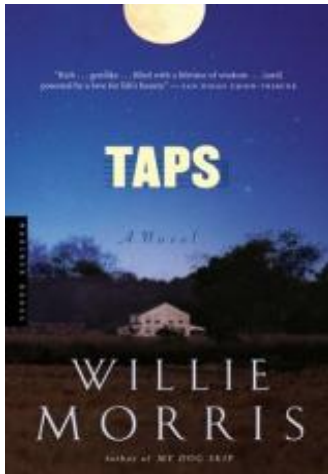


# Taps: A Novel

by Willie Morris

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## About the Book

The final work from one of America's most beloved authors and an instant classic, **Taps** takes readers on one last fictional journey to Willie Morris's South and spins a tender, powerful, very American story about the vanishing beauty of a charmed way of life and the fleeting boyhood of a young man coming of age in a time of war. In Fisk's Landing, Mississippi, at the dawn of the Korean War, sixteen-year-old Swayze Barksdale is suddenly called to an unexpected duty - playing "Taps" at the gravesides of the town's young casualties sent home from the front. Gradually, Swayze begins to pace his life around these all too frequent funerals, where his horn sounds the tragic note of the times. At turns funny, at turns poignant, **Taps** abounds with colorful characters and yet "sings and sighs . . . with a kind of minor key wistfulness" (*Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*) as Swayze learns what it means to be a patriot, a son, a lover, a friend, a man.

## Discussion Guide

1. **Taps** opens with this description of Fisk's Landing: "The hills came sweeping down from their hardwood forests and challenged the flatness, mingling with it in querulous juxtaposition" (p. 1). How is landscape, particularly the relationship between the flatlands and the hills, important to the story? How are the characters shaped by the land around them?
2. When recalling his father's death Swayze remarks, "Selective memory is a human trait, and memory itself, I have learned, is the 'corrector of existence'" (p. 18). In what ways does memory operate as a "corrector of existence" in this novel, and in life?

3. Swayze notes, "An observant boy in the small town of that long-ago American era could learn much by just listening and watching, and could privately appropriate merely in the course of events more knowledge of an adult person than that person might have of himself" (p. 33). Whom does Swayze understand better than the person understands him or herself?
4. On some levels, Durley Godbold and Amanda Pettibone seem poorly suited for each other. The town gossips burst with ideas as to why they are together ? most hypotheses centering on the Godbold money. Why do you think Amanda marries Durley?
5. Swayze recognizes that in his position of funeral director Potter Ricks has become "a custodian of our past" (p. 121). Are there any other characters who can be similarly described?
6. Swayze asserts that doing something well makes one a hero (p. 290). Who are the heroes in **Taps**?
7. When Swayze and Arch are first commissioned to play "Taps," they look upon it as a somewhat unwelcome task. By the end of the novel, their playing has clearly taken on a new meaning for them? In what ways does this experience change them? Is it for the better?
8. Fisk's Landing has sent its young men to many a war ? the Legionnaires, for the most part, represent veterans of WWI, and the VFW has begun recruiting from the veterans of more recent wars. How does the Korean War affect the town differently from any past war?
9. Willie Morris has often been categorized as a "Southern" writer. Could this story have been set anywhere else?
10. Luke Cartwright is described as "achingly American" (p. 70). What makes him so? What is Willie Morris's definition of "American"?

## Author Bio

Willie Morris was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1934. He graduated from the University of Texas and pursued graduate studies in history at Oxford University. During the Korean War, Morris played "Taps" for military funerals in his hometown of Yazoo City, Mississippi. He worked on **Taps** from the late 1960s until his death in 1999.

Morris held editorial roles at the *Daily Texan* and the *Texas Observer*, and was the youngest editor in chief of *Harper's*, the nation's oldest magazine. From 1967 to 1971, while at *Harper's*, he worked with writers such as William Styron, Gay Talese, David Halberstam, and Norman Mailer. Morris wrote for many publications, including *Vanity Fair*, *George*, *Esquire*, the *Oxford American*, and *Southern Living*.

Morris won numerous awards, including the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship for **North Toward Home** (1967), the Christopher Medal, the Richard Wright Medal for Literary Excellence, and the Governor's Award for Literature. His works include **My Cat Spit McGee** (1999), **The Ghosts of Medgar Evers: A Tale of Race, Murder, and Hollywood** (1998), **Prayer for the Opening of the Little League Season** (1995), **Terrains of the Heart and Other Essays on Home** (1981), **The Last of the Southern Girls** (1973), and **Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town** (1971).

Morris's novel **My Dog Skip** (1995) was adapted for the screen and made into a popular film.

Morris directed much literary energy and great passion towards Mississippi and its environs. He sought to change both the way Northerners perceive Southerners and to change the way Southerners themselves dealt with the legacy of slavery. Morris used writing to express his dueling sense of alienation from and affection for his native state, and in doing so gave voice to a generation of displaced Southerners.

Morris returned to Mississippi in 1980 and served as writer-in-residence at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. In 1999 he died of a heart attack at the age of sixty-four. He is survived by his wife, JoAnne Prichard Morris, and his son, David Rae Morris. Compatriots from the literary world and Yazoo City united to pay tribute to their lost friend as he lay in state in the rotunda of Mississippi's Old Capitol. William Styron remarked that Willie's "country-boy openheartedness and candor masked an encyclopedic knowledge and an elegantly furnished mind." David Halberstam proclaimed, "No one ever did it better, no one made it more fun, and no one did it with greater sweetness."

"Mississippi is America writ large," Willie Morris used to say. Through his writing and editing, he helped to redefine what it means to be Southern, and in a larger sense what it means to be American.

## Critical Praise

"Poignant, funny, heartwarming and suspenseful...a deeply affecting swan song by one of America's most beloved writers."

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### **Taps: A Novel**

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