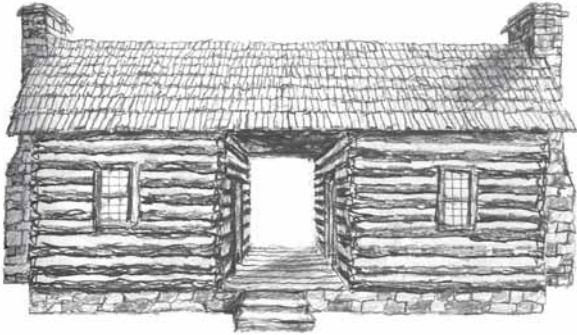


Donald Harington and
His Stay More Novels:
A Celebration of 35 Years



by
Bob Razer

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Cover illustration: Jacob Ingledew's "dogtrot house" by Donald Harington. Reproduced from The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks.

Introduction

The year 2005 marked the 35th anniversary of the publication of *Lightning Bug*, the first of Donald Harington's novels set in the mythical town of Stay More, Newton County, Arkansas. To mark that anniversary, the University of Arkansas Libraries Special Collections Department held a "Stay More Celebration" on December 2, 2005. Bob Razer, a veteran librarian at the Central Arkansas Library System in Little Rock and an authority on Arkansas literature, gave the keynote address at the celebration. His remarks, which are published here for the first time, provide us with an outstanding statement on Harington's life and work.

The Special Collections Department is pleased to publish Razer's presentation, for we believe that Donald Harington's work is of great literary and cultural value to America, to Arkansas—and to the Ozarks region in particular. We are also pleased to append a detailed bibliography of Harington's works—as well as a selected listing of writings about Harington and his novels.

We hope this booklet will not only help familiarize more Arkansans with Don and his work, but that it will encourage more people to read books by residents of our state. Arkansas has a rich literary tradition, but it is not well known to our citizens. We invite you to read this booklet and in so doing introduce yourself to one of America's greatest contemporary writers.

Tom W. Dillard
Head of Special Collections



Donald Harington, ca. 1942.

Courtesy of *Donald Harington*

Biography

Donald Harington, Distinguished Professor of Art at the University of Arkansas, began teaching at the University in 1986. Before that he was a member of the art history faculties at Windham College in Putney, Vermont, and Bennett College in Millbrook, New York. He has also been a Visiting Professor at South Dakota State University, University of Pittsburgh, and University of Missouri–Rolla. He has received numerous awards, including:

Robert Penn Warren Award for Fiction (2003)

from the Fellowship of Southern Writers

Award of Merit (1995)

from the American Association for State and Local History

Distinguished Teaching Award (1992)

from the University of Arkansas Alumni Association

Porter Prize for Literary Excellence (1987)

from WORDS: the Arkansas Literary Society

Harington's education includes a B. A. in Art from the University of Arkansas (1956), M.F.A. degree in Printmaking from the University of Arkansas (1958), M. A. degree in Art History from Boston University (1959), and from Harvard University, ABD (Art History), 1960.

Harington has also received numerous fellowships, including a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Writing (1979), Yaddo Fellowships (1970 and 1979), and a Rockefeller Foundation Fellowship (1966-1967).

Donald Harington was born December 22, 1935, in Little Rock. He and his wife, Kim McClish Harington, live in Fayetteville.

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“Good of you to drop by again. Pull you up a chair, sit on your fist, and lean back on your thumb – but I can see you’re already seated.”

So opens Donald Harington’s novel *Butterfly Weed*. It’s an invitation to sit for a visit. It could also serve as a greeting at a family reunion of sorts, where a multigenerational gathering comes to celebrate the novels set in the community of Stay More and to honor Donald Harington, the man who wrote these remarkable books. Some of the Stay More family that gather—appreciative readers—attend such a reunion in body. Others in attendance—the Ingledews, Coes, Swains, Dinsmores, Chisms, Latha, Diana, Day, and so many other Stay More residents—attend in spirit. Dawny has a foot in both camps.

