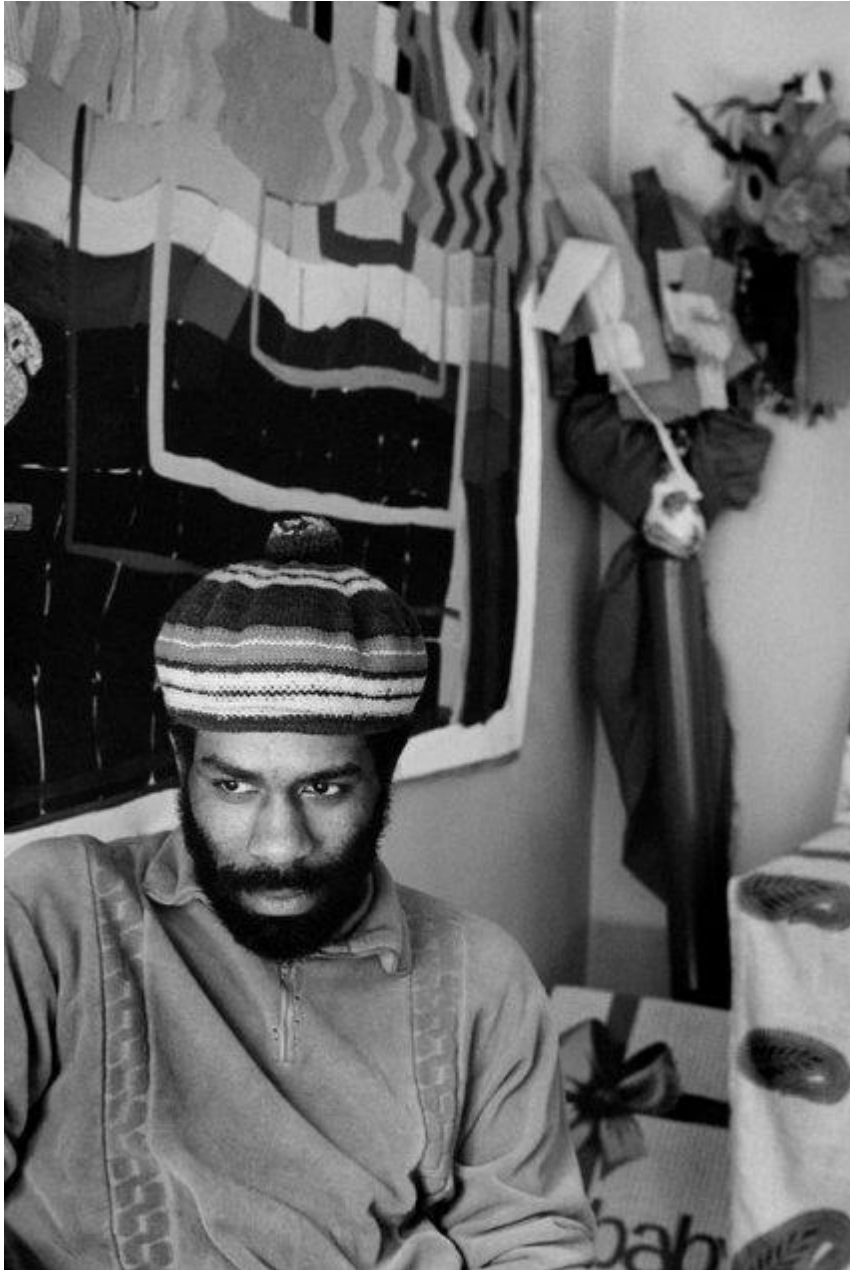


William Melvin Kelley, Who Explored Race in Experimental Novels, Is Dead at 79

By [William](#) Grimes FEB. 8, 2017



William Melvin Kelley in Paris in a 1968 photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson. Credit Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

William Melvin Kelley, who brought a fresh, experimental voice to black fiction in novels and stories that used recurring characters to explore race relations and racial identity in the United States, died on Feb. 1 in Manhattan. He was 79.

The cause was complications of kidney failure, his daughter Jessica Kelley said.

