

PRESS RELEASE

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Gregory White Smith, Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author of *Jackson Pollock* and *Van Gogh: The Life*, Dies at 62



Gregory White Smith, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Jackson Pollock and the definitive biography of Vincent van Gogh, has died peacefully at his home in Aiken, South Carolina, which he shared with his partner of 40 years, Steven Naifeh. The cause of death was a rare brain tumor which Mr. Smith battled for almost four decades. He was 62.

In addition to writing 18 books with Mr. Naifeh, Mr. Smith was an accomplished musician, historic preservationist, art collector, philanthropist, attorney, and businessman who founded several companies including Best Lawyers® that spawned an entire industry of professional rankings.

His brain tumor, which was diagnosed in 1975, led to 13 brain surgeries as well as radiation and nuclear medicine treatments and experimental chemotherapeutic regimens. His search for cutting edge medical care was profiled on CBS's "60 Minutes" and recounted in his book *Making Miracles Happen*.

"He managed to pack four lifetimes into these past forty," says Dr. Lawrence Feinberg, Director of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art.

Jackson Pollock: An American Saga was published in 1990. The *Philadelphia Enquirer* called the book "Brilliant and definitive ... so absorbing in its narrative drive and so exhaustively detailed that it makes everything that came before seem like trial balloons." "Amazing," said the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "an extraordinarily riveting work, full of miraculous research." In addition to winning the Pulitzer Prize, the biography was a finalist for the National Book Award. It was also the basis for Ed Harris's Academy Award-winning film "Pollock" and served as the inspiration for John Updike's *Seek My Face*.

Van Gogh: The Life, which Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* called "magisterial", was published in 2011 with a companion website hosting over 6,000 pages of notes. The book stirred global controversy by debunking the widely accepted theory that Van Gogh committed suicide and arguing instead that village bullies shot him.

"As a tale of ambition, hard-fought fleeting triumphs and dark despair," said the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "it has the dramatic pull of a gripping nineteenth-century novel. ... [The] biography enriches the eye. Its insight and vast information vault readers into the work of Van Gogh and the artists of his

time. It deepens the experience of looking at art.” “A tour de force,” said the *Los Angeles Times*, a “sweepingly authoritative, astonishingly textured book.”

Gregory White Smith was born in 1951 in Ithaca, New York, to William R. and Kathryn White Smith, who owned a small chain of hotels. He was raised in Columbus, Ohio, where he attended the Columbus Academy. At age eight, Greg began dictating short novels into a Dictaphone his father used in business, which his mother transcribed. “They were only 25 or 30 pages long,” Mr. Smith said, “and the work of a child. But I was so thrilled that my mother typed them. There was my name at the top of the first page, ‘By Gregory White Smith.’”

Walking to school at that same early age, he would think of a sentence. Then, talking out loud, as he did for the rest of his life, he would try different ways to articulate the same thought, clarifying the idea and giving the words more character and force. It was the beginning of a lifelong love of and gift for words.



As editor of his high school newspaper, he once wrote an editorial about the French experience in Vietnam and its lessons for the United States. When the headmaster burned all of the copies of the paper, Mr. Smith called on the headmaster to resign. “Greg was already showing his fiercely combative spirit,” says Mr. Naifeh, “the same spirit that would get him through a lifelong battle against a terrible disease and unending pain.”

Mr. Smith graduated summa cum laude from Colby College in Waterville, Maine, where he earned a Watson Fellowship that made it possible for him to spend a year studying early music in Europe and the former Soviet Union.

Mr. Smith went on to Harvard where he earned his law degree and an M.A. in Education. It was at Harvard that he met his life partner Steven Naifeh and where he became the Assistant Conductor of the Harvard Glee Club. In that capacity he helped prepare choruses and sang for a parade of luminaries of twentieth century music – Leonard Bernstein, Mstislav Rostropovich, Seiji Ozawa, Sarah Caldwell, and Michael Tilson Thomas. He had many of the most thrilling experiences of his life in the Glee Club and met many of his closest lifelong friends.

Working briefly for the law firm Morrison & Foerster in San Francisco, Mr. Smith became an editor at the Free Press, where he published the *Encyclopedia of Crime and Justice*. It was at this time that he began his extraordinarily productive career as a writer with Mr. Naifeh. The partnership resulted, not only in the two definitive biographies of Pollock and Van Gogh, but also in 16 other books – with five *New York Times* bestsellers – including *The Mormon Murders*. Their book *Final Justice* was a finalist for the Edgar Allan Poe Award in Fact Crime. Mr. Smith also wrote two television series, one on the history of the Supreme Court for PBS with Archibald Cox and one on human behavior for NBC with Phil Donahue.

Mr. Smith's early book *The Best Lawyers in America*, a peer-review list that was first published in 1983, went on to become Best Lawyers®, a global network linking lawyers and clients. *Best Lawyers* now ranks 74,965 lawyers representing 18,034 law firms in 75 countries.

Recently, the company partnered with U.S. News to produce rankings of law firms and in 2014 it gave out 61,138 rankings to 11,681 law firms in 120 practice areas.