This year marks the 35th anniversary of the publication of the first Stay More novel, *Lightning Bug*. Published in 1970, this book proved to be the beginning of a marvelous journey, though it is hard to believe *Lightning Bug* appeared that long ago.

I am at an age now where increasingly my youth is other people’s history. To paraphrase Lloyd Bentson’s comment to

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Dan Quayle: “I knew 1970.”

I was a college student in 1970, a wonderful time for receiving an “education.” Some of my education even came in the classroom. It was an interesting era. While the music of the Grateful Dead is still very much with us, Jerry Garcia, the band’s leader, is not, except for his ties. My political memorabilia collection from those years includes several “McGovern for President” buttons, as well as one “Don’t Blame Me I Voted for McGovern” button. Given my political philosophy, I seem to have collected way too many of those “don’t blame me” buttons over the years.

So while we celebrate the publication of the first Stay More novel, we are really celebrating far more than that one Stay More book. We celebrate them all as we honor their creator. From 1970 to 2005 (so far)—from *Lightning Bug* to *The Pitcher Shower*—we immigrants to Stay More (Stay Moron wannabes) have been enthralled, beguiled, enchanted, entertained, and seduced by these books.

It is a daunting assignment for any Moron to reflect on these books on behalf of their many fans. But I’m a big Moron. Interpret that as you wish.

The Stay More novels are the pinnacle of Arkansas literature to me, but they also are very personal books for readers. We each have our reasons why these books mean so much to us. I can only comment on why the books are important to Arkansas literature and mention some of the reasons the books appeal to me personally. Maybe some of my reasons are other readers’ reasons as well.

There are many factors that explain why the Stay More works are important to Arkansas literature. First, individually

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the books are enjoyable on a number of different levels. A reader can know nothing about Arkansas, its history or folkways, and still enjoy the Stay More novels simply because they each tell a good story. Harington is foremost a storyteller and a very good one. That's the initial level of enjoyment: appreciating a good story. Some

clever readers might think of Kafka or Nabokov when reading certain Stay More novels and that would be permissible.

The more a reader knows about Arkansas, however, the deeper appreciation they will have for these books. Readers with knowledge of Arkansas history, folklore, Ozark mountain speech, and mountain folkways in general smile knowingly as they read these books and as they catch factual details scattered throughout each volume. Harington's fiction is grounded in nonfiction and in the work of Vance Randolph, Mary Parler, and other Ozark folklorists. He also draws from his own memory of summers spent in the hills.

At times, Harington uses real historical figures by name, while in other instances readers have to know their Arkansas

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history to catch a reference when names—but not history—have been changed. A second level of enjoyment: a reader can identify the Arkansas bits in the story and realize that the book is grounded in research so as to be truthful, even though it's a novel.

Closely associated with this level of enjoyment is the reader's realization that much has been learned about the way of life in the Ozarks before "progress" arrived. I will admit that my introduction to Arkansas' vernacular architecture came thanks to a Harington novel, even though at first glance that novel's title sounded like a textbook.

I am a firm believer that sometimes fiction can relate history better than non-fiction. Many of the Stay More books do that.

For instance, Harington's novel *When Angels Rest* won the Arkansas Library Association's Arkansiana Award for Fiction, an award that is presented for a novel that best depicts the social and cultural history of Arkansas and its people. A book doesn't win that award just because it has a good plot. It is an award that is rarely given, in fact. *When Angels Rest* provided insight into how World War II affected the everyday lives of people in even the most remote of rural communities in Arkansas. Decades ago, Arkansawyers far removed from the main roadways really did see movies thanks to traveling "pitcher shower" men, though I doubt most of those midsummer nights of entertainment were as puckish as those Harington describes in his most recent book.

Finally, we come to the deepest level of enjoyment and

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appreciation of the Stay More books. It's more like a worshipful devotion to the Holy Writ really, rather than simple "appreciation." Here we find readers who are card-carrying Stay Morons. You know who you are. These people have read all the Stay More books—some of them more than once. Not only do these readers recognize and understand all the Arkansas related bits, they realize the meaningfulness of comments offhandedly tossed by the author to the alert reader who might be able to catch them. That little reference there



Donald Harington views the PowerPoint presentation created for the event.

