



Donald "Skip" Hays

FEB 14, 1947 - NOV 21, 2025



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The novelist and retired University of Arkansas professor Donald "Skip" Hays passed away on the morning of November 21, 2025 at the age of seventy-eight at his home in Fayetteville, Arkansas, after a long bout with cancer. He is survived by his wife Patty, his son Gabe and three grandchildren.

Hays's first novel, *The Dixie Association*, was a finalist for the 1985 PEN/Faulkner award and was followed in 1990 by *The Hangman's Children*, a Los Angeles Times Critics Choice selection. His 2007 story collection, *Dying Light and Other Stories*, received accolades from numerous writers, including Colum McCann, Ellen Gilchrist, Sabina Murray and Christopher Castellani.

His forthcoming novel, *The Great Awakening*, completed only months before his death, will be published by Regal House in May 2026. It has already earned ecstatic praise from Richard Russo, Ron Rash, George Singleton, Sabina Murray, Tom Franklin and Steve Yarbrough. Susan Perabo says that "this masterpiece by Donald Hays says everything that needs saying about this broken time in this broken country. A beautifully written book about ugliness. A terrifying, hilarious, brutally honest all-American howl."

Hays was a graduate of the University of Southern Arkansas, where he excelled as a baseball player after having been a multi-sport athlete in high school, in Van Buren, Arkansas. Later, he earned an MFA from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, where he eventually joined the faculty himself and mentored dozens of writers who have gone on to major success as novelists and screenwriters.

The son of a Navy veteran, Hays was nicknamed "Skip" by his father, who fondly hoped that one day his son would become a Navy skipper. Nevertheless, during the Vietnam War, Skip Hays became a conscientious objector who, rather than leaving the country to avoid punishment, agreed to perform janitorial work in the psychiatric ward at the UAMS Medical Center in Little Rock. Hays's many longtime friends came to see that episode as perhaps the definitive one, as he was fiercely devoted to principles. And the principle he held most dear was following the dictates



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of his own conscience whether that met with favor or not. Another deeply held principle was loyalty to family and friends.

It was no accident, then, that when news of his illness began to circulate among his former students, as well as his own former high school, college and graduate school classmates, so many people wanted to visit him from different parts of the country that it became necessary to schedule them between cancer treatments. Among the last to see him, only hours before his death, were two of his former students, with whom he laughed and told stories for a good part of his final evening.

News about a memorial service will follow in a few days.

Memorial contributions may be to Doctors Without Borders, and the ACLU

To place an online tribute, please visit www.bernafuneralhomes.com



Tribute Wall

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Elizabeth Carter posted:

Skip was selfless in giving his time to his students and truly cared about their development as fiction writers. His guidance in workshops was marked by its wisdom, humor, kindness, and acute insight. He gave a tremendous amount of himself to the M.F.A. program, always with humility and an overwhelming concern for his students.

January 3 at 7:26 AM



Allison Wolcott posted:

Skip's story about his dad saying Skip wasn't any use "come hog-killing time," and the way he laughed every time he told it to students at the bar after workshop when they asked about his conscientious objector journey, still makes me laugh. And the memory of how he could fix you with those blue eyes in class and say with all the gravel on earth, "that's right" still chills my blood.

December 7 at 12:07 PM



Patty Besom posted:

I met Skip at SAU during the 1968-69 school year where he and Patty were students and I was teaching and where on campus happenings helped fuel the fire for what was to become The Dixie Association. His and Patty's relationship became a love story for the ages. Having them and Gabe in my life has been-- no single word can do justice here--a joy. Patty Besom

December 1 at 12:50 PM



Becky Ivey posted:

Skip Hays is truly unforgettable. A few of the things I could never forget about him include his uncanny way of sharing a funny story, his head full of gorgeous silver white hair, and his walls full of books. But the most unforgettable thing about Skip is the unbelievable love story he shares with Patty. This love story includes his son, Gabe, and his 3 beautiful grandchildren. The relationships Skip built and maintained with so many students and friends are a true testament to the kind of man he was. He will be missed!!!!

November 28 at 9:31 PM



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Steve Yarbrough posted:

Skip was the finest storyteller I have ever known. He once made me laugh so hard I literally fell down. His stories were full of life—and full of love. I will miss him until the end of my days.

November 27 at 2:09 AM



Memories only last if you share them

Join us in honoring Donald by contributing to a collection of shared memories.



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