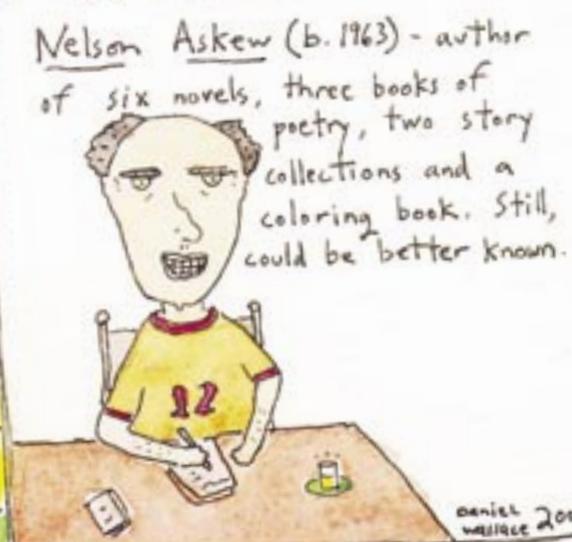


# FIRST DRAFT

## LESSER-KNOWN ALABAMA WRITERS



Leddy Bellweather (b. 1951)  
Prolific writer of novels with cats in them. Not very well known.

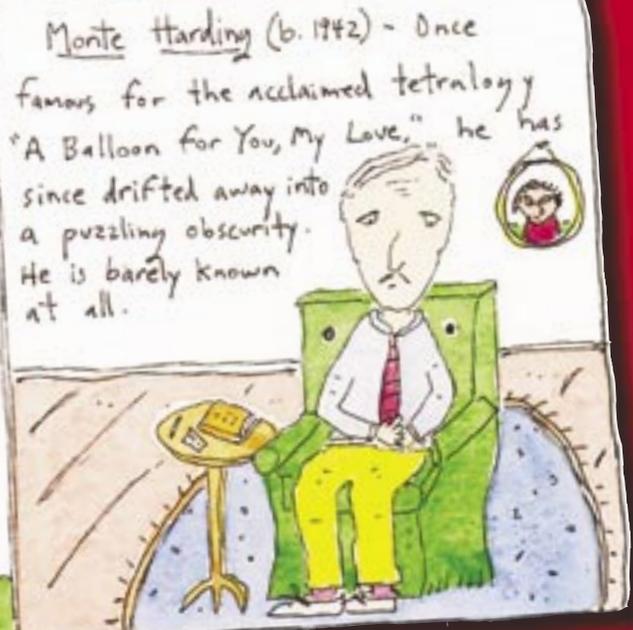


Nelson Askew (b. 1963) - author of six novels, three books of poetry, two story collections and a coloring book. Still, could be better known.

Daniel Wallace 2003



Gwendolyn Tyler (b. 1930?)  
Publicity-shy, and a total shot-in, Tyler is still the best-known lesser-known writer in Alabama.



Monte Harding (b. 1942) - Once famous for the acclaimed tetralogy "A Balloon for You, My Love," he has since drifted away into a puzzling obscurity. He is barely known at all.

FY 04

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## From the Executive Director The Alabama Writers' Forum

*A partnership program of the  
Alabama State Council on the Arts*



Jeanie Thompson

### *Doing the Work of Writing*

You will be reading this message from me after the Amendment One vote, after the fall Special Session of the Alabama Legislature to craft our state budgets, after the 2003 football season is halfway gone. Sena Jeter Naslund will have made her Alabama tour for *Four Spirits*, her novel about the world-changing events in 1963 in her home state. Homer Hickam will have delighted us at the Center for the Book Gala dinner with his novel *The Keeper's Son*. Rick Bragg will be well into the drafting of his story of Private Jessica Lynch.

A young boy in an alternative school in the Mississippi Delta town of Greenville will be learning about creative writing – his teacher will use a curriculum guide first developed in “Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program” of the Alabama Writers' Forum. The boy will hear a poem that will sound better to him than the CD in his backpack, or he'll read a story that will thrill him to his bones, and he'll write down the rage that he carries. He'll look at what he's written and perhaps a smile will creep across his face. He'll feel a power—the power of words, his *own* words.

A young girl at the Sequoya School in Chalkville, Alabama, will be learning to articulate her life, with the help of teaching writer Priscilla Hancock Cooper. She will read Alice Walker's *Letter to God* and decide there's a letter she has to write. She will begin to do her work, and the rest of the brutal world may disappear, even if just for an hour.

If you are a writer in Alabama, I believe that you are doing your work. Your memoir, your story, your poem is cooking on a slow burner, and you'll stir it from time to time. If you are a playwright, you are imagining your character speaking to me as I sit in the audience of one of the greatest theaters in the world, the Alabama Shakespeare Theater. Perhaps your play is in production as part of the Southern Writers' Project.

If you are a screenwriter, you will be dreaming of the way the camera will hold and unfold your images.

To paraphrase a famous line from the Broadway musical, *A Chorus Line*, “A writer writes.” We are all doing the work of writing. It is slow, painful, exhilarating, and real. If the Alabama Writers' Forum has adequate funding this year, then we can all say, *Hallelujah!* If times are tight, we will ask and we will receive, though we may not know from whom, when, or where.

No matter what, we will do the work.

I salute you this fall as *you* do the work, as you keep the faith for the arts, as you celebrate Alabama, a state of many, many surprises and beauty beyond belief.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeanie Thompson".

Jeanie Thompson  
Executive Director

The Alabama Writers' Forum is generously funded by the Alabama State Council on the Arts, with additional funding from the Children's Trust Fund of Alabama and corporate, institutional, and individual associates.

Cover: “*Lesser-Known Alabama Writers*,” Daniel Wallace. In addition to being a writer, Wallace is also a graphic artist and cartoonist.

## ACFTB Celebrates

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KATIE LAMAR SMITH



Nancy Anderson (left), special guest Homer Hickam, and Jacqueline Trimble at ACFTB author dinner

New York Times best-selling author **Homer Hickam** was the guest of honor at the 2003 Alabama Center for the Book Gala Author

Dinner. The event also celebrated the world premiere in Montgomery of Hickam's new novel, *The Keeper's Son*. The Center for the Book's Telling Alabama's Stories festival featured **Kathryn Tucker Windham**, artist **Charlie Lucas**, and more than a dozen other tellers and writers in a day-long celebration of the spoken word. With its partners—including the Alabama Writers' Forum, the Alabama

STEVE GRAUBERGER



Kathryn Tucker Windham and Charlie Lucas at Telling Alabama's Stories

Public Library Service, the Alabama State Council on the Arts, the Alabama Department of Tourism and Travel, Old Alabama Town, Troy State University Montgomery, Capitol Book & News, and Alabama Power Company—the ACFTB hosts an author dinner and storytelling festival to highlight books and reading on the last weekend in September. Guest author for the 2004 dinner will be announced soon.

## Alabama Writers' Forum Welcomes New Board Members

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Three new members have joined the AWF board. **Judge Sharon Gilbert Yates** is a graduate of the University of Alabama School of Law and served in Alabama and Washington, D.C., before being elected to the bench in 1992. She is the first woman to sit on the Alabama Court of Civil Appeals. Judge Yates also serves on the board of directors for the Alabama Lawyers for Children and Child Protect, Inc. She is vice-chair of the Alabama Supreme Court's Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee and is a member of the Family Preservation Court Improvement Project. Former Alabama Department of Youth Services CEO **James Dupree, Jr.**, is now a consultant on criminal justice matters and management professor at the University of Alabama graduate school of social work. He is also a partner in TMS Consulting, LLC, a Montgomery-based consulting firm specializing in youth services and children's issues. **Sheldon Burton Webster** is a certified public accountant and executive vice-president of Borland, Benefield, Crawford and Webster, CPAs. He also serves as chairman of BKR International, an accounting and business-consulting affiliation based in New York. Webster is a mountaineer, sailor, and conservationist. He has published three books, including the latest, *House of Sugar, Bay of Pigs—CIA/Mafia Assassination Conspiracies*. AWF warmly welcomes these new members.

Vol. 10 No. 1  
FALL 2003

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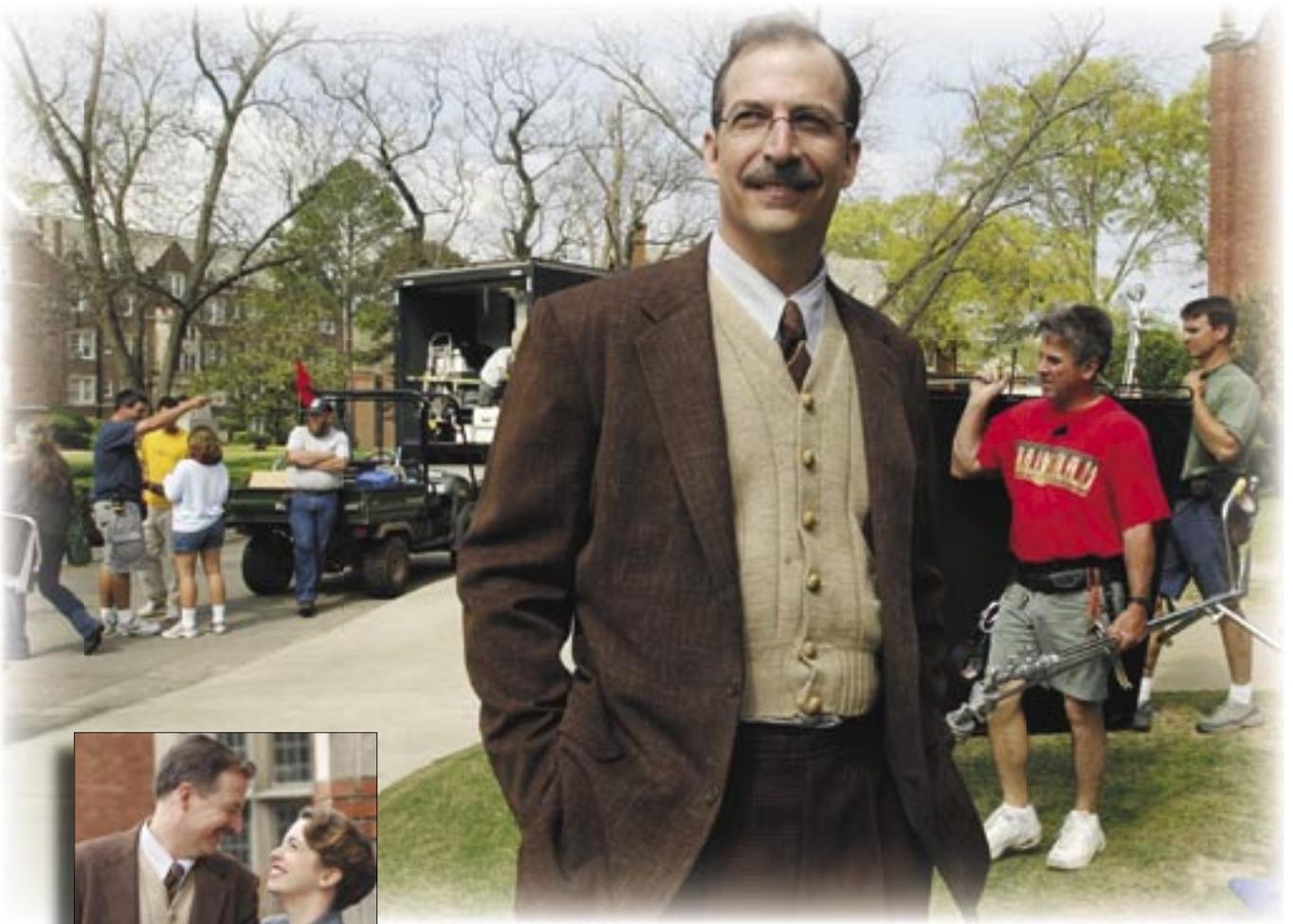
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# Daniel Wallace, HIMSELF

by Michelle Rupe Eubanks



*Above: Daniel Wallace, in period costume for cameo role in the movie Big Fish. Inset: Daniel and his wife, Laura. All photos in this essay © The Montgomery Advertiser*

We're driving through downtown Memphis, my husband Jeff and me, and we're late as usual. We're looking for the Marriott where author Daniel Wallace awaits. From his cell phone to mine, I learn there are two Marriotts, one bigger and the other smaller.

"OK, Daniel," I say, "What are you looking at?"

He tells me there's a trolley going by.

"What color is it?"

"Green."

The one that I'm looking at is red. I persevere. I have to find him because I've promised him a beautiful afternoon wandering along Beale Street in downtown Memphis and chitchatting about all things literary. And, maybe more important, I need an interview.

When I finally find his Marriott, the larger of the two, I notice him instantly. Black leather jacket, sunglasses, jeans—he is unassuming yet easygoing and cool.

First stop: Lunch. Where else but Rendezvous can you get the best ribs Memphis has to offer and a little attitude from the servers, too? We've just met and already I can tell that Daniel Wallace is not afraid to be himself, not afraid to laugh, and not afraid to tell me he's famished.

Over racks of ribs that are covered in a spicy dry rub and tall glasses of sweet iced tea, I learn a lot about Daniel—his family, his wife, his son, what it's really like to be a writer, and why not all folks who've published a book make mega bucks.

Wallace grew up in the Mountain Brook section of Birmingham, spending summers with grandparents in Cullman. Unlike some of his other Southern writing contemporaries, Wallace's childhood and youth were not agrarian; they were suburban. In that way, Wallace says, "I missed out. I don't have that shared rural experience."

It's for that reason his tether to the South might be a bit more tenuous." I don't think of myself as a Southern writer," he tells me later as we chat via telephone before the "Buffy, the Vampire Slayer" season finale. "Larry Brown, for example, is much more Southern than I am; he's a real Southern writer. I sense there's something extra in his writing and Lee Smith's writing that's not in my writing," he added.

The land, the culture, the geography, the undeniable and indefinable tie to the South, he says, are all things that may illustrate the differences best. "I don't think I can (write like) that," he said.

In fact, it was the television that made a strong impression on Wallace as a child. Sitting in front of the soft glow, he watched a fictional reality take shape.

"Some of my greatest memories are of TV shows," he said. "The Munsters," "Batman," "Dark Shadows," "I Dream of Genie," and "Bewitched" created for Wallace a world he said he did not find as he looked around his neighborhood. But, for some reason, he was drawn to them.

Of course, it could also be from those old sitcoms that Wallace developed his talent for comedy, both verbal and written. Hearing him tell about his childhood and his career as an artist and writer, I have to stop myself from asking him if he's serious. His tone sometimes masks the humor of his words.

Daniel's first book, *Big Fish*, published by Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, often causes similar reactions in his growing number of readers. We know, for instance, that the narrator's father is depicted as larger than life for hyperbolic effect, but Wallace's comedic timing and understatement make the father's deeds pleasantly believable. Would it ever even occur to us to ask if he really came up with the slogan "buy one get one free?" Probably not. We just assume it is so. And, to that end, the subtitle, "A Novel of Mythic Proportions," makes just as much sense as the title.

Southerners, especially, seem to identify readily with this flawed but doting father-son relationship that frames the story; we see it played out in real time and by real people.

Wallace's storytelling skills were not lost on Hollywood either. Purchased by Columbia Pictures and given to John August (*Go!*) to write a screenplay, Wallace's first book was on the cusp of a life of its own.

Although some writers marry their words, often forming unseemly attachments to them, Wallace made no such commitment. Proud of his story, he says he was not afraid of the changes that were sure to take place once his story fell into the hands of another writer who had his own ideas about what it could be.

"I wasn't going to put my foot down about anything," he said. "This is their movie, and this is my book. I could have put up a stink about it, but the bigger point is that I'm pleased with it.

"No matter what happens in the movie, the book will not change. And the bottom line is that I want people to read the book."

His experience with Hollywood, he said, has "been so good, better than my experience in the publishing world." It's given him the idea to tackle screenplays as part of a future writing project, that along with collecting and finding a publisher for his twelve short stories. No small task for a writer as busy as Wallace.

Of course, the money didn't hurt, either. With what he made from the sale of *Big Fish* Wallace bought a house. "I closed on my 40th birthday," he said.

Playing a bit part as an economics professor during filming

on the Huntingdon College campus in Montgomery, Wallace says his experience with Hollywood types was just low-key enough.

"You know that professor isn't in the book?" he asks, perhaps making sure I actually read the book.

"Yes, I do, and was that a problem for you, playing a role you didn't create?"

Apparently not at all.

On the set in Montgomery with, Laura, his wife of three years, Wallace tells me he felt right at home mixing with the

Hollywood illuminati, making sure to tell me that, no, he wasn't star struck at all.

"There was no star aura around anybody while they were working," he said.

"Star images, I believe, are all marketing. Red carpet is just part of the job." He adds, "Acting and being in

movies is no more glamorous than any other job. It's grueling and exhausting and it takes all day. And, when you're finished, you can't go out to the coffee shop without someone coming up and asking for an autograph."

In Memphis that beautiful early April day to sign copies of his books at Burke's Books, Wallace said he's not familiar with the price of fame—yet—but if the opportunity presents itself, he says he's not sure he'd turn it away. In fact, his one brush with stardom came in Montgomery, not in his home state of North Carolina.

"We were going to a Thai restaurant," he said. "Laura called to make a reservation for two for Wallace, and the Thai owner said 'Daniel Wallace?' That was my first brush with fame."

But Wallace says he'll be there on the red carpet himself when the movie premieres. "I don't know when or where it will be," he said, "but it's in my contract to be there. Every little thing is in writing."

Shooting of the film wrapped in April, and the sleepy little town of Wetumpka went back to being itself—minus the storefront facades, minus the period clothing and automobiles, and minus all those celebrities and crew members. When the film appears in theaters, however, the Wetumpka viewers see may not be a Wetumpka Alabamians recognize at all.

*Big Fish* is scheduled to open in December. For the most current information about the film and to see the trailer, visit <http://minadream.com/timburton/BigFish.php> or [www.danielwallace.org](http://www.danielwallace.org). For more pictures and articles, also check <http://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/specialreports/BigFish>. A special Birmingham premiere benefiting the Ronald McDonald house is planned. For information, contact the Alabama Booksmith at 205-870-4242.

Set primarily in Cullman in the 1950s, the screenplay for *Big Fish* takes up the touching yet refreshingly humorous story of the father as a young man, played by Ewan McGregor (*Down With Love*, *Moulin Rouge*); the role of the son is played by Billy Crudup (*Almost Famous*, *Without Limits*). Other cast members include Helena Bonham Carter (*Fight Club*, *A Room with View*), Steve Buscemi (*Fargo*, *Mr. Deeds*), and Robert Guillaume (TV's "Benson," "Sports Night"). Albert Finney (*Tom Jones*, *Erin Brockovich*) plays the older father. The film is directed by Tim Burton (*Batman Returns*, *Edward Scissorhands*, and *Nightmare Before Christmas*).

Since working on the film, Wallace has toured parts of the country signing copies of his books, often adding to his signature a caricature of himself on the title page. Despite the schedule, he always finds time to write, even if it's just a page or two, and even if churning out that page or two becomes more like a chore.