Photo by Tim Nutt

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was part of the plot of an earlier book. This paragraph here proved to be its own book a few years after this one was published.

It's surprising what epiphanies occur rereading Stay More books years later. Readers likely will notice meaningful details and references to events that they totally missed during their initial reading.

This new-found recognition is partly due to the fact that the sequence of books and their publication dates don't follow a straight chronological order of events in the telling of the Stay More saga. Readers come to realize that the Stay More novels tell just one story really—the story of the town and its people. But the tale is divided into many books, and the telling of it jumps hither and yon through time.

So there are some reasons the Stay More books are memorable and occupy such a special place in Arkansas literature. They tell a good story. They teach so much about Arkansas history and folkways—to the knowing and unknowing alike. They are enjoyable on a number of different levels—the more you know about Arkansas' heritage, the more you enjoy these trips to Stay More.

There are additional reasons why the books appeal particularly to me. I have a background in the social sciences with decades spent as a librarian, historian, and Arkansas literature bibliophile. I have even more experience as a political junkie.

At the tender age of seven, I believed that Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver should be the 1956 Democratic

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nominee for president because Kefauver supporters wore coonskin caps at the Democrats' nominating convention, an event I watched diligently on television. During the mid-1950s, such gentleman's millinery attire immediately brought to mind Davy Crockett to seven-year-old boys, thanks to Walt Disney and his Wonderful World of Color. I really liked Davy Crockett (also known as Fess Parker, according to Mr. Disney's television credits). I assumed that Senator Kefauver must have some sort of inside connection with Davy because of those hats, so therefore he'd make a swell president according to my political analysis of the situation.

My family no doubt thought, "what's wrong with that boy?" since they were Eisenhower voters, though they got great enjoyment out of listening to me pronounce



Stay More's own Latha Bourne, portrayed by Abbey Molyneux, with her creator Donald Harington.

Photo by Tim Nutt

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“Estes Kefauver” as I tried to convince them of his presidential worthiness. Years later, when I enthusiastically championed George McGovern’s campaign for the White House, I’m sure there was a bit of “I always knew that boy wasn’t right” among my relatives.

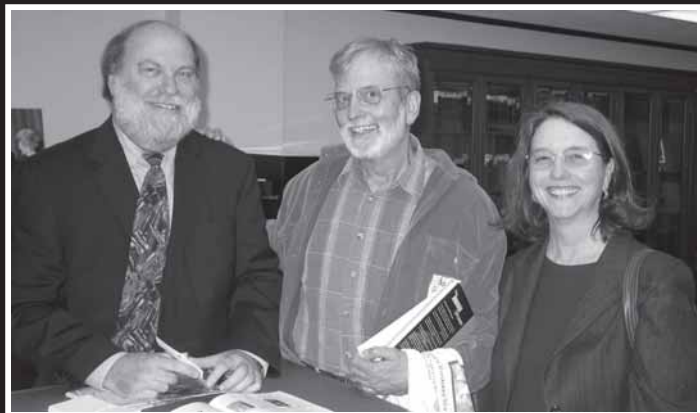
Today, those varied interests of mine as they apply to Arkansas make me a student of Arkansas studies, though such fancy phrases didn’t exist in my college days. It is easy to see why the Stay More stories would appeal to someone with my interests. But there is other subject material, besides those fields I’ve mentioned, to be learned from the pages of the Stay More books—particularly medical knowledge.

Why is there not a telethon to fund research to find a cure for the frakes? This illness has plagued Stay Morons for far too long. A 5K run to publicize this distress might be considered bad taste given the nature of the disease, but how much energy would a telethon take? “Donate and Help Donald’s Kids” would be sure to raise the big bucks.