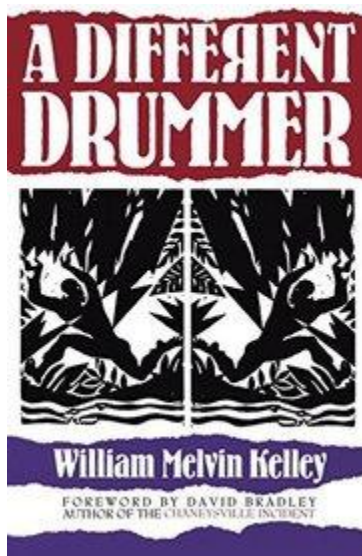
[Mr. Kelley](#) blended fantasy and fact to construct an alternative world whose sweep and complexity drew comparisons to James Joyce and William Faulkner. Minor characters in one story or novel might appear later as larger figures, their stories elaborated in greater detail — and, in his later fiction, in language that recalled the linguistic experimentation of Joyce’s “Finnegans Wake.”

Mr. Kelley’s fabulist bent was apparent in his first novel, “A Different Drummer,” published in 1962. Set in a mythical Southern state, it traced the fortunes of a black farmer, Tucker Caliban, who salts his land, shoots his horse and cow, burns down his house and heads north with his pregnant wife and their infant child, prompting an exodus of every black resident in the state.

The author’s hope for a peaceful resolution of America’s racial problems, reflected in his early writing, waned over time. After the assassination of Malcolm X in 1965, he took a more radical stance and a more experimental approach to fiction that culminated in his last novel, the dystopian fantasy “Dunfords Travels Everywheres” (1970).

In that book, a Harvard-educated black man, Chig Dunford, tours a mythical country where the apartheid system is based on clothing color. Along the way, he encounters an alter ego, the Harlem hustler Carlyle Bedlow, another of Mr. Kelley’s recurring characters, for whom Mr. Kelley invented a language blending Bantu, pidgin English and Harlem slang.

Photo



Mr. Kelley’s first novel, published in 1962, revealed his fabulist bent. Credit Anchor

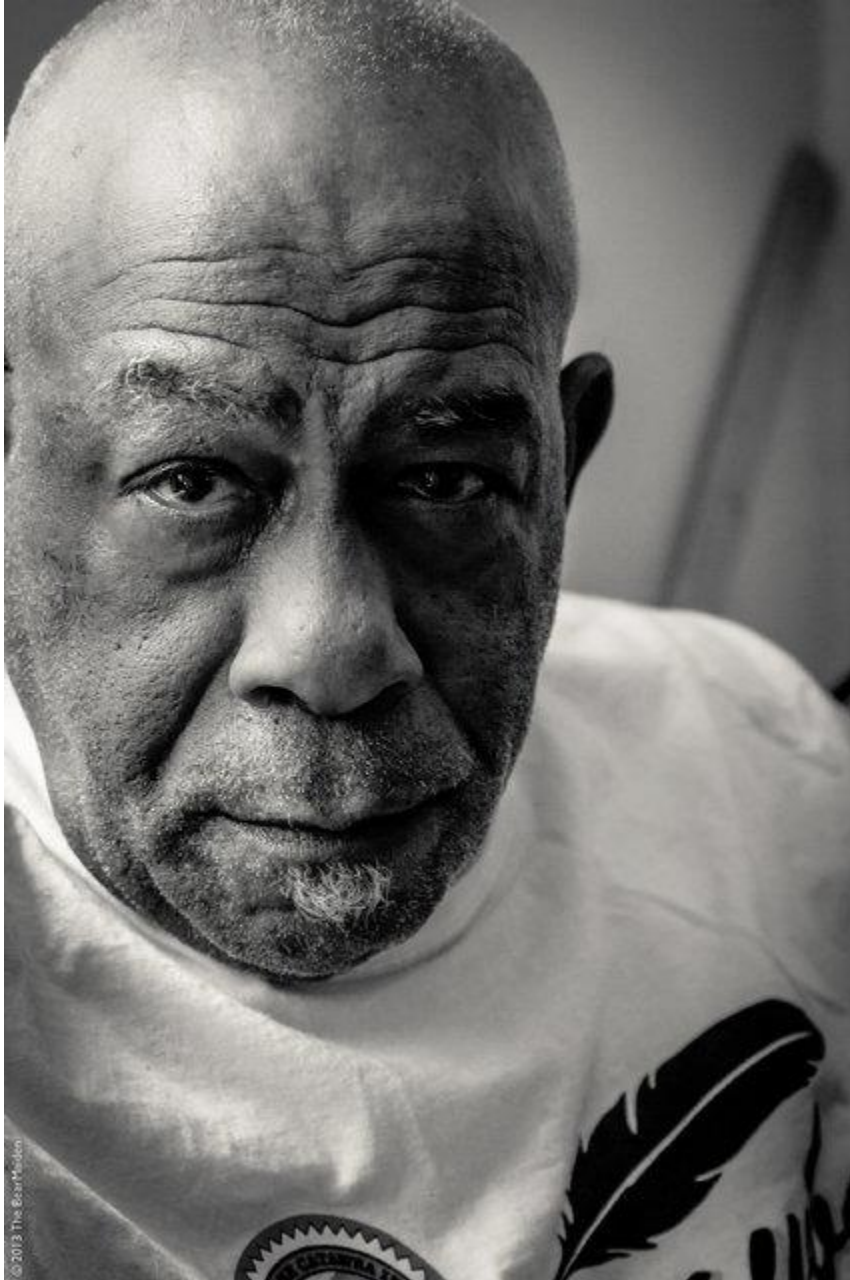
“Perhaps I’m trying to follow the Faulknerian pattern, although I guess it’s really Balzacian when you connect everything,” Mr. Kelley was quoted as saying in “Conversations” (1967), a collection of author interviews conducted by Roy Newquist. “I’d like to be 80 years old and look up at the shelf and see that all of my books are really one big book.”