"There are a lot of both periods (in writing). Sometimes it's enjoyable and I'm pleased," he said. "At other times, there are rough patches that are hard to get through where there is a lot of gray doubt. But it's balanced." Writing *Watermelon King*, his most recent work, presented a unique set of challenges. "*Watermelon King* was difficult to get through because I'm dealing with hard topics like incest. It was also tough because each section is so different; it's like writing three different books."

"Usually, I get to a certain point and I can follow the story. I get to a point when I've invented everything out of nothing. When the invention is over, I'm left with those elements that have to be resolved."

With *Watermelon King*, he says he couldn't follow that progression. Instead, the work was intermittent.

His work in progress is a "futuristic sci-fi love comedy that takes place in the future, 150 years in the future, after a great war," he tells me. Man's inability to procreate is on the line, and Wallace is certain his protagonists can save the day.

Top to bottom:

- Actor Albert Finney portrays old Edward Bloom in *Big Fish*.
- Director Tim Burton, left, and actor Ewan McGregor on the set of *Big Fish* in Wetumpka during the bank robbery scene.
- Crews work to set up a shot with actor Matthew McGrory, who plays a giant in the film and in real life is over 7 feet tall.
- Behind-the-scenes workers for *Big Fish*, clockwise from top left, stunt coordinator Charlie Croughwell, associate director Katterli Frauenfelder, cinematographer Phillipe Rousselot and director Tim Burton prepare to film a scene on the Bibb Graves Bridge in Wetumpka.





Actor Ewan McGregor portrays Young Edward Bloom in *Big Fish*.

Walking out into the late afternoon sun from the depths of the restaurant's basement, we are all three—me, Daniel, and Jeff—temporarily blinded by the brightness, squinting up and then around at each other.

“What now?” Wallace asks.

“How about some of those tacky tourists shops?”

Perfect. The streets are almost deserted, and I get the feeling he's on a mission.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?”

“Just something to take back to Laura,” he tells me.

In a little shop by the New Daisy Theater he finds it: A tiny spun glass lamp on a mirrored pedestal. If that weren't enough, it also plays music and lights up.

When we talk later, I learn the gift didn't last long. Flawed from the start, its light ceased to shine, but the music just wouldn't stop playing.

As I learned that day in Memphis, that's so Daniel.

---

*Michelle Rupe Eubanks is a free-lance writer living in Florence.*

# Making BIG FISH GO

Screenwriter *John August*



Screenwriter John August visited Wetumpka during the filming of *Big Fish*.

John August sat at a table in Wetumpka on Monday, a few dozen yards from where Tim Burton and a film crew had begun the first day of shooting on *Big Fish*, the screenplay he wrote and once thought might never be shot.

Even before the release of *Go*, the critically acclaimed 1999 film for which he wrote his first major screenplay, August had asked Columbia Pictures to buy Daniel Wallace's *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*.

The novel deals with a father-and-son relationship. When the son, a reporter in Paris, discovers that his father is dying, he returns to the small Southern town where he grew up to try and know his father better. It is through his father's tall tales that the son begins to understand the elusive man.

“I'd read it in manuscript form, and loved it,” August said. “People at Columbia read it, and they responded like everyone seems to. They said ‘Oh, that is just like my relationship with my father.’”

“I met Dan Wallace in Virginia, and it was an amazing opportunity to talk with the writer about all the little secret layers of the book. One of the tales in it is based on ‘The 12 Labors of Hercules,’ and while I caught about half of it, he explained the rest to me. He and I continued to keep in touch through e-mail.”

They've kept in touch more than four years now.

Since writing *Go*, the 32-year-old writer has been on the go, co-writing *Charlie's Angels*, *Titan A.E.*, and a sequel to *Charlie's Angels*. He's also been hired to make last-minute script changes for movies such as *Jurassic Park 3* and *Scooby Doo*.

It looked for a time as if *Big Fish* would flounder.

“The studio liked the screenplay, but they were nervous that it was both a very small and a giant movie,” August said. “You had this very intimate movie, but with gigantic effects that weren't going to be cheap to do.”

August said it appeared that Columbia wasn't going to tackle the project, which is when he took things into his own hands by “slipping” the script to some friends of his.

The friends, in this case, just happened to be Dan Jinks and Bruce Cohen, the team of producers who had just won the Oscar for *American Beauty*.

They were interested, and so was Steven Spielberg.

"When producers like Dan Jinks and Bruce Cohen said they wanted to make it, Columbia couldn't really say no," August said. "Spielberg was the trump card."

August met with Spielberg during the summer, talking about one of the script's main difficulties—which characters to include and who to play them.

After some delays, Spielberg chose to make *Catch Me If You Can* instead.

"The great thing about being a Spielberg is that there are always great films to make when you want to make them," August said.

Other directors, including Ron Howard, expressed interest in the project, but after Tim Burton said he was interested, August said everyone believed they had the perfect match for the screenplay.

"He has this incredible style, plus he has been able to interweave it with smaller, intimate stories, such as *Ed Wood*," August said.

While *Big Fish* was in production, August prepared to leave the set to fly to Los Angeles and then to Canada to start work on a new ABC crime drama series set in Alaska, but he returned to help with *Big Fish*, including writing some changes.

"Most of what I did is small, but you are always refining things," he said. "You are looking at what Tim needs, what he can afford to shoot and just new ideas that come up along the way.

"The screenplay is like a blueprint to a house. It is a plan to show you how to construct it, but you are always changing it up until the last minute."

Those who have read Wallace's novel will discover "some really big changes from the book to the movie," August said.

"Will, the son, is mainly just the narrator in the novel, but he has become much more of a character in the movie. When I heard his wife was French, I decided there was really a need for her in the movie too, even though she is a complete invention of the movie.

"We used some of the fantasy scenes in the book, but changed others. For instance, in the movie there is a circus. The circus has always been in the script, but wasn't in the book. But the book has all these small stories through various parts of the father's life, and the circus was a way to bring them all together."

The script brought not just the stories together—it also drew an A-list of stars.

When August talked about the cast, he never thought it would include Ewan McGregor, Albert Finney, Billy Crudup, Jessica Lange, Danny DeVito, Helena Bonham Carter, Steve Buscemi, Alison Lohman, Robert Guillaume, and Marion Cotillard.

"It was a surprise to get a cast like this one," he said. "I expect that it was a combination of things—everyone really has meaty roles, everyone wanted to work with Tim, and everyone wanted to work with the other actors who were in the film. There are fun things to film here."

"Here" is Alabama, another casting decision of which August approves.

"It has added to the movie on every level," he said. "As grounded as this film needs to be at times, it needs a reality that you couldn't get on some Hollywood sound stage.

"You could spend \$20 million and not get a river as beautiful as the one here," he adds, pointing at the Alabama River.

# Big Fish

## Details

**Release Date:** December 2003

**Distributor:** Columbia Pictures (Sony)

**Production Company:** Jinks/Cohen Co. (*Down with Love*, *American Beauty*), The Zanuck Company (Tim Burton's *Planet of the Apes*)

**Cast:** Billy Crudup (William Bloom), Ewan McGregor (Young Edward Bloom), Albert Finney (Old Edward Bloom), Helena Bonham-Carter, Steve Buscemi (Norther Winslow), Danny DeVito, Jessica Lange, Alison Lohman

**Director:** Tim Burton (*Planet of the Apes*, *Sleepy Hollow*, *Mars Attacks!*, *Beetlejuice*, *Batman*)

**Screenwriter:** John August (*Go*; cowriter of *Charlie's Angels*, *Titan A.E.*, *Scooby Doo*)

**Based Upon:** The novel by Daniel Wallace, *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*.

**Premise:** William Bloom (Crudup) tries to learn more about his dying father, Edward (Finney), by piecing together the facts out of the various fantastic tales and legends of epic proportions he's been told over the years (with McGregor playing the young version of Edward in these "retellings" of his stories). Edward was a traveling salesman, often far from home, and it's those journeys throughout the South that are the seed of his son's tales. There are four separate tales told, each fantastic and wild, of Edward's life, with each ending with him at his deathbed, as William tries to understand his father's great deeds, and failures. The titles of the legends (in the book) are "In Which He Speaks to Animals," "How He Tamed the Giant," "How He Saved My Life," and "His Immortality." Oh, and as you might guess from the title, one of them has a giant fish. (premise summary written by Greg Dean Schmitz, 8/10/00)

**Filming:** Production started on January 13th, 2003, in towns in rural Alabama. Film wrapped in April 2003.

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*Rick Harmon is features editor of the Montgomery Advertiser. This article first appeared in the Advertiser.*



Mary Ward Brown offered a guided tour of her library at the 2003 Southern Voices conference in Hoover. We are delighted to publish her talk in *First Draft*.

# A House of Books

Since this conference project of the Hoover Public Library and you're all probably readers, I'd like to tell you about my own books.

It would be pretentious to call my books a library, because it would give the wrong impression. You'd think of a large room in a fine house. My house is modest. The rooms are small, and the books are not in one room but in every room. By now they've overflowed all the bookcases added year after year, until no wall space is left. The overflow is being stacked temporarily, I like to think, in front of the bookcases on the floor. When I know company is coming, I dust and re-stack them neatly, until the next time. I should be ashamed to tell you this, but I will. Some are stacked under my bed.

When I wake up in the morning in my bed, I see books wherever I look. Years ago, on the entire wall to my right, I had two large bookcases built to within a few inches of the ceiling. In that top space, stacked flat so that no space is wasted, are books too tall to fit in the shelves.

The bookcase on my right, closest to my bed and closest to my heart, houses books on the short story. My favorite short story writers are there, fixed stars like Chekhov, Flannery O'Connor, Ernest Hemingway, and the Russian-Jewish writer Isaac Babel. Babel fell victim to the Stalinist purges of 1930 and was killed before his work became widely known and appreciated. Joyce's *Dubliners* is there, and the

stories of Katherine Anne Porter. Raymond Carver is there, but I don't go back and reread his stories as I do those of the fixed stars. Alice Monroe and William Trevor will probably wind up there. Other favorites come and go. Some who were once there are now down on the floor. There are anthologies, mainly *The Best American Short Stories*, and books on usage—Fowler and Follett—, dictionaries on slang, literary terms, and one titled *You All Spoken Here*, described as “a plunder room of words and phrases... used in southern parts of the United States.” There are books on craft, technique, and criticism, mainly in paperback college textbooks picked up at book sales, which continue to help me understand and write short fiction.

On the top shelf of the adjoining bookcase are favorite novels, *War and Peace*, *Anna Karenina*, the novels of Faulkner and a new icon of mine, Cormac McCarthy. *Madam Bovary* is there, *The Brothers Karamozov*, *Moby Dick*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and *Mrs. Bridge* by Evan S. Connell. The next shelf down holds favorite biographies and autobiographies, such as Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa* and Alfred Kazin's *A Life Time Burning in Every Moment*. Down a shelf are collections of letters, among them the letters of Carl Jung, the psychoanalyst. In 1933 a Frau V. wrote Dr. Jung asking how one ought to live. What Dr. Jung replied has helped and/or confused me many times over the years. “There is no

single, definite way for the individual which is prescribed for him and would be the proper one," Dr. Jung wrote back. "If you always do the next thing that needs to be done, you will go most safely and sure-footedly along the oath prescribed by your unconscious." In other words, do the next most necessary thing. Which is in direct opposition to Joseph Campbell's famous counsel to "follow your bliss."

On the next two shelves, for no reasonable reason, are Greek and Roman classics, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, and the Theban plays. There's a group on folklore, including several by Zora Neale Hurston. Then, since I'm a jazz aficionado, there are biographies of jazz musicians like Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and my favorite, Thelonious Monk. On the last shelf are poets, mainly Yeats, Eliot, Hopkins, and Christina Rossetti. Poets like Wallace Stephens and John Ashbury I can't understand, so they're there only in anthologies.

My best literary friend for many years, the late Crawford Gillis, a Selma artist, had read everything worth reading in Literature. He wasn't keen on contemporary literature, but since I am, he read the books I bought, or found, so we could talk about them. On his tombstone, he said he wanted engraved, "He returned books," which he did, punctiliously.

Anyway, one day after the two big book cases were built and filled completely, he looked at them and said, "Are those bookcases nailed to the wall?" I'd never thought about it.

"Why?" I said.

"There was a writer," he said, and named an obscure writer of whom I'd never heard, "whose bookcase fell on him and killed him."

Well, I examined the bookcases and they were not nailed to the wall, just standing up on their own. I didn't really believe they'd fall on me, but the thought made me nervous. I asked my son to check them and he assured me that they were steadied by the contents and would never fall except in a tornado.

Still, some nights or mornings when I'm in bed feeling nervous and anxious in general, I look at those bookcases and wonder. If I should meet death by books, it might not be entirely inappropriate.

On the other side of my bed is an old homemade bench, about five feet long, stacked with two rows of books. The back row, held up by bookends, holds books on writing by the masters, *Ernest Hemingway on Writing*, *Robert Frost on Writing*, *Stephen King on Writing*. There's one titled *The Eye of the Story* by Eudora Welty. They're my "how-to" books, I guess you could say.

On the front row on the bench, stacked flat, are books

I want to read, mean to read, and hope to read someday.

Milton's *Paradise Lost* has been there for a long time (I don't know how I missed it in school, since I was an English major), but Donna Tart's *The Little Friend* didn't stay a day. Others I've read in part, and will finish in time, such as a collection of stories by Alistair MacLeod of Nova Scotia, titled simply *Island*. His stories are so good they have the power to inflict wounds and affect moods that last for days. To read one is almost like living through a challenging time in real life. So I have to space them out and read one when I feel up to it.

On the other side of the bench is a small bookcase, jammed against my bill-paying desk, not my writing desk, which is back in my workroom. On one side of my dresser is a metal turning rack from some junk store. I don't know what it held originally, but it's stuffed with books. Another tall but narrower bookcase, almost to the ceiling, stands behind the bedroom door, and books are stacked on the floor in front of it. The door to my bedroom won't open all the way back, because it's stopped at a right angle by books stacked behind it.

Almost everyone who comes into my bedroom, and all bookish visitors do, will sooner or later look at all the bookcases and say, "Have you read all these books?"

I have to tell the truth and shame the devil. I have not. I've read a good many, and a good many more I haven't. I no longer hope to read them all, but I do hope to read at them as long as I can see.

One problem I've solved, after a fashion. When I read a book that I like, I want to underline favorite lines, paragraphs, or applaud the right word in the right spot, so I'll be able to go back and find it. I have a friend who draws little hearts in the margins by her favorite passages. Hearts are what I feel too, but underlining comes more naturally. I don't like to mark up nice editions, however. So I have Faulkner's books in the Library of America editions that just sit in glory on that top shelf, and paperback editions that I read and mark up. I have two sets of Chekhov, the Oxford University hardback edition on the shelf and the Ecco Press set in paperback, which I keep shut up in the box it arrived in. These I mark, as inconspicuously as possible, then put carefully back in the pasteboard box. I count on their being ready to go to the nursing home with me!

So we've been through only one room upstairs, and there's still my workroom, a guestroom now known as my granddaughters' room, since I no longer have house guests, and a sleeping porch, full of books. About the books, I'm like a miser with his gold. On rare days when I have few loose

minutes, I like to simply look over the shelves, or get down on the floor and see what's there. Since none of the books are catalogued, and since as they have increased my memory has declined, this can be full of surprises.

One day, back around Thanksgiving, I noticed several books by a critic, Lionel Trillin, who died in the seventies. I'd never looked inside those books since I put them there, so I took one out and saw a chapter titled "Flaubert's Last Testament." I love Flaubert because of *Madam Bovary* and that transcendent long short story, "A Simple Heart," and for his lifelong dedication to the art of writing. The essay was about his novel, *Bouvard and Pecuchet*, which I'd never read. I knew I had the book, because my friend Crawford, mentioned earlier, had read it. When I bought it, I remembered that he'd said he'd like to look at it again and took it home. In my mind I could see it, a thick, new book in a black binding. But I couldn't find it. For days, at least a week, in every spare minute I looked obsessively through books in all the rooms, including stacks on the floor.

Finally, I decided that for once in his life, Crawford hadn't returned a book. Then I took one more look, with a flashlight, in the place it should have been with everything else by and about Flaubert, in my workroom. On the top shelf of that bookcase, which is made from old pine shelving from my father's country store, with zigzag ends so the shelves can be adjusted, I looked again with the flashlight. Up on the top shelf is the Yale set of Shakespeare, a gift from my son Kirtley during his first job as a lawyer, and they take up most of the shelf. But down at the far end, I saw with the flashlight two faded old red books from some Good Will or junk store that I didn't recognize at all. I had to take them down to read the title. And that was the novel, in two volumes, the pages now brown around the edges. So I read it and am glad I did.

The sleeping porch on the south side of the house, all windows on three sides, was added by my parents after the house was built. At the time, it was thought healthful, a passing fad, I suppose, to sleep with windows wide open, winter and summer. So we slept out there under mounds of quilts, and blankets made from the wool of our own sheep, until I was moved into a room of my own. So the sleeping porch has only one wall-full of books.

But my first editions are out there. The two most notable are a hardback copy in excellent condition of *Stride Toward Freedom* by Martin Luther King, signed "Best wishes, Martin Luther King," which I bought in the Selma Salvation Army store for either a quarter or fifty cents, so long ago I can't remember which. The other is example of poetic justice. When *To Kill A*

*Mockingbird* was first published, I sent a copy as a gift to my brother-in-law, Roberts Brown, a lawyer in Opelika, who was a great reader. Years later when he died, childless and remarried, most of his books, including that one, came to me.

My workroom, which was my son's old bedroom, is like my own bedroom now, maybe worse, with two big bookcases, small bookcases between every stick of furniture, and books on the floor. But the books in one of the bookcases are mostly big volumes, often illustrated, such as *The Arabian Nights*, *The Last Days Of Pompeii*, and *Don Quixote*, books to have, to have read, or to take down and look through, rather than to read. I should say here that I've seldom paid the steep, original price for such books. I found most of them at Ivy League University book-outs or from a Strand bookstore sale, by mail. One big book that I was recently glad to pay the full price for, however, is the King James Bible, designed and illustrated with engravings by Barry Moser.

Also back there are signed and unsigned copies of books by friends and acquaintances, including many fellow Alabamians, whom you know. Among those are books by the late Fred Bonnie, who wrote fine short stories, died far too young, and never got his literary due, in my opinion. Back there are also books that I keep as a Southerner, in a South greatly changed since they were written, *Lanterns on the Levee*, *The Last of the Whitfields*, *With a Southern Accent*, *Stars Fell on Alabama...I'll Take my Stand* should be back there too, but is now in my granddaughters' room, in a glass-front bookcase from the Marion law office of my late half-brother, Sheldon Fitts. Brother, as I called him, lived down the road from me and is still sadly missing in my life.

And the dictionaries are there. My favorite, the one I use most, is *The American Heritage Dictionary*, third edition, because it's most up-to-date and has hundreds of pictures. There's now a fourth edition with the pictures in color, and I have it too, downstairs. Years ago, during lean years on the farm, my husband and son gave me for Christmas one year a wonderful surprise. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, unabridged, on a stand, And I still use it. I also have the *Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, which has to be read with a magnifying glass that came with it. I don't use it often, since I'm not a scholar and don't work the *New York Times* crossword puzzles every week as one friend does!