Stay More is afflicted with other medical problems, as well, including one that has affected untold thousands. Why, I myself have been struck many times by the “fatty goo” (the pronunciation of “fatigue,” should you not remember Doc Swain’s health class where this medical malady was discussed). After a hard day’s work, sometimes all a body can say is, “boy, am I fatty-goo’ed.”

A lot of attention has been focused lately on the Cache River Wildlife Refuge and the rediscovery of the ivory-billed woodpecker, and rightly so. But I do think the butterfly weed

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Bob Razer, Bob Besom, and Jeannie Whyne.

Photo by Tim Nutt

two-pecker is a memorable sighting, too, and deserves some attention. I'm pretty sure a two-pecker sighting is darn rare! Plus, the butterfly weed two-pecker gives a whole new meaning to "wildlife refuge" as a habitat.

Surely a habitat where two-peckers could prosper is worthy of protection? Seems to me, such a place could become a national park, maybe, and a state park for sure. "Aren't you glad we got 'em" would have even more meaning than just as a slogan for our state parks if two-peckers were part of the picture. I can't even imagine the boom this would mean for Arkansas tourism.

I'm sure everyone remembers his or her first time. Now, I refer to the first time a Stay More novel was read by a person new to Harington's works. Some might have thought

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about another “first time” in their personal history and that sort of thinking about jemmisons, twitchits, and goings over the mountain is probably why those sorts of people are Stay Morons.

My first Harington was *Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*—partially read in an intensive care waiting room in a Houston hospital. Back in the mid-1970s heart bypass surgery wasn’t as common as it is today. As a result, my father was referred to Denton Cooley in Houston for surgery. Waiting in Houston through several days of tests, the surgery, and the recuperation period before my father could be flown back to Little Rock, meant I’d need several books to read on that trip. *Architecture* was to be one of them. No one told me it was hilariously funny.

For instance, there is the account of Virdie Boatright’s recruiting technique on behalf of the Confederate States of America. Virdie’s approach to “raising troops” (no pun intended) might have been called prostitution, but instead of monetary payment for her services, she signed up “volunteers” for the C.S.A. when her “recruitment activities” ceased. Jacob Ingledeew, husband of Sarah, was both mayor of Stay More and a Union man. He felt compelled to speak to Virdie about her work.

Upon entering Virdie’s recruitment office—her Conestoga wagon—Jacob is “overcome” (so to speak) as Virdie “recruits” him on the spot for the southern cause. Afterward, learning that Jacob was the town’s mayor, Virdie recruits him again, having never recruited a mayor before. It was during

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this second “recruitment session” that the following occurred:

Virddie cried out, a long low groan, but she didn't stop and Jacob realized that if she kept on going like that he might very well cry out himself. But just then a voice outside the wagon called 'JAKE! AIR YE IN THAR?' And he knew it was Sarah. 'ANSWER ME' she requested, so he did. "Yeah, I'm in here but I'll be right out." He was bucking beneath the weight of Virddie in an effort to finish. 'WHAT 'RE YE DOIN' IN THAR, JAKE?' Sarah wanted to know. "I'm havin' words" – he panted – "with this here rebel foe." He was nearly there, though he realized the wagon must be visibly shaking. Virddie suddenly stuffed her dress into her mouth but it was not enough to keep another one of her long groans from coming out. 'JAKE!' Sarah hollered. 'YOU AIN'T A'HURTIN' HER AIR YE?' "Jist a little," he answered, "to teach her a lesson." And then he got there, rapturously, reflecting, GODALMIGHTY, IF I COULD GIT THIS REG'LAR, MAYBE I'D JINE THE REBELS AFTERALL.

No, definitely, this was not recommended reading material for an intensive care waiting room filled with anxious relatives. And on surgery morning, while reading passages such as that, I was forced to abandon my mother and sister there in the waiting room as I was struck a couple of times with a sudden “coughing” attack that required an immediate (and very rapid)

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Barbara Taylor signs the commemorative tee shirt created for the 35th anniversary of the first Stay More novel.

