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Groom GUM

on up

*Author Winston Groom reflects on the
30th anniversary of his most popular book*

BY: EMILY WILLIAMS

At first glance, Winston Groom's office does not appear to be that of a world-famous author.

Everyday sounds echo in the brick walled room - the tinkle of ice against the sides of a glass tumbler; the steady hum of a lawnmower next door; the beep of the answering machine; his daughter's Shih Tzu, Camellia, reminding him that feeding time is promptly at 5 p.m.

The shelves are filled, floor to ceiling, with books by everyone from W.E.B. Griffin to Clarence Darrow and even Jimmy Buffet. A glass front cabinet on the opposite wall displays an impressive collection of rifles. On his desk papers are stacked in piles surrounding the computer where he writes every afternoon.

Nothing is out of the ordinary.

But there, hanging on the wall above his desk is a poster of a man in a white suit sitting on a bench. In the white space around the photo, in great curling black ink, are signatures from some of the biggest names in Hollywood – Gary Sinise, Sally Field and, largest of all, Tom Hanks.

Sitting in a rolling chair beneath all those names is the man who brought them all together, in a way. And it all started, 30 years ago, with a novel called *Forrest Gump*.

Groom, the author of *Gump* and nearly 20 other books, rarely has time to reflect on things like 30th anniversaries, because he's just as busy as ever.

Though he's lived everywhere from New York to North Carolina, the 73-year-old Mobile native still calls Alabama home. Much of *Forrest Gump* was inspired by growing up in Mobile, and by his years as a student at The University of Alabama.

"It was just interesting meeting new people with new ideas, not these parochial ideas we had here in Mobile," he said. "I grew up in the old city and went to the military school, and it's the same thing that's been around for 200 to 300 years. It was interesting to meet people from Anniston or Aliceville who were bright, fun people."

An English major and philosophy minor, Groom served as the editor of the campus humor magazine *Rammer*

Jammer and joined the Delta Tau Delta fraternity. He counted among his brothers Alabama senator Donald Stewart and future Washington Redskins linebacker Fred Davis.

With enrollment at around 10,000, the campus of Groom's day was much different than the campus he brings his daughter, Carolina, to visit today. Aside from classes and his editing duties, Groom spent his days squirrel shooting behind fraternity row and often saw Alabama football coach Bear Bryant walking across the quad to get a cup of coffee.

After graduation in 1965, Groom had plans to become an editor, but those plans were put on hold when he was deployed to fight in Vietnam. After the war, Groom worked for a newspaper in Washington D.C. and then moved to New York to pursue fiction.

His experiences in Vietnam inspired his first book, *Better Times Than These*, published in 1978. Although the book was well received, Groom said the initial idea of publishing a novel was frightening to him.



“It was the scariest thing I’d ever done in my whole life, including everything I did in Vietnam.”

“It was the scariest thing I’d ever done in my whole life, including everything I did in Vietnam,” he said. “But I’ve been doing this ever since. It’s a combination of being in the right place at the right time, luck and some semblance of talent.”

He wrote two more novels in the next six years and was working on a third when a conversation with his father triggered an idea he couldn’t pass over. At lunch one day, Groom’s father told him a story about a boy he knew growing up who was mentally handicapped but extraordinarily gifted at the piano.

The story stuck and that night, Groom wrote the first chapter of what would become *Forrest Gump*.

“It just sort of wrote itself, and that has never happened to me before or since,” he said. “I didn’t have anything planned, no outline, no research, no notes. I’d just sit down and say, ‘Well, what is he going to do today?’”

He finished the story in around six weeks but was hesitant about his work, so he looked for feedback from his peers.

Among Groom’s friends at the time, famed Washington Post reporter Carl Bernstein and *Harper’s Magazine* editor Willie Morris, who first encouraged Groom to get an agent. Groom recalls a 2 a.m. phone call from Morris shortly after he sent over his manuscript for *Forrest Gump*.

“Don’t change a word,” Morris said.

Groom sent the manuscript to his agent and a few days later it was purchased by Doubleday Publishing. The book was successful, but it wasn’t

until 1994 when it was adapted into an Oscar-winning movie by director Robert Zemeckis that *Forrest Gump* became a household name.