William Melvin Kelley Jr. was born on Nov. 1, 1937, on Staten Island. His father, who had been the editor of The Amsterdam News in the 1920s and early ’30s, worked as a civil servant for New York City after a series of unsuccessful attempts to start his own newspaper. His mother, the former Narcissa Garcia, was a homemaker.

He grew up in a working-class area of the North Bronx, surrounded by Italian-Americans. After graduating from the private Fieldston School in Riverdale, he entered Harvard in 1956 (Harvard Class of 1960 – a member of Adams House) with the idea of becoming a civil rights lawyer. Instead, he switched to English, taking seminars in fiction with John Hawkes and Archibald MacLeish.

In his senior year, his short story “The Poker Game,” published in The Harvard Advocate, won the Dana Reed Prize, awarded for the best work of fiction in an undergraduate publication. He left school before graduating to concentrate on writing and in 1962 published “[A Different Drummer](#).” It was followed two years later by a short-story collection, “Dancers on the Shore,” which stamped his growing reputation as an original new voice in American fiction.

In 1962, Mr. Kelley married Karen Gibson, an art student at Sarah Lawrence College who later took the first name Aiki. She and his daughter Jessica survive him, as do another daughter, Cira Kelley; three grandchildren; and a great-grandson.



Mr. Kelley in 2012. Credit Jesi Kelley

Although racial politics suffused his fiction, Mr. Kelley resisted being categorized as a social commentator. “At this time, let me say for the record that I am not a sociologist or a politician or a spokesman,” he wrote in the introduction to “Dancers on the Shore.” “Such people try to give answers. A writer, I think, should ask questions. He should depict people, not symbols or ideas disguised as people.”

In “A Drop of Patience” (1965), Mr. Kelley told the story of a blind jazz musician, abandoned by his white mistress, who finds solace and meaning in music — his own country, separate and independent. The parable-like “Dem” (1967) — which begins “Lemme tellya how dem folks live” — took an absurdist premise for its journey into race relations.

In that book, a white woman gives birth to twins, one white and one black, after pursuing an affair with a black man out of boredom. Her husband, determined to find the second father, ventures into Harlem and discovers an unimagined new world.

After The Saturday Evening Post assigned him to cover the trial of the men accused of assassinating Malcolm X — the article was never published — Mr. Kelley became disillusioned with the American justice system and took his family to Paris. He later moved to Jamaica, before returning to the United States in 1977 and settling in Harlem. In 1989, he began teaching creative writing at Sarah Lawrence.

Mr. Kelley wrote, produced and starred in “Excavating Harlem in 2290,” an experimental film made with the video artist [Steve Bull](#) and released in 1988. His video diaries of Harlem were edited by Benjamin Oren Abrams into a short film, “[The Beauty That I Saw](#),” which was shown at the Harlem International Film Festival in 2015.