Police Department. *The Big Kiss*, his initial work, is a police procedural. In the course of the investigation of a murder case, a young woman who is under suspicion is severely beaten and brought to Ochsner

for treatment, where the investigating detective interviews her.

12. *Behind Eclair's Doors*. Sophie Dunbar. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

This is the first in a series of lightweight mysteries set in New Orleans that feature hairdresser Evangeline Claire (Eclair) Jeanerette. The heroine's ex-husband, intent on remarrying her, goes to the lengths of subjecting himself to testing at Ochsner Clinic for “AIDS and every other STD there was a test for.”

13. *The Poydras Project*. Margaret Lawhon. Baton Rouge, LA: Two Ones Publishing, 2003.

The author is a former medical reporter for a Baton Rouge television station. The book deals with a bioterrorist attack with smallpox virus introduced into the air-conditioning system of the New Orleans Superdome during a Super Bowl game. The heroine, a television medical reporter, is called away from a double lung transplant at Ochsner to cover the impending epidemic.

In addition to these published stories, there has been at least one musical contribution about Ochsner. The Dixieland jazz musician Mugsy Spanier (1906–1967) had a serious illness and was Dr. Alton Ochsner's patient during the 1930s and 1940s. From this encounter came his composition “Oh, Dr. Ochsner.” On the flip side is “Relaxing at the Touro.”

These literary works have little in common beyond the fact that the preponderance of the authors live in New Orleans or elsewhere in the South and that they include reference to Ochsner Clinic or its physicians, sometimes in passing. It is remarkable that the key figures in some of these Ochsner citing novels, *Slow Poison*, *Blood Memory*, and *Now Let's Talk of Graves*, are physicians, mercifully non-Ochsner physicians, usually presented unflatteringly as less than noble individuals. However, Ochsner's inclusion in such a broad range of publications confirms its status as an established member of the community, the city, and the region.

The works cited are in the Ochsner in the Literature Collection at the Medical Library of Ochsner Clinic Foundation. Those who discover other examples of references to Ochsner in the literature are invited to donate them to the collection.