In the early stages of production, Groom was involved in developing the screenplay, although he cites differences with the producers as one of the reasons he was fired.

“All writers want their movie to be just like their book, but then the movie would be three or four days long,” he said. “And so they’ve got to tinker and by the time they get through with it, it is substantially different from what it was intended, because condensations just require that.”

Most notable among the changes was the characterization of Forrest himself. Standing 6 feet 6 inches and weighing 250 pounds, Groom’s Gump was a football and wrestling powerhouse with a penchant for cursing and the occasional drink.

Screenwriters adapted the role to fit the smaller frame and sweet disposition of America’s most trusted actor, Tom Hanks. Mark Cobb, chief arts and entertainment reporter for the Tuscaloosa News, said the producers used the book as source material rather than creating an adaptation but kept the spirit of the original character intact.

“I think the book is honestly better, myself,” Cobb said. “You can’t compare the two, because they are separate art forms. But if you really love the character of *Forrest Gump*, you can love the book and the movie.”

Also noteworthy was the film’s use of special effects, inserting *Forrest Gump* in milestone historical events such as the stand in the schoolhouse door and Vietnam War protests at the National Mall. UA Telecommunications and Film professor Jeremy Butler said the effects were nearly unprecedented at the time and influenced future filmmaking.

“For the time, they employed really cutting edge digital special effects, using actual film or documentary films and inserting Tom Hank’s face into them,” Butler said. “It’s a key narrative component and in terms of film history, it was one of those turning points in the ability of filmmakers to do certain types of special effects.”





Much of the appeal of the book and the film is the way the story captures important moments in history, particularly in the often-romanticized 1960s and 70s. This nostalgia, Butler said, has made the film popular with Baby Boomers, but the story appeals to younger generations as well.

"It's a movie that has different audiences," Butler said. "For somebody who is Forrest Gump's age, it's going to have a certain resonance in terms of shared experiences. Somebody younger would probably enjoy it more as a story or a narrative with humorous incidents without having that same resonance of the lived experiences of that time."

With phrases like, 'life is like a box of

chocolates...' and 'run Forrest run' a part of the modern American lexicon, it's hard to imagine a world without Forrest Gump.

"(Groom) created an immortal character," Cobb said. "There are very few people who would not recognize that name and who wouldn't have seen the film. It's a cultural landmark."

Following the success of the movie, Groom wrote a sequel novel *Gump & Co.* continuing the story of the beloved Forrest. But shortly after the 1995 follow up, he stopped writing fiction for a while to focus on his other love, nonfiction.

"The problem with writing fiction is you've got to have good ideas," Grooms said "You run out of ideas but you

can't live if you don't write, so people write on bad ideas. That wasn't a path I particularly wanted to go down and so I thought well, I can write nonfiction as well as I can write fiction, and I went to my publisher and told him what I wanted to do and he thought I was crazy."

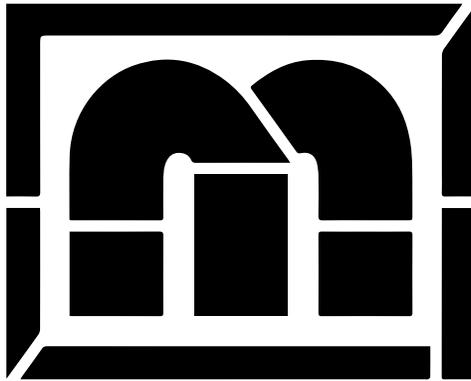
Despite his publisher's doubts, Groom found success in the world of nonfiction, publishing several books of military history as well as an illustrated history of Crimson Tide Football.

Groom insists he hasn't left fiction altogether. He has a novel coming out later this year set in Boston and Northern Mexico.

Whether or not he will ever come back to the character of Gump remains to be seen. At the moment, he's focused on more important things, like whether or not his high school senior daughter will be wearing crimson in the fall.

"I could do it again if I wanted to," Groom said. "It wouldn't have the same impact, probably because I think I'm spent on that character. He's a great character, but you can't just keep going on and on and on. He's not like Rocky."

“He created an immortal character. There are very few people who would not recognize that name.”



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