Also in my work room, behind my blueberry blue iMac, on what was called a "watermelon bench" when I bought it, are what I think of as writing props, Roget's and Webster's thesauruses, Webster's dictionary of synonyms. On the other

side are *The New York Times Manual Of Style And Usage* And *The Chicago Manual Of Style*. On top of my desk is that tiny, well-known writer's bible, *The Elements Of Style* by Strunk and White.

With all these books and helps and props, you'd think I could write beautiful, eloquent prose. Instead, I seldom use a word that I wouldn't be comfortable using in ordinary speech. I think I'm afraid it would be somehow out of character, so I look hard for simple words that are not cliché. And I spend half my writing time looking things up, trying not to make a mistake. Writing fiction is like writing nonfiction. Use one detail that's not true or right, and you lose your reader's trust. Sometimes forever.

When I brought you on this book tour of my house, we came straight upstairs to my bedroom. But there are books downstairs too. In the living room bookcases, on either side of the fireplace, are mostly sets, some from someone's once-fine library that wound up in an antique shop or even junk store. In those bookcases there's also a number of leather-bound books from a series of 100 American classics published by Franklin Mint, in celebration of the American Revolution Bicentennial, and the Heritage Club books I began to buy the one year I worked at Judson before I married Kirtley.

When I was young, my favorite diversion was to rummage through secondhand bookstores, thrift stores, junk stores, and antique shops, looking for books. Many of those books that I have were found there. Now, to find books that I can afford, I don't use the Internet, which is the best place to find bargains, I know, because I'm afraid to give up my credit card information. So I use mainly two sources. Edward R. Hamilton, Bookseller, in Falls Church, CT, by mail, and Daedalus Books in Columbia, MD, by phone. Both these sources are also on the Internet.

But since books are my worst extravagance (I don't travel, dine out, go to movies, and haven't had a vacation in 25 years), I often pick up the phone and order from my friends the independent booksellers.

So when I do read, after keeping a house and yard halfway presentable, looking after the farm (which is leased but still my responsibility, and also my *living*), and trying to be a tolerable mother and grandmother? I always read in the morning, with a book propped in front of me while I eat breakfast, and I'm always surprised how fast I get from page 1 to page 300 that way. And I always read in bed at night. Except for the noon and nightly news, I watch very little television, often a real loss. I recently missed the *Forsythe Saga* again. But if I have to

choose, read or watch, I usually read, unless it's something like Ken Burn's *Civil War* or 9/11.

And when do I write? I haven't written a line of fiction since *It Wasn't All Dancing* was published. To write fiction, I have to have ahead of me a cleared-out space for sustained, full-time work. I don't seem to be able to write an hour here, an hour there, as some writers can, successfully. I can revise piecemeal but, so far, I haven't been able to get a story down that way.

About a good workday for a writer, Eudora Welty said it best in a little book titled *The Writer's Desk*. "I like to wake up ready to go," she wrote, "and to know that during that whole day the phone wouldn't ring, the doorbell wouldn't ring—even with good news—and that nobody would drop in. This all sounds so rude. But you know, things that just make a normally nice day are not what I want...I'd just get up and get my coffee and an ordinary breakfast and get to work. And just have a whole day.

I don't read much when I'm writing, except things like the *Selma Times-Journal* and *Time* magazine. Instead, I iron washed linens that I've put up out of sight for months, clean out a closet, or walk around my yard several times for exercise. Do mindless, physical things. But I'm so happy when I'm working. It's the hardest thing I've ever done, but the one I love most.

My greatest problem has always been deciding when writing fiction is the next thing that needs to be done. We have only one life to live, and there are duties, needs, and opportunities all around us. William Butler Yeats wrote a poem titled "All Things Can Tempt Me From This Craft of Verse."

When I was writing the stories in *Tongues of Flame*, nobody, including me, thought that what I wrote would ever be worth the effort, so I was thought to be deluded and was generally left alone. When "The Amaryllis" was published in *McCall's* and a newspaper reporter tried to find me, he was told that I was something of a recluse. It hurt my feelings, because I've never wanted to shut myself away from people or the life around me. But to write, one does have to somehow be shut away. In bed every night, I think of people I haven't stayed in touch with, letters and emails I haven't answered, opportunities I've let go by, even flowers I haven't put on the graves of my family.

I just hope I'll be able to write one or two more stories before I leave this earth and, at the same time, be forgiven a few sins of omission while I'm doing it.

---

*Mary Ward Brown is the author of two acclaimed collections of short stories, Tongues of Flame and It Wasn't All Dancing.*

## FAMILY HISTORY

# Reading HELL AT THE BREECH

by Hardy Jackson

On Christmas night, 1892, my great-great-uncle, Ernest McCorquodale, was entertaining guests at his home in Coffeeville, Alabama. Hearing someone knocking on the gatepost, McCorquodale and his wife went out on the porch. My aunt held the lantern high so her husband could see who was there. Illuminated by the light, my uncle was an easy target.

Years later, I am told, you could still see holes in the doorframe from the buckshot that missed. There weren't many of them. Most found their mark.

My uncle was murdered by a man who was hired by another man whose farm my uncle, a merchant, had taken in a foreclosure. The farmer swore that he paid the note and my uncle cheated him. My uncle swore he did not. The judge found in favor of my uncle.

Then came the killing.

It wasn't the last. The local justice of the peace, a cousin, knowing who

was behind the shooting but unable to prove it in court, sent some other members of our family, including the merchant's 16-year-old son, to ambush the suspect. They left him dead in the dirt.

And the "Mitcham War" began.

I grew up hearing the stories, tales of how my uncle's murderer was part of a gang called Hell-at-the-Breech that operated out of Mitcham Beat, a scattering of farms northwest of Grove Hill, the county seat of Clarke County. I heard of how my great-grandfather, William W. Waite, who happened to be the murdered merchant's brother-in-law, organized a posse of prominent men, went into the Beat, and cleaned the outlaws out. And I was told how, over half a century later, there were folks up there who still had no use for my family because of it.

Grown up, a university trained historian, I decided to find out what really happened back then. I never could.

Instead I found loose ends, different perspectives, "official" accounts, and a treasure trove of stories passed down in whispers. What my family called the posse was called a mob by folks who still lived up in the Beat. Maybe they had a point. If our side represented the law, why were none of the "outlaws" that we hunted down ever brought to trial? If the "posse" was legal, when they caught an accused ringleader of the gang, why didn't they take him to jail? Why did they tie him between

*The picture was taken about 1946 or 1947. I was 3 or 4. Grandpa Bill was in his early 80s (he was born in 1864, died in 1950). We were on the front steps of his house just outside Grove Hill.*



two trees and shoot him so many times that they could not pick up the body for fear it would fall apart? Sheriff Waite wasn't there when that happened, but surely he knew the men involved. Why weren't those killers arrested?

Working with two friends who still lived in the county, one of them a descendent of the "Mitchamites" my family fought, we pieced together the story, arranged the facts, and published the whole thing in a short book written to be read by local folks who could and would use what we found to fill in what they already believed. Later I took this account and molded it into an article on class conflict over political power in the rural South – the sort of thing university trained historians write for each other and which, generally, strip the flesh, drain the blood, and leave the bones bare and bleached and boring.

I'm not making excuses here. That is just the way the process works, and few historians, bound by fact and documentation, can or will write outside it. Sometimes the system won't let us. In an early draft of the article, I listed all the reasons that I felt were behind the violence of that summer of 1893. One of these was "general meanness." The editor, a man of impeccable scholarly credentials, suggested I take it out because "general meanness" was a category too vague and unsupportable for a serious publication such as theirs.

I started to reply that if he'd go with me to Charlie's Chicken Shack on the Old Line Road on a Friday to watch just-paid pulpwood workers get drunk and settle scores I'd show him general meanness a-plenty, but I didn't. I just removed the reason and wrote around it. Historians do that.

Novelists don't.

Which is why Tom Franklin's novel, *Hell at the Breech*, will help readers understand what took place in Clarke County, Alabama, so long ago.

Ignoring the facts of the matter (Billy Waite, his hero, my great-grandfather, was a young man when the "war" occurred – Franklin ages him), or reshaping facts to fit his story, Franklin writes less about the Mitcham War than about circumstances and conditions that drive people to violence. In the process my ancestors, my antecedents, emerge not as plaster saints or scholarly assessments but as flesh and blood driven by passion and emotion and love and hate and, yes, general meanness.

They, my ancestors, emerge as your ancestors, too.

That is the advantage the novelist has and the challenge the novelist faces. A historian can, and often does, hide behind facts. It is safe there. We venture beyond what the record reveals at our own peril.

The novelist must go further, must create from little or nothing people who could have done the terrible deeds of those dark days – and probably did. And in those creations the novelist must also find the good, the compassion, which is always there, though not always evident. In short, the Waites, Bedsoles, Yorks, and Burkes of Clarke County cease to become specific people and become all of us.

I was a child when my great-grandfather died. I remember little about him. Today those memories are captured in a fading photograph of an old man and a little boy sitting on the front steps in the warm winter sun. He looks spry. I look anxious. I don't know if he is the man Tom Franklin created, but he might have been.

I hope he was.

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*Dr. Harvey "Hardy" H. Jackson III is chair of the history department at Jacksonville State University and author, most recently, of The Redneck Riviera: The Southern Gulf Coast. This essay first appeared in The Anniston Star.*

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## AUTHOR AND EDITOR

# *A Conversation Between Friends*



*Ashley Gordon*



*Carolyn Haines*

Not too long ago, Carolyn Haines, author of mysteries, literacy fiction, and creative nonfiction, chatted with River City Publishing editor Ashley Gordon about writing, reading, editing, and publishing. The two have just finished their first editor/author venture together on *My Mother's Witness: The Peggy Morgan Story*, which was out in September from River City Publishing. Carolyn is currently working on *Bones to Pick*, the sixth Sarah

Booth Delaney mystery. *Hallowed Bones* will be out in 2004 from Dell Publishing. Ashley is working on books for River City Publishing's 2004 season.

Between them, Carolyn and Ashley bring a world of insight into the processes of writing and publishing. Read on as they share their opinions, experience, and advice.

*Carolyn:* Authors often talk about the "book of their hearts," but editors must surely have that same book that they'd love to work on. So what kind of book would that be for you? Be as specific as possible.

*Ashley:* First, it would have beautiful language, the kind of phrases that you stop and reread just to savor, like a good wine on your tongue. It would have emotional moments or descriptions that were so true that they made your heart hurt. You could see the characters and hear them and know exactly who they are. You would find yourself saying, "Yes, that is what that's like." It would be funny enough

to laugh out loud. It might have moments that bring tears, but not without the possibility of redemption. It would be almost perfect, but it would still have a few places that need a good reader (which is what I think an editor really is) to ask the right questions of the author. What did you mean to accomplish here? What tone was this supposed to strike? Then we'd work together to determine what was, in reality, accomplished on the page as opposed to what was intended. Finally, we'd find the ways for the writer to get the words where he or she wanted them to be. And it would be a book that, once read, stays with you, like a vivid dream you can't shake off in the morning.

*Now my turn. You've worked with a variety of publishers, all shapes and sizes, and the editors that go with them. As a small publisher, you've even been an editor yourself. Based on your experiences from both sides of the pen, how would you describe the perfect editor?*

*Carolyn:* Ah, the perfect editor is a paragon of virtues. She/he would have the eyes of an eagle and the diplomacy of a peace negotiator. Seriously, I don't know a single writer who can't benefit from a good editor. A good editor has an eye that sees where the warp and weave of the story have gone a little askew. She's able to ask "why?" in a way that makes the author actually think about the issue. "Why does this character move to Seattle? Why Seattle?" Often writers believe the answer is clear when it isn't. The editor gently nudges this along until it's right. Editors also have the gift of cutting. Often, less is better. Pruning just the exact cluster of little words away is truly a gift. For writers, often each word is a jewel. It takes an objective eye to cut. Editors are also charged with marketing considerations that writers aren't. This is a sad but true fact of life. The only real advantage a published writer has over a non-published writer is the ability to talk to her editor and ask questions before a book is written. For an editor to get behind a book and push, that editor must feel certain that the book will do well in the market. A good editor with an eye, a sense of market, and the willingness to push hard for a book can make a tremendous difference in a writer's career. This last quality may be the most important—a good editor should have the ability to fall in love with a book. When an editor becomes too jaded, or when marketing considerations are her only concern, then it's rough on her writers.

*Okay, Ashley, the hot potato is back to you now. What are the five most egregious no-no's a writer can commit in a manuscript? And this can include the conduct of a writer after he/she's submitted the manuscript.*

*Ashley:* I'm tempted to launch into a diatribe about the blunders made when submitting manuscripts for publication consideration, but I think we should save that for a later question. For now I'll stick to the writing (and the conduct? Boy is that a tempting can of worms!). It's tough to generalize and still offer valuable advice, but these are problems I've noticed in manuscripts I've read recently.

1. Make sure the story has a conflict. It's a problem when

I'm at page 50 and I still haven't discovered the burning question that must be answered to keep me reading for another 250 pages. Sometimes short stories can survive on intriguing characters, unique style, or intellectual questions alone, but novels can't. Be sure there is a problem that the reader wants to see solved.

2. Don't skimp on the parts that you find too hard to write. Inexperienced writers often will let the narrator quickly tell the results of a confrontation or explain the important aspects of a character's personality rather than creating the scene that reveals this to the reader. That's boring to read and exposes the writer's weakness. Same goes for parts the author finds boring and, therefore, hurries through. If the author thinks it's boring, we will too. Skip it entirely or make it real.
3. Writers should use words they know and are comfortable with. That is not to say that most of us wouldn't benefit from an expanded vocabulary, and a thesaurus can be a valuable tool. However, incorporating unfamiliar words simply to make the style erudite usually results in just the opposite; the writing sounds clumsy and stilted. So be careful that the words flow. If they are true, they will be beautiful, no matter how simple.
4. But... another mistake is to give all the characters the same voice. Not everyone talks like the author or the narrator, so all the voices in a book shouldn't sound the same. The best writers have an ear for the cadence and music of speech and recreate them in their writing. This is a skill to strive for.
5. Finally (for now) if you don't know grammar, find someone who does who will read and correct your manuscript. As dreadfully dull as your seventh grade grammar class may have been, the rules of writing are important. They are the basis for communication and that is what writing is—communication. You are only allowed to break the rules if you do it on purpose and you are one of the best. Faulkner comes to mind. So, if you're not Faulkner, follow the rules.

*Those are some obvious problems that I see in manuscripts every day. But I've often read that the real key to progressing from "a writer" to "a successful writer" is the ability to revise one's own work. So how do you know when your manuscript has these problems and then how do you fix them?*

*Carolyn:* I have to laugh when I answer this because I know when my writing has a problem—I just don't always know

what the problem is. It's very much the story of the lion with a thorn in its paw. The story can't walk, but pulling the thorn is going to be painful and require someone with great courage (editors and friends come in here). I think that's the most frustrating part of writing—to know something is off but not know how to fix it. Many young writers make the mistake of sending out a manuscript before it's ready. I certainly understand the compulsion to get feedback, but it's generally a good idea to hold a manuscript for several weeks and then read over it again. It's surprising what will show up. I like to have my work as near perfect as I can make it before I send it to an editor. I'm also fortunate enough to work with a professional critique group, The Deep South Writers Salon. And my husband is an editor, which is helpful. I don't suffer from the phobia of showing my work, and I'm glad I don't. I spend a lot of time reading manuscripts and offering advice to writers at all different levels. I'm glad that I can benefit from a reciprocal arrangement. The bottom line is that the old partnership between an editor and a budding writer rarely exists any more. Editors don't "bring writers along" anymore. Manuscripts have to be almost ready for publication. The rare exception to this is the smaller publishing house, which will sometimes find a gem and polish, polish, polish on it to make it sparkle. When a writer finds this kind of editor, she should realize that stardust has fallen on her.

*A natural follow up to this question deals with submissions. I'm not a publisher, but I'm asked to read a good number of manuscripts, and I do so when I have time. But I have two pet peeves—number the dang pages and double space! What are some things you'd like to engrave on the brains of those who would be published writers?*

*Ashley:* First, for heaven's sake, yes, do the basics. Put the title and the author's contact information on the cover page. Include the page number and the author's last name and/or the title of the work on every page. The text should be printed double-spaced and single-sided. And don't forget the SASE.

Next, before the manuscript goes anywhere, do as much research as possible. Most publishers have Web sites that list their submission guidelines and the types of material they are interested in. Follow those guidelines to the letter. If they say they are only looking at poetry in March, don't send the manuscript in January. If they have no self-help books on their list, send no more than a query letter for your self-help

book (if even that), and be prepared to make a strong case as to why they should be interested in a book that is outside their normal genres. If they want only sample chapters, don't send the entire manuscript. Not only is it inconsiderate, you run the risk of not being considered at all.

As for follow up, again adhere to the publisher's instructions. If they ask you not to call, don't. Just do the math: translate twenty to fifty queries a week into phone calls! But it's perfectly reasonable to send an e-mail or postcard if you haven't heard from them in the time they say to expect an answer.

Here are a few suggestions for that research I mentioned. Go to the bookstore and library and find books similar to yours and then find out which companies publish those. Check out *Writer's Digest* (the magazine and web site) or *Writer's Market* (book series and web site) for more tips. Another magazine and web site is *Poets and Writers* (poetsandwriters.org). These are all geared toward writers looking for publishers.

*Finding the right publisher is the hardest but probably the most important part. You've published in a variety of genres with several houses, big and small. What are your thoughts on finding the best publisher for a particular manuscript?*

*Carolyn:* Writers first have to learn to be able to categorize what they're writing. I think that's terribly hard, at first. But it's a must, no matter what kind of writing you do. As you said earlier, part of a writer's research is knowing what a publishing house publishes and whether it's a fit. That's where I start. I firmly believe that New York publishers do a terrific job on many different types of books. New York is the publishing Mecca, and in many regards, it's where the big bucks are. But there are hard realities in this area of publishing. Many, many wonderful books are overlooked. I'm not saying they aren't published—they are—but they don't really gain the attention of the publisher. They're published, shipped, and forgotten. This is where a smaller publisher can better serve an author. In many instances, a small house can get behind a book and put everything into the push. The small house is much like the author—this book is their baby. They are as invested in the book as the author. I think writers must learn to weigh these considerations. There is prestige in publishing with a big New York house. But what's best for a particular book? I can speak to this from personal experience. When I wrote *My Mother's Witness*, I considered

New York, but after I toured River City Publishing with Carolyn Newman and saw her obvious commitment to books, I knew that River City would be the best home for this book. I also knew the manuscript needed someone who had a real passion for the content. There was a problem with the last one hundred pages of the book, and I needed an objective eye to offer some solutions. I knew when I talked with you, Ashley, that you had the grit to help me make this book better. I've worked with a lot of editors, and that's one thing I require—an honest give-and-take relationship. If that relationship isn't there, it doesn't matter who the publisher is, your career is in trouble.