Photo by Tim Nutt

exit to the hallway—way down the hallway. Even requiring a trip outside of the hospital once. After the second “coughing” attack, I switched to reading *National Geographic*.

That next Christmas, my entire family got copies of *Architecture*. The waiting room story and the book that led to it have a place in our family history in the chapter dealing with “funny things that happened.”

In later years, whenever I’d see the bumper stickers that said “WWJD” I knew they must mean “what would Jacob Ingledew do?” And I would think of the Virdie Boatright episode, and I decided Jacob Ingledew was a good role model

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for me.

So, I like the humor of the Stay More books. It's much more difficult in my view to write a book that is funny than it is just to write a book. Not all of the Stay More novels are humorous, of course. A couple of them, in fact, are grim. Much like life—laughter and sadness, too.

Harington's books not only have actual historical figures in them but also on occasion include contemporary "real" people. In *Thirteen Albatrosses*—the most political of Harington's novels—Bob Razer, a reference librarian in Little Rock, makes his first appearance on page 122. Razer—the fictional one—is described as a "splendid fellow" who readily agrees to assist Vernon Ingledeu's campaign for governor of Arkansas since Razer, to quote Harington, "was a major fan of Harington's fictions." This revelation being further evidence that Harington's novels are grounded in fact.

Yes, it's quite the honor to be a character in a Stay More novel. True, for a number of months following publication of *Thirteen Albatrosses* when in the company of fellow Stay Morons, or other literati, I rather often said "Hi, I'm Bob Razer, page 122, 'splendid fellow.'" I tried to stay humble, though.

I thought it was a bit of typecasting, actually. Not the librarian part, but the fact that Bob Razer—the fictional one—became an opposition research man for Vernon. An "oppo man" is a person who looks for dirt on the other candidates. I can see me doing that. It's a fine line separating opp research and "spin" from Nixonian dirty tricks and lies. And it's not a straight line either—the path resembling more a certain pig

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trail as this fine line winds its way through the ethical mine field of today's slash-and-burn politics.

Fortunately, so far, Bob Razer—both of them—has managed to escape grand jury indictment for past political activities. Harington explained in the acknowledgments of *Thirteen Albatrosses* that his publisher required “character releases” from the “real” people portrayed in the book, an action which Harington explained suggested to some of these “real people” that “I have requested them to relinquish their character, if they possessed any to begin with.” I don't think my role required any—and it's so much easier that way.

Another reason I like Harington's books relates to the writing techniques he employs, two in particular. One is that



Bob Razer, *left*, waits to address the crowd.

Photo by Molly Boyd

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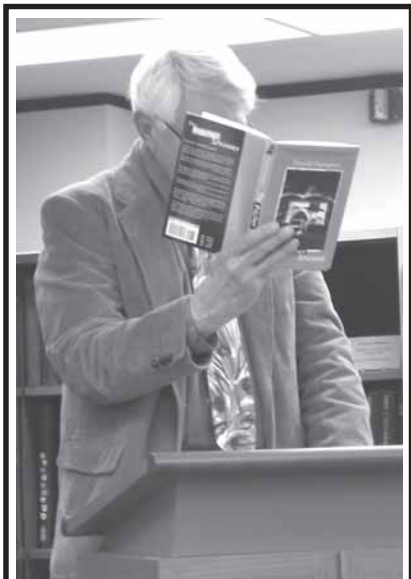
the opening sentence of a book frequently grabs you from the get-go. In addition to the opening of *Butterfly Weed*, there are other examples of this initial sentence appeal.

From *The Choring of the Trees*: “At sundown, when they led him to the chair, Nail Chism began to understand the meaning of the name of his home town, Stay More.” Readers soon learn that the chair in question is the state pen’s “Old

Sparky” and that Chism is about to be executed. He is not, though, and the whys behind that make for a memorable book.

From *Thirteen Albatrosses*: “You’ve never heard of Vernon Ingledew unless you’ve read a book by the name of *The Architecture of the Arkansas Ozarks*, but that’s not essential.” Surely the opening line of *Huckleberry Finn* comes to mind?