In 1975, a few months after beginning Harvard Law School, Mr. Smith began experiencing unexplained skeletal pain. After six months of clinical investigation, he was diagnosed with a hemangiopericytoma, a tumor so rare it landed him on the cover of the *New England Journal of Medicine*. Uncertain that he could survive the disease – in 1987, he was given three months to live – Mr. Smith, together with Mr. Naifeh, spent the rest of his life finding doctors around the world who could perform operations or improvise treatments to keep him alive long enough for the next lifesaving treatment to emerge.

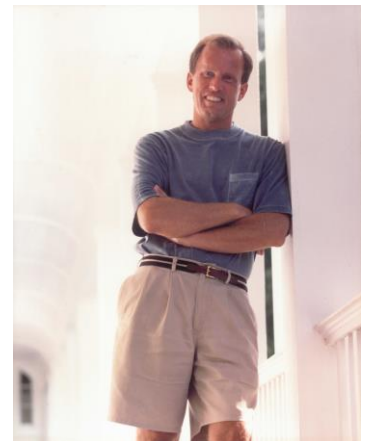
In 1997, Mr. Smith told his story, as well as those of other patients conquering critical illnesses, in the book *Making Miracles Happen*. With Mr. Naifeh, he also founded Best Doctors, a company dedicated to helping others with undiagnosed or seemingly untreatable medical illnesses find the best medicine anywhere in the world.

Mr. Smith's own survival and the company he founded were featured on a segment of CBS's "60 Minutes" in 1997. He was asked by Morley Safer, "Everyone must ask the question when given what appears to be a death sentence, 'Why me?'"

Mr. Smith answered, "I've been very, very lucky in my life. I had a great family – have a great family. I have Steve. I've been endowed with some talents. I've had a chance to write a book that I'm very proud of. I have great friends. And never once in all those things, I never once said, 'Why?' So how can I demand from the universe some sort of rationale for the bad that I've never demanded for the good?"

In 1989, Mr. Smith and Mr. Naifeh moved to Aiken, South Carolina, to restore the historic Whitney-Vanderbilt house, Joye Cottage, a creation of both Stanford White and Carrère and Hastings. Mr. Smith, who revised the Historic Preservation Ordinance for the town of Aiken, and served for a decade as its Commission Chairman, spent two decades with Mr. Naifeh restoring the estate. The story of that renovation is told in their book, *On a Street Called Easy, In a Cottage Called Joye*. They are leaving the house to the Julliard School as a residence for artists in music, drama, and dance.

As a child, Mr. Smith also dreamt of becoming an architect and his childhood drawings were so imaginative and graceful that they were included in an exhibition of child architecture at Rutgers University. He dedicated his final two years to the space in Joye Cottage that a later generation of the Whitney family had used to create a ballroom, detailing it with a Beaux-Arts vocabulary drawn from the Carrère and Hastings



additions. And most unexpectedly, he created an expansive modernist space underneath the house, using a Miesian idiom, for an art library, gallery, and other rooms to accommodate its future role as a retreat for Juilliard artists.

Five years ago, with Dr. Sandra Field, Mr. Smith co-founded the Juilliard-in-Aiken Festival, an annual arts festival in partnership with the Juilliard School. The Festival has an ambitious outreach program that has already brought Juilliard artists together with more than 17,000 schoolchildren in South Carolina and Georgia. This year, the Festival culminated in an early-music performance of Bach's St. Matthew Passion that was presented not only in Aiken but in Spivey Hall in Atlanta and Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center. James R. Oestreich raved in the *New York Times* that the performance contained "flashes of brilliance, all right. But what made the event so deeply satisfying was mainly the consistent excellence of all its parts."

Mr. Smith and Mr. Naifeh have also assembled a highly-regarded collection of nineteenth-century art. Many of the works with special meaning to Vincent van Gogh have been promised to a major European museum, a bequest to be announced later this year. "Spending 40 years together," says Mr. Naifeh, "we came to see with the same eye. We could look through a book with a hundred illustrations and know precisely which work of art would most excite the other."

"In fact, Greg once said, 'Every time we argue, it catches me by surprise that we're not the same person.'"

Mr. Naifeh adds, "It took enormous grit and determination to stage this heroic ongoing battle against his brain tumor. Yet it never robbed him of his passion for life. Or his sweetness. He was so unassuming about his intellectual gifts, so guileless, that he had an extraordinary capacity to help people understand how special they were in their own ways. During the past three months of pneumonia and seizures and medically-induced comas, so many people, from all walks of life, have told me that no one ever made them feel as good about themselves as Greg did. God knows, he did that for me for 40 years."

Mr. Smith received honorary doctorates from the Juilliard School, the University of South Carolina Aiken, and Colby College.

Mr. Smith and his partner of 40 years Steven Naifeh were married in City Hall in New York in 2011. He also leaves his mother-in-law Marion Naifeh, his sister Linda Hirata, his cousin Robert Rich, and a niece and two nephews, Emma, William, and Matthew Chaiken.

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For *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* Reviews, please [click here](#).

For *Van Gogh: The Life* Reviews, please [click here](#).

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