*Since I became a writer, I find that I'm a far more critical reader than I used to be. But there are authors who never disappoint. Tell me who you read, and why?*

*Ashley:* This is the most fun question for any reader. The writer I'd wait in line for, in rain, sleet, or snow, is P. D. James. She's a smart writer, with marvelously plotted stories and fully developed characters. I try to pace myself to make the new books last longer, but I usually devour them in one sitting. For exciting literary mysteries in far away places, Arturo Perez-Reverte. For pure musical lyricism that transports me to other worlds, there is Gabriel Garcia Marquez, especially *Love in the Time of Cholera* and his short stories. For the phrases that take my breath away, Fitzgerald. *The Great Gatsby* is still one of the best books ever written. For linguistic intensity, Hemingway, particularly *The Sun Also Rises*. When I'm feeling intelligent and want a challenge, Umberto Eco and A. S. Byatt,

with my dictionary handy. They always inspire me to go research a new topic. When life is awful and I need an old friend, Jane Austen. No one creates dialogue better than she. And wouldn't it be lovely to be Elizabeth Bennett just for a day!

And I'm attaching an addendum: top five personal favorite books of all time not by the aforementioned authors.

1. *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Harper Lee
2. *Franny and Zooey*, J. D. Salinger
3. *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf
4. *The Hotel New Hampshire*, John Irving
5. *The Lord of the Rings*, J. R. R. Tolkien

*Now your turn, same questions. And wrap this up by telling what you are reading right now.*

*Carolyn:* I have to confess to several additions, James Lee Burke is first and foremost, for the simply beauty of his language, his sensual settings, and the moral dilemmas of his character. Dennis Lehane is a new addiction. *Mystic River* is a fabulously crafted book.

My other favorites include Elizabeth George's earlier works for the complexity and deft drawing of character; John Irving, for his incredible mastery in plotting and weaving, and for his use of language; Pete Dexter for his sheer talent; and Kinky Friedman for his humor and his politics. These are writers who seldom disappoint.

As to what I'm reading now, I just finished *Triggerfish Twist* by Tim Dorsey (he's a very sick man and I love him), and I'm looking forward to reading the next John Deal book by Les Standiford.

*Alabama Troubadour* is a gem—a brilliantly original way to view the state of Alabama . . . consistently interesting, sometimes surprising, sometimes provocative. . . .

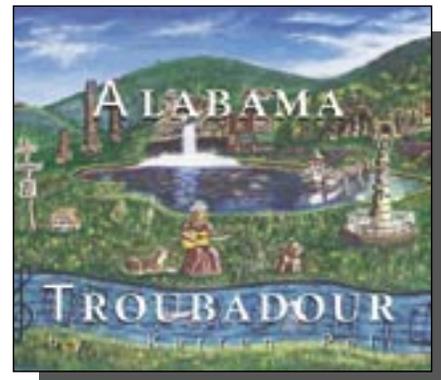
—Lee Smith, author of *The Last Girls* and *Fair and Tender Ladies*



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—Lee Sentell, Director, Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel



# Excuse Me, Did You Say

## MANNA or MANILA?

by Sonny Brewer

There they are on your desk, the manila envelopes bulging with the hopes of doctors and lawyers and waitresses and artists and hairdressers and teachers and cops and shrimpers and computer geeks, who all, by God, want to quit their day jobs and become writers.

And you are a bookseller. You need writers.

You've also been known to refer a manuscript to a publisher. You've even watched some of these typescripts transformed to case-bound, beautifully printed and presented books. There comes the mailman, his collar soaked with sweat from trudging the Fairhope sidewalks, pushing that little cart, lugging that canvas bag. He's bringing you more manila envelopes. He brought some yesterday. He'll have some more fat envelopes for you tomorrow. The river of reams will never cease to flow.

It has not been more than a week since someone said to you, "You know, I been thinking about writing me a book." You read that John D. MacDonald said he'd get pissed off when people at parties would say to him, "I got a great idea for a novel, I just gotta sit down and write it is all." This hard working writer said he'd think of the thousands of pages, of the thousands of hours, of the years of reading, of the tons of rejection slips that made up his career effort to keep Travis McGee alive and well aboard the *Busted Flush* in Lauderdale's Bahia Mar marina. (Jeez! you think, what a debt of gratitude you owe to *The Deep Blue Good-By* and *The Lonely Silver Rain* and all that went between.)

John D. MacDonald said he told those same "some day I'm gonna" writers that he'd been thinking about doing some brain surgery. Along with MacDonald you wonder at the audacity of the someones who think they can fall out of bed in the morning and dash off a novel that anybody'd want to read. We can all talk and tell a pretty good story, so it necessarily follows that we can all write a pretty good story. You know that's a crock.

You wish the mailman was more like William Faulkner when he took a turn in Oxford, Mississippi's post office and

managed to lose folks' mail. You don't want any more bad manuscripts.

But you keep reaching for the letter opener, dragging out the thick proof of a lonely effort, lifting your eyes heavenward before dropping them onto that first half page. (W.E.B. Griffin told you one time that the best writing advice you can hear is in the instructions for the form in which manuscripts must be prepared for submission to publishers: Start your story half way down the first page. Bill said there you are met with the terrible truth that you only got half a page to catch some editor's eye, that an editor will, in good conscience, reject a book on the first page of manuscript if he ain't been "spoken to.") You admit possibility, you expect disappointment. You are sympathetic following the inevitable letdown. It takes a lot of work to write a book. Even if it fails. You hope that the philosophers are right, that no work is wasted.

Then one day...

Then one day the manila envelope on the top of the two that's just been handed to you is not quite sealed. (You think later that Hitchcock would have loved that detail.) Slicing open the flap, right away you know it's not a manuscript. It's a letter. And some kind of arts tabloid, newsprint, color cover. You don't lift your eyes heavenward. It's just a letter.

"Dear Mister." You've heard this before. Then he tells you he's glad you like Southern writers because he fancies himself, now or later, a Southern writer. You can't bite down on your tongue fast enough to cut off, "Yeah, right. And I'm gonna be a brain surgeon."

But...

But you find you like the voice of the letter writer. It is an honest voice. Behind the voice is some intelligence. Some

confidence. And he tells you you might want to read his story in the accompanying little newspaper. You are still standing at your desk. You glance at your watch. Why not? You open to the page where a story called “The Hole” begins. You notice, with some relief, that it stops on the same page. This is not much more than the proverbial half-page. The litmus test first sentence goes down easy. A paragraph falls away, taking you with it, down, down. You are being sucked into a story. You get this sinking feeling you’re going to stand there and finish the whole thing.

And in moments you are done.

Your legs are wobbly. You want a cigarette. But you don’t smoke.

Your bookstore manager Martin walks by, catches the look on your face, notes the paper in your hand, asks, “What’s up?” You don’t so much speak as wave the paper, and because he knows you so well, he walks over and takes the paper. You ask Martin to sit in the armchair. You walk out into the bookstore to let your breathing ease back down into the depths of your chest where it belongs. Your mind settles. A question forms, “Who the hell is this guy?”

From behind you, “Who is this guy?”

“What’d you think of the story?”

Then Martin tells you how the story drilled into his brain the way it did your own, tells you in words you only partly register—you want to get on the phone. There was a phone number on that letter, wasn’t there?

Then you’ve got him on the phone. He’s down there in Louisiana some place. He’s got some more stories. He’s published a few here and there. He studied some with Tim Gautreaux. You are brash and get right to the point. You want to know if he’s got an agent. “Not yet,” he tells you. That confidence again.

He says to you, “Let me send you some more stories. You read ‘em. We’ll talk.”

While you are off at a beach house avoiding distractions, thumbing through his pages, one story to the next, unbelieving of the gift of storytelling in near equal measure you find in each story, he’s on the phone asking another Louisiana author what she knows about you. That author, she is doing you right, yeah. She’s telling him she believes he can work better with you than with a New York agent.

Then, when you’re back at work, back on the phone to Louisiana, he tells you he’ll be coming near enough to your bookstore in a couple of

weeks that he can swing by, no problem. You discover he’s on his honeymoon up in Charleston, and on his way back home, he’ll stop in Fairhope at Over the Transom Bookstore. The two of you will sit and visit some.

You are standing in the front of the bookstore. Waiting. The postman comes in, leaves some mail, a book or two, the day’s complement of manila envelopes. As he’s going out the door, he brushes past a big man walking into the bookstore with a woman. This’ll be your writer guy. That’s gotta be his new wife.

He walks straight up to you, sticks out his hand. He calls your name. Doesn’t hang a question mark on the end of it. You nod, and he says, “Dayne Sherman. Glad to meet you.”

More than two hours later, his wife browsing the stores, calls once from her cell phone. He tells her, “Another half hour.” An hour and a half more, you see the writer to the door. Step to the sidewalk with him, confirming that, though he doesn’t yet have a book, you will get to the print shop and order a special printing of a story that burned you when you read it, three hundred or so copies of a chapbook so he’d have something to sign after reading in your bookstore on the last day of July, taking the place of Melinda Haynes, who had to cancel.

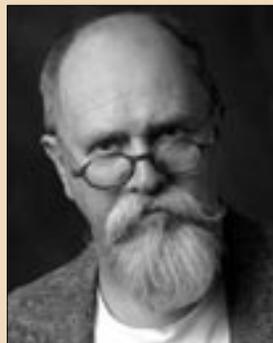
A couple of weeks later, the printer calls to say your chapbooks are ready. “How do they look?” you ask him on the phone. “Good looking,” he says. You know they are good reading. Good looking, good reading, that about covers it.

You’ve done this lots of times before, but driving across town to Nall Printing to pick up your books, you get excited. Another book, by God. What the world needs. “Nothing so important as the book can be,” said Maxwell Perkins. Damn straight.

Then you walk in, and Buddy, sashaying up to you ahead of all that smell of ink and new paper, the clack and hum of presses through the door behind him, hands you a five-and-a-half by eight-and-a-half chapbook, *Hard to Remember, Hard to Forget*. It could be nitroglycerin, the way you hold your

breath. First thing you see, right there on the cover is that quote that Rick Bragg gave you after reading a typescript of the story: “Dayne Sherman writes the way I would if I was young enough to start again.”

You lift your eyes heavenward and thank god for manila envelopes.



*Sonny Brewer owns Over the Transom Bookstore in Fairhope. He is an editor and writer. His novel Walking Across the River is due out in 2005.*

# University of North Alabama Celebrates Stribling

by William E. Smith, Jr.

The University of North Alabama hosted the 2003 T.S. Stribling Celebration as part of its 2003 Fine Arts Festival. The event was held March 7-9, 2003. The festival honored the late Florence resident T. S. Stribling and included more than thirty programs, sessions, and activities. Highlights from this year's event included a presentation ceremony establishing the T. S. Stribling scholarship, a dramatic reading of Stribling's Broadway play *Rope*, the unveiling of the T. S. Stribling marker, and recognizing the 2003 T. S. Stribling Writing Competition winners.

The T. S. Stribling/Books-A-Million scholarship was endowed through the generous donation of twenty thousand dollars by Books-A-Million to the University of North Alabama. The scholarship will be awarded through UNA's Department of English. Sandra B. Cochran, president of Books-A-Million, made the check presentation to UNA President Robert Potts and English Department Chairman Dr. Bill Foster.

UNA alumnus Steve Viall directed the readers' theater presentation of *Rope*. The play adaptation of Stribling's novel

*Teetfallow* originally appeared on Broadway at the Biltmore Theatre in 1928. *Rope* was introduced by Al Head, executive director of the Alabama State Council for the Arts, and featured numerous professional actors.

The final day of this year's celebration included recognizing the 2003 T. S. Stribling Writing Competition winners. All three winners from the middle school division were students of Weeden Middle School. First place went to Caroline Tomlinson. Elliot Broder finished second. Amanda Yeargan placed third.

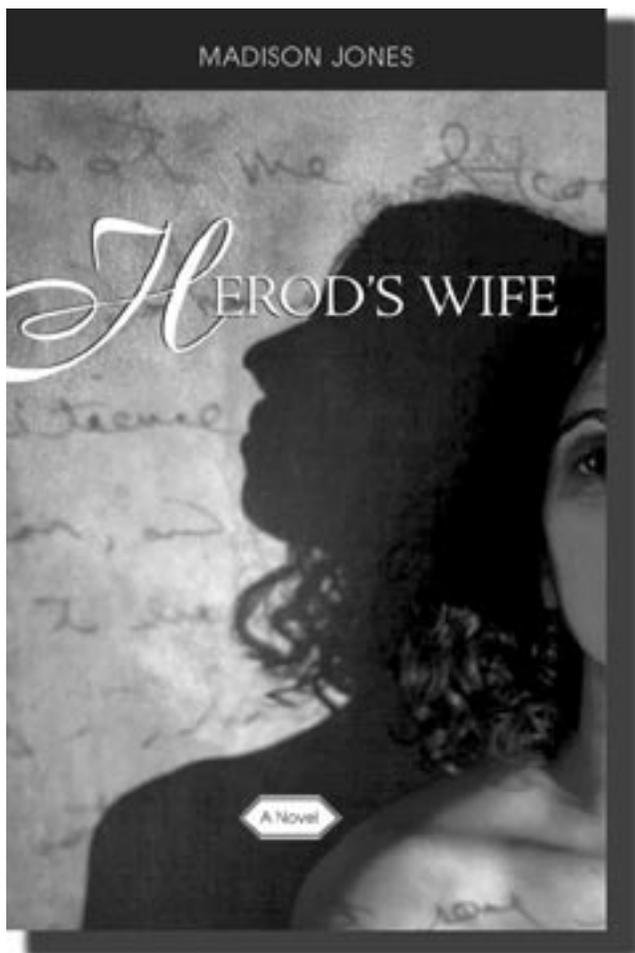
Winners from the high school division were students from Coffee High School and Bradshaw High School. The winners were Ian Brown, first place, Luke Breland, second place, and Scott Fortner, third place. Honorable mention went to Roshan Ahmed, Caleb Darnell, Nathaniel Williams, Margaret McCloy, and Ashley Pier.

The 2003 celebration coincided with the re-issuing of Stribling's famous southern trilogy (*The Forge*, *The Store*, and *Unfinished Cathedral*). Set in Lauderdale County, the trilogy spans North Alabama life from the Antebellum Period through the Industrial Revolution. A special limited edition box set commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stribling's graduation from UNA is available through the UNA National Alumni Association (256-765-4201).



Above: Middle School Winners; Amanda Yeargan, 3rd place, Elliot Broder, 2nd place, Caroline Tomlinson, 1st place. Near left: Stribling Marker; Ken Vickers, Randy Cross, William Smith, and Wilton Eckley. Far left: High School Winners; front row; Darlene Montgomery, Bradshaw High School Teacher; Roshan Ahmed, Honorable Mention, Margaret McCloy, Honorable Mention, Ashley Pier, Honorable Mention, Jenny Ozbirn, Coffee High School Teacher. Back Row; Scott Fortner, 3rd place; Luke Breland, 2nd place; Ian Brown, 1st place

# Desperate acts of deceit and manipulation.



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MADISON JONES

**A timely new novel—evocative of the biblical story of the beheading of John the Baptist—by a major American writer.**

Hugh Helton, a prosperous attorney in a progressive town, has married his brother's ex-wife, Nora. As Hugh negotiates his relationships with his new spouse, her daughter, Jean, and parish priest Father John Riley, Nora's growing hate for the church into which they were all born and from which they have all lapsed drives her to desperate acts of deceit and manipulation.

Father Riley himself wrestles with his own sense of purpose and mission. But when Nora attempts to discredit him as an authority figure in the minds of both her husband and their community, she uses her devoted daughter as the springboard for a series of accusations against the priest that has catastrophic results for all involved.

Grappling with issues of faith, trust, family loyalty, child molestation, and scandal in the Catholic Church, *Herod's Wife* is a fictional exploration of subjects from today's headlines. It illuminates the isolation and search for meaning of characters young and old,

innocent and experienced, in a rapidly changing and bewildering southern landscape. Madison Smartt Bell, author of *All Soul's Rising*, writes, "The main plot revolves around a mother pressuring a child to express her will in a more concrete way than she would or could herself—so that the child ultimately commits acts which are both criminal and morally horrifying. . . . [*Herod's Wife*] is a morality play set in contemporary conditions, with its eye on eternal verities." George Garrett writes, "This is an original and first rate work of fiction, worthy of its maker and his earned and well-deserved reputation."

**Madison Jones** is the author of 10 previous novels, including *An Exile* and *A Cry of Absence*. He has won the T. S. Eliot Award from the Ingersoll Foundation, the Michael Shaara Award from the United States Civil War Center, and the Harper Lee Award.

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## A Broken Thing

by Marlin Barton

Frederic C. Beil, 2003

\$24.95, Cloth

Marlin Barton, whose fine short story collection *The Dry Well* was set in and around the imaginary Black Belt town of Riverfield, Alabama, returns to that place for his family saga, *A Broken Thing*. In this novel, which takes place in the mid-seventies, the setting is so sensitively and accurately rendered that those familiar with the place are bound to nod their heads repeatedly. Nothing in the book seems to be exaggerated or sensationalized for dramatic effect, and while Barton understands metaphor and indirection as well as the next writer, his motifs—such as Civil War history—fit so comfortably into his story that there is never any sense of forcing. In my recent reading, only Kentucky nov-

elist Silas House uses setting with such precision and profound effect.

A dusty coat of melancholy hangs over Barton's world, and as we are introduced to his principal characters, we encounter secrets, repressions, resentments, lies, and even truths used at various times as both bludgeons and defensive weapons. The central character, Seth, just on the brink of adolescence, lives with his father, Conrad, after his parents' divorce. He chafes more and more under his father's smothering, obsessive love, but he does not want to cause problems to anyone, even if that means denying his deepest feelings. He greatly misses his mother, Laura, who, according to Conrad, is unable to take care of her son properly because of her history of depression and suicidal tendencies. Describing his life after the divorce, Seth says, "I felt broken up and scattered, like old bones. I needed a place where I didn't feel I was in pieces." The real heart of the novel is Seth's slow process toward reintegration. We see him finally assert himself against the controlling influence of his father and accept his need for his mother. And, because of his assertion, Seth leads other characters to face their own failings far better than they have been able to do previously.

The novel uses first-person narrations by a series of excellently drawn characters. Not only do we hear the voices of Seth, Conrad, and Laura, but there is also Seth's older half-brother Michael who, lacking the attention of his father, develops a destructive tendency, especially toward himself. In addition, we hear from Conrad's mother, May, a no-nonsense down-to-earth woman with a strong sense of family loyalty, and there is one short section from Emily, Laura's mother, whose death initiates the novel. The danger of the structure Barton has chosen is that the story might sprawl and have no narrative thread. But through a slow process of revelations and concealments, Barton moves the plot along masterfully.

Barton does not flinch from showing the tremendous power individuals have to hurt others, but neither does he present a world without the possibility of forgiveness and atonement. As I read the book, I was struck by how wonderfully it depicts the necessity of accommodating an imperfect world. Barton has no utopian illusions in *A Broken Thing*, but he understands perfectly the possibility of forgiveness, and therein lies the cathartic effect the novel has as it moves to its close.