Then there are the two best opening lines in all of Arkansas literature. *Architecture*’s brief and to the point: “We begin



Donald Harington reads from *The Pitcher Shower*.

Photo by Tim Nutt

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with an ending: the last arciform architecture in the Arkansas Ozarks.”

And the Faulknerian-length opening sentence to *Lightning Bug*: “It begins with this sound: the screen door pushed outward in a slow swing, the spring on the screen door stretching vibrantly, one sprung tone and fading overtone high-pitched even against the bug-noises and frog-noises, a plangent twang, WRIRRRRAANG, which, more than any other sound, more than cowbells or distant truck motors laboring uphill, more, even, than all those overworked katydid, crickets, tree frogs, etc., seems to evoke the heart of summer, of summer evenings, of summer evenings there in that place, seems to make it easy for me to begin this one.”

How ironic that the first Stay More novel—*Lightning Bug*—opens with a section titled “Beginning” and with a first line that starts “it begins with this sound.” And thirty-five years later, author and readers are still going.

And that’s the second writing technique I want to mention: the books never really end. In the

It’s surprising what epiphanies occur rereading Stay More books years later. Readers likely will notice meaningful details and references to events that they totally missed during their initial reading.

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last chapter, Harington's narrative changes to the future tense as the author relates to readers what will happen to the book's characters after there are no more words to read. So the books stop with a "to be continued" really, rather than with a "the end." This is a good thing, for there is nothing that makes a reader sadder than to turn the last page of a book they love. At least Harington tries to let readers down gently with an unspoken promise of more to come, farther along, as readers continue their visits to an unforgettable place.

Once upon a time, there was a writer in a neighboring state who wrote books about his "little postage stamp of native soil." He said he would never exhaust it, no matter how many books he wrote. That feller produced a fine crop of novels. But we Arkansawyers know that there is a mighty rich piece of land up in the Ozarks, over in Newton County, halfway between Jasper and your imagination. Stay Morons—humble though we may be—will put the tiller of that Ozark patch and his crop of novels up against that other feller and his crop any time.

Splendid Fellow will end as he began, with Harington's own words:

Doc Swain says:

"You'uns be good now, hear?"

"Don't be rushin' off, Doc" Nail says formally, in the code of the backwoods politeness, "Stay more and spend the night with us."

"I'd shore lak to, but I better be gettin' on down home. You'uns come go home with me."

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“Better not, I reckon,” Nail says. “Stay and have supper with us.”

“Cain’t do it, this time.” Doc says.

Viridis listens in wonder as the two men invite and counterinvite each other until finally Nail says, “Wal, come back when ye kin stay longer.”

And Splendid Fellow will think—as he always thinks when he visits the pages of a certain Newton County community—that if his own self were ever offered such an invite, he would be bodacious and commit a social faux pas with his reply:

“Wal, shore, I’d be rite happy to sit with ye fur a long spell. Ain’t nothin’ pleasures a body more’n a long visit in Stay More. Thank ye, kindly.”

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Donald Harington quizzes the audience to see who is the biggest “Stay Moron,” with the winner receiving a copy of *The Pitcher Shower*.

Photo by Molly Boyd



The audience recites the Stay Moron's Oath, as administered by Donald Harington.

Photos by Molly Boyd and Tim Nutt

The Stay Moron's Oath

Do you solemnly swear that country life is not only more peaceful than city life but more likely to last into contented old age?

That strictly speaking, a “moron” is simply a person preferring to keep to the age span between seven and twelve years?

That it is possible to remain this age for all of one's long life?

That this is a good age for the hearing or reading of stories?

That a good story is the sweetest way to escape from the ordinary life?

That nothing is to be gained by leaving, that the greatest of all decisions is staying?

That “more” means until you're good and ready to leave, at least not before supper and ideally not before breakfast.

Then I, with the authority vested in me by The Grand Architect of the Universe, do hereby pronounce you citizens of Stay More, with all the rights and privileges and pleasures pertaining thereto.

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