Barton uses an image of restoration to underscore his theme as he shows us Conrad fixing up the old family home. Conrad offers this insight:

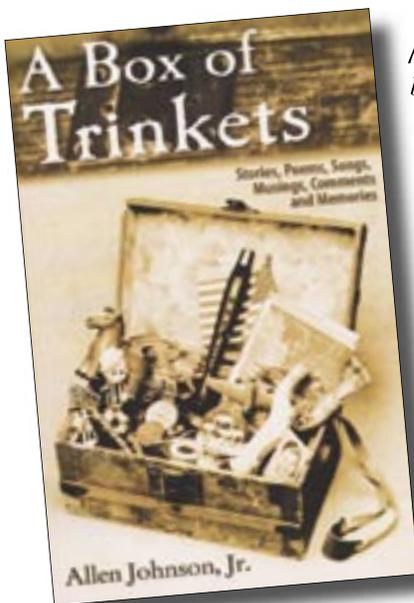
Human relationships are far more complex than carpentry and masonry, and we are all unskilled laborers. Maybe time, the very thing that does such damage to a house, is the only thing that can repair the people who live within it. Yet we can't just sit waiting. We have to try our hand.

By novel's end, we see that both Conrad and the other characters are making an effort to repair damages, and it is quite moving to witness what the ancient Greeks called *anagnorisis*, which at its most profound level means the moral recognition that comes through suffering.

The final words of the book are Seth's thoughts about his family: "for one long moment I have the strength in my arms to hold them and pull them tight against me, and then I find the strength to let them go." Barton understands that in a well-lived life the need to be bound and the need to be free must come to a workable balance. This is the lesson that the reader either learns or finds reaffirmed in Barton's *A Broken Thing*.

---

*Norman McMillan, author of Distant Son: An Alabama Boyhood, is a Black Belt native. He lives in Montevallo with his wife, Joan.*



### A Box of Trinkets by Allen Johnson Jr.

Premium Press, Nashville,  
2002  
\$10, Paper

Be prepared to be unprepared for this book!

Alabama author Allen Johnson Jr., a great teller of children's tales (see the Picker McClicker books, *The Christmas Tree Express*, *A Breeze in the Willows*, *My Brother's Story*), also has much to say as an adult—and he says it in a fun and

engaging manner. Johnson's pages are full of potato soup surprises (start on page 83), feisty army sergeants (start on page 1), inventive enlisted grunts (start on page 22), luxury yacht voyages (start on page 84), train rides you wish you had taken yourself (start on page 79), and an occasional slap on the wrist for all the silly things society tries to serve up without first being asked (read entire book).

Getting real up-close and personal, Allen tells you how he found his British bride—just when he had about given up hope of meeting a woman who would actually look him in the eye (page 105).

Read with joy the exploits and thoughts of an unapologetic Southern writer who's been there and sometimes done that a few more times than you and I.

---

*Jim Reed, columnist and author, is curator for The Museum of Fond Memories and owner of Reed Books, Alabama's largest old-book loft, in Birmingham. He is co-editor of the arts and literary quarterly, Birmingham Arts Journal.*

### One More River to Cross:

The Selected Poetry of  
John Beecher  
by John Beecher  
Edited with an introduction by  
Steven Ford Brown  
Forward by Studs Terkel

NewSouth Books, 2003  
\$20, Paperback

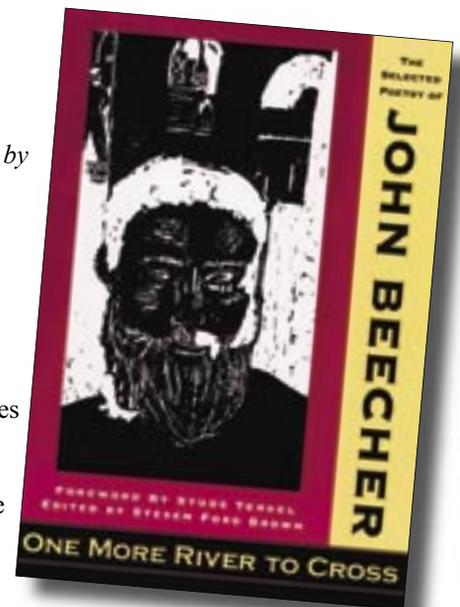
In *One More River to Cross*, John Beecher sketches a Whitmanesque vista of an industrialized South during the first three quarters of the twentieth century. This is poetry as history, a chronicle of the "foundrymen millwrights ingot chasers mixer men and steel pourers," the people who stuck through hard times, won the war, and made American industry work.

Beecher also narrates the story of "all the sharecroppers/white and black/asking the good Lord Jesus/to look down/and see how they were suffering." Present, too, are "black girls from Birmingham/with blood upon their Sunday finery/and faces blown away."

Beecher's pathos often translates into wrath. His poems celebrate the mill worker, the migrant farmer and the civil rights marcher while pointing a cold bony finger at robber barons, landlords and the police who protect them.

Beecher's verse may lack the polish of such contemporaries as Robert Frost, but what he lacks in finesse he makes up for with conviction, "Beecher's damn truth" as Studs Terkel calls it in his introduction.

Editor Steven Ford Brown begins this collection with two long poems. The first, "And I Will Be Heard," traces Beecher's genealogy from a colonial blacksmith to Lyman Beecher,



founder of the Underground Railroad, and his daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe. His father, an executive with the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company in Birmingham, brought a young Beecher into the mills where he labored among many of his subjects.

His historic lineage firmly rooted in social protest and industrial capitalism, Beecher then indicts the newsmakers of his day—Henry Ford, Charles Lindbergh, William Randolph Hurst, John L. Lewis, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and others.

“Think It Over, America” readies this country for war with Germany. Beecher writes, “We have got to stop Hitler,” but not at the expense of “slum clearance and old age pensions and workers’ wages...and all the rest of the New Deal.” He then cautions America against military, economic, and racial imperialism.

Brown continues *One More River to Cross* chronologically. As the decades pass, readers discover an insider’s view of the labor movement, the Great Depression, World War II, and the Civil Rights Era. Beecher places his readers on the ingot lines, the bread lines, the front lines, and the picket lines. His imagery is often violent, always sharp. “Report to the Stockholders” begins:

he fell off his crane  
and his head hit the steel floor and broke like an egg  
he lived a couple of hours with his brains bubbling out  
and then he died.

With a nod toward Edgar Lee Masters, Beecher writes ironic vignettes from the points of view of America’s historically disenfranchised. “We Are the Americans” introduces six tragic characters who suffer red baiting, torpedoes, corrupt politicians, foreclosure, racism, and death in battle. “To Live and Die in Dixie” records a racial divide in an Old South Beecher later wills “dead and gone.”

Beecher ultimately warns against “a uniformity of view... the reigning imbecility of belief!”

Brown ends Beecher’s record with the poet’s perceived legacy:

Dissect my corpse in seminars.  
Transmogrify my bones to index cards.  
Hang my dead portrait in the library  
and crucify your living rebels still.

---

*Danny Gamble is a teaching writer with Writing Our Stories, a project of the Alabama Department of Youth Services and the Alabama Writers’ Forum, Inc.*

## Beyond the Burning Bus:

The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town  
by *Phil Noble*

NewSouth Books, 2003  
\$24.95, CLoth

An account of the Civil Rights Movement in Anniston has been told in a book called *Beyond the Burning Bus: The Civil Rights Revolution in a Southern Town*. The Rev. Phil Noble wrote the book as he saw the events unfold from his position as the head of the bi-racial Human Relations Council formed by Anniston’s mayor in 1963. It was the first such council on race relations in Alabama, possibly the first in the South, and while its efforts to calm and resolve tensions in Anniston can never be measured exactly, its formation might be one reason Anniston never had the problems of Birmingham or Selma.

Anniston had plenty of civil rights troubles, though, and the book begins with the telling of the most infamous, the burning bus incident on May 14, 1961, when a violent crowd attacked the Freedom Riders on U.S. Highway 78 near Anniston. The book focuses on the time between that incident and other violent acts, such as shootings into the homes of black leaders on the same day of the Birmingham church bombing, attacks on black leaders when the Public Library of Anniston-Calhoun County was integrated, and the random murder of an innocent Anniston citizen, Willie Brewster.

Noble researched the book well and tells of the historical influences leading up to the events of the 1960s. It ends with a look-back of thirty years when the Nobles, who now

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live in Decatur, Georgia, visited Anniston and observed improved race relations.

Noble's writing is safe in that the worst attitudes and acts of prejudice by many leading citizens are not discussed, but readers can detect that Noble knows more than he's telling. The book would be weightier had Noble risked being offensive, not for the sake of being hurtful but for reflection and learning, as did Birmingham author Diane McWhorter in her book, *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama—The Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution*. It earned her a Pulitzer. Noble's efforts are "noble," though, and will be appreciated, especially since it's a firsthand story.

Readers throughout the state will have a clearer understanding of what happened in Anniston during the civil rights years, and maybe what happened in many of their own towns and cities during a dark era of Alabama history.

---

*Sherry Kughn is executive secretary at The Anniston Star and co-directs the Accent on the Author program at the Anniston library.*

## Bonnie Plant Farm:

A Granddaughter's Memoirs  
by Betty Paulk Adams

Bullock Publishing Co., 2003  
\$19.95, Illustrated Paperback

"Travel with me through the life and times of the Paulk family" invites this charming illustrated volume. Author Betty Paulk Adams shares her memories of rural Southern life in the mid-twentieth century, but her stories and family pictures re-create a period that seems much more than fifty years ago. Although some might say, with justification, that it's an era better forgotten, Paulk's slim memoir is worth reading. The book does, indeed, give us a view much closer to Scarlett's than to Mammy's, but we're not living in Tara here, either. The white planters who founded Bonnie Plant Farm in Bullock County, Alabama, worked together with the local black community to create a business that provided—and still provides—jobs for hundreds of rural Alabamians.

Illustrated with archive photos from Bonnie Plant Farm records and family albums, *Bonnie Plant Farm: A Granddaughter's Memoirs* tells a three-generation story of faith and hard work, family values, and community spirit. Mrs. Adams, a granddaughter of the company founder and family patriarch, Livingston Paulk, punctuates her narrative with verses from familiar hymns. Her memories of family life, business activity, and community characters encourage readers to believe that a successful business can be built on a foundation of family values, religious faith, and social responsibility.

More than simplistic nostalgia, Adams's book is better described as a literary version of primitive art. With a similarly

naïf style and point of view, the stories in *Bonnie Plant Farm* render a particular time and place accessible to modern readers. In her poem "Snake," poet Mary Oliver says, "There are so many stories, more beautiful than answers." Despite raising questions with ugly answers, the stories here have their own beauty and may just open up new viewpoints to readers.

Adams indirectly acknowledges changing mores and shows some contemporary social awareness, as in the slightly defensive claim in her preface that "the love of God in one's heart reaches to all races." Using a child's point of view for events in the '50s defuses racial tensions that adults, including Adams herself, would notice today. We see little Betty sitting among workers at the wrapping tables and "helping" the field hands pull plants, but only until she gets tired. Her adult perspective reminds us in contrast that the farm laborers worked "from dawn until dusk and even far into the night."

Like a primitive painting, Adams's descriptions of the rural south in the early twentieth century present their detailed picture without irony. The women pulling seedlings in the fields sing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," like a movie scene. One might suspect idealizing here, except that Adams also recalls the packinghouse foreman yelling, "Come on! Hurry up! We need more crates! Let's move!" Readers may find their own irony in the fact that "every afternoon Daddy sat in our den and watched the 6 o'clock news and weather" to plan the next day's work.

On the other hand, Adams's lack of irony gives her voice a rare sincerity. Her section on "Faithful Workers" and the chapter titled "The Community Characters" would otherwise seem condescending. We learn folk wisdom from the family's domestic employees and canny survival skills from the "characters." We also learn that this privileged white family, county leaders, built a new stucco ranch house when the style was a status symbol. However, it was Mama herself who "made the curtains for all of our bedrooms," not a black seamstress, and the family lived with "clean sheets over the windows" for weeks after moving in. In another, more humorous scene, we see little Betty Paulk eavesdropping on the party line. She hears no scandal, though. All she learned was that Mr. Shaw was "fixin' to fry the chicken" for his mid-day dinner.

Travel with Betty Adams to a time when the forty miles from Union Springs "uptown" to Montgomery was an all-day adventure and life was punctuated by tent revivals. Whether you're a historian, a sociologist, or a gardener curious about Bonnie Plant Farm, the trip will be worth your time. Adams joins other literary lights from Union Springs—Annie Mae Turner, Kathleen Cope, and *Amaryllis* publisher Lyn Jinks—to prove once again that Southern Literature grows from deep and tangled roots.

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*Karen Pirnie teaches English at Auburn University Montgomery.*

## Four Spirits

by Sena Jeter Naslund

New York: William Morrow, 2003  
\$26.95, Cloth

Forty years ago, Sena Jeter Naslund began a journey that culminated this year with publication of her novel *Four Spirits*. A native of Birmingham, Naslund grew up during the beginnings of the civil rights movement, a movement that brought infamy to the Magic City and tragedy to its participants and to its onlookers. Naslund, a student at Birmingham-Southern College when the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed on September 15, 1963, vowed that if she ever became a successful writer she would tell the story of this turbulent time and of the people who lived it. After five books—and the tremendous success of *Ahab's Wife*—Naslund returned to her quest of “exploring the deep spiritual root of the huge and complex American civil rights struggle” (Author's Note) and has created this tribute to the four little girls killed in that bombing.

In *Four Spirits*, Naslund successfully weaves the historical events of those years into the fabric of her fictional characters' lives, producing a powerful narrative that resonates with voices of black and white, young and old, liberal and conservative, native Southerner and Northern outsider, believer and non-believer, educated and ignorant, saint and sinner. Throughout all pervade the spirits of those four young innocents, who sing to the souls willing to receive them.

The structure of the novel is much like that of the *monomyth*, the archetypal journey of the hero who ventures forth to face the demons of an unknown world and returns with a boon to save his people or to save himself. Stella Silver's voice bears many resemblances to that of her creator, and she is the heroic figure who leads the reader through this journey—from the childhood innocence of Norwood prior to 1954, to recognition of the duality of life in the midst of the civil rights struggle in Birmingham, to final acceptance of her own identity, her individuation (in Jungian terms), in the aftermath of the violence and tragedy in which she has become enmeshed.

Orphaned at five and living with her two elderly aunts, Stella realizes she is “different” from her classmates at Phillips High School, different in that she understands, and appreciates, the comments of a teacher who dared to condemn those who judged individuals by the pigment of their skin. However, like most whites in Birmingham, Stella views the violence of the fire hose attacks and random bombings from the safety of Vulcan's observation tower, a physical and intellectual detachment that allows her to refuse the call to become involved personally with the Movement. Only with the help of her guide and mentor, Cat Cartwright, a wheel-chair bound Phi Beta Kappa classmate at Birmingham-Southern College, does Stella venture across that threshold to experience. She agrees to join Cat in teaching GED classes to black

students at Miles College, a decision that leads to encounters which threaten her life and, more dangerously, threaten her soul. Stella emerges from the darkness of this world—a world peopled not by shades but by ordinary folks like her who are caught up in something far bigger than themselves—with a greater understanding of her society and of the forces that shaped it, with a greater understanding of herself.

Each of the voices the reader hears in *Four Spirits* tells of his or her heroic and, yes, sometimes demonic, journey. There are the voices of the historical figures, Fred Shuttlesworth and Martin Luther King, Jr., who are committed to the Movement and courageously offer their lives for the cause. There are the voices of the Aunt Krits and Aunt Pratts of the world, those whites who acknowledge the reality but remain safely ensconced within their cloistered domain. There are the voices of the blacks who have no choice but to live it: single mom Christine Taylor; high school dropout Charles Powers; hotel bellman TJ LaFayt and his wife, Agnes; Arcola and Gloria, volunteer teachers for the H.O.P.E. project and for sit-ins; Lionel Parrish, minister who understands well the waywardness of his flock. There are the voices of outsiders like Jonathan Bernstein Green, a New York Jew who once believed in the Eagle Scout oath. And there is the voice of Ryder Jones, a Klansman who aspires to more power and respect than that accorded a service station attendant. There is also the voice of his long-suffering wife, Lee, who understands better than anyone the power of the evil lurking within everyone's soul.

Naslund masterfully weaves together these voices to give us that full, rich tapestry, layered much as her character Old Aunt Charlotte layers her quilts about her for her funeral shroud: “A soft, old-friend quilt closest to her. Old on bottom, newer, newest. Newest, hardest, and prettiest on top.”

Naslund's quest in writing this novel about the 1960s, as she says, was “to re-create through words what it was like to be alive then: how ordinary life went on, ...how people worked ordinary jobs, tried to get an education, worshiped, looked for entertainment, grew up, died, participated in the great changes of the civil rights struggle or stood aside and watched the world change” (Author's Note). She brilliantly captures the essence of each of these fictional characters' lives as they experience the trials and tribulations of their individual journeys, and, in so doing, she conveys the journey of an entire society—the South—in its trek toward self-realization.

*Four Spirits* may be a painful journey for many readers, especially for those of us who lived the story, those of us who were there, those of us who remained safely under Vulcan's torch and never ventured into the valley below. Naslund's words, however, will strike a chord in any reader who has experienced pain, hope, and love. As her character Reverend Mr. Lionel Parrish eloquently says in his sermon at Joseph Coat-of-Many-Colors Church: “We been together in grief before. Us here. We don't have enough of anything else, but grief.... But I tell you, I tell you, I tell you. Together today.

Together tomorrow. Together forever. One world! God didn't make but one world."

Sena Jeter Naslund makes a world of stories, stories that enable all of us to make our heroic journeys with a better understanding of ourselves and our society if we are willing to listen to the songs of those spirits, the songs that are beyond words.

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## Montgomery: The River City by Wayne Greenhaw

River City Publishing, 2003  
\$39.95, Cloth

Wayne Greenhaw came to Montgomery almost forty years ago intending to stay only one year. Then he began meeting residents of the city, listening to their family stories and learning the history of the town. He came to realize how apt was the description of Grover Cleveland Hall, Jr., "As in the case of highly endowed individuals, the city's personality is complex; it sometimes baffles newcomers, sometimes frustrates them."

Greenhaw has put together residents' stories as well as extensive research to compile *Montgomery: The River City*. The work provides both a good introduction to the casual reader wishing to learn about the factors that helped create Montgomery and an opportunity for a long-term resident to gain greater understanding of his milieu.

Since the work covers over 460 years in the development of Montgomery and its surrounding area, understandably much of the history is compressed. However, Greenhaw entertains in this 219-page work sprinkled with colorful anecdotes of Montgomery's settlers and subsequent inhabitants. He tells both the good and the bad of a city that grew from a rough and tumble frontier town to a community that prides itself on its cultural resources. The reader will read of economic development from Andrew Dexter's Land Office purchase of local property to escape Boston scandals through the cotton shipping days, and the arrival of the Wright Brothers, up to recent development by David Bronner and by private investors. The reader will learn of early theatrical events as well as the relatively recent establishment of the Shakespeare Festival. Montgomery is presented through accounts of ordinary citizens as well as through the eyes of noted travelers from the Marquis de Lafayette to F. Scott Fitzgerald.

The narrative conveys a strong sense of the atmosphere of the town during various periods. Most dramatic are those eras immediately preceding and through the Civil War, the world wars, and the period of the civil rights movement and George Wallace's tenure. Greenhaw describes the well-known days of

Montgomery as the capital of the Confederacy but also tells of its less publicized surrender a few days before Lee's surrender. Among other significant, often overlooked items of Montgomery history that Greenhaw includes is part of the text of the speech Martin Luther King, Jr. presented on the steps of the Capitol at the end of the Selma-to-Montgomery march.

Although the book is not a definitive scholarly work but more of an introduction to Montgomery's history, the reviewer often wished for footnotes. Citations to works used are general, not page specific, and at many points no sources were attributed. A timeline is provided but a table of contents and an index would be helpful when one wants to retell an anecdote or check background. Nevertheless, its up-to-date bibliography may serve as a helpful starting point for readers. The text is enriched throughout by photographs and reproductions of portraits.

The first few chapters are drier with fewer personal anecdotes available, but the reviewer hopes that most readers will persevere to the more compelling and, incidentally, better edited parts. If not, these readers will miss a treat.

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*Since retiring from the Alabama Public Library Service, Alice Stephens works as a consultant and serves on the executive board of the Alabama Center for the Book.*

## Ecstatic in the Poison by Andrew Hudgins

Overlook Press, 2003  
\$24.95, Cloth

Andrew Hudgins is perhaps the best storyteller writing poetry today. His five previous books of poems have given us clear yet lyrical narratives that go right to the heart and may haunt us a lifetime. His best poems, whether personal or historical, whether horrific, bizarre, or elegiac, brim with humor and sadness and generosity.

His newest book, *Ecstatic in the Poison*, takes a similarly tragicomic approach, but the poems find a much greater range in form. More than half of the poems are written in a kind of light verse, close to a hymn or ballad, as opposed to his more characteristic iambic pentameter. The first poem, for example, "In," revisits Hudgins' Alabama childhood when the mosquito trucks fogged his neighborhood with D.D.T.:

When first we heard from blocks away  
the fog truck's blustery roar,  
we dropped our toys, leapt from our meals,  
and scramble out the door.

The poem has a nursery rhyme feel, but flirts with danger like the best nursery rhymes and fairy tales, as the children dance and blur and turn invisible in their misty "temporary heaven":

Freed of bodies by the fog,  
we laughed, we sang, we shouted.  
We were our voices, nothing else.  
Voice was all we wanted.

The white clouds tumbled down our streets  
pursued by spellbound children  
who chased the most distorting clouds,  
ecstatic in the poison.

This form does much for Hudgins' narratives. It gives them a light, ironic touch. Although it occasionally constrains subjects and forces endings, it also compresses stories to their essentials, yielding a denser lyricism. The strongly enjambed lines and slant rhymes give tension to the story but hint at darker, more complicated themes lurking beneath it—in "In"'s case, the children's spirit of play, first spiritual urges, even artistic impulses, all spawned in poisonous clouds.

Both this first poem, "In," and the last poem, "Out," are, in fact, pared down, light verse/hymnal versions of two poems from Hudgins' earlier book, *The Glass Hammer: a Southern Childhood*. The two poems work as autobiographical parentheses around a startlingly wide variety of poems—iambic pentameter and tetrameter narratives, fractured pentameter, even structured free-verse. "In" and "Out" also state many of the book's themes, and between the prelude and postlude we find more people from Hudgins' past but also fascinating, memorable characters like the mysterious prankster who completely rebuilds a Cadillac in an attic; two Russian generals moments before their execution; Celtic warriors taking part in a deeply disturbing funeral ritual; even "The Lord God walking in the cool of the evening."

Nearly every poem touches, in some way or other, on death. Rarely morbid and never sentimental, however, the poems muse on our own deaths, the deaths of those close to us, the grace with which we and others face death, the stories we leave behind after death, and the manner in which we tell those stories.

One of the best poems in the book is "Come to Harm," in which Hudgins fits all these death themes into one of the hymn/light verse poems about, appropriately, singing hymns with his mother:

We were driving from one state to another  
my father already there,  
and we'd been singing hymns, hymns  
soaring from the car

with our joy at passing on to glory,  
where loss would turn to gain,  
our wounds would heal—and in the silence  
after our last refrain

my mother said she'd known, known  
before the call had come,  
her father had died. She'd felt his passing.  
She'd known "he'd come to harm"—

as if Death had enticed him. As if  
he had returned to drinking  
and wed Death's hootchie-cootchie girl,  
Death's crude seducer. Thinking

"True Tales of the Supernatural!" I wondered  
how I could tell this story  
and make my friends shudder. Or failing that—  
I was this predatory—

how I could make them laugh. I flipped  
"There's a world beyond this world"  
to "My mother is a silly woman"—  
and back again, as we hurled

through the darkness singing songs of hope.  
She told her sacred story.  
We sang. We laughed. She died. I wept.  
Her story isn't mine. I'm sorry—

and not—about how I have told it.  
Who knows what's coming after  
There may be another world. There may.  
There will be laughter.

"Come to Harm" touches on nearly everything Hudgins does best—the humor, the tenderness, the strangeness, and the generosity—yet it also questions his own role as a storyteller, the nature of telling stories, and the reasons we need to tell them. Like many of the poems in *Ecstatic in the Poison*, it is not only moving but also full of shrewdness and full of song.

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Poet Richard Newman lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

## Kingdom of the Instant

by Rodney Jones

Houghton Mifflin, 2002  
\$22, Cloth

As the title suggests, Rodney Jones' seventh poetry collection, *Kingdom of the Instant*, marks a slight change of tack for the poet. It is a book concerned with the instant, a particular moment in time, and many poems break with his more traditional narrative approach and embrace a denser lyricism, stringing longer poems together with fractured lyrical gestures and "instances" of memory.

The book's first poem, "Keeping Time," sets the tone,

beginning, “To be there with it, tock to its tick, mud/to its chink, oh, but running, unthinking, /alive...” Here Jones expresses a joyful urgency of the moment, though it is a moment both playful and musical as well as ominous. “Why linger?” he asks. “Why why when when wicks the flesh right off the bone....”

Jones rests the foundation of *Kingdom of the Instant* on several longer poems. The first one, “A Whisper Fight at the Peck Funeral Home,” composed of eleven sections, begins “No balm in heaven. Bone light. Things tick as they desiccate.”

Similarly fragmented, the poem’s narrative lies buried under lyrical moments frozen in mid-sentence, distant memories jumbled with more recent ones, and even journal entries that mark and measure the past. The poem also includes a grimly funny story, told piecemeal from the undertaker’s point of view—dark humor in the face of death and sadness. After several twists and lyrical turns on the subject of death and our rituals of grieving, the poem ends with the kind of lines only Rodney Jones can write: “He looked in death placid and composed as he had never been in life, /as if he had resumed thinking/the thought he was thinking before he was born.”

Much of the rest of the book explores these themes (time, memory, mortality, the instants that comprise our lives, what lies beyond them) in more traditional, straightforward narratives. “Channel,” for example, is classic Rodney Jones:

I do not like to hurt a thing alive, even a catfish, so slow  
to perish not even Saint Thomas Aquinas  
or W. C. Fields could raise the eloquence to free its killer of  
guilt. In Florida, catfish walk.  
Nailed to an oak, skin peeled like wallpaper, catfish won’t  
stop talking in twitches.

One could say the same of these poems. “Family Mattress,” also classic Jones and perhaps an instant classic, celebrates his and his family’s past, its many instants, recorded on a dusty old family mattress.

One of the book’s richest and most successful poems, “Backwards,” offers a startling narrative of witnessing an accident but submerges it under personal and family history, musings on mortality, and jokes about time. The poem plays with the notion of looping back in time and begins, “Mind goes that way. Not life. All yesterday/was like a siesta taken by someone else...” It strikes the refrain, “Inside they were working the body very hard,” several times throughout the poem before it concludes with the lines that give the book its title:

Days flash-seal with a pop like canning jars.  
There was an olive in an empty martini glass.  
There was the light of one place: the kingdom  
of the instant against the democracy of time.

The last section of the book, perhaps inevitably, addresses

notions of a god, divinity, spiritual aches, a hereafter. It contains another of those long poems, this one in nine sections, called “Divine Love.” It’s a dense poem, and it is sometimes difficult to follow Jones’s leaps, but it contains some great moments: “...randy for the depths/ innumerable of the *Bhagavad Gita* and *I Ching*, /wisdom being a mystique all its own.../though the meat inside the mystery puff is nearly/always sex.”

The last poem of the book, “Song of Affirmation,” is a kind of prayer. It begins “From all races and nations, may the future/find among the legacies and approved minorities/ a place for the ugly, weak, stupid, and small,” cataloguing hopes for the world’s misfits and unfortunate. “For the duck-footed and pigeon-toed/may there be phone numbers to call,” Jones writes, heaping well-wishes on the luckless and alone, before concluding with qualified, if not dubious, praise, “To live in a remission of enlightenment / is to be given a faith and an irony / whose end is praise: almighty is the God.”

Rodney Jones’ previous books of poems have all been great collections because his poignant narratives have dared to be direct and accessible, to poets and non-poets alike, without losing any of their lyrical energy, their wisdom, or humility. *Kingdom of the Instant* is generally less accessible than previous works but certainly no less ambitious. Not all the poems work. Some poems here demand more work than they reward, and others, merely average, feel a little like filler. But even a merely average Rodney Jones poem is better than most poets’ best poems, and *Kingdom of the Instant* is one more book toward ensuring that Rodney Jones will be read long after this kingdom of the instant, our little moment, crumbles and fades.

Richard Newman

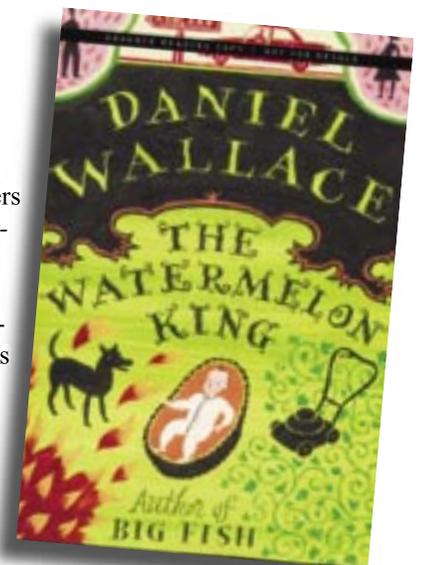
## The Watermelon King

Daniel Wallace

Houghton Mifflin, 2003  
\$23, Cloth

Daniel Wallace draws readers into his latest book, *The Watermelon King*, with his honest, concise descriptions of the locales and characters Southerners know from birth and others just imagine.

The book opens as Thomas Rider arrives on the outskirts of Ashland, Alabama—a town first introduced in



Wallace's first novel, *Big Fish*. Thomas, who was raised by his grandfather, is searching for clues about his past—knowledge of the mother who died in childbirth and the father no one will name.

We meet Thomas as he stands at an abandoned gas station on the edge of town pondering his mother's arrival nineteen years before. Thomas is unaware that the gas station, with its army of weeds and dim mirror, probably slipped into oblivion about the same time his mother put an end to the town's world-famous watermelon festival and the mysterious fertility of its soil. As Thomas gazes at his reflection imagining his mother gazing at hers, he enjoys his last moment of blissful ignorance about his roots and his destiny.

Wallace waltzes within the confines of a traditional Southern fable by introducing the necessary fictional stereotypes—the idiot, the widow, the bully, the carpenter, the men living in the past—while touching on charged topics ranging from sex to race, gender roles to the very stereotypes the author pens.

Thomas immediately immerses himself in the town's heartbreaking obsession with his mother and her destruction of Ashland's watermelon festival. Each character tells a per-

sonal version of Lucy Rider's arrival and untimely death—a version parallel to the others, but always unique. People cast blame then grin as they describe a love for the outsider who floated into their town and blew it apart.

Thomas sorts through the tales, finally coming to understand that the stories reveal as much about the tellers as his mother. He learns that the town once prided itself on its distinction as watermelon capital of the world. Every year the citizens held a festival celebrating the title, and every year the oldest male virgin—the Watermelon King—was sent into a watermelon field to lie with a woman. Lucy put an end to the festival and the town's fertility before Thomas' birth. For eighteen years the town has waited for her only son to return and resurrect history.

But Thomas learns in the end that memories are more complicated than they seem, and no story reveals the entire truth. He speaks a fabulous, terrible tale no one except a village idiot had the courage to reveal. And through hearing, living, and telling, Thomas Rider becomes a man.

I laughed out loud then fought tears as Wallace told a tale so real I almost forgot it was fiction. His simple but elegant prose continues to impress me—almost as much as his storytelling, which whispers of Faulkner and Twain. He remains an author to watch and read for years to come.

---

*Meg Pirnie is a journalist in Columbus, Georgia.*

## On the Hills of God

by Ibrahim Fawal

Newsouth Books, 1998, 2001

\$19.95, Paper

What this first novel of Ibrahim Fawal's may mean for American readers cannot be underestimated. It is a masterpiece of history, romance, maturing youth, and political tragedy of great importance. How the British and U.N. involvement in Palestine prior to May 15, 1948, that makes up so much of this book, could anticipate the American involvement in Iraq in 2003 should give Americans pause for reflection. The assumption in both cases by the intruding forces is that an English-speaking European or American country can somehow manage the affairs of a Middle Eastern country like Palestine or Iraq. As in the former case with the British, the Arabs want the Americans out.

The story involves the Arab Safi family, Dr. Jamil who plans a grand hospital in Ardallah (the fictional city), and his wife Yasmin, their adolescent son Yousif (Joseph) and the love of his life Salwa Taweel. It centers in Yousif's maturing into manhood as an impending war expands, and his hopes for marriage to Salwa (though he has to stop her marriage to another man to do so). It also focuses on the tragic events in

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the lives of the young trio of friends, Yousif (Christian), Amin (Muslim), and Isaac (Jewish). Only one battle on the Western Hill is treated in any detail, but we are made vividly aware of atrocities and losses as the war comes on.

The historical facts that inform Fawal's work date from the League of Nations Balfour Declaration (1917), which gave the British a mandate in Palestine requiring the British to help the Israelis develop a "home" in Palestine, though not a homeland. Zionist Jews took this to mean "homeland," and both the Arabs and Zionists made preparations for war as the British pulled out on May 15, 1948.

*On the Hills of God* recounts the devastation and accompanying terror and despair of the Arabs who were physically dispossessed of their homes, lands, and belongings during 1947-48. Though the Arabs were at first victorious, the 30-day truce brought about by the U.N. on June 11, 1948 enabled the Zionists sufficiently to rearm so they could drive the Arabs bodily out of Palestine into Jordan. After twenty-eight years the British were unsuccessful in solving Arab-Israeli relations or in living up to the Declaration of 1917. What does this say to Americans, in only their first year in Iraq?

With Yousif we witness barrel-bomb terrorism, the death of his father, the Arabs' killing of Isaac, the rape of the young woman Hiyam, the death of Salwa's father Anton on the long death-march toward Jordan, and the disappearance of Salwa among the thousands of refugees. Reading the history of Israel and Palestine will make a reader realize how fact and fiction come together in Fawal's graphic descriptions of what happened.

To the author's credit, *On the Hills of God* has all the makings of an excellent film. Himself a successful film maker, Fawal directs the reader just by raising the size of the type at the beginning of chapters, focusing like a camera lens to open scenes and accentuate changes in time and action. Fawal reminds us of this when he catches what a witness may see in one of the bomb scenes: "Dust particles danced in the sun rays like those in the beam of a motion picture projector." The plot itself, significant scenes, the crowd, Yousif making his speeches, the interludes of love with Salwa, and the specific, overt descriptions of wounded and dead—spare, yet telling all, almost pre-opt for film.

Like a good Middle Eastern writer, Fawal is a lover of the poetic line, and his metaphors and imagery remind us that life is more than war and hatred and politics. The *meuzzin* cries his *Qur'an* side by side with Fawal's Christian images where Salwa can appear as "an aggrieved Madonna," or Yousif before a sunset over the Mediterranean Sea is "like a man in a cathedral, letting the stillness wash over him, drinking the sunburst as though it were the elixir of life." More subtly, Fawal can enlarge the image of Yousif's father:

Obviously, according to Fawal, there was a time in Ardalah when Christian, Muslim, and Jew could live in peace. The three boys, Yousif, Amin, and Isaac, make a solemn pact of their friendship, but greed and war destroy it, as well as Dr.

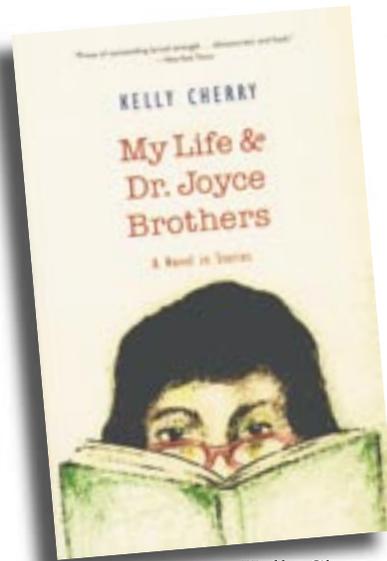
Safi's planned hospital, and everyone is displaced from the "hills of God." Things and dreams fall apart in this drama of human aspiration and suffering.

In what may be the novel's central statement, Dr. Safi declares, "As much as I love this country, it's nothing but a big cemetery. More wars have been fought here than any other place in the world." Yousif cannot understand why people who have been so much a part of their land can suddenly be deracinated from it, at the same time he says no one owns it.

If Americans are to understand the Middle East, and why we are so involved in it now, we would do well to read this novel to discover how America, too, is tied to that long history of wars, having done so little to understand why. Truth has its fictional advocate here. It is a long history, and Ibrahim Fawal has provided much to open our eyes to it.

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*Theodore Haddin is a writer, editor, and emeritus professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham.*



**My Life & Dr. Joyce Brothers**  
A Novel in Stories  
by Kelly Cherry

A Deep South Book  
University of Alabama  
Press, 2003  
\$18.95, Paper

**We Can Still Be Friends**  
by Kelly Cherry

Soho Press, 2003  
\$24, Cloth

Kelly Cherry is one of the great undiscovered treasures in American writing. Proficient in all genres—poetry, fiction, prose, drama, and translations—she writes masterful short stories. First published in 1990, *My Life and Dr. Joyce Brothers* has been reissued in paperback as part of the University of Alabama's "Deep South" series.

Nina Bryant's life is *complicated*. Now middle-aged, she has emotional baggage. Divorced and childless, she's alone again after having been dumped by a man she assumed was the great love of her life. The Wisconsin winters are depressing her, and she longs for the warmer climates of her native South. Taking matters into her own hands, Nina's decided to have a child with the help of a doctor and a young sperm donor from Memphis.

Nina's most recent break-up has forced her to revisit and re-examine her past in the hopes of making a home for herself, her dog, and her much wanted child. Her self-help regime

forces her to confront her older brother, who has dominated her imagination most of her life; a sexual violation that occurred before the days of date rape; and her aging parents. Nina's inherent kindness and good heart bring about one of the funniest "reconciliation at a funeral scenes" in recent fiction.

Written with a light touch, Nina's stories are filled with the age-old battles between the sexes. Not only does the heroine overcome her past, there's the hint of the triumphant future Cherry creates for Nina in 1999's *The Society of Friends* (University of Missouri Press).

As in *My Life and Dr. Joyce Brothers* and *The Society of Friends*, Cherry explores the themes of the quest for love, what constitutes family, and the battles between the sexes in *We Can Still Be Friends*.

While Ava Martel has heard the classic break-up line, "We can still be friends," when the handsome, too-sexy-for-his-own-good Tony Ferro waits to use the line on her during a long-distance call, something in her snaps. They've been dating and all of her fantasies lead to marriage and a child once his divorce is final. After calling her therapist and her best girl friend, Ava decides she needs to know more about Claire, the woman for whom Tony's dumped her.

Boyd, Claire's husband for the last twenty five years, has always been aware of his wife's beauty and indiscretions. Having agreed to an open marriage, he's never acted on his own impulses and is secretly pained by his wife's. Boyd, feeling a little too old to continue playing this game, sighs with resignation as he watches the mating game going on between Claire and Tony.

The ways the lives of the four characters intersect in *We Can Still Be Friends* makes for a wry, tender, and sad look at the choices women make to "have it all" and the choices men make in the hopes of making the women they love happy. The novel is heart-wrenching and deeply satisfying.

Cherry will be returning to the University of Alabama Huntsville in 2004 as eminent scholar in the Humanities.

---

*Writer and reviewer Pam Kingsbury lives in Florence, Alabama.*

## Some Heroes, Some Heroines, Some Others

by Joe Taylor

Swallow's Tale Press at Livingston Press, 2003  
\$26, Cloth; \$14.95, Paper

Joe Taylor, professor of English at the University of West Alabama in Livingston, has a previously published novel, *Oldcat and Ms. Puss: A Book of Days for You and Me*. In this volume, *Some Heroes, Some Heroines, Some Others*, he has collected seventeen short stories, thirteen of them previously published in such magazines as *The Florida Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, *The South Carolina Review*, and *The Virginia Quarterly Review*.

Make no mistake, most of these stories are not your standard realistic, slice of life, coming of age, moment of epiphany short stories. Several of these are quirky, surrealistic, even hallucinatory. They are sometimes very "literary" and allusive. Some are based on myth or folk tales. They are the creations of a very highly educated fiction writer, and they are going to be enjoyed most thoroughly by well-read readers, who will appreciate the nuances.

For example, Taylor has written a story of the unhappy life of the lesbian Angelina. Angelina is confused, unhappy, depressed, alcoholic, and, surprisingly, a Frank Sinatra fan. Her name, Angelina, is repeated throughout the story in a stylistic mannerism that should remind some readers of Melanctha, in the story "Melanctha" from Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*.

"A Puff of Roses" is built on the foundation of a medieval chivalric tale. John Wotham's wife, Sue Anne, has been unfaithful and has left him, but he still loves her and wants her back. Shelley, a witch with a magic ruby ring, among her many tools of seduction, wants to marry John, at least briefly, and become half owner of his very prosperous Frankfort, Kentucky, restaurant. She tries to bewitch poor John, the knight errant in big trouble, but he resists, saved from her Morgan le Fay witchcraft by the scent of roses, which is the scent of the Virgin Mary, but also his wife's scent. He forgives Sue Anne, and they will begin their marriage anew and, we hope, wiser.

Several of these stories are set in Kentucky, Taylor's home state, and several more in Florida. "On the Importance of Gulls" takes place in West Palm Beach and follows the lives of a group of five friends for the day or two after they discover a dead woman's body propped up against the front wall of a restaurant one of them owns. This is a realistic story, a psychological story, and a kind of philosophical rumination with each section prefaced by a quotation from Blaise Pascal. For example, section four begins: "Man's grandeur is great because he knows himself miserable./A tree does not."

Another realistic story, but with a twist, is "Alpha and Omega." This story, written fifteen years ago, describes the sexual abuse of a young boy by a priest he trusts. Yet the story ends oddly. In the world of infinite possibility in which we live, any change in the course of things could have prevented the priest from abusing the boy. In order for anything to have happened, everything from lies to silence had to happen just as it did. But then, isn't that always the way?

The lead story, "Gentle Glow," is a sensitive portrait of a very slow-witted young man. Not a mentally retarded person, but rather one of the legion of the marginally intelligent. What will become of him? "Three Lines and A Moral" tells the awful little tale of two Vietnam vets in a small Kentucky town, one now the local chief of police, the other a drunk and deranged, angry and dangerous man. The chief must act, but he knows better than anyone else in the county why Bill Green is the way he is. Vietnam changed them both forever.

These are off-beat stories and not a package from Art

Buchwald, but they are strong and worth the time of a reader who's up to them.

---

*Don Noble is host of APT's BookMark and Alabama Public Radio's "Alabama Bound." This review aired on "Alabama Bound" earlier this fall.*

## The Alphabet Parade

by Charles Ghigna  
illustrated by Patti Woods

River City Kids, 2002  
\$17.95, Hardback

## A Fury of Motion: Poems for Boys

by Charles Ghigna  
Foreword by X. J. Kennedy

Wordsong, 2003  
\$16.95, Paperback



**Halloween Night: Twenty-One Spooktacular Poems**  
by Charles Ghigna  
illustrated by Adam McCauley

Running Press Kids,  
2003  
\$15.95, Hardback

## One Hundred Shoes: A Math Reader

by Charles Ghigna  
illustrated by Bob Staake

Random House, 2002  
\$3.99, Paperback

Homewood poet Charles Ghigna clearly is at the height of his creative productivity. With four books currently in release, Ghigna is establishing himself not only as a prolific writer, but as a versatile one as well. From a collection of Halloween poems that will garner more laughs than gasps, to a beginning reader's story about the choices a centipede must make when purchasing shoes, to a dazzlingly kinetic tribute to the English alphabet, and finally to a modest compilation of poems about playing sports and living life, Ghigna demonstrates his impressive ability to both entertain children and enhance their appreciation of the world around them.

By the way, Ghigna's works certainly will appeal to

grown-up readers as well, as he has a wonderful way of calling attention to what's significant and meaningful about being alive, along with what's fun and worthy of celebration.

The "spooktacular" poems in *Halloween Night* will rhyme right into the ears of children who consider October 31 a major holiday. Writing from the point of view of a youngster at the height of his Halloween enthusiasm, Ghigna captures the most important issues associated with the Fright Night experience: what to wear, which neighbors give the best treats, who's the biggest scaredy-cat, and—most crucially—how to tackle the things that are truly terrifying. Detail and empathy prevail on every page, as in "Witch Way":

With warts on her nose  
And sharp pointy toes  
She flies through the night  
on her broom.

With covers pulled tight  
In the shadows of night,  
I hide in the dark of my room.

Through the entire collection, Ghigna seems aware of the potential for Halloween traditions to help kids face and feel empowered over their fears. Adam McCauley's whimsical illustrations assist in keeping the focus on what's fun about the holiday, providing perfect backdrops to the poems.

*One Hundred Shoes: A Math Reader*, a volume in Random House's "Step into Reading" series, is written for an audience of preschool to first grade students. Obviously influenced by theories supporting reading-across-the-curriculum approaches to education, *One Hundred Shoes* asks intriguing questions that will engage children in thinking about relationships among numbers without feeling pressed to solve any problems. Ghigna's skill in making math simultaneously real and interesting shows especially well in the following excerpt:

Shoes come in pairs.  
Pairs are so nifty.  
Two shoes in each pair,  
so you will need fifty.  
Or do you buy sets?  
Five sets of twenty?  
Ten sets of ten?  
I hope they have plenty!

Perhaps math anxiety is a phenomenon that need not be inevitable. With books like *One Hundred Shoes*, it does seem possible that early introductions to mathematical thinking can succeed in showing children that math is an integral part of our everyday lives.

Certainly, knowing and appreciating the ABCs is also vital to a child's intellectual development. Ghigna's *The Alphabet Parade* showcases a menagerie of performing humans and

animals, all proudly representing their particular letters. This parade is a delightful one; every page bursts with the bright colors of Patti Woods' illustrations, while Ghigna's text honors the impressive talents of the various representatives of the alphabet. The letter "F," for instance, is for a fox, and not just any fox either; it's for "the friendly fox who fiddles for fun." And the letter "N"? It's "for the newt who wears his corduroys," of course.

*A Fury of Motion: Poems for Boys* is a slim and rich collection of previously published and new poems by Ghigna. The foreword, written by nationally recognized poet X. J. Kennedy, challenges readers to give poetry a chance to be "fun" and to realize that its subjects can be "things you just might care about." Sure enough, there are concrete poems about playing baseball, tennis, and football, including the quite affecting "Basketball Tryout," in which a New England college coach asks a young athlete from the South where he has learned how to play.

The All-State boy from Alabama  
spun, dipped, jumped, and said,  
"High school."  
Through the boy's thick drawl  
and the gym's hollow acoustics,  
the coach misheard it as "I'ze cool."  
Pale, he called the boy "boy,"  
Preceded it with "hey,"

And followed it up with  
"that's all."

Not all the poems in *A Fury of Motion* are about that which is painful or unfair. "Shortstop," for example, presents an impressive metaphor likening the shortstop to "a patient cat" who "pounces/upon the ball,/his hands flying/above the grass,/flinging his prey/on its way...." And not all the poems are about sports. Some, including "Over Herd" and "Haircut" may be surprising in their stark challenges to conformity and cooperation. "Over Herd" is particularly chilling in this respect.

This time it will be different.  
This time we will not go  
like our bovine brothers

one by one down the ramp,  
headfirst through the chute  
into the slaughterhouse,

into the waiting slug of night.  
This time we will rouse the herd,  
we will rise from our dung-

drenched funeral boards,  
we will sway from side to side  
in our heavy wave of defiance,

## The Alabama Writers' Forum gives a heartfelt **THANK YOU!** To Capitol Book and News of Montgomery!

**C**apitol Book and News generously sponsored an "Indoor Yard Sale" to help the Forum with its year-end appeal on August 16. Proprietors Cheryl and Thomas Upchurch estimate that more than 1,500 books were donated to go with the uncorrected proofs, posters, and other goodies donated by the store. Proceeds of the sale topped \$3,200. The remaining donated books were given to libraries at the Dept. of Youth Services campuses and the writers' library at Julia Tutwiler State Prison for Women in Wetumpka.



L-R: Al Head, Executive Director of the Alabama State Council on the Arts; Jeanie Thompson, AWF Executive Director; Tess Ware, AWF Assistant Director; Bill Perkins, *Dothan Eagle* editorial page editor; and Bettye Forbus, AWF President-elect.

we will dance our rite to life,  
we will rock and roll this cattle car  
right off its clacking tracks.

Based on the broad variety of these four notable publications, it appears that Charles Ghigna is in the prime of his poetic powers. If another year brings a similar output from Ghigna, readers of all ages will be much the richer for his efforts.

---

*Glenda Conway is an associate professor of English at the University of Montevallo.*

## A Thin Difference

by Frank Turner Hollon

MacAdam/Cage, 2003  
\$22.00 Hardcover

In his third novel, Frank Turner Hollon introduces us to a small town murder mystery, and balances first-person narration, wit, and introspection in his intense protagonist. Set in present-day Baldwin County, Alabama, this novel tracks Jack Skinner, a defense attorney working on a high-profile case.

Immediately, the reader is introduced to Brad Caine, Skinner's client who has been accused of murdering the elderly Haddie Charles and stealing her priceless jewelry. Convinced of Caine's innocence, Skinner neglects everything, including his family and himself in an effort to free Caine. Skinner is fully aware of his obsession and thus finds comfort and solace in the courtroom.

Despite the lack of other suspects, Hollon has us pulling for Caine in every courtroom scene and prison meeting. Caine is kind, levelheaded, and begs us to believe in his innocence. However, this seemingly typical murder mystery quickly turns into a quest to uncover both the killer's and Skinner's psychological baggage. It is this baggage that eventually connects the two men.

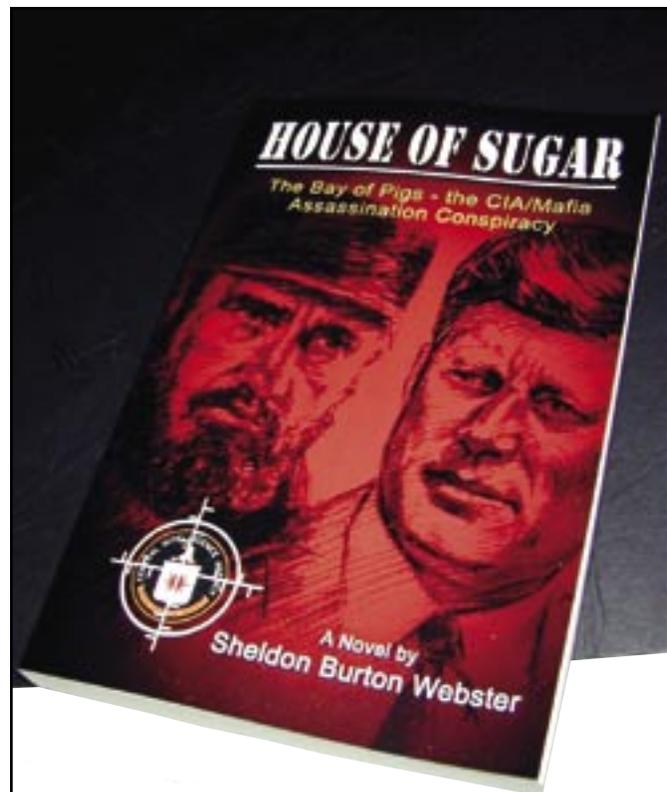
Hollon acutely portrays the hectic, stressful life of Skinner by having most of the novel set in the courtroom, prison, and law office.

Hollon also reminds us that Gulf Shores is more than a vacation spot and calls us to question aspects of the American legal system such as the death penalty and the value of human life.

With a surprise ending and an unconventional testimony from the witness stand, both lawyer and client, personal and professional collide and leave the reader uncomfortable and disturbed by the harsh truths Hollon delivers.

---

*Kristen Covington is an English major at the University of Montevallo.*



*"House of Sugar is a breakthrough novel and I marveled at the blend of very accurate history with fiction. Webster has a special ear and skill for telling stories through dialog."*

Bob Dowling, International Editor  
*Business Week* magazine

**House of Sugar is a historical novel based on recently declassified material of the Bay of Pigs invasion. The novel is a stunning re-creation of the 60's C.I.A./Mafia partnership to assassinate Fidel Castro and JFK by characters whose lives and voices are inserted into history.**

**It reveals shocking documentation of the C.I.A.'s covert operations to overthrow foreign governments, funded in part, through Mafia drug trafficking.**



Webster's other books include *The Betheaden Road*, a short story collection set in Mississippi, and novel, *The Voyage of the Encounter*- a look at Wall Street greed, lust and revenge from Newport to Bermuda, available from [booksmith@mindspring.com](mailto:booksmith@mindspring.com).

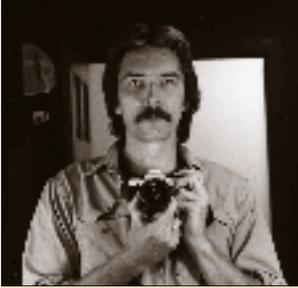
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# ALABAMA STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

## Fellowship Award

### Winners 2003-04

## Tony Crunk



Fellowship support from ASCA will enable me to complete writing, and begin seeking publication for, a new chapbook-length collection of poetry. Should this project progress successfully, I hope to use it as the central material for a third full book-length collection.

My first two collections, *Living in the Resurrection* (Yale University Press, 1995) and *New Covenant Bound* (currently seeking publication), treat real subjects realistically. The first drew on my own experiences coming of age in rural western Kentucky; the second is about the forced relocation of people in western Kentucky in the 1930s to make way for the TVA's Kentucky Lake. Two major aspects of the realism of these two books were the prominent roles of nature and religion in each — these are two mainstays of the cultural and social history of the area (and of the people who come of age there).

In the new material I've begun drafting for the chapbook project, nature and the sacred seem to be mingling in new, less realistic, more mythic ways. I seem to be addressing nature, and its sacredness, not as background for the human drama(s) that unfold in their context, but as entwined subjects in their own right. In reading and research, I've been exploring the attention that specific aspects of nature—particular animals, insects, trees, flowers, etc.—have received in mythology, folklore, legend, religious texts and practices, and such like.

In pre-industrial cultures, it seems that most of nature's creatures had/have specific identities and very rich stories attached to them. For example, in Chinese lore, the snail was considered sacred because the luminous trail it leaves in its wake was considered emblematic of the Milky Way, which itself was the bridge from earth to heaven. In Celtic lore, an even number of crows was a good omen, sent from good gods, but an odd number was a bad omen, sent from gods intending harm. And biblical texts are chock full of such morsels as well. Consider this passage from Psalms: "The leech has two daughters: 'Give, give,' they cry." I'm not sure what the significance of that may be, but it sure gives one a different, more curious, more sacral perspective on leeches.

Ecologists have been warning us for years that we humans

need to re-establish some "connection" with the natural world. This connection requires much of us in realistic, pragmatic terms, but I think this kind of lore, of story provides an essential spiritual and aesthetic dimension to this connection. When cultures were more attentive to the natural world, its inhabitants were given their appropriate, respected places in the human spiritual constellation—as both emissaries and manifestations of the universe's sacredness.

In the poems, I'm drawing on this material to attempt to craft some new lore-like appreciations of our non-human co-inhabitants of the natural world. The collection's tentative title is *Parables and Revelations*.

### ENCOMIUM

Great bird of iron  
born of crucible and anvil

grain by grain  
your piked tongue

first creation  
of the forges of Tubalcain

has sipped the waters  
of Chaos when you alone

your feathers  
are strokes of black lightning

strode the roofbeam of the ark  
gloating

your head a fierce coal  
struck from the netherside

over a world  
gone down to anguish

of the sun your claws  
have clutched the life

and for this  
your voice is rust now

from Night's throat  
your names multiply

is sand and stone and thorn  
your great wisdom

like seeds of darkness—  
Magus Chaldean

nothing now  
but the outraged croakings

gravebird hellwing  
almsthief

of a feeble  
second hand Pharaoh.

—ravenous  
you devour the earth

## RIDDLE

What I had mistaken for eternity	by the universe stars clanking by on their pulleys
was only the long silence	planets heaving and whistling
before the next tick	and the crows incessant imperious calling—
of the second hand the elm	watchman!
outside my window filling with crows	watchman!
a clattering of deaf undertakers	what is left
surrounded on all sides	of the night?

## MUSE

Late February and the crow has come	she lifts from the birch branch
through yet another winter one good eye	cries twice vengefully --
burnt wing heart still whispering	I, I —and wings off across the stubblefield
but as snow again breaks free	vanishing finally into a poem
falls to earth	about ice.

Each year, the Alabama State Council on the Arts awards Artist Fellowships of \$5,000 or \$10,000 for Alabama artists working in crafts, dance, design, media/photography, music, literature, theatre, and visual arts. Recipients may use funds to set aside time to create art, improve their skills, or to do what is most advantageous to enhance their artistic careers. Recipients must be residents of Alabama. The Fellowships are highly competitive and are reviewed by peer panels. There are different requirements for each artistic discipline.

**Next Deadline for Artist Fellowships:  
Thursday, March 1, 2004, 5 p.m.**

For more information contact the Council at 334-242-4076 or [www.arts.state.al.us](http://www.arts.state.al.us).

## Marian Carcache



Celeste, the main character in my unfinished novel, has waited long enough for me to finish telling her story. We are both a number of years older now than we were when we started out, and we both know the value of having a story worth telling. I need to stop pushing Celeste aside in order to do the practical things that are necessary for survival on the most basic level but

which do little to feed the soul. Until I finish telling her story, we are both dangling.

Since I left Celeste at the Golden Cherry motel on a stormy night with a reporter named Skye Pentecost, two Mirandas and a Ming Lee have taken up residence in my heart, my brain, and my computer. They, too, are anxious to have their stories told.

The ASCA fellowship will allow me to return to my first love, fiction writing, and to finish what is unfinished, polish what is unpolished, and, most important, start new endeavors.

In one of the Miranda stories, after having withdrawn from the cold world of human beings for quite some time, Miranda is touched by the warmth of a powerful healer and realizes that she wants to participate in life again. Receiving this fellowship has had a similar effect on me.

This was not the first time Celeste had felt that her world was about to end. The year she was thirteen, the universe was predicted to blow to bits and people started building bomb shelters in their back yards. And, of course, signs followed that the end was near. That same year a star fell through the roof of a woman's house one Sunday night and burned the sofa she was lying on as she watched t.v. Later, she told reporters, without one trace of a smile, that she had been watching "Circus of the Stars" when it happened. It was the year that outlines of crosses started mysteriously appearing in A.M.E. church windows, and a tornado lifted a house trailer up and set it back down across the road from where it had been, without even waking the couple inside. The same tornado wrapped a Lincoln Continental around a light pole, but didn't crack even one of the dozen eggs in a grocery bag on the backseat. The lady who owned the car thought the whole thing was a sign and wouldn't cook the eggs. She put them in a nest inside a wire basket that was shaped like a hen, and guarded them as holy. When Celeste's grandmother built their fallout shelter and stocked it with dry goods, Celeste told her that if a bomb alert went off, she was going to gather the animals, two by two, the way Noah did, and take them into the shelter. Her granny said she wasn't going to allow dog hair and bird feathers in her shelter, so Celeste told her she wouldn't go in either then, that she'd rather die than live in a damned old

shelter where animals weren't allowed. From then on, Celeste called the shelter "the Hell Hole" and told people who didn't know better that she was an orphan and had been raised by wolves. She wished with all her heart that she had been.

The memories made Celeste shiver in the night air. Fall was on its way, too, and the nights had grown cool. The goldenrods and French mulberry already covered the fields between the Bellflower house and the river. The moon with the night clouds moving across its face like scowl lines seemed to be spying into her soul and frowning at what it found. Celeste had always connected the moon with the face of God, and she wondered if God was frowning, too.

Celeste heard a lot about God when she was growing up in the Bellflower house. She used to wonder if he lived in the woods behind the house, down near the river. Sometimes, late at night, after everybody else was asleep, she imagined she could hear Him down there walking through the underbrush. It happened a lot in the summer when the windows were all open from the top. It used to make her feel guilty because it scared her more than it comforted her to think of God out there, roaming around on the riverbank, knowing people's most secret thoughts.

The river was realer to Celeste, and more alive, than all of the Bellflower kinfolks who lived down the road. It was the

river that brought visitors from Georgia on a ferryboat and fishermen from all over the world. Once John Wayne came fishing on that very river and bought a Coke and a pack of peanuts at Rountree's Store. For weeks after that, Celeste sat at Rountree's wearing the tiara she had won for being Harvest Queen, waiting for John Wayne to come back, hoping he would notice that she was different and take her back to Hollywood to be a star. Ever since she had been elected queen, whenever Celeste saw scary movies about humans beings sacrificed to the gods that controlled crops, she wondered if someday she would pay for having been singled out as Queen of the Harvest that year. She had learned, after all, from her grandmother, that the world was always on the brink of disaster.

Any time that word got out that a prisoner had escaped from the county jail, her grandmother Bellflower was sure he would follow the river, wading in it to lose the bloodhounds, all the way to their house where he would rape and mutilate her and Celeste. But Celeste, hungry for any type of excitement, loved the times of escaped convicts, half hoped they would turn up at the Bellflower house and create some type of stir. She used to think she would rescue them and save them from their fate at the hands of the sheriff. Once she asked her grandmother what would happen if a convict ran up on God and God forgave him

*Continued on page 42*

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**The symposium is a project of the  
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**For more information call Donna Reed,  
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**ALABAMA  
WRITERS  
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# 2003 High School Literary Arts Awards

## LEGISLATORS LAUD YOUNG WRITERS IN CAPITOL CITY CEREMONY

On April 23, 2003, young writers, their teachers and schools from across Alabama were recognized for their accomplishments in the literary arts at the annual High School Literary Arts Awards ceremony in Montgomery. The Honorable Seth Hammett (D-Andalusia), speaker of the Alabama House of Representatives, gave the awards address, and a number of his colleagues from the House and Senate joined him to praise young writers in their districts.

Here is a scrapbook sampling of winners. For a complete listing of winners by genre, with teachers and schools, plus guidelines for the 2004 High School Literary Arts Awards (deadline February 2004), go to [www.writersforum.org](http://www.writersforum.org).



*Alabama House Speaker Seth Hammett congratulates Senior Scholarship Portfolio winners. L-R Katie McGriff (Alabama School of Fine Arts), China Alexis Irwin (Briarwood Christian School), Alana J. Thaxton (ASFA), Elizabeth Lillian Ott (ASFA), and Katherine Garner (Coffee High School).*



*Representative Mac Gipson (R-Prattville) congratulates poetry certificate recipient Sarah Byrd (Prattville High School) and her mother.*



*Senator Quinton Ross (D-Montgomery) stands proudly with four winners from his district. L-R front row: Booker T. Washington students Katherine Russell and Erin Young, LAMP student Valerie Gribbon, and LAMP teacher Sharon Garrison. L-R back row: Booker T. Washington teacher Jerry Lawrence, Senator Ross, and Keith C. Woernle (LAMP).*



*L-R Rep. Billy Beasley (R-Eufaula) congratulates Eufaula High School students Angela Wilkerson and her parents, and LaSunda Wilder and her parents.*



*Opelika High School student winners are all smiles with Senator Ted Little (D-Auburn). L-R, Audrey Taylor, Senator Little, and Roxanne Dunson, editor of Perspectives literary journal.*

**THE 2003 HIGH SCHOOL LITERARY ARTS AWARDS WERE MADE POSSIBLE BY THE ALABAMA STATE COUNCIL ON THE ARTS AND THE ALABAMA POWER FOUNDATION.**

and baptized him right there in the river, what would the sheriff do then? Granny Bellflower told her that God didn't take any truck with convicts. That didn't sound right to Celeste, but she held her tongue the way she had learned to do when her grandmother started up about the Indians who used to live along the riverbank, on the very spot that the Bellflowers now rented out to farmers to grow corn and peanuts on. Celeste used to go to the freshly plowed fields and search for arrowheads and broken pieces of pottery. Sometimes she would look up from sifting the hot field dirt through her fingers just in time to see an Indian turn back into a brown and rusty stalk of corn. But even when the Indian disappeared, she could still clutch the misshapen arrowhead in her palm and know he had been there. God was harder to find evidence on. And Celeste was enthralled by people who claimed to have "seen" Him or to "know" or to "walk with" Him.

The state had installed a picnic area on the riverbank, in a spot where the river formed a big creek in an open field. It attracted what Celeste's grandmother called "a bad element." Every spring for several years, hundreds of motorcycle riders, wearing black leather and chains, converged on the field to swim and drink liquor and listen to music for a long weekend. At night, you could hear their music and the revving motors

from the back porch of the Bellflowers' house. They sounded like hordes of insects come to eat the community. One year, Celeste talked to one of them at Rountree's store – a boy who said to call him Blade – and he convinced Celeste to climb out the window later that night and come down to the creek to meet him.

When she got there, he put his arm around her and kissed her all over her neck. Then they sat on the riverbank near the campfire and drank whiskey straight from the bottle. He told her he had seen God before and that God was pretty pissed off with the way folks were distorting His word. Celeste wanted to hear more about God, but the boy started kissing her neck again, so she let him. It was an amazing moment for her: the internal heat from the whiskey and the warmth of the campfire, the excitement of talking to a boy who had seen God. Her face was chapped before the night was over – not as much from the proximity to the campfire as from the whiskerburn from the boy's beard.

The next morning the news spread quickly that sometime during the night one of the motorcyclists had walked into the river and never come back. When they dragged his body out later that day, the sheriff found a hypodermic syringe and a wet hundred-dollar bill in his bluejean pocket. Celeste went into mourning over that boy, never knowing if he had been Blade or another one of the motorcyclists, but grieving just the same.

The bongo drums sounded all night after he died, echoing on the water, and bonfires were lighted all along the creek bank, reflecting in the water. It wasn't until she remembered it years later that Celeste thought about the Indians who used to sit along that same creek bank by campfires and pound drums made of animal skins. Back then, it just gave her chill bumps and made her think of something older and scarier than the Indians, something that had her in its thrall, but which she couldn't name.

After that year, the state closed the picnic area and the vines grew up to cover it. Once, during a storm, a tree struck by lightning fell across the cement tables, crushing them so that what was left looked like broken tombstones sticking through the vines. Celeste would pretend that Blade was buried there, and on Sundays, she would sneak down to the field and gaze at his grave, imagining that there had been more between them than there had actually been. On one particular late Sunday afternoon, she came upon the African Methodist Episcopalians in their Sunday white, holding a baptism service in the creek down near the old picnic area. She kept her distance and watched. Raising their trembling arms to heaven and chanting words she couldn't make out, they looked like spirits come back to mourn the dry bones in the Valley of the Dead.

That was where she grew up: in the Valley of the Dead. And as she grew older, she couldn't stand it. Her dreams of being a movie star or of marrying a Kennedy—or maybe a convict or a priest—somebody she could save or who could save her—just weren't coming true. She had to get out, she thought, or she would suffocate under it.



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# Literary News

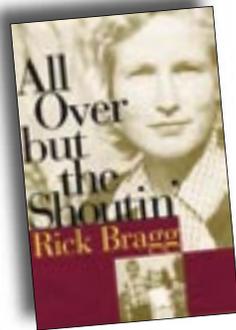
The **University of Alabama Press** is pleased to announce that *ForeWord Magazine* has named *Discovering Alabama Wetlands*, and *It Wasn't All Dancing and Other Stories* among its Book of the Year Awards winners. *Discovering Alabama Wetlands*, text by Doug Phillips and photographs by Robert Falls Sr., received the Silver Award in the Nature category. Mary Ward Brown's *It Wasn't All Dancing and Other Stories* received the Bronze Award in the Fiction-Short Stories category. *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* by J. Mills Thornton III has been selected as the winner of the 2003 Liberty Legacy Foundation Award by the Organization of American Historians. This award is given annually for the best book on any aspect of the struggle for civil rights in the United States from the nation's founding to the present. Two Alabama Library Association awards went to publications from the University of Alabama Press. Author Mary Ward Brown received the fiction award for her 2002 publication, *It Wasn't All Dancing and Other Stories*. Co-editors Samuel Webb and Margaret Armbruster received the nonfiction award for *Alabama Governors: A Political History of the State*, a 2001 publication.



Andrew Hudgins

Andrew Hudgins, Joel Brouwer, Jim Murphy, and Juliana Vice will read from their work on November 13, 2003, 7:30 p.m. at **Huntingdon College** in Montgomery. The reading is free and open to the public. A reception will follow the reading and books will be for sale.

The poets will also conduct workshops during the afternoon of November 13 at 1:15 p.m. and 2:30 p.m. The workshop fee is \$40 for all students not enrolled at Huntingdon College and \$25 for Huntingdon College alumni. For more information contact Dr. Jacqueline Trimble, Huntingdon College, (334) 833-4435.



On the Same Page is the name of Snead State Community College's "one book-one community" program. Held this fall in Boaz, the program featured Rick Bragg's *All Over But the Shoutin'*. Study groups, libraries, civic clubs, and schools read the book, then met to discuss it. Members of Snead's humanities division were available to present programs to area groups. On the Same Page culminated with a free-to-the-public appearance by Bragg on the Snead campus.



Phyllis Perry



William Cobb



Honorée Jeffers

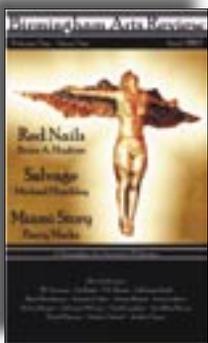
**Jefferson State Community College** and the **Alabama School of Fine Arts** announce the 2003-04 **Red Mountain Reading Series**. This year's programs will include Honorée Jeffers (December 5), Bill Cobb (February 12), Phyllis Perry (March 10), and Kevin Brockmeier (April 15). For location information, contact Brian Ingram at [gingram@jeffstateonline.com](mailto:gingram@jeffstateonline.com)

**River City Publishing** and best-selling author **Robert McCammon** of Birmingham teamed up to win prestigious industry awards presented at the 2003 National Book Expo Convention. McCammon and RCP won the historical fiction category for the annual Independent Publishers Book Award recognizing McCammon's critically acclaimed novel, *Speaks the Nightbird*. The regional publishing house and author also received a bronze award recognizing fiction/historical books presented by *ForeWord Magazine*.



Brad Watson

The 2003 **Southern Book Critics Circle Awards** went to three books with Alabama connections: Valerie Boyd's biography of acclaimed writer Zora Neale Hurston, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, won the nonfiction award. Lee Smith's *The Last Girls* and Brad Watson's *The Heaven of Mercury* were co-winners of the fiction award.



Its editors are pleased to announce the launch of the **Birmingham Arts Journal**. The journal will feature art, fiction, non-fiction, and poetry from guests and members of the Birmingham Art Association. Subscriptions are \$4 per issue or \$14 per year. For submission information, contact editor Jim Reed at [jim@jimreedbooks](mailto:jim@jimreedbooks) or see the BAA website at [www.birminghamartassociation.com](http://www.birminghamartassociation.com).



Poet **Natasha Trethewey** was among the visiting authors leading workshops for young writers through the 2003 *Writing Our Stories: An Anti-Violence Creative Writing Program*. *Writing Our Stories* is currently underway at three Alabama Department of Youth Services facilities.

# BANKHEAD

## VISITING WRITERS SERIES

2003 - 2004

### **Lynn Emanuel & Joyelle McSweeney**

7:30 p.m., September 11  
205 Smith Hall

### **Lydia Davis**

7:30 p.m., February 19  
205 Smith Hall

### **Ralph Angel & Bei Dao**

7:30 p.m., October 2  
205 Smith Hall

### **George Saunders & Mary Gaitskill**

7:30 p.m., March 4  
205 Smith Hall

### **Jane Smiley**

7:30 p.m., TUESDAY, October 21  
Bama Theatre  
600 Greensboro Avenue, Tuscaloosa

### **Charles Simic**

7:30 p.m., March 18  
Bryant Conference Center

### **Robin Hemley & Shonya Ramaya**

7:30 p.m., November 6  
205 Smith Hall

### **M.T. Anderson & Aldo Alvarez**

7:30 p.m., April 8  
205 Smith Hall

### **Natasha Trethewey & Larissa Szporluk**

7:30 p.m., December 4  
205 Smith Hall

### **Alumni Reading**

TBA: Late April or Early May

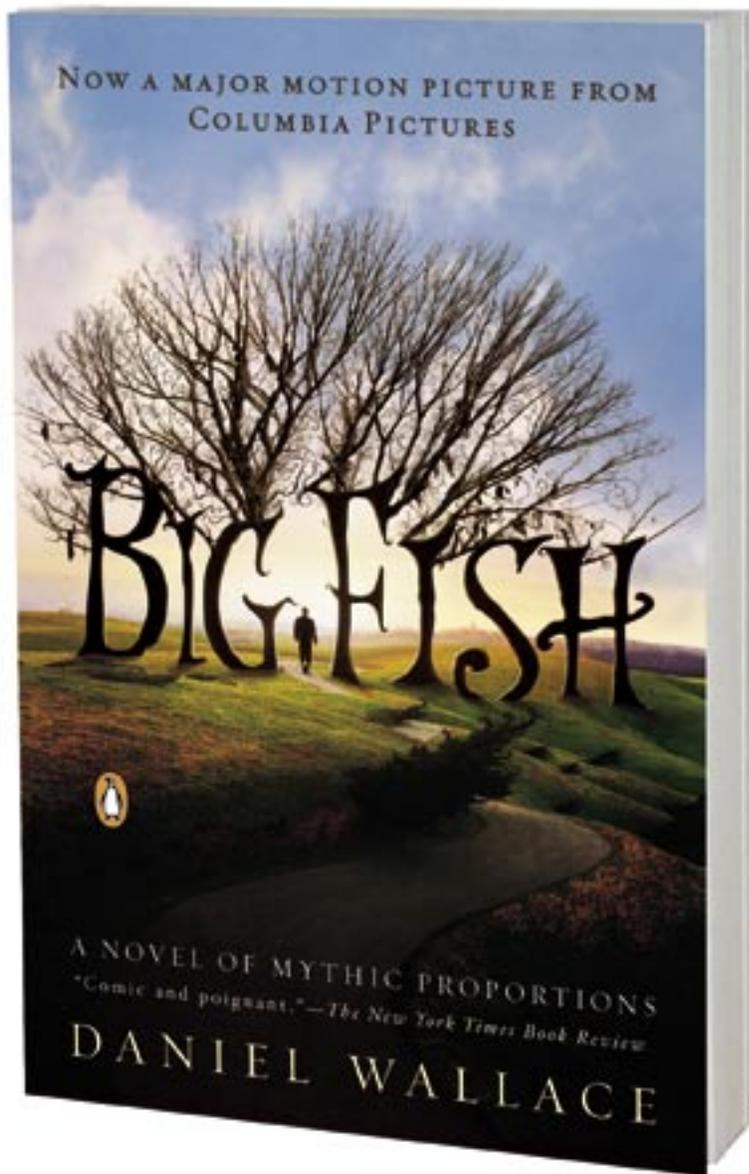


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*All events are free, open to the public and—unless otherwise noted—take place on the campus of The University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. The Bankhead Visiting Writers Series is made possible by an endowment from the Bankhead Foundation, the Program in Creative Writing, the Department of English, and the College of Arts & Sciences. For more information—and to confirm dates and locations—please call the Creative Writing office at (205) 348-0766 or visit our web site: [www.bama.ua.edu/~writing](http://www.bama.ua.edu/~writing